

MEETING OF THE PARLIAMENT

Thursday 21 May 2009

Session 3

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Scottish Parliament

Thursday 21 May 2009

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

Student Hardship

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson):

Good morning. The first item of business is a Labour Party debate on motion S3M-4188, in the name of Claire Baker, on student hardship. We have little flexibility on time—I stress the word “little”.

09:15

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

We know that the Scottish National Party promised much for students in its manifesto but has delivered far short of that. Promises easily made during an election campaign have been dumped in government. Little has been done to boost student support or to tackle hardship among the poorest students in Scotland. Students have criticised the Government’s limited actions for the same reason. Gurjit Singh, the president of the National Union of Students Scotland, said recently that abolishing the graduate endowment had had

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

Billions of pounds-worth of promises have been boiled down to £30 million for student support next year. That sum, which was announced in the comprehensive spending review, must be the most debated pot of money in the history of the Scottish Parliament. There has been a protracted bidding process that has set poor student against poor student. Worse still, we have £12.5 million of efficiency savings in the student support budget—a means test change that has cut the support of tens of thousands of students halfway through their degree—and recent changes to the education maintenance allowance that will impact heavily on college students. It seems increasingly that, with the £30 million, the SNP is just giving students their own money back.

There is a missed opportunity in the Government’s proposals for how the money should be used. Even the most generous option would increase student support by only a few hundred pounds. The proposal by the Association of Scotland’s Colleges, too, does not go far enough. I welcome the focus on college students, who are often forgotten in discussions about higher education, but I have two main concerns about the ASC’s proposals. First, its research

does not distinguish between Government loans and commercial loans. Secondly, the proposal does not address student hardship, which is as much a concern in colleges as it is in universities. In March, the Parliament rejected the proposals outlined in the Government’s consultation because they failed to address the issue adequately.

Students say that although graduate debt is a concern for them, not having enough money to live on is a bigger problem, which the SNP is failing to address. The SNP needs to swallow its pride. Students are being forced to choose between fuel and food, books and bus fares. The poorest are increasingly saddled with credit cards, bank loans, overdrafts or even loan sharks, as part-time work and parental contributions dry up. Student hardship is the real issue.

The SNP is not doing much to address Scotland’s high drop-out rate. Boasts of the return of free education ring hollow for students who are struggling to get by and have been pushed into commercial debt by a student support system that is no longer fit for purpose. It is no wonder that the patience of students at colleges and universities across Scotland has run out.

Since the previous debate on student support, the NUS, student leaders from colleges and universities across Scotland and all three main Opposition parties have signed an open letter to the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning demanding a new direction from the Government and delivering a wake-up call to the SNP. The letter agreed joint principles: a minimum income of £7,000, or as close to that as possible, for the poorest students; focusing available resources on tackling student hardship, not graduate debt; increasing the availability of student loans; addressing students’ continuing reliance on commercial credit; and increasing the funds that are available for hardship and child care funding, while looking at the potential for reform.

The Minister for Schools and Skills (Keith Brown): Claire Baker implies that the Labour Party would make extra resources available. Given the cuts of £500 million that are coming next year, would she raise extra resources by reintroducing the graduate endowment tax?

Claire Baker: The proposals that the main Opposition parties have put forward, which are supported by the NUS, are covered by the £30 million in the 2010-11 budget—they require no additional resources from the Government. Scottish Labour, with the other main Opposition parties, has taken forward the principles that I have outlined and presented alternatives to the Government’s proposals.

This is an opportunity for the SNP to work with a ready-made cross-party majority in the Parliament,

and a consensus among students, to deliver for the poorest students in Scotland—investing in the short term, through this economic downturn, to invest in the long-term future of Scotland.

I acknowledge and welcome the difference in tone in the SNP's amendment. Although initially alternative suggestions to the Government's position provoked calls of "Grow up" to the students—and, possibly, the Opposition—there seems to have been a period for reflection. The amendment suggests a more sensible, perhaps even pragmatic, approach, which is to be welcomed. However, while the Labour motion makes clear that there are key principles that the Government needs to take on board, the Government's amendment does not recognise that.

I would like today's debate to be constructive. To that end, I would like to hear from the SNP three things that are not contained in its amendment. I hope that Fiona Hyslop will address each of them in her speech. First, I would welcome a cross-party dialogue on tackling student hardship, with an urgent meeting on the subject, if the cabinet secretary is willing. Secondly, I would like the SNP to agree to the joint principles that were outlined in the open letter to Fiona Hyslop, which was signed by students and the main Opposition parties. Thirdly, I would like to work with the SNP on Scottish Labour's and the other main Opposition parties' proposals for tackling student hardship.

The position of Scottish Labour and the other main Opposition parties is that existing resources should be used to provide a £7,000 income—as called for by students throughout Scotland—for 20,000 of the poorest students, including more than 6,000 college students, to take them over the poverty line; an increase in grant of £500 for the poorest students; an increase in support of £200 for all students, through non-means-tested loans; and investment of nearly £2 million in hardship and child care funds, which have been stretched to breaking point across Scotland this year.

By giving the poorest students the choice of a mix of loan and grant that suits their circumstances, the proposals would allow those students who do not want to take up the full £7,000 entitlement to choose to take a lesser amount in grant, close to halving their graduate debt. We would be treating students like adults—the choice would be theirs. The proposals are affordable, achievable and fair, would reduce hardship and would help many through the economic downturn.

Scottish Labour will not support the Liberal Democrat amendment, despite our agreement on many aspects of student support. Although I have sympathy for the idea of a minimum income, it is not realistic or achievable in this session.

Furthermore, we cannot sign up to a policy that has not yet been costed.

We will not support the Scottish Government amendment. I recognise that it represents an olive branch, but I was hoping for a white flag to be waved not at any party represented in the chamber but at Scottish students, recognising that their views will be listened to and acted on, not fought against.

Keith Brown: Will the member give way?

Claire Baker: I am sorry, but that was my last sentence.

I move,

That the Parliament calls for a cross-party approach on tackling hardship among the poorest students in Scotland; believes that students have been severely let down by the SNP's broken promises, actions and inaction in power; further believes that the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning's efforts have been misplaced in focussing solely on reducing graduate debt rather than student hardship while student demand for hardship and childcare funds increases, commercial borrowing among students continues and student support levels in Scotland fall far behind the rest of the United Kingdom; notes the open letter to the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning signed by NUS, the main opposition parties and student leaders across Scotland calling for the Scottish Government to increase levels of student support through increased loans and for a new direction from the Scottish Government; further notes that on the 12 March 2009, through motion S3M-3675 as amended, the Parliament rejected all of the proposals contained in the *Supporting a Smarter Scotland* consultation, which closed in April 2009, for not adequately addressing student hardship, and calls on the Scottish Government to work with the main opposition parties on their joint approach to tackling student hardship by using the available resources to provide £7,000 in support for the poorest students, a £500 increase in grant for the poorest students, an increase in support of £200 for all students through the non-means-tested loan and almost £2 million to discretionary funds for childcare and hardship funding.

09:22

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning (Fiona Hyslop): The Government has introduced a number of policies to address student hardship. We have abolished the graduate endowment fee, benefiting more than 50,000 graduates and students by saving them around £2,300 each. We have introduced a £38 million package of grants for part-time learners, benefiting up to 20,000 students a year. We are providing £16 million a year to institutions to alleviate student hardship. Because of the combination of those actions, for the first time since devolution the average student loan debt fell in 2007. In 2008, it stood at £5,354, compared with £9,580 south of the border.

In the four years from 2003 to 2007, the previous Administration made improvements to higher education student support totalling £22

million. I repeat: £22 million. In the two years that we have been in government, we have already provided double that amount—more than £44 million—to make specific improvements to higher education student support. Based on their track record, seeing the Labour Party and the Lib Dems competing with each other to be the students' friends, with duplicate motions in the space of weeks, is a bit like watching two bald men squabbling over a comb.

In addition to the £44 million that I have mentioned—double the £22 million that the previous Administration set aside—we have set aside £30 million to implement the results of the consultation.

Claire Baker: Does the cabinet secretary accept that the vast majority of the £44 million to which she referred is spent on tackling graduate debt, not student hardship, which is the subject of this morning's debate?

Fiona Hyslop: I make clear that the previous Administration spent £22 million on student support, whereas we have spent £44 million on student support. I will explain to Claire Baker some of the steps that we are taking to tackle student hardship, in particular.

On top of all the provision that I have just talked about, we now propose to set the interest rates for student loans at 0 per cent or lower.

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

Fiona Hyslop: That will ensure that student loan borrowers will not see an increase in the value of their debt. Indeed, some of them will see a decrease. Many MSPs have written to us on that point.

Murdo Fraser: I am sorry, but can the cabinet secretary explain how there can be an interest rate lower than 0 per cent? Are we going to start paying money back to students?

Fiona Hyslop: I am more than happy to write to the member about the issue. We think that it is correct that when the inflation figures are as low as they are, if a level of 0 per cent is required, we will pay it, to ensure that students and graduates pay less or see their debt value decrease. If graduates have to pay less or if their loan debt is reduced, it should be welcomed across the chamber.

We have increased student discretionary funds from the £14 million that we inherited from the previous Administration to just over £16 million this year, of which £4.7 million is specifically for higher education child care funds. That is a rise of 14.6 per cent. Higher education discretionary funds are intended to assist students who are in financial difficulty and at risk of not completing their course.

They are not—and never were, under the previous Administration—intended to be anything other than a contribution from Government to help institutions to meet genuine cases of hardship.

In addition to the higher education discretionary funds, the Scottish Further and Higher Education Funding Council is providing an additional £6.7 million—a 9.3 per cent increase—to help colleges respond to the increased demand for further education student support in the current climate. I think that a 9.3 per cent increase is to be welcomed.

Scotland is in a recession, and we are facing unprecedented cuts in our budgets. Westminster is taking £500 million out of the Scottish budget in 2010-11. We expect continued pressures over the next few years, which will shape the context of all future spending decisions across every portfolio. Extremely difficult decisions will have to be made.

Claire Baker: Will the cabinet secretary take an intervention?

Fiona Hyslop: I have already taken an intervention from the member.

I acknowledge that recessions also have an impact on students. However, I assure the Parliament that student support and tackling student hardship will remain a high priority for the Government. "Supporting a Smarter Scotland: A consultation on supporting learners in higher education" closed only three weeks ago. I had hoped that the Opposition parties would give us due time to analyse properly all the responses that we have received before demanding that we make a decision. Those parties might consider the terms of our amendment, which reflect the exact wording that the three other parties used barely three weeks ago. That gives some indication of our acknowledgement of their position.

The options that were set out in our consultation represented our thoughts on the best way to proceed. The consultation asked:

"Are there any other initiatives or ideas that you believe we should explore further?"

That is a clear statement that we are open to and happy to consider different ideas and that we will work with others to investigate the potential implications. That includes co-operation with the other parties in the Parliament. I hope that that addresses Claire Baker's questions.

The motion reflects the views and opinions of Labour, Liberal Democrats and the Conservatives in the Parliament, as expressed in a similar motion on 12 March. In our amendment, the Government clearly acknowledges and recognises those views of Parliament. I hear the message loud and clear and acknowledge it: the Opposition parties oppose and will oppose replacing loans with grants, and

they want the Government to boost income levels for students by increasing debt levels.

I call on Labour, the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats to work together to deliver specific and fully costed proposals to tackle student hardship. Within the context of the recession, which affects students as well as the economy, and reflecting the difficult financial situation that has been forced upon us, the Government agrees that we need to work together to come up with solutions to tackle hardship, and we will do so.

I move amendment S3M-4188.2, to leave out from first "calls" to end and insert:

"notes the proposals from Scottish Labour, the Scottish Conservatives and the Scottish Liberal Democrats contained in their responses to the *Supporting a Smarter Scotland* consultation; notes motion S3M-3675 as amended whereby the Parliament called on the Scottish Government to tackle student hardship, and calls on the Scottish Government to work with all political parties to deliver specific proposals to tackle student hardship, particularly during this time of recession."

The Presiding Officer: All contributions should be around four minutes from now on, please.

09:29

Margaret Smith (Edinburgh West) (LD): We have been shocked this morning by the minister's bald comments—but, sporting her fancy new haircut, it is no wonder that she is fixated on hair. What we wanted to be fixated on is student hardship—that is the focus of today's debate. The cabinet secretary is right to point out that we have had a couple of debates on the issue in a matter of a few weeks. That is a reflection of the fact that we all take it seriously.

There are a number of reasons to be concerned about the Government's recently completed consultation on student support. At certain points, there seemed to be totally unnecessary fight picking with the United Kingdom Government on student support, and there was a predictable attempt to blame other parties for the Government's failure to decrease student debt, which it had gone around Scotland promising Scottish students it would dump completely. There has also been a totally inadequate attempt at a minimum income guarantee.

What I found most concerning was the Government's apparent ignorance of the serious and worsening financial situation that Scottish students currently face. Living costs have risen significantly, but the average award payments from the Student Awards Agency for Scotland have not. Rents for students have increased, too, and in many key places they look set to continue to increase. Food prices have risen, and part-time and temporary jobs for students are increasingly

hard to come by, with the careers service at the University of Edinburgh reporting a 20 per cent drop in the number of positions advertised. Those who can find work might find their hours or income reduced as businesses cut back on costs; those who rely on tips might find that they are reducing, as customers count the pennies when they go out for an evening meal. Meanwhile, students' parents and families are under more financial pressure, and they might be less able to help out than before.

All of that combined means that more and more students are living in hardship during their studies, yet the Government still wants to talk about its grand plans to make all students debt free—albeit at a rate of just £30 million a year, whereas the SNP's election pledge to drop student debt would have cost £2.5 billion. The ignoring of student hardship in the Government's proposals is particularly worrying. In the face of cross-party, student-supported alternatives that would actually reduce hardship, I find the cabinet secretary's response—to tell students to stop complaining and to grow up—quite inappropriate. However, I am heartened by her comments on the record today and by the tone of the Government's amendment.

With the support that is currently provided, students are forced to live below the UK poverty line. How can the SNP claim to support a smarter Scotland if the annual income of an individual moving from benefit to education would drop by nearly £2,000? Higher education, and education as a whole, are far too important for us to get this wrong.

We have a good track record, in government and opposition, of supporting students and of funding higher and further education. Our amendment to the Graduate Endowment Abolition (Scotland) Bill meant that the Government had to include consideration of something that had been a long-held policy intention of the Liberal Democrats: a minimum income guarantee for students.

Keith Brown: Will the member give way?

Margaret Smith: No. The minister is well aware of our support when it comes to scrapping the graduate endowment. We are committed to moving towards an annual income of £7,000 for Scotland's students, made up from a combination of grants, loans and parental contributions. It is unacceptable that the Scottish Government is prepared to leave students in poverty, but we accept that, with the limited funds that the Government is offering and the budgetary tight squeeze that we are all facing, we cannot deliver that income for all students with the money that is being allocated for 2010-11. However, while we accept that the income guarantee has to be an aspiration, it goes in the right direction of travel.

We also accept that our position is not shared by other parties in the Parliament, although it is held by key organisations such as the NUS and the British Medical Association. That has not prevented us responding to the consultation, through joint proposals with the Labour and Conservative parties. Over the past few months, I am pleased to say, I have worked with Claire Baker and Murdo Fraser to find a better way forward for Scotland's students. We remain happy and willing to pull up another chair for Fiona Hyslop any time she wants to join us.

The Opposition parties are clear: we can make the £30 million that is available go further than the Government's loans-to-grants option. We want to help the poorest young students—those who receive the young students bursary—to achieve the minimum income guarantee of £7,000. We all stand ready to work with the Government if it is willing to consider alternative solutions.

What are we calling for? We want a £500 increase in the grants for the poorest students, meaning a £7,000 income for them, through increased grants and an increase in the student loan entitlement. Interestingly, our consultation response produced the idea of giving students a choice in what they do—whether to have extra grants or to take extra loans.

The Presiding Officer: Could you close, please?

Margaret Smith: We are talking about young adults. We also want there to be an increase in support through loans for all students, because we recognise that all students are struggling at the moment. We want an extra £2 million to be put into discretionary funds.

The Presiding Officer: You must close, please.

Margaret Smith: This is a very important issue. We stand ready to work with members from all parts of the chamber to tackle it, and to tackle it properly.

I move amendment S3M-4188.1, to insert at end:

"and agrees that the Scottish Government should make further progress towards the provision of an adequate minimum income guarantee for all students."

09:34

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I am pleased to speak in support of Claire Baker's motion, which represents the joint position of Scottish Labour, the Scottish Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats.

I congratulate the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning on her stylish new look—she looks sultry sitting on the front

benches. Unfortunately, the look might be new but the SNP Government has the same old policies. Its record on student hardship has been utterly woeful. Lest anyone needs reminding, let us recall that, during the most recent election campaign, the SNP was to be found on campuses throughout Scotland promising to dump the debt. Many students—and, for that matter, many parents of students—took it at its word and voted SNP as a result. As they now know, they were victims of a cruel delusion. The SNP pledged to replace loans with grants and wipe out student debt, which it has singularly failed to do. It has not even brought properly costed proposals for implementing that manifesto pledge to the Parliament for members to scrutinise.

Perhaps students have no one but themselves to blame for that sorry state of affairs. I well remember being on a hustings panel at the University of Stirling last year with Claire Baker, Margaret Smith and Christopher Harvie. It is sad that Professor Harvie is not in the chamber this morning because, when he was challenged at that meeting on the issue, he said on behalf of the SNP that students should not have been so naive as to believe that a political party should be expected to deliver in government something that it had said in its manifesto. So there we have it: the official SNP response is that we cannot believe a line in its manifesto.

Student debt is a serious issue but, right here, right now, student hardship is a greater one. That view is supported by the student representatives in the NUS and universities throughout Scotland. Many students who previously supplemented their incomes with part-time employment find that, due to the economic downturn, they are unable to get jobs or, as Margaret Smith pointed out, the income from their jobs has fallen.

Keith Brown: I point out that Murdo Fraser's last statement goes against his manifesto commitment that students would be able to borrow as much as they liked because they would have increased earning potential in future years.

Murdo Fraser: No, it does not contradict it at all. Over their lifetime, students will earn more money, so we should allow them the opportunity to borrow more money from the Student Loans Company—especially if they get interest rates of less than 0 per cent, which would be a very attractive prospect—rather than having to borrow money, if they can get it, at high interest rates from commercial lenders or, even worse, on credit cards. That is what they do at the moment, and it causes real hardship.

The SNP Government's response to the matter in its consultation paper "Supporting a Smarter Scotland" is, unfortunately, inadequate. The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong

Learning would rather use the available money to switch loans to grants for a small minority of students. In fact, what students need now is greater access to student loans—a secure and inexpensive way of borrowing—to protect themselves from hardship.

In our response to the consultation, the Scottish Conservatives adopted the approach that the £30 million that has been allocated should be used to reach a £7,000 minimum income for the poorest students; to increase by £200 the amount that is available to all students by means of the loan; and to invest an extra £2 million in discretionary funds to alleviate pressure on hardship and child care funds. That targeted approach would provide help to all students but focus on the poorest. It has the support of the three Opposition parties in the Parliament and of student representatives, so I hope that the Government will pay serious attention to it.

Fiona Hyslop: I do not know whether Murdo Fraser is aware that, in 2009-10, the Scottish Further and Higher Education Funding Council will provide an additional £6.7 million to help colleges respond to the demand for child care from further education students. Murdo Fraser is right to identify that issue, but there has already been some movement on it.

Murdo Fraser: I welcome that clarity from the cabinet secretary because, as she knows, I have received a great deal of correspondence on the issue.

The Government amendment strikes a more conciliatory tone than we have heard previously, which I hope demonstrates good progress. The SNP has broken its promises to Scottish students, but it now has the chance to adopt a new approach, one that is shared by the Opposition parties and student leaders throughout Scotland. I hope that it will see sense in the debate and realise that it has an opportunity to start redeeming its reputation in the eyes of Scotland's students. I urge it to accept the motion in the name of Claire Baker.

09:39

Pauline McNeill (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab): In the past few months, there has been a serious focus on what students need in order to study. That is due in part to the Opposition parties' constructive approach, about which we have heard and which has focused on the financial support that students need while they are at college or university.

The SNP manifesto promise to wipe out student debt has been well and truly exposed as an election ploy. I have not read or seen reports that the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning has, in any sense, lobbied in the Cabinet

for the £2 billion that would be needed to fulfil that promise.

Fiona Hyslop: I make it clear that servicing student debt does not cost £2 billion.

Pauline McNeill: As the cabinet secretary knows, that manifesto commitment was costed at £2 billion. She knows the point that I am making: that manifesto commitment has been well and truly exposed as an election ploy.

The Government has found £30 million, and that is what the Parliament has been asked to address. The Labour Party believes that that money should be used to relieve hardship for all students but should be focused on the poorest students in particular. The student support system is failing students and the SNP has allowed Scotland to drag behind the rest of the UK: the maximum income that is available to students here is less than the income that is available in England, and the threshold for entitlement has not been uplifted, so more students have lost out.

In a recent constituency case, I was astonished to learn that the Government changed the student support rules in a rush to ensure that the income of single parents' cohabiting partners will be counted towards the calculation for support. That is affecting students in the middle of their degrees. In two cases that have been brought to my attention, students have found that they no longer qualify for bursaries because the rules have been changed. I cannot for the life of me understand why the Government would rush to change the rules in the middle of an academic session. There is a certain injustice in that.

Fiona Hyslop rose—

Pauline McNeill: I would be happy to take an intervention from the cabinet secretary, because I have written to her on that point.

Fiona Hyslop: That change to means testing was fully supported by the NUS. Only 45 students contacted the universities on that point because of hardship and, with the allocation of increased hardship funds, the difficulties for the small minority that has been affected have been addressed. Indeed, that has been reported to the Education, Lifelong Learning and Culture Committee.

Pauline McNeill: I would be pleased if the cabinet secretary gave that response to my two constituents who, in the middle of their degrees, have found their incomes reduced. That is an injustice, and I do not understand why the cabinet secretary does not share that view.

I have written to the cabinet secretary on another issue: age discrimination within the system. In fairness, it has come about because of changes through the European convention on

human rights, but I understand that England has already reviewed the matter, and I ask the cabinet secretary to do the same. Age should not be a barrier to lifelong learning. I have a constituency case in which someone was turned away from the system because they were deemed to be too old to qualify for student support.

Many members have received representations from many constituents who have child care responsibilities and are pleading for changes to the student support system. The current system is becoming a barrier to parents who are trying to find their way in difficult circumstances. The system is piecemeal and uncertain, and there is a strong case for reforming it. We should consider the English system, in which parents' entitlements are more centralised. I support the idea that parents who go to university should be able to see what they can claim so that they can work out what they have to live on.

As Margaret Smith said, students will realise that the Opposition parties are making a serious attempt to improve their lives while they are at university. There is a clear call to consider student hardship now. Labour wants to focus on the poorest students. Even though the amount of money allocated is pitiful, we are making a serious attempt to play a constructive part in the consultation.

The relief of student hardship is a key issue in these hard economic times. Students will welcome the Parliament's focus on it.

09:44

Christina McKelvie (Central Scotland) (SNP): I am shocked by Claire Baker's motion—*[Interruption.]* Wait for it; it will be worth it. Despite the massive turmoil in the world economy, which has been caused by the unsustainable debt that her party leader and the Labour Government in London encouraged, she wants to pile more debt on to students before they have a chance to get started in life.

Labour is talking about loans of £7,000. What a tuition fee that would be for a poor student who was caught in the pitiless grip of Labour's failed economic policies. Not content with plunging the country into an economic vortex, in which Government debt is on target to be about 80 per cent of gross domestic product in four years' time, Labour politicians want to capture each individual and make them suffer for the misfortune of living under a Labour Government.

Throughout the UK there are record levels of personal debt, which has been encouraged by Labour's philosophy of borrow, buy and consume.

Margaret Smith: Does Christina McKelvie realise that many students are turning to commercial loans? Such loans certainly do not attract an interest rate of "0 per cent or lower"; the average rate appears to be about 15 per cent. Student loans start to be paid back when a graduate is earning £15,000; we want to deal with student hardship now.

Christina McKelvie: Margaret Smith need look no further for a response than a report from the Association of Scotland's Colleges, which concluded:

"A large majority of higher education students in colleges find their debt levels to be a significant problem and would far rather have greater financial hardship than be in debt."

Claire Baker: Will the member give way on her point about the ASC?

Christina McKelvie: I want to make progress.

Since 1997, Labour has encouraged people across our islands to borrow more than they can afford to borrow. Labour relaxed banking regulations to make irrational lending the norm. For Labour, location, location, location became far more important than education, education, education. Money, not wealth, has been the touchstone of Labour's years in power. There has been a fascination with piles of filthy lucre, with no idea how they would be paid for. Bankruptcies are increasing throughout the UK under Labour and more and more people are finding it impossible to survive under Gordon Brown's economic miracle. In Scotland, bankruptcies among students and graduates soared while Labour and the Lib Dems were in power. There was a 380 per cent increase in such bankruptcies between 1999 and 2007.

Thank goodness for the election of an SNP Government. The number of young people facing bankruptcy was cut by 11 per cent in our first year in office. How was that achieved? Not through the naive, simplistic and populist posturing in which Labour engages but through good, solid policy work. We abolished the graduate endowment fee. We put £84 million more into student support than Labour put in. We put £38 million into grants for up to 20,000 part-time students, as Fiona Hyslop said. I never thought that I would hear a Labour member complain about part-time students getting support from the Government.

Claire Baker: Does the member acknowledge that the part-time student grant of £500 goes towards the student's tuition fees and does not give them a penny to tackle their hardship issues?

Christina McKelvie: The grant reduces the overall burden by £500. I know students in colleges throughout Lanarkshire who welcomed it.

The SNP has put £16 million into student hardship funds—that is 14 per cent more than Labour put in.

It is unbelievable that Labour wants to move away from supporting students and prefers to drive students' economic prospects further underground. We all face decades of paying back the money that Labour is borrowing to try to bail itself out of the catastrophic failure of its economic and regulatory policies, so this is not the time to tell the people on whom we rely to create tomorrow's wealth that they must shoulder the burden of a massive personal debt that has been forced on them by the state. That would not be a good idea at any time, but it is barking mad when we are facing the economic tsunami that Labour created.

There is one comfort for us all: Labour is no longer in power in Scotland. We continue to suffer the effects of the mess that a Labour Government in London has made of our economy, but we are at least spared the double whammy of Labour making things worse in Scotland.

Instead of offering policies that might be good for the country and engaging in the debate to find the most appropriate way forward, Claire Baker, like the rest of her party, is more interested in trying to score party political points. While Labour continues to whinge and complain, the SNP will continue to make Scotland a better place to be. Why? Because we have got what it takes.

09:49

Karen Whitefield (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab): Given the promises that the SNP made during the election campaign in 2007, we might have thought that student hardship would be a thing of the past by now and that there would be no need for this debate. It might have been reasonable to assume that having done away with student debt, the Government would have moved on to improving the lives of students while they study.

We all know that the promise to wipe out student debt was no more than electoral smoke and mirrors. It would have cost an estimated £2 billion, so there was as much chance of the Government wiping out student debt as there was of it—let us see—introducing a local income tax, building a school or increasing the number of teachers in our schools and nurseries. I could go on. There have been so many broken promises, and I have not even mentioned the Scottish no-futures trust.

The cabinet secretary claimed that the cost of servicing student debt would not be £2 billion. The figure is irrelevant to Scotland's students; the point is that the SNP Government promised them that their debt would be written off. Our students deserve better: they deserve to be supported

during their time at college or university and they deserve to be properly funded at a time when jobs are becoming scarcer.

By focusing only on the graduate endowment, the SNP left Scottish students far worse off than their counterparts in England.

Fiona Hyslop: Is the Labour Party committed to reintroducing the graduate endowment fee?

Karen Whitefield: No, it is not. However, I make the point that although the cabinet secretary said, when she came to the Education, Lifelong Learning and Culture Committee to argue for abolition of the graduate endowment, that she was motivated by the story of a young woman who had to give up her university studies because she could not afford to continue, the abolition of the graduate endowment has done nothing to help a single student to continue to study in any of Scotland's colleges or universities.

We want to discuss student hardship in this debate. Scotland's students are worse off than their counterparts in England and Wales. The maximum that most students in Scotland can receive is £4,510, whereas students in England and Wales can receive up to £6,200. We argue that students in Scotland should be able to receive up to £7,000.

The Labour Party believes—indeed, all parties in Parliament, apart from the SNP, believe—that more funding must be targeted at supporting students while they study. That is why the three main Opposition parties have joined NUS Scotland in calling on the Government to use the additional £30 million that has been announced to ensure that our poorest students are guaranteed a minimum income of £7,000. That would be an effective way of attracting young people from our poorest communities back into further and higher education. Far too few of the young people in my constituency go on to further and higher education. That needs to be tackled.

We need more funding for child care, as Murdo Fraser said. Like many members, I have been inundated with e-mails from students who attend the University of the West of Scotland about the closure of the nursery at the Hamilton campus. Many students said that the removal of the service would make it impossible for them to continue their courses.

Keith Brown: Will the member give way?

Karen Whitefield: I need to wind up.

We call on the Government to increase by £500 the grant for the poorest students who are in receipt of the full young students bursary.

The Government often says that it wants to listen to and to work in partnership with other

parties. All the Opposition parties stand ready to work in partnership with the Government, if it is willing to listen. Student representatives throughout Scotland want the Scottish Government to accept our proposals, which are affordable and respond to the explicit requests of Scottish students. What could be simpler? I support the motion in Claire Baker's name.

09:54

Ian McKee (Lothians) (SNP): It is with slight trepidation that I return to debate an education-related subject, having taken some stick—if I may put it that way—for my remarks on corporal punishment two weeks ago. However, I am so struck by the opportunism and cynicism that are exhibited in the Labour motion that I cannot remain silent.

A stranger to the Parliament might gather from the exchanges in the debate so far that all was rosy in the student garden until the SNP came along two years ago and ruined things, but the truth is very different. Student finances deteriorated under the watch of what are now the major Opposition parties here for more than 20 years. We moved from the days when a student grant could keep a student in some comfort for the year to the point in 2007 when just about every student faced not only hardship but mountainous debt. However, the Opposition parties have the cheek to criticise the SNP for not putting all this right in a mere two years.

George Foulkes (Lothians) (Lab): Will the member give way?

Ian McKee: If Lord Foulkes wishes to apologise for his cynicism and opportunism, I suggest that he do so in his speech later on.

It is no wonder that the Opposition parties are huddling together for warmth today.

Members will recall that "Supporting a Smarter Scotland: A consultation on supporting learners in higher education" set out a three-point plan for student funding in Scotland. The goals were to abolish the unfair graduate endowment fee, to replace student loans with a means-tested system of grants, and to service the debt of Scotland-domiciled and resident loan borrowers. We have already seen the achievement of the first of those goals, with the burden of debt on graduating students being reduced by £2,300. The £30 million extra boost to the student support budget for 2010-11 will begin to address the second goal. The cabinet secretary has pointed out that, in addition, and among other dynamic measures that the Government has introduced, an improvement to the discretionary fund is available for education institutions to distribute, based on their assessments of individual student need. The fund

now stands at £16.1 million, which represents an above-inflation increase of 14.6 per cent in two years.

Much progress is being made. The SNP Government has already taken more steps to help students than any previous Administration. The Opposition's squawks of protest about broken promises do not take into account the fact that, because of UK Government mismanagement of finances, the incoming Scottish Government in 2007 faced the tightest financial settlement from Westminster in the history of the Parliament.

Student hardship and graduate debt can be serious problems, and the prospect of either may inhibit some people from entering tertiary education altogether. Several reports have found that debt, or even the prospect of debt, is a major factor when students consider dropping out from their courses.

Why do I accuse the movers of the motion of cynicism and opportunism? I do so because they put in place the present system, which they now discredit, and then—with their Lib-Dem colleagues—maintained throughout their joint terms of office a loan-based system of student support that led to 370,000 students and graduates owing more than £2 billion to the state at the end of the 2007-08 financial year. That means that students graduating from a four-year course now face debts of around £10,000, with the highest level of debt generally being incurred by students from families that have the lowest incomes. Furthermore, because mature students are not eligible for grants, they can graduate with up to £18,000 of debt.

I welcome the idea of the cross-party approach that the motion calls for, but support for our students should not be a political football. The motion's cross-party gesture is immediately shown to be hypocritical because the next phrase in the motion seeks to rubbish the Government party—the biggest party in the Parliament. If Labour is looking for genuine cross-party support, it is going a very funny way about it. The suggestion by the member who moved the motion that she is looking for a white flag, rather than an olive branch, hardly suggests that she is taking into account the need for cross-party co-operation.

We need to work together and we must wait for the result of the recent consultation to be analysed and discussed. I put it to you, Presiding Officer, that Fiona Hyslop's amendment is one that will allow us to go forward and work together for the future of Scottish students.

09:59

George Foulkes (Lothians) (Lab): Presiding Officer, you and others may be aware that I stood

earlier this year, probably unwisely and certainly unsuccessfully, for the post of rector of the University of Edinburgh. However, I was able to hear the views of many hundreds of students, which I will try to reflect in my speech.

The University of Edinburgh is a world-renowned education institution that has a hugely impressive record of research, particularly in the growth industries of bioscience, informatics and regenerative medicine, which will power Scotland's economy in the future. The university has 26,000 students from 120 countries around the world. However, several thousand of those are Scottish students who rely on the SNP Government to fund not just the university, but themselves.

We heard from Murdo Fraser and Pauline McNeill about the SNP's broken promises to dump student debt. We have also heard again the tired rebuttal from Fiona Hyslop that—allegedly—student debt is falling. SNP members might have convinced themselves of that, and might even have convinced a number of wet-behind-the-ears journalists, but all the students to whom I spoke during my rectoral campaign are not convinced at all. They feel totally abandoned by the SNP.

The current president of the students representative council at the University of Edinburgh set up a Facebook petition, with a statement to which 700 students signed up:

"Fiona Hyslop fails to understand that many students are struggling as much as anyone else. Our families are suffering from the credit crunch. The job market is drying up. If the SNP allow poorer students to be priced out of education, they will be allowing a short term recession to condemn a generation."

The cabinet secretary said rightly that the amount that students owe the Government is falling—Murdo Fraser pointed out that, thanks to the Westminster Labour Government, it is interest-free debt—but students have increasing debt with, for example, Topshop, Barclaycard and Visa, with high interest rates. That is a complete travesty, particularly when the SNP Government has the power to do something about it but lacks the will to do so. For example, as has been said, the Government could extend the loan thresholds to match those in England and Wales, but it will not. It could agree a guaranteed minimum income for students of £7,000, as Karen Whitefield argued eloquently just a few moments ago, but it will not. It could also provide more money for campus student hardship funds, but it will not.

There are nearly 100,000 part-time and full-time students in Edinburgh, who are crucial to the economic future of our country. They need support from the Government, but have been told by the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning that they should grow up and stop

complaining—that was a patronising and insulting remark. The student community feels totally let down by the SNP and by the cabinet secretary personally. Whatever we might think about top-up fees—whether they were right or wrong—at least the student community know what it was up against. It knew the rules of engagement and the nature of the debate. The SNP's higher education policy and the complete lack of principle that forms its shaky foundations are an enigma and anathema to the student community.

Students want a guaranteed minimum income so that they can keep commercial debts low and part-time hours of work down. However, what they get from the Government is a raft of arrogance, ignorance and broken promises.

The Presiding Officer: We come to closing speeches. I ask members to keep reasonably close to the times that they have been given.

10:02

Hugh O'Donnell (Central Scotland) (LD): Education debates are becoming a regular Thursday morning gig, which is not necessarily a bad thing, given the importance to Scotland of student hardship, funding for students and education generally. Rather than rehash the arguments that have been adequately expressed in the Labour motion and in the speeches of Margaret Smith and Murdo Fraser, I will reflect on a couple of points.

Much of the Government's defence—such as it is—on funding is founded on what it has done, not what it said it would do. Ultimately, that is why students are so angry at the situation that they are in, because it is not what was promised. I received a letter from the Minister for Schools and Skills, Mr Brown, in which he states that the Government did not know how much student funding was going to cost. Frankly, it is not acceptable to put that to the public.

I am pleased that we have cross-party Opposition support for the direction of travel on the issue, and I am pleased to have a somewhat conciliatory amendment to the motion from the cabinet secretary. It is encouraging that we might eventually develop a more mature debate around the issue.

However, I have some questions for the minister. What action will the Government take to deal with the anticipated 40,000 applications that our colleges expect to receive over the course of the next few months? What is the cabinet secretary's view on the Scottish Higher and Further Education Funding Council's apparent guidance to colleges that such places should be funded by reducing courses that involve less than 10 hours? Furthermore, what is her view on the

funding council's apparent direction to colleges that they should focus on school leavers? Given that we currently face a dramatic and serious recession, we must surely strike a balance between school leavers and adults returning, mostly to further education colleges, to upskill and retrain. In my region, 300 people in Larbert might face that prospect, so I would be interested to know whether the Government has a cohesive approach on that. People who are retraining will also be students who are in hardship.

In order to comply with the Presiding Officer's request on timings, I will simply leave those questions in the air and hope that I hear from the SNP Government how it will address them. I am pleased to see that we have consensus among the Opposition parties in supporting the minimum income guarantee as the best way forward to reduce student hardship.

The Presiding Officer: Although I am always grateful when members give the chair a little bit more time, I should say that we are not that desperate, so members should feel free to take up the time that they have been offered.

10:06

Elizabeth Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): As my colleague Murdo Fraser made clear, we are pleased to support Labour's motion this morning. In my summing up speech, I want to dwell on three main issues.

First, there has been a distinct failure on the part of the Scottish Government to prioritise appropriately the financial problems that are faced by students today. In the current economic recession, increased numbers of people want places at college and university as they seek to retrain for a very difficult job market. The statistics that were released last week show just how difficult that job market is, as do the tertiary education sector's statistics on the number of applications that they receive that are not from school leavers. If we add in the fourfold increase in student bankruptcy in the past 10 years and the increased number of applications for university hardship funds—the University of Abertay Dundee has already run out of such funds twice this year—we can see why the student body is so desperately concerned.

Secondly, in our opinion, the Scottish Government has made a fundamental error of judgment in seeking to increase the level of grants, rather than loans, that are available to students. That is not good value for money and does not widen access to university education, which the SNP election manifesto claimed was such an important commitment.

Fiona Hyslop: Elizabeth Smith makes a serious point about the need for value for money in public finance. A genuine problem with student loans is that servicing the loan involves a cost to the public purse of a third of the value of the loan. Does she recognise that an over-reliance on the loans system involves inherent problems for the public finances?

Elizabeth Smith: There are complexities, but I believe firmly that loans are a much better option than the grants system. We must recognise that the problem is now acute. Before the economic downturn, many students could supplement their student loans with income from part-time jobs, but such jobs are now more difficult to find, so students are left with no choice but to borrow from credit card companies. That is a major issue for students.

As Murdo Fraser and Claire Baker both said, a much better use of the £30 million of available funds would be to target the poorest students. The money could be used to help about 19,000 students who currently receive the full young students bursary and a further 15,000 students who receive part of that bursary. On top of that, we propose providing a £200 increase for all students by increasing the amount that is allocated through the non-means-tested loan, which in turn would help about 78,000 students. We would also provide close to £2 million in discretionary funds. Those measures would go a long way towards relieving the current pressure on child care and hardship funds, although it is good to hear the commitment that the cabinet secretary gave on that issue.

We believe that our proposals are the first step to addressing the urgent need to support our poorest students. Our proposals would tackle student hardship and help students to move away from a situation in which they become permanently trapped in debt. By supporting the Labour motion, we have shown that we are ready to engage with other parties in order to progress the proposals. They are affordable, achievable and fair and could be delivered within the £30 million that is already available.

Finally, let me say a word on the on-going debate about tertiary education. Our universities and colleges are to be warmly congratulated for their success. As George Foulkes said, their qualities are vital to ensure Scotland's continuing success in the future. They should not be compromised by political dogma or hollow rhetoric in an election manifesto. Unfortunately, that is a very real fear if the Scottish Government continues to fail to understand properly the dilemmas—both academic and financial—that provide major headaches for our tertiary education institutions as they struggle to maintain their competitive

advantage and the international reputation that they have spent hundreds of years establishing. Students, by definition, are caught up in those dilemmas. It is wrong that students are unable to rely on Parliament to address those fundamental problems, many of which have been eloquently expressed by student groups both privately and publicly.

No one doubts that the questions that surround the future of tertiary education, its staff and its students are complex, but they will not be answered if we do not recognise the true extent of the problem that we face. That is why we need a new approach, and that is why we are pleased to support Labour's motion.

10:11

The Minister for Schools and Skills (Keith Brown): Today's debate has, like the previous recent education debate, been wide ranging. As Hugh O'Donnell almost said:

"It's like déjà vu all over again."

However, as several members have mentioned, higher education is important, so it is important that we send the clear message to students and graduates that the Government values highly the contribution that they make to society. We will do, and are doing, all that we can to support students at what is perhaps the most important stage of their lives.

Although this might not be obvious from some comments in the debate, the Government has already done a great deal, as the cabinet secretary said, to address both hardship and debt. Before I reiterate some of our policy decisions that have demonstrated our support for students, let me just contrast those with the position of other parties. First, we have the £500 million of cuts coming next year and each year afterwards from Labour—

George Foulkes: No, no.

Keith Brown: Lord Foulkes might want to wish that away, but that is the hard reality that faces this Government and the people of Scotland.

On manifesto commitments, the Lib Dems have recently ditched their idea—not even a manifesto commitment—of making £800 million of cuts. It would be interesting to know how they would fund the things they want while taking £800 million out of the public purse. For the Conservatives, of course, the £500 million in cuts cannot come soon enough and would be brought forward. That is the background against which the decisions that we have taken—

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

Keith Brown: No.

The abolition of the graduate endowment tax has saved 50,000 students £2,300 each year. It is worth mentioning that in the context of the different attitude to debt that now exists in society. People are more frightened of debt than they were, as Ian McKee mentioned. The prospect of taking on debt is always a disincentive, but it is much accentuated when we have, as a country, a massively increased debt that will overhang our students in future years.

Claire Baker: Will the minister commit to giving serious consideration to the proposal from the Opposition parties that students should be allowed to choose whether to borrow the amount that is currently available to them as a loan or to take a reduced amount as grant? That could halve the average amount of graduate debt.

Keith Brown: The cabinet secretary's amendment already commits us to considering the proposals. It is worth mentioning that a loan of £1,000 costs the Scottish Government £310 in addition to the £1,000, whereas a grant of £1,000 costs us £1,000. Obviously, that must be a factor in our considerations.

As the cabinet secretary and Christina McKelvie mentioned, we have provided £16 million a year to institutions to alleviate student hardship. That is an increase of 14.6 per cent, which is a huge rise. For the first time, we have also uprated the higher education discretionary funds in line with other student support.

I will pick up one or two others points that have been made in the debate. Pauline McNeill might be interested to know that we have had no further requests from the University of Glasgow for the additional hardship funds that we have provided. The same is true—I mention this for Karen Whitefield's benefit—for the University of the West of Scotland and for the University of Edinburgh. In recognition of the increased demand on such funds, we have provided additional funding that is being used to meet that additional demand.

Other members pointed to the obvious need for the recession to feature in our decisions. We cannot take decisions without acknowledging both the recession and the increased demands that are being made on the education system. On the issues that Hugh O'Donnell raised, if he writes to me, I will respond to the serious points that he made about the increased demand on colleges and so on. Those issues are not part of this debate, but perhaps reflect the debate that he wanted to have.

The budget cuts of about £500 million that we face mean that we will have to make hard decisions. Despite that, we are adding £30 million

to student support, which has given rise to this and previous debates.

The consultation process has been open to everybody and we want to take account of everyone's views. I therefore question why Labour's motion gives us only three weeks to analyse the responses and to make decisions. That is not a proper way in which to deal with the responses that have been received from a wide range of people.

Margaret Smith: Will the minister give way?

Keith Brown: No. Margaret Smith would not take an intervention from me.

The Labour motion does not give us sufficient time to consider those responses, but the Liberal Democrats went even further in wanting us to make decisions before we had even finished the consultation. There is, at present, a competition to find a new quote from the people of Scotland to put on the Parliament building. The last thing that we want is for it to be, "What's the point of consulting us?"

Claire Baker *rose—*

Keith Brown: I have already taken an intervention. I would like to make progress.

The Scotsman interviewed four universities, and only one—the University of Abertay Dundee—said that it had requested additional discretionary hardship funding in the current year. I think that I am right in saying that that request was met by the Government. In the current year, institutions have requested a total of £882,000 in additional discretionary funds to tackle student hardship, which is about £226,000 less than was requested in the previous two years. By and large—although it is not true of all universities and institutions—universities are meeting their increased demands from the resources that are provided by the Government.

The Government has made it clear in the debate that we take student hardship seriously. That is underscored by our commitment of additional resources to tackle the problem. We have invested a great deal of additional money in student support—far more than the previous Administration. The cabinet secretary mentioned the £22 million under the previous Labour-Lib Dem Administration and the £44 million under the present Administration. In addition, we have run a consultation on how best to spend the £30 million in additional funds that have been allocated.

The Labour Party is pressing us to commit to a specific approach before we have given due consideration to all the responses. We do not want to do that, at this stage. We are trying, as has been mentioned, to be conciliatory in our amendment and to take all views into account. We

will consider Labour's proposal, but we must consider the wide range of other proposals, as is only fair to those who have taken the time to respond. We are happy to work with Labour, the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats, but we call on them to make specific proposals and to say where they would take money from to fund their proposals. One or two members have said that they would provide more than the £30 million: it is incumbent on them to say from where that money would come.

It is essential that we work together for the benefit of students in Scotland. As our amendment is, the motion is relatively conciliatory at the start, and talks about a cross-party approach. However, as Ian McKee said, it quickly degenerates into an attack on one party, which is perhaps not the best basis for a cross-party approach. The amendment that has been moved by the cabinet secretary states that we want to work together on the issue. I ask the other parties to respect that and to vote for our amendment.

10:17

Rhona Brankin (Midlothian) (Lab): Claire Baker said that the SNP has failed to tackle the growing hardship problems that are faced by the poorest students in Scotland. She is quite right, and her words have been echoed by many members. Student support levels in Scotland are far below those in the rest of the UK and many students are forced to rely on commercial credit which, when it is available, is an expensive way to fund one's education. I therefore make no apology for repeating what other members have said about the SNP's policy to dump the debt.

As with the first-time buyers grant, the local income tax and the policy on maintaining teacher numbers, the SNP's slogan, "It's Time to Dump the Debt", was just that—a slogan. It was a policy that the SNP never had any intention of delivering, and it was never brought to Parliament. However, rather than admit that the SNP has broken its promise on student debt, Fiona Hyslop now denies making the promise in the first place. That makes one wonder how anybody can trust anything the cabinet secretary says. Students feel let down by the SNP, and with good reason. Their mistake was to believe what Alex Salmond and Fiona Hyslop told them in the SNP manifesto.

Nevertheless, it is not too late for the SNP to do the right thing by students. As we have heard from many members today, Scottish student support levels are considerably lower than those in the rest of the UK. Combined with the economic downturn, that means that hardship funds and child care funds are being stretched to breaking point at colleges and universities throughout Scotland, as those institutions are forced to top up completely

inadequate funding. The SNP's wholly inadequate response to that challenge has been to set aside an additional £30 million for student support next year, with an insistence that the money should not be used to increase the availability of student loans. As we have heard, that will have the effect of driving students to commercial lenders who, even with the base rate at an historic low of 0.5 per cent, can charge an annual percentage rate of upwards of 20 per cent.

In July 2007, Fiona Hyslop wrote in *The Times Higher Education Supplement*:

"We believe it is wrong that graduates begin their working life encumbered by financial pressures".

Opposition members cannot see how the SNP can reconcile that statement with the policy of leaving it to commercial lenders to fill its student funding hole. It was no surprise that Parliament overwhelmingly rejected the options that were put forward in the Government's consultation document in March.

The joint principles that have been talked about this morning rightly focus on the provision of additional support for the poorest students. We must reduce barriers to higher education, and tackling hardship must be a key part of that. I am concerned that, although higher education participation rates have generally risen over the past decade, there are still pockets around the country—including in my constituency—where, in common with a number of former industrial areas, the number of university entrants is lower now than it has been in the past. There will be a variety of reasons for that. However, for students from poorer households, concerns about funding should never be a factor.

Fiona Hyslop and Keith Brown made valiant attempts to be upbeat in the debate, claiming that the Government has spent millions of pounds on student support. However, current full-time students know that there is not one penny more in their pockets. Christina McKelvie put the case that Scotland's colleges have made; however, we have significant concerns about the robustness of their research. We do not believe that they distinguish between commercial debt and Government debt, and they do not tackle student hardship.

Fiona Hyslop: Rhona Brankin mentioned Government debt. There is a 30 per cent charge to the Government for every £1,000 that is loaned. From where does she think the cost of servicing the Government loan should come?

Rhona Brankin: The cabinet secretary talks about the cost to the Government of loans: I presume that she does not know that the Scottish Government pays 31p in the pound while the UK Government pays the rest. Under that policy, Scotland gets £458 million from Westminster for

Scottish students. I am sure that she would be supportive of that. We simply must tackle the problem of student hardship.

Keith Brown asked for the detail of the policy that we propose. A lot of work has been undertaken by students and the three Opposition parties on the issue and we have much detail, which we would like to discuss with the Government. It is rich of Keith Brown to ask for detail when, for months, my colleague Claire Baker has been using the freedom of information procedure to try to get details of the Government's proposals. We want to work consensually with the Government. It is a minority Government and it is time for it to listen to the majority in Parliament.

I pay tribute to the students and their leaders who have come together to make their voices heard on student hardship. We are now in the highly unusual situation of the main Opposition parties and student leaders joining forces to ensure that the minority Government listens and that it tackles student hardship instead of just focusing on graduate debt. We and the students believe that the ministers have already let down students unforgivably with their empty promise to dump the debt. Their amendment today is far too woolly and simply indicates that they are listening to no one but themselves. Now is the time for ministers to show some humility, to show that they are listening to students and to do the right thing. I urge members to support the motion in the name of Claire Baker.

Supporting Employment

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Alasdair Morgan): The next item of business is a debate on motion S3M-4187, in the name of John Park, on supporting employment in Scotland.

10:24

John Park (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): I welcome the opportunity to open this debate on behalf of the Labour Party.

Day after day, we hear of more Scots facing unemployment. Behind every statistic is a person who has lost their job and who will face a level of uncertainty in their life that will affect not only them but their families. I am sure that, like me, many MSPs regularly meet constituents who have lost their jobs or who need help in dealing with the consequences of losing their jobs. We shoulder that individual responsibility on a day-to-day basis, but we also shoulder a collective responsibility—here in Scotland and at United Kingdom level—to ensure that as much as possible is being done to support businesses and to support both people who are in work and those who are out of work.

The Scottish Government has at its disposal some very important levers for economic development, workplace training and supporting people who face redundancy. Through the devolution settlement, we can have Scottish solutions to Scottish problems while benefiting from being part of a wider UK economy.

I am sure that the Minister for Enterprise, Energy and Tourism and the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning will hear concerns in the debate about the gap between Government rhetoric and the reality for our communities and people who are concerned about their employment. In times such as these, people look to Governments for help. That is why our motion focuses on a number of key suggestions that we believe will help to ensure that the Scottish Government can more effectively deliver help and assistance to people throughout Scotland.

In this year's budget negotiations, the Labour Party focused on apprenticeships and support for people facing redundancy because we believed that that would mean that Government support would be more effective. We were happy that the Government agreed to a 73 per cent increase in apprenticeship numbers and said that it would guarantee that all apprentices facing redundancy would be able to complete their training. We were happy not for ourselves but for the thousands of Scots—including many young men and women—whom those measures would support.

However, since that agreement in February, more than 1,000 apprentices have been made redundant. Only 321 have found alternative employment. Some 547 still need to find a way to complete their training and, most worryingly, 154 have just disappeared into thin air. That figure of 154 might not sound like a lot, but if we were even to make a conservative estimate that most of them had completed about 18 months of training, that amounts to 200 years' worth of training potentially down the drain.

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning (Fiona Hyslop): I know that the member has taken a keen interest in this area. I can tell him that we will be making announcements shortly about further aspects of the apprenticeship scheme proposals. Does he recognise that the statistics for those not completing their training are similar to those for previous years? Does he accept that our big challenge is to ensure that those who can be placed in other employment are supported? Will he support us when we bring forward proposals in that regard in the next few weeks?

John Park: I am coming to what the Scottish Government can do to support the apprentices, but I will first deal with the comparison that has been made with Northern Ireland. There, 300 apprentices have been made redundant in the period that we are talking about and only 11 have disappeared. Clearly, Northern Ireland is getting something right and we are, perhaps, not dealing with the issue in the way that we should.

We recognise that supporting redundant apprentices and expanding the system is a challenge, and that there are no easy options right now. That is why we were pleased that the Scottish Government also agreed to hold an apprenticeship summit. I was fortunate enough to be able to attend that event in April, along with key people from training and industry. At the summit, I heard many ideas and suggestions about ways in which redundant apprentices could be supported, but those ideas have to be delivered.

Timescales are tight, which is why our motion calls on the Scottish Government to outline how it intends to deliver the extra 7,800 apprenticeships places agreed for 2009. We need it to do that before the summer recess. Failure to deliver will have a negative impact on our skills base not only next year and the year after that but three, four and five years down the line.

On 1 April, at the Scottish National Party's spring conference, the First Minister announced 75,000 training places. We need clarity on those figures. When the skills strategy was launched in September 2007, we were promised 50,000 training places over the course of this parliamentary session. Could the Cabinet

Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning clarify whether that figure of 75,000 is the new total number of training places that will be delivered or is additional to the previously announced 50,000 training places, which is clearly what the First Minister hinted at when he spoke about those “new opportunities”. Our motion calls for more information about those opportunities because, in the current economic climate, the public expect Government to be about action, not just headlines.

The support that is provided by partnership action for continuing employment—PACE—for individuals facing redundancy is vital. However, from previous recessions, we have learned that it is also vital that we support viable businesses to keep people in work so that the most can be made of the upturn.

Previously, I have highlighted steps that have been taken in Northern Ireland to support redundant apprentices, and our motion also highlights the ProAct initiative that has been developed in Wales by our other Celtic neighbours. For those who do not know the programme, its aim is

“to help businesses cope with the downturn, and use quiet time to develop staff skills ready for the upturn.”

ProAct is available to businesses that have introduced short-time working and face the threat of redundancies. It covers training costs of up to £2,000 per individual and a wage subsidy of up to £2,000 per individual during that training.

As I said earlier, there will always be Scottish solutions to Scottish problems, but that should not prevent us from considering good ideas from other countries. In many ways, we are similar to Wales, particularly in terms of the size and spread of our small businesses, so we should give the ProAct initiative our full consideration.

In conclusion, I would like to say a little about the Scottish Government’s economic recovery programme. One of the things that have surprised many in this recession has been the pace of change. Many things that would have been unthinkable this time last year have been utterly necessary for the economic recovery.

The pace of change is the main reason for our final suggestion this morning, which is that the Scottish Government bring back to the Parliament a renewed economic recovery programme before the summer recess. That programme needs to cover the issues that I have spoken about and tell us how the 7,800 apprentices will be delivered and what plans will be in place to support the redundant apprentices who have not found a way to complete their training. The Government also needs to tell us whether it will consider the ProAct initiative that has been forced through in Wales.

I am sure that the Scottish Government is in regular dialogue with industry stakeholders, particularly now, because of the problems that we have, and that many of those stakeholders will be making constructive suggestions about the type of support that they need in order to help to support economic activity. However, as is the case with the apprenticeship summit, dialogue is good but subsequent action from Government is far better.

I move,

That the Parliament is concerned that 34,000 extra Scots were out of a job in the last year and that many live under the threat of redundancy; recognises that government support for business and individuals is vital in the current climate; calls on the Scottish Government to examine the ProAct scheme developed by the Welsh Assembly Government, which supports businesses on short-time working, with a view to developing a similar initiative in Scotland; further recognises the seriousness of the economic situation in Scotland; believes that the Scottish Government should bring forward a new and revised economic recovery programme prior to summer recess, and calls for such a plan to outline how the Scottish Government intends to deliver the extra 7,800 apprenticeship places agreed for 2009 and the 75,000 training places announced by the First Minister on 18 April 2009.

10:32

The Minister for Enterprise, Energy and Tourism (Jim Mather): I welcome the debate. Quite rightly, during such difficult times, there have been calls for radical action to be taken to protect employment. The Scottish Government is extremely alert to the need to support employment for people throughout Scotland. We are keen to see skills and key workers retained in sectors of the Scottish economy as we work towards the economic recovery. We are keen to do whatever we can to empower Scottish businesses to take the fullest advantage of the opportunities that lie ahead. That is why we are carefully considering calls for wage subsidies and other interventions to protect and sustain employment.

As we move through the current economic crisis, there has been much discussion about the merits or otherwise of wage subsidies, and various models have emerged in various countries, including the Welsh ProAct model that John Park mentioned. That model has clear advantages for the Welsh economy and was chosen by the National Assembly for Wales because of the scale and shape of the Welsh economy. However, the Scottish economy is different in structural composition from that of Wales and is at a different stage of economic development, and we have to consider what will work well in the Scottish context. The Government is actively considering options for wage subsidy, including models to support individual sectors, models to support those facing redundancy and models to support

those moving into the workforce for the first time during an economic downturn.

Those responses are all possible, but we have to ask questions about their cost. We have to consider the long-term consequences of all our decisions, including the possible unintended adverse consequences. Additionally, we have a duty to compare the long-term value that alternative strategies can provide. It is important to consider the evidence and analyse the potential negative impacts of any wage subsidy intervention, including substitution and replacement effects, which involve existing workers being replaced with subsidised workers either in the same firm or in other firms and either in the same area or in other areas. We must also consider whether the employment that might seem to have been generated by a subsidy would have happened regardless of the interventions. All those risks have to be weighed up when considering the value of any subsidy model.

Research into the effectiveness of previous wage subsidy schemes suggests that they are most successful when they are targeted and time limited.

Jeremy Purvis (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD): I know that any scheme would have to be appropriate for Scotland. We have been told repeatedly by the Government to consider examples from other countries—usually small, independent European nations. The National Assembly for Wales announced its measures on 2 January. In the past five months, has the Government concluded any review of the matters that the minister is talking about?

Jim Mather: The member must take on board the fact that, as I said a moment ago, there are differences between what is happening in Wales and what is happening here. We need to examine the evidence. There must be a sound rationale to underpin any programme of support. The costs must be weighed against the benefits of alternatives and the financial implications of even tightly focused and time-limited wage subsidy interventions must be taken into account, as they are likely to be considerable.

That is especially true given the significant fiscal constraints that Scotland faces. Scotland does not gain any benefit from an additional or maintained flow of pay-as-you-earn income, schedule D corporation tax or national insurance, so we must analyse all the options to ensure that we support employers in the current situation. We must adapt the options to the specific challenges that we face here, and we must discuss them openly and inclusively.

It is tempting to try to circumvent some of those processes, but that will lead only to short-term

reactive decision making, which will in turn lead to unintended consequences such as those that I have discussed. Ultimately, it will slow our progress towards a rational solution. We must evolve approaches that will genuinely and sustainably support our businesses and employees over the longer term.

We know from previous recessions that even after growth resumes, the impact of a recession can run for a number of years, and unemployment is a lagging indicator. We are conscious that precipitate action could fail to deliver the cost benefits that we desire, which is why we are—quite rightly—analysing the options and planning a Scottish response. We are prepared to discuss that response widely, objectively and rationally.

Members are familiar with the decisive and rapid action that we have taken to date as part of the economic recovery programme to help Scottish families and households. Since last summer, we have consistently taken action to support jobs in our communities. We have doubled the resources of PACE, and there have been notable successes with Barclaycard and Goldfish, Vestas, the Rosyth to Zeebrugge ferry and others with whom we are working to try to get a phoenix to rise from the ashes.

As John Park saw in the manufacturing session that we ran, the Scottish manufacturing advisory service is directly beneficial and has a huge fan following. It is doubling its number of consultants, and I expect it to cross-pollinate other sectors of the economy. It advocates the things that work, such as focusing on the customer and on quality. We are committed to continuing that process, and to strengthening the skills and the key capabilities in the Scottish economy.

We are taking forward the economic strategy to increase sustainable economic growth in Scotland. We were right to make that our central purpose back in May 2007, and it is still right now. Despite the downturn, key elements in the Scottish economy are still discovering and exploiting opportunities for growth.

There is still much activity in the oil and gas sector, even with the depressed prices. That is important—people in that sector are telling us that they made mistakes in the 1980s in releasing people whom they later needed when the accelerator was ready to be pushed again, and that they are not making the same mistake this time around. There is an equally huge amount of activity in the renewables sector, as was highlighted in yesterday's announcement. Much was happening at the all-energy conference in Aberdeen; and we are continuing the support for apprenticeships to which John Park referred earlier, and on which my colleague will expand in a moment.

The key point of our amendment is that we want to go forward openly with colleagues in the Parliament to reach the right conclusions. Those conclusions, will, I hope, pass the test of time and meet Scotland's requirements in the long term.

I move amendment S3M-4187.2, to leave out from "with" to first "Scotland" and insert:

"to establish whether or not a scheme would benefit Scotland's economic recovery".

10:38

Jeremy Purvis (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD): Liberal Democrats welcome the opportunity to take stock and look at the future, and we are pleased that John Park has brought the debate to the chamber.

The Scottish Government has said on a number of occasions in the past few months that the environment with regard to unemployment is stronger in Scotland and that Scotland is faring better than other parts of the UK. From some readings of the statistics, I can appreciate why the Government says that, but if we take a closer look at what is happening in our communities and examine the situation sector by sector, we see a picture of regrettable diffidence from the Government.

That is not a personal comment against the Minister for Enterprise, Energy and Tourism, whom I hold in high regard, but we need action rather than assertion. We welcomed some measures that the Government has announced, such as the accelerated capital expenditure, which we are told weekly is supporting 5,000 jobs. However, if we examine the information that Parliament has at its disposal, it seems that only half of the £323 million that it is asserted is being accelerated has been identified. We do not even know whether the Government is on course to deliver all the accelerated capital within the current financial year.

We supported the accelerated capital, but we did not know that it would be at the heart of party politics over the presentation of budget information by the Scottish National Party Government and the Treasury in London. All the accelerated capital is baselined into the current financial year, which skews the debate in relation to the coming years. That is not the correct context in which to consider a proper way forward.

In the Borders, which I represent, 1,041 people have lost their jobs in the past year, according to official Scottish Government statistics. If we use that as a per capita indicator, it is broadly equivalent to the loss of 20,000 jobs in urban Glasgow. That is the scale of the crisis that is affecting the economy now. It is not a case of

waiting to assess something in due course during the year—action is required.

I appeal to the minister to look at examples of schemes in other parts of the UK, one of which has now been in place for five months. If there are genuine reasons why that method is not applicable to Scotland, there has been sufficient time for the Government to have examined, assessed and reviewed it; to have reached the conclusion that it is not appropriate; and to have brought that conclusion to the Parliament.

The textiles sector in particular and the manufacturing sector overall have seen what the Welsh Assembly Government has done. The ProAct scheme is not a minor scheme—it is part-funded by the European social fund, which is at the Scottish Government's disposal too, and it is targeted to support 12,000 people. It is a targeted, innovative measure, and it is supporting a number of jobs that is way above what the Scottish Government claims to be supporting by accelerating capital, of which only half appears to have been identified. My constituents are therefore having to make the awful choice to take redundancy rather than moving to short-time pay levels that they cannot live on. They are looking at their counterparts in Wales, where there is some form of alternative. I appeal to the Government to consider that scheme.

We are debating this issue in the context of the Government's decision before the recession to directly cut the budget of Scottish Enterprise—not the head count or the operational budget but the direct business support budgets. The college and university budgets are flatlining—according to the Government's own figures, from 2009-10, there is a real-terms cut in that budget of 0.5 per cent, even using the revised gross domestic product deflators.

Fiona Hyslop: Will the member give way on that point?

Jeremy Purvis: I am anxious about my time, but I will give way to the cabinet secretary.

Fiona Hyslop: Is the member aware that the higher education spend has increased in real terms by 2.9 per cent over the current spending review period? Is he aware that, for Skills Development Scotland, the training budgets are up and the administration and back-room costs are down?

Jeremy Purvis: I will address each of those points directly. The figures that the Government published in November 2007—which appeared in the now infamous table—indicated that the Government was able to use the real-terms growth figures only because it evenly spread out one year's capital expenditure over a three-year

period. A note to that table, which was published by the Government, states:

"The effects of additional capital funding allocated in 2007/8 have been spread evenly across the SR07 period for illustrative purposes."

We do not need information from the Government "for illustrative purposes"—we need places in colleges and support for students.

With regard to Skills Development Scotland, I suspect that the cabinet secretary did not see—and I therefore refer her to—the evidence that the Finance Committee received two weeks ago from Skills Development Scotland, which showed a direct cut in the programmes that were available to it.

It is in that context that we must consider the direct cuts in the budgets of Scottish Enterprise and the colleges. We have received evidence that, in my area, there has been a 72 per cent increase in applications to Jewel and Esk Valley College in Midlothian and a 20 per cent increase in applications to Borders College. Colleges will be turning away many more students, as they simply do not have the capacity. They are operating from a lower base because the Government flatlined the budget.

Investing our way out of this recession will be crucial for future jobs and skills, but the Government's baseline is making that job harder. The Parliament has to tackle that job and it has to do so urgently.

I move amendment S3M-4187.1, to insert at end:

“; regrets the flat-lining of budgets for colleges and universities in the spending review period announced in 2007 and the dramatic real-terms cuts in operational funding for Scottish Enterprise and the new agency, Skills Development Scotland; expresses concern at the impact that this will have on the sector's ability to accommodate increased training demand in the workforce, and fears that this could lead to a slower recovery for Scotland from the recession.”

10:45

Derek Brownlee (South of Scotland) (Con): In his opening speech, John Park struck the right tone when he talked about the human cost of unemployment, which not only affects those who have lost their jobs but hangs over the heads of those who fear that they might. That is a significant concern, and I was interested to read in its unanimous cross-party report on the budget the House of Commons Treasury Committee's consideration of the prospects of UK unemployment. The report says:

"There is a strong possibility that unemployment will rise above three million, with some economists warning that it is possible that unemployment could rise as high as four

million. Approximately 40% of the unemployed are likely to be young people aged under 25."

With regard to the measures that the UK Government has taken, it says:

"it is too soon to judge whether the Government proposal"

is

"a sufficiently timely and substantial response to the scale of the unemployment challenge."

Of course, unemployment might not reach 4 million—or indeed 3 million—and, even if it were to do so, the level might not necessarily rise faster in Scotland than in the rest of the UK. However, the report highlights the potential scale of the challenge that we face with job losses.

As the Minister for Enterprise, Energy and Tourism has pointed out, even when growth resumes—which it will at some point—there will still be a significant delay in job creation. As a result, even as our concerns centre on what can be done in the short term, we must take a long-term approach to dealing with unemployment.

The Fraser of Allander institute has suggested that 80 per cent of the jobs that are lost in Scotland this year and next will be in the service sector. That profile of job losses is different from that in previous recessions, and that will have different implications for our response to the situation. Although I am interested in the proposals from the Labour Party that are based on the Welsh experience of ProAct, I must be entirely candid and say that I am profoundly sceptical as to whether it is a cost-effective method of supporting employment. That said, in comparison with regional selective assistance grants and set against the First Minister's comment that 9,000 jobs will be lost as a result of the £500 million squeeze—in other words, £55,000 a job—the ProAct initiative seems relatively cheap.

However, there is a question about the effectiveness of job subsidies and a real concern about how we design out moral hazard and ensure that we do not simply spend public money on something that would happen anyway. I am also concerned about how firms would behave after a job subsidy was withdrawn—and, of course, how such a subsidy would be paid for. Perhaps that is what Mr Purvis is about to tell us.

Jeremy Purvis: As the member knows, £30 million of the Welsh scheme comes from the convergence European social fund, which is also at our disposal in Scotland. As I recall, David Cameron has proposed an alternative job subsidy scheme for the unemployed, so it does not appear that the Conservatives have a principled opposition to the scheme. Does the member agree that, if the proposal receives cross-party support,

we have a good chance of delivering it in Scotland?

Derek Brownlee: With regard to unemployed people, the Conservatives are proposing at UK level to shift some of the spending that would otherwise go on unemployment benefit into short-term reductions in national insurance, which would have a beneficial effect on public finances. I should point out that, if my calculations are correct, the forecast increase in national insurance from 2011 will cost the Scottish economy something like £130 million. Avoiding that would give Scotland a very significant boost.

The Government's suggestion that we should evaluate the Welsh experience is perfectly sensible. If the scheme proves to be cost effective, we should consider it—assuming, of course, that we can find the money for it. However, if it proves not to be cost effective, I believe that we should not throw public money at it ineffectively. We need to consider all the available options.

As a result, although the Labour Party's proposal is interesting and worthy of substantial consideration, I feel that the Government amendment strikes the right tone. We will not support the Liberal Democrat amendment, which seems to be nothing more than another in its long list of spending demands.

10:49

Duncan McNeil (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab): More than 40 years ago, I walked through the gates of the Cartside shipyard and met the head foreman, Mr Alan Swindells. He was a wee character, but he had enormous power. Little did we know what changes lay ahead. A job for life? I think not.

As the representative of a community that for many years now has been subject to significant and on-going change, from ships on the Clyde to banks on the Clyde and from building ships to microchips, I understand the need for change. I know only too well that nothing stands still and know how important it is to educate individuals and equip them with skills and to support businesses through such change.

As a worker, as a trade union official and as a member of this Parliament, I also know how important politicians and politics can be in that process. In my various roles over the past 30 years, I have dealt with secretaries of state and ministers of all parties, including Mrs Thatcher in her den in Downing Street. As a result, I am not starry-eyed about the influence that politicians can have, either positive or negative. *[Interruption.]*

I think that that was a negative influence.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We will add on injury time for that, Mr McNeil.

Duncan McNeil: Thank you, Presiding Officer. The person who constructed my lectern obviously did not serve his time in the Cartside shipyard.

I have seen shipbuilding move to the far east and the electronics industry move to eastern Europe, and I know that we cannot compete with sweated labour from abroad. However, I understand that change needs to be managed and that we need to retool and reskill people through education and training to build the workforce of the future. In order to do that, we need to be prepared to get involved and to act early. In our small country, we should be aware of the changes that are happening and manage them not for the here and now but for the next five, 10 or 20 years.

In that respect—and to bring a note of disappointment into the debate—I wonder how we can be confident that this Government and its ministers are prepared to act. For example, in February, Telecom Service Centres Ltd, one of Scotland's biggest contact centres, announced hundreds of redundancies in Greenock as a result of T-Mobile offshoring work to the Philippines. When I wrote to the Minister for Enterprise, Energy and Tourism to warn him of the threat not just to those jobs but to the whole industry, I did so not as an act of political posturing—after all, I knew that the agencies were already in place to support some of the workers—but because I recognised the early signs of an industry that was facing real challenges. The answer that I received was, at best, complacent in its attempt to assure me that everything in the garden was rosy, and it was not until a couple of months later when the same company announced the loss of hundreds of jobs in Falkirk that Mr Mather's officials made the call.

In his letter to me, the minister defended his position by name-checking his work with the Customer Contact Association. However, even a cursory glance at the association's website reveals various references to challenges such as the squeeze on costs and offshoring trends. Fully three months later almost to the day, after more redundancies and the closure of the Greenock contact centre, the First Minister will today respond by meeting T-Mobile. Let us all hope that he can seal the deal and secure guarantees that will minimise the job losses among the TSC workers.

Jim Mather: Will the member be gracious enough to acknowledge the fact that we have engaged fully with TSC and are working with the company to ensure that there is a backfilling of jobs in Scotland?

Duncan McNeil: The minister, the workers at TSC and I know that there was no call to TSC until

the eve of the additional job losses in Falkirk, despite representations from TSC and from me. For many of those workers, it is too late—they will lose their jobs. However, my concern is that the situation is not simply a local difficulty, but the beginning of a trend that will impact significantly in my constituency, where contact centres at T-Mobile, the Royal Bank of Scotland and IBM contribute to the economy and provide thousands of jobs. Those are high-skilled jobs that need multilingual, information technology and financial advice skills.

The issue is no small matter for the Scottish economy, in which more than 60,000 people are employed in 300 contact centres that offer 26 different languages. If Inverclyde and Scotland are to continue to benefit from those jobs, the Government needs to engage proactively at times of crisis, but also, more important, before crises are confirmed. The Government needs to bring the industry together, understand the challenges that it faces, and work with it to ensure that Scotland and Inverclyde remain good places to do business.

10:56

Stuart McMillan (West of Scotland) (SNP): I welcome the opportunity to participate in this important debate. As everyone knows, we are in the midst of a recession that is having a devastating effect on many families in Scotland, the UK, Europe and the wider world. Only this week, we heard that the Japanese economy shrunk by 4 per cent in the first quarter of 2009. That highlights the global situation that we are facing. We are discussing the situation in Scotland, but it is important to highlight the Japanese example.

The Scottish economy is in a downturn, but we are faring well compared with the rest of the UK. During the first quarter of this year, unemployment in Scotland was 5.9 per cent, compared with 7.1 per cent in the UK—I would be the first to admit that those figures are 5.9 per cent and 7.1 per cent higher than they should be. Labour has told us that 20,000 jobs have been lost in the construction sector alone this year. According to the Office for National Statistics, construction activity fell by 3.8 per cent in Scotland, 11.6 per cent in Wales and 6.4 per cent in England. The latest figures from the ONS—they are from 7 May—show that there was a 0.4 per cent increase in construction orders in Scotland from the last quarter of 2008 to the first quarter of 2009, compared with a 9.3 per cent decrease in England over the same two quarters.

John Park: Does the member acknowledge that a lot of people in the construction sector are self-employed rather than directly employed? Quite a

lot of the redundancies are therefore beneath the radar and are not reflected in the ONS figures.

Stuart McMillan: I accept that point, which leads into what I am about to say.

I have family members who live in England and work in the construction industry there. When I have spoken to them in recent months, they have told me about the devastating downturn that is affecting them. Some of my relatives stay in the midlands. In the past, they have had no problems whatsoever in obtaining work. Now, the situation that they face is similar to, but worse than, that in Scotland.

I do not wish to see anyone lose their job through no fault of their own. However, in light of the statistics that I have just mentioned, it is clear that Scotland is suffering a wee bit but that it is certainly doing better than the rest of the UK, as I have said. I wonder what devastation would have befallen the Scottish economy if the Scottish Government had not brought forward capital funding in the budget.

Recently, the Scottish director of ConstructionSkills, Graeme Ogilvy, stated:

“there is still short-term growth in the industry, assisted by public sector spending”.

Councillor Steven Purcell stated recently:

“there’s so much work going on in Glasgow just now”.

Some of those projects will be at least part funded by the Scottish Government.

Numerous announcements have been made about new building projects throughout the country. One of those projects is in the Inverclyde community that I live in. New schools have been commissioned by the Inverclyde Council Labour-Conservative-independent coalition and signed off by the Scottish Government. There is some £80 million for four new schools. Announcements have been made throughout Scotland to try to maintain jobs in these trying times.

Members keep hearing about the 20,000 job losses in the construction industry, and Labour continually attempts to blame the Scottish Government. I must have missed the furore when Chancellor Darling announced £500 million-worth of cuts for Scotland next year. That is expected to cost 9,000 jobs in Scotland.

I congratulate John Park on lodging a constructive motion, and welcome his acknowledgment of the ProAct scheme. I think that that scheme will bring benefits to Wales, and I hope that the Scottish Government will consider it. I am sure that John Park acknowledges that the scheme was introduced in Wales when Plaid Cymru became a partner in the Welsh Assembly Government.

11:01

James Kelly (Glasgow Rutherglen) (Lab): I welcome the opportunity to take part in the debate, which is taking place at an important time for Scotland. Unemployment has risen to 157,000, and 34,000 Scots have lost their jobs in the past year. Earlier in the week, 300 proposed job losses in Lloyds TSB were announced. In South Lanarkshire, 13 people are chasing every vacancy.

In such times, the role of Governments is to use the levers at their disposal to protect their economies and to ensure that measures are in place to try to inject cash into them to create jobs. In that regard, I welcome initiatives that have been taken at the UK and Scottish levels, including the bringing forward of the capital acceleration programme, which has brought much-needed investment into the Scottish economy, measures in the budget earlier in the year to create 7,800 apprenticeships, and support for the PACE scheme to help people whose jobs are under threat find employment in other areas. Those are important aspects.

I know a lot about the threat of unemployment in my area. In January 2009, the Vion plant in Cambuslang announced 142 proposed job losses. Fortunately, as a result of the good work of the trade union and the company, 56 of those jobs have been saved in the short term, until the end of the year. That is a positive development, which is to be welcomed. However, building on that is important. Shortly, I will host a meeting in the Parliament that will involve Unite, Vion, the Scottish Government and agency representation, to consider how we can protect the Cambuslang plant and build a sustainable future for it.

In that context, the ProAct initiative, which has been welcomed, is worth considering. The minister and Derek Brownlee questioned the scheme's viability and asked whether such a scheme would contribute towards economic growth in Scotland. Such a scheme would introduce short-time working in Cambuslang, keep people in employment there and contribute to protecting the local economy, which would contribute to the wider Scottish economy.

The SNP must do more for the economy. Last October, it announced a six-point plan, which in essence tinkered at the edges. We need a plan that gives more details about some of the announcements that were made in the budget and which reflects the new economic circumstances. It is essential that we know how the 7,800 apprenticeships will be rolled out across Scotland. Last week, I was contacted by a constituent whose 16-year-old son is keen to get a job as an apprentice joiner. He had contacted Careers Scotland, but was unable to get any concrete

information about how and when the apprenticeships would become available. Will the minister address that point when he sums up?

The SNP ministerial team must be a lot more visible when communities are under threat of job losses. The minister, correctly, went to Dundee pretty sharply when NCR was under threat but, in Cambuslang, it took me a month to arrange a commitment for a meeting with local trade union officials, and that was only on the day when I sponsored a members' business debate on the issue in Parliament.

It is important that we get action, because actions speak louder than words. It is time for the minister and his team to act now.

11:05

Bill Kidd (Glasgow) (SNP): I am sure that all members welcome the opportunity to discuss employment in Scotland at a time of great uncertainty for all our people. All too many Scots live long term with uncertainty of income, or at least with the certainty that it will be low. Sadly, the present recession brings them closer to their neighbours, although only by degrees and then for all the wrong reasons. The benefits system is a mess. At present, the Parliament cannot address that directly, but the issue must be considered. Many more families, through no fault of their own, are finding themselves in the worrying situation of unemployment, debt and living on benefits that do not meet their outgoings.

That is why I am glad that John Park's motion is, in essence, positive in its presentation and that it gives the Scottish Government the opportunity to look for a like-minded approach from Opposition members. The Government, by bringing forward capital investment in the housing sector, will help with the training of the 1,000 modern apprentices in Glasgow over the next three years, which is backed by £6 million of Government money. As my colleague on the back benches Stuart McMillan mentioned, that has been welcomed by Graeme Ogilvy, director of ConstructionSkills in Scotland, who has stated:

"there is still short-term growth in the industry, assisted by public sector spending".

As Stuart McMillan also mentioned—note to self: never go last in a debate—Steven Purcell has gone on record to praise the booming parts of the economy in Glasgow because of regeneration projects that are funded, at least in part, by the Scottish Government. That is surely the kind of cross-party consensus about which we are all happy, especially as Steven Purcell was not at that point referring to the jobs that are to come from the construction of the new Glasgow hospital and the Glasgow airport rail link.

Everything is not hunky-dory, however. A growing number of our citizens are suffering unemployment or are worried for themselves and their children in the job market in the short and long term. I have been there more than once, so I know the humiliation, and the fear that the longer someone is without a job, the less likely an employer is to take them on. We must therefore keep our eye on the ball in the Parliament and consider ideas from elsewhere, such as the ProAct initiative in Wales. However, we must ensure that such an initiative would work here, or we risk wasting the limited resources that are at our command. We will also have to work alongside Westminster, as long as it will let us, and only while it still holds the purse strings.

We should remember the need for Scottish solutions to Scottish problems. One size does not fit all, so with any joint economic programmes to boost employment, or in launching any initiative, we must ensure that it fits with the requirements in the Scottish jobs market and with the funding that is available to us under the present economic constraints. Investment in renewables is an ideal medium for a longer-term solution for Scotland. It will help us to ride out future recessions, while helping to save our planet's environment and all our futures. After only six years in business, the renewables company SgurrEnergy in Glasgow is growing internationally—it recently opened an office in Beijing. Welcon in Machrihanish, which Jim Mather knows well, is creating long-term construction jobs in the hundreds. Those are examples of Scottish solutions to Scottish economic and employment problems.

I hope and believe that all members will work with the serious attitude that is required to see Scotland's people through the recession.

11:10

Hugh Henry (Paisley South) (Lab): Derek Brownlee echoed John Park's comments about the human costs of redundancy. It is right that the effect on ordinary people should be the main focus of attention in the debate. The comments of Duncan McNeil and James Kelly concerned me. If workers are made redundant anywhere in Scotland, they deserve the full attention of politicians, and specifically ministers, irrespective of where the companies are and who the workers' local representatives are. I hope that ministers are not being partial in their response to redundancies, as some of the evidence that I have seen suggests. It would be fundamentally wrong if workers who are made redundant had to pay a price for political infighting in the Parliament. I understand that, inevitably, ministers will support members from their party on local initiatives—that is the nature of politics and I do not criticise them

for it. However, no worker in the country should have a delayed response from ministers simply because they live in one area rather than another. I hope that ministers will reflect on those comments. Let us not have a stushie; let us just reflect on the issue and possibly change attitudes and future behaviour.

Jim Mather: Does the member acknowledge that, as part and parcel of fulfilling our responsibilities, since way back last May, we have been going round the country, running 96 sessions and talking to 5,000 people at community and industry levels? We are trying proactively to make Scotland's economy better and more effective. Will the member reflect on that?

Hugh Henry: I will reflect on that but, equally, Jim Mather needs to reflect on the criticisms from Greenock, Cambuslang, East Kilbride and other areas where there have been delays in responses from ministers. That is unacceptable and the minister must address it.

We must plan and prepare for our future and we need to invest in our young people. I am concerned that, in Renfrewshire in the past year, 30 apprentices have been made redundant, of whom 21 are still looking for alternatives. The main source of apprenticeships in the construction industry has dried up. Large companies are now often contract managers and brokers, so they subcontract rather than employ. Therefore, we need to support small companies that can provide apprenticeships for young people. I am thinking of companies such as MPS Training in Johnstone in my constituency, which is run by Willie Cosh. Such companies often offer young people varied and stimulating training and learning experiences that are better all round. If we invest in those companies now, we will be paid a handsome dividend in the future.

Several members have mentioned ConstructionSkills in Scotland. I do not want to be particularly critical of it, but we need to have an open mind, be objective and ask hard questions about its performance. Is it helping small companies? Do they feel that it is of value? Let us be open minded and objective in coming up with answers on what we can do and, more significantly, what we can do better.

I compliment colleges throughout Scotland for their role in tackling the problem. For example, Reid Kerr College in Paisley has an outstanding record of helping young people into training and employment. I give particular credit to the college's built environment department. Colleges can make a difference, so we must invest in them.

Packages of employment and training need to be made available and we need partnerships that can work together closely. We need partnerships

between the private and public sectors and between schools and colleges. ConstructionSkills in Scotland should be the facilitator for such an approach, but at this juncture, I worry whether it can do that job. I worry that rather than preparing young people for the construction industry as it exists today, it is continuing to prepare young people for the construction industry in a world that no longer exists and in social circumstances that have moved on. That should be a wake-up call and a challenge to us all.

11:15

Jeremy Purvis: The context for the debate this morning is the Government's skills strategy, which received scant support from this Parliament, and the Government's economic recovery programme. Concerns have been raised about its innovation and the depth of the work that it does.

By and large, the recovery plan policy is a toolbox with only one tool in it: accelerated capital. It is impossible for the Parliament to find out how much of that accelerated capital is in work that is being done at the moment, because the Government has not provided a breakdown. Bill Kidd commented on the work that is being done in Glasgow and quoted the council leader. It would be helpful if the Government were to publish such a breakdown of contracted works that are being delivered now and a timeframe for them. The danger is that we will enter the next financial year and find that part of the money that was due to be accelerated was not accelerated after all.

Stuart McMillan said that we are "suffering a wee bit". I hope that that is not a statement of the Scottish Government's policy. Even the comparative unemployment figures from the rest of the UK mask the information about sectoral and construction unemployment, although there has been some discussion about that. Stuart McMillan quoted Labour figures of 20,000 job losses. I agree with him that we should not necessarily trust Labour figures, but it was Michael Levack and not the Labour Party who told the Finance Committee two weeks ago that 20,000 jobs had been lost to the construction sector before the recession. It is the hiatus created by the Scottish Futures Trust and the Government's decisions not to introduce programmes and to cause delays in other programmes that have caused considerable difficulty. Critically, we are now seeing colleges having to adjust some of their work over the coming year because of what the Government has done to the Scottish economy.

Not all employment issues are within the remit of a devolved Government, and we agree with the Government on a number of issues that arise in the UK Parliament. The focus of debates such as this is the powers at the Scottish Government's

disposal and what difference they can make to unemployment in Scotland.

We were pleased to work with the Government on finance sector jobs. When we argued in the autumn that the structures that the Government has in place were insufficient and called for a finance sector jobs task force, we were pleased that it accepted that argument, albeit after a little too long. We need to take that body to the next level because it is becoming apparent in the finance sector that there will be a drip-drip effect over coming months.

Although I am mindful of the good news that the minister rightly highlighted about the finance sector in Scotland, we still see a different type of employment in our local areas. It is interesting that the two areas of greatest unemployment growth over the past year are the Borders and East Lothian. There has been a 116 per cent increase in unemployment in the Scottish Borders and a 134 per cent increase in East Lothian. Those are both travel-to-work areas for the city, and both have experienced growth in capital and housing investment. They are both being harmed.

From the finance sector, I move on to skills and whether the skills strategy is configured appropriately. We are concerned that the strategy is the basis for our colleges and universities, as their budgets have flatlined. At the Finance Committee on Tuesday, it was encouraging to hear John Swinney say that he will look again at college funding in the coming year. A cynic might call that an admission of failure, but I will be far more constructive and say that it might be the beginning of a recognition that in the coming year we have to look differently at the in-year budget.

Fiona Hyslop: Will the member give way?

Jeremy Purvis: I am afraid that I am in my last minute; I would have given way otherwise.

We need to look aggressively at all public spend in the coming financial year to free up resource, to stimulate the economy and to look at supporting private sector employment. At the same time, public sector employment is growing. Government figures published in March indicate that, although there are fewer public sector bodies in Scotland, more people are working in the public sector. The growth profile of public sector employment corresponds exactly to the decline profile of private sector employment. For the long-term sustainability of our businesses, we need to look at both what the Welsh Assembly is doing and what our Government is doing within this year's budget.

11:21

Gavin Brown (Lothians) (Con): John Park and the Labour Party have come to the chamber this morning with an important debate and with what I would describe as a plausible and positive suggestion. The Scottish Conservatives are happy to examine any plausible and constructive suggestion. Although, as Mr Brownlee said, we have initial concerns with Labour's proposal, the fact that such a plausible suggestion has been made is a good step forward.

We heard from various speakers about the deeply worrying situation in Scotland and the UK as a whole. The motion talks about 34,000 job losses in Scotland in the past year, but unemployment is measured in different ways. The claimant count—another perfectly legitimate way of looking at unemployment—has increased by 54,000 in the past 12 months, which is even worse than the figure in the motion.

Derek Brownlee spoke about the UK position. A couple of months back, somebody suggested that 3 million people might become unemployed in the UK. That estimate was on the fringes of mainstream opinion, but it has moved into the mainstream over the past few months, and most commentators think that we will be staring in the face a figure of 3 million unemployed people over the next 12 months or so. A statistic of huge concern that I confess I had not heard before is that about 40 per cent of those 3 million people could be under the age of 25. That creates enormous problems for this country into the future.

The central plank of Mr Park's proposal is the ProAct scheme initiated by the Welsh Assembly. It came out of a meeting with various business groups in November last year; it was implemented in January this year and has been running for five months. There are clear benefits from the scheme, which is having an effect in parts of Wales, but my biggest concern is the number of companies that gain from it. The most recent figures that I could get hold of suggested that 53 Welsh companies have been helped so far and a further 106 are currently being assessed. Applications number around 30 a month. As I understand it, only one company a day is applying to the ProAct scheme. Fifty-three companies have been helped, which contrasts with about 4,000 companies that need help, as I read in the official reports of the debates in the National Assembly for Wales. That is why it could be argued that the scheme is only scratching the surface of the problem in Wales.

BDO Stoy Hayward predicts that 5,000 companies in Scotland are in serious danger of failing this year, with the potential for another 5,500 companies failing next year. Potentially, greater numbers of companies will fail, but if we are looking at helping only 53 of them—or perhaps

more in Scotland—we must question seriously how big a difference such a scheme can make. The minister made a fair point in asking that question. One could contrast that scheme with the small business bonus, for which we pushed and which I understand has helped something in the region of 146,000 companies throughout Scotland.

We will certainly examine the ProAct scheme, but there are concerns at the outset. There are concerns about the bureaucracy, which can probably be taken care of with the benefit of hindsight. There is also the obvious question of where the money might come from. It is a £48 million scheme in Wales. I have seen various estimates of the funding: some say that £30 million has come from European structural funds while others say that that figure is £38 million, with the rest made up by the Welsh Assembly Government.

From the tone of the minister's speech, it sounded to me as if the Government had made up its mind that the scheme was not a good idea, although I might have picked that up wrong. I am happy to be corrected on that, but that is the impression that I got. Any examination of the scheme has to be swift. If it is a good idea and it is going to work, the examination and the implementation have to be swift.

Jim Mather: Will the member take an intervention?

Gavin Brown: I think that I have only 10 seconds left, but I will take an intervention.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Please be very quick, Mr Mather.

Jim Mather: I draw to the member's attention the fact that I was calling for an objective and rational assessment. We intend to honour that.

Gavin Brown: I am happy to take that at face value. The examination has to be swift and a decision has to be taken quickly. In Wales, the scheme was up and running within two months. Two months is a perfectly reasonable time for us to make a decision—yes or no.

11:26

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning (Fiona Hyslop): I thank John Park for bringing the debate to the Parliament. Since last summer, the Government's number 1 priority has been to focus its resources to support individuals and businesses suffering the consequences of the recession. That remains our priority.

Nearly 8,000 more people will start apprenticeships this year thanks to the additional £16 million that was announced in February, which

was supported throughout the Parliament. Up to 75,000 Scots will benefit from support through 79 projects that receive European social fund support from the £25 million that we announced in April.

Last year, a record 35,000 people—up 37 per cent on the previous year—used individual learning accounts to support work-related training. The changes that we made to ILAs last month mean that more people than ever can now access those funds.

On Gavin Brown's points about young people, through the new policy for 16-plus learning choices, by December 2010 we will offer a place in learning post-16 to every young person in Scotland who wants it, which will help 60,000 young people each year. Within that, we will focus on improving the way that we support our most vulnerable young people, and we will invest £16 million over the next two years to develop activity agreements with them.

Our economic recovery effort is all about supporting people, communities and businesses. What matters most to us is how the numbers that I have just mentioned translate into real, practical help for individuals. Duncan McNeil and others reflected on that in their speeches.

I will give a couple of real-life examples. Alex from the south side of Glasgow was made redundant last December after working for 25 years at Woolworths. He used ILA funding to train for and pass his passenger service vehicle licence theory test, and he is now working as a bus driver with FirstGroup.

After being made redundant in his 50s, David from Alexandria got tailored advice, training and support from PACE, which led to him securing work in the social care sector.

Students at colleges such as John Wheatley College, Elmwood College and Perth College are benefiting from £20 million of extra infrastructure improvements from the acceleration of capital spending.

Duncan McNeil: Does the cabinet secretary not accept that my criticism of the failure of the Minister for Enterprise, Energy and Tourism to act has been acknowledged by the Government, given that the responsibility for certain matters has been transferred to the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth and that the First Minister is meeting T-Mobile today? Does she not acknowledge, however grudgingly, that that is progress?

Fiona Hyslop: When I mentioned Duncan McNeil, I was referring to his reflections on how the recession impacts on individuals and the importance of dealing with individuals. His points

are on issues around the response to individual companies.

We have to approach the recession by working together. Attacking individuals, whether ministers or other MSPs, will not be welcomed by our constituents and it will not get the results that we want.

We know that more than 1,000 butchers, bakers and ancillary staff in the food manufacturing industry will benefit from training as a result of two ESF projects and that 5,000 people will now have access to basic training through the Scottish Trades Union Congress-led ESF project, which builds on the £4 million investment that we are making in union learning.

I hope that Parliament agrees that the actions that we are taking will make a real difference, but we know that we have to do more. We will continue to use the resources within our powers to bolster that effort.

On the Liberal Democrats' amendment, we have heeded the calls of the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats to cut back spending on public jobs and quango costs. The Skills Development Scotland operating budget will reduce as a result of a voluntary severance scheme, although training budgets are not being cut and front-line services are being enhanced.

Chris Travis, in reflecting on the 2009-10 college allocations, said:

"The increase in funding for colleges is encouraging and takes into account the need to provide increased financial support for colleges and students, particularly in these challenging economic times."

Jeremy Purvis: I hear what the cabinet secretary says, but the information that the Government itself has published shows that the college recurrent funding was £539 million for 2009-10 but will be £535 million for 2010-11.

Fiona Hyslop: We can trade figures, but a 2.4 per cent real increase over the spending review shows our commitment.

I move on to examining the pros and cons of wage subsidies. We are examining a number of proposals and the experience of ProAct in Wales. It would be wrong to prejudge whether measures such as wage subsidies are suited to the specific experience of the Scottish economy now or in the future. We are also looking at the Northern Ireland redundancy apprenticeship model, although there are slight concerns about low uptake. We want to look at the successes and the problems that those and other schemes in Europe face.

There are big challenges. Jeremy Purvis identified the need to support college places. In our assessment of wage subsidies for individuals and sectors or to deal with mass redundancies, as

in Wales, we have to identify whether resources are best placed there or in colleges. Those are exactly the points that we have to consider.

We have also adapted the eligibility of training programmes to support better those in need. That means that training for work—a vocational training programme to enable people to develop job-specific skills—is now available to unemployed people after three months, compared with the previous threshold of six months. It is also available immediately to people on notice of redundancy. That means that people in work can receive training while they are working their redundancy notice, in order that they can move from work to work. That is one of the best solutions that we can provide.

I have already announced 1,000 apprenticeships for the Glasgow Commonwealth ambitions, 50 for the creative industries and 100 for home energy and efficiency. John Park mentioned the apprenticeships summit, at which 150 employers joined us. Only yesterday, key industry sector organisations met the Minister for Schools and Skills to develop that thinking further. When the report from the summit is published, which will happen shortly, I will outline further details on how we are building a strong skills base to enable Scotland to survive the recession and to thrive when the recovery comes.

The Government will also produce an updated economic recovery programme within the next few weeks.

I thank John Park for lodging the motion. If Parliament agrees to the Government amendment, we can proceed in a united way in acknowledging John Park's proposals.

11:33

John Park: I welcome the contributions from members. The debate has enabled us to discuss issues of importance and relevance to the people whom we represent, and it has allowed members to raise a number of local employment concerns. I do not doubt that MSPs of all parties take the issues seriously and are working hard to ensure that their constituents are supported individually and collectively through these difficult times. If the motion is passed at 5 o'clock, as I hope it will be, that will be another important step towards ensuring that the Government is accountable for the decisions that it takes and that it delivers on the commitments that we make in Parliament.

I agree with many of the points in the amendment in the name of Jeremy Purvis on behalf of the Liberal Democrats. Much of what the Scottish Government intends to spend on skills is being channelled through ESF funding—the additional spending that we are considering today.

That is the right thing to do, and we have to be supportive in reprofiling the money to ensure that there are proactive measures to support people who are in work but under the threat of redundancy.

I am concerned that that assistance should not be at the expense of supporting projects for the people who are furthest away from the labour market. We definitely need to support both groups, in particular because the people who are furthest away from the labour market are in the communities that have never fully recovered from recessions in the past.

I do not want to get bogged down in semantics, but I think that the wording in the SNP's amendment is similar to that in our motion. We will take our chances at 5 o'clock.

It is without doubt self-evident that whatever proposal we in the Parliament come up with must be rigorously assessed on what it would do and deliver. It goes without saying that policy making must be evidence based—I am comfortable with that.

Fiona Hyslop: In our examination of wage subsidy schemes, including the Welsh example, we are discussing the idea with business partners and the STUC. It is important that we reflect on what they say.

John Park: I am relaxed about the fact that such a proposal needs to be brought back to Parliament. That is absolutely the right approach.

We have spoken about the small business bonus scheme, whose universal approach I have expressed concern about. I acknowledge that the scheme reduces fixed costs for individuals, but we must measure whether that results in reinvestment in the workforce. Evidence from the Federation of Small Businesses shows that the scheme has led to only a 5 per cent increase—

Derek Brownlee *rose*—

John Park: I knew that Mr Brownlee would stand up when I said that, but I will finish my point. Only 5 per cent of companies say that the scheme has led them to reinvest in their workforce to support employment.

Derek Brownlee: I, too, will refer to FSB evidence on the business rate cuts. Emerging evidence from the FSB suggests that about one eighth of eligible businesses that receive the business rate reductions would have difficulty remaining in business were it not for the reductions. Is that not a significant impact not just on employment but on self-employment?

John Park: That is a good point, but were those businesses viable before? The same argument is made about whether Scotland should have a wage

subsidy scheme like ProAct. We must apply to the figures from the FSB on one form of Government spend the same logic as we would apply to a wage subsidy.

Some members, particularly from the Labour Party, have expressed concern about the consistency of the Government's approach. I know that Mr Mather has gone around the country to speak proactively to industries and companies, but when MSPs are approached by constituents who are concerned about their employment it is vital that the Government responds consistently.

Jim Mather: Will the member take an intervention?

John Park: I must make progress and get on with my speech—the issues have been covered and there is no point in going over them again.

The FSB at the UK level, the UK Trades Union Congress and CBI Wales support ProAct. As part of the Scottish Government's analysis—whether or not it is part of a wider economic recovery programme—it should engage with key stakeholders and ask the CBI, the STUC and FSB Scotland what support would be needed if such a scheme were introduced in Scotland. ProAct has the support that I described—although I take the points that Gavin Brown made—and when we in the Scottish Parliament have to make evidence-based policy decisions, anything that we do to consider such a scheme more seriously will be very welcome to Labour members.

James Kelly spoke about Vion Food Group, and I will say a little about the Vion campaign. I spoke in the members' business debate earlier this year on the job losses at Vion, and the situation highlights the important role that trade unions play. The trade unions sat down with Vion, campaigned locally and made a difference. They considered ways of mitigating the job losses and delivered for their members. At the same time, they ensured that the company knew that it had to do things in the right way. The people who do such work throughout the country—whether they are union members or ordinary workers—are the unsung heroes in the workplace. They try to maintain employment and keep people in work. We in the Parliament should recognise their valuable work.

I have highlighted the figures on redundant apprentices. Yesterday, I was approached by Daniel McGuinness, a third-year plumber, who advertised in the *Daily Record* and the *Sunday Mail*—and whose mother has even written to the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning—to say that he has nearly finished his apprenticeship and that he needs someone to take him on. We must deliver for such people. The real and perceived barriers to helping apprentices complete their training were considered at the

apprenticeship summit, which also covered the 7,800 places that we need to achieve.

I hope that the Scottish Government will bring the issues back to the Parliament before the summer recess and that we will deliver on employment and apprentices.

Question Time

SCOTTISH EXECUTIVE

General Questions

11:40

National Concessionary Travel Scheme (Extension)

1. Cathy Peattie (Falkirk East) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive whether it will extend the national concessionary travel scheme to include demand-responsive community transport schemes such as Dial-a-Journey in Forth valley, which is used by older and disabled people who are eligible for the scheme but cannot use scheduled services. (S3O-7024)

The Minister for Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change (Stewart Stevenson): The Scotland-wide free bus travel scheme for older and disabled people already includes demand-responsive community transport services that are registered local services. The scheme has been the subject of a review since last July. The review is now complete and the resulting report and recommendations will be published this month.

Cathy Peattie: Why are private bus operators trusted to operate concessionary transport schemes when community transport organisations are not? A number of disabled and older people throughout the country cannot access travel schemes. Will the minister please look again at the discrimination that those people face daily?

Stewart Stevenson: The member makes a perfectly fair point about the need to provide access to affordable public transport for people with a range of disabilities that prevent their having ready access to standard service buses. We provide substantial support for a wide range of demand-responsive transport, which comes in many shapes and sizes. Some forms fall within the present scheme, whereas others are outside it. We have commissioned additional work on the demands of the transport sector to which Cathy Peattie refers. That work will be available to us later.

Ian McKee (Lothians) (SNP): What are the differences between the concessionary travel schemes north and south of the border? Does any reciprocity between them exist?

Stewart Stevenson: The scheme in England is operated locally. Unlike the Scottish scheme, it does not provide national coverage. It has been examined recently and several revisions to it have been made—for example, it now excludes, for the

first time, bus services on which the majority of seats are booked. We are not minded to follow such a restriction on the successful scheme in Scotland.

Compulsory Redundancies (Public Sector)

2. Derek Brownlee (South of Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government which areas of the public sector are not covered by its commitment to avoid compulsory redundancies. (S3O-6976)

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth (John Swinney): The scope and coverage of the Government's commitment to no compulsory redundancies are set out in a general agreement with the council of Scottish Government unions. The commitment applies over the current spending review period, up to and including 2010-11. It applies to permanent staff in the core Scottish Government, its associated departments, agencies and non-departmental public bodies.

Derek Brownlee: Given the scale of the wage bill relative to Government spending as a whole and given the significant squeeze that will come to the Scottish Government like all other parts of Government, is a policy of no compulsory redundancies sustainable in the medium term?

John Swinney: The policy is sustainable. It conditions the decisions that the Government must take about our approach to balancing the budget that we must present to Parliament.

We have attached a significant premium to simplifying the public sector. That has the consequence that individual posts might be lost, which would mean redeploying individuals in other parts of the public sector. The Government will take decisions on the wider budgetary issues that it faces against the back-cloth of the commitment to no compulsory redundancies. That is the correct thing to do, to maintain the motivation and performance of public sector workers in Scotland.

Jeremy Purvis (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD): I am interested in what the cabinet secretary said. He will know from Government figures that, although the number of public sector bodies has gone down from 199 to 162, the total number of people who are employed in core Government, its agencies and departments has risen from 186,670 in the third quarter of 2007 to 188,780. Will the Government reverse that growth trend?

John Swinney: As Mr Purvis will be aware, some of the increase is the result of our bringing into core Scottish Government some agencies that were outwith it. Since this Government came to office in 2007, there has been an increase of 0.2 per cent in the number of people who are

employed in the public sector. That contrasts with an increase of 8.7 per cent in the period before that from 1999. The Government is stewarding the resources of Scotland effectively. As part of the simplification exercise, we are bringing more employment into core Scottish Government, where we can undertake those requirements effectively.

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson): Question 3 was to have been asked by Margaret Mitchell but she does not appear to be in the chamber. Members are aware of my feelings on the subject. They will be made known to her.

Community Courts (Glasgow)

4. Margaret Curran (Glasgow Baillieston) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive, in light of the Cabinet Secretary for Justice's decision not to proceed with plans for a pilot community court in the east end of Glasgow and the vote on motion S3M-4065 on 7 May 2009, what plans it has to implement fair, fast and flexible justice for the people of Glasgow. (S3O-6996)

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice (Kenny MacAskill): Our plans for fair, fast and flexible justice will benefit all the people of Scotland.

"Protecting Scotland's Communities: Fair, Fast and Flexible Justice" explains the two key strands of our policy, which are a robust, visible and credible regime of community penalties and strong and proportionate management for offenders whose crimes merit prison. We propose to provide the necessary legislative support through the Criminal Justice and Licensing (Scotland) Bill, which is currently before the Scottish Parliament.

Margaret Curran: As Kenny MacAskill will surely be aware, the decision to abandon the community court in the east end of Glasgow undermines his credibility in delivering that effective criminal justice system in Scotland. Will he explain why SNP parliamentarians at Westminster are demanding that the Government in that place respond to the will of Parliament whereas SNP Scottish Government ministers are dismissing arrogantly the will of the Scottish Parliament? When will Kenny MacAskill have some consistency on the matter? When will he answer to the will of the Scottish Parliament on the community court in Glasgow?

Kenny MacAskill: We have made it clear that this is the decision of the project board, which is made up not only of representatives of the Scottish Government justice division but of the Crown Office, Glasgow City Council and the Court Service. It was on the project board's advice that the Government took the decision. Ms Curran should recognise the record amounts of funding that we are putting in. Spending on community justice social work has increased from £36.5

million in 1999-2000 to £103.95 million in 2008-09. That is an increase of 185 per cent over 10 years. There is also an additional £2 million and other moneys. The money continues to rise.

Anne McLaughlin (Glasgow) (SNP): Members may be aware of the figures that Strathclyde Police reported last week, which show a marked decline in crime on the south side of Glasgow. The figures include a 24 per cent reduction in violent crime in greater Pollock and a 52 per cent reduction in housebreaking in Pollokshields. Does the cabinet secretary agree that it is clear that increased community policing is having a beneficial effect across Scotland? In this as in all others, Government actions speak louder than the Opposition's empty rhetoric.

Kenny MacAskill: Absolutely. The Government is committed to a visible police presence. We now have record police numbers. In terms of the city of Glasgow, in addition to the Government's record on police numbers, I pay tribute to the respective chief constable and police board. Their actions have ensured not only the roll-out of the additional officers who we funded through the 1,000 additional officers commitment but that officers are deployed properly.

At the end of the day, as we have always made clear, this is not only about recruitment but about the retention of valuable, experienced officers and the deployment of officers away from needless bureaucracy and back-office jobs that can be dealt with by civilian posts. We want to ensure that we have the visible police presence in our communities that reassures good citizens and deters bad citizens. As Ms McLaughlin pointed out, it ensures that crime is falling.

Pharmacy Applications

5. James Kelly (Glasgow Rutherglen) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what steps it is taking to review the rules and procedures governing pharmacy applications. (S3O-7006)

The Minister for Public Health and Sport (Shona Robison): The framework against which national health service boards consider pharmacy applications are provided for in the NHS (Pharmaceutical Services) (Scotland) Regulations 1995, which the Scottish Government intends to review. The process will begin prior to the summer through discussion and scoping work with stakeholders, with a view to a formal consultation being published in the autumn.

James Kelly: I thank the minister for the commitment on the consultation. As she may be aware, an appeal is pending on a pharmacy application in the Spittal area of my constituency. My constituents and I have concerns about conflicts of interest, given that the objectors

include senior members of Community Pharmacy Scotland, which has representation on the appeal panel. Will the minister consider amending the rules to eradicate such conflicts of interest and introduce more fairness and transparency into the proceedings?

Shona Robison: As the member will be aware, we lodged an amendment this week, which is designed as an interim measure to ensure that the public continues to be involved in pharmacy applications. As I said in my initial answer, if any further changes require to be considered as part of the review, we will do that, once we have consulted all stakeholders.

Mary Scanlon (Highlands and Islands) (Con): Does the minister acknowledge the importance to people in remote and rural areas of dispensing general practitioner practices? Does she take account of the effect on service provision when a practice loses its right to dispense? Can the dispensing doctor arrangements be amended to include the new services that community pharmacies provide? That would ensure that patients across Scotland have equal access to pharmacy and GP services.

Shona Robison: Dispensing GP practices were designed to cover areas where patients would have serious difficulty obtaining their medicines. It is important to remember that the extra remuneration that dispensing GPs receive is intended to cover the delivery of that additional service, not to cross-subsidise general medical services provision; there should be no impact on the other GP services that are provided in the area. As I said in my answer to James Kelly, we will of course have an open review. I am sure that the member will wish to submit her comments as part of that process.

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): With the best will in the world, there is cross-subsidisation. Dispensing GPs are able to employ other people to provide pharmacy services, which means that surgeries are open for longer.

Will the minister ensure that, as part of the review of the regulations, communities will continue to be involved in decision making and that the health professionals who work in an area will be consulted on an application?

Shona Robison: Well, yes. As I said earlier, in lodging the amendment we have ensured that the public continue to be involved in pharmacy applications. It was important to do that. Any further changes, including consultation with other stakeholders, are important. The fact is that we are taking forward the consultation. The views of key stakeholders form an important part of the process. I am sure that we will listen to their views and act accordingly. I am also sure that the

member will wish to submit her comments as part of the process.

Forth Replacement Crossing (Baseline Indicators)

6. Margaret Smith (Edinburgh West) (LD): To ask the Scottish Executive whether Transport Scotland plans to quantify baseline noise and air quality indicators at individual residences that are affected by the proposed Forth replacement crossing. (S3O-7040)

The Minister for Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change (Stewart Stevenson): Yes. By using a model that is verified by some actual measurements, baseline levels at individual properties in the vicinity of the scheme will be predicted. The results of the noise and air assessments will be reported in an environmental statement later in 2009.

Margaret Smith: The minister is aware of residents' concerns about the impact of the new crossing on noise levels and air quality at Linn Mill, Clufflats, Echline and Dundas Home Farm.

At a recent meeting with Transport Scotland, I was told that there would be no on-the-ground baseline figures and that all baseline figures—which are crucial to discussions about mitigation and compensation—would be produced as a result of purely desk-bound calculations. Does the minister share my concerns about that? Will he instruct Transport Scotland to undertake on-the-ground monitoring of current noise and air quality indicators at the affected locations?

The Presiding Officer: Order. Far too many conversations are taking place in the chamber.

Stewart Stevenson: I said in my original answer that the model will be verified by measurements on the ground. We shall use contour plots, with a base year of 2005, for nitrogen dioxide and fine particulate matter, which are key. In addition, we will provide contour plots for NO₂ and PM10 to show the difference in pollutant concentration for 2017 and 2032 with and without the proposed scheme. That substantial piece of research should give a high degree of confidence that we understand and are able to mitigate any effects on individual properties.

Registered Sex Offenders

7. Paul Martin (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what steps are being taken to manage registered sex offenders. (S3O-7010)

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice (Kenny MacAskill): Through the Criminal Justice and Licensing (Scotland) Bill and the Sexual Offences (Scotland) Bill, we will introduce tougher court

orders to impose new obligations on high-risk sex offenders; further strengthen the requirements for sex offenders who declare themselves, or claim to be, homeless; provide additional powers to the courts to impose extended sentences for offences where there is a significant sexual aspect to the offender's behaviour; and introduce new offences to protect children from sexual abuse and exploitation. We have also recently announced plans to pilot greater individual disclosure for parents who may have concern about an adult who has access to their child.

Paul Martin: On 24 March, I submitted a question to the minister requesting information on how many of the 33 recommendations of the Justice 2 Sub-Committee would be implemented. Despite receiving a holding response on 14 April, I have yet to receive a response to that inquiry. Eight weeks on, will the minister respond to the question that I submitted?

Kenny MacAskill: I am happy to confirm to Mr Martin that a letter will shortly be on its way to him. As far as the Government is aware, 29 of the 33 recommendations have been delivered. By the time the letter reaches Mr Martin, we may have been able to increase the figure further. I assure him that the Government is delivering the recommendations of the sub-committee of which both he and I were members, because we recognise the requirement to ensure that our children are protected from those who would seek to exploit or abuse them.

Scottish Futures Trust

8. David Whitton (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive for what reasons the Scottish Futures Trust has not put any projects out to tender. (S3O-7028)

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

David Whitton: Anyone who has studied the matter knows that the Salmond-Swinney slump has already put 20,000 workers in the construction industry on to the dole queue. I know that SNP back benchers do not like to hear that, but the facts are the facts.

I am sure that Mr Swinney is aware that Michael Levack of the Scottish Building Federation appeared before the Finance Committee again last week. He said:

"Planning is very difficult at the moment, given the vacuum that is being created by the lack of major projects

coming forward, following delays with the Scottish Futures Trust."—[*Official Report, Finance Committee*, 12 May 2009; c 1252.]

When will the minister get a move on and order Angus Grossart and Barry White to set down at least one construction project?

John Swinney: Mr Whitton seems to have missed the fact that the Government has presided over the commissioning of a range of construction projects around the country, including the M74 and the M80, which probably goes through his constituency—the member should open his eyes and look at what is in front of him. He should look at the statistics into the bargain. According to the most recent employment statistics for Scotland, construction employment has risen by 1 per cent. Perhaps that will put the member's gas at a peep.

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson): Before we move to questions to the First Minister, I know that members will wish to join me in welcoming to the gallery the Speaker of the House of Assembly of the Parliament of South Australia, the hon Jack Snelling MP. Mr Speaker, you are most welcome. [*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-1708)

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

The whole Parliament will wish to join me in congratulating all those who work in the national health service, who have worked so hard to meet—for the first time ever—the two-month target to treat urgently referred cancer patients. Figures released this week confirm that 95.4 per cent of urgently referred patients began treatment within two months. The national target was first set in 2001, and it was due to be achieved in 2005. I am proud that it has now been delivered under this Administration.

Iain Gray: On Monday, convicted gunman Brian Martin got up and walked out of Castle Huntly open prison. He is yet to be recaptured. Why was a man with a long record of violence and of fleeing justice being held in an open prison in the first place?

The First Minister: Open prisons, by their very nature—and since their instigation in the 1950s—are designed for long-term offenders who are approaching the end of their sentences. That is what open prisons are for. Any absconding from an open prison is to be regretted. There have been three absconds from the open prison estate this year. Two people have been apprehended; the search is on for the one who has not.

Iain Gray: When he walked out of the open prison on Monday, Brian Martin was just three years into a 10-year sentence for firing a gun during a fight in a house in Fife. His previous offences include a string of armed robberies and threatening police with a sawn-off shotgun. This is a man who was once dubbed “the most dangerous man in Britain”. Will the First Minister agree with me that Brian Martin should not have been in an open prison in the first place?

The First Minister: Neither Iain Gray nor I can rule on the criteria for open prisons, but we can look at the figures for open prisons and abscondings over the past generation. After the introduction of the tightened regulations following the case of Robert Foye, which were announced by the Cabinet Secretary for Justice and approved, I think, by the whole Parliament, we can now see from the figures what is actually

happening in the open estate. In the last year of Labour control, there were 339 prisoners in the open estate and 79 abscondee. That is an abscond rate, as a percentage of the daily population, of 23 per cent. In the past year, following the reforms that were instigated by the justice secretary, there were 342 prisoners in the open estate, of whom 16 absconded.

In other words, although it is greatly to be regretted for anybody to abscond from the open estate, I do not think that Iain Gray is on particularly firm ground when he complains about abscondee, as the rate under the present justice secretary is one fifth of what it was under the Labour Party.

Iain Gray: I am not entirely sure about the arithmetic there—

Members: Oh!

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson): Order.

Iain Gray: Although the figures on the reduction in the number of absconds are welcome, that misses the point. Back in March last year, the justice secretary said:

“every abscond is one too many.”

Surely this abscond—Brian Martin—is the one too many.

Two years ago, Robert Foye absconded from Castle Huntly and viciously attacked a young schoolgirl. Following that, Mr MacAskill said that there was now

“a clear presumption against returning a prisoner to the open estate if they have previously absconded.”—[*Official Report*, 26 March 2008; c 7308-9.]

This is not the first time that Brian Martin has gone on the run, is it? He has had previously to be pursued using roadblocks and sniffer dogs, yet he was still housed in an open prison. Is it not the truth that Mr Salmond and Mr MacAskill have not done enough to protect the public since the last such case?

The First Minister: I am glad that Iain Gray is not clear about the arithmetic: that applies to every subject that he raises in the chamber. The statistics on the number of abscondee from the open estate are important, and I remind him that they show a dramatic reduction. He says that that is to be welcomed; indeed it is, and I hope that that welcome applies across the Labour benches.

Iain Gray asked me to say that one abscondee is too many. Yes, it is. The three that we have had this year are too many as well, but let us recognise that, because of the firm action taken by the justice secretary, the number of abscondee from the open prison estate in Scotland is at an all-time low. Is not that to be welcomed?

Iain Gray: I have already welcomed the improvement shown by the statistics, but the statistics also show that a particularly dangerous violent criminal is on the loose. It would be bad enough if Mr MacAskill let the public down in that way occasionally, but hardly a day goes by without another fiasco: he missed the knife summit to go to a pub in Canada, defied Parliament to cancel community courts and abandoned tough action on antisocial behaviour. We found out this week that hundreds of cases in the High Court are being delayed and that police officers are being trained in the dark at Tulliallan to save on electricity bills. He persists—[*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Order.

Iain Gray: Kenny MacAskill also persists with the madness of ending all six-month sentences. He has failed to protect the public from Brian Martin; will Mr Salmond now protect the public from him and admit that his justice secretary is just not up to the job?

The First Minister: Iain Gray says that police officers are being trained in the dark at Tulliallan. If it had been up to him, they would not be trained at all, because there would be no extra police officers. Under the justice secretary, 16,675 police officers patrol the communities of Scotland and keep them safe.

Iain Gray still does not understand the statistics for abscondee from the open prisons, so I will read out the numbers for the last three or four years of Labour control in Scotland: 71, 63 and 79 abscondees. The figure of 16 for last year is a great deal lower than was the case under any Labour justice minister.

At some point, Iain Gray will have to admit that we had the biggest reduction in crime statistics for a generation and have a record clear-up rate because we have police officers going through Tulliallan day and daily under the current justice secretary.

Secretary of State for Scotland (Meetings)

2. Annabel Goldie (West of Scotland) (Con): To ask the First Minister when he will next meet the Secretary of State for Scotland. (S3F-1709)

The First Minister (Alex Salmond): I plan to meet the Secretary of State for Scotland on 23 June, when he will come along to give a pre-Cabinet presentation, in line with a range of social partners who are doing so, on fighting the recession. I suspect that that discussion may turn to the impact of Westminster budgets on Scotland.

Annabel Goldie: David Cameron has pledged that, if elected as Prime Minister, he will treat devolution with respect and responsibility. Indeed, if he is Prime Minister, he will offer to appear

before MSPs in this Parliament to answer questions on any subject.

Can the First Minister demonstrate the same respect and responsibility? Is he big enough to put aside his gripe and grievance politics for the good of Scotland? He claims to be Scotland's voice at Westminster—although, with his attendance record, it is more of a whisper—so will he match David Cameron's pledge and offer himself for questioning before MPs at Westminster?

The First Minister: Scottish ministers have already appeared before Westminster committees and I have no difficulty in doing so.

I am interested to hear that the Conservative Party and David Cameron will treat Scotland "with respect". Behind that new phrase is there not an admission that in the past the Conservative Party did not treat Scotland with respect? Perhaps the secret of the long-term continuous decline in the party's fortunes in Scotland is that for years it was viewed as an anti-Scottish party, precisely because it did not treat Scotland with respect. New policies might come in floods these days, but I suspect that many people in Scotland will say, "The leopard doesn't change its spots and these are the same old anti-Scottish Tories."

Annabel Goldie: It is unfortunate for the First Minister that what voters tell me and what the opinion polls reflect is very different from the image that he might like to portray.

There are two types of politician in the Parliament: those who, like the public, want devolution to work, who are in the majority; and those who, like the First Minister, want to wreck devolution, who are in the minority. Perhaps Alex Salmond cannot rise to the challenge of being a responsible First Minister. Perhaps he will always be a separatist party leader with a wrecking agenda. Does he agree that the best way to nurture a strong relationship between our two Governments and Parliaments, build mutual respect and responsibility and start to restore trust in our politics is to have a general election, to give people a say and to let them vote for change?

The First Minister: At last there is something that I can agree with. Let us have a general election and vote for real change in Scotland's representation in Westminster.

I do not know which opinion poll Annabel Goldie has been reading, but she shouldnae get carried away by the one that showed her ratings above Iain Gray's ratings among the Scottish public. That was not because she is going up; it was because he is going down.

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-1710)

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

Tavish Scott: Six hundred jobs went at Lloyds TSB Bank this week and 900 others went the week before, on top of yesterday's 300 jobs at the Royal Bank of Scotland. If that happened in one go there would be a riot, but job losses are being dripped out bit by bit. Lloyds has made it plain that headquarters functions will move from Scotland to London. It also admitted to the City of London yesterday that it will have to sell off parts of its business, perhaps even the Bank of Scotland.

Will the First Minister bring a new plan to the table to protect Scottish banking jobs?

The First Minister: This week's announcements from RBS and Lloyds are serious—they were not entirely unexpected but they are no less serious for that. We have been in contact with both organisations, which say that they will do their utmost to avoid compulsory redundancies, but we are talking about a considerable number of finance sector jobs.

The finance sector jobs task force, which Tavish Scott urged us to set up, is up and running, meeting and doing good work. It is engaging in dialogue not only with the institutions that are shedding jobs but with institutions that are growing in the financial sector. For example, esure has announced 500 new jobs in Glasgow, Tesco Personal Finance is establishing its headquarters in Edinburgh, there are new jobs from BNP Paribas and we all celebrate Martin Currie's recent success in gaining the long-term administration of part of the Chinese pension fund—I am not sure how much of it, but I think that we can safely say that it will be a considerable amount.

I make those points not to diminish in any way the seriousness of the job-loss figures but because we should not give the impression that the whole of the Scottish financial sector is shedding jobs. There are companies in our financial sector, particularly in pensions, life management and asset management, which are doing extremely well and robustly through the economic recession.

Tavish Scott: If the First Minister builds a genuine campaign, which is not just cross-party but across Scotland, I will back it. That should be a campaign to bring Bank of Scotland home.

Last year, the Labour Government used all the instruments of state to force the takeover of HBOS. We said that that would hit competition and

hurt customers. The European competition commissioner, Nelly Kroes, whom I met on Monday, recognised that, too. Lloyds will now have to sell parts of its business. There must be a campaign for a smaller bank that serves Scotland's families and businesses, rather than taking high-wire gambles with other people's money. Can we have the Bank of Scotland back home? Will the First Minister lead that campaign?

The First Minister: I agree with the analysis of the dangers of lack of competition in the retail-banking sector in Scotland. We are not in charge of the decisions that will be made on whether bank assets are or are not put up for sale, as Tavish Scott well knows. However, right now, we are engaged in attempting to attract new players into the Scottish financial scene, because we have traditionally relied on two exceptionally strong banks for a substantial share of the market. Right now, we have to attract new players who are in a better financial position, and that is what we are focused on. The financial sector jobs task force is also focused on its work, looking at how skills that might be released from some institutions could transfer into other institutions.

If Tavish Scott is asking me to campaign for and promote additional competition in the Scottish financial sector, certainly I am for that, because I think that competition benefits the Scottish people and Scottish business in the long term.

The Presiding Officer: I will take a constituency question from Michael McMahon.

Michael McMahon (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab): Does the First Minister recognise that the families of the 14 elderly residents who perished in the fire at the Rosepark nursing home in Uddingston in my constituency have been waiting more than five years now for justice and answers in the wake of the tragedy? This week, the latest attempt by the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service to bring charges against the owners of the nursing home failed. It now seems unlikely that the families will ever receive justice, because of the Crown Office's mistake in serving the original charges on the company that owned the home at the time rather than on the directors, who subsequently dissolved that company and created a new one to run the home.

Will the First Minister assure me, other members and, most important, the bereaved families that a fatal accident inquiry, or another form of public inquiry, will be held to ensure that answers are found and that lessons are learned from the tragedy? Will he also assure the people of Scotland that the legal loophole that allowed the company to avoid being charged will be closed—using the legislative opportunity that is provided by the Criminal Justice and Licensing (Scotland) Bill—so that no individual director or corporate

entity can escape justice in the future by using that loophole?

The First Minister: On the final point, Scottish Government and United Kingdom Government officials are working together on how legislation can close that loophole. I am not making a political point, but the incident happened under a previous Administration, and I do not think that it is as simple as saying that the Crown Office made a mistake. The case brought up a genuine gap in the law that must be addressed.

I have genuinely just been handed a piece of paper that was released at 11.52 by the Crown Office—I am sure that the constituency member will get a copy directly—which states:

“A Fatal Accident Inquiry is to be held to look into the circumstances of the deaths of 14 residents of Rosepark Care Home”.

That was announced by the Solicitor General for Scotland today. [*Applause.*]

I am sure that the constituency member and, indeed, all members in the chamber welcome the fact that the fatal accident inquiry will seek to ensure that those who lost loved ones in the fire at Uddingston in January 2004 can know the full circumstances of that tragic incident as soon as possible.

The Presiding Officer: I will take a further constituency question from Christina McKelvie.

Christina McKelvie (Central Scotland) (SNP): Following the detention of Fatou Felicite Gaye and Arouna Gaye, what progress has been made to stop the detention of children in Dungavel detention centre in Lanarkshire and what contact has the Scottish Government had with the UK Border Agency?

The First Minister: The Scottish Government is engaged in extensive contact with the UK Border Agency and, indeed, with UK ministers on that issue. I am extremely disappointed that, after a period when substantial progress appeared to be made on the issue of the detention of children at Dungavel, this incident has now arisen. I do not believe that the explanations that have thus far been presented by UK ministers explain what seems to be a reversion to a previous, totally unacceptable, practice.

It is the view of this Administration—and, if I remember correctly from previous votes, of the overwhelming majority of members of this Parliament—that it is not acceptable in Scotland to detain children in an establishment such as Dungavel.

Curriculum for Excellence

4. Christine Grahame (South of Scotland) (SNP): To ask the First Minister what resources the Scottish Government has allocated to develop and support the curriculum for excellence. (S3F-1719)

The First Minister (Alex Salmond): We are providing the right resources for the curriculum for excellence in terms of money, time and commitment to ensure that all Scotland's young people are equipped with the skills for learning, life and work that they need in the 21st century. The previous Administration spent £10 million in developing the curriculum for excellence programme in the period 2005 to 2007. Since then, we have invested some £11.9 million, with a forecast figure of £30.1 million for the period 2009 to 2011.

We have put in place an additional year for implementation, announced three extra in-service days to support implementation, made provision for 100 additional teachers to support implementation in the classroom and supported the establishment of an implementation network, which will be led by the Association of Directors of Education in Scotland. Every teacher is receiving their own copy of the new curriculum guidance, which will be enhanced by world-leading on-line resources.

Christine Grahame: I thank the First Minister for that detailed answer. However, like all members, I have heard and read the concerns that leaders of unions and councils have expressed on the resourcing of education, including the curriculum for excellence. I understand that the partnership with councils means that they are responsible for delivering education on the ground, but part of any partnership is constructive discussion. Will the First Minister give an assurance that he or his ministers will meet council leaders, including those who have made such opinions public, to impress on them the importance of passing on appropriate funding to education?

The First Minister: I can confirm that education budgets are, of course, a matter for local authorities. All those with an interest in the success of our children and young people can make their views known to their local decision makers. We have provided record funding settlements for local government of £23 billion for the period 2008 to 2010.

Discussions are taking place and have been arranged between ministers and local government colleagues. We have a shared educational agenda with local government, which is set out in the concordat and includes delivery of the curriculum for excellence.

Let me point to an example of how that partnership is working. I am delighted to note that South Ayrshire Council has organised for today a curriculum for excellence festival for 1,400 teachers and colleagues who are involved in making the curriculum for excellence real in classrooms. Over two venues, some 78 workshops are planned that will examine how to set about improving learning and teaching to provide the young people of Scotland with the skills for learning, life and work for the 21st century. I think that the whole Parliament should welcome such indications that local authorities across Scotland are taking their responsibilities seriously.

Margaret Smith (Edinburgh West) (LD): No doubt the First Minister has noted the concerns of the Scottish Secondary Teachers' Association about how the curriculum for excellence will work in practice. The SSTA is concerned that guidance about delivery has been too vague and that resources remain insufficient. In light of that, does the Government plan to accept the SSTA's recommendation to delay delivery further until a clearer and more robust strategy for implementation is in place?

The First Minister: We are confident about the strategy for implementation and the enthusiasm of teachers across Scotland for the implementation of the curriculum for excellence. I have spelled out to the Parliament the increased and enhanced resources that have been devoted by the Government to ensure that the curriculum for excellence is a substantial success.

The whole Parliament will recognise that those resources are being devoted in times that do not look particularly propitious as far as public expenditure is concerned. *[Interruption.]* I hear the Labour Party complain about that, but facts are chieft that winna ding—there is a £500 million cut in the Scottish budget next year. However, despite Labour cuts, resources are being devoted to the curriculum for excellence, and that should be welcomed by the Parliament.

Young People not in Education, Employment or Training

5. Jack McConnell (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab): To ask the First Minister what options will be available for young people not in education, employment or training in the next 12 months. (S3F-1711)

The First Minister (Alex Salmond): The Government is determined to avoid another lost generation so we are taking action to limit the disproportionate and damaging effect that recession can have on young people. Through 16+ learning choices, we will ensure that every young person has an appropriate and attractive offer of post-16 learning, including through

schools, colleges, training, volunteering or non-formal learning.

Jack McConnell: I am pleased that the First Minister has mentioned volunteering as an option. However, two years ago, Scotland led the rest of the United Kingdom in providing full-time volunteering placements for young people. A month ago, Barack Obama quadrupled the number of places that are available in the United States on the programme that originally inspired Project Scotland. Unfortunately, while youngsters in Dallas and Pennsylvania will have better opportunities next year, youngsters from Dumfries to Perth will see the door closed in their faces. Will the Scottish Government reconsider its decision to end its funding of Project Scotland? Will the First Minister agree to meet the youngsters from Project Scotland who have benefited from their volunteering placements? Will ministers stop blanking Project Scotland volunteers and start backing them, giving them the opportunities that they deserve and want?

The First Minister: There have been regular meetings between Project Scotland and ministers. I advise the former First Minister that we are making improvements in good destinations for young people in relation to employability. The position is improving: last year, 87 per cent of young people were in positive post-school destinations—seven points up from 2003-04.

Project Scotland did some excellent work, but we must also consider value for money in volunteering and the voluntary sector. The grant in 2007-08 was £6.5 million—20 per cent of our total investment in the third sector for 2008-09. There are many other volunteering projects in Scotland. The MV awards scheme encourages and facilitates part-time volunteering and cost a total of £800,000 in 2006-07. It provided 4,400 part-time placements at around £180 a placement. Community Service Volunteers Scotland placements cost around £9,000 for a full year, including the cost of bed and board. Project Scotland placements cost £8,500 for six months and did not include accommodation costs.

Good work is being done. However, given the fact that all Governments must consider which organisations can deliver cost-effective volunteering opportunities for young people on the scale that we require and in the way that we need them, it is pretty clear that the ministerial decisions on Project Scotland were correct.

Teachers (Safety)

6. Elizabeth Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): To ask the First Minister what plans the Scottish Government has to address the recent comments made at the Scottish Secondary Teachers' Association conference that attacks by

pupils are the biggest risk that teachers face. (S3F-1717)

The First Minister (Alex Salmond): The evidence is clear that the vast majority of pupils in our schools are well behaved and a credit to Scotland. That was the consensus in the debate on school discipline on 7 May, too. The number of school exclusions decreased by 11 per cent overall between 2006-07 and 2007-08, and the number of exclusions relating to physical assault decreased by 6 per cent over the same period.

Elizabeth Smith will have seen the comments that were made by Ronnie Smith, the general secretary of the Educational Institute of Scotland, in *The Herald* on 3 March:

"While we have problems with indiscipline, this tends to be low-level such as answering back rather than assaults."

However, any violence in schools is unacceptable. That is why the Government is preparing new guidance on exclusion, in partnership with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and other key stakeholders.

Elizabeth Smith: The First Minister will be aware that the general secretary of the SSTA has expressed concern about the small minority of violent pupils who are being allowed back into mainstream education before they have demonstrated that they can behave properly and pose no risk to other pupils and staff. Does the First Minister share that concern?

The First Minister: I am glad that Elizabeth Smith acknowledges that we are talking about a small minority. The guidance on risk assessment, which was commented on at the SSTA conference in relation to pupils coming back into mainstream education, will cover cases in which a pupil has been excluded from school because of violent behaviour and what future provision is needed to ensure the safety and welfare of pupils and teachers. The improved behaviour in Scottish schools survey, which is to be published in the autumn, will also provide a clear and up-to-date picture of the approaches and strategies that are being used by teachers throughout Scotland to manage behaviour.

Margo MacDonald (Lothians) (Ind): Would the First Minister care to speculate on why teachers now have a stress line that they can call and on whether it is entirely true to say that, because physical attacks on teachers are diminishing, the stress of being a teacher is any less?

The First Minister: Teaching is a stressful profession. There is a range of jobs in the public sector that have high stress levels. I acknowledge the benefits that teachers, in their professionalism, have given to Scottish education over the generations.

We take the matters that Margo MacDonald raises extremely seriously, as she knows. She and I can join together in welcoming the fact that teachers face the challenges of their profession with a good heart and a willing spirit to direct and improve the education of Scotland's young people.

12:30

Meeting suspended until 14:15.

14:15

On resuming—

Question Time

SCOTTISH EXECUTIVE

Europe, External Affairs and Culture

Broadcast Spectrum

1. Alasdair Morgan (South of Scotland) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what representations it has made to Ofcom regarding the local broadcast spectrum to be made available for auction in Scotland. (S3O-7066)

The Minister for Culture, External Affairs and the Constitution (Michael Russell): The Scottish Government regularly meets Ofcom to discuss a number of issues, including the future use of spectrum. We have responded to the consultations that were carried out as part of Ofcom's digital dividend review. In our response to the United Kingdom Government's "Digital Britain" interim report, which I had the opportunity to talk to Lord Stephen Carter about, we recommended that further work should be undertaken to establish whether the seventh multiplex spectrum would be suitable for broadcasting purposes.

Alasdair Morgan: The minister is aware of the unsatisfactory situation regarding current affairs programming in the south of Scotland following the demise of Border Television. He also knows that there was concern that the spectrum that was originally offered for local broadcasting in that area did not allow a sufficient proportion of the population to be reached. Now that the auction has been postponed, will he undertake to make strong representations to Ofcom in favour of an auction that offers greater potential for local content?

Michael Russell: I very much sympathise with the point that the member makes. Indeed, I have made such representations to Ofcom, to the new chair of Ofcom and to the Scottish director of Ofcom very recently, and I will continue to make them.

We all recognise that the situation following the demise of Border TV's news coverage is totally unacceptable. The present coverage by Tyne Tees Television is unacceptable; indeed, it is irrelevant to the local audience in the Borders and especially to the audience in Dumfries and Galloway. The best solution would be to have a single Scottish licence. I have made that point to Ofcom, and I do not think that there is much disagreement with it in the Parliament or in the broadcasting sector.

I sympathise with the member on the need for new possibilities in local coverage and, in so far as we are able to, we will support the development of such new possibilities. Of course, we could do even more if broadcasting powers were the responsibility of the Scottish Parliament, and I hope that transfer of that responsibility will not be deferred for too long.

National Trust for Scotland

2. John Scott (Ayr) (Con): To ask the Scottish Executive what its relationship is with the National Trust for Scotland and what meetings the Scottish Government has had with it about its current difficulties. (S3O-6975)

The Minister for Culture, External Affairs and the Constitution (Michael Russell): The National Trust for Scotland is an independent charity that works to conserve our Scottish heritage, and the Scottish Government provides it with funding support for specific projects.

Recently, I and my officials have had several meetings with the trust's chair and chief executive to discuss its current, extremely disturbing difficulties. I have also met representatives of Prospect, the trade union that represents many of the trust's staff, and of in trust for Scotland, the members organisation that wants the trust to be more accountable.

John Scott: Yesterday, the National Trust for Scotland confirmed that there will be 65 redundancies among its permanent staff, which will comprise 44 compulsory redundancies and 21 voluntary redundancies. What effect will that have on the maintenance and display of our national heritage? Are there any further measures that can be taken to support those who are being made redundant?

Michael Russell: The full facilities that the Scottish Government offers with regard to redundancy will be made available to the trust's staff. I am sure that my colleague the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning and her colleagues will support the trust's staff through the partnership action for continuing employment programme and other initiatives.

I deeply regret the redundancies, which are a matter for the trust. In their representations, the trade unions made what seemed to me to be a fair point, which was that in an organisation that is as specialised as the National Trust for Scotland, the greatest care must be taken to ensure that crucial skills, particularly in conservation, are not removed from the organisation. The trust must confront the difficulties that it undoubtedly faces, many of which are long term, although some of them have arisen recently, but I hope that it will consider the balance of work that it can do and ensure that it does not

find itself abnormally weakened by the decisions that it makes. I will be very happy to work with the trust on those matters; indeed, conversations are continuing between my officials and trust officials.

3. George Foulkes (Lothians) (Lab): John Scott and I must be telepathic.

To ask the Scottish Executive what meetings it has had with the chair of the National Trust for Scotland and what was discussed. (S3O-6999)

The Minister for Culture, External Affairs and the Constitution (Michael Russell): I am tempted to say, in language with which Lord Foulkes is familiar, "I refer the member to the answer I gave some moments ago." As we do not use that terminology here, I simply say that my officials and I have had several meetings recently with the chair of the National Trust for Scotland. We discussed the trust's proposals for changes to its operating arrangements at several properties, staff reductions, and the specific projects that the Scottish Government is funding.

George Foulkes: Does the minister recall the written reply that he gave to me earlier today, which confirms that £3 million of public money is given to the National Trust for Scotland each year? My experience, as an NTS member who has visited trust properties—particularly Culzean—is that there is clear evidence of a lack of commercial nous in the way in which those properties are run. Is the minister aware of that?

I am trying to be helpful for a change. Our heritage is in the care of various bodies—not just the NTS but Historic Scotland, British Waterways and a number of private trusts. Will the minister consider bringing together those bodies to develop joint marketing, development of commercial expertise and other ways of working together to get value for money, while keeping our entire heritage safe and open to the public?

Michael Russell: I remember the answer that I gave the member this morning—my attention span is still capable of remembering such things. As the member indicates, that answer mentions a considerable sum of money. That money is project-related funding for specific projects. It is a considerable contribution to the trust and to the wellbeing of Scotland's heritage.

I am very familiar with the trust's work in a variety of places, including Culzean, where I had the pleasure to be a member of staff when I was a student. It is a special place, although even then there were strong questions about the way in which the trust approached the commercial aspects of its work.

I am sure that the member will be pleased to know that yesterday, at the final conference of the Historic Environment Advisory Council for

Scotland, I said not only publicly but repeatedly that I wanted Historic Scotland, the National Trust for Scotland, and the owners of the historic houses in Scotland, including the Historic Houses Association, to work together closely, to share experience, to find ways in which they can pool costs, and to sharpen the offering that we can make in Scotland.

Others could be involved, too. I am sure that members will be as surprised as I was to learn yesterday that the largest owner of grade A scheduled monuments in Scotland is not the National Trust for Scotland, Historic Scotland or the owners of historic houses, but the Church of Scotland. Eighty per cent of the ecclesiastical buildings that are scheduled in Scotland belong to the Church of Scotland. There are issues throughout Scottish life. However, those who are trying to make a commercial prospect out of our heritage and to ensure that it continues need to work together.

Christina McKelvie (Central Scotland) (SNP): Is the minister aware of the situation with the David Livingstone centre in Blantyre? It was confirmed in a letter to me from the National Trust for Scotland that a £100,000 legacy is being held until a decision is made on the centre's future. Will the minister raise that issue with the NTS when he and I visit the centre next Tuesday?

Michael Russell: I thank the member for letting me see the letter a short time ago. I find it disturbing to discover that the National Trust for Scotland has received a substantial legacy from a donor, applying to the David Livingstone centre. Presumably, if the trust had withdrawn from the centre, those resources would have had to be returned to the donor. That fact is germane, and it might have been better if it had been in the public domain when the discussions were going on, rather than now.

I encourage the trust, and its chair and chief executive in particular, to be transparent and open in the discussions that are taking place about the future of the trust's work. The National Trust for Scotland is a membership organisation, and it is important that its members and the wider public know the facts on which people are making decisions. I look forward to discussing those and other matters when I go to the David Livingstone centre with the member on Tuesday.

Rob Gibson (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): I am pleased to hear that the minister has been speaking to the National Trust for Scotland. In a recent press release about job cuts, the trust talks about cutting jobs from 91 to 65. However, it says that Hugh Miller's cottage will remain open as it is anticipated that the deficit will be eliminated by the reduction in staff and a reduction in opening hours to four days. Does the minister agree that it will be

necessary for him to intervene in the near future to stop any salami cuts, if the trust cannot deal with its debts?

Michael Russell: I remind the member that the trust is a membership organisation: its officials are responsible to its members, and it is for the members to take the actions that they think necessary. I have visited Hugh Miller's cottage within the past year, and I found it a remarkably interesting place. Places such as Cromarty are not overburdened with attractions of that nature, so it is important that the attractions remain open, so that they can describe the distinctive nature of their part of Scotland. I hope that the trust will focus on ensuring that its range of offerings is made widely available.

If memory serves, this is the second major round of cuts in recent years. Public confidence in the trust will be greatly eroded if cuts are seen to be part of a continuous process.

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson): Question 4 was not lodged.

Scottish Screen

5. Rhona Brankin (Midlothian) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive whether it recognises the importance of Scottish Screen in supporting the screen industries. (S3O-6992)

The Minister for Culture, External Affairs and the Constitution (Michael Russell): The Scottish Government recognises the important role that Scottish Screen currently plays in supporting the screen industries. That is why we provide the body with on-going grant-in-aid funding to allow it to undertake that work. Creative Scotland will inherit the functions, responsibilities and resources of the Scottish Arts Council and Scottish Screen, and, by a transformation, will build on that work, taking the best from both organisations and creating a single unified body.

Rhona Brankin: I am glad that the minister acknowledges the importance of Scottish Screen—given that £240 million is spent in Scotland on film and television production. Scottish Screen has played an important role in developing a vibrant and dynamic sector.

Scottish Screen is a recognised and respected brand within the screen industries. I was pleased when the minister told the chamber on 2 April that its work would continue to appear under that brand, in some way, after the merger with the Scottish Arts Council. Can the minister give us more detail on how he expects that Scottish Screen brand to live on as part of creative Scotland?

Michael Russell: No, I cannot. I think that I indicated that, although I acknowledged the

importance of the Scottish Screen brand, I also acknowledged the importance of a new creative Scotland brand. That will be essential. If the new organisation is to be the dynamic force that we all want it to be—the establishment of creative Scotland has been supported in this chamber—we should focus on ensuring that it is a dynamic brand. That is not to do down anything that has happened in the past, but to acknowledge that, in a time of limited resources, we should focus on getting—if I may use this phrase in the chamber, Presiding Officer—as many bangs for our buck as we possibly can. That means that we should be working to ensure that the creative Scotland brand is taken forward.

The important work that Ken Hay and his colleagues do is of high value and will continue under the creative Scotland label. If a way can be found to use the Scottish Screen label as an adjunct to that, well and good. I hope that the good work will continue—but Scotland could gain much more in terms of film production if we had the taxation powers that other countries have to attract film production here.

Ted Brocklebank (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): The minister will recall that, when Iain Smith resigned from the board of creative Scotland, he claimed that, in its haste to form the new body, the Scottish National Party Government was in danger of ending up like the surgeon who said, "The operation was a success, but unfortunately the patient has died." Was Mr Smith right in his diagnosis? Has the minister been able to recruit anyone with Mr Smith's screen industry credentials to replace him on the new board? If not, when might such an appointment be made?

Michael Russell: I shall not be replacing Mr Smith on the joint board. I see no need to do so, because that joint board is a transitional board.

I have been in touch with Iain Smith since his resignation. I regret his resignation, and I said so at the time. I hope to have a longer conversation with him, but I know that there were many reasons for his resignation. He was doubtful about the process that was being undertaken. That process has been accelerated in recent months.

To continue Mr Smith's analogy of the operating table, the people who withheld the oxygen were those who voted against the bill when it was going through. I might therefore blame the entire chamber. However, let us not look back now, whoever the murderer is—and I see that Mr McAveety appears to want to claim the credit. Now that I am in the emergency room, I hope to be able to do something. I have been trying to take the process to completion; to assure all stakeholders that it will happen; to find the proper way of informing the chamber of the costs, which I hope I have done; and to reassure members about the

key issues. Those key issues include the one that the Tories have properly raised, namely the resources for the creative industries—we are taking that issue forward.

I hope that in talking to Mr Smith and others—*[Interruption.]* I hear strange noises coming from the Labour benches. A former minister with responsibility for the matter appears to be overexcited. If she had delivered, we would not be in this situation. We will deliver, our approach will work, and we will move forward. That will show up the failures of others, particularly Ms Brankin.

The Presiding Officer: Question 6 was withdrawn.

Slovakian Nationals (Glasgow)

7. Mr Frank McAveety (Glasgow Shettleston)

(Lab): I hope that the new Dr Kildare will be gentle with me.

To ask the Scottish Executive what discussions it has had with Slovakian diplomatic officials about Slovakian nationals in Glasgow. (S3O-7011)

The Minister for Culture, External Affairs and the Constitution (Michael Russell): The Scottish Government has had no discussions with Slovakian diplomatic officials about Slovakian nationals in Glasgow. However, I recognise that there is an issue in parts of Glasgow and I am sure that the member has information that will assist me in taking the matter forward.

Mr McAveety: As the minister probably knows, the Govanhill area of my constituency is the part of Scotland that has experienced the most substantial influx of Slovak Roma. At the most recent count, there were at least 2,000 new residents in an area that has 16,000 people and was already densely populated. The situation has created substantial pressures on local health and education services and there are significant new problems of antisocial behaviour and street littering.

Will the minister consider how we can open up better dialogue with Slovak officials and seek their assistance in ensuring that Slovak nationals integrate into a host community that has faced immigration over the years and has integrated newcomers effectively? Will he visit my constituency to discuss with residents and local agencies how best to deal with a unique set of circumstances?

Michael Russell: The issue cuts across the responsibilities of a number of ministers, but I will be happy to visit the member's constituency to discuss areas that are of particular relevance to me in my capacity as minister with responsibility for external affairs. There are also issues to be

discussed with the ministers with responsibility for health, education and justice.

The member and Councillor Anne Marie Millar have talked about policing with the help of Slovakian officials. There are issues in that regard that need to be discussed. There is also an on-going petition from Govanhill Housing Association on issues that are of some relevance. I assure the member that we will work hard with him. Perhaps more than one minister should engage with him on the issue.

Local Newspapers

8. John Lamont (Roxburgh and Berwickshire)

(Con): To ask the Scottish Executive what is being done to retain the cultural role of newspapers in local communities. (S3O-6973)

The Minister for Culture, External Affairs and the Constitution (Michael Russell): The Scottish Government recognises the importance of a strong local newspaper sector and the contribution that it makes to culture, democracy and the economy. We appreciate the pressure that the newspaper industry has been facing for many months, which is why my colleague Jim Mather facilitated a discussion at a Scottish Government seminar on 4 February on how the problems might be overcome. Since that session, the First Minister and Jim Mather have had a series of meetings with industry representatives, to encourage active industry engagement and exploration of new business opportunities arising from the exploitation of new technologies.

John Lamont: Last week was local newspaper week. I am sure that the minister is aware of the threat that faces many local newspapers, including many in the Borders, due to declining revenue and other financial pressures. Will he support that vital sector by ensuring that public notices continue to be published in print editions?

Michael Russell: We live in a time of considerable change in how the media operate. It is not possible to beat back the tide simply by continuing as we are; it is necessary to have new ideas about how we support local media and how the sector should develop.

I was interested to note that in recent months Mr Lamont called for the establishment of the Scottish digital network—I agree with him on that—and made a link between such a network and the health of the local media and newspaper sector. Problems are associated with the operation of a commercial digital network on a local television basis and the health of local newspapers—one could adversely affect the other.

Although I do not agree with some of the member's ideas, I agree that we need to help the local newspaper sector to adapt and change in the

current times, and I will work with him and others to achieve that.

Pauline McNeill (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab): The minister will be aware that the repeal of legislation on public notices would result in a loss of £10 million for the newspaper industry. Is he concerned about that? Will he explain why Glasgow City Council's area is one of five areas that have been chosen for a public notices pilot, given that in Glasgow, internet use, which is one of the ways in which the public will be expected to view public notices, is 20 per cent behind internet use in the rest of the country? Did the minister take that into account when he chose Glasgow to be a pilot area?

Michael Russell: Many trade-offs have to be made. The substantial reduction in the 2010-11 Scottish Government budget that has been brought forward by members of Pauline McNeill's party means that we must take ever tougher decisions to achieve a more efficient public service. We would want to do that in any case, but the decisions are being driven on by financial pressure from south of the border. The member therefore cannot complain about one thing but not complain about that. As I have said, we are in a time of profound change for the media, so it is important that we are not—as the member appears to be—luddite.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes questions on Europe, external affairs and culture.

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. Do you share my concern that there has not been a single member of the Liberal Democrat party in the chamber for the past 20 minutes? As it is hard to believe that not a single Liberal Democrat is uninterested in the topics of Europe, external affairs or culture, perhaps you can investigate whether they have been struck down by a pandemic of a mysterious illness.

The Presiding Officer: Mr Fraser, you are well aware that that is not a point of order for me.

Education and Lifelong Learning

Individual Learning Accounts

1. Angela Constance (Livingston) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Executive what it considers the benefits will be of the recently announced changes to individual learning accounts. (S3O-7048)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning (Fiona Hyslop): Among other changes, eligibility for both ILA 200 and ILA 500 has been extended to people earning less than £22,000, which means that an additional 250,000 people and nearly half the workforce are now

eligible. ILA 500 can now, for the first time, be used for part-time postgraduate study. Those and other changes will offer more flexibility for learners who want to upskill or retrain.

Angela Constance: How will those recent changes promote sustainable economic growth in West Lothian, given that it has the highest unemployment for a decade, the biggest more choices, more chances cohort in Scotland, a rising population, demand for training that outstrips supply and comparatively low salaries?

Fiona Hyslop: I am very aware of the situation in West Lothian and the concerns that the member raises. One specific change that will be helpful is the fact that, for the first time, people who are still in work—including those who are facing redundancy—will be able to use ILA 200 to retrain. We are engaging with West Lothian Council to address some of the other concerns that the member mentioned, particularly those for young people. The 16+ learning choices model, which we recently launched, will provide support in that regard, as will recognition of the issues around the funding of West Lothian College. I know that the Scottish Further and Higher Education Funding Council is actively engaged with those issues.

Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): I welcome the announcement of the extension of the ILA schemes. The changes will undoubtedly increase demand for college courses, over and above the huge increase in applications of up to 300,000 this year. Will the minister commit today to using the £12 million in consequential from the Westminster budget to increase the number of college places in Scotland?

Fiona Hyslop: I had a useful meeting with the Scottish colleges only yesterday. I welcome the comments of Chris Travis, the new chief executive of Scotland's Colleges, on the 2009-10 allocation for colleges, which he said was very welcome, particularly during a recession. It is important that we support our colleges, which have been good at reacting to and supporting initiatives during the recession and in planning for recovery.

Cabinet colleagues will discuss how we can best use the budget consequential. However, given that we face £500 million of cuts in 2010-11, it will be extremely difficult to ensure that all public services can be geared as the member and I would want in order to ensure that we can support students who are looking to retrain.

Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Bill

2. Alasdair Allan (Western Isles) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what it considers the benefits of the Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Bill will be to island communities. (S3O-7045)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning (Fiona Hyslop): The Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Bill will update and strengthen the consultation practices that local authorities apply to all proposals for major changes to their schools. It will safeguard Scotland's rural schools by ensuring that local authorities have special regard to specific factors before deciding to consult formally on rural school closures. Those provisions are particularly pertinent for island communities, most of whose schools would be classified for the purposes of the bill as rural.

Alasdair Allan: Does the cabinet secretary agree that the role of schools in rural areas in general is inextricably linked to their communities' economic activity, with supply very much leading demand?

Fiona Hyslop: Yes, I do. An important requirement under the bill is the provision of an educational benefits statement, which reiterates that educational decisions should be at the heart of any proposal. The special provision for rural schools recognises that, by and large, they are at the heart of their communities' economies. Indeed, when we launched the bill in Dalwhinnie primary school, I was particularly struck by the fact that many of the local estates required a school in the community so that local workers could be recruited.

Jamie McGrigor (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I welcome the fact that the Scottish National Party Government is pushing ahead with another Scottish Tory policy through the bill.

Does the cabinet secretary agree that local parents and pupils at the junior secondary schools in the Western Isles greatly value the quality of education that those schools provide? Is she aware that those parents will welcome the extra safeguards against closure that the bill offers?

Fiona Hyslop: I recognise that a number of people have pursued the issue of rural school closures. I have been involved for five years, and it was referred to in the SNP manifesto. I recognise the contribution of Murdo Fraser, who has worked on the matter more recently. I also recognise Jamie McGrigor's point about the value of local education provision in the Western Isles. Indeed, the strengths and abilities of rural schools, including both their academic and wider achievements, have been reflected in a number of reports from Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education.

Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning (Meetings)

3. Johann Lamont (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive when the Cabinet

Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning last met the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and what issues were discussed. (S3O-7008)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning (Fiona Hyslop): I met COSLA's spokesperson on education, children and young people on 30 April. We discussed a range of relevant issues, which focused on our shared agenda of improving outcomes for all Scotland's children and young people. I also met Councillor Pat Watters of COSLA on Thursday 14 May at the Cabinet sub-committee on resilience.

Johann Lamont: Have the cabinet secretary and COSLA discussed the process of placing requests, which is exercising many of my constituents? On their behalf, I ask the cabinet secretary to clarify the legal grounds for refusal of an application, given the significance of such refusals to families and how they manage their child care. Is it legally sustainable for a local authority to refuse a placing request on the grounds of its policy to reduce class sizes to 18, given that that does not appear in the legislation that created placing requests?

Fiona Hyslop: I am more than happy to send the member a copy of the national guidance on parental rights and the legal provisions. From her question, I think that she will be aware that local authorities have some latitude in interpreting individual policies. For example, I know that some local authorities look at planning matters over not just one year but several years when they are deciding on intake. If she has particular cases in which such policies have been a reason for refusing placing requests, I will be more than happy to ask my officials to look into the matter in the context of the current legal framework.

In response to Johann Lamont's initial question on whether we have had discussions about placing requests, I recognise that there have been problems in areas such as East Lothian and East Renfrewshire in particular, so such requests have been an active area of discussion with local government. Yes, local authorities sometimes want us to impose less regulation, but they are keen to have more regulation in some areas, including on placing requests. I cannot give a definitive answer as to where those discussions will take us, but we are actively looking at the issue.

The Path is Green

4. Rob Gibson (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government how successful Careers Scotland's the path is green programme has been. (S3O-7054)

The Minister for Schools and Skills (Keith Brown): The path is green, which was launched in May 2008, was an innovative approach to encourage young people to consider green jobs and opportunities in the renewables sector. As a campaign, its success can be demonstrated by the awards it has won and by the increased level of awareness that it has helped to create among key groups. More important, as an example of good practice, the model is planned to be extended across the wider science, engineering and technology sectors. The new programme—the path is SET—will encourage young people to prepare for and pursue careers in science, engineering and technology. The path is SET programme is currently being developed and will be launched later this year.

Rob Gibson: Will the success of Skills Development Scotland's the path is green programme be related to the take-up of and funding for renewable energy skills-related courses in colleges such as the North Highland College in Thurso, which would be able to meet the industry's needs in the Pentland Firth if the courses were fully funded?

Keith Brown: The Government is doing a great deal to encourage young people into the areas that the member mentions. In February, we launched our do something creative, do science campaign to tackle stereotypes about science and the career opportunities that are available to those who study science. That included £140,000 for a pilot scheme, £2.56 million a year for four science centres and £225,000 to fund Scotland's science festivals.

We have had on-going discussions with officials from Skills Development Scotland—as recently as last week and again this week—and I am happy to take up the points that the member has raised when we next meet them.

Children's Hearings System (Reform)

5. Elaine Murray (Dumfries) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what progress is being made on the reform of the children's hearings system. (S3O-7020)

The Minister for Children and Early Years (Adam Ingram): I announced to Parliament on 30 April the Scottish Government's proposals for reforms to reinforce and modernise the children's hearings system, to refocus it for the 21st century and build on its strong foundations of supporting

local communities with local people taking decisions for local children. I have personally written to every panel member, panel chair, children's panel advisory committee and children's hearings training unit outlining the proposed reforms. Those proposals will form the basis of a bill that will be introduced to the Scottish Parliament in the autumn.

Elaine Murray: Last night, Jim Hume and I met chairs of children's panel advisory committees from throughout Scotland. As the minister will be aware, those are groups of highly trained volunteers who, with clerical assistance from local authorities, recruit and train children's panel members. Can the minister advise what future he envisages for CPACs? Does he intend to pass their functions to a central national body and abolish them? If so, why? CPACs have operated successfully for the past 38 years, evolving during that period to adjust to new challenges and ensure that there is local expertise in the recruitment and training of children's panel members.

Adam Ingram: As I said in my initial answer, we need to modernise the children's hearings system to make it fit for the 21st century. As part of that modernisation programme, we must improve the levels of consistency and quality in the system throughout the country. I have spoken to many panel chairs and CPAC members, and it is recognised that we all must improve the outcomes for children and young people. That should be the focus of everyone's attention.

We intend to abolish the 32 CPACs and introduce a new national body—a children's hearings tribunal—that will establish a proper, consistent, high-level recruitment, training and support service for all children's panel members throughout the country. The tribunal president will have the opportunity to engage volunteers at the local level, and I expect CPAC members to be part of that effort.

Liam McArthur (Orkney) (LD): The desire to safeguard the local characteristics of the children's hearings system—children's panels and CPACs—is shared by those who are involved from the Borders to the northern isles. The minister will be aware, from my recent correspondence, of similar concerns in Orkney to those that Elaine Murray has expressed. Can the minister confirm that the area support teams in the island groups will be drawn from the island communities? Will he urge his officials to meet those who are involved in the system in Orkney over the coming weeks to discuss in more detail their continuing concerns?

Adam Ingram: I can answer yes to both questions. Indeed, I inform Mr McArthur that I shall visit the northern isles at the end of the month to speak to children's panel members and CPAC members in Shetland, where they will all come

together from the island communities—very conveniently—for me to meet them.

Bologna Process

6. Bill Wilson (West of Scotland) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government whether there have been any recent Scottish developments from the Bologna process. (S3O-7073)

The Minister for Schools and Skills (Keith Brown): The Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve communiqué setting out the next stages in the Bologna process was agreed on 29 April. It highlights priorities for the European higher education area over the next three years in areas such as mobility, lifelong learning, quality assurance and employability.

The stocktaking report, which is produced for each ministerial meeting on the basis of reports from the 46 participating countries, indicates progress against the various Bologna action lines. Scotland reports separately from the rest of the United Kingdom and achieved maximum scores for all action lines—the only country to do so.

Bill Wilson: The minister will be aware of my concerns about inequality. What does the Scottish Government plan to do with respect to the social dimension of higher education, in other words, with regard to widening access and improving retention rates?

Keith Brown: Much of the action that is being undertaken by the Scottish Government was highlighted in the debate on student hardship earlier today. On the Bologna process, however, the communiqué that I mentioned emphasises the social characteristics of the process and aims to provide equal opportunities for quality education, and the Scottish Government has signed up to that. We agree that access to higher education should be widened by fostering the potential of students from underrepresented groups and by providing adequate conditions for the completion of their studies. That involves improving the learning environment, removing all barriers to study and creating the appropriate economic conditions for students to be able to benefit from the study opportunities at all levels.

We have done as much as that in relation to addressing student hardship by removing graduate endowment fees. Obviously, with regard to the question of the appropriate economic conditions, not all of the levers are in our hands, but we have done as much as we can, within the budget that is set for us, to improve diversity at our universities.

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): The minister will be aware that one of the principles underlying the Bologna process is the promotion of academic freedom. How does he

square that with concerns that have been raised by the University and College Union and others that the outcome of the Government's joint future thinking task force threatens academic freedom, as it ties additional resources to the alignment of institutions' objectives with those of the Government?

Keith Brown: The Scottish Government is extremely supportive of academic freedom, and our actions have underlined that point.

Murdo Fraser started off by asking about mobility and the ability of students to take the courses that they want. That was also a concern of ours in the Bologna process. There is a move across the 46 countries that are involved in the Bologna process to increase mobility. We did not agree with some of the proposals in that regard, because there were no effective measurements for them.

At the same time as we have been promoting the freedom of students to move between institutions in different countries, the actions of this Government have underlined our commitment to academic freedom.

Ian McKee (Lothians) (SNP): How many Scottish students have benefited from the European Union's Erasmus exchange programme in the past academic year?

Keith Brown: The latest figures for participation in the Erasmus programme, which are for 2007-08, show a 44 per cent increase on the previous year in total outward mobility for Scottish students and a 29 per cent increase for Scottish staff. We recognise that low numbers of Scotland's students participate in the programme. The 1,500 participants represent 13 per cent of those from the United Kingdom as a whole. Early figures for 2008-09 indicate that the increase will be maintained.

We have implemented a number of actions to help to increase participation. For example, we recently committed to ensuring that Scottish students who are eligible for tuition fee support from the Student Awards Agency for Scotland retain that entitlement for all recognised exchange programmes.

Schools (Refurbishment or Reconstruction)

7. Mike Pringle (Edinburgh South) (LD): To ask the Scottish Executive what funding mechanisms it has in place to facilitate the refurbishment or reconstruction of schools in urgent need of repair or replacement. (S3O-7036)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning (Fiona Hyslop): Local authorities already have a range of funding mechanisms open to them to enable them to make

best use of the record levels of capital funding that this Government is making available.

We are supporting £2 billion-worth of school construction and many thousands of jobs. Some £1 billion is being invested in private finance initiative and non-profit-distributing model projects that we have signed off or which are in the pipeline, and the infrastructure investment plan shows that authorities plan to invest a further £1 billion over the current five-year period.

We have already indicated our intention 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.

Mike Pringle: The cabinet secretary has said time and again that she will make a statement to Parliament on the funding approach for the next elements of the school estate programme, but she has not said when she will do so. Two years after the Scottish National Party took office, councils are still waiting for the Scottish Futures Trust to offer any kind of funding. When will it be forthcoming? Can the cabinet secretary assure me that the City of Edinburgh Council will be able to use the Scottish Futures Trust for its vital wave 3 school building programme? If so, when will that happen?

Fiona Hyslop: I would be more than happy to make a statement, with the agreement of the Parliamentary Bureau, when we can make those details available to Parliament. With the member's support, that is something that we intend to do. I look forward to sharing that news with him.

Aquaculture

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson): The next item of business is a debate on motion S3M-4186, in the name of Roseanna Cunningham, on the importance of aquaculture to the Scottish economy.

I remind members that we are tight for time, so Presiding Officers will have to be strict in enforcing the time limit for each member.

14:56

The Minister for Environment (Roseanna Cunningham): I am happy to be here for today's debate, but I begin by expressing my condolences to the families of Maarten Pieter Den Heijer and Robert MacDonald, the fish farm workers who died in the tragic accident on Loch Creran earlier this month. Our thoughts are with their family members and friends at this time, and we await the report on the incident from the relevant authorities.

This is an important debate. The aquaculture industry is enormously important to Scotland, both economically and socially, and in particular to the many remote and rural communities within which much of the industry's activity takes place. The total farm gate value of Scottish aquaculture is estimated at around £350 million per annum, which is broadly in line with the value of catches from Scottish fishing vessels—a fact that many people might find surprising.

We are the largest producer of farmed salmon in the European Union, and the third-largest producer in the world behind Norway and Chile, although current problems in the industry in Chile mean that Scotland could overtake it to become the world's second-largest producer.

Aquaculture is a major success story for Scotland. There are 1,200 jobs in salmon production and a further 3,700 jobs in salmon processing alone. It is not just about salmon, however; Scotland also produces some 7,500 tonnes of rainbow trout, brown and sea trout, halibut and arctic char. That fin-fish production supports an additional 600 jobs, and shellfish production supports another 400 jobs.

The United Nations food and agriculture organisation states that aquaculture is probably the world's

"fastest growing food-producing sector",

which accounts for nearly 50 per cent of the world's consumed fish, compared with just 9 per cent in 1980. Importantly, it suggests that aquaculture is the only way to meet surging worldwide demand for seafood in a sustainable

way. Scotland should be in a good position to benefit from that increased demand.

The strategic framework that we are discussing today results from a wide-ranging consultative process that took place throughout 2008. An analysis of the responses is available on the Scottish Government website. That consultative process included a debate in November, and the points that were raised at that time have—I hope—been addressed. Members who participated in that debate may be able to pick up on some of the issues that have now been dealt with.

The framework sets out plans for a refocused ministerial group on aquaculture, which will be chaired by me and will meet for the first time this summer. It will oversee the work of five sub-groups, which will be working on critical themes for the industry: healthier fish and shellfish; improved systems for licensing aquaculture developments; improved containment; better marketing and improved image; and improved access to finance.

I turn to the first theme of healthier fish and shellfish. Scotland's fish-health status compares extremely well with that of other countries that are farming the same species. However, the incidence of infectious salmon anaemia this year, which includes the confirmation this week of a site close to existing sites, and the continuing challenges that are posed by sea lice, pancreatic disease and bacterial kidney disease, underline the need to remain vigilant at all times.

The healthy fish and shellfish group will have the task of further strengthening the industry's approach to disease control through carefully planned and managed approaches to disease and parasite control and synchronised production and treatments in management areas of an appropriate size, as suggested by the science. The group will be supported by a specialist expert group on sea lice, the details of which I recently set out in response to a question from Robin Harper. The sea lice group will examine the range of factors that contribute to the effectiveness of current treatment strategies and make recommendations on how we can be more effective. It will also comment on the proposals that we will bring forward later this year on strengthening Marine Scotland's understanding of the prevalence of sea lice in Scottish aquaculture.

I have been very impressed by the industry's optimism and ambition; indeed, despite the current economic climate, it remains extraordinarily upbeat. That presents opportunities that we must grasp, but to do so we will need to improve the licensing and planning of aquaculture development. That will require a far more strategic approach to the siting of fish farms that not only recognises the importance of wild salmon and

trout rivers, but offers the industry much greater certainty about prospects for expansion and the areas in which such expansion can take place. Make no mistake: fish farms want to expand.

The development of marine spatial planning in Scotland, which will be supported by the Marine (Scotland) Bill and Marine Scotland, provides an opportunity to get all this right. The licensing sub-group will provide a forum for early discussion of and agreement on siting between the relevant regulators, including local government, and the various interests. That work will inform not only future marine spatial planning but any revived relocation programme for fish farms.

The industry's current code of good practice has already driven significant improvements in containment and the minimising of fish escapes. I know that the issue is of concern to many members; however, the number of escapes in 2008 was significantly down on that for 2007. In fact, so far in 2009, there has been only one reported escape, which I am sad to say happened only very recently. If it had not happened, I would have been able to say that there had been no escapes in 2009 to date. One escape is still one escape too many, but we should welcome the fact that a clear downward trend is emerging. The industry deserves a great deal of credit for that improvement and we will continue to work with it as the inspection regime under the Aquaculture and Fisheries (Scotland) Act 2007 beds in.

Predators can be a cause of escapes from fish farms, and the containment sub-group will examine how such events can be avoided, taking into account international best practice. A number of wild fisheries interests have expressed concern over freshwater smolt production, and the containment sub-group will consider the most appropriate equipment or facilities to ensure containment at such sites and will set out its views in due course.

I am absolutely determined to promote a positive image of Scottish aquaculture at home and abroad, and the marketing and image sub-group will ensure that we get across the positive story that the industry has to tell about the health benefits of fish and shellfish; the strong progress on minimising environmental impacts by, for example, tackling escapes; progress on feed sustainability and so on. To get such messages across, we must raise public awareness and understanding of the industry, particularly given its importance to not only the whole Scottish economy, but many local communities.

That sub-group will also consider another issue of concern to members: how best the aquaculture industry can attract and retain talented people. The strategy explicitly states that a greater focus on training and education will be required.

Scotland is already well equipped in that respect, with a number of Scottish vocational qualifications in aquaculture and degree-level study at Stirling University. Moreover, the European fisheries fund is open to bids from companies or associations for training purposes. As a result, resources are available to the industry to allow it to develop in that direction. The memorandum of understanding that we hope to sign this year with Norway on co-operation in aquaculture will allow us to compare approaches to training and education, to share lessons appropriately and to learn from good practice elsewhere.

Like many other industries, the aquaculture industry faces challenges in securing finance. The access to finance sub-group will look at ways of improving that situation, including Marine Scotland considering with the industry what it can do to develop data and information sources that can highlight the value of and prospects for the industry in Scotland. I do not think that such matters are widely understood, and those efforts will be supported by the minimising of disease risks and the improved public perception that should follow the industry's continuing efforts to act as a good neighbour to other users of the water environment.

We are also using the European fisheries fund to support the sustainable development of the industry in Scotland. The EFF is helping businesses to invest in the latest technology and is supporting trade bodies in opening new markets for our wonderful produce. Anybody who saw, as I did, the amazing expo in Brussels just a few weeks ago will understand the unbelievably staggering contribution that the aquaculture industry makes in Scotland, the importance of new markets, particularly given the Chilean collapse, and the incredible importance of the industry to the whole of the United Kingdom.

We expect that shellfish interests will be covered by each of the five sub-groups. However, in recognition of the unique challenges and opportunities that the shellfish sector faces, we will establish a regular shellfish forum, with a secretariat provided by Marine Scotland and a membership that is drawn from those with an interest in supporting the sector's growth. I am particularly conscious that we can do more to promote the health and environmental benefits of shellfish to the public, and look forward to working with the industry on that.

I will announce membership of the ministerial group on aquaculture and the chairs of our five sub-groups in June. "A Fresh Start: The renewed Strategic Framework for Scottish Aquaculture" provides the context within which they will operate and the key outcomes against which we expect them to make progress. It is important that the

industry is judged against its actions. The progress that has been made in recent years must be recognised, as must the actions that are outlined to secure further improvements with respect to sea lice, disease control, containment and the strategic siting of fish farms. In turn, it is up to the public sector to listen to the industry's concerns and needs and to be responsive to them where we can.

I reiterate that the industry is incredibly economically important to Scotland, and that amazing optimism and ambition have been expressed by people throughout the industry who, despite the current economic climate, see huge opportunities for expansion. That there is such a vibrant and growing industry that wants to grow further is incredibly important for the Scottish economy.

I invite all members to support the Government's motion.

I move,

That the Parliament notes the publication of *A Fresh Start – the renewed Strategic Framework for Scottish Aquaculture* and its key themes; promotes the continued development of an ambitious, sustainable, profitable, thriving and growing Scottish aquaculture industry; recognises the economic importance of the industry to Scotland as a whole and many coastal communities in particular; acknowledges the vital role to be played by aquaculture production, processing and associated businesses during the economic downturn; supports efforts to promote the many positives of the industry and to advance the enviable international reputation of quality Scottish aquaculture products, built on high environmental standards; encourages Marine Scotland to work with others to deliver a transparent, streamlined and proportionate regulatory framework that encourages shellfish and finfish industries while at the same time ensuring that adverse impacts on biodiversity and other users of the marine and freshwater environment are minimised and managed; welcomes proactive and effective engagement with other aquaculture-producing countries through sharing knowledge and promoting best practice and Scotland's role as a major contributor to international cooperation on research, and acknowledges the continued engagement of the shellfish and finfish industries and other stakeholders in the development and implementation of the Strategic Framework for Scottish Aquaculture.

15:07

Elaine Murray (Dumfries) (Lab): I associate Labour members with the condolences that the minister offered to the families of the two gentlemen who died.

It seems only a matter of weeks since the previous Minister for Environment and I, despite the best efforts of colleagues throughout the chamber to protract their speeches, had 25 minutes between us to sum up in a debate on the draft "Scottish Aquaculture: A Fresh Start". I feared that we might have the same problem today, but the Presiding Officer has assured us

that time is tight, so more members may want to speak in this debate than spoke in the previous one.

Last November's debate was held shortly after the consultation on a refreshed strategy had taken place. At the time, some of us felt hampered by not being able to access responses to the consultation, as they had not yet been published. This time round we are in a marginally better position, as we have had access to the consultation responses. The Government's decision to unveil the refreshed strategy in this debate rather than before it has restricted our ability to assess whether the new strategy addresses the issues that were raised in the consultation. Prior publication would have afforded members and—this is important—stakeholders a chance to digest the strategy's contents. The whole thing smells a bit fishy, if members will excuse the pun. I suspect that the Government is trying to hide something. Why has it left things to the last minute? Is it because, although the strategy's aspirations and objectives are worthy, it is a bit thin on action?

Whatever has prompted the Government's move, the opportunity for a full and frank debate on the future of Scottish aquaculture will now have to wait for another day. Crucially, stakeholders have had no chance to brief us in advance of the debate. If the Scottish Government wanted to launch the strategy in Parliament, a ministerial statement would have been the appropriate mechanism for doing so. To expect members to debate the strategy without having seen it and without having had expert input through external briefings is disrespectful. This morning, I thought of raising a point of order on why the document had not been made available to all members, including the back benchers who will speak today. It was somewhat disrespectful that that did not happen. There seems to be more of a false start than a fresh start.

That said, the desired outcomes that are listed in the strategy seem to include most of the issues that the consultees raised. For example, under the key theme of health, the complex topic of the control of sea lice was a specific concern for many, including the Fish Veterinary Society, the University of Stirling's institute of aquaculture, the Scottish Association for Marine Science, the Association of Salmon Fishery Boards, Rivers and Fisheries Trusts of Scotland and the Atlantic Salmon Trust. Sea lice control was identified as a key concern by about two thirds of the respondents to the consultation. That is acknowledged in the new strategy, which states that the issue is

"crucial for the long-term future"

of "farmed and wild salmonids." That is welcome, but from my brief study of the strategy, I am uncertain as to what will actually be done, other than data collection.

The Association of Salmon Fishery Boards wants all escapes to be reported to district salmon fishery boards. The prevention of escapes was mentioned as a concern by 29 of the 47 respondents to the consultation, despite the previous Minister for Environment's assurances that he had reduced the number of escapes from 210,643 in 2007 to 66,471 by November last year. If the current minister has reduced that to only one, she has done remarkably well. I note that Marine Scotland is to undertake an inspection role and that the industry code of good practice is to be revised.

In addition to asking for specific action on sea lice, the Atlantic Salmon Trust pointed out in its consultation response that there should be a specific link with the strategic framework for Scottish freshwater fisheries. I would appreciate clarification on how that will be achieved. The trust also suggests that freshwater smolting cages should be sited not in lochs, but in tanks on land, where pollution and escapes can be controlled better. I have observed cages of that type at Barony College, where trout and salmon are bred for the specific purpose of release into rivers and lochs for the pursuit of angling.

The Scottish Salmon Producers Organisation has informed us in a briefing that, in 2008, salmon farming was worth £500 million to the Scottish economy, including £36 million directly in wages, principally to workers in remote and rural communities. The briefing also describes the success of the industry on exports, which have increased by more than 500 per cent in two decades, and in the UK market. A fresh salmon meal is consumed by almost 2 per cent of the UK population every day. The industry contributes significantly to the availability of healthy, locally produced food.

Several organisations, including Highlands and Islands Enterprise and the Scottish Salmon Producers Organisation, wanted a clear indication of how aquaculture will be dealt with in marine planning. They sought assurance that the creation of Marine Scotland will not cause further uncertainty. On Tuesday, along with other members of the Rural Affairs and Environment Committee, I met representatives of Marine Scotland and was reassured to hear that consideration of that aspect of marine planning is already well on the body's radar. Nevertheless, the concern about marine planning was the one that was mentioned by the highest number of respondents to the consultation, with 31 of the 47 respondents raising the issue.

Scottish Environment LINK pointed out in its response that the sustainability of feed ingredients is a major long-term concern. Excessive nutrients entering watercourses and the marine environment can seriously alter the ecological balance and can lead to algal blooms and other problems. Questions also arise about whether the feeding of fish-derived product to fish is sustainable. The figure of 5kg of feed to produce 1kg of fish has been referred to in briefings for previous debates. Again, that issue is reflected in the desired outcomes but, so far, without any detail.

The Labour Party proposes a minor amendment to the motion. We do not in any way disagree with the content of the motion and seek only to expand the welcome reference to “high environmental standards” with a reference to

“the principles of sustainable development”.

Those principles were detailed in the previous Executive’s strategy on sustainable development, which was published in 2005, and they are acknowledged throughout the UK and internationally. I am sure that every member in the chamber recalls what they are, but I will reiterate them just in case. The principles are: living within environmental limits; ensuring a strong, healthy and just society; achieving a sustainable economy; promoting good governance; and using sound science responsibly. Although those principles are implicit in the motion and are mentioned specifically in the strategy document, we feel that it would be useful to refer explicitly to them, as they are relevant to the future of the aquaculture industry in Scotland and to the balance that must be struck between economic growth and environmental protection.

John Scott’s amendment makes reference to the importance of aquaculture in supporting not only employment, but the existence of many remote and rural communities. It is impossible to disagree. I have already referred to the importance of the industry in remote and rural communities. We will of course support the Conservative amendment.

Liam McArthur’s amendment highlights the importance of training and career opportunities to the long-term future of the industry. In our previous debate on aquaculture, I mentioned the courses that are delivered at the Barony College in my constituency, which provides higher national certificate and Scottish vocational qualifications level 2 qualifications through a variety of aquaculture-related courses. The strategy refers to the role of education and training in promoting aquaculture as a viable career. Training is vital to the future of any quality industry, which is another reason why we will support the Liberal Democrat amendment.

When I first read Robin Harper’s amendment, I thought that he was being a little harsh in concentrating on the problems created within and by the industry in the past. I had hoped that study of the new strategy would reveal the way in which those issues were being addressed. However, the embargo on the document has meant that there has been no opportunity for the industry, organisations that represent anglers or any other stakeholders to comment on its contents and, therefore, it is difficult to know whether the strategy is adequate. In addition, I feel that the strategy as it stands is a little thin. As a precaution, we will support Robin Harper’s amendment to retain attention on the need for the strategy to continue to address those serious issues.

I agree completely that the industry is extremely valuable to the Scottish economy, but it is also important that it does not interfere with other industries and activities that are equally valuable to the Scottish economy. I hope that the strategy is able to produce a way forward that ensures the viability of the industry as well as the protection of the environment and the viability of angling and other industries that are important to Scotland.

I move amendment S3M-4186.2, after “environmental standards” insert:

“and the principles of sustainable development”.

The Presiding Officer: All speeches from now on should be of no more than six minutes.

15:16

John Scott (Ayr) (Con): I associate my party with the condolences that have been expressed by the minister to the families of those who recently lost their lives.

I welcome this debate on the importance of aquaculture to the Scottish economy and the Government’s revised strategic framework, which was delivered to my office late this morning. Our aquaculture industry is one of our biggest success stories in Scotland. As other members have said, it produces economic benefits through the sale of farmed salmon and shellfish worth over £500 million annually, and has a retail value of well over £1 billion. In addition, it supports 1,579 direct jobs and a further 4,700 downstream jobs, which makes a total of almost 6,300 jobs. However, those jobs—which would be valuable in any community—are lifeline jobs, particularly in the Highlands and Islands, which contains some of the most remote and fragile areas in Scotland. Those key jobs, 77 per cent of which are based in the Highlands and Islands, put £33 million into local pay packets and 92 per cent of them are in recognised rural communities. In my view, that makes them doubly valuable because jobs in those areas are so difficult to create and sustain.

We have an industry that has a worldwide reputation of which we should be justifiably proud, and which I have admired for many years. Our fish-farming industry, with 454 registered finfish sites and 332 registered active shellfish sites, is ideally placed to grow further. Of course, we in Scotland have to compete with Chile and Norway to do so, but the potential for growth is huge. We in this Parliament and the Government must do all that we can to encourage the appropriately and sympathetically sited growth of the industry. However, in order to achieve that, barriers need to be overcome. They are, in the framework document that has been published today, identified under five headings: healthier fish and shellfish, improved systems for licensing aquaculture developments, improved containment, better marketing and improved image and improved access to finance. I will try to address a few of those issues in the time that is available to me.

It is self-evident that fish farming has to be a good neighbour to other users of the seas, as well as a custodian of the environment. That means that future development has, whenever possible, to be achieved with wild-fish interests in mind and with due regard having been given to the marine environment in which it operates. As a specific example, we must make every effort to control escapes—my colleague Jamie McGrigor will say more about that later. We need to deal with the problem of seals attacking cages and we need to move to develop deterrents to keep them from doing so. I appreciate that that is more easily said than done, but it has to be achieved. With wild stocks under pressure and fish farming trying to keep its costs to a minimum, there has to be a cool-headed approach to the problem. I suspect that in order to take matters forward, the industry will have to continue to invest in increased cage protection measures.

On the health of farmed fish, I noted with regret last night that the fourth outbreak of infectious salmon anaemia has taken place in Shetland. Again, I ask the minister to reassure Parliament in more detail that all that can be done is being done to contain that outbreak. The dangers are not just to our farmed salmon, but to our wild salmon, which makes resolution of the problem all the more important. Sea lice are a problem, and will remain so in the foreseeable future, but with the likely worldwide growth of the industry it will be important that research and development continues to develop the next generation of treatments and best-practice fish-farming techniques, in order that we can protect farmed fish and keep to a minimum the transfer of sea lice to wild fish.

I turn to development of the industry. Recently, the Rural Affairs and Environment Committee

visited the seafood fisheries trade fair in Brussels. I was hugely proud of Scotland's part in that event and I offer my congratulations to all those involved. It is important to support the fantastic image of our seafood industry. For farmed salmon in particular, that means that we must continue to support the cherished label rouge status, which the French gave our salmon producers some years ago. It means, however, that we must continue to support the industry in other ways, now that the minimum input price has been abolished, and that efforts must be made to retain and attract young people in and to the aquaculture industry.

We should encourage further public and private sector investment in the industry which—as the minister has said—has a huge future, albeit that it has to operate in competitive circumstances. However, 'twas ever thus, and the size of the industry in that competitive marketplace is a tribute to the people who have already grown this unique Scottish industry. Every encouragement and succour should be given to those risk takers who want to take the industry on from its already dominant market position. In that context, the ministerial working group must drive forward progress and innovation in order to sustain this world-class business. The Scottish Conservatives will certainly give that every support.

We welcome the production of the strategic framework document, which we will now study in detail. It is a pity that it was not available earlier, which might have meant that the debate was more focused on its contents. However, the fundamental issues have not changed overnight, and nor will they. The Scottish Conservatives will consistently do all they can to support this vital and vibrant Scottish industry.

I move amendment S3M-4186.3, to insert at end:

“and notes the importance of the 6,200 Scottish jobs supported by the aquaculture industry in maintaining the environmental, economic and social fabric in communities often located in Scotland's most remote and fragile areas.”

15:21

Liam McArthur (Orkney) (LD): I start by associating the Liberal Democrats with the condolences that were expressed by the minister to the families of those who lost their lives on Loch Creran. As we consider the importance of the aquaculture industry to the Scottish economy, we are ever more conscious of the potential dangers for those who are employed in the industry. The minister was right to acknowledge that any lessons that emerge from the investigation into the two deaths must be taken on board fully in the strategic framework. A prosperous and sustainable aquaculture industry can be founded

only on ensuring the highest possible standards of health and safety, and on addressing its impact on the environment.

The Liberal Democrats welcome the publication of the Government's framework, although I share Elaine Murray's and John Scott's concerns about its timing. As, I am sure, my colleague Ross Finnie will observe, the document is the latest contribution in a process that was initiated in 2003.

In launching the consultation on the document last year, Mike Russell acknowledged that "strong foundations" were "already in place" as a result of the original framework. As other members have already suggested, those strong foundations were much in evidence at the recent European seafood exposition in Brussels. During a visit to Brussels at the end of April, members of the Rural Affairs and Environment Committee were privileged to be able to attend the exposition, albeit briefly, which is now unquestionably the world's largest gathering of those involved in and interested in all aspects of fisheries and aquaculture.

In this year of homecoming, when Scotland opens its arms and its doors to the world, it is fair to say that the committee perhaps felt that the organisers of the exposition might have reciprocated that welcome a little more wholeheartedly. Nevertheless, even in the short time that was available to us at the site of the 1958 world fair, it was impressive to see such a formidable presence from the Scottish shellfish and finfish industries. The response from those who attended the event—from customers right through to competitors—was impressive, too. In the discussions that I had with various exhibitors, it was clear that the industry faces challenges, not least in the availability and, more often, the cost of finance. Equally clear, however, was the message of optimism about the future. In most instances, the banks appear to recognise the encouraging prospects for established and innovative companies, although I suspect that that might not be the case for all companies.

Many people I spoke to were concerned about how their businesses—their staff, in particular—might cope with the pressures of expansion. Although those are problems that managers, and the industry in general, would wish to have, it would be wrong to underestimate the strains that can result from trying to expand within existing markets or moving into entirely new ones. The middle east was the market that was cited most often as the one where opportunities exist. I note what the minister said, but it would be helpful to hear from her what specific support is being provided to support efforts—such as what work Scottish Development International has done—to identify and develop those market opportunities.

It would also be interesting to hear what assessment the Government has made of potential market opportunities, notably in the United States of America, that might result from the difficulties that the industry in Chile is experiencing as a result of ISA. The perception, at least, appears to be that global supply will not, because of the reduced Chilean harvest, meet demand. That is also pushing up the price of salmon. Of course, it would be a mistake for the Scottish industry to scale up simply to try to fill a short-term gap in the US marketplace, not least because US customers might look for cheaper alternatives to farmed salmon if prices continue to rise, as Callander McDowell has said. It would help to know what discussions ministers have had with the industry about how they might respond to the situation and what assisting role the Government might play.

It is not only Chile that has been forced to deal with the consequences of ISA, as John Scott said. My colleague Tavish Scott has worked hard to support the industry in Shetland, following the discovery of the ISA virus in four farms in his constituency, first in January and with the latest discovery as recently as yesterday. I acknowledge that ministers and officials have been closely involved in the situation. However, some companies that are free of the virus have been forced to cease or to scale back their operations significantly. Without further help, companies such as Skelda Salmon Farms Limited face serious financial risk.

Liberal Democrats support the substance of and approach in the Government's motion. I accept that any criticism that I might have made of its length is fully undermined by my attempt to add to it. As I said, Liberal Democrats believe that the highest environmental standards are essential if we are to have the industry that we wish to have. A tension exists with the commitment to growth, but that can be effectively managed, and the Labour amendment would make a sensible addition. John Scott's amendment repeats the motion somewhat, but it would place a more specific emphasis on the industry's impact on Scotland's more remote and fragile areas—including my constituency—so it is valuable.

Robin Harper's amendment asserts that more must be done in several areas. He will struggle to find anyone—certainly among Liberal Democrats—who would argue with that. However, I am concerned by the tone, extent and underlying motivation of his amendment. I will listen carefully to what he says, but I am minded to vote against his amendment.

My amendment returns to skills and training. Members will recall that when we debated aquaculture back in November, the Parliament

voted unanimously for our amendment, which encouraged the development and retention of a skilled and qualified workforce in the aquaculture industry. Back then, Mr Russell refused to accept that a problem even existed. I note what his successor has said today, acknowledge that Mr Russell might have been the barrier to change and welcome the Government's change of heart.

Given the standards to which we want the industry to aspire, it is self-evident that we must retain and attract skilled workers. Our small and medium-sized enterprises must be supported to create genuine career opportunities. In both instances, qualifications have a vital role to play. It is therefore of concern that the Government is withdrawing funding from over-20s who seek qualifications. In general, the workforce in the Highlands and Islands is older. Training providers and aquaculture companies in the region are worried about the impact that withdrawal of that funding will have on efforts to improve and extend skills.

Scotland is the top European Union salmon producer and the third-biggest salmon producer in the world. However, with scale come challenges, not least in controlling disease and managing the impact on the environment. If we are to meet those challenges successfully, the framework will need to be backed by private and public investment. That is the only way of burnishing the industry's reputation. I have pleasure in moving the amendment in my name.

I move amendment S3M-4186.4, after "economic downturn" to insert:

"; further recognises that, if the industry is to attract, retain and develop people for a long-term career in aquaculture, the Scottish Government must ensure that a range of suitable training opportunities are made available".

15:28

Robin Harper (Lothians) (Green): I, too, associate myself and my party with the condolences and sympathy for the families who recently suffered bereavement.

I was pleased to see the SNP's motion. I would have appreciated a copy of the mysterious document that everybody else appears to have seen—perhaps it is on its way to my desk. It would have helped me to prepare my speech, but the burden of my speech will remain the same.

I reassure the Liberal party that I will not speak against aquaculture, if that is what is at the back of the party's mind. My speech will support what I believe to be the Government's attitude, which is that we need to strike the correct balance between the expansion and development in an environmentally sustainable way of an industry that is enormously important to Scotland—and to

the world, as a provider of protein—and the demands of profitability.

As has been said, aquaculture represents the fastest-growing food production system in the world. However, putting unnaturally large numbers of farmed fish into a water body that would normally host a much smaller number of animals, most of which would not be there for long times, will inevitably cause serious problems for the health and welfare of fish, and for the local marine environment.

Countries such as Chile and Norway have learned that lesson the hard way, through losing massive numbers of farmed fish to disease and parasite attack. With infectious salmon anaemia back in Shetland, Scotland must learn from the lessons of Chile and Norway and take action now to ensure that we do not face the same problems. For some time, Scotland appeared to be making great strides in dealing with the problem of sea lice. However, owing to the recent loss of effectiveness of Slice, we once again face the prospect of a potential overuse of toxic and polluting chemicals in the marine environment in order to control parasites on fish—a prospect that would see the industry emulate the constant chemical treadmill on which conventional terrestrial farming is trapped.

Jamie McGrigor (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I appreciate Robin Harper's concerns about chemicals, but how would he do away with the sea lice problem?

Robin Harper: I will address the matter in some detail, either before the end of this speech or in my summing up.

It would be criminal of the Government to allow the annihilation of wild salmon and trout stocks for financial gain—I think that it will not do that—particularly when about 80 per cent of the fish that are farmed in Scotland are produced by large companies that are based overseas.

The most frustrating part of all of this is that those actions are simply unnecessary. Responsible aquaculture can have a minimal impact on wild fish populations, marine habitats and water quality. I offered a solution to the minister the last time I spoke on the subject in the chamber. At the time, she was unable to respond. I am, in respect of the new structure, hopeful for our conversations. The five subgroups that are being established—which are a great step forward—will give time and opportunity for people to look at the issue, under the heading of containment.

There needs to be a physical barrier between farmed fish stocks and the wider environment. Enclosed tanks, into which sea water is pumped from below the level at which sea-lice larvae

survive, would eliminate the problem of lice. Such tanks not only prevent sea lice from making contact with wild stocks, but protect farmed fish from adverse weather conditions, algal blooms, jellyfish swarms and predation by seals. In other words, they provide complete protection for the farmed salmon. People may think that doing that would be extremely expensive. However, the technology to make large tanks exists. Indeed, it has been since the days of the Mulberry harbour, but the technology is now much better. Seals would no longer be able to eat the farmed fish or spook them, which would remove any justification that salmon farmers have relied on in the past for shooting seals. All of this could be achieved without reliance on the use of acoustic deterrents, which we know can have a detrimental effect on cetaceans and other marine life.

Unfortunately, thus far, the aquaculture industry has chosen—over and over again—to reject the idea. How many millions of pounds do these companies have to lose in places like Chile and Norway before they realise that they cannot afford not to move down this path?

I am only part way through my argument, Presiding Officer, but I will keep to my time and continue my speech in my summing up.

I move amendment S3M-4186.1, to insert at end:

“and further notes that problems remain to be addressed by the aquaculture industry, including the commercial confidentiality clauses that restrict access to the minutes of area management group meetings, the comparative lack of action on re-siting fish farm activities where this could be advisable, the huge problem of sea lice infestation and the industry’s wider impact on wild fish stocks, seals and the marine environment and its relationship with future plans for marine conservation areas and no-take zones for fisheries.”

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Alasdair Morgan): I am obliged.

We move to the open debate.

15:33

Dave Thompson (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): I welcome the publication of “A Fresh Start: The renewed strategic framework for Scottish aquaculture.” The framework will help to strengthen and maintain the continued sustainable development of the Scottish aquaculture industry.

The negativity of the Opposition’s comments is a shame. There is nothing surprising in the document: it reflects the views of the various consultees, which is of course the whole point of consultation. Opposition members never see anything good in anything that our SNP Government does. Why do they always have to

have frowns on their brows? Lighten up, folks—this is good news.

As other members have said, aquaculture is vital to Scotland as whole, and to the Highlands and Islands in particular, where it provides a lot of much-needed employment in many remote and rural areas. We have only to look at the map in the “Fresh Start” document to see how true that is. The map shows that all the freshwater and shellfish sites are in the Highlands and Islands. That is how important shellfish and salmon farming are to the Highlands and Islands.

I will put the issue in context and give members an idea of the industry’s importance to Scotland. It has been calculated that salmon farming is worth around £380 million a year, although the figures vary. As well as salmon, we farm trout, cod, halibut, char and shellfish. I had a very nice bit of halibut in Lerwick on Saturday; I would recommend the halibut there to everyone.

As has been said, salmon farming supports many jobs—1,195 people are involved directly in salmon production, and there are 3,733 full-time, part-time and seasonal jobs in salmon processing. Those are significant numbers. In total, there are about 6,000 jobs in aquaculture, most of which are in remote and coastal areas of the Highlands and Islands. The Scottish Salmon Producers Organisation’s briefing claims that the results of the organisation’s survey show that salmon farming brings £500 million to the Scottish economy, which is more than the official figures suggest. The SSPO’s also figures show that if one applies standard Government multipliers to the £36 million in local wage payments that primary salmon production provides, it translates to an injection of £165 million into the wider local rural economy, because money that is earned locally is spent locally.

The SSPO also says that expenditure on supplies and services has continued to increase, despite the recession. In 2008, it reached £304 million, £223 million of which was spent in Scotland and, of that, £143 million was spent in the Highlands and Islands. The SSPO’s members estimate that they have invested more than £84 million in capital projects over the past three years, the vast majority of which has been spent in the Highlands and Islands. Capital investment has risen year on year from £19.5 million in 2006 to £35 million in 2008.

I believe that the key to future prosperity in Scottish aquaculture, as in so many areas, is the quality that goes with our clean green image. Our unique selling point is that consumers are guaranteed quality from food that is produced in our pristine environment. We need to do everything possible to retain that reputation. It is essential that we take the necessary measures to

protect and promote such a valuable industry, which has an enviable worldwide reputation for quality. The aquaculture industry needs a sound regulatory framework that promotes sustainable development, protects jobs and incomes, and enables the industry to continue to make such an important contribution to the Scottish economy.

As has been said, outbreaks of infectious salmon anaemia, for example, can dent our reputation. Other countries have found, and are finding, to their cost that lax regulation can lead to devastation of their industries—the Chilean industry is in real trouble and the Norwegian industry is severely affected. However, tight regulation and good practice in our industry have meant that we have had only one outbreak in 10 years. It was one outbreak too many, unfortunately, but we are still streets ahead of our competitors. That gives us a huge advantage that we can exploit.

Following the Chilean industry's problems, the American market is now wide open, so we must ensure that our aquaculture industry can take advantage. The Scottish aquaculture industry is amazingly upbeat and optimistic, despite the recession. We must do all that we can to help it to fulfil its ambition to expand, to develop and to be the best in the world. It has earned an enviable worldwide reputation for quality, sustainability and high standards, and it deserves praise for its achievements. It also deserves our support and help to ensure that its reputation is maintained and enhanced.

It is imperative that our aquaculture industry continues to play a major role in providing jobs and income for our local remote and rural communities, and to make a valuable contribution to the Scottish economy. The Scottish Government is highly supportive of an aquaculture industry that is sustainable, ambitious, thriving, competitive, profitable and diverse. The renewed strategic framework for Scottish aquaculture will help the Government to meet those aspirations and to deliver a sustainable industry.

15:39

Peter Peacock (Highlands and Islands) (Lab):

As other members have said, it is unfortunate that we did not get access to the framework document until this morning, after we went hunting for it. As a result, we have not had the benefit of feedback from the industry or those that surround it about their reaction to the document or whether it provides for their needs.

I was going to be critical of the Government for not giving us the time to absorb fully what I had anticipated to be a substantial and detailed document. However, now that I have seen the

document, I could argue that the Government's judgment might have been right after all, as it clearly knew that it would take only a few minutes to read and absorb the detail. I have to confess that I am completely underwhelmed by the publication.

Back in November, we debated the consultation document that preceded this document. At that time, I set out a range of issues that I thought needed attention. Those issues were against the background of the recognition—which has been mentioned today by other members—that the aquaculture sector has had a huge and beneficial impact on the social and economic life of the Highlands and Islands, especially on the most remote parts.

The salmon and shellfish industry has become a significant employer that employs about 6,000 people. As a result of its success over the years, communities in the Highlands and Islands have remained viable, and public services in those communities have been sustained, which might not have been the case but for that industry. It is one of the few industries that can revive that part of the world because of its close association with the particular environment of that part of the world.

I noted during the debate in November that the aquaculture industry has considerable scope to grow. Thankfully, the industry—particularly the salmon industry—is in one of its best periods. The market is strong and prices are good. As other members have mentioned, when a number of us were in Brussels a couple of weeks ago considering environmental issues and visiting the expo that the minister talked about, we were struck by the industry's optimism, and its confidence in the future. That is partly due to the plight of the Chilean industry, which was mentioned by Dave Thompson and which has been seriously affected by disease.

The problem for Scotland is that although we can enjoy the benefits of that in the short term—we should build on it—Chile will undoubtedly recover and solve its problems, just as Scotland has solved its own problems in the past. The world market will then become more competitive again. Our industry needs to prepare for those days by becoming even better and more efficient at what it does, and with even higher environmental standards. It must build on its reputation for quality in order to hold and grow its markets.

In November, I noted some of the issues that the industry needs to address and the areas in which it needs help to meet those challenges. Among those issues was the enduring problem of sea lice, which Robin Harper and others have mentioned. I am glad to see that today's document makes it clear that that problem needs continuing attention. I had, however, hoped that it would not just

confirm that the problem exists, but would set out a detailed approach to addressing it. The document alludes to the need for more research and the development of a more sophisticated view throughout Scotland about what is going on, but there is no definite action plan, there is no timescale and there are no sums of money attached. I hope that the minister will take the opportunity to say a bit more about that when she sums up.

I hope, too, that she will say how she will report to Parliament on the action plan that will be developed through the various work streams that she talked about, in order to deal with the problem of sea lice, so that we can give the matter attention in the future.

In November, I mentioned the minimum import price to protect against dumping of salmon by Norway. The MIP was discontinued by the EU, and the then minister made it clear that the Government would monitor the situation closely. Again, I hope that the minister will say something in summing up about the Government's current assessment of Norwegian salmon coming into EU markets and the impact—if there is any—of that.

The independent salmon producers have a particular need to secure working capital if they are to invest for the future. Their plans for an aquaculture finance company have been difficult to advance and the difficulties have, no doubt, been exacerbated by the banking crisis. In November, I urged the Government to help in that respect. Although there is mention of the need for access to finance in the framework document that has been published today, there is no indication of what is to be done. I would have hoped that the document would have said something concrete about what can be done and what the Government's intentions are on the issue. If there is no intention, through its economic development agencies or in partnerships with others, to offer practical assistance in that financial sector, it might have been best to say that, so that people can begin to consider the alternatives. As matters stand, it is not clear what role the Government thinks it might play, so I hope that the minister will say something about that when she sums up.

The financial issues are especially acute because of the contraction in the availability of trade credit insurance, which has been raised by many people in Brussels. Frank Johnson of Framgord in Shetland has told me of his great confidence for his business. He knew of the possibility of an expanding market, but he knew also that he was facing real difficulties because access to trade credit insurance had tightened. The other night, some of us discussed the issue with representatives of the Clydesdale Bank. They acknowledged that the issue had arisen, and felt

that the Government might have a role to play, at least in the short term. Again, I hope that the minister might say something about that.

I see that my time is running out. I have more to say, but, on this occasion, I will not say it.

15:45

Ross Finnie (West of Scotland) (LD): As other members have said, aquaculture is extraordinarily important to the Scottish economy—not just because of the headline figure of the 40 per cent of all Scottish food exports that the industry accounts for or the quality of the product, but because, as John Scott and others have said, of its location among the rural and remote communities of Scotland, where the industry is critical.

The industry has come a long way over the past 10 years. Its potential has always been immense, as has the industry's sense of optimism, but 10 years ago the industry was plagued by poor site management. Too many farms had allowed ISA to take hold, and a combination of contaminated and compulsorily fallow sites had laid the industry low. It is therefore all the more disappointing to hear of the cases that have broken out in Shetland. Those cases serve to remind us of how vulnerable the industry could be to the onset of disease.

Liam McArthur said that he would listen carefully to what Robin Harper had to say. Unfortunately, so far we have heard only volume 1 of Robin's two-volume prose anthology on the control of sea lice. I am therefore unable to offer him any further assistance on how Liberal Democrats might respond to his amendment. However, some of the issues that he raised are critical to the industry's future and potential development. Those issues include the importance of site selection; the need for the industry to take seriously the importance of a tidal flow to scour the sea bed in farms; and the need for effluent management systems to separate out the elements that can give rise to disease. Other members have mentioned escapes management, and Robin Harper got halfway through the question of what we can do about sea lice management. There is no doubt that there is a good deal of scientific knowledge in Scotland to assist with work on sea lice—and I hope that time will permit Robin Harper to complete his anthology, which will be fascinating.

To some extent, all the issues that I have just mentioned are incorporated in measures in the Scottish Salmon Producers Organisation code of good practice for fin-fish aquaculture. However, the industry must take up those measures and reach the target that it has set for itself—100 per cent achievement under its third and highest recommended strategy.

It is axiomatic that the maintenance of high standards is critical for the maintenance of quality and a hard-earned international reputation. The attraction of good people to the industry will be critical, as will their retention and development. That is why Liberal Democrats have attached such importance to that issue in our amendment.

The previous aquaculture strategy was a start and, although I say it myself, I thought that it was a reasonably good start. However, time has moved on, and so has the industry. As Liam McArthur has said, the Liberal Democrats welcome the Government's new framework, "A Fresh Start". All frameworks leave gaps to be filled in—that we accept—but we would like the minister to explain the timetable and the progress that she expects. As she said, the provisions of the Aquaculture and Fisheries (Scotland) Act 2007 are also available to her, which are critical in the imposition of standards.

The international reputation of Scottish seafood in general and aquaculture in particular is immense. The industry's international potential has not yet been exploited, but we must be cautious: that potential can be exploited only on a sustainable basis. In developing the industry we must be sure of that principle, which is critically related to how the industry responds to environmental concerns. Environmental problems are exacerbated whenever the volume of the industry increases at a particular location.

Peter Peacock talked about finance, which has long been a critical and difficult matter. It is not easy to assess the value of the aquaculture industry. For example, it is difficult for banks to put a value on smoults, which are subject to disease. I will be fair to bankers—I have not been fair to them recently—and say that in the current climate the problem is all the more difficult. We must be serious about ensuring that finance is available for the development of the industry.

We should be aware of the competition. We should not be complacent because Chile is suffering from ISA; we should remember what happened in Scotland when we were plagued with the disease and learn lessons about how we develop the industry.

I was pleased to hear from the minister about the memorandum of understanding with Norway, which will be helpful in developing the industry.

15:51

Maureen Watt (North East Scotland) (SNP): I am pleased to take part in the debate, and I welcome the publication of "A Fresh Start: The renewed Strategic Framework for Scottish Aquaculture". I echo members when I say that the industry is hugely important to the Scottish

economy, particularly in some of our most fragile communities in the Highlands and Islands.

At the Glasgow fishing expo 2009, which took place last week, the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and the Environment urged the nation to eat more fish. I think that I am right in saying that the consumption of salmon has grown annually by some 8 per cent in recent years, but I agree with the cabinet secretary that more needs to be done to promote the consumption of fish, not least for its health benefits. Consumers in Spain, Portugal and Norway eat twice as much fish as Scots eat. We need to grow the internal market for fish products and capture a greater share of the huge market for fish in Europe and further afield.

I attended the European seafood expo in Brussels and was captivated by the great optimism that Scottish exhibitors showed at their slick promotional stand, which had been co-ordinated by Scottish Enterprise and Seafood Scotland. I think that many people were drawn to the Scottish stand by the wonderful Cullen skink that was served throughout the day.

We need to do everything that we can do to help our successful exporters to expand existing markets and develop others. The salmon industry in Scotland is the third largest in the world, after the industries in Norway and Chile, and the opportunities for expansion are substantial, not least because of the unfortunate outbreaks of ISA in those two countries.

We must ensure that aquaculture in Scotland comes to be known as the greenest and cleanest in quality. I welcome the Government's strategic objectives of promoting

"high standards of husbandry and biosecurity"

and

"Continual development of control strategies and making best use of available medicines as well as research and development into emerging diseases".

There has been a reduction in escapes, but the number remains unacceptably high. The reduction of escapes is of economic benefit not only to the fish farms concerned but to businesses that rely on wild fish stocks, which can be threatened by parasites that are carried by the farmed variety.

The objective of improved systems for licensing aquaculture developments is also welcome but trickier, and it will obviously exercise the minds of the Rural Affairs and Environment Committee members as we take evidence around coastal areas on the Marine (Scotland) Bill. We are already being made well aware of the competing demands on our coastal waters, but the opportunities for expansion in other shellfish and fish farm species, such as mussels, halibut, cod and haddock, must be encouraged. There are

opportunities for the taking not just in increased fish production but in developing and retaining a skilled and knowledgeable workforce, not to mention the opportunities for scientists, given the large number of scientists supporting and pioneering new efforts in this field, as we saw during our committee's visit to Marine Scotland earlier this week.

Like Peter Peacock, I want to raise with the minister the issue of finance, as well as the concerns on trade credit insurance that were raised by exhibitors at the Brussels seafood exhibition, given that companies in the middle east and elsewhere default on their payments for products that are sent to them. Our exporters simply cannot bear such non-payment.

The opportunities for the aquaculture industry are there to be harnessed. I am confident that, with the renewed framework, the Scottish Government is providing the right climate for growth.

15:56

Karen Gillon (Clydesdale) (Lab): Like others, I welcome the opportunity to participate in the debate. I share the concern expressed by members across the chamber, but particularly by those in the Opposition parties, that the strategy has arrived so late and has not allowed a detailed debate with input from stakeholders. In that regard, perhaps Dave Thompson thinks that his role is to follow blindly. I did not accept that role when I was a member of a Government party, and I certainly will not accept it as a member of an Opposition party.

It is heartening, however, to see a minister recognise the role of aquaculture and its importance, particularly alongside sea fishing. The statistics that the minister outlined earlier about the sector are quite staggering. Perhaps it is time to spend a bit more time than we have spent in the past on considering the importance of aquaculture.

Aquaculture is the backbone that supports many rural and island communities the length and breadth of Scotland, from the northern isles, through the coastline of the Highlands and Islands to the south of Argyll and, indeed, even in my own constituency. The industry has seen great development over the past 30 years, and it is undoubtedly the lifeblood of many of the communities where it operates.

Perhaps the most obvious impact of aquaculture on rural conditions is the employment that it brings, which can amount to as much as a third of employment in the communities in which it is present. There are a great number of active freshwater and shellfish farms across Scotland. The salmon and shellfish industry employs around

6,000 people, which makes it a significant employer. It is true, too, that, across processing and in supporting other rural businesses, aquaculture is a key sector for our economic development.

We assume that fish farms only produce food for consumption, but they also provide fish for restocking our rivers and lochs to cater for recreational fishermen and to support the angling industry, which is another key sector that we want to be supported and developed, particularly in relation to tourism in our more rural areas.

Aquaculture helps to support public services in rural communities. Back in November, Peter Peacock spoke of schools that would have closed had it not been for the presence of children whose parents worked in local aquaculture. The aquaculture industry supports education in that way, but it is equally important that aquaculture education is encouraged at the other end with training programmes. In that regard, I am happy to support the amendment in the name of the Liberal Democrats. I will welcome further details from the minister on how such programmes are to be developed and expanded in the months to come.

The University of Stirling has one of the largest aquaculture departments in the world. I have seen how it supports aquaculture work both here and in Malawi, helping colleagues at the University of Mzuzu to work on the issues that they face regarding fish in Lake Malawi. How will we ensure that we work closely with the aquaculture industry to develop aquaculture work-based learning programmes in order to take the industry forward and ensure that distance learning can be better developed as it continues to play an important role, particularly in rural Scotland?

An issue of continuing debate is whether aquaculture opportunities are hindered by the planning regime. We all, I think, want to see further expansion of the industry, but that must happen only in appropriate and sympathetic sites. The Association of Scottish Shellfish Growers estimates that Scotland is capable of supporting about 100,000 tonnes per annum, which compares with the 5,000 to 7,000 tonnes that are currently produced each year. However, as I said, any expansion must happen sympathetically.

Shellfish growers are concerned about the availability of sites and leases. They suggest that there should be a presumption in favour of shellfish leases for sites that are freed up under the location and relocation programme. There is a role for the Crown Estate in that, but there is also a monitoring role for the Government. I am sorry that the strategic framework that the Government has published today does not take that issue further forward in a definite way. Although the

document makes general references to the issue of leases, it suggests no concrete action.

The document also makes no reference to planning fees. Shellfish growers believe that they are charged disproportionately high fees because they are assessed on the same basis as much larger salmon enterprises, yet their profits and impacts are significantly different. That must be an impediment to growth, and it appears to conflict with previous Government advice on the matter.

I regret that the document makes no mention of the regime for measuring E coli. As Peter Peacock said in November, shellfish growers have highlighted real difficulties in the way in which the measurement of E coli in shellfish is used to assess water quality. That can lead to perverse results. He gave the example of the clean waters of Applecross being regarded as less healthy than those of the River Clyde, which he thought was hard to imagine. Spikes in E coli levels in shellfish that are caused by natural stock and not linked to human pathogen presence can result in area closures. Although that point is not picked up in the document, I hope that the issue will be considered in one of the work streams under the new ministerial working group arrangements.

I believe that the document moves us forward, but it is lacking in detail. I hope that, at least in the work ahead, the issues that we have raised today can be given the attention that they deserve. Perhaps the minister can address some of the issues when she sums up.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We now move to wind-up speeches.

16:02

Robin Harper: Maureen Watt mentioned that she would like our fish farming and aquaculture industry to be the cleanest and the greenest in the world. I absolutely agree with that as an aspiration for the industry. Of course, that means that we should arrange that, within reasonable limits, the industry should have the minimum adverse effect on the marine environment.

I ended my opening speech on a paean of praise for the idea of enclosed fish farm cases. If we sat down and costed them, I believe that we would see that, in the long term, they are the most profitable—and certainly the safest—way of moving the industry forward. That must be the long-term solution to many, if not most, of the problems that are faced by the aquaculture industry.

Some changes could be made instantly, such as designating fish farm-free zones in Scottish waters. The siting of fish farms has a crucial impact on the wider aquaculture environment. We

must take the opportunities that are provided to us through Marine Scotland and the Marine (Scotland) Bill to ensure that inappropriately sited farms are moved or cease to exist and that new fish farms are sited only in the most appropriate places.

In that regard, Norway has led the way with its designation of national salmon fjords, which are areas where fish farming is simply not allowed. Of course, the Norwegians have a little more room to do that than we have, but the idea deserves serious attention. Scotland should follow by designating farm-free sea lochs. Perhaps—I do not know—Loch Broom or Little Loch Broom could be the first of many such lochs. Although fish farms have already been sited there, I know that at least one of them is extremely well managed. There should be no siting of fish farms where there are runs of wild salmon and sea trout. All smolt cages should be removed from freshwater lochs that contain native migratory fish. Aquaculture is clearly going to continue to be an important industry for Scotland, so it is critical that we get the regulation right.

I am pleased that, in her opening speech, the minister talked about the establishment of the five groups. The Association of Scottish Shellfish Growers will be particularly pleased that it is to be included as a separate group within the first group that she mentioned.

We simply do not have enough suitable sites to increase production beyond its present level in a way that will not cause catastrophic and irreparable environmental harm. We must look for new solutions if we are going to expand the industry. The solution that I have mentioned is part of that and is staring us in the face. We have a superb opportunity to lead the world by working with companies that have developed closed containment systems of fish farming. We need to start focusing on quality as well as on quantity and we must stop trying to beat nature at her own game.

I am glad to say that I will support all the other amendments. As soon as I saw the motion, I was disposed to support it.

I explain to Liam McArthur that the detail in my amendment was included because it is essential that we keep our minds focused on the real problems that exist and will continue to exist. Sea lice and ISA are not going to go away—they are part of the marine environment. We must continue to concentrate on how best we can control infestations and fish diseases.

A raft of solutions have been proposed in the past, many of which the industry has resisted, such as giving fish more space in their cages. One can understand that reaction if they want to

expand the industry and there is a limited number of sites that they can use, but if they are not going to go down that route they must find another route. People might gently smile at the idea of full containment, but it is being considered in other countries and it will work.

The only way in which we can avoid a firefighting scenario on an endless loop is by placing farm stocks where they do not come into contact with wild fish—not just wild salmon and sea trout, as the *Calligus* parasite is carried by many other species. We must also ensure that they do not come into contact with the open marine environment, where they are subject to damage from seals, algal blooms, jellyfish swarms and so on. I repeat myself advisedly: as far as we can see, the only way to achieve that is to place some sort of physical barrier between the farm stock and the marine environment—either that or we kill all the wild fish and produce sterile fjords for the farms. Even then, the jellyfish will come and the farmed fish will still die.

The minister seemed at first to be cool on the idea of providing extra protection for our wild salmon stocks, but I am certain that I will be disabused of that notion before the end of the debate.

I hope that members will support my amendment, and I thank Labour members for indicating that they will do so.

16:08

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): I have the advantage over my colleagues, Ross Finnie and Liam McArthur, in that I have heard volume 2 of Robin Harper's thesis.

It has been an interesting debate, and one that has been relevant, to say the least, to my constituency and to others. I felt that the minister pushed all the right buttons in her opening speech in reminding us of the contribution that aquaculture makes to the Scottish economy: as well as the jobs, the £350 million per annum—a figure that equals the value of our fishing catch. That is something that we should remember at all times. We have the biggest fish farming industry in the European Union.

As Robin Harper mentioned, the minister talked about containment and mentioned access to finance, as did other members. In doing so, she set the right tone for the debate. Before I make some points of my own, I will comment on other members' speeches.

Dr Elaine Murray spoke about the industry's importance to workers in remote communities—an issue that is relevant in my constituency, Liam

McArthur's constituency and many other constituencies in far-flung bits of Scotland.

John Scott rightly made play of the issue of seals attacking cages. That is an issue that all of us have come across on our visits to fish farms. It has to be tackled and there must be greater cage protection. John Scott also mentioned the image of our seafood industry, which is a great advantage that we enjoy, as it is a good image that is associated with a high-quality product and good flavour. That is a strength.

Liam McArthur spoke about the importance of developing new market opportunities. Chile is in great trouble as a result of ISA, and we also have opportunities with regard to the USA.

The Liberal Democrats' amendment is about skills, training and, in particular, the future funding for that training. We must not neglect that because, as has been said, the people who are working in this industry are getting older and it is important that we have new entrants with new skills.

Robin Harper made a most interesting contribution about pumping water up high into a totally contained, land-based fish farm. That might well work, although it might be something that we do a little further in the future. If it did work, I would like some of the farms to be situated in my constituency.

Robin Harper: The tanks could also be floating.

Jamie Stone: Absolutely.

Dave Thompson reminded us that local spend in the local economy is the beauty of the industry. The fact that Loch Duart fish farm operates where it does, in Scourie in west Sutherland in my constituency, assisted us in our campaign not only to maintain a filling station but to have it upgraded.

Peter Peacock mentioned that the industry has the scope to grow. We heard from Karen Gillon that the shellfish industry said that a capacity of 100,000 tonnes a year is not impossible in the future, and I echo that.

I think that Maureen Watt was the only member who mentioned the role of scientists. In that regard, I would like to take an advertising break in my speech and tell members about the Ardtoe marine laboratory, which does fascinating and groundbreaking work. Its developments in relation to the rearing of halibut and cod are worthy of examination. Of course, halibut may well become an important part of the industry.

Loch Duart, a salmon farming company in my constituency to which I have already referred, is run by the redoubtable Dr Jean Balfour, a former county councillor in Fife and, although she is a lady of some years, not a foe to be taken on

lightly. I see members nodding in agreement—she really does lead from the front. Loch Duart was one of the first companies to develop site management and site rotation, and it has reaped the benefits in its turnover, which has increased, and its recent acquisition of Salar in the Western Isles.

Ardtoe marine laboratory is an example of the very best in research and Loch Duart is an example of the very best in fish farming.

No contribution from me would be complete if it did not include a mention of something extremely local. In the Dornoch Firth, as Peter Peacock knows, we have the Dornoch Firth mussel fishery. I take this opportunity to cordially invite the minister to come and see how we run the fishery. It was given to the royal burgh of Tain by King James VI of Scotland and I of England, much to the irritation of Dornoch. The charter stood well, even in the Court of Session, and the money that comes from the fishery goes to the common good fund in Tain. It is one of the largest natural shellfisheries in the British isles, if not Europe, and I think that it is worthy of study. Because it is a natural fishery, it requires no chemicals or any other form of management apart from harvesting, which means that it is completely sustainable. There is something to be learnt from that.

I am glad that members mentioned the dumping by the Norwegians. I hope that the minister will be able to comment on that in her closing speech. I know that she has got a lot to comment on, but it is a matter that has been brought to the attention of many MSPs for as long as they have been members of the Scottish Parliament, and it was an important issue long before that. It is one of the greatest unfairnesses in the industry.

I urge members to support Liam McArthur's amendment, which is about training people so that they have the skills that the industry will need in the future.

16:14

Jamie McGrigor (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I thank the minister for expressing the Parliament's sympathy over the tragic deaths of Robert MacDonald and Maarten Pieter den Heijer while they were working on Loch Creran. It is indeed a dreadful loss for their families and for the whole fish farming community in Argyll.

I welcome today's debate, which has been largely constructive and useful. As a Highlands and Islands MSP and a one-time trout farmer in Argyll, I am hugely conscious of the importance of aquaculture to the region's economy, especially in the more remote and rural parts. However, wild river fisheries, too, are significant and important,

so we must strive for successful co-existence between the sectors.

The minister mentioned the crucial issues of sea lice and ISA, which are even more crucial in the light of yesterday's sad news of a further outbreak in Shetland. The Scottish Government has correctly recognised that an integrated sea lice control strategy is essential for the health and welfare of farmed fish, and to limit the spread of infection to our valuable wild fish populations of salmon and sea trout.

However, I gather that some fish farms are still rotten with sea lice—those fish are heavily stressed, and are therefore more likely to get ISA, which many believe is endemic in the water. The code of good practice that is set out by the SSPO for Scottish fin fish aquaculture is excellent if it is adhered to, but a small minority of fish farmers are still able to drive a coach and horses through the regulations. That is unfair on the rule-abiding majority, and I urge the Government to use the new powers under the Agriculture and Fisheries (Scotland) Act 2007 to ensure 100 per cent compliance with the rules of the code. The rules are on parasites, containment and record keeping, and they must be enforced. Site following plans are also vital for a clean industry.

Tripartite working groups have generally been successful in the areas in which they operate on the west coast, but they do not apply in Orkney and Shetland, where river boards do not exist. Could that be significant, given that the recent outbreaks of ISA have all been in Shetland? Does the minister agree that the tripartite umbrella could cover Orkney and Shetland as a guard against bad practice?

Norway seems to be ahead of Scotland with regard to the publication of data on sea lice. Will our Scottish Government publish data about farm sites in Scotland in the way that Norway does on the Lusedata website? It is unfortunate that 90 per cent of the Scottish industry is owned by its main competitor. That is perhaps one reason why our native Scottish industry has waned in recent years.

The most important priority is to find out why ISA has struck particular farms in Shetland because, until we have the answer to that, the threat of ISA will continue to hang over the industry like the sword of Damocles, and confidence in the future of fish farming may falter. We all want anything that is possible to be done to prevent ISA from taking hold in Scotland—it is an obvious priority—but do ministers accept that huge losses have already been incurred by independent Scottish smolt and egg producers?

The Government says that there can be no compensation for the sector, while at the same

time vaccines against ISA cannot be used. What is the Scottish Government doing to promote confidence? Does it accept that the Faroe Islands has already used vaccination as part of its eradication programme and that, among our major competitors, Chile is using vaccines and Norway is likely to follow suit?

Does the Government accept, furthermore, that the use of vaccines in carefully restricted areas and circumstances need not necessarily change our ISA status within the European Union? Will ministers continue to engage with the independent smolt and egg producers on the issue? Unfortunately, some of those producers have already been forced to leave the industry.

In the previous debate on aquaculture in the Parliament, my colleague John Scott—on my behalf—raised the issue of halibut farming, which is being pioneered by three farms in Argyll, including Kames Fish Farming Ltd near Oban. Will the minister indicate whether any progress has been made in setting up the relevant border control inspection at a Scottish airport to allow young halibut stock to be imported directly into Scotland, rather than into London or Manchester? That would greatly benefit Scottish businesses, and it would improve the welfare of the young fish in transportation and boost survival rates. Although I am aware that Scottish halibut farmers are keen to be able to breed their own stock in hatcheries in a few years—and I wish them every success with that—Scotland might well want to import other species in the future, and a dedicated Scottish airport of entry might therefore be a real boon.

With regard to seals, I agree with other members that we have to approach the issue in an unemotional way. No one here wants to see those beautiful mammals culled unnecessarily, but we need to respond to the fact that each year approximately 20,000 to 30,000 seal attacks take place on Scottish salmon farms. Last year, the industry was forced to shoot 489 seals. Although the industry makes it very clear that it wants to bring down that number by making significant investment in more sophisticated acoustic deterrents, trialling different nets, working with the sea mammal research unit at St Andrews and supporting research through the Scottish Aquaculture Research Forum, it maintains that, from time to time and as an act of last resort, it needs to shoot any persistent rogue seals that attack its nets. I remember that, in the first parliamentary session, Ross Finnie proposed the establishment of a seal commission that would be similar to the Red Deer Commission. What happened to that idea and what does the Scottish National Party think of it?

Time prevents me from talking on some of the other subjects that have been raised, but the mussel industry—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I am afraid that time prevents you from talking on any other subject, Mr McGrigor. Your time is up.

Jamie McGrigor: Right. I just want to say that the mussel industry is also extremely important to Scotland.

16:21

Elaine Murray: There is clear cross-party agreement on the importance of the aquaculture industry in many parts of rural Scotland, including my constituency. For example, the seafood company that earlier this year took over Pinneys of Scotland is probably Annan's largest employer, and I am pleased to say that it continues to process 100 per cent Scottish farmed salmon.

St James Smokehouse, at the other end of the scale, is also situated in Annan. Several members have mentioned the European seafood exposition, which took place last month in Brussels. I hope that they have not given the impression that we have been on some monumental jolly, because the Rural Affairs and Environment Committee spent a fairly action-packed couple of days learning about the common fisheries policy and the common agricultural policy. However, on our whistle-stop visit to the exposition, I was very pleased to find St James Smokehouse advertising its wares on such a huge international stage. It was very gratifying to see such small companies, some of which were from Galloway, promoting their products internationally.

As in many other rural constituencies, the economy of my constituency is reliant on the contribution of wild fish. Indeed, the area is well known for its angling and netting, which not only are valued leisure pursuits for local people but attract tourists to the region. We need to reconcile the difference between the two industries and find a sustainable way forward. Indeed, that is important right across the board.

As I said in my opening remarks, I would have appreciated more time to study and consider the Government's renewed strategic framework for Scottish aquaculture, for the very reason that aquaculture is so important to the Scottish economy and the availability of quality local food. I was not, as Dave Thompson implied, just being grumpy; I admit, though, that I might have been slightly grumpy, given that I had leapt out of my bed early this morning and, without even so much as a cup of tea, rushed into Parliament to attempt to get a copy of the document only to be advised that it would not be available until the afternoon.

However, Robin Harper fared even worse; I understand that he did not receive a copy at all.

Many stakeholders, producers, consumers, processors and environmentalists have a keen interest in the strategy, and we should have been able to find out whether it adequately addresses their concerns. As I say, I would have appreciated more time to hear the views of those stakeholders and to construct a more considered response. It might have been more useful had the minister launched the strategy in a statement and, perhaps a month later, when we had a fuller picture of the composition of the ministerial group and the task forces, how the forum would be set up and how the strategy was going to be taken forward, we could have had a more productive debate.

I do not intend just to be negative, because we support the document's intentions. After all, who can disagree that the way forward lies in having healthier fish and shellfish, improved licensing systems, aquaculture developments, improved containment, better marketing and an improved image and better access to finance? As ministers in the current Government have acknowledged in previous debates, all that builds on the previous Executive's good work.

Of course, what really counts is whether objectives are achieved, and we should not congratulate ourselves on achieving a good strategy until we know whether that is the case. We all know that words are reasonably easy; what matters is whether they translate into effective action. We will be judged on that.

Many members, including Karen Gillon, Peter Peacock, Ross Finnie, Liam McArthur and Maureen Watt, have spoken about the importance of the aquaculture industry to the Scottish economy. The fact that Scotland is the second largest producer of farmed salmon in Europe bears repeating. It was the third largest producer of farmed salmon in the world, but I am not sure whether it is not now the second largest, given the problems that there have been in Chile. Salmon farming is worth £324 million per annum, trout farming is worth £15 million per annum, and shellfish farming is worth £5 million per annum. As members have said, there is considerable room for expansion of the latter. The Association of Scottish Shellfish Growers believes that a shellfish output of 100,000 tonnes per annum is possible. That would mean a 20-fold increase in current production. Does the Government agree that an increase of that magnitude is possible? How long would it take to develop the strategy that would be required to deliver that? The matter is significant to the Solway, for example, which has, it has been estimated, the capacity to produce 13,000 tonnes of farmed oysters or 19,000 tonnes of farmed mussels.

Liam McArthur mentioned discussions with the industry on the opportunities that arise from the collapse of the Chilean industry. Robin Harper and Ross Finnie made the point that we also need to know what lessons should be learned about the risks to the Scottish industry.

It is not surprising that many members have mentioned sea lice and health and welfare issues. I was interested in Robin Harper's description—volumes 1 and 2—of possible technological solutions to sea lice and seal attacks. I would be interested in the industry's response to some of the proposals that have been made. From what Robin Harper said, it seems that technologies have been rejected. I would like to hear more from the industry about why it is not prepared to consider them further.

Peter Peacock talked about the need for more details on timescales, the funding that is available to tackle the problem, and how progress will be reported to Parliament.

Ross Finnie rightly reminded us of the vulnerability of the industry to disease and said that we should not be complacent, as something that has happened to somebody else could equally happen to us.

Seals have been mentioned. Obviously, seals are one of the components of the Marine (Scotland) Bill. I was pleased that the Government proposes to repeal the Conservation of Seals Act 1970 in that bill, as that act is very out of date and does not conserve seals in the slightest. As thoughts develop, I would be interested to hear more about how the Government thinks that the concerns of the welfare sector will be met. I am not one of those people who believe that no seal should ever lose its life. Seals, which are intelligent animals, sometimes predate on fish farms. They learn how to swim up rivers to attack them. I think that sometimes there is no option other than to kill an animal because it has become fixated on the predation of fish farms. We should not lose sight of the fact that there are fish welfare issues if fish are being stressed and frightened by continual seal attacks. The issue is not as easy as some might think.

Karen Gillon mentioned the important issue of the planning and identification of leases and sites. The Scottish Salmon Producers Organisation has expressed reservations about the capability of local authorities to provide aquaculture framework plans with a sufficient level of detail or the presumption of development guidance that is contained in Scottish planning policy 22. Will the minister expand on the relationship between SPP 22 and the proposed robust and appropriate planning and licensing schemes, which are one of the strategy's desired outcomes?

I support the development of a strategy, but it is a bit thin and a wee bit late, and perhaps it has not been presented to Parliament in the right way. However, I think that we all agree that the industry is extremely important and that it needs to proceed using a sustainable economic development approach.

16:29

Roseanna Cunningham: I would need at least three or four times the minutes that have been allocated to me to answer every question that members have asked. I fear that some members will therefore be disappointed. If the document dealt with things in the detail that has been suggested, there would be little point in any of the working groups, in which some of the details will be worked through.

I ought to say at the outset that I am happy to accept the Labour, Liberal Democrat and Tory amendments. I will not accept the Green party amendment, for a specific reason that I will outline later.

I am glad that everyone has acknowledged the value of the industry and its ambition and optimism, which is one of the most striking features of the industry right now. It is extremely important that we continue to say whenever we can that the industry is hugely optimistic and that it is of enormous economic value to Scotland. That value is not often recognised, perhaps because people see things through the prism of sea fisheries, rather than the aquaculture industry.

I hope that I will be able to deal with some of the bigger issues that have been raised by several members. Many members mentioned sea lice. We are committed to producing a proposal this year to establish a national system for the collection of sea lice data. I know that people scoff at that a little, but if we do not have the information in the first place, it is difficult to move on. That system will be a big step forward, as it will inform the industry's treatment strategies and guide the Scottish Government's research and action. Action must be based on sound science, hence the need for an expert working group, so that policy is informed by science. I will make more comments about sea lice later if I have time.

Several members talked about freshwater aquaculture. I acknowledge the issues that surround that. The Scottish Environment Protection Agency is confident that its licensing approach under the Water Environment (Controlled Activities) (Scotland) Regulations 2005—which are known as CAR—provides protection from the risk of eutrophication. However, we know that that is not an effective legislative means of dealing with escapes.

Recently commenced provisions provide the fish health inspectorate with powers to regulate and improve the containment of farm stock, thereby reducing the potential for interaction with wild salmonid populations. We hope that that work will bear fruit.

Several members mentioned the siting of fish farms. As I have said, marine Scotland will establish a marine spatial planning system that will consider those issues. In the interim, we are establishing a process to allow agreements to be reached between the aquaculture industry, wild fisheries interests and regulators on areas in which expansion could be expected and areas where development might not be appropriate—we acknowledge that that might be the case.

Several members, including John Scott and Elaine Murray, talked about seals. I salute Elaine Murray for her courage in saying that it is not the case that no seal should ever be shot. We are aware of the concerns about the issue and we are looking at it very carefully. In fact, I am looking very carefully at the moment to try to find the information that I have on the issue. I might have to come back to that shortly. No—I can give a quick comment. We will consider a licence system that is based on the model that has been developed in the Moray Firth seal management plan pilot. That will centre around an annual application process to cover activity during the whole year and will include provision for reporting and monitoring. The system will involve the use of the permitted potential biological removal method, which provides a maximum figure for the number of individuals that can be removed without affecting the wider population. We are trying to find the right balance, which is important.

John Scott and many other members talked about the impact of ISA. The recent outbreak has been an enormous disappointment. As members might imagine, since coming into my ministerial post, that has been the focus of my interaction with the industry for very obvious reasons. I am only too aware of the difficulties that the outbreak raises. The recent new case is in the same area as the previous cases, so there is no evidence of spread outside the area. It is within the currently contained area and the biosecurity controls remain in place.

Liam McArthur and others talked about support to expand export markets. We are in constant discussions with the industry. The member will not be surprised to know that my initial focus has been on ISA, which is understandable, but officials are aware of the need for such support. Finance is available through the EFF to make common-interest bids that will help the export market. For example, there was a recent award of about £215,000 to Scottish Quality Salmon for a targeted

promotional campaign in France for its label rouge Scottish farmed salmon, and for developing the product in other countries, too. There is a mechanism there that can be used to help, and I hope that people will take advantage of it.

The marketing and image sub-group provides a forum for discussions with the industry on opportunities for further export. I have been told in discussion with the industry that Scotland can best support the sector by providing space to expand. It comes back to the provision of developmental space.

Jamie McGrigor: I have a point to make about expansion. The minister has not so far mentioned the new species in this regard, such as halibut. One of the advantages of halibut is that they do not get, and are not hosts for, sea lice.

Roseanna Cunningham: There are many things that I simply do not have time to mention. I will have to mop up some of them outside the confines of the debate.

EFF awards are available if the right bids are put in, but we should not forget that they are application led.

Robin Harper raised a number of points. The part of his amendment that causes the difficulty is nothing to do with the science or the issues that he raises; it is to do, I am afraid, with his specific comments about the expectation of confidentiality, the tripartite working group and the area management agreements. Given that the group is a voluntary organisation, we fear that any expectation that all the information is to be made public would end up undermining the voluntary approach, and that it would achieve precisely the opposite effect of what Robin Harper wants to achieve.

I wonder whether Robin Harper would be prepared to withdraw the amendment in his name if I agreed to meet him about the other issues that he has discussed, on which we have no great concern, as we recognise their importance. Our difficulty is to do with the very specific issue of confidentiality and not undermining the voluntary arrangement in that respect. If we say that everything is going to be in public, we are afraid that producers simply will not come. We want to ensure that they engage.

Robin Harper: If the minister will allow me to take full advantage of that generous offer, I am prepared to be equally generous and to withdraw my amendment.

Roseanna Cunningham: Peter Peacock asked how we will keep people informed of various aspects of work. I can tell him that the sea lice group will report to the ministerial group on aquaculture, under the healthier fish and shellfish

theme, and we will publish all the minutes online. I am happy to provide an update to MSPs when the group reports. I personally hope that debates on aquaculture are not confined to just one per year—perhaps there will be opportunities to come back to the chamber on the subject. On action plans, the ministerial group will meet this summer, with a chair being appointed in June. Each group will have to develop a time-bound action plan, to be made available online. Relevant interests will be represented by groups.

I am afraid that I will have to jump to the end of my speech now. I will deal briefly with export credits and finance. On 8 May 2009, the Export Credits Guarantee Department launched a public consultation on a proposal to offer a scheme to confirm letters of credit for British exports. I encourage all Scottish companies to participate in the consultation, which closes on 3 July. I hope that members will encourage any companies in their areas with significant concerns on the matter to participate.

I should come to a close now. There are many issues that I have been unable to deal with, and I am sorry about that—I would like to go on a great deal longer. This is an extraordinarily important industry for Scotland, and I am hugely enthusiastic about it and supportive of it. I knew very little about the industry before but, in the short space of time for which I have had an interaction with it, I have been incredibly impressed by all the companies that I have seen, as I hope are members in the chamber. I very much commend to members further interaction with companies in their areas so that they can learn more and see more of that enthusiasm and ambition. I commend the strategy to the Parliament.

Coroners and Justice Bill

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson): The next item of business is a debate on legislative consent motion S3M-4124, in the name of Kenny MacAskill, on the Coroners and Justice Bill, which is United Kingdom legislation.

16:40

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice (Kenny MacAskill): The UK Coroners and Justice Bill includes provisions that extend to devolved matters in three areas, in relation to which I am promoting this legislative consent motion. Those provisions deal with the European Union services directive, criminal memoirs, and inquiries into the deaths on active service abroad of Scottish service personnel. The provisions on information-sharing gateways have now been withdrawn from the bill.

The bill includes provisions that will allow the Scottish Government to implement the EU services directive through secondary legislation made under the European Communities Act 1972. Those provisions will enable the directive to be implemented on time, before 28 December 2009.

The aim of the EU services directive is to open up the internal market for service providers, in the same way that it is already open for people, capital and goods. To implement the directive fully, a new power is required to disapply the penalty limits that can be included in secondary legislation made under the European Communities Act 1972.

The Justice Committee has raised questions about the exercise of the power; so, indeed, has the House of Lords, for the same reasons. The UK Government is now considering how best to provide the necessary safeguards in the bill in relation to the exercise of the power.

The bill's provisions on criminal memoirs will introduce a scheme that enables the recovery of profits made by criminals from publicising the stories of their crimes. Those provisions will apply to convicted criminals who seek to profit from and glorify accounts of their crimes, and will act as a powerful deterrent. UK-wide provisions will avoid the exploitation by profit-seeking criminals of any difference between Scots law and the law in other parts of the UK.

The provisions on deaths abroad of Scottish service personnel represent an agreement that was reached between the Scottish and UK Governments. After consulting the families concerned, UK authorities will be able to notify the Lord Advocate of cases in which an inquiry in Scotland would be preferred to a coroner's inquest. The system requires flexibilities to deal

with, for example, single incidents or multiple deaths. Some of the operational protocols are still being worked on by the Ministry of Defence and the Crown Office, which will have to acquire expertise in this area.

However, I am pleased that, under these arrangements, the deaths on active service abroad of Scottish service personnel will be able to be investigated here in Scotland. That has been warmly welcomed, especially by representatives of bereaved service families, and I am pleased to promote them to the Parliament.

I am aware that the matter has been of concern to many members in the Parliament. It is a complex issue that involves both reserved and devolved legislation and has required a great deal of co-operation, not simply from the Crown Office but from the Ministry of Defence and other departments south of the border. As members of all parties here and in legislatures south of the border have said, this is a major issue, which has been a huge concern. It is fundamentally wrong that we have not been able to deal with those who have given their lives on active service and address the plight of those who have been bereaved. Therefore, it is a pleasure to be able to deal with the matter now. As I said, there are still protocols to be discussed, given the complexity of the issue. Good discussion and co-operation between the Crown Office north of the border and the Ministry of Defence on a UK-wide basis will be required. Given the common cause that has been shown, I am sure that we can do our best to alleviate the suffering of those whose relatives have given their lives on active service.

In all three cases—implementing the EU services directive, introducing a scheme for criminal memoirs and investigating the deaths abroad of Scottish service personnel—I am convinced that the bill will serve Scotland's needs. I am happy to move the motion, which I urge the Parliament to support.

I move,

That the Parliament agrees that the relevant provisions of the Coroners and Justice Bill, introduced in the House of Commons on 14 January 2009, relating to the EU Services Directive, criminal memoirs and the Scottish system of investigation of deaths and fatal accident inquiries into deaths abroad of members of the armed forces and others, so far as these provisions relate to matters within the legislative competence of the Scottish Parliament, should be considered by the UK Parliament.

16:45

Richard Baker (North East Scotland) (Lab): I welcome the legislative consent motion, and I am pleased that the Scottish Government has brought it before Parliament today. The Coroners and Justice Bill was introduced in Westminster to

deliver more effective, transparent and responsive justice and coroner services for victims, witnesses, bereaved families and the wider public. It will make several important changes to the law to achieve those goals.

Some of the policy areas that this Westminster bill covers will be debated here as we consider the Criminal Justice and Licensing (Scotland) Bill, which is before the Justice Committee, but some important legislative changes are best expedited through our agreeing to the motion, which I hope the Parliament will do.

Having observed the progress of the proposals, I believe that an example has been provided of welcome collaboration between the Scottish ministers and their UK counterparts in the Scotland Office and the Ministry of Defence. That is particularly evident in relation to the provisions on fatal accident inquiries. It is very welcome that in future we will be able to investigate in Scotland the deaths while abroad on active service of Scottish service personnel. Given the recent and current conflicts in which Scottish troops have been actively engaged and the fatalities that have occurred as they have played their part in the engagement of our forces abroad, the issue has been a great concern to bereaved families at the most difficult and traumatic of times and to representatives from all political parties here and at Westminster.

We all agree that, whenever possible, we should enable relatives to avoid the added stress of travelling considerable distances down south for inquiries into the deaths of their loved ones. Avoiding that stress will now be possible, although that might not happen in every instance—for example, in some instances of multiple deaths. Ministers are taking the right approach through flexibility and continuing work to ensure that the two Administrations can work together so that inquiries can be conducted here whenever possible.

We support the necessary provisions on the European Union services directive and the provisions to ensure that people who are convicted of crime cannot profit from memoirs—that measure is widely supported. The provisions on information sharing are not referred to in the motion, which reflects the decision in Westminster to put such measures in a new bill. I was minded to agree that when information-sharing measures can assist in addressing poverty and deprivation, they should be welcomed, but that debate is for another day.

I am sure that the motion will attract the support of all parties. Labour will certainly support it.

16:48

Bill Aitken (Glasgow) (Con): It is somewhat unusual to find an air of consensus about justice matters these days, but it is certainly present now. The bill will be useful under several headings. First, as the cabinet secretary properly said, the bill will remove the obscene situation whereby thugs, gangsters and criminals can legally make money from their activities. The bill will close that loophole, which all right-thinking people found totally offensive.

The most important provision is that which will have an impact on the bereaved relatives of servicemen who have lost their lives abroad. All of us hope that such legislation will not be used frequently, but we must face the facts. Such deaths have occurred even in the past few days. Given the conflicts that are taking place throughout the world, which British forces and Scottish personnel in them must confront, deaths are to an extent inevitable.

The bill will enable relatives to attend fatal accident inquiries in the sheriff court that is relevant to them. For example, the case of those who lost their lives in the Nimrod disaster not all that long ago could have been dealt with at Elgin sheriff court, and the case of the marines who lost their lives in Afghanistan could have been called at Arbroath sheriff court. Those cases could have been dealt with much more expeditiously, causing much less grief and angst for the relatives, than they were dealt with.

As Richard Baker said, this legislative consent motion is a classic illustration of what can happen when all the agencies get together in a co-operative and collaborative manner. The effectiveness of the legislation and the way in which it has been dealt with does credit to not only the Scottish Government and its Westminster counterpart but the Ministry of Defence and the Scottish Parliament.

The Justice Committee had certain reservations about the bill. Recognising those concerns, Mr MacAskill withdrew that aspect of the original draft motion.

The motion will be agreed to by the Parliament with, I am certain, unanimous support. It is a good job, well done. It will result in a great deal of comfort to—I hope—few people, very much in their hour of need.

16:51

Robert Brown (Glasgow) (LD): I am glad to speak on behalf of the Liberal Democrats in support of the legislative consent motion on the Coroners and Justice Bill.

I welcome in particular the arrangements for the hearing of fatal accident inquiries in Scotland in cases that involve servicemen and servicewomen who have a connection to Scotland. The matter was first raised by my colleague Margaret Smith—I think that she is in the chamber—and then taken forward by the Scottish Government.

Members across the chamber will echo Bill Aitken's hope that the provisions will require to be exercised as seldom as possible. On those occasions when it might be necessary to do so, we hope that they will relieve, albeit in small measure, the pressures on the family and friends of service people who are killed in the service of their country. Like others, I am happy to pay tribute to the happy effects of the co-operation on the matter between the different levels of government in the United Kingdom.

We should not forget that the bill also includes measures on the EU services directive and to prevent criminals from profiting from publications on their crimes—that measure has the unanimous support of the chamber.

On a slightly more hostile note—if I may put it that way—the motion is, unusually, the second on the bill to be presented to the Parliament. After I raised at the Justice Committee the draconian powers on data sharing, which were referred to in the original draft motion, and after the committee also expressed its concern about those powers, the cabinet secretary was forced to revise the original draft motion. That was subsequent to the UK Government dropping the data-sharing provisions, although I am not sure whether that was due to our activities.

I hope that the SNP Government has learned to look rather more closely at legislative consent motions. We have the ludicrous situation in which the SNP, having opposed most LCMs when in opposition on an in-principle basis, now rubber-stamp them when in government, apparently without realising their implications. In this case, the oversight was a pretty big one. It took a little while for ministers to dig themselves out of the hole that they had created. That said, the exercise was a tribute to the importance of Opposition scrutiny of legislation and to the importance of the Scottish Parliament committee system. As other members said, at the end of the day, the right result has been achieved.

The substantive measures that are now going forward are extremely welcome. Again, I welcome the co-operative attitude that has surrounded them. On behalf of the Liberal Democrats, I am glad to say that we will support the LCM, now that the rather offensive provisions have been omitted.

16:53

Kenny MacAskill: I thank the members who have spoken in the debate and those in the chamber who have listened to it. I also thank the members of the Justice Committee, who supported the general tenor of the bill or sought the amendment of certain provisions. I accept the legitimate point that Mr Brown raised.

Obviously, some aspects of the bill are not the most dynamic. The EU services directive, for example, may not generate a great deal of interest, but we are obliged to implement it, and it is important that we do so within the appropriate timescale. The directive will benefit services north and south of the border and the Scottish and UK economies as a whole. It is therefore important that we proceed with its implementation.

As Richard Baker, Bill Aitken and Robert Brown said, a common approach needs to be taken to criminals who seek to profit by publishing accounts of their crimes. Real-crime or true-crime genre paperbacks can be found at airport and railway station bookstores in Scotland, England and Wales. It is important that we have uniform measures to deal with that genre, albeit that some accounts are perfectly legitimate. The genre may not be to my taste, but I do not seek to demean that style of writing.

Jamie McGrigor (Highlands and Islands) (Con): Will the bill stop people ghosting criminal memoirs?

Kenny MacAskill: It is about exploitation. We must ensure that we can prove that exploitation is taking place. The Justice Committee discussed the ghosting of criminal memoirs. The bill is meant to stop exploitation, but there are limitations as regards proof and evidence.

We are keen to do what Mr McGrigor's colleague suggested we should do. It is one thing for a journalist to write a legitimate book about a heinous crime, but it is quite another for someone who has perpetrated a heinous crime to seek to glorify their exploits or to gain from what they did—that is fundamentally unacceptable and we must ensure that it does not happen. Thankfully, such circumstances have been few and far between, but they have arisen and we need to ensure that there is uniformity north and south of the border.

The most important issue is the one that relates to service personnel who have given their lives on active service. I am grateful for the comments of members of other political parties. As a Government, we recognise that whatever differences we might have on the constitution, we need to bury them when it comes to dealing with people who have sacrificed their lives for their country. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Order. There is too much noise.

Kenny MacAskill: Whether they were based at RM Condor in Arbroath or up in the north-east of Scotland, we have a fundamental obligation to try to limit the trauma and agony that their families suffer. Members such as Margaret Smith have highlighted that issue. It is a question of doing what is right. That is why I welcome members' support for the motion. It is appropriate that it should receive unanimous support. The new arrangements will not ease families' grief at the loss that they have suffered, but we must do everything that we can to minimise their suffering thereafter. That is why I commend the motion to Parliament.

Parliamentary Bureau Motions

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson): The next item of business is consideration of a Parliamentary Bureau motion. I ask Bruce Crawford to move motion S3M-4180, on the approval of the draft Community Right to Buy (Definition of Excluded Land) (Scotland) Order 2009.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees that the draft Community Right to Buy (Definition of Excluded Land) (Scotland) Order 2009 be approved.—[Bruce Crawford.]

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

The next item of business is consideration of another Parliamentary Bureau motion. I ask Bruce Crawford to move motion S3M-4181, on the approval of the draft Local Government and Housing Act 1989 Amendment (Scotland) Order 2009.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees that the draft Local Government and Housing Act 1989 Amendment (Scotland) Order 2009 be approved.—[Bruce Crawford.]

The Presiding Officer: Mr McLetchie has indicated that he would like to speak. You have up to three minutes.

16:57

David McLetchie (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Con): My purpose in formally opposing the motion is to highlight the fact that in the 10-year history of this Parliament, rarely have members been asked to participate in such a pointless exercise. The statutory instrument that we are considering requires to be dealt with under affirmative procedure, but it will achieve absolutely nothing.

Members do not have to take my word for it: the Executive note that accompanies the order says quite categorically that

"This change has no effect in law: it simply removes a superfluous reference in the 1989 Act."

I am sure that the statute book is littered with superfluous and redundant references. Accordingly, one wonders why the cabinet secretary has singled out the "superfluous reference" in question for special attention.

Members of the Local Government and Communities Committee were told that the issue had come to light following consideration by the United Kingdom Parliament of the Local Democracy, Economic Development and

Construction Bill. That piece of legislation might ring a bell with members.

Tavish Scott (Shetland) (LD): No.

David McLetchie: Well, it should ring a bell, because it was the subject of a Sewel motion that Parliament passed on 5 March this year, whereby we agreed that Westminster should legislate for us on devolved matters relating to the Local Government Boundary Commission and construction contracts. One might, in that case, ask why the issue that we are dealing with now was not tidied up at the same time, thereby sparing Parliament further procedure.

Could there possibly have been an oversight on the part of the cabinet secretary's officials? Apparently not, because at the Local Government and Communities Committee, the cabinet secretary solemnly told us that in his judgment, the legislative point in the Local Government and Housing Act 1989 would be dealt with more "efficiently" through the making of the order that is before Parliament today, which I remind members has, by the Government's own admission, no substantive effect in law.

At a time when Scotland's economy is falling deeper into recession, when thousands of our fellow Scots are losing their jobs and when the cabinet secretary has to cope with the budgetary consequences of an apparent £500 million of cuts, while ensuring that the First Minister gets free prescriptions for gout, selective amnesia or any other affliction that may beset him in the future, and free meals for his weans, one must seriously question whether this is a good use of ministerial time.

The cabinet secretary assured us in committee that he has not set officials to the task of scouring the statute book for "superfluous" legislative references that we can then solemnly repeal. I am glad to hear it. In this case, the cabinet secretary's zeal for tidiness is misplaced and his energies would be better focused. We will not vote against the order, but we question why it was introduced in the first place.

17:01

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth (John Swinney): Allow me to provide the encore that Mr McLetchie did not have the time to provide. The Local Governance (Scotland) Act 2004 repealed provisions that disqualified local government employees in receipt of an annual salary above £33,423 from being politically active. However, the 2004 act left a loose end. It did not repeal part of section 3 of the Local Government and Housing Act 1989, relating back to section 9. As a result, the reference in the 1989 act is still extant.

As a consequence of superb co-operation between the—[*Interruption.*] Wait for this. As a consequence of superb co-operation between the Scottish Government and the United Kingdom Government, the problem was identified. This lot—the Conservatives—are demanding more co-operation with the United Kingdom Government every day of the week. We had a choice. We could have left things as they were and tidied up the legislation through a bill that is currently before the UK Parliament or, given that the Scottish Parliament has the necessary powers, we could have legislated in the form of a short order to amend the act. After all, Mr Michael McMahon has regularly been demanding more legislation from this Government.

On balance, I decided that we would introduce an order, with the minimum of fuss, given that the position was not of this Government's making but was the result of the incompetent legislation of the Labour Party and the Liberal Democrats. That is no secret now, though. Mr McLetchie has shone a light into the whole process. Of course, Mr McLetchie is guilty of just a little bit of that word that begins with "H" and ends with "Y".

Members: Henry!

John Swinney: Mr McLetchie has complained about a waste of Parliament's time. He was not concerned about wasting UK parliamentary time in his beloved House of Commons had it resolved the matter. He has wasted 10 minutes of committee time and, dare I say it—notwithstanding the hilarity and the jocularity of this response—he has wasted 10 minutes of parliamentary time.

My real intention is to ensure that the law of Scotland is in a very tidy state of affairs. The reason why is that it will be much easier for Mr McLetchie, when he has to return to the practice of law, to have the law in a decent state of affairs, because that is exactly where Mr McLetchie is heading.

Decision Time

17:03

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson):

There are 14 questions to be put as a result of today's business. The first question is, that amendment S3M-4188.2, in the name of Fiona Hyslop, which seeks to amendment motion S3M-4188, in the name of Claire Baker, on student hardship, be agreed to. Are we all agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

FOR

Adam, Brian (Aberdeen North) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Western Isles) (SNP)
 Brown, Keith (Ochil) (SNP)
 Campbell, Aileen (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Livingston) (SNP)
 Crawford, Bruce (Stirling) (SNP)
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perth) (SNP)
 Don, Nigel (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP)
 Fabiani, Linda (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee West) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gibson, Rob (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Christopher (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Lothians) (SNP)
 Ingram, Adam (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacAskill, Kenny (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Marwick, Tricia (Central Fife) (SNP)
 Mather, Jim (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 Maxwell, Stewart (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 McKee, Ian (Lothians) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 McLaughlin, Anne (Glasgow) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Morgan, Alasdair (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Neil, Alex (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Paterson, Gil (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee East) (SNP)
 Russell, Michael (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Salmond, Alex (Gordon) (SNP)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Lothians) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banff and Buchan) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Govan) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (North Tayside) (SNP)
 Thompson, Dave (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Watt, Maureen (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 Welsh, Andrew (Angus) (SNP)
 White, Sandra (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Wilson, Bill (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Wilson, John (Central Scotland) (SNP)

AGAINST

Aitken, Bill (Glasgow) (Con)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Baker, Richard (North East Scotland) (Lab)

Boyack, Sarah (Edinburgh Central) (Lab)
 Brankin, Rhona (Midlothian) (Lab)
 Brocklebank, Ted (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Brown, Gavin (Lothians) (Con)
 Brown, Robert (Glasgow) (LD)
 Brownlee, Derek (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Butler, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab)
 Carlaw, Jackson (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Chisholm, Malcolm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab)
 Craigie, Cathie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab)
 Curran, Margaret (Glasgow Baillieston) (Lab)
 Eadie, Helen (Dunfermline East) (Lab)
 Ferguson, Patricia (Glasgow Maryhill) (Lab)
 Finnie, Ross (West of Scotland) (LD)
 Foulkes, George (Lothians) (Lab)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gillon, Karen (Clydesdale) (Lab)
 Glen, Marlyn (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Goldie, Annabel (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Gordon, Charlie (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Gray, Iain (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Harper, Robin (Lothians) (Green)
 Henry, Hugh (Paisley South) (Lab)
 Hume, Jim (South of Scotland) (LD)
 Jamieson, Cathy (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (Lab)
 Johnstone, Alex (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kelly, James (Glasgow Rutherglen) (Lab)
 Kerr, Andy (East Kilbride) (Lab)
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab)
 Lamont, John (Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Livingstone, Marilyn (Kirkcaldy) (Lab)
 Macintosh, Ken (Eastwood) (Lab)
 Martin, Paul (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney) (LD)
 McAveety, Mr Frank (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab)
 McCabe, Tom (Hamilton South) (Lab)
 McConnell, Jack (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)
 McGrigor, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 McInnes, Alison (North East Scotland) (LD)
 McLetchie, David (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Con)
 McMahon, Michael (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab)
 McNeil, Duncan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab)
 Milne, Nanette (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Mulligan, Mary (Linlithgow) (Lab)
 Murray, Elaine (Dumfries) (Lab)
 O'Donnell, Hugh (Central Scotland) (LD)
 Park, John (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Peacock, Peter (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Peattie, Cathy (Falkirk East) (Lab)
 Pringle, Mike (Edinburgh South) (LD)
 Purvis, Jeremy (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD)
 Rumbles, Mike (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD)
 Scanlon, Mary (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)
 Scott, Tavish (Shetland) (LD)
 Simpson, Dr Richard (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Smith, Elizabeth (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Smith, Iain (North East Fife) (LD)
 Smith, Margaret (Edinburgh West) (LD)
 Stewart, David (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Stone, Jamie (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)
 Tolson, Jim (Dunfermline West) (LD)
 Whitefield, Karen (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab)
 Whitton, David (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Lab)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 47, Against 71, Abstentions 0.

The amendment is therefore carried. I beg your pardon, the amendment falls. [*Laughter.*] And there are 13 more to go.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S3M-4188.1, in the name of Margaret Smith, which seeks to amend motion S3M-4188, in the name of Claire Baker, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

FOR

Brown, Robert (Glasgow) (LD)
 Finnie, Ross (West of Scotland) (LD)
 Harper, Robin (Lothians) (Green)
 Hume, Jim (South of Scotland) (LD)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney) (LD)
 McInnes, Alison (North East Scotland) (LD)
 O'Donnell, Hugh (Central Scotland) (LD)
 Pringle, Mike (Edinburgh South) (LD)
 Purvis, Jeremy (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD)
 Rumbles, Mike (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD)
 Scott, Tavish (Shetland) (LD)
 Smith, Iain (North East Fife) (LD)
 Smith, Margaret (Edinburgh West) (LD)
 Stone, Jamie (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)
 Tolson, Jim (Dunfermline West) (LD)

AGAINST

Adam, Brian (Aberdeen North) (SNP)
 Aitken, Bill (Glasgow) (Con)
 Allan, Alasdair (Western Isles) (SNP)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Baker, Richard (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Edinburgh Central) (Lab)
 Brankin, Rhona (Midlothian) (Lab)
 Brocklebank, Ted (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Brown, Gavin (Lothians) (Con)
 Brown, Keith (Ochil) (SNP)
 Brownlee, Derek (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Butler, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab)
 Campbell, Aileen (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Carlaw, Jackson (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Chisholm, Malcolm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Livingston) (SNP)
 Craigie, Cathie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab)
 Crawford, Bruce (Stirling) (SNP)
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perth) (SNP)
 Curran, Margaret (Glasgow Baillieston) (Lab)
 Don, Nigel (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Eadie, Helen (Dunfermline East) (Lab)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP)
 Fabiani, Linda (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Ferguson, Patricia (Glasgow Maryhill) (Lab)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee West) (SNP)
 Foulkes, George (Lothians) (Lab)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gibson, Rob (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Gillon, Karen (Clydesdale) (Lab)
 Glen, Marlyn (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Goldie, Annabel (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Gordon, Charlie (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab)

Grahame, Christine (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Gray, Iain (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Harvie, Christopher (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Henry, Hugh (Paisley South) (Lab)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Lothians) (SNP)
 Ingram, Adam (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Jamieson, Cathy (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (Lab)
 Johnstone, Alex (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kelly, James (Glasgow Rutherglen) (Lab)
 Kerr, Andy (East Kilbride) (Lab)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab)
 Lamont, John (Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Livingstone, Marilyn (Kirkcaldy) (Lab)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacAskill, Kenny (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Macintosh, Ken (Eastwood) (Lab)
 Martin, Paul (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab)
 Marwick, Tricia (Central Fife) (SNP)
 Mather, Jim (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 Maxwell, Stewart (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 McAveety, Mr Frank (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab)
 McCabe, Tom (Hamilton South) (Lab)
 McConnell, Jack (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)
 McGrigor, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 McKee, Ian (Lothians) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 McLaughlin, Anne (Glasgow) (SNP)
 McLetchie, David (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Con)
 McMahon, Michael (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab)
 McMillan, Stuart (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 McNeil, Duncan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab)
 Milne, Nanette (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Morgan, Alasdair (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Mulligan, Mary (Linlithgow) (Lab)
 Murray, Elaine (Dumfries) (Lab)
 Neil, Alex (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Park, John (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Paterson, Gil (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Peacock, Peter (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Peattie, Cathy (Falkirk East) (Lab)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee East) (SNP)
 Russell, Michael (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Salmond, Alex (Gordon) (SNP)
 Scanlon, Mary (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)
 Simpson, Dr Richard (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Smith, Elizabeth (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Lothians) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banff and Buchan) (SNP)
 Stewart, David (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Govan) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (North Tayside) (SNP)
 Thompson, Dave (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Watt, Maureen (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 Welsh, Andrew (Angus) (SNP)
 White, Sandra (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Whitefield, Karen (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab)
 Whitton, David (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Lab)
 Wilson, Bill (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Wilson, John (Central Scotland) (SNP)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 15, Against 103, Abstentions 0.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S3M-4188, in the name of Claire Baker, on student hardship, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

FOR

Aitken, Bill (Glasgow) (Con)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Baker, Richard (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Edinburgh Central) (Lab)
 Brankin, Rhona (Midlothian) (Lab)
 Brocklebank, Ted (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Brown, Gavin (Lothians) (Con)
 Brown, Robert (Glasgow) (LD)
 Brownlee, Derek (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Butler, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab)
 Carlaw, Jackson (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Chisholm, Malcolm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab)
 Craigie, Cathie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab)
 Curran, Margaret (Glasgow Baillieston) (Lab)
 Eadie, Helen (Dunfermline East) (Lab)
 Ferguson, Patricia (Glasgow Maryhill) (Lab)
 Finnie, Ross (West of Scotland) (LD)
 Foulkes, George (Lothians) (Lab)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gillon, Karen (Clydesdale) (Lab)
 Glen, Marlyn (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Goldie, Annabel (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Gordon, Charlie (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Gray, Iain (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Harper, Robin (Lothians) (Green)
 Henry, Hugh (Paisley South) (Lab)
 Hume, Jim (South of Scotland) (LD)
 Jamieson, Cathy (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (Lab)
 Johnstone, Alex (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kelly, James (Glasgow Rutherglen) (Lab)
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab)
 Lamont, John (Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Livingstone, Marilyn (Kirkcaldy) (Lab)
 Macintosh, Ken (Eastwood) (Lab)
 Martin, Paul (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney) (LD)
 McAveety, Mr Frank (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab)
 McCabe, Tom (Hamilton South) (Lab)
 McGrigor, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 McInnes, Alison (North East Scotland) (LD)
 McLetchie, David (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Con)
 McMahan, Michael (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab)
 McNeil, Duncan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab)
 Milne, Nanette (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Mulligan, Mary (Linlithgow) (Lab)
 Murray, Elaine (Dumfries) (Lab)
 O'Donnell, Hugh (Central Scotland) (LD)
 Park, John (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Peacock, Peter (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Peattie, Cathy (Falkirk East) (Lab)
 Pringle, Mike (Edinburgh South) (LD)
 Purvis, Jeremy (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD)
 Rumbles, Mike (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD)
 Scanlon, Mary (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)
 Scott, Tavish (Shetland) (LD)
 Simpson, Dr Richard (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)

Smith, Elizabeth (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Smith, Iain (North East Fife) (LD)
 Smith, Margaret (Edinburgh West) (LD)
 Stewart, David (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Stone, Jamie (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)
 Tolson, Jim (Dunfermline West) (LD)
 Whitefield, Karen (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab)
 Whitton, David (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Lab)

AGAINST

Adam, Brian (Aberdeen North) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Western Isles) (SNP)
 Brown, Keith (Ochil) (SNP)
 Campbell, Aileen (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Livingston) (SNP)
 Crawford, Bruce (Stirling) (SNP)
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perth) (SNP)
 Don, Nigel (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP)
 Fabiani, Linda (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee West) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gibson, Rob (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Christopher (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Lothians) (SNP)
 Ingram, Adam (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Kerr, Andy (East Kilbride) (Lab)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacAskill, Kenny (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Marwick, Tricia (Central Fife) (SNP)
 Mather, Jim (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 Maxwell, Stewart (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 McConnell, Jack (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)
 McKee, Ian (Lothians) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 McLaughlin, Anne (Glasgow) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Morgan, Alasdair (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Neil, Alex (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Paterson, Gil (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee East) (SNP)
 Russell, Michael (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Salmond, Alex (Gordon) (SNP)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Lothians) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banff and Buchan) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Govan) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (North Tayside) (SNP)
 Thompson, Dave (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Watt, Maureen (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 Welsh, Andrew (Angus) (SNP)
 White, Sandra (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Wilson, Bill (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Wilson, John (Central Scotland) (SNP)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 69, Against 49, Abstentions 0.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament calls for a cross-party approach on tackling hardship among the poorest students in Scotland; believes that students have been severely let down by the SNP's broken promises, actions and inaction in power; further believes that the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning's efforts have been misplaced in focussing solely on reducing graduate debt rather than

student hardship while student demand for hardship and childcare funds increases, commercial borrowing among students continues and student support levels in Scotland fall far behind the rest of the United Kingdom; notes the open letter to the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning signed by NUS, the main opposition parties and student leaders across Scotland calling for the Scottish Government to increase levels of student support through increased loans and for a new direction from the Scottish Government; further notes that on the 12 March 2009, through motion S3M-3675 as amended, the Parliament rejected all of the proposals contained in the *Supporting a Smarter Scotland* consultation, which closed in April 2009, for not adequately addressing student hardship, and calls on the Scottish Government to work with the main opposition parties on their joint approach to tackling student hardship by using the available resources to provide £7,000 in support for the poorest students, a £500 increase in grant for the poorest students, an increase in support of £200 for all students through the non-means-tested loan and almost £2 million to discretionary funds for childcare and hardship funding.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S3M-4187.2, in the name of Jim Mather, which seeks to amend motion S3M-4187, in the name of John Park, on supporting employment in Scotland, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

FOR

Adam, Brian (Aberdeen North) (SNP)
 Aitken, Bill (Glasgow) (Con)
 Allan, Alasdair (Western Isles) (SNP)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Baker, Richard (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Edinburgh Central) (Lab)
 Brankin, Rhona (Midlothian) (Lab)
 Brocklebank, Ted (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Brown, Gavin (Lothians) (Con)
 Brown, Keith (Ochil) (SNP)
 Brownlee, Derek (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Butler, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab)
 Campbell, Aileen (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Carlaw, Jackson (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Chisholm, Malcolm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Livingston) (SNP)
 Craigie, Cathie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab)
 Crawford, Bruce (Stirling) (SNP)
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perth) (SNP)
 Curran, Margaret (Glasgow Baillieston) (Lab)
 Don, Nigel (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Eadie, Helen (Dunfermline East) (Lab)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP)
 Fabiani, Linda (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Ferguson, Patricia (Glasgow Maryhill) (Lab)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee West) (SNP)
 Foulkes, George (Lothians) (Lab)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gibson, Rob (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Gillon, Karen (Clydesdale) (Lab)
 Glen, Marilyn (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Goldie, Annabel (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Gordon, Charlie (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab)

Grahame, Christine (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Gray, Iain (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Harvie, Christopher (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Henry, Hugh (Paisley South) (Lab)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Lothians) (SNP)
 Ingram, Adam (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Jamieson, Cathy (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (Lab)
 Johnstone, Alex (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kelly, James (Glasgow Rutherglen) (Lab)
 Kerr, Andy (East Kilbride) (Lab)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab)
 Lamont, John (Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Livingstone, Marilyn (Kirkcaldy) (Lab)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacAskill, Kenny (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Macintosh, Ken (Eastwood) (Lab)
 Martin, Paul (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab)
 Marwick, Tricia (Central Fife) (SNP)
 Mather, Jim (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 Maxwell, Stewart (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 McAveety, Mr Frank (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab)
 McCabe, Tom (Hamilton South) (Lab)
 McConnell, Jack (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)
 McGrigor, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 McKee, Ian (Lothians) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 McLaughlin, Anne (Glasgow) (SNP)
 McLetchie, David (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Con)
 McMahon, Michael (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab)
 McMillan, Stuart (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 McNeil, Duncan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab)
 Milne, Nanette (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Morgan, Alasdair (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Mulligan, Mary (Linlithgow) (Lab)
 Murray, Elaine (Dumfries) (Lab)
 Neil, Alex (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Park, John (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Paterson, Gil (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Peacock, Peter (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Peattie, Cathy (Falkirk East) (Lab)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee East) (SNP)
 Russell, Michael (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Salmond, Alex (Gordon) (SNP)
 Scanlon, Mary (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)
 Simpson, Dr Richard (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Smith, Elizabeth (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Lothians) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banff and Buchan) (SNP)
 Stewart, David (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Govan) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (North Tayside) (SNP)
 Thompson, Dave (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Watt, Maureen (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 Welsh, Andrew (Angus) (SNP)
 White, Sandra (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Whitefield, Karen (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab)
 Whitton, David (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Lab)
 Wilson, Bill (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Wilson, John (Central Scotland) (SNP)

AGAINST

Brown, Robert (Glasgow) (LD)
 Finnie, Ross (West of Scotland) (LD)
 Harper, Robin (Lothians) (Green)

Hume, Jim (South of Scotland) (LD)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney) (LD)
 McInnes, Alison (North East Scotland) (LD)
 O'Donnell, Hugh (Central Scotland) (LD)
 Pringle, Mike (Edinburgh South) (LD)
 Purvis, Jeremy (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD)
 Rumbles, Mike (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD)
 Scott, Tavish (Shetland) (LD)
 Smith, Iain (North East Fife) (LD)
 Smith, Margaret (Edinburgh West) (LD)
 Stone, Jamie (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)
 Tolson, Jim (Dunfermline West) (LD)

Presiding Officer: The result of the division is:
 For 103, Against 15, Abstentions 0.

Amendment agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S3M-4187.1, in the name of Jeremy Purvis, which also seeks to amend motion S3M-4187, in the name of John Park, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

FOR

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Baker, Richard (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Edinburgh Central) (Lab)
 Brankin, Rhona (Midlothian) (Lab)
 Brown, Robert (Glasgow) (LD)
 Butler, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab)
 Chisholm, Malcolm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab)
 Craigie, Cathie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab)
 Curran, Margaret (Glasgow Baillieston) (Lab)
 Eadie, Helen (Dunfermline East) (Lab)
 Ferguson, Patricia (Glasgow Maryhill) (Lab)
 Finnie, Ross (West of Scotland) (LD)
 Foulkes, George (Lothians) (Lab)
 Gillon, Karen (Clydesdale) (Lab)
 Glen, Marlyn (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Gordon, Charlie (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Gray, Iain (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Harper, Robin (Lothians) (Green)
 Henry, Hugh (Paisley South) (Lab)
 Hume, Jim (South of Scotland) (LD)
 Jamieson, Cathy (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (Lab)
 Kelly, James (Glasgow Rutherglen) (Lab)
 Kerr, Andy (East Kilbride) (Lab)
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab)
 Livingstone, Marilyn (Kirkcaldy) (Lab)
 Macintosh, Ken (Eastwood) (Lab)
 Martin, Paul (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney) (LD)
 McAveety, Mr Frank (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab)
 McCabe, Tom (Hamilton South) (Lab)
 McConnell, Jack (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)
 McInnes, Alison (North East Scotland) (LD)
 McMahon, Michael (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab)
 McNeil, Duncan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab)
 Mulligan, Mary (Linlithgow) (Lab)
 Murray, Elaine (Dumfries) (Lab)
 O'Donnell, Hugh (Central Scotland) (LD)
 Park, John (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)

Peacock, Peter (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Peattie, Cathy (Falkirk East) (Lab)
 Pringle, Mike (Edinburgh South) (LD)
 Purvis, Jeremy (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD)
 Rumbles, Mike (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD)
 Scott, Tavish (Shetland) (LD)
 Simpson, Dr Richard (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Smith, Iain (North East Fife) (LD)
 Smith, Margaret (Edinburgh West) (LD)
 Stewart, David (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Stone, Jamie (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)
 Tolson, Jim (Dunfermline West) (LD)
 Whitefield, Karen (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab)
 Whitton, David (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Lab)

AGAINST

Adam, Brian (Aberdeen North) (SNP)
 Aitken, Bill (Glasgow) (Con)
 Allan, Alasdair (Western Isles) (SNP)
 Brocklebank, Ted (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Brown, Gavin (Lothians) (Con)
 Brown, Keith (Ochil) (SNP)
 Brownlee, Derek (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Campbell, Aileen (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Carlaw, Jackson (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Livingston) (SNP)
 Crawford, Bruce (Stirling) (SNP)
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perth) (SNP)
 Don, Nigel (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP)
 Fabiani, Linda (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee West) (SNP)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gibson, Rob (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Goldie, Annabel (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Grahame, Christine (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Christopher (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Lothians) (SNP)
 Ingram, Adam (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Johnstone, Alex (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Lamont, John (Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacAskill, Kenny (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Marwick, Tricia (Central Fife) (SNP)
 Mather, Jim (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 Maxwell, Stewart (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 McGrigor, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 McKee, Ian (Lothians) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 McLaughlin, Anne (Glasgow) (SNP)
 McLetchie, David (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Con)
 McMillan, Stuart (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Milne, Nanette (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Morgan, Alasdair (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Neil, Alex (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Paterson, Gil (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee East) (SNP)
 Russell, Michael (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Salmond, Alex (Gordon) (SNP)
 Scanlon, Mary (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)
 Smith, Elizabeth (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Lothians) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banff and Buchan) (SNP)

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

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 55, Against 63, Abstentions 0.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S3M-4187, in the name of John Park, on supporting employment in Scotland, as amended, be agreed to.

Motion, as amended, agreed to,

That the Parliament is concerned that 34,000 extra Scots were out of a job in the last year and that many live under the threat of redundancy; recognises that government support for business and individuals is vital in the current climate; calls on the Scottish Government to examine the ProAct scheme developed by the Welsh Assembly Government, which supports businesses on short-time working, to establish whether or not a scheme would benefit Scotland's economic recovery; further recognises the seriousness of the economic situation in Scotland; believes that the Scottish Government should bring forward a new and revised economic recovery programme prior to summer recess, and calls for such a plan to outline how the Scottish Government intends to deliver the extra 7,800 apprenticeship places agreed for 2009 and the 75,000 training places announced by the First Minister on 18 April 2009.

The Presiding Officer: Before I come to the next question, I understand that Mr Harper has indicated that he wishes to withdraw amendment S3M-4186.1. Mr Harper, will you confirm that that is the case?

Robin Harper (Lothians) (Green): I seek to withdraw amendment S3M-4186.1.

The Presiding Officer: The amendment can be withdrawn only with the full agreement of Parliament. If any member objects to Mr Harper's amendment being withdrawn, I will have to put the question on the amendment to the chamber.

Does any member object to the amendment being withdrawn?

Members: No.

Amendment, by agreement, withdrawn.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S3M-4186.2, in the name of Elaine Murray, which seeks to amend motion S3M-4186, in the name of Roseanna Cunningham, on the importance of aquaculture to the Scottish economy, be agreed to.

Amendment agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S3M-4186.3, in the name of John

Scott, which seeks to amend motion S3M-4186, in the name of Roseanna Cunningham, on the importance of aquaculture to the Scottish economy, be agreed to.

Amendment agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S3M-4186.4, in the name of Liam McArthur, which seeks to amend motion S3M-4186, in the name of Roseanna Cunningham, on the importance of aquaculture to the Scottish economy, be agreed to.

Amendment agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S3M-4186, in the name of Roseanna Cunningham, on the importance of aquaculture to the Scottish economy, as amended, be agreed to.

Motion, as amended, agreed to,

That the Parliament notes the publication of *A Fresh Start – the renewed Strategic Framework for Scottish Aquaculture* and its key themes; promotes the continued development of an ambitious, sustainable, profitable, thriving and growing Scottish aquaculture industry; recognises the economic importance of the industry to Scotland as a whole and many coastal communities in particular; acknowledges the vital role to be played by aquaculture production, processing and associated businesses during the economic downturn; further recognises that, if the industry is to attract, retain and develop people for a long-term career in aquaculture, the Scottish Government must ensure that a range of suitable training opportunities are made available; supports efforts to promote the many positives of the industry and to advance the enviable international reputation of quality Scottish aquaculture products, built on high environmental standards and the principles of sustainable development; encourages Marine Scotland to work with others to deliver a transparent, streamlined and proportionate regulatory framework that encourages shellfish and finfish industries while at the same time ensuring that adverse impacts on biodiversity and other users of the marine and freshwater environment are minimised and managed; welcomes proactive and effective engagement with other aquaculture-producing countries through sharing knowledge and promoting best practice and Scotland's role as a major contributor to international cooperation on research; acknowledges the continued engagement of the shellfish and finfish industries and other stakeholders in the development and implementation of the Strategic Framework for Scottish Aquaculture, and notes the importance of the 6,200 Scottish jobs supported by the aquaculture industry in maintaining the environmental, economic and social fabric in communities often located in Scotland's most remote and fragile areas.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that legislative consent motion S3M-4124, in the name of Kenny MacAskill, on the Coroners and Justice Bill, UK Legislation, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that the relevant provisions of the Coroners and Justice Bill, introduced in the House of Commons on 14 January 2009, relating to the EU Services Directive, criminal memoirs and the Scottish system of investigation of deaths and fatal accident inquiries into

deaths abroad of members of the armed forces and others, so far as these provisions relate to matters within the legislative competence of the Scottish Parliament, should be considered by the UK Parliament.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S3M-4180, in the name of Bruce Crawford, on the approval of a Scottish statutory instrument, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that the draft Community Right to Buy (Definition of Excluded Land) (Scotland) Order 2009 be approved.

The Presiding Officer: The final question is, that motion S3M-4181, in the name of Bruce Crawford, on the approval of an SSI, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that the draft Local Government and Housing Act 1989 Amendment (Scotland) Order 2009 be approved.

Strathclyde Police Prolific Offender Programme

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson): The final item of business is a members' business debate on motion S3M-3563, in the name of John Wilson, on the Strathclyde Police prolific offender programme. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament congratulates Strathclyde Police on the success of the Prolific Offender Programme, aimed specifically at drug and alcohol offenders, which has resulted in a 30% reduction in offending rates, particularly regarding shop lifting, housebreaking and prostitution; welcomes the inclusion of counselling, education and housing opportunities as part of the rehabilitation process under this pioneering initiative aimed at improving community safety, and notes that since 2007 over 194 people have been involved in the initiative while 95 people remain engaged in the programme.

17:11

John Wilson (Central Scotland) (SNP): I thank members who supported the motion, which congratulates Strathclyde Police and Glasgow addiction services on the successful operation of the prolific offender programme. Since the programme became operational on 27 November 2006, it has sought to engage prolific offenders in intensive support and treatment, through community-based outreach, to reduce criminality. The programme, which is funded by Glasgow community planning partnership, is a community safety initiative and brings together the work of Strathclyde Police and Glasgow addiction services.

In conjunction with existing services, and in recognition of worrying statistics on repeat offending, the programme was designed to provide an initial intervention to tackle addiction-related offending; integrate substance-misusing offenders into mainstream addiction services; improve quality of life; and promote training or employment opportunities and overall community safety. The project built on the success of similar initiatives in England, such as the tower project, which was implemented in Blackpool and Fylde in 2002 to tackle drug-related crime.

The programme has achieved real success in achieving its aims. An evaluation, which was published in July 2008, suggested that targets that were set at the outset are being met. There has been a 28.51 per cent reduction in offending rates, which equates to a reduction of approximately 270 crimes per year.

It is clear that the decrease in criminality among service users throughout greater Glasgow has wider community benefits, including a decrease in

antisocial behaviour, improved community safety and savings in the cost of health, criminal justice and victims' services. For example, in 2006-07 the Scottish Prison Service estimated the average cost of a prisoner place in Scotland to be £31,000 per annum. Persistent offenders place a substantial burden on the prison service, in relation not only to capacity but to cost. However, for people who have been involved in the programme, time spent in custody has fallen from 30.2 days to 7.4 days per annum. The reduction is welcome, particularly during this period of economic uncertainty.

I have taken an active interest in the prolific offender programme, so I was pleased to meet project leaders to gain a more detailed understanding of the work that is being done and of what has been achieved since the project began. Most significant, perhaps, was the fact that two service users were in attendance, each of whom had their own experiences of the programme to share after struggling for some time with drug addictions and repeat offending. Both had found the programme extremely valuable in transforming their lives. Since engaging with the project, one of them had found employment, while the other was applying for a place on a training programme. By working with the project, both have achieved commendable goals relatively quickly and have re-established good relationships with their families, which were previously problematic. Both individuals praised the joint working approach of Glasgow addiction services and Strathclyde Police; they had found the tracking service fundamental in bringing about their initial engagement and subsequent re-engagement with the programme.

The 2008 evaluation process showed that those two service users are not alone in their opinion. Feedback from a spectrum of service users remained extremely encouraging. It was highlighted that involvement in the prolific offender programme had had significant results for service users' lives, providing stability to people with chaotic lives and ensuring retention in treatment. Service users also reported improvements in their physical and mental health, and improved access to training and employment opportunities. That feedback was reflected in the accounts of the individuals whom I had the pleasure of meeting, whose lives had been transformed after they engaged with the programme. In fact, both went so far as to say that the programme may have saved their lives.

Community-based projects like the prolific offender programme go a long way towards addressing the needs of those who are usually missed by traditional policies. Understanding and dealing with the underlying problems will undoubtedly have a significant impact not only on

offending rates, but on the quality of life of those who are in the grip of substance abuse. Much can be taken from the continued success of the programme, but perhaps most important are the partnership and information-sharing aspects, which appear to have been fundamental throughout the project's implementation. Through engagement with the police, social workers and addiction services, offenders have had a reliable support network to work with, instead of against.

Following the success of the prolific offender programme throughout Glasgow, similar services are being initiated elsewhere. For example, in February 2009, the opportunity to reduce criminal activity project came into force throughout Peterhead and north-east Aberdeenshire. With a similar approach to the prolific offender programme, ORCA brings together Turning Point Scotland, the Aberdeenshire criminal justice addictions team and Grampian Police to provide support services in the local area for persistent offenders with drug or alcohol problems.

Given the success of the prolific offender programme and similar initiatives, we must ensure that funding continues to be made available for those projects to continue, so that they can improve the lives of those who are in the grip of substance addiction and stuck firmly in the perpetual circle of criminal activity. The work and commitment of Strathclyde Police and Glasgow addiction services, along with the social work teams, should be highlighted, as they develop and continue to deliver that valuable project to those who are in the most need of intervention in the city of Glasgow. Given that the benefits go far beyond those who are immediately involved in the programme and extend to the wider community, the development and implementation of similar initiatives throughout Scotland should be encouraged.

I thank again those members who allowed the debate to take place and those who have stayed to participate in it. I look forward to hearing the Minister for Community Safety's contribution.

17:19

Hugh Henry (Paisley South) (Lab): I congratulate John Wilson on initiating a debate that is important, although it is not being held in Government time.

Everyone across Scotland is aware of the implications and the consequences of repeat offending for our communities. From talking to divisional police commanders in my area over many years, I know just what impact a small number of repeat offenders have in my local communities; that situation is probably the same throughout Scotland. However, if a small number

of offenders are removed, even periodically, from the community, the level of reoffending is reduced drastically.

Removing repeat offenders has a beneficial consequence for the communities that suffer from their offending, but it does not take great imagination to understand that a significant reduction in crime also has resource implications for social work and the police, whose resources are not called upon in the same way. There is a distinct advantage in ensuring that repeat offending is both addressed and, where possible, reduced.

Now, that is easier said than done. I know that politicians of various persuasions over many years have called for action to reduce persistent offending, but there are also some simple truths associated with the problem. Yes, one of those truths is that we need a visible police presence in our communities and that a range of agencies must be involved, but another fundamental truth is that many of those who are engaged in persistent offending have, as John Wilson said, a chronic and severe drug or alcohol dependency. If we as a society do not address those addictions, we will not be in a position to reduce repeat offending. Although many of the people who are engaged in reoffending might not be at the more salubrious end of society, repeat offenders are often driven by the need to feed an addiction and resort to stealing to do so.

Clearly, the easy solution would be to ensure that more resources are deployed to tackle repeat offending. Like John Wilson, who eloquently outlined the contribution that a multiagency approach has made, I congratulate Strathclyde Police and Glasgow City Council's community planning partnership and social work department on their determined efforts, which have clearly made a difference. However, we need to be realistic in acknowledging that such initiatives cannot be left just to one area. Certainly, I would love to see such an initiative in my Paisley South constituency where many communities would benefit greatly from an initiative that successfully tackled repeat offending, but the question is how we do that. If we are honest, we must acknowledge that, successful though it has been, given the numbers involved, the prolific offender programme is not a cheap option. If we expect the minister to endorse and support that programme and if we expect action from the Parliament, we need to face up to the financial consequences of that. Given the scarcity of the resources that are available, it is not enough for me just to call for Strathclyde Police and my local council to roll out the initiative without saying that extra money will be made available.

Another point to consider is the need to adopt a spend-to-save approach. By spending money now, we could save money in the longer term. I do not think that it is good enough to say, "Well done, the project should be rolled out", if we then leave the police and local authorities to their own devices. Towards the end of his speech, John Wilson clearly accepted that funding is needed. I hope that the minister will recognise and endorse the success of the prolific offender programme, but he should also be clear that, if the programme is to be rolled out elsewhere in Scotland beyond its current boundaries, Government ministers will need to commit further resources to the police and to local authorities to make that happen.

17:24

Bill Aitken (Glasgow) (Con): I, too, congratulate John Wilson and thank him for bringing the matter before the Parliament this afternoon.

As Hugh Henry said, there can be no doubt that repeat offenders cause a great deal of hassle, inconvenience and downright annoyance to many people in our society. Frankly, that type of small-time, petty, repetitive crime can do much to affect the lifestyles of many people, especially in some of Scotland's poorer communities.

John Wilson will be interested to learn that, at the Justice Committee meeting that was held in Alloa on Tuesday, we received evidence of how this type of programme can work. The programme has had some measure of success, although I suggest that the jury is still out, at this stage, on how effective it might be in the longer term. From what we heard, it seems that there is genuine interest in seeing how the programme can be made to work more effectively.

All of that comes with an important caveat. The levels of intervention that we are talking about are intensive and, inevitably, expensive. In the course of the budget considerations that we will all have to face to a considerable extent in the months ahead, we must decide whether programmes of this sort would be affordable in the longer term. Perhaps that is a question for another day—or quite a number of days.

Nevertheless, we should look for ways in which we can reduce this type of offending. In my experience of dealing with such cases, an awful lot of the offences are drug related. If we can get people off drugs, they will not commit the petty thefts such as shoplifting and opening lockfast premises that they commit to feed their drug habit. At that stage, we are a little bit further forward. The same considerations apply in respect of offenders whose conduct is predicated on the abuse of alcohol.

As ever, if we have sufficient resources to work at something, we can get a level of co-operation from the subjects and, hopefully, some progress. However, I caution that, in the future, we will have to recognise that there are many competing priorities. I doubt that many people out there would find spending on such programmes acceptable if cutbacks were to be made in other, more sensitive, parts of social work budgets. The matter will need to be considered and will, I have no doubt, be argued out in due course.

It is worth while that John Wilson has brought the programme to the attention of the chamber. Prolific offenders pose a problem and are a real nuisance. If we can get some of them off their pattern of offending behaviour, not only will there be a significant saving of money; they will have the opportunity to contribute to society much more fully.

17:27

Anne McLaughlin (Glasgow) (SNP): What I particularly like about the prolific offender programme is the two-pronged, carrot-and-stick, approach and the fact that the deal is very simple: "Sign up to this and we'll help you to fight your addiction; don't and we'll be watching you." It ticks all the boxes and satisfies both the liberals and the authoritarians among us.

Box number one on the checklist is the recognition that addicts of alcohol or drugs are victims, too; that they have an illness that is difficult to treat; and that enabling them to recover has far more benefits for our communities and the wellbeing of society than simply locking them up.

Box number two on the checklist is the recognition that we cannot allow people—regardless of the reasons or their addictions—to carry on breaking into our houses, stealing our cars and making our older people afraid to leave their homes. We cannot turn a blind eye, nor will we. We should make no apology for telling those who refuse to participate in the programme that they will be targeted. Targeting criminals is, after all, what the police are there for. If someone does not want to be targeted, they should not commit the crime. As I say to those who complain about speed cameras, "Tough. If you don't want to get done, there's a very simple solution and it's within your control."

The difference between the victims and the offenders is that the victims have no control over the actions of the perpetrator. There is almost nothing a victim can do if an addict is intent on committing a crime against them but, although I do not underestimate how incredibly difficult it is to beat an addiction, there is something the addict can do.

There is also something that we can do—and the success that the prolific offenders programme has achieved in its two years is a perfect example. We must be tough on those who refuse to participate in the programme—although I was delighted to read that, so far, only one person has refused. That demonstrates that addicts want to get better. For their sake and for the greater good, our focus must be on helping addicts to get well and to turn around their chaotic lives.

There are two main arguments for taking such an approach: the economic argument and the moral argument. It makes no economic sense to continue to jail people only to release them into their same old routines. Hugh Henry said that the programme is not a cheap option. He is right, but I will give the chamber an example of the costs and the potential savings to society.

When I first read the estimate that 73 participants in the programme committed, on average, 871 crimes a year, I divided 871 by 73. That was before I realised that the estimate was that they committed 871 crimes each. That is a shocking 17 crimes a week by every participant, which causes up to 17 police reports, insurance claims, shops losing goods and so on, not to mention the minimum of 17 victims and the costs that might arise as a result of, for example, those victims having to take days off work to recover. We can only imagine how much all that costs us.

There is also a moral argument. During a brief foray into teaching, I worked with 11-year-olds in one of Glasgow's most deprived areas. It was a class of 22. The teacher told me that not one of them did not have a link to drugs—some had been orphaned, some had parents who were in jail for dealing and some had not much older brothers and sisters who were addicted. We talked in class about their hopes and aspirations. Guess how many of them listed drug and alcohol addiction as one of their ambitions. Not one, of course. No child sets out to be an addict, but that is what some of them will end up becoming. They were innocent children—11-year-olds with a tough fight on their hands not to get involved in alcohol and drug abuse. I can hardly bear to think that they will now be 16 years old and that some of those fantastic kids will have fallen already.

We can all feel sympathy for those children, but when they turn into adults with addiction issues and a prolific career in crime, the sympathy often disappears. It is our duty to remember how they got there, to think about the examples they were set and the life chances they had when they were growing up in their communities. The prolific offender programme offers them compassion, understanding and a way forward.

Drug and alcohol addiction are two of the biggest scourges of our society. I am dismayed

that there has been such a lack of robust assessment of the impacts of addiction strategies, but I am encouraged to know that discussions that have been instigated by the Scottish Government and the setting up of the delivery reform group are moving to address the situation. After all, if we do not know what works, how can we possibly plan for the future?

We know that the prolific offender programme works. I congratulate Strathclyde Police and Glasgow addiction services on that and look forward to hearing the minister's views on how this type of programme can benefit Scotland as a whole.

17:32

Robin Harper (Lothians) (Green): I congratulate John Wilson on bringing this issue to the chamber this afternoon. It would merit a full-scale debate in the chamber and I would like to draw members' attention to the fact that I am trying to set up a cross-party group on penal reform, which would enable matters such as this to be debated at greater length.

We need a better method—indeed any method—of social accounting. I congratulate Anne McLaughlin on her neat analysis in that regard. If we add the costs associated with a drug treatment order, social work supervision, attendance at an adult learning institution and so on, they still come to less than the £34,000 a year that it costs to put someone in prison—and if offenders are put back through the revolving door of petty crime followed by short prison sentences, the cumulative cost to the community and the public purse is gigantic.

Anne McLaughlin's back-of-a-cigarette-packet approach was neat, but I think that if we applied a proper system of social accounting to the real costs of crime we would be able to see how valuable the strategy to which John Wilson has introduced us today is. I do not think that, at the end of that bit of social accounting, anyone would be able to say anything other than that the programme must be supported to the full and that it merits being rolled out throughout the country.

I want to talk about two examples. One involves persistent high-tariff offenders; the other involves young people who could be at risk of offending. The young people who are possibly at risk of offending are those who have not attended school, who have already had brushes with the law and who have little or nothing in the way of educational qualifications. Project Scotland has been helping 2,900 of those young people so far—we have heard from them today in the Parliament—and it deserves the kind of support that John Wilson is asking for with regard to the Strathclyde initiative.

During the first session of Parliament, there was a panic subtraction of funds—which I am sure many of the people involved will live to regret—from the airborne initiative. The initiative was having roughly the same success rate—25 per cent—as the Strathclyde project, and it dealt with high-tariff offenders, who cause even more damage to the community. Such damage cannot be quantified—people are being beaten up, murdered and raped, and one cannot put a monetary value on that.

A system that gives such people confidence in themselves and returns them to society much less likely to offend again, and which reduces the likelihood of reoffending by 25 per cent, is—or was—worth every penny that was invested in it. I plead with the Government—and subsequent Governments—to develop a sophisticated and creative method of social accounting that will properly assess the kind of project that John Wilson has brought before us this evening.

17:36

The Minister for Community Safety (Fergus Ewing): I congratulate John Wilson on having brought this timely debate to the chamber. I visited the Strathclyde Police prolific offender programme just last week, and I was extremely impressed with what I heard. I met Allison Lawson, the contract manager; Andy Brown, the police sergeant and team leader; Keith Chalmers, the social care senior addiction worker; Neil Hunter, joint general manager for Glasgow addiction services; and Stevie Lydon, strategic co-ordinator.

Members have already set out many of the arguments that I was going to make. The Strathclyde project seeks to identify prolific offenders who have a serious drug problem, who spend thousands of pounds a week to fuel their habit, and who get that money by committing acquisitive crime.

The police, by and large, know who those people are and the programme seeks to identify them, reach out to them and offer them help to tackle their drug problem—but to put the offer in such a way as to make it most likely that it will be accepted. In other words, it is not a case of two polis arriving, chapping the door and saying, "Come to the drugs rehab programme".

The police are usually accompanied by a drugs treatment worker if the person is approached in their home, or perhaps in their cell or through other methods of referral. In each case, the message—as Anne McLaughlin said—is fairly clear: "There is help for you, and we want you to break your drug habit. Take this help—here's the fellow from the addiction service who will help you find recovery from your problem."

In each case, the police know that the prolific offender has a serious problem—probably a variety of serious problems that go beyond drug addiction—and probably many difficulties in their life such as prostitution, neglect, homelessness: the whole works. However, the offer is made and, as members have said in this debate, it is very often accepted.

What really impressed me about the problem was the huge commitment of the individuals. Such programmes often succeed or fail by the quality and commitment of the individuals who are involved. I felt that, with the commitment involved, the joint approach of the police and drugs team workers was the right one—and it has been successful. Of course, we need to evaluate these programmes to find out how successful they have been, but I believe that in a particular year 102 people went through this programme while only 19 went through a previous similar programme.

We are talking about a large number of people who have committed many, many crimes; indeed, one of them had, over a 10-year period, committed 222 crimes for which he had been convicted. Goodness knows how many crimes the individual had carried out for which he had not been convicted. As a result, when we are considering the costs of the programme—which, as members have pointed out, are not insubstantial—we must include in the equation the benefits that stem from crimes not being committed and from people not becoming victims. The programme is expensive but extremely worth while.

We have contacted other police forces, and it appears that similar approaches and projects have been introduced in all or almost all constabularies. Indeed, I recommended to the chief constable of Lothian and Borders Police that he consider the Strathclyde scheme. Police throughout Scotland are doing excellent work in reaching out to prolific offenders.

As always, I want to respond to points that have been made in the debate. Bill Aitken rightly pointed out that in deciding whether to mainstream the scheme—which, at the moment, is funded through the fairer Scotland fund—we should be clear that it stands up to evaluation. I am quite sure that its prospects in that respect are very good.

Hugh Henry raised a similar question, and both members are right to ask where the resources for the scheme come from. However, I should point out that I cannot readily be criticised on that score, because I do not readily call for resources from the taxpayer to fund multifarious schemes. Indeed, the reality is the opposite: just recently, we decided not to roll out mandatory drugs testing of all people who are arrested in Scotland. The approach was tried but, as only 223 individuals engaged with

treatment services at a cost of £2.2 million, we decided that it did not represent value for money. As a result, we will save £1.8 million.

Similarly, we, unlike the rest of the parties in the Parliament, do not feel that investing £3 million in a new community court building is the right decision. I am not trying to be controversial or make a party political point; I am simply acknowledging that we have made difficult choices and that we will continue to take responsibility for making them.

That said, it seems to me that we succeed in turning people's lives around, in taking them away from a pattern of serious crime and in stopping them being a real menace to many hundreds of people in Scotland not by spending millions on new buildings but by ensuring that we harness the skills and qualities of individuals like those who work in the prolific offenders programme. After all, it is their work that has turned people's lives around.

Indeed, I had the opportunity to become familiar, on an anonymised basis, with a couple of the cases. One young lady had been involved in prostitution but, thanks to her family and the programme, she is out of that life, in college and in a flat. Her life has probably been saved as a result of the programme.

Robin Harper referred to the Airborne initiative, and I guess that, at the time, my view about what happened to it was similar to his. That was another approach in which youngsters were diverted from a life of crime and in which the qualities of individual people in Scotland were harnessed. It did not require money to be blown on new buildings that in any case would probably not be very green.

Robin Harper: I should make a correction. I should have said earlier that some of the offenders who went through the Airborne programme had committed grievous bodily harm and violence that amounted to attempted murder and crimes of attempted rape—I do not think that there were any actual murderers or rapists on the programme.

Fergus Ewing: I note Mr Harper's point.

I suggest that the programme has important lessons for other force areas. I commend the work that Strathclyde Police, the Glasgow addiction services and others are doing on it, and pay tribute to them. I hope that we will consider the matter again. Whether those of us who have spoken in the debate are liberals or authoritarians—to adopt the classification of human beings that Anne McLaughlin introduced—I hope that we can all, as pragmatists, recommend, support and applaud the Strathclyde Police prolific offenders programme.

Meeting closed at 17:45.

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