

MEETING OF THE PARLIAMENT

Wednesday 4 November 2009

Session 3

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Scottish Parliament

Wednesday 4 November 2009

[THE PRESIDING OFFICER *opened the meeting at 14:30*]

Time for Reflection

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson): Good afternoon. The first item of business this afternoon is time for reflection, and our leader today is Father Michael Hutson, the parish priest at St Andrews, Rothesay, in the Isle of Bute.

Father Michael Hutson (St Andrews, Rothesay): It is a sad fact of life that we tend to see the faults and failings in those around us before we see their good points. Familiarity breeds contempt. The psychologists tell us that when we use up our energy in finding fault with others we are really trying to deflect attention away from our own sinful tendencies. By revelling in the sins of others, we are trying to cover up our own faults and failings.

Gossip, for example, according to the scriptures of the three major religions, is identified as sinful and destructive of the whole community. It harms its victim without giving an opportunity for defence, according to the Qur'an. That is why we should resolve our differences face to face, according to Jesus, since none of us is perfect in the sight of God.

We can all be guilty of being overjudgmental or overcritical of our neighbour, and in Scotland we are all neighbours. But people in public service, such as priests and politicians, can also be the victims of such abuse. Your families suffer, too, when unfair or out-of-proportion blame is hurled in your direction. Government must be open and accountable, but all society must be responsible and charitable in what we say and how we act for the good of the whole community.

In Scotland, we are all neighbours and the opportunities for being aware of the mistakes of others are many, although, in reality, we seldom know the whole story.

You are often faced with the challenge of having to deal with the faults of other people, and that is when we do well to remember that there is no justice without mercy. It is when we show mercy that we are most like God. Kind words, gentle words and even—when appropriate—firm words, when offered with integrity, will always win the day over hurtful words and gossip. Priests and politicians can be challenged and encouraged by that reflection.

Talking of words, the most important words that we might offer today are words of condolence for the families of the five British soldiers who were killed in Afghanistan yesterday. In this week, leading up to remembrance Sunday, the death of those five young men lends a relevance and an urgency to our prayer that justice and peace be established throughout the world. Remembering the five who died yesterday and all those who died because of bombs, bullets and terrorist attacks, we pray that they will sleep in peace and rise in glory.

I want to end with a wee prayer that I found in the house at my new home in Rothesay. It is the prayer I offer for you today as you play your part in the building-up of the Scottish nation.

"Lord God, help us to love our land but to hate no other. Help us to love and appreciate our own traditions, but to understand and respect the beliefs of others. Help us to bring love and understanding where there is hatred and distrust. Protect the Scottish nation and all who live here. May the cross of St Andrew be a symbol of love, friendship, hope, justice and compassion. We make this prayer in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen."

National Parks

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson): The next item of business is a debate on motion S3M-5110, in the name of Roseanna Cunningham, on Scotland's national parks.

14:34

The Minister for Environment (Roseanna Cunningham): Today's debate provides me with an opportunity to set out the Government's thinking on the way ahead for national parks.

To start with, I remind all members of how important our national parks are to Scotland, especially in the year of homecoming. Each of our national parks has four aims: conservation, recreation, the sustainable use of resources—of course—and the economic and social development of communities. The fourth aim is unique to Scotland.

I know that there is interest in and enthusiasm for national parks across the chamber, and I think that the conveners of both national park authorities are in the public gallery with their chief executives. I extend a warm welcome to them all.

I will address three issues: the national parks review, the contribution that the national parks make to sustainable social and economic development, and the national parks' role in delivering a greener Scotland.

This summer, I signed off the strategic review of the national parks. I want to remind members why that review was conducted, what it recommended, how we consulted on the recommendations and when we will implement them.

Why was there a strategic review? In 2008, Michael Russell, who has just joined us, announced the review in the context of the Government's commitment to more effective government. That translated into a couple of key questions: what is the most appropriate public body for delivering national park functions in Scotland, and what are the most appropriate employer and governance arrangements?

The review was conducted in the summer of 2008. More than 280 individuals and organisations provided their views. The report was published in November 2008 at the same time as a public consultation was launched on some of the key recommendations. Those recommendations were that the two NPAs should continue as free-standing and separate non-departmental public bodies for the medium term; that a ministerially chaired national parks strategy group should be set up; that the national park authorities should work together; that the boards of the NPAs might be reduced in size; and that the conveners and

deputy conveners, rather than being elected, might be appointed from among board members.

The consultation on those recommendations produced interesting results. I will explain how we have taken account of the responses in moving forward to implementation and deal with each of the five main consultation issues in turn.

First, I confirm that both park authorities will remain as free-standing NDPBs. The majority of respondents supported the national park authorities. A typical comment was:

"The current arrangements allow Park Authorities to deliver national policy outcomes through the development of local priorities for action which is a key strength of the present structure."

Secondly, the proposal that there might be a national park strategy group attracted strong support, but very few respondents commented on its proposed remit. Instead, respondents preferred to make their own suggestions and provided unprompted views on the composition of any such group. I have to think about the broader agenda for simplifying the public sector, which means that any strategy group will need to exist for a fixed term and that it will have to have a definite end point and a clear sense of what it is being asked to achieve. I hope that that neatly deals with the Conservative amendment.

I therefore intend to chair a small strategy group that will complete its work within 18 months. I will look for the group to provide strategic guidance that complements the national parks founding legislation, which sets out the criteria and detailed formal processes that must be used when setting up or extending a national park. The group should focus on establishing the principles that the Government might be expected to follow in considering both new national parks and boundary changes to existing national parks, and thereby help ministers to decide whether and when to activate the formal statutory process. I anticipate that there will be public consultation on those principles.

Thirdly, there was strong support for the NPAs to work together. Some respondents commented that practices should be shared only when doing so would prove beneficial to both parks. I am pleased that good progress is already being made in that regard. In the summer, both park authorities approved a set of principles to underlie their joint working, particularly when that can be of mutual benefit to both parks.

Fourthly, the review's recommendation that the 25-member boards of the NPAs might be slimmed down polarised views in the consultation. More agreed than disagreed with the proposal, but there was a clear steer from the consultees about the importance of the boards having three types of

member: ministerial appointees, council nominees and directly elected members. Views were sought on the relative proportions of those three categories of member, but there was no consensus.

I have therefore decided that the boards should be reduced to fewer than 20 members while retaining a balance between the three categories of member and maintaining the absolute number of directly elected members. That, in turn, means that the proportion of directly elected members will increase. I hope that that makes the Liberal Democrats happy.

It is my intention to bring about, by October 2010, a board of 19 for the Cairngorms National Park Authority and a board of 17 for Loch Lomond and the Trossachs National Park Authority. The reason for the difference in size is simple. The extension of the Cairngorms national park into Perth and Kinross, which is already supported in the Scottish Parliament, means that the number of nominating councils will increase from four to five. I referred earlier to the formal processes that are required by the National Parks (Scotland) Act 2000 when changes are made. Those will now come into play as we bring about smaller boards. We have started a statutory consultation on modifying the designation orders that set up the parks.

Finally, there is the issue of national park authority conveners. Currently, the founding legislation requires that conveners and their deputies be elected from among board members. The review recommended that conveners be appointed by ministers from existing board members, but a majority of consultees disagreed. They felt that the present system is democratic and that changing it could have an adverse effect on the sense of local accountability. I have listened to the consultees and therefore decided that conveners of the national park authorities will continue to be elected by board members.

I turn briefly to the fourth aim of our national parks, which is to promote the sustainable and social development of the areas' communities, which sends a clear message that our national parks are about people as well as wildlife and landscapes. There are many well-documented examples of businesses seeing a unique selling point in their being based in a national park, including tourism-based businesses, farmers' markets and transport initiatives. The key point is that the marketing basis for all those businesses is the national park—the park is the brand. In addition, there are businesses that locate within the national parks for quality-of-life reasons. In common with many rural areas, the Cairngorms and Loch Lomond and the Trossachs have high

levels of self-employment, with almost a quarter of the working population being self-employed.

Large numbers of visitors are also attracted to the parks: the Cairngorms national park was awarded the 2005 European charter for sustainable tourism—a first for a United Kingdom national park—and Loch Lomond and the Trossachs was awarded it in 2008. I am aware, however, that there is a small minority of visitors whose behaviour is antisocial and can, in some cases, be deemed criminal. I am particularly alert to the fact that the east side of the Loch Lomond and the Trossachs national park can become a key hotspot for such behaviour at particular times of the year. I agree with the national park authority that such issues need to be addressed, and they are being tackled on a partnership basis through a range of initiatives.

Land management is also a vital part of the economy. The Cairngorms deer advisory group brings together land managers, public agencies and communities to share information and advice. The Loch Lomond and the Trossachs National Park Authority administers the natural heritage grant scheme, under which more than 50 projects are under way and more than £500,000 in grants is delivered. Also, within the Cairngorms, a land-based business training scheme delivered training to 550 people last year. That figure should be borne in mind.

In terms of social development, both parks are fostering sustainable communities. The Loch Lomond and the Trossachs National Park Authority is running a pioneering community futures programme, which helps communities to prepare local action plans and raise funds. The Cairngorms National Park Authority is a partner in a multi-agency project under the heading "Our Community...A Way Forward", which provides baseline information on communities and their needs and then identifies the priorities for action.

On health matters, both parks are great places to enjoy the outdoors, with the corresponding benefits to physical and mental health. Good progress has been made in both parks on increasing people's access through path improvements. A get active festival in the Loch Lomond and the Trossachs national park last year focused on what are known as the four Bs—boots, bikes, boats and buses—and encouraged people to leave their cars behind and get outdoors.

On education, both parks have been working with Learning and Teaching Scotland and local authorities to develop outdoor learning opportunities as a delivery tool for the curriculum for excellence. Last year, the Europarc Federation junior ranger camp was held in the Cairngorms, and both parks are active on the John Muir award scheme.

I hope that members will now have a clear view of the successes of both parks and their contributions to the promotion of the economic and social development of the areas' communities as well as the many benefits that they bring to Scotland across a wide range of economic, social and educational functions.

I am aware that I have not dealt with the Labour amendment. I promise our Labour friends that I will listen carefully to what they have to say and address the amendment in my closing remarks.

I move,

That the Parliament commends the contribution that Scotland's two national parks make to sustainable social and economic development and to delivering the Greener Scotland agenda; notes the outcome of the National Parks Strategic Review, and welcomes the proposal to set up a National Parks Strategy group to guide future strategy for Scotland's national parks.

14:45

Sarah Boyack (Edinburgh Central) (Lab): We know that this is not a filler debate that has been scheduled simply to enable others to go off to the by-election campaign. I have logged the fact that we have four environment debates in two weeks, which my team will cope with.

Today's debate gives us a good opportunity to reflect on the contribution that our national parks have made to Scottish life and to celebrate some of the fantastic work that is carried out by our national park authorities and the contribution that has been made by communities and the range of organisations that are involved in making those parks a success. It also allows us to consider the minister's comments about the outcome of the review and her views on the proposals to set up a national parks strategy group. Further, it gives us a chance to look to the future. I want to spend some of my time talking about where we go next with national parks. We should not stay where we are; there are opportunities to develop our national parks and to have more national parks.

At the outset, we should reflect on the reason why we established national parks. It was because we wanted to acknowledge and protect some of our most outstanding landscapes, our environment and our heritage. Ten years ago, when this Parliament debated the policy framework, the support that we gave it underpinned the first two national parks for Loch Lomond and the Trossachs and the Cairngorms. When we introduced the original legislation, the International Union for Conservation of Nature guidelines were the gold standard, and they have to be the gold standard today. That principle of looking after some of our most important national heritage has got to be at the core of our national parks policy.

I welcome the minister's comments about the success of the national parks. However, the national parks policy was drafted to ensure that all the aims of the national parks were met collectively—that has been the distinctive contribution that Scotland has made to the development of national parks across the world. We were one of the last countries in the world to develop national parks, which were one of the huge benefits of our new Scottish Parliament, and we need to ensure that we do not throw out our initial vision as we move forward.

Mike Rumbles (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD): The member will remember our exchanges 10 years ago about the directly elected element of the park authorities. Does she accept that, after 10 years, it can be seen that the directly elected element has been a huge success?

Sarah Boyack: The member did not need to wait until today to hear my comments on that. In numerous debates since the establishment of the parks, I have said that that has been a success. Indeed, at the time when that approach was discussed, I said that I hoped that it would bring benefits. I believe that the evidence shows that it has done so. The combination of directly elected local people who reflect the different geographies of our national parks, local authority representatives and national representatives has given the parks a range of people to draw on. When I address the Liberal Democrats' amendment, I will comment on how we can move forward in that regard.

That is where we are now. The Scottish Government's motion does not tell us a great deal, apart from the fact that it has effectively decided to park the issue of what happens next with regard to national parks until after the next election. In some ways, that is a pity, because there are other things that we could be doing now with regard to setting up new national parks, particularly marine and coastal national parks.

Roseanna Cunningham has not expressed her views on our amendment, so I hope that I do not talk her out of supporting it. We have crafted it quite carefully. It asks the Scottish Government simply to

"explore the potential for establishing new national parks, including in marine and coastal areas."

We could have just said that the Government should get on with setting up a marine coastal national park, because SNH has done work on the issue, extensive work was commissioned by Ross Finnie when he was the Minister for Environment and Rural Development, and the matter has been debated in Parliament and enthusiastically supported by a large number of us. However, I have accepted reality and that the SNP, by virtue

of having one extra vote, is in the driving seat. That is why I asked only that the Government should explore the potential. I do not think that that ties the Government down too much.

The SNP ministers made a commitment to consider the issue of establishing a marine coastal national park once the wider legislative framework for the marine environment is completed. That work has not been totally completed, but it is well under way, and I know that the Rural Affairs and Environment Committee is beginning to draft its stage 2 amendments to the Marine (Scotland) Bill. Given that a national parks strategy group is being established, it would be a great pity if marine and coastal national parks were excluded from its agenda, which is how it will be interpreted if the Labour amendment is not supported today.

It is not only members on the Labour side of the chamber who hold that view. I know that the Liberal Democrats have previously been very enthusiastic about marine and coastal national parks, and a range of environmental groups outwith the Parliament view it as the next natural step in developing new national parks.

We can see some fantastic examples around the globe of marine national parks that have been very successful in increasing fishing stocks and local tourism, and which have added to the protection of some of the world's most important marine environments. It would be a big mistake to rule out exploring the potential of establishing new national parks in general, and particularly in marine and coastal areas. The Scottish Wildlife Trust has argued that we need a timescale for action, and I look forward to hearing the minister discuss when she sums up the debate how the new national parks strategy group will progress those issues.

It is not a question only of marine coastal national parks; a new national park on Harris has also been suggested. If the Labour amendment is not agreed today, will that proposal effectively be parked until the next Scottish Parliament elections? That would be a pity, as work could be carried out now to consider that in much more depth.

There is a great deal of enthusiasm for national parks, and the experience of our first two national parks makes the case for more to be established. However, we need criteria for and a proper robust approach to developing those national parks, which is why we have—constructively, we believe—suggested an amendment to give the Government's motion a bit of bite. It would give the national parks strategy group the opportunity to examine the potential for new national parks, including in marine and coastal areas, and would be an intelligent amendment to the Government's

suggestions in its motion. I hope that the minister will agree to consider the issue.

We want to celebrate the opportunities that have arisen from the creation of our national parks and the particular contribution that local communities have made. I have some questions on that, and I am interested to hear John Scott and Liam McArthur speak to their amendments this afternoon. With regard to John Scott's amendment, we on the Labour side of the chamber do not believe it is a simple equation to say that, if you reduce the size of the boards of the national park authorities, you automatically produce greater efficiencies and reduce running costs. We think that there are questions to be answered in relation to that amendment.

It is clear from the responses to the minister's questionnaire from both national park authorities that they have reservations about reducing the size of the national park boards. One of the opportunities that have arisen from the creation of the new national parks is the contribution of local members, which is the point that I made in response to Mike Rumbles. The directly elected members and the local authority members have a very important role to play, and we should not kid ourselves by thinking that, if the minister is successful in reducing the numbers, it will not lead to issues that both national park authorities will have to deal with.

Those board members are not just there to sit and vote through policies; they are there to work. If people are not sitting on the boards, the national park authorities will have to involve them in other ways. There are already sub-committees that deal with recreation and planning in both national park authorities, and certain issues need to be addressed. We should not assume that reducing the numbers will be an easy way to cut the budgets; it will not work like that.

The issue of balance in board membership is important, and I look forward to hearing Liam McArthur's comments on the matter. Changing the balance has to be done with extreme care. Local authorities make a contribution to the national park boards and, even though their members are not directly elected, the system enables political parties of all perspectives in different areas of the two national parks to be represented on the national park boards. Those members bring a partnership with and resources from local authorities, and it would be a pity to reduce that contribution. Equally, the national representatives—even though they were appointed under an SNP Government—reflect the national interest, which is one of the purposes of national parks.

We are—perhaps like Roseanna Cunningham—slightly sceptical about the Liberal Democrat and

Conservative amendments, and we would like to hear the arguments.

The national resources issue is important. I am glad that the two national parks contribute to the SNP Government's core objectives, but they have wider objectives too. Regardless of the colour of the Government of the day, our national parks must be with us for a long time and they must be supported. The strategy group must be seen as an opportunity to consider not just the successes of our existing national parks but where the new national parks should be and, crucially, the pressures that both national parks are facing.

The national parks need support. Today's debate is an opportunity for us to suggest priorities and express support for the parks. Let us look to the future and consider where the new national parks should be, and let us not rule out marine and coastal national parks. A lot of work has been done already, but there is a huge contribution still to be made. I hope that the minister will listen to our constructive arguments today and think about supporting our amendment at decision time. We believe that the argument is strong and that it would add to the strength of the ministerial group that she is going to set up.

I move amendment S3M-5110.1, to leave out from "to guide" to end and insert:

"and believes that it should explore the potential for establishing new national parks, including in marine and coastal areas."

14:55

John Scott (Ayr) (Con): I begin by declaring an interest as a farmer.

What a difference a year makes. It is important to record the progress that we have made since our previous debate on national parks in 2008. I turn first to Sarah Boyack's points and the most contentious issues.

In March 2008, I called for a reduction in the size of the boards of our two esteemed national park authorities—to protests, as I recall, from both the Liberals and the Labour Party. I commend the authors of the national parks review for their recommendation that the boards should be reduced in size. As I said in 2008, provided that local democracy can be delivered, I believe that even smaller boards would still achieve the same purposes, but nonetheless I wish the new boards every success in the future and welcome the direction of travel as well as the development of local democracy in governance terms.

In the interest of continuing to reduce costs, I welcome the progress that the national park authorities are making in relation to the report's proposals on the sharing of corporate services and

joint working. In the current economic climate, the boards' willingness to develop joint working is greatly to be welcomed.

I also welcome the minister's intention to create a short-life national parks strategy group to examine the further strategic development of our national parks. I again commend to the Parliament the model of the Banff national park in the Canadian Rockies, which was established in 1885 and which first led me to see the enormous benefits of national parks to local ecosystems and economies. The environmental, social and economic benefits that are beginning to accrue for the residents of our national parks and others make the expansion of the parks' boundaries worthy of further consideration.

The possibility of developing other national parks should also be considered. I know that the Presiding Officer has campaigned for a national park to be established in and around the Galloway forest park, and that idea is certainly worthy of support. Indeed, I understand that the Scottish Council for National Parks recently showed interest in pursuing the prospect of a Galloway national park and flagged up the potential of the geography in that part of south-west Scotland as highly conducive to the creation of a joint marine and land-based national park. I am sure that the minister will agree that that idea is worthy of consideration.

Perhaps the short-life working group will also consider the further development and protection of our regional parks in recognition of the important role that they play in protecting and enhancing unique landscapes and their proximity to two of our major cities. As the lungs of Glasgow and Edinburgh, the Clyde Muirshiel regional park and the Pentland hills regional park in particular only have a greater role to play in the future in protecting and enhancing the immediate environs of those cities while delivering tourist destinations of choice and complementing our two national parks.

As more UK residents are likely to holiday at home rather than abroad in the foreseeable future—given Labour's recession and the resulting weakness of the pound—it makes good sense to deliver more activity and eco-based tourism opportunities. Having visited the Clyde Muirshiel regional park during the summer, and having spent much of my teenage years tramping over the Pentlands, I know at first hand about the amazing scenery and the parks' fine views over the Clyde and the Forth. In marketing terms, they could easily be used to complement our truly unique and magnificent national parks at Loch Lomond and the Cairngorms.

Turning to other governance issues, I note the report's recommendation that the convener and

deputy convener of the national park authorities should be appointed by the Scottish ministers to ensure the delivery of national policies and objectives. I would have thought that such a position was not unreasonable, but I also note that the majority of consultees felt that the conveners and deputy conveners of the national park authority boards should be elected from the ranks of board members. It is a brave Government decision to accept that view.

Given that the majority of national parks funding comes from Government, the approach recommended in the report would certainly be consistent with regard to accountability and the need to streamline park authorities to ensure value for money. The appointment of the conveners should have been in the gift of the Scottish Government and the fact that they are not might in the future raise questions about the wisdom of the Government's decision. That said, I wish the conveners and deputy conveners every success.

I welcome the progress that the minister has made in the past months. Although the Conservatives believe that yet more could have been done to increase accountability and reduce costs, we nevertheless welcome the progress that has been made towards our shared goal of turning our national parks into destinations of choice for all those who visit Scotland in the future and those of us in Scotland who have time on our hands and want to explore our native landscapes and habitats.

I move and commend to Parliament amendment S3M-5110.2, to insert at end:

"while also welcoming the reduction in the size of the boards of the National Park Authorities, thereby producing greater efficiencies by way of reducing running costs, and emphasising that the proposed National Parks Strategy group must have a clear timescale of operation and well defined sense of purpose in its objectives."

15:01

Liam McArthur (Orkney) (LD): I welcome this debate on what has been a genuine post-devolution success for Scotland. Like Sarah Boyack, I am in no way disheartened by the suspicion that we are here because our respective business managers have deemed us and the issue that is under debate to be of little electoral interest to the good people of Glasgow North East.

The Scottish Liberal Democrats support the Government's motion and the establishment of the strategy group to guide future national park policy. We also support Sarah Boyack's amendment's addendum: as the minister has made clear, the Cairngorms and Loch Lomond and the Trossachs national parks have, since their establishment proved their worth. That provides a sound basis on which to move forward and, at the very least, to

consider the scope for new national parks, which would rightly be a task for the strategy group. As far as marine and coastal areas are concerned, it makes sense to await the outcome of our deliberations on the Marine (Scotland) Bill.

I find it slightly more difficult to support the Tory amendment. Although it properly identifies the potential efficiency savings that are to be gained from reducing the size of the boards, there is—as I will explain—always a balance to be struck.

I believe that my amendment articulates that trade-off by pointing up the importance of ensuring that local people have a strong voice in managing their own environment. I entirely recognise ministers' efforts to safeguard that voice in progressing the strategic review's recommendations, and I welcome the decision to maintain the number of directly elected members on both boards in the face of a proposed reduction in overall numbers, although I note that that is already required under statute. That said, I hope that the minister will go further and agree that directly elected members, council nominees and ministerial appointees should have equal representation on boards. Such an aim could be achieved while keeping overall board numbers well within the set limits, and would deliver further benefits in local accountability and engagement. As Sarah Boyack has pointed out, council-nominated board members provide a valuable democratic link to the people who live and work in the national parks, but the process of directly electing members to the boards could and should engage the public more fully and require candidates and voters to reflect on what the parks should achieve and how they should be managed.

I accept that a balance needs to be struck and that the strategy group is best placed to weigh up the pros and cons and to make informed recommendations. As a result, with Boyackesque pragmatism, I have, in my amendment, committed the minister only to inviting her strategy group to consider the options. I hope that she will accept it in the spirit in which it is intended. I argue that my amendment would help to reinforce other steps that the minister has taken—and has outlined again today—to safeguard the parks' local dimension. For example, I find it encouraging that the Government has agreed to retain the park authorities as free-standing non-departmental public bodies. There was much debate about that when the previous Administration set up the parks: I think that the model is certainly the best way of developing strong links with local communities. It is imperative that we maintain and enhance that local connection.

The parks showcase our country's remarkable diversity in natural and cultural heritage. As the Scottish Wildlife Trust points out in its briefing, the

parks can act as biodiversity hubs, supporting habitat networks and functional and healthy ecosystems, which is very much in keeping with the spirit and letter of the legislation that established the parks.

However, we should not forget that the intention was never to set in aspic the parks and the communities that are within their boundaries. The parks can and must continue to deliver tremendous environmental benefits, but it is important also to emphasise the social and economic opportunities that they present. That point was reflected in the minister's remarks and it is, quite deliberately, a stated priority of both park authorities and one on which they have successfully delivered during their short lives to date. However, I am sure that both authorities accept that more will need to be done if the parks are to continue to meet the needs of their local communities which, unsurprisingly, mirror the needs of communities throughout the country.

Housing, transport, jobs and education are among the day-to-day concerns of those who live in our national parks. To preserve and protect the uniqueness of our parks, care might need to be taken in the way in which those and other needs are met, but I do not see an inherent conflict in that. We would fail those communities and would not meet the objective of the parks if we did not ensure that the legitimate expectations of those who live and work there are met.

I have sought to be as consensual as possible on an issue on which there is welcome cross-party agreement, if not unanimity, but I will strike one discordant note before I conclude. Notwithstanding all that I have said, for many people in the Cairngorms park, debates about board structures might be a little dry and even esoteric, but that is not the case in respect of the plans to upgrade the Beaulieu to Denny transmission line. The project has aroused strong views and emotions for and against, as well as all points in between. I believe that the upgrade is essential if we are to realise Scotland's renewables potential, and that it will help to unlock significant developments in the north of Scotland. If our true potential as a global powerhouse in renewables is to be met, urgent attention must be given to the need for subsea cables and interconnectors, but the Beaulieu to Denny upgrade is the most pressing issue and a formal decision on the proposal is now long overdue.

I realise that, whatever the position of the political parties, we all have colleagues who have expressed genuine concerns in representing their constituents' interests. However, that makes it all the more important that a formal decision be made as soon as possible. Ministers have had the reporter's recommendations for about 10 months,

and it seems clear from reports that have been leaked to the media that a decision has been made. If that was an attempt to soften up opponents prior to a formal announcement, it has not worked. In the interests of good and transparent government, I urge the minister to impress on her colleagues the need for the decision to be made public. Given the project's national strategic importance, I argue that the decision merits a statement to Parliament.

Our national parks are a phenomenal asset to the country. Having given the concept of a national park to the world through the pioneering efforts of John Muir, we were perhaps a little tardy in practising what our ancestors had happily been preaching for a century or more. Nevertheless, we have made a good start, which should give confidence for the future and create the potential for extending the network of parks. However, as before, we must ensure that we take with us the people and communities who are most directly and immediately affected.

With pleasure, I move amendment S3M-5110.3, to insert at end:

"...celebrates the success of the boards of the National Parks in giving a voice to local people in managing their own environment, and calls for early consideration to be given to increasing the directly elected presence on boards."

The Presiding Officer: That concludes the opening speeches. We come to the open debate. As we have a little time in hand, members should feel free to take interventions and even to speak for longer than they have been advised to do, as long as they do not abuse that privilege. I am sure that they will not.

15:08

Christopher Harvie (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP): In his last novel, "The Duke's Children", Anthony Trollope, whom no one would regard as a radical, wrote of a Scottish Highlands that was afflicted by field sports—empty of people and trees and with sportsmen blasting anything that moved. A few years after he wrote that, his friend the jurist and Oxford professor James Bryce, was the first MP to press for an access to mountains bill in the 1890s. I wrote his biography quite recently, and found that that was the first attempt to get access to those beautiful areas of the country. Bryce was a great disciple of John Ruskin, a Scot of Scots, who was the architect of the National Trust.

I have seen a national park close up—I live on the fringes of the Snowdonia national park—so I know that the status imposes certain disciplines on the area and the people who live there, and that living in a national park is the most valuable form of education about a natural life that is threatened from so many directions.

Scotland's national parks—Loch Lomond and the Trossachs and the Cairngorms—are beginning to play a crucial part in the conservation of our natural heritage, and in allowing the public to enjoy those treasures of nature and scenery. The two national parks cover more than 3,000 square miles and contain such scenic presences as Ben Lomond and Loch Katrine, Rob Roy's Balquhider and Queen Victoria's Balmoral. As the lady said, it is so interesting to talk to the Highlanders, whom one meets so much in the Highlands. With Queen Victoria, what you saw was what you got.

In August 2005, only two years after opening, the Cairngorms national park was awarded the European charter for sustainable tourism in protected areas—the first national park in Britain to win the prestigious award. It is therefore encouraging to see that despite tight finances, cuts and the like, the Scottish Government is still able to increase slightly the maintenance budget for the national parks to around £13 million, and that new initiatives are striving to streamline and democratise national park authorities.

One has to go further. It is not just a question of preventing damage from being done to the parks by those who are insensitive or plain stupid; the parks should also be signposted sensitively. The late Ian Nairn, who was a great defender of the planning system, used to talk of the subtopian impact of festoons of road signs dotted all over the place that were aimed at drivers driving very fast so that they could pick out the signs in their bright and usually lurid form. It is surely in the national park ethos that the speeds at which cars travel and, for that matter, the size of the cars, should be consonant with the heritage of the parks. However, we have clogged roads and the curse of the four-wheel drive vehicle. We have the supermarket on the park fringe killing off the village stores that walkers or cyclists might require, and we have the cottage wall covered in graffiti. [*Interruption.*] Does Mr Rumbles want to intervene?

Mike Rumbles: Yes—I will take this opportunity. Christopher Harvie must remember that people live in the parks and we need supermarkets. I, for one, need a supermarket, as do many of my constituents.

Christopher Harvie: I do remember that. I also remember that Tesco—that great liberating force—is about to descend on the town of Machynlleth, which has a farmers' market, a small supermarket and lots of small stores including butchers and bakers. How many of those will remain once Tesco has done its work? Will it remain when, in 20 years, the petrol has all gone?

Next year will see an interesting development in the Snowdonia national park, quite the opposite of the scenario that I have just described. It is the

opening of 20 miles of new railway from Caernarfon to Porthmadog, giving access to that park along a 2ft gauge track, which interferes nowhere with the scenery that it enhances. We ought to be able to do the same here, but we have *The Scotsman* rooting against the prospect of any railway being built to the Scottish Borders, which is to my mind a retrograde view, when we should open an area that is terribly isolated from the rest of the country. I speak with feeling, because it will take me more than two hours tonight to get back from this place to Melrose by the not-exactly-comfortable X95 bus.

I end on a point about the Trossachs area. Trees are to be planted by Loch Arklet on a high mountain moor between Loch Lomond and Loch Katrine. The planting will involve trees that have not been planted there since the Caledonian forest died out and will target an area of outstanding beauty with beautiful views towards the hills above Arrochar. Moreover, that place is commemorated outside this building on the speaking stones on the High Street. In the 1880s, Gerard Manley Hopkins, the Roman Catholic monk, visited it and wrote these unforgettable lines:

What would the world be, once bereft
Of wet and wildness? Let them be left,
O let them be left, wildness and wet;
Long live the weeds and the wilderness yet.

That is what our national parks must be about.

15:15

Peter Peacock (Highlands and Islands) (Lab):

I welcome the debate, as others have done, and I hope that it heralds a new period of action on national parks.

The motion asks us to commend the two existing national parks, which I am happy to do. The Cairngorms national park is largely within my region, although it is extending beyond it at a rate, these days. The park authority is a young institution that is still maturing and has, no doubt, made errors along the way. However, it already has many successes to its name: it has progressed the work of the Cairngorms Partnership, of which I was fortunate to be a member at one point in my past; it has strengthened the identity of the Cairngorms as a cohesive area; it has helped to create greater coherence between institutions and landowners in the area; it has helped to lever funding into the area for investment; and it has improved the path network, interpretation and the tourism that is on offer. It is also a home for much more education through the John Muir award and the like, and the work that it has been doing to try to preserve the wildcat is very important.

I want to highlight the work that the national park is doing on housing and housing policies, and the ambitious target that it is setting for affordable housing. I vividly recall that when I was a member of the former Cairngorms working party, which preceded the Cairngorm Partnership in considering the future management of the area, of all the issues that were raised with us about the future of the Cairngorms, housing for local people was the overwhelming one. I will return to that in a moment.

The motion also urges us to welcome the strategy group that is being established. I am happy to do that in the context of Sarah Boyack's amendment, because a clearer purpose for the group is required. A briefing that I got from the Scottish Council for National Parks suggests that the group should have a bigger, stronger and longer-term role. The briefing makes many good points and I hope that the minister will consider them when she has the time. I heard what she said, but I do not agree that the group needs to be a short-life group.

I want to focus on matters that I hope the strategy group will look at and keep firmly in mind as it undertakes its task in the coming period. I do so from the perspective of the Highlands and Islands which, given the area's outstanding environmental quality, is likely over time to yield the most areas that are likely to be candidates for new national parks both on land and in the marine setting.

Given the social and economic history of the Highlands and Islands, which has experienced 200 years and more of decline, with only comparatively recent recovery—which has happened only in parts of the area—if there are to be more parks in that part of the world, the opportunity that they provide for social and economic development will be a key factor. National parks' conservation objectives must also widen economic opportunity, otherwise they are unlikely to be acceptable to people in the Highlands and Islands. That was true of the Cairngorms when the national park was mooted. It was not a universally popular concept, because people saw it as a limitation on economic opportunity. However, very few people today would go back from where they are now.

The point about economics was illustrated by recent interesting developments in Harris, where a referendum of local people came out in favour of a national park. That was motivated principally by people's desire to protect their island and to see new economic opportunities for the area. Without that key focus on social and economic opportunities, it is unlikely that national parks anywhere in the Highlands and Islands will get support.

Within national parks, there ought to be an income stream for local development and improvement of the sort that we see moving into the existing parks. We should certainly not impose national parks on people; we need to take people with us in that.

That takes me to the third main point that I want to make. We have to remember that they are national parks, so they must be of national importance, but that must never mean that we exclude local people from their management. Local people in those areas, wherever they happen to be, are perfectly capable of managing national assets in the national interest if we are clear about the objectives and if we back them with resources. Over time, that will probably involve not only local people, but local people in partnership with national interests. The existing parks provide an example of how that can be achieved.

Planning decisions are crucial in the mix. It has always struck me as being paradoxical—particularly as the Highlands cover a vast territory, of which much could be designated in the long term—that people who live in a beautiful area should enjoy fewer democratic rights than those who do not live there. That is a challenge. The Cairngorm planning arrangements sought to strike the right balance between local and national interests. I am sure that the arrangements are not perfect, but they reflect the tension that will continue wherever a national park is proposed in the Highlands and Islands. Each new national park needs to be tailored to local circumstances—no single prescription for a park exists.

The size of a national park presents an interesting dilemma in the Highlands and Islands. The Cairngorms national park is vast and growing, but its boundary follows no particular logic. If the park is entered from the Dava moor side, where a new sign is on a granite plinth—if that is the right way to describe it; it is much larger than a plinth—one wonders why on earth the boundary is there, because travelling there involves going through a fantastic area of moorland that has its own attractions. I hoped that stage 2 of reviewing the parks would give people in Dava the opportunity to make the case for their area being in the national park, but I am sorry that they were deprived of that opportunity. However, if I understood the minister, they will have that opportunity through the new strategy group. If that is so, I welcome it.

Equally, if we drive south down the Drumochter pass, the area on the left is in the national park, but the area on the right is not. No logic that relates to the environment or the environmental quality determines that boundary. However, the dilemma in the Highlands and Islands is about how far the boundary should be moved to the

right, because the landscape is fantastic all the way to the coastline in Lochaber.

The dilemma in designating parks in the Highlands and Islands is about how big they should be. It is arguable that so much of the Highlands could be designated as to make the exercise impossible, because the resources would never be available to make that work locally. The ability to provide funding and the ability to make a difference are needed. Big issues are involved.

In the Cairngorms, communities are in the park. That was the subject of much debate. The exception is Laggan, which objected to being left out of the park. As soon as communities are brought into a park tensions arise, because that involves all the human interactions with housing, for example, that do not arise if the park's size is narrowed to a core conservation area. If parks are to have social and economic purposes—I think that they should—we must accept that communities might be brought within park boundaries. As soon as that happens, it means that the governing body's membership must involve local people and that planning and housing issues must be dealt with. It should surprise nobody in the Cairngorms that more planning applications for housing are being made there, because the communities there are part of the park. As I said, that is a crucial concern for those areas. That comes with how we designate parks.

Presiding Officer, you look comparatively relaxed, so I will move reasonably, but not totally briskly, to a conclusion. The strategy group has much to consider. Does the potential for more parks exist? Has Scotland reached its limit for parks? I do not think so. Will future parks be on land or in the marine environment? How do we prioritise? Is the strategy about conservation or achieving a balance throughout Scotland between Dumfriesshire and the Highlands and other parts, for example? Is it about economics? Should communities have a bidding process? What do we do about existing bids from communities? How will candidate sites be identified? A range of questions has to be answered.

I hope that the Government does not hide behind the strategy group: it must make clear its view. Does it want more national parks? If so, where? What are the Government's priorities? Are they related to conservation or to social and economic development? Will the Government encourage bids?

I could go on, but I see that you are waiting for me to wind up, Presiding Officer. I shall do so with politeness and thanks for your grace.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Alasdair Morgan): In as relaxed a fashion as possible, I call Gil Paterson.

15:24

Gil Paterson (West of Scotland) (SNP): Presiding Officer, I apologise to you and other members for the fact that I need to leave a bit early, unfortunately. I hope that members forgive me—I have a prior engagement. I am delighted to participate in this important debate about some of Scotland's greatest assets—our national parks.

I will aim my speech at Loch Lomond and the Trossachs. It should be recognised that that area, like many areas in Scotland, is not just about nature, because it has a population of people and communities. The results of bad land-ownership decisions mean that the general area of the park has become almost empty of people, compared with the situation in the past. I therefore very much welcome and support the approach and strategy that is in place to protect the wild beauty of the area, while keeping and growing the enterprises in the park. It is possible that, over time, the legacy of the past can be overcome so that a vibrant and productive community will thrive within the park's borders.

It should come as no surprise to learn that it was a Scotsman, John Muir, who first came up with the idea of protecting wild lands by declaring them national parks, for which he is acknowledged and celebrated in the United States of America and, to a lesser extent, in his homeland of Scotland.

At present, Scotland has two national parks, with the Loch Lomond and Trossachs park being situated in the West of Scotland region, which I serve as an MSP. Since being elected, I have never stopped visiting the area not only for constituency business, but in a private capacity. I have been impressed by the advancements that have been made since the area became a national park in 2002.

The park makes an important contribution to the local community. It is economically important to places such as Balloch and Luss because of the influx of tourists who come from abroad and, in big numbers, from throughout Scotland. Local businesses rely heavily on those visitors, who are interested in seeing some of Scotland's most beautiful places. However, striking a balance between the need for economic development and the need to protect the park's natural beauty has been a constant challenge for the park authority, which it has so far been able to meet, I am glad to say.

I know the park area extremely well. It is an area of great beauty, in which I have walked, climbed, fished, boated and camped, plus a few other things that I dare not mention.

Members: Oh!

Gil Paterson: I will tell you about them in private. They are not as naughty as members may think.

Few cities have, as Glasgow does, a resource close to them like greater Loch Lomond and the Trossachs. We could say, with little exaggeration, that the area is on the outskirts of Glasgow. Most Glaswegians certainly think that that part of Scotland is their own. Like many others who host visitors to Scotland, I make a beeline to Loch Lomond when taking them around our country in an effort to impress them with it. I never fail to get a positive reaction from our guests, many of whom comment on how close the area is to the centre of the city and on the wildness of the places in the park to which I take them. It is an experience that I very much enjoy, but never take for granted.

Under the National Parks (Scotland) Act 2000, Loch Lomond and the Trossachs National Park Authority is the full planning authority for the area. That is unlike the situation in the Cairngorms national park, where the relevant local authority makes planning decisions. The Loch Lomond situation has allowed the park to introduce byelaws that have attempted to deal not only with environmental problems but with antisocial behaviour problems. That brings to mind the park authority's decision to introduce a maximum speed limit on the loch to tackle the increased problem of speedboats, which are regarded as both detrimental to the loch's natural beauty and unsafe.

A balance must be struck between development and conservation in the park. I hope that it will always be acknowledged that the job is not to create a wilderness over the whole park, because the area was not always like that. Communities once thrived along the shores of Loch Lomond and beyond. The job is to keep the diversity of the park while increasing the population to the levels that once existed, thus returning the area to a more natural state of affairs. Of course, that will not happen overnight, but it can be done over time by good governance. From my experience, the park's management is on the right lines. I wish it every success for the future.

15:30

Jamie McGrigor (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I am pleased to be able to take part in today's debate. Our two national parks, the Cairngorms and Loch Lomond and the Trossachs, play a large part in the life of my Highlands and Islands region.

Echoing my friend John Scott, I agree with the broad thrust of the recommendations of the national park review, including the plans to reduce the number of members of national park authority

boards. Over the years, the concern has been put to me repeatedly as an MSP that some elements of the administration have been overly bureaucratic; I see that Neil Kay also makes that point. Anything that streamlines and increases efficiency is to be welcomed. One constituent suggested to me that the high staff turnover in the Loch Lomond and the Trossachs national park is also of concern. The minister may wish to examine the reasons for that coming and going.

I believe strongly that the future of rural Scotland, including our national parks, depends not just on preserving our environment and sustaining existing communities and livelihoods but on allowing and, indeed, encouraging some new development of both businesses and housing and the appropriate sustainable use of our natural resources. Some of my constituents remain concerned that, sadly, our national parks have stifled development that would otherwise have been given the go-ahead and would have boosted local economies. In the Highlands and Islands, economic opportunities can be rare and must be grasped firmly with both hands.

I am communities and housing spokesman for my party, so the provision of affordable rural housing is an issue close to my heart. One issue of concern, which I raised in the previous debate on the subject, is the requirement that the Cairngorms National Park Authority places on developers for 50 per cent of new homes in a development to be affordable, if they are in the national park, as opposed to 25 per cent elsewhere. We all share the aim of providing more affordable housing, but it has been put to me that the restriction is deterring developers from building in the national park area, which may, therefore, be missing out on affordable housing being built. Basically, it is doubling a tax that is sometimes seen as counterproductive in respect of affordable housing.

Linda Fabiani (Central Scotland) (SNP): Does the member welcome the plans that have been announced to assess 60 abandoned cottages and farmsteads in the Cairngorms for possible conversion to affordable housing?

Jamie McGrigor: Absolutely—that is marvellous. Consideration should be given to using the rural empty properties grant for that purpose.

Constituents in the Cairngorms national park have asked me to raise a further specific development issue—the proposed new community of An Camas Mòr, near Aviemore. Outline permission was applied for in May. Naturally, the applicants would like a timely decision, so that they can start detailed work next year. I say to the minister that the time that it takes to get planning decisions is an important issue—more so than

usual in the current financial climate. The innovative master plan for the development is a community vision that goes all the way back to a proposal by the community council in 1989, when the problem of Aviemore's affordable housing shortage was discussed. It is interesting to note that housing was seen as a problem 20 years ago. Since then, far too little has been done to improve the situation. The vision that is proposed has exciting possibilities for the future.

I say to those who are against this type of development in the Cairngorms national park that, given the park's enormous size, it is vital that there are sustainable, vibrant communities within its boundaries to ensure that there is a nucleus of productive activity and job creation. Environmentally sound and attractive developments in which people can make their homes will be infinitely superior to a situation of continued housing shortages that lead to a stifling of objectives. Such developments offer huge opportunities to local companies and the prospect of many extra jobs.

I want to touch on some of the good work that has been done in our national parks. I remain especially interested in the work that the Cairngorms National Park Authority is doing to offer training to land-based businesses in the Cairngorms area. That training is benefiting any business that is related to the management or use of the land in the park: estates, farms, crofts, forestry, fishing, horticulture, nurseries and outdoor recreation providers. Environmental courses in deerstalking, black grouse management, mole control, water margin management and dry-stone dyking are all vital in maintaining the traditional skills in the area. I liked Christopher Harvie's speech very much.

Public benefit courses that have been delivered through the training programme include ones on the Scottish outdoor access code, Cairngorms wildlife, tick control—which is very important, both healthwise and economically—heather management and catering for the less able visitor. The comments from businesses and organisations within the park about the training that has been received have been very positive.

In the Loch Lomond and the Trossachs national park, a community training programme runs courses in a range of subjects including how community organisations can better access funding streams. That is important. I am impressed by the work that the Loch Lomond and the Trossachs National Park Authority has done to increase the number of apprenticeships in the area of the park and to encourage businesses in the park to make use of the latest information technology. I was also pleased to see the park encouraging barn owls, with some success.

Christopher Harvie mentioned people blasting things, and I was horrified to hear about the indiscriminate slaughter of too many red deer, which constitute an important part of our national heritage.

Now that sheep have been found not to have been detrimental to the water supply from Loch Katrine, I ask for consideration to be given to restocking the sheep farms and bringing back the tenancies that were removed several years ago.

In conclusion—

Mike Rumbles: Oh!

Jamie McGrigor: Do you want me to go on?

Members: No.

Mike Rumbles: We are spellbound.

Jamie McGrigor: I wish the minister's national parks strategy group every success, and I hope that any further sensible recommendations can be implemented quickly in the interests of my constituents and, for that matter, in the interests of Scotland as a whole.

15:37

Rob Gibson (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): I welcome the opportunity to speak in the debate—and I have been musing on some of the interesting contributions that members have made up to this point.

Our two national parks are a success story, and the extension of the Cairngorms national park into the Blair Atholl area makes a natural unit. However, it raises questions—which were mentioned by Peter Peacock—about where to have boundaries, how to extend them and what happens on the other side of the boundary. I will return to that in a minute or two.

Much of the wish for national parks is because a great national project to have areas of excellence in the countryside is a very good idea. However, I question whether such a model can be extended all over Scotland. In a minute I will give some reasons why I think that that might not be a productive approach.

It was interesting to hear what the Labour spokesperson, Sarah Boyack, said. She might remember when I attended an away day on the subject with the Environment and Rural Development Committee in the previous session. I asked, in simple terms, who would look after the bits in between the national parks. If we set up a necklace, or plethora, of national parks, we are bound to miss some bits, in which we might need to think about some important things.

Sarah Boyack: Will the member take an intervention on that point?

Rob Gibson: I certainly will.

Sarah Boyack: I note that the atmosphere is slightly more relaxed this afternoon.

Rob Gibson makes a very good point, which follows what Peter Peacock said. Will Rob Gibson accept that that is why we have sites of special scientific interest, national scenic areas and other environmental designations that enable us to protect land? The national parks need to sit on top of those, however, because they also involve the community and economic development issues that we have discussed. The two things need not be counterpoised.

Rob Gibson: We were talking about bureaucracy, regulation and so on, and it occurred to me that the shackles of present crofting law, together with more regulation, offer a most interesting circumstance to deal with for crofts that happen to be in a national park. I know that there are some crofts in the Cairngorms national park, although they are very few compared with the crofts on the north and west coasts and on the islands, in areas where the member would like there to be more marine and coastal parks.

We should trust local people. In fact, my prognosis, having learned from the way in which national parks have worked in the hothouse areas around Loch Lomond and the Cairngorms, is that we ought to be thinking about a system of much more local government so that people could be involved with the process in a comprehensive fashion. As Peter Peacock said, it is not against the national interest to trust the local people to play an increasing part in the way in which these things are organised.

I am interested in whether members agree that there is a better way. I am sure that members have all been briefed, as I was, by the Scottish Wildlife Trust. The principles of the ecosystem approach that the trust outlines in its briefing involve the kinds of approaches that the national park structure wants to deliver, and they refer on to what should be happening in every area of scenic beauty or national importance, every SSSI or whatever. One principle is to

"Recognise that objectives for land and seas are society's choice".

We must acknowledge that people make choices. Another principle is to

"Encourage decentralized decision-making".

Absolutely. There need to be some differences in the way in which different parts of the Cairngorms national park are organised, so we must have a means to do that. Another principle is to

"Ensure economic policies encourage biodiversity".

Indeed. We will have to follow through on those principles and there are many more.

Another of the principles that is outlined in the briefing is to

"Accept and adapt to change".

Will Sarah Boyack tell me that, once there are many more national parks—as proposed in the Labour amendment—for the strategy group to look at, we will do better by biodiversity and do better by the people taking the decisions? Is that the best way ahead?

As I have said in the chamber previously, I was not a member during the first session of Parliament. My question why we want to set up national parks needs a much more detailed answer. If we are considering establishing coastal national parks, to which the Liberal Democrat amendment refers, the Scottish Wildlife Trust again has the right idea. It recognises that until the Marine (Scotland) Bill is enacted, we are not in a position to do anything further, so we should wait for that and we should also recognise that the bill proposes a range of new controls and regulations with regard to our sea coast and so on.

Liam McArthur: As a point of clarification, I think that the member was talking about the Labour amendment, which refers to establishing more national parks. I acknowledged in my speech that, if we were to look at marine and coastal areas, that would have to await the deliberations and conclusions on the Marine (Scotland) Bill.

Rob Gibson: I am happy with Liam McArthur's emphasis.

John Scott rose—

Rob Gibson: Excuse me, but I must try to make my point.

There are issues about the human uses of these areas and, as I said, about society's choices.

I will pick up Liam McArthur on a point that he made about the Beaulieu to Denny proposals, in relation to which we expect a decision to be announced soon. Never forget that an application was submitted directly to the Scottish ministers in September 2005 and that they announced in August 2006 that the matter would be referred to a public inquiry. Nearly a year was wasted. Please remember that when people complain, at this end of the process, about the need for a decision.

There is much to be said for looking at what sort of regulation and structures are created to protect the national interest and to enhance local involvement in our areas of most scenic beauty and in ecosystems that are vital to Scotland's future, but we must adopt the principles of the ecosystem approach wherever we go, not just the artificial principle of creating national parks and

assuming that they will be the answer for every part of the country.

15:44

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): Thank you, Presiding Officer—you will acknowledge how difficult it is to follow Christopher Harvie and Jamie McGrigor, so I will not even begin to try.

Instead, I will be shamelessly parochial, because I consider myself fortunate to represent part of the Loch Lomond and the Trossachs national park. It is undoubtedly a beautiful part of Scotland and, in my understandably biased local view, I might even go so far as to say that it is the most beautiful part of Scotland.

I well remember participating in a debate led by Sarah Boyack on the creation of Scotland's first national park around Loch Lomond and the Trossachs. It is right to recall the policy framework that underpinned the creation of the national parks, which Sarah Boyack outlined for us, because their subsequent success is largely grounded in our having got that initial framework right. However, as with anything, there is room for improvement and innovation. I welcome the outcome of the review and the minister's strategic group. I am delighted that Loch Lomond and the Trossachs National Park Authority will remain as a free-standing NDPB and that the nonsense about merging it with SNH has been parked well away.

I will consider what we need to do for the future. I recognise that, in a desire to hit the ground running, the national park authority was keen to address not only strategic issues but long-standing local issues and went about—to the delight of many—plugging a lot of holes, not all of which were its responsibility in terms of service delivery. I do not criticise that, but I welcome the fact that its focus is now increasingly on the park's core purpose, which the authority describes as visitor experience, conservation and rural development and planning. That creates the space for the authority and its partners to ensure that the park is a world-class tourist destination, recognising that all need to play their part locally.

There are some clear examples of the way in which the national park authority has managed to fulfil that challenge by embracing the idea of creating a visitor experience and working with local people to do so. That leads to visitors coming not only once, but time and again. For instance, Cruise Loch Lomond won the innovation category of the Scottish Thistle awards 2009 for its west Highland way rambler cruise—I have yet to try it, but I assure members that I will do so—a tourist attraction that uses the unique selling point of Loch Lomond to offer a water-based transportation method, thereby enabling tourists to enjoy the

waters of the loch and experience walking some of the west Highland way.

The management responsibility and revision of the Loch Lomond byelaws are another matter on which the national park authority has demonstrated strong leadership. The current byelaws deliver for not only visitors, but residents by helping to protect the islands and environment around the loch, the natural surroundings and the wildlife, as well as by providing more safety and a larger area for quieter activities.

Jamie McGrigor: Does Jackie Baillie agree that the byelaws on Loch Lomond could be used on other lochs in Scotland as a good management proposal?

Jackie Baillie: I agree in the sense that there is much to commend the overall approach to the management of visitors at Loch Lomond and that would have wider application. The minister will be aware—indeed, she referred to it—of the need to add to the byelaws, particularly to restrict wild camping, which has caused disruption not only to the east bank of the loch but the west bank, particularly Luss. I congratulate the national park authority on its plans to manage visitors much more actively. I hope that the Scottish Government will assist in ensuring that the process is obstacle free as the authority starts to consider additional byelaws.

I turn to the many development opportunities. I am pleased that the national park authority is working with local communities—in particular, around the Tarbert and Arrochar area, which is in my constituency—because there is great potential for further water-based activities there and for positioning Tarbert and Arrochar as a gateway to Argyll. I say to the minister that a little bit of money for a pier would be a most welcome Christmas present—I mean this Christmas rather than next.

Joking aside, I invite the minister to consider the benefit of injecting small amounts of capital to improve the public realm because, by doing so, we undoubtedly not only make the area more attractive to visitors, but stimulate economic development and attract commercial interest. We also get other partners, such as local authorities—I hesitate to name the ones I mean, but members will know—and the Forestry Commission to play their part in providing appropriate local services. The minister will be aware that facilities are not as good as we would want them to be. Some of the road signs are not exactly visitor friendly. Indeed, some of the roads, such as the A82, remain a challenge. There is still a lot of work to be done, not just by the national park, but on a partnership basis. There are also financial constraints and there is little growth. Loch Lomond and the Trossachs national park has decided to withdraw from providing visitor centres and concentrate on

its core purpose. Some staff numbers have had to be reduced to ensure that money is available for development. The park is also considering charging for things like car parking, and although it has the desire to get an income stream, the idea is being progressed with some caution. The small injection of capital would stimulate a lot more, so I invite the minister to consider that.

Before my closing remarks, I turn to the local plan. The national park is in the process of finalising its local plan, which I believe will go to the board in December and thereafter to the Scottish Government reporters unit in the new year. I cannot miss the opportunity of having the minister and Mike Cantlay in the same room to raise the matter of local occupancy conditions. Mr Cantlay could have written my speech for me; he knows that I will say this.

Some properties in the Loch Lomond and the Trossachs national park have a local occupancy condition attached, but I was surprised to find that no one knows how many or which ones, and that there is no list and no idea of where those properties are. There is also very little concrete evidence that local occupancy conditions work and deliver what they are supposed to. They seem to have been used as a proxy for delivering affordable housing, but there are other policy drivers. I disagree with Jamie McGrigor, because I think that requiring a percentage of affordable housing in a new developments works and is a much more effective policy driver. I therefore encourage that approach, rather than the use of local occupancy conditions. For example, I happened to visit a very substantial home—it would probably be well out of the reach of anyone in this room—to which local occupancy conditions are applied, because it is to be retained as affordable housing. There is no way that that house is affordable, certainly not for anyone I know. District valuers say that properties are devalued as a result of having occupancy conditions placed on them. There is some evidence to show that the practice stops people and investment from coming into the community, and there is considerable inconsistency. Cairngorms national park and, in its planning advice, the Scottish Government, have rejected local occupancy conditions. Let us focus on delivering affordable housing properly, not by imposing restrictions through local occupancy conditions.

The national parks do a great job. I look forward to having a debate in 10 years' time on where we take them next.

15:52

Linda Fabiani (Central Scotland) (SNP): It amazes me that it is nine years since the National

Parks (Scotland) Act 2000 was passed. I was on the Transport and the Environment Committee at the time, and I think that I am right in saying that Sarah Boyack was the minister. I remember the general consensus on the designation of national parks. As Liam McArthur and Gil Paterson said, they were long overdue when one considers the international work of John Muir. As Sarah Boyack said earlier, it was essential to protect our outstanding landscape and heritage.

That worthy statement is so important because we do have outstanding landscapes and a wonderful heritage. I look at the principles and objectives of our two national parks as written and followed in the Cairngorms and Loch Lomond and the Trossachs. Those of the Cairngorms talk about conserving and enhancing biodiversity and landscapes, as well as sustainable deer management, which is very particular to that area. The Loch Lomond and the Trossachs national park recognises that it represents some of Scotland's most iconic landscapes and reflects Scotland's identity through the natural and cultural heritage that it promotes and protects. So we start from a good base of what national parks are about.

However, as we have heard from the minister and others today, also behind the national park designations and their progress were issues such as the economic and social development of communities. Our national parks are about people, as well as wildlife and landscapes. We have heard today about the successes of both parks in that regard. For example, there is tourism and its inherent business, transport initiatives, training schemes and grant administration.

I know that there are concerns. Jamie McGrigor spoke about concerns about planning requirements. I hope that he takes comfort in and supports the measures that came into effect in August to create a more effective planning system in order to support economic recovery. Those measures will impact on the planning functions of national parks. The changes include the establishment of local review bodies so that councillors rather than the Scottish Government can review decisions about small-scale local developments. That change was introduced because, historically, a large volume of planning applications were routinely notified by planning authorities to ministers for consideration, but around 90 per cent of those applications did not require decisions to be taken at the national level.

The changes also mean that there is a requirement on developers to consult communities before they submit major development proposals. That is more important in our national parks than anywhere else. More information on planning decisions will also be made available. It is

extremely important that we consider those things in the round and the benefits that can be brought to our national parks as a result of them.

I was interested in what Jackie Baillie said about local occupancy conditions, which are an issue. That is one example that shows why it was important to recognise that the time was right for review. We can consider our experiences over the past nine years and try to make improvements for the future. A lot has happened in the nine years since the 2000 act was passed; it is time to review what has happened and implement measures. I therefore welcome the minister's statement. She outlined sensible measures, particularly the designation of a defined term for the ministerially chaired strategy group, so that it does not go on for ever. That is extremely important.

Rob Gibson's speech was interesting. We should never think that one solution fits all; rather, we should always consider what is best for local communities and how that will serve Scotland's national interest.

Over the decades, successive committees of inquiry, way back to the Ramsay committee in 1945, have recommended other locations for national parks. Different locations have been mooted over the years, including Glen Affric, Glen Cannich, Strathfarrar, Ben Nevis, Glencoe, Loch Torridon, Loch Maree and Loch Broom. As recently as February 2009, Harris in the Western Isles voted in a local referendum, by 732 votes to 311, to petition the Scottish Government for the parish area to be recognised as a national park. When he was the Minister for Environment, Michael Russell said that he would consider such a request if it had the community's support. I understand that the request is still open to consideration. There is a democratic element. That takes us back to what Rob Gibson talked about. The wish must come from the community. Things that are community driven are always more sustainable. We should never try to impose a model that has worked in one place on to somewhere else.

We have talked about the economic benefits of the parks, and I opened my speech by talking about the absolute requirement to protect our fabulous landscapes and heritage. However, we should not forget that our national parks can also be about fun and enjoyment. Indeed, the Loch Lomond and the Trossachs National Park Authority talks clearly about special places and co-ordinating the efforts of local communities and all the different sectors to deliver better integration of activities, the best use of resources and better results in terms of environmental, economic and social benefits. We should never underestimate the sense of wellbeing that being out and about in

our wonderful landscapes creates for people. That is important.

National parks are to be welcomed and I support our having the debate, which has been interesting. National parks are about sustainable development, biodiversity and economic development, but they are also about the health and wellbeing of the people of this nation. I return to what Chris Harvie said. I will not quote Gerard Manley Hopkins; rather, I will paraphrase him. We have all those things, but let us never forget the absolute joy and importance of preserving our wildernesses for future generations.

15:59

Mike Rumbles (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD): This has been a genuinely good and positive debate. Roseanna Cunningham made it clear at the beginning that the Cairngorms and Loch Lomond and the Trossachs national parks will continue as separate bodies, which is welcome and appropriate. She confirmed that the strategy group will be limited—coincidentally, of course—to the remaining duration of the current Parliament.

Roseanna Cunningham: That makes sense.

Mike Rumbles: Absolutely, it makes sense. She also said that she intends to keep five locally elected members on each of the park boards.

Peter Peacock: Will the member take an intervention?

Mike Rumbles: I have had only 30 seconds. Let me get into my stride—there is plenty of time.

However, it is not in the gift of the minister to reduce the number of locally elected members. It was my amendment to the bill—against ministerial wishes at the time—that created directly elected members in the first place.

Elaine Murray (Dumfries) (Lab): We remember it well.

Mike Rumbles: Sarah Boyack does, too. I am sure that she will be back in the chamber in a minute.

We embedded in the 2000 act the requirement for boards to have five directly elected members precisely because I did not want a future minister to be able to reduce the number of such members from five. That number is enshrined in primary legislation. I welcome Sarah Boyack's recognition of the success of those directly elected board members and we support Labour's amendment, which proposes examining the possibility of creating new national parks, including in marine and coastal areas.

Peter Peacock: Mike Rumbles is making a point about future national parks. I do not know whether he has seen a briefing that members received from the Scottish Council for National Parks, which points to the minister's decision to limit the timeframe for the strategy group—a decision that I disagree with. The campaign sets out a cogent case, using examples of what has happened in other parts of the world—in England, in particular—to drive long-term progress on national parks by having some kind of strategy group to help over the long term, not just in the short term. Is there no merit in that?

Mike Rumbles: Peter Peacock makes a cogent point—as he always does in his interventions.

I politely disagree with John Scott's view that ministers should appoint the conveners and deputy conveners of the park boards. The boards work much better together if they elect their own conveners and deputy conveners. I have spoken to many board members in the Cairngorms, although not Loch Lomond and the Trossachs, about that and that is what they have said. I therefore applaud the minister's decision not to act on the advice that was given.

John Scott: Will the member give way?

Mike Rumbles: I am sorry, but I have already allowed an intervention and do not have time to take another one.

My colleague Liam McArthur said that it is important that local people have a strong voice. The Liberal Democrats' preference is to have an equal number of ministerial appointees, local councillors and locally elected people on the boards. I hoped that there would be such a balance in the original bill, but life is a compromise, is it not? We look back at the act with rose-tinted spectacles but, at the time, it was touch and go whether we would get locally elected people into the act at all. Thank goodness, we did. That is now generally recognised as a real success, and I compliment Sarah Boyack on having accepted that on a number of occasions.

I was going to intervene on Christopher Harvie anyway, and when he invited me to intervene I could not resist. Listening to his speech, one would be led to believe that he would prefer everyone to live in our national parks in some kind of 1950s idyllic utopia, shopping in corner shops. No doubt, he would prefer to have blacksmiths everywhere to shoe the horses. However, my constituents in the Cairngorms live and work in a modern environment and need modern facilities.

I say to Jamie McGrigor—again politely—that his opposition to the requirement for 50 per cent of homes in the national parks to be affordable homes is wrong. There are 5,000 people in Aberdeenshire who need homes, and any

affordable homes there are snapped up. I have spent many hours with my constituents in Ballater, Braemar and Strathdon who need affordable homes. I applaud the action that is being taken by the park board and wish that our councils were able to follow its lead. Jamie McGrigor must listen to the entrepreneurs who build the houses—that is absolutely right—but he must also listen to the people who need to live in those houses.

Jamie McGrigor: I want more affordable housing, but the requirement for 50 per cent of housing to be affordable is counterproductive.

Mike Rumbles: I heard the member say that earlier on, and he did not add anything in that intervention. I do not agree with him.

Wild camping is a real problem in my area of the Cairngorms park. In fact, it is not wild camping but camping just off the road, particularly the road north to Braemar. People just dump rubbish when they leave, which is a problem for land managers. It would not be right if we did not raise the matter in Parliament during a debate about the parks. I ask the minister to ensure that the issue is addressed.

Our national parks are a great success and make a great contribution to sustainable social and economic development. The Liberal Democrats will support the Government's motion and Labour's amendment, and we hope that our amendment will be supported, too.

16:05

Nanette Milne (North East Scotland) (Con):

This has been a useful and interesting debate on the Government's response to the recent consultation on the conclusions of the 2008 national parks review. By and large, as John Scott has indicated, Scottish Conservatives are supportive of the Government's recommendations, particularly to reduce the size of the park authority boards, and to create a short-life national parks strategy group to set the direction of travel for national park development.

Scotland's national parks were a long time coming, as they were first recommended by the Ramsay committee in 1945. It is now important that lessons are learned from their early days and development so that we can ensure value for money for the increasingly pressured public purse ahead of the designation of any further national parks that may be considered.

Legislation requires national park authorities to conserve and enhance the natural and cultural heritage of the area that they represent, while promoting the sustainable use of their natural resources and recognising the needs of local

communities within the designated areas, as many members have stressed this afternoon.

Seven years after the establishment of the Loch Lomond and the Trossachs national park, and after six years of the Cairngorms park, it is appropriate to examine what the parks have achieved so far and to consider their future development and management, hence our support for the proposed national parks strategy group that is to be chaired by the Minister for Environment. However, we feel strongly that that group must be time limited and focused and must have a clear sense of what it is trying to achieve. A key consideration for the setting up of such a group has been the broader agenda for simplification of the public sector, and it is therefore important that the group does not develop a separate administrative identity or budget or employ additional staff.

We are content with the Government's decision that the strategy group should have a fixed term of no more than 18 months, and that it should operate at a strategic, rather than an operational, level, with a remit to focus on establishing the principles that are involved in considering boundary changes to existing national parks and the establishment of new ones.

Of the two existing national parks, I am more familiar with the Cairngorms park, whose current plan focuses on outdoor access, sustainable deer management, biodiversity, sustainable housing, awareness and understanding, tourism and business and sport and management. I am told that, so far, halfway through its five-year span, 29 of the plan's 41 outcomes have been met. Some progress has been made on developing the necessary affordable housing within the park area, which Peter Peacock and Mike Rumbles mentioned, although that has been difficult in the current financial climate. There has been a significant focus on a land-use strategy and on creating a low-carbon national park, with clear renewable energy targets, as well as on moorland management, local food production and promotion of the excellent and varied food and drink product that is available throughout the park. Further, the Cairngorms business partnership has been set up to assist businesses—most of them SMEs—within the park. As the minister said in her opening remarks and Jamie McGrigor highlighted in his speech, business training has been provided to a significant number of people.

A great deal of work has gone on in the past six years to achieve the aims of the Cairngorms national park, and I have no doubt that that is also true for the Loch Lomond and the Trossachs park. However, we are all aware of Professor Neil Kay's highly critical report regarding the organisational structure of the existing national parks, and there

is little disagreement that it is overly bureaucratic and would benefit from being streamlined. We therefore welcome the Government's proposals to keep the existing park authorities, but to reduce their size. We feel that local involvement in management is essential, and the proposals will allow that, but they will also help to ensure better value for money and, hopefully, better delivery.

Some people, including my colleague John Scott, think that the park authorities would benefit from being made smaller still than the 17 and 19 members that the Government proposes to reduce them to. Personally, however, I am pleased that the proposals will allow directly elected board membership to increase proportionately as the number of Government and local authority appointees decreases. It is crucially important that local people have a significant input into the functioning of the authorities.

Liam McArthur: Nanette Milne indicated her support for a further reduction in board numbers. Would that be at the expense of council nominees or ministerial appointees?

Nanette Milne: I did not indicate support—I commented on what John Scott wishes to happen. I am content at present with what the Government proposes. *[Interruption.]* Members should not interpret that too strongly, although it is still a consensual debate.

Scottish Conservatives supported the National Parks (Scotland) Act 2000. We also supported John Swinney's member's bill, which would have extended the boundary of the Cairngorms national park into Perth and Kinross, so we are pleased that the current Government has decided to go ahead with that, and we fully support the boundary proposals.

As I said at the outset, Scottish Conservatives broadly support the Government's proposals for the administration and development of Scotland's national parks. The parks exist to serve and conserve their areas, and it is vital that the boards that manage them are held to account for their successes or failures in meeting their clearly defined objectives, particularly given that almost all their funding comes from the Government.

In that context, as John Scott said, we note the Government's brave decision that conveners and deputy conveners will continue to be elected by board members. That goes against the recommendation of the national parks review, but it is in line with the prevailing view of those who responded to the consultation.

I hope that the proposals that we endorse today will result in a more efficient national park structure that ensures better delivery of the parks' objectives and good value for the public purse. I look forward to the outcome of the work that the

proposed national parks strategy group will undertake on the future development of national parks in Scotland.

16:11

Elaine Murray (Dumfries) (Lab): The debate has been interesting and entertaining. Initially, I felt that my colleague Sarah Boyack was being rather modest in not mentioning the fact that she was the minister who introduced the national parks legislation, although other members have referred to that fact. I remember the National Parks (Scotland) Bill well, as it was the first bill that I dealt with in depth after becoming an MSP, when we considered it in the Rural Affairs Committee. We spent a lot of time on the bill—indeed, in those days I was so enthusiastic about having a bill to consider that when it was published I read it on the train on the way home. Unfortunately I am not quite as enthusiastic now, after all these years.

The legislation was a long time in coming—Scotland's first national park was established some 51 years after the first one was created in England and Wales, and I doubt whether we would have any national parks yet if it had not been for devolution.

The minister reminded us of the four aims of the 2000 act. I must say that I was a little concerned when I first read the Government's motion, because it appeared to commend the parks for their contribution to the Government's agenda. The national parks were not established to promote the priorities of the first Scottish Executive, nor should their purpose now be to promote this Government's agenda. The parks' contribution to conservation and to promoting biodiversity and environmental benefit is as important as their contribution to social and economic development.

I was reassured, however, after hearing the minister's speech, in which she highlighted the fourth plank of the 2000 act, which is unique to Scotland—I am happy to accept that. Christopher Harvie's contribution was entertaining as always, although I am not sure that it was always relevant to the topics under discussion. It is certainly true, as other members have said, that our two national parks are remarkable and contribute greatly to their regions. Peter Peacock mentioned that the parks strengthened the identity of their respective areas, and Jackie Baillie spoke about the ways in which the Loch Lomond and the Trossachs national park had worked to meet various challenges, and its success in dealing with matters such as the revision of the byelaws.

Loch Lomond and the Trossachs national park is within an hour's drive of 50 per cent of Scotland's population, which probably includes the people of

Glasgow North East, so it is not irrelevant to them. The park has 22 larger lochs, and around 50 rivers. The Cairngorms national park has perhaps a smaller cohort of people around it, but it contains some 25 per cent of Britain's threatened species. Those are tremendous areas, and there are, of course, great challenges for the national park authorities—to which they rise—in maintaining those areas and facilities. I am sure that Loch Lomond and the Trossachs rose to the challenge of dealing with the unmentionable acts that Gil Paterson confessed to committing in the park.

There was some disappointment at the time of the Government's announcement in August that the review, which was supposed to be in two stages, would be undertaken only in one stage, and that the report seemed to concentrate on governance issues. I am pleased that the national park authorities were not sacrificed on the bonfire of the NDPBs. The report focused on things such as changes to and reductions in board membership. Many of us believe that there are other strategic issues that should be reviewed.

In August, the Government announced its proposal to establish a national parks strategy group. We welcome that, but we believe that its remit is rather constrained. It focuses on how the work of the national parks contributes to the Government's agenda, which sounds a bit like a justification for retaining them. I hope that that is not the case. Also, the membership of the group seems rather worthy and governmental. It includes the chairs of the park authorities, the Scottish Government's rural director, SNH, the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, one other NDPB and one independent member. I hope that it will be a bit wider than that, going beyond local and central Government to encompass a wider agenda. Peter Peacock made a number of interesting suggestions about what that wider agenda could be.

Seven years into the Loch Lomond and the Trossachs national park and six years into the Cairngorms national park, there are surely more extensive and informative issues that could be discussed. For example, is additional support required to enable the parks to fulfil their potential? Jackie Baillie made a bid for resources for her local park. We could look at what has been learned about partnership working and consider whether that can be translated into other aspects of rural development planning. How do our national parks compare with those in other countries? Sarah Boyack mentioned the international recognition of our parks. Are we marketing them well enough through VisitScotland?

Rob Gibson asked about the effect on the bits between the parks. What has been the effect on

other areas that are not part of a national park? For example, have the jet-skis and power boats descended on them? Has the concentration on sustainability and conservation reduced in non-park areas or have the parks acted as examples of good practice?

Our amendment raises the crucial question of whether we are going to stop at having two national parks. We believe that Scotland has the potential to have more national parks. We do not suggest, as I think one member did, that loads of national parks should be created willy-nilly. That is not the purpose of our amendment. However, two years ago, when the review was announced, the Scottish Council for National Parks urged the Government to set up a family of land and marine-based national parks throughout Scotland. If we look further back to 1945, the Ramsay committee, which Linda Fabiani mentioned, recommended the creation of five national parks and three reserve areas in Scotland. Sixty years later, we still have a fair way to go.

The previous Scottish Executive consulted on the establishment of a coastal and marine national park, but the idea was shelved by the current Government. That was disappointing to the many people, including me, who supported the Solway Firth's bid. The Scottish Wildlife Trust argues in its briefing for today's debate:

"the case for Scottish Coastal and Marine National Parks is compelling and one or more CMNPs should be identified once marine legislation has completed its passage through the Scottish Parliament."

In response to a question that I asked, the minister's predecessor told the chamber that the matter might be reconsidered after the Marine (Scotland) Bill has completed its passage, if there is sufficient community support. I believe that such support already exists. I hope that the minister will confirm that that is still the Government's intention and that she will tell us whether she intends to reopen consultation on the matter. I am pleased that the minister confirmed that the criteria for new national parks will be part of the strategy group's considerations.

I am pleased that John Scott supports the creation of additional national parks, although I did note some splits in the Conservative party. John Scott was a lot more enthusiastic about national parks than Jamie McGrigor was, and Nanette Milne seemed to have rather different views from John Scott on the size of the boards. Perhaps they need to speak to one another about the issues. I welcome the fact that Liam McArthur said that the Liberal Democrats support the proposal.

I turn to the other amendments. As Sarah Boyack said, we have reservations about them. I am not convinced that they are necessary. The Conservative amendment suggests that the

reason for the review and the changes to the boards was to save money. Efficiency is always to be welcomed, but the focus of any change should be the effective running of the national parks. Moreover, the cost of running the boards is small compared with the cost of running and policing the parks. An effective board will do what the boards of our two national parks have done and lever in significant external funding.

John Scott: Will the member take an intervention?

Elaine Murray: I am sorry, but I have only 15 seconds left and I must talk about the other amendment.

When I saw the Liberal Democrat amendment, I suspected that it was an opportunity for Mike Rumbles to get out his trumpet, and I was not disappointed. Like the Liberal Democrats, we welcome the parks' success in involving local people. As the minister pointed out, the changes to the structures of the boards will increase the proportion of directly elected members. However, I think that we all agree—including Liam McArthur, given what he said in his speech—that there is still a need for expertise from local authorities and Governments because the parks are national and not regional parks. Although I am sympathetic to the sentiments that are expressed in the Liberal Democrat amendment, I am not sure that it is absolutely necessary.

That said, I hope that, having heard Labour members' contributions, the minister now feels that the Government can accept our amendment to its motion.

16:20

Roseanna Cunningham: This really useful debate has pointed up the need to have—and, indeed, the benefit of having—these slightly more reflective debates, because it has allowed a whole range of opinions to be expressed across and within the party groups. However, if anyone else says that I have been brave, I will begin to suspect that I have made the wrong decision.

I should have said at the beginning of the debate that, like Jackie Baillie, I represent part of the area in which the Loch Lomond and the Trossachs national park sits. There is a tendency to forget that that park is not just about Loch Lomond; it covers many other lochs, including Loch Earn, half of which is in my constituency.

I am going back some way now but in the 1980s, as a young solicitor working in Dumbarton District Council, I was on the steering group that began the process of setting up the Loch Lomond and the Trossachs national park. As a result, I

have some background and history on this matter, and remember the debates very well.

I have listened with interest to what has been said this afternoon. As I implied in my opening speech, I am in a very generous mood and will accept the Liberal Democrat and Conservative amendments. Although both John Scott and Liam McArthur asked me to go further, I welcome the fact that they have endorsed the Government's direction of travel. I listened carefully to Labour members' speeches and, after considering the matter, I am prepared to accept their amendment. However, I make it crystal clear that there can be no consideration of a marine and coastal national park until the Marine (Scotland) Bill has successfully gone through its parliamentary stages.

As for new national parks, which Sarah Boyack and Peter Peacock asked about, only Harris is being considered for such a designation. As it happens, I have already met the campaigners, and it is fair to say that they will have to overcome a considerable number of hurdles before they can move the proposal much further forward. The Galloway proposal had not been brought to my attention before but, thanks to John Scott, I am now aware of it. I should also point out that giving the strategy group the role of exploring criteria for new parks, including marine and coastal parks, is consistent with our policy, and I hope that that reassures members that we have not forgotten about the future.

I have taken a considerable amount of notes and, in the time I have available, want to do justice to the points that members have made. First, I make it clear that I will not rise to the temptation offered by some members to comment directly on current planning rows. As members know perfectly well, none of those matters is likely to fall on my desk and I have absolutely no influence over the decision-making processes.

Peter Peacock and Rob Gibson raised a number of serious points, some of which, as befits both members, were quite philosophical. I say to Peter Peacock that I am not one for hiding and that is certainly not what the strategy review group is about. He and Rob Gibson highlighted a number of issues that will be the subject of live debates as we go forward; after all, with this debate, we will never reach a point at which we will feel that everything is fixed and sorted. Indeed, I suspect that the issue will be raised regularly not only in the chamber but in Scotland as a whole.

Christopher Harvie made his speech in his own inimitable fashion, educational as ever, as befits his background.

Jamie McGrigor raised the issue of affordable housing, which I thought rather unfortunate

because, in truth, most of the members who are in the chamber know exactly what would happen if the restrictions that he mentioned were lifted. Affordable housing is already a big problem in rural Scotland.

Jackie Baillie raised a separate housing issue. It is important to reflect on the problems that the occupancy policy raises. The Scottish Government has advised that occupancy restrictions should not be used unless there are exceptional circumstances to justify them. The Loch Lomond and the Trossachs National Park Authority will make a decision on the future of the occupancy policy when it meets on 14 December, so I guess that we just have to watch this space.

One or two members mentioned regional parks. Although the debate is about national parks, I will comment on some other schemes that are available and which members might not be aware of. It is important to mention that a variety of approaches can be taken to protected sites, other than the designation of a national park. One is the establishment of regional parks, which, before national parks appeared on the scene, led the way in Scotland on the practical and positive management of open-air recreation close to centres of population. We can be proud of the regional parks' achievements. I read in *The Herald* this morning about another big proposal for a regional park centred around the Campsie. The regional park idea has not gone away and I do not expect it to do so as it still has a part to play.

We also have geoparks, of which members might not be so well aware. Scotland has three geoparks, which are areas with a geological heritage of particular importance. They use geology and other aspects of the natural and cultural heritage to promote sustainable economic development, usually through tourism. I congratulate Shetland on achieving geopark status earlier this year. It joins the other geoparks, of the north-west Highlands and Lochaber. The award of that United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization status is a great accolade for those areas and for Scotland as a whole.

There are also biospheres, which are another UNESCO idea and which might be relevant to the proposal in Galloway. I am encouraged by renewed community interest in the biosphere concept. As Elaine Murray knows, the issue is a particularly live one in the south-west of Scotland, where three local authorities have come together to pursue the idea. The partnership sees the designation as making a contribution to a range of policies, including the social and economic development of the area, and it is carrying out a further and final round of public engagement on the proposal.

Sarah Boyack: The minister has provided an excellent opportunity for me to raise the point that I raised with Rob Gibson earlier, which is that the ministerial strategy group can identify a range of opportunities in different parts of the country. In some areas, national parks might be appropriate but, in other areas, SSSIs or regional parks, which the minister has mentioned, can not only take the weight off national parks, but provide positive opportunities that are not identical to those of the national parks.

Roseanna Cunningham: That is absolutely important. Some members might not be fully aware of the breadth of designations that are available. We do not always have to go through the national park set-up.

I will say one or two words about some of the advantages of national parks. There is a huge issue about natural heritage, to which one or two members referred. Earlier this year, I launched a wildcat project in the Cairngorms. Some members might think that that was a very appropriate project for me to launch. Our national parks are also key in relation to climate change. Several good initiatives on climate change have been taken by national parks. We must recognise that the national parks, as well as other areas such as biospheres and geoparks, contribute to a range of public goods. That is not always as widely recognised as it might be.

I am about to run out of time and I do not want to use more than my allotted space. I accept all the amendments. We have had an extraordinarily good debate and I look forward to the next one on national parks.

Skills

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Trish Godman): The next item of business is a debate—*[Interruption.]* Sorry, I am just checking that members are paying attention. The next item of business is a statement by Fiona Hyslop on making skills work for Scotland through ScotAction. The cabinet secretary will take questions at the end of her statement, so there should be no interventions or interruptions.

16:30

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning (Fiona Hyslop): I welcome the opportunity to update Parliament on the actions that the Scottish Government has taken to ensure that businesses and individuals have the skills to cope with recession and to build for recovery.

When we launched “Skills for Scotland: A Lifelong Skills Strategy” in 2007, we made it clear that the strategy was a call to action to work together on building a responsive and flexible lifelong learning system. That is now being delivered, and the recession has meant that such an approach is even more important than ever. For the delivery of Scotland’s skills strategy, we have a skills system that is responsive and has acted quickly and effectively in response to the challenge that we have faced over the past year of making skills work for Scotland. Last year, we created more than 69,000 training opportunities. With our boost to apprenticeship numbers and the widening of individual learning accounts, we anticipate that the number of opportunities will increase again this year. To support skills for recovery, we have put in place a comprehensive set of measures—under the banner “ScotAction”—to provide training for work, training in work and training from work to work.

Scotland’s unemployment rate remains below that of the United Kingdom—our youth unemployment rate remains 2 percentage points below that of the UK—but we still face major challenges. Through ScotAction, we are doing all that we can to use the economic levers that are under our control to help individuals to learn new skills or to enter employment. The Government will not repeat the mistakes that were made in previous recessions. We do not want to see another lost generation of young people.

First, I will address training for work. Over this year and next, colleges are being supported with an extra £16.1 million of funding to provide thousands more opportunities to school leavers and young people to study at college as an alternative to unemployment. Already this year, an additional £7.7 million has been allocated to 23

colleges in the areas worst affected by youth unemployment. A further £8.4 million is being made available in 2010-11. We plan to boost that figure by leveraging in additional European social fund money, which will almost double the funding that will be available in 2010-11. The expectation is that colleges will use the funding to support young people who seek a college place under the youth guarantee scheme. We are also making it easier for young people and adults to go to university. Last week I announced that, for the first time, a grant of £1,000 will be available for 14,000 independent students, who were previously reliant solely on loans.

Our work on co-ordinating and integrating the work of Skills Development Scotland and Jobcentre Plus is ensuring that individuals get access to the right training and advice at the right time. Early indications are that people who access the new service get back into work more quickly, so plans are now being developed to roll out the programme across Scotland from next year. Working with Skills Development Scotland, we have boosted funding for the training for work programme by £2.9 million to £6.5 million, which will provide an additional 3,150 places throughout Scotland. Individuals can now access training for work programmes after only three months, instead of six months, as previously. Accelerating our spend in relation to European funding has already resulted in £58 million being allocated to community planning partnerships to support those who are feeling the worst impacts of the recession.

ScotAction's second strand relates to training in work. I can announce that Scotland now has the most comprehensive package of support for apprentices in the UK. The apprenticeship summit that was held in April and subsequent regular meetings with employers and businesses have informed our work. This year, we are providing £16 million for an additional 7,800 apprentices—a 73 per cent increase—which will bring the total number of apprenticeship opportunities to 18,500 this year. Skills Development Scotland has completed contracting with training providers for all those opportunities.

The allocation of places focuses on sectors in which opportunities either currently exist or will emerge as we move into recovery. Over the summer I announced: 100 home energy and efficiency apprentices; 50 for creative industries; 500 for the hospitality and tourism sector; 410 for the food and drink industry; 460 for financial and business services; 1,000 apprentices in Glasgow; 1,250 for health and social care; 170 apprenticeship places for early years and child care; 2,000 for the retail sector; and 600 management apprentices.

To support apprenticeships, ScotAction is providing funding to invest in new apprentices, safeguard existing apprentices in their jobs and adopt redundant apprentices.

Employers, particularly small and medium-sized enterprises that are struggling to recruit and retain their apprentices, will benefit from the safeguard an apprentice scheme, which provides £75 a week for businesses to retain their apprentice's skills and knowledge.

To encourage SMEs to take on a new start, I have launched the invest in an apprentice scheme, which will give employers in the manufacturing, food and drink, energy and textile sectors a £2,000 financial incentive to take on a young person. It also provides a £2,000 incentive for microbusinesses to take on a management apprentice.

To ensure that we have enough technicians for the future in the growing life sciences sector, I have introduced the innovate with an apprentice scheme, leveraging in European funding to put in place our two-for-one apprentice offer. More than half the places are already being taken up, mostly by SMEs.

Supporting skills for business growth is essential, which is why I am delighted to be able to announce funding for businesses in the manufacturing and engineering sector to undertake the business improvement techniques qualification. Improving business performance now will ensure that companies are well placed to grow in the future.

We have also encouraged and supported individuals to earn and learn on a part-time basis. Individual learning accounts are now available to 16 and 17-year-olds for the first time and the learning threshold has been increased from £18,000 to £22,000, which makes more people eligible. Individuals can now access work-focused learning and have more choice of learning providers. Uptake of ILAs is already up 42 per cent this year in comparison with last year.

A £38 million package that replaces loans with grants is supporting up to 20,000 part-time students to access higher education, helping those who have been made redundant and who are working part time to support a family to retrain with a higher education qualification.

We are supporting postgraduate study, which is another area in which Scotland is leading the way across the UK: I have also now extended financial support to people who are undertaking part-time postgraduate courses.

The third strand of ScotAction is about helping people from work to work. In response to the rise in redundancies, we have moved rapidly to put in

place measures that are helping affected individuals to move swiftly from work to work.

We have boosted support to partnership action for continuing employment—our national partnership approach to supporting redundancy—as well as improving and widening the service. Through the strategic use of European funding, we are providing 24 additional advisers across Scotland for the PACE redundancy service, which is ensuring that individuals have immediate access to the right advice and the right training. Those who face redundancy now have immediate access to training for work, and we have broadened the training opportunities available by opening up opportunities in colleges, funded by an additional £7 million.

PACE partners have responded to an unprecedented level of demand and I commend them for their work. From January to August, PACE has assisted 234 organisations and 14,232 employees. PACE is also now available to small companies.

Support for redundant apprentices, which is available through our adopt an apprentice scheme is a key part of our work, and we are seeing results. In Scotland, construction skills figures show that 43 per cent of redundant apprentices have found employment, in comparison with 33 per cent in Wales and 26 per cent in England.

The adopt an apprentice scheme is the most comprehensive in the UK and, to date, Skills Development Scotland has received applications for more than 180 redundant apprentices. The scheme is helping people such as Jonathon Cowper and Thomas Kay, whom I met on Monday. They were delighted to have the opportunity to complete their apprenticeships with Grant Westfield Ltd in Edinburgh, which received support through the adopt an apprentice scheme. More than 140 businesses have seen the value in investing in apprentices and building a future for the trainee, the company and, ultimately, Scotland.

Those measures are working. They are making a real difference to real people. I will continue to listen to employers, individuals, learning providers, the voluntary sector and our other partners, including Opposition parties, to ensure that we constantly look at ways to improve support.

We are ensuring that employers know about the ScotAction programme by promoting our work in the press and working with partners such as the Federation of Small Businesses and the Scottish Chambers of Commerce. It is important that Parliament and MSPs know the actions that we are taking but also that they help us ensure that their constituents, employers and individuals can access ScotAction programmes.

As a Government, we remain committed to doing all that we can to ensure that individuals and businesses have the skills that are needed to face the challenges of the economic downturn and to support growth and recovery.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The cabinet secretary will take questions on the issues that were raised in her statement, for which I will allow 20 minutes.

David Whitton (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Lab): I thank the cabinet secretary for the advance copy of her statement, although it did not really contain anything new. I read most of it in the papers on Sunday.

I am glad that the cabinet secretary said that she will listen to the Opposition, because we have a long track record of supporting the creation of apprenticeships. We argued for the funding to create 7,800 more apprenticeships in the budget negotiations for 2009-10 and finally got the Scottish National Party Government to agree to that. We argued for the apprentice guarantee scheme. The First Minister promised that he would back that—that claim was repeated in the press release about the adopt an apprentice scheme, but we know that of the 1,300 trainees who have been made redundant, 600 are still looking for alternative training options and nearly 300 have left training. The idea of the adopt an apprentice scheme was born at the skills summit in April—another Labour proposal. Here we are in November—seven months later—and we finally have the details. Better late than never.

The SNP Government now claims that funding for apprentice places is vital to the Scottish economy. We have told the Government that for months. The Government talks of the challenging time that faces the construction industry and its impact on apprentice places. That challenge has been made all the harder by the SNP's decision slavishly to proceed with creating the Scottish Futures Trust, which led to a dramatic reduction in public sector construction projects that put thousands of workers on the dole. How many apprentice places could be created if the SNP reversed its ludicrous decision to scrap the Glasgow airport rail link project?

The cabinet secretary boasts that Scotland has “the most comprehensive package of support for apprentices in the UK.”

Just saying that does not make it so. As she said, more than 600 apprentices still look to finish their courses. What action is she taking to place them? More than 300 apprentices have left training. What action is she taking to find them and get them back into training? She boasts of extra capacity, but if Labour asks for another 7,800 apprentice

places to be funded from next year's budget, will she support us?

Fiona Hyslop: That was several statements and a few questions; I will address the few questions.

It would have helped if Labour had supported the SNP Government's first budget for 2009-10, which contained funding for apprenticeships.

David Whitton: No, it did not.

Andy Kerr (East Kilbride) (Lab): No, it did not.

Fiona Hyslop: That fact did not change even when Labour was not willing to support the budget. I am more than happy to share good ideas with Labour. The money for apprenticeships was in the budget the first time and the second time, regardless of whether we had Labour's support.

There is £2 billion working in the construction sector to help to ensure that we can build for recovery. The investment of £2 billion in schools alone from 2007 to 2012 is essential, particularly given that most redundancies are in the construction sector.

Not for the first time, the Labour Party's figures on apprentices are wrong. Since February, only 397 apprentices have been made redundant. Each redundancy is difficult for the individual concerned, but we can take credit for the fact that 43 per cent of apprentice construction workers have been offered places and are continuing their apprenticeships and that 180 apprentices are in jobs.

As for the 300 apprentices who have left, Dave Whitton might not be aware that apprentices leave courses all the time, every year—recession or no recession—for disciplinary reasons or to have children, for example. I do not think that he had that in mind when he said that he wanted us to search them down and bring them back in.

We must work constructively with the sector. Ordinarily, Dave Whitton comes to the chamber with constructive suggestions, to which I am more than willing to listen. Rather than trying to nitpick, pick holes or mislead people, he would be better spending his energy on ensuring that employers in his area and his constituents benefit from the variety of options and incentives that are available. That is what people expect of the Parliament during a recession.

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I thank the cabinet secretary for the advance sight of her statement. As businesses throughout the country struggle with the effects of Labour's recession, it is important that the Government provides support to sustain employment and help with retraining, so we welcome many of the measures that the cabinet secretary announced. However, I agree with David Whitton, who is

muttering at me from across the chamber, that there was little new in the cabinet secretary's statement, although it is helpful to have a summary of what has already been announced.

I have two questions for the cabinet secretary. First, there is reference in the statement to the skills strategy, which, as she will recall, was rejected by Parliament back in 2007. Since then, we have had numerous calls from across the chamber for the skills strategy to be refreshed and brought back to Parliament. When will that happen? I believe that now would be the perfect time to do that. If the cabinet secretary brought an updated skills strategy back to Parliament, she would probably find that the other parties would engage constructively on it.

My second question relates to the cabinet secretary's announcement of the allocation of money to colleges. I am sure that she will recall the debate that we had a few weeks ago, when a Conservative amendment on the allocation of funding to colleges, particularly for those in rural areas, was accepted unanimously by the Parliament. Will she ensure that rural colleges get their fair share of future allocations of money?

Fiona Hyslop: On the member's second question, I have indicated that it is important that we ensure that colleges across Scotland are supported. That is why, despite a real-terms reduction in the budget for 2010-11, colleges will receive not only a cash-terms increase but a real-terms increase. However, I remind members of differences in the claimant count for 18 to 24-year-olds across the country. For example, in North Lanarkshire there is an increase of up to 5 per cent; in East Ayrshire, the increase is more than 4 per cent; in North Ayrshire, the increase is 4.5 per cent; in Aberdeenshire the increase is down to just over 1 per cent; and in Angus the increase is 1.4 per cent. Indeed, there has been a reduction across Scotland in the claimant count for 18 to 24-year-olds.

Our youth unemployment figures are below those of the UK because we are taking strategic decisions that help us to support areas that need it. However, I recognise that, particularly with the youth guarantee scheme and some of the issues that we will have to deal with post-Christmas and into next year with the flexible new deal, rural colleges as well as others will need support.

I should say that I am responding to a request from Parliament to come and update members on the details of ScotAction and the contracting of apprenticeships. The Parliament requested that in May, and I am acceding to it. We refreshed the skills strategy as requested by Parliament, and that was published in January or February last year. However, I have also agreed to a request by Margaret Smith that we come again to the

strategy. I remind members that one of the reasons why we have been able to provide sector-specific incentives is because we abandoned the previous one-size-fits-all strategy. Part of the skills strategy allows for more flexible and responsive attitudes. We might not have been able to take those steps in the recession had we not adopted our skills strategy.

Jeremy Purvis (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD): I thank the cabinet secretary for an advance copy of her statement.

It remains the case that no Government skills strategy has been endorsed by the Parliament. The Government has said in every one of its messages that we are supposed to pay heed to the focus on outcomes rather than inputs, so how many new jobs will be created by the measures in the package that the cabinet secretary announced in her statement?

In October 2009, official labour market statistics showed that unemployment is growing at a faster rate in Scotland than in the UK as a whole. However, the SNP election address for the European elections this year claimed that, on top of the capital budget, 20,000 new jobs would be created as part of the recovery plan. Will the cabinet secretary indicate where those further 20,000 jobs are being created for the Scottish economy?

The cabinet secretary referred to construction skills figures in her statement. However, in a report in October 2009, the ConstructionSkills group said:

“ConstructionSkills predicts that just 36% of its apprentices in England will find work this year”—

and

“an even bigger plunge in Scotland, with only 1,200 apprentices expected to find employment—a 46% drop since 2008.”

Why was there no mention of the ConstructionSkills forecasts?

Regrettably, there is nothing in the statement for employers, especially in textiles and manufacturing, in my constituency and others who have made difficult decisions to ask workers to go on to short-time working. The issue has been addressed by the Welsh Assembly, but there has been nothing from the Government on the matter, despite our repeated requests over more than a year. The cabinet secretary cannot say in her statement that she has been listening to Opposition parties if those parties have been telling the Government for a year that an issue is critical for our economy but the Government has done nothing about it. When will she respond positively to our request?

Fiona Hyslop: The member has raised a number of issues, but I am conscious of the time. Apprentices in Scotland are employed. We have not taken the programme route, as in England, where apprenticeships can be achieved without employment. The 7,800 additional apprenticeships that we are providing all involve employed apprentices. They have added to the provisions of the economic recovery plan that have helped to create and preserve jobs. Of particular importance is the public sector investment that has been made in rail, as the member knows, and construction across Scotland. That has occurred with particular support from accelerated capital expenditure.

I am pleased to tell the member that Keith Brown has met Jim Hume to discuss some of the issues that have been raised in relation to the textile industry, in particular. The announcements that have been made about ScotAction include provisions for the textile industry. Invest in an apprentice is one initiative of which that industry can take advantage.

We have put together a programme for all sectors and ages that is the most comprehensive in the UK. That is why a number of national skills bodies are looking to Scotland to provide the lead in the area. We regularly share and exchange information with our English colleagues.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I, too, am conscious of the time. Seven members have indicated that they wish to ask a question. I ask them to keep to questions and ask the minister to keep to answering them. If she cannot reply to a question now, she can do so in writing.

Linda Fabiani (Central Scotland) (SNP): While meeting many businesses in Lanarkshire recently, I have noticed that the view is prevalent that when times are rough—in times of recession—it is essential not to drop training and to hone businesses so that they can be successful when we come out of recession. Can the cabinet secretary explain further today's announcement of funding to support business improvement techniques? I understand that that involves work-based training, especially for manufacturing and engineering businesses. Can she give us an idea of the level of interest among companies large and small in taking up the offer?

Fiona Hyslop: Business improvement to shape businesses for the future is an important area. John Park has pursued the issue, in particular management apprenticeships. Small businesses can invest to enable existing employees to take on business improvement training. Lanarkshire is a key example of an area where support is needed; I referred to the increases in youth unemployment there. That is why colleges in Lanarkshire received

the largest investment in some areas, especially to support young people.

John Park (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): Figures from the Scottish Parliament information centre indicate that 1,369 modern apprentices have been made redundant since April and only 486 have been placed since then. The safeguard an apprentice scheme that has been announced today is the right approach. However, will the cabinet secretary confirm that it will cover only 100 apprentices in the engineering, construction and manufacturing sectors?

Fiona Hyslop: We can follow up the matter with SPICe, but the figures that it cites are for a 16-month period, not the period since April. I gave the figure of 397, with 180 apprenticeships supported by the adopt an apprentice scheme. I am sure that we can pursue the veracity of the figures later. It is better to focus our attention on the success stories and on ensuring that people are aware of what can be achieved.

The provision of £75 a week is a good measure that will enable people to keep the apprentices whom they need. The programme is sector specific and includes a range of initiatives. We have been told that the sectors to which the safeguard an apprentice scheme applies are those that will benefit most from it. Small and medium-sized businesses can benefit most from the ScotAction programme.

Aileen Campbell (South of Scotland) (SNP): The cabinet secretary noted that there has been a 42 per cent increase in the uptake of ILAs compared with last year. Will she elaborate on the groups that are benefiting from that?

Fiona Hyslop: A number of groups are benefiting. Where people have been made redundant, we are encouraging employers to allow them to retrain while they are in work, so that they can be retrained before moving elsewhere. ILAs and the flexibility that they offer are another outcome. I know that Jeremy Purvis does not like outcomes from the skills strategy, but a 42 per cent increase in the number of those taking up ILAs is important.

When we deliver programmes to help those who are unemployed, people expect the Parliament to come together to promote what is available and to ensure that people know about it. All MSPs are being given information relating to this statement to help them to communicate with their constituents, particularly about the short-term courses that ILAs provide. In many ways, those are what employers are looking for, rather than courses that take several years. The flexibility of what is available, from modern apprenticeships to short, sharp ILA courses, is producing a responsive system under ScotAction.

Margaret Smith (Edinburgh West) (LD): I welcome the statement. I wish to focus on the specific issue of financial sector jobs. On Monday, the Royal Bank of Scotland—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: A question, please, Ms Smith.

Margaret Smith: This is my question. On Monday, the Royal Bank of Scotland announced a further 3,700 job losses. I know from speaking to representatives of RBS and Lloyds yesterday that the banks are continuing to work with the finance sector jobs task force to find employment for those who have lost their job. What is the cabinet secretary doing in respect of the task force? How successful has it been in securing training and employment for those workers who have lost their job in that key sector, many of whom are my constituents?

Fiona Hyslop: That is a very important question. PACE has been involved with RBS for some time, anticipating that there might be difficulties ahead. The role of the finance sector jobs task force is important. There are jobs and opportunities in the financial services sector, albeit that they are in areas other than those where people are facing redundancy. It is essential that we use the skills of individuals who provide careers guidance. The support for PACE and the increased number of advisers will help with the response to large-scale redundancies. In this instance, it is not just larger companies that will be affected by restructuring; smaller companies within the broad family will also be affected, and they, too, will get support from PACE.

I also mention the responsibility of Jobcentre Plus. People are coming out of the labour market, claiming unemployment benefit and then moving on to other jobs. There is still a throughput of people who, having been made redundant, are getting jobs, which compares positively with previous recessions. We cannot make snap judgments in that regard, but there is evidence that much of the support from PACE and other organisations is helping people to get back into work in Scotland.

Johann Lamont (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab): Given all the evidence of inequality within Scotland, for example in the employment of women and regarding the severe challenge that people with disabilities face in accessing work, can the minister explain why her statement is virtually silent on how those and other disadvantaged groups will be targeted and supported? Will the minister specify what steps she and Skills Development Scotland are taking to address inequality in employment? Will the minister review her strategy as a matter of urgency to ensure that it identifies and addresses targets for those who are most vulnerable to unemployment and who

are suffering the impact of the recession disproportionately?

Fiona Hyslop: That is a very important issue. One of the big challenges now relates to training for work for those who are more vulnerable, particularly because of the recession. I have corresponded with Johann Lamont on the matter, and I am happy to do so further on issues around apprenticeships. The perspective of apprenticeships—and even the word “apprenticeship”—can put off many women. I acknowledge that there is a gender imbalance. Johann Lamont has raised the matter before on a number of occasions. I am happy to take the matter forward in developing the strategy.

Elizabeth Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Did the work that the cabinet secretary mentioned regarding the Federation of Small Businesses and the Scottish Chambers of Commerce include discussions about improving apprentices’ literacy and numeracy?

Fiona Hyslop: One of the issues in the skills strategy that Murdo Fraser wishes us to revisit is the opportunity to deliver literacy and numeracy, for the first time, through work-based assessment and learning supported by ILAs. We have already taken exactly that position.

The member is absolutely right about improving numeracy and literacy. The biggest survey that Scotland has ever seen is currently taking place to benchmark that, and the 42 per cent increase in ILAs that we have promoted is a great example of how to use flexible learning to help with literacy and numeracy in support of people in the workplace. The FSB and the Scottish Chambers of Commerce have been very much engaged in ensuring that the ScotAction programme is informed, and they are making their memberships aware of the opportunities.

Small businesses in Scotland need our support, and we are providing that support with ScotAction.

Business Motions

16:59

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson): The next item of business is consideration of business motion S3M-5113, in the name of Bruce Crawford, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, which sets out a revised business programme for Thursday 5 November.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees the following revision to the programme of business for Thursday 5 November 2009—

after

2.15 pm Themed Question Time
Health and Wellbeing

insert

followed by Ministerial Statement: Sex Offenders—
[Bruce Crawford.]

Motion agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next item of business is consideration of a further business motion, S3M-5114, which is also in the name of Bruce Crawford, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, which sets out a business programme.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees the following programme of business—

Wednesday 11 November 2009

2.30 pm Time for Reflection

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Scottish Government Debate:
Scotland’s Historic Environment – A
Unique Resource for our Economy
and our People

followed by Business Motion

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members’ Business

Thursday 12 November 2009

9.15 am Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Scottish Government Debate:
Central Scotland Green Network

11.40 am General Question Time

12 noon First Minister’s Question Time

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

2.55 pm Scottish Government Debate: The
Future of Community Fire Safety in
Scotland

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time
followed by Members' Business

Wednesday 18 November 2009

2.30 pm Time for Reflection
followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions
followed by Stage 3 Proceedings: Arbitration
 (Scotland) Bill
followed by Business Motion
followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time
followed by Members' Business

Thursday 19 November 2009

9.15 am Parliamentary Bureau Motions
followed by Scottish Government Business
 11.40 am General Question Time
 12 noon First Minister's Question Time
 2.15 pm Themed Question Time
 Finance and Sustainable Growth
 2.55 pm Stage 3 Proceedings: Schools
 Consultation (Scotland) Bill
followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions
 5.00 pm Decision Time
followed by Members' Business—[*Bruce
 Crawford.*]

Motion agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next item of business is consideration of yet another business motion, S3M-5115, in the name of Bruce Crawford, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, which sets out the timetable for stage 2 of the Marine (Scotland) Bill.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees that consideration of the Marine (Scotland) Bill at Stage 2 be completed by 4 December 2009.—[*Bruce Crawford.*]

Motion agreed to.

Parliamentary Bureau Motion

17:00

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-5116, on approval of a Scottish statutory instrument.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees that the draft Public Appointments and Public Bodies etc. (Scotland) Act 2003 (Amendment of Specified Authorities) Order 2009 be approved.—[*Bruce Crawford.*]

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

Decision Time

17:01

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson):

There are five questions to be put as a result of today's business. The first question is, that amendment S3M-5110.1, in the name of Sarah Boyack, which seeks to amend motion S3M-5110, in the name of Roseanna Cunningham, on Scotland's national parks, be agreed to.

Amendment agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S3M-5110.2, in the name of John Scott, which also seeks to amend motion S3M-5110, in the name of Roseanna Cunningham, on Scotland's national parks, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

FOR

Adam, Brian (Aberdeen North) (SNP)
 Aitken, Bill (Glasgow) (Con)
 Allan, Alasdair (Western Isles) (SNP)
 Brocklebank, Ted (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Brown, Gavin (Lothians) (Con)
 Brown, Keith (Ochil) (SNP)
 Brownlee, Derek (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Campbell, Aileen (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Carlaw, Jackson (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Crawford, Bruce (Stirling) (SNP)
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perth) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP)
 Fabiani, Linda (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 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)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Lothians) (SNP)
 Ingram, Adam (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Johnstone, Alex (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Lamont, John (Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacAskill, Kenny (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Marwick, Tricia (Central Fife) (SNP)
 Mather, Jim (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McGrigor, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 McKee, Ian (Lothians) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 McLetchie, David (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Con)
 McMillan, Stuart (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Milne, Nanette (North East 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)

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

Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Baker, Richard (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Edinburgh Central) (Lab)
 Brown, Robert (Glasgow) (LD)
 Butler, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab)
 Chisholm, Malcolm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab)
 Curran, Margaret (Glasgow Baillieston) (Lab)
 Ferguson, Patricia (Glasgow Maryhill) (Lab)
 Gillon, Karen (Clydesdale) (Lab)
 Glen, Marlyn (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Godman, Trish (West Renfrewshire) (Lab)
 Gordon, Charlie (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Gray, Iain (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Harper, Robin (Lothians) (Green)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Henry, Hugh (Paisley South) (Lab)
 Hume, Jim (South of Scotland) (LD)
 Kelly, James (Glasgow Rutherglen) (Lab)
 Kerr, Andy (East Kilbride) (Lab)
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab)
 Macdonald, Lewis (Aberdeen Central) (Lab)
 Macintosh, Ken (Eastwood) (Lab)
 Martin, Paul (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney) (LD)
 McAveety, Mr Frank (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab)
 McCabe, Tom (Hamilton South) (Lab)
 McConnell, Jack (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)
 McInnes, Alison (North East Scotland) (LD)
 McMahon, Michael (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab)
 McNulty, Des (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab)
 Mulligan, Mary (Linlithgow) (Lab)
 Munro, John Farquhar (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD)
 Murray, Elaine (Dumfries) (Lab)
 Park, John (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Peacock, Peter (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Peattie, Cathy (Falkirk East) (Lab)
 Pringle, Mike (Edinburgh South) (LD)
 Purvis, Jeremy (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD)
 Rumbles, Mike (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD)
 Scott, Tavish (Shetland) (LD)
 Simpson, Dr Richard (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Smith, Elaine (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab)
 Smith, Iain (North East Fife) (LD)
 Smith, Margaret (Edinburgh West) (LD)
 Stephen, Nicol (Aberdeen South) (LD)
 Stewart, David (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Stone, Jamie (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)
 Tolson, Jim (Dunfermline West) (LD)
 Whitefield, Karen (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab)
 Whitton, David (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Lab)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 51, Against 51, Abstentions 0.

I will therefore use my casting vote and, according to convention, the amendment will fall.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S3M-5110.3, in the name of Liam McArthur, which seeks to amend motion S3M-5110, in the name of Roseanna Cunningham, on Scotland's national parks, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

FOR

Adam, Brian (Aberdeen North) (SNP)
 Aitken, Bill (Glasgow) (Con)
 Allan, Alasdair (Western Isles) (SNP)
 Brocklebank, Ted (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Brown, Gavin (Lothians) (Con)
 Brown, Keith (Ochil) (SNP)
 Brown, Robert (Glasgow) (LD)
 Brownlee, Derek (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Campbell, Aileen (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Carlaw, Jackson (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Crawford, Bruce (Stirling) (SNP)
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perth) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP)
 Fabiani, Linda (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 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)
 Hume, Jim (South of Scotland) (LD)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Lothians) (SNP)
 Ingram, Adam (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Johnstone, Alex (North East Scotland) (Con)
 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)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney) (LD)
 McGrigor, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 McInnes, Alison (North East Scotland) (LD)
 McKee, Ian (Lothians) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 McLetchie, David (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Con)
 McMillan, Stuart (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Milne, Nanette (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Morgan, Alasdair (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Munro, John Farquhar (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD)
 Neil, Alex (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Paterson, Gil (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Pringle, Mike (Edinburgh South) (LD)
 Purvis, Jeremy (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee East) (SNP)
 Rumbles, Mike (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD)
 Russell, Michael (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Salmond, Alex (Gordon) (SNP)
 Scanlon, Mary (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)
 Scott, Tavish (Shetland) (LD)
 Smith, Elizabeth (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Smith, Iain (North East Fife) (LD)
 Smith, Margaret (Edinburgh West) (LD)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Lothians) (SNP)
 Stephen, Nicol (Aberdeen South) (LD)
 Stone, Jamie (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Govan) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (North Tayside) (SNP)

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

AGAINST

Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Baker, Richard (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Edinburgh Central) (Lab)
 Butler, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab)
 Chisholm, Malcolm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab)
 Curran, Margaret (Glasgow Baillieston) (Lab)
 Ferguson, Patricia (Glasgow Maryhill) (Lab)
 Gillon, Karen (Clydesdale) (Lab)
 Glen, Marlyn (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Godman, Trish (West Renfrewshire) (Lab)
 Gordon, Charlie (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Gray, Iain (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Harper, Robin (Lothians) (Green)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Henry, Hugh (Paisley South) (Lab)
 Kelly, James (Glasgow Rutherglen) (Lab)
 Kerr, Andy (East Kilbride) (Lab)
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab)
 Macdonald, Lewis (Aberdeen Central) (Lab)
 Macintosh, Ken (Eastwood) (Lab)
 Martin, Paul (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab)
 McAveety, Mr Frank (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab)
 McCabe, Tom (Hamilton South) (Lab)
 McConnell, Jack (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)
 McMahon, Michael (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab)
 McNulty, Des (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab)
 Mulligan, Mary (Linlithgow) (Lab)
 Murray, Elaine (Dumfries) (Lab)
 Park, John (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Peacock, Peter (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Peattie, Cathy (Falkirk East) (Lab)
 Simpson, Dr Richard (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Smith, Elaine (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab)
 Stewart, David (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Whitefield, Karen (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab)
 Whitton, David (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Lab)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 65, Against 37, Abstentions 0.

Amendment agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S3M-5110, in the name of Roseanna Cunningham, on Scotland's national parks, as amended, be agreed to.

Motion, as amended, agreed to,

That the Parliament commends the contribution that Scotland's two national parks make to sustainable social and economic development and to delivering the Greener Scotland agenda; notes the outcome of the National Parks Strategic Review, and welcomes the proposal to set up a National Parks Strategy group; believes that it should explore the potential for establishing new national parks, including in marine and coastal areas; celebrates the success of the boards of the National Parks in giving a voice to local people in managing their own environment, and calls for early consideration to be given to increasing the directly elected presence on boards.

The Presiding Officer: The final question is, that motion S3M-5116, in the name of Bruce Crawford, on approval of a Scottish statutory instrument, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that the draft Public Appointments and Public Bodies etc. (Scotland) Act 2003 (Amendment of Specified Authorities) Order 2009 be approved.

Elaine Murray (Dumfries) (Lab): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. Can you clarify whether it is appropriate for one member to shout “hypocrite” at another member from a sedentary position in the chamber?

The Presiding Officer: I did not hear that, Dr Murray, but if that did indeed happen, I would not approve of it and I would suggest that members refrain from such behaviour.

Glasgow Airport Rail Link

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Alasdair Morgan): The final item of business today is a members’ business debate on motion S3M-4882, in the name of Bill Butler, on don’t derail GARL. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament regrets the proposal in the SNP government’s draft budget, published on 17 September 2009, to drop the Glasgow Airport Rail Link (GARL) project; considers that the proposed cut is short-sighted, given that a new airport rail link would provide Glasgow with a direct connection to three international airports and would contribute in a positive fashion to the economic development of Glasgow and west central Scotland, especially at this difficult time; believes that the rail link is an indispensable component of a modern 21st century transport infrastructure for the whole of Scotland; considers that GARL will boost public transport and reduce the number of car journeys to the airport; further considers that the promise to have GARL in place was a vital consideration in the awarding of the 2014 Commonwealth Games to Glasgow, and hopes that, in the course of the budget process, wiser counsel prevails.

17:05

Bill Butler (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab): On 17 September, John Swinney announced the Scottish National Party Government’s decision to axe the Glasgow airport rail link. It was a bolt out of the blue—certainly to Opposition members and, I suspect, to most, if not all, SNP back benchers. There had been no consultation of the main stakeholders in the project, the business community had been left in the dark, and the leader of Glasgow City Council had been given all of 20 minutes’ notice of the announcement. The same degree of courtesy was extended to Amanda McMillan, the managing director of Glasgow airport.

The debate provides members with their first opportunity in the chamber to support a call for the reversal of this short-sighted proposal. I suspect that it will not be the last time that Government ministers find themselves under scrutiny on the matter. They should not be surprised, given the overwhelming case in favour of the GARL project.

Until 17 September, the case for GARL had enjoyed widespread support across the parties in the Parliament. As far back as 3 October 2000, Sandra White, the SNP list member for Glasgow, bemoaned the

“lack of a direct rail link to Glasgow airport”

and urged the then Scottish Executive to

“implement plans and make available the necessary funds”

for such a scheme. She was right to do so.

Indeed, in 2006, at the preliminary and final stages of the Glasgow Airport Rail Link Bill—the private bill to promote GARL—all SNP members who were present voted in favour of the project's implementation. Parliament spoke with an almost unanimous voice. SNP MSPs—then humble Opposition back benchers, some now elevated to ministerial rank—willingly lent their support. Among them were Mr Swinney, who is now Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth; Stewart Stevenson, who is now holder of the transport portfolio; and Nicola Sturgeon, who is now Deputy First Minister and still one of Glasgow's 17 MSPs. In 2006, they all spoke up for GARL. Since the announcement of its axing in September, all SNP MSPs have been struck dumb. The debate provides SNP members—whether from Glasgow or not—with the opportunity to rediscover the power of speech and, importantly, their self-respect.

I hope that we hear from all parties the compelling case in favour of GARL. It is a powerful case, which not even the most obdurate minister would dare to ignore. The project would provide a number of significant benefits: around 1,300 jobs would be created; extensive training opportunities would be provided in the west of Scotland; and at least £300 million-worth of investment would be attracted to west central Scotland. Indeed, as the then Minister for Transport, Tavish Scott, said during the final stage debate on 29 November 2006,

"The Glasgow airport rail link will provide an important contribution to economic growth in Renfrewshire, Glasgow and throughout Scotland. The link will be good for local residents, airport workers, tourists and Scottish business."—[*Official Report*, 29 November 2006; c 29839.]

In addition, GARL would provide Glasgow's business district and the rest of Scotland with a vital link to the international airport, where passenger numbers are predicted to go from 8.8 million a year to 17.1 million by 2030.

Indeed, the environmental advantages of GARL are not insignificant. At the moment, 95 per cent of people who travel to Glasgow airport do so by road, many on the congested M8. From an environmental and logistical point of view, that is unacceptable. GARL and Glasgow crossrail—which, at the moment, finds itself shunted into a siding by the Government—are particularly significant in that regard, because such developments can provide a 20 per cent modal shift on to public transport, as evidenced by Manchester and Newcastle airports.

Members should also note that the GARL project and the Government's guarantee to deliver it played a vital role in Glasgow's successful bid for the 2014 Commonwealth games. A promise

that was given on the international stage on behalf of all Scotland should be kept.

Given those obvious benefits and the Government's acknowledgement of the national strategic importance of GARL to the Scottish economy, our constituents are entitled to ask why on earth Mr Salmond has agreed to dump it.

Increasing concern at the

"significant difference in the real costs"—[*Official Report*, 17 September 2009; c 19763.]

of the project was cited by the finance secretary on and after September 17, especially in relation to early work being carried out to the airport campus itself. He claimed that costs had rocketed from £8 million to £70 million. That staggering increase is—I will be polite—misleading and inaccurate to say the least. The £8 million was a costing from 2004 before the bill had been introduced to the Parliament. The £70 million, which Mr Swinney and Mr Salmond say has been added to the overall cost, was clearly contained within the £210 million budget estimate when Strathclyde partnership for transport transferred responsibility for the project to Transport Scotland in May 2008. It is important for members to realise that, when the official transfer took place, Transport Scotland carried out its own thorough risk assessment and due diligence over a period of three months. No significant cost increase or overspend was identified. The financial case for GARL was and remains sound.

The Government's proposal to axe GARL is plain wrong. No convincing case to ditch the project has been advanced. On the contrary, the evidence for reinstating the project in the budget is highly persuasive. The SNP Government has got its priorities wrong, and I hope that all members, including back benchers on the Government side, will press ministers to reconsider. I advise them that not to do so is a mistake that will not readily be forgiven, for GARL is a national priority for Scotland. It is time for all parties to speak up, to step up to the plate, and to put GARL back on track. Members on this side of the chamber will do just that.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: In view of the number of members who wish to speak in the debate, I am minded to accept a motion without notice to extend the time for debate by half an hour.

Motion moved,

That, under Rule 8.14.3, the debate be extended by 30 minutes.—[*Bill Butler*.]

Motion agreed to.

17:12

Sandra White (Glasgow) (SNP): I welcome the opportunity to speak in the debate and to give those who wish to make political capital from this difficult decision an opportunity to reflect on and, I hope, digest certain unequivocal truths.

I remind Bill Butler that his Government never took GARL forward—he should remember that. *[Interruption.]* Yes, we hear the shrill voices, outrage and horror from the Labour members, but will we have a mature debate on the subject and the savings that will have to be made if GARL is to go ahead? I doubt it.

Only yesterday, the Labour Chancellor of the Exchequer announced a further bail-out of Britain's banks to the tune of almost £40 billion, which dwarfs the entire block grant that is available to the Scottish Government. He also announced the sale of the banks' profitable insurance operations, which will endanger a very important sector that currently supports 1,600 jobs in Glasgow. Do we hear anything from the members opposite about that? No, of course not. They have no concern for the people of Glasgow, their future or their livelihoods. They are in opposition for opposition's sake, and are ready to dance whenever the jig is asked of them. It is political posturing of the worst kind. It has always been known that they do not stand up for Glasgow or Scotland's interests as they take their orders from London's Labour Party.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Order. I ask the speaker to address the motion that is before us.

Sandra White: I will, but this is part of it.

It pains me to say this as I have great respect for certain journalists—I lobbied and led debates in support of media jobs and freedom of speech—but the *Evening Times*, once a widely respected newspaper, has in many people's eyes become the mouthpiece of the Labour Party in Glasgow. Some might say that the tail is wagging the dog. I wonder who is being ripped off. GARL is mentioned in the *Evening Times* day after day.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Order.

Sandra White: I mentioned GARL.

Bill Butler: On a point of order, Presiding Officer. Would you be so kind as to remind the member again to speak to the motion?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The member must speak to the motion that is being debated, which I have not heard much about so far. Can we get back to it? I would also appreciate fewer interruptions from Labour members.

Sandra White: Presiding Officer, I did—

Jack McConnell (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab): Will the member take an intervention?

Sandra White: No, I will not.

I did mention GARL. It was part of an *Evening Times* campaign about ripped-off Glasgow.

Let us deal in truths rather than scaremonger. Let us acknowledge—I am going on to GARL—that, of all the mainland councils in Scotland, Glasgow City Council receives the highest funding. Does Bill Butler dispute that it receives £2,871 per person?

Labour members have a big chance today. It is time for their party to grow up, be straight with the people of Glasgow and the people of Scotland, and tell us where they would save money to allow GARL to go ahead.

Dr Richard Simpson (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): Will the member take an intervention?

Jack McConnell: Will the member take an intervention?

Sandra White: No. I am sorry.

I suspect that Labour members will not tell us where they would save money to allow GARL to go ahead and that, through their inability to put forward any alternative proposal, they will be exposed as the political opportunists that many have come to know them as. Why will Steven Purcell, who is a Labour councillor, not use his millions of pounds of reserves to help to fund GARL? What is he doing with that money? It is time to come clean with the voters and explain to them exactly what is going on in Glasgow.

Labour is no longer the party of the people; it is the party that has created the largest public deficit in history. We are currently paying out £6 billion in interest rate payments every month. Labour members talk about GARL, about money, about Glasgow and about savings. The Labour Party has been in control in Glasgow for decades and has had the opportunity to take forward GARL and crossrail.

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

Sandra White: It is Labour that is ripping off Glasgow. *[Interruption.]*

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Order.

17:17

Lewis Macdonald (Aberdeen Central) (Lab): I congratulate Bill Butler on securing the debate. In his speech, which was mature and reasoned, he made it clear that the Glasgow airport rail link is of regional importance but it can also be an indispensable component of a modern, 21st

century transport infrastructure for the whole of Scotland. My constituents in Aberdeen would agree with him on that.

Jack McConnell: Does the member accept that the impact of the Glasgow airport rail link would be felt outside Glasgow, not just in it? Does he agree that people in constituencies such as mine, which has the lowest level of car ownership in Scotland outside Glasgow, would benefit from the existence of a rail link that would give them public transport access to Glasgow airport that they do not have at the moment, and that the decision that has been made therefore has implications far beyond the city? I hope that the Government is aware that its concern for the airport should extend beyond funding for Glasgow and that it will support the constituents of Lanarkshire and elsewhere.

Lewis Macdonald: Jack McConnell is absolutely right. He speaks with authority as he was First Minister when the GARL proposals came forward. My constituents in the north-east will welcome his comments. Their ability to use Glasgow airport to access places that are not served by flights from Aberdeen is significant. On that ground, they will support a direct link from Glasgow airport to the railway network that connects our cities.

Brian Adam (Aberdeen North) (SNP): Will the member tell his constituents and MSPs where the cuts would come in order to have the Glasgow airport rail link reinstated?

Lewis Macdonald: SNP members are not satisfied with setting Scotland against the rest of Britain; they spend a lot of time and effort trying to set one part of Scotland against other parts of Scotland.

The cancellation of the Glasgow airport rail link is not the SNP's first offence, of course. Mr Swinney and his colleagues cancelled the Edinburgh airport rail link as soon as they could after taking office. Some might believe that the cancellation of EARL and GARL is mere coincidence; others might detect a trend. For those of us who represent areas outwith the central belt, that trend is very worrying indeed. Of course, I want to see more direct routes to and from Aberdeen airport, which already has good connections with Scandinavia and generates much traffic indirectly with North America. However, a city region with a population base of 500,000 people, no matter how dynamic its local economy, cannot sustain the whole range of international and intercontinental routes. That is why I want my constituents to have the best possible access to Glasgow and Edinburgh airports and it is why I want those airports to have the best possible connections with the north-east.

The suggestion has been made—it was implicit in Brian Adam's question—that reinstating the Glasgow airport rail link would put at risk projects of importance to other parts of Scotland. That is a deeply divisive and misleading proposition. When it was first made, I raised my concerns directly with John Swinney, who responded within the same working day—I give him credit for that. However, he did not answer directly the question that I put to him then: was the Aberdeen western peripheral route considered for cancellation at the same time as the Glasgow airport rail link? That is what has been suggested by members of the SNP in the north-east, and it would be useful if Mr Swinney could answer that specific question directly this evening.

The Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change Committee heard in evidence last week that it will take three years to build the WPR—

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

17:21

Bill Aitken (Glasgow) (Con): I, too, congratulate Bill Butler on obtaining the debate and thank him for bringing the matter to the chamber. It is important that the issue is debated.

The justification for the GARL project has been repeated time and again in the Parliament, and I had thought that there was unanimity of opinion on it. As Bill Butler has said, its cancellation has implications for jobs and for the allied training that those jobs would inevitably require. Also, the existence of the link would make Glasgow a more attractive venue for both tourism and business. Indeed, as I have said in the chamber before, I doubt whether there is any city of metropolitan status in Europe that does not have a rail link from its airport to the city centre.

Dr Simpson: Is the member aware that there are more than 300 proposed airport rail connections throughout the world and that only the Scots have cancelled two such projects instead of building them?

Bill Aitken: I was not aware of that, but I welcome the information as it underlines that airport links to city centres are very important.

It is particularly disappointing that GARL is now not going to take place because it was an important feature in bringing the Commonwealth games bid to such a satisfactory conclusion. I have considerable sympathy with the view that Councillor Purcell has expressed. He feels that he gave his word on something that is no longer going to happen, which is disappointing to say the least. How the matter was handled and how the information was imparted left a lot to be desired.

On the other hand, the Government has an argument in respect of the costing of the project. The fuel dump removal costs, which have escalated dramatically, are a consideration that we must look at. There is also the difficulty that has arisen since it was agreed that the project would be undertaken with regard to BAA's policy on the disposal of certain airports. We cannot predict what the outcome of BAA's approach will be, but the potential sale of Glasgow airport would create some uncertainty about the GARL project.

The overall financial position must be looked at. I have been disappointed—not only in this context, but in many contexts over the past few weeks—that there still seems to be no appreciation in the Parliament as a whole of just how serious the economic situation is and what we will have to do to remedy it in the two to three years ahead. Those things must be considered. Everything is now in the melting pot for budget consideration and I hope that, even at this stage, the Government will look again at GARL and see whether there is any possibility of the project being fulfilled.

At the same time, it is incumbent on all of us who have any other viewpoint on the matter and would wish the project to go ahead to come up with solutions to the problem of how savings are going to be made in other accounts. In the present situation, that might not be easy.

17:25

Patricia Ferguson (Glasgow Maryhill) (Lab): I too congratulate Bill Butler—it is not something I am known to do, but I will on this occasion—on securing this vital debate and giving us all an opportunity to debate the Glasgow airport rail link.

I will concentrate on the issue that I know best in connection with GARL: the successful 2014 Commonwealth games bid.

The bid document that the previous Scottish Executive submitted to the Commonwealth Games Federation in 2007 clearly stated the many commitments that the Scottish Executive, Glasgow City Council and the Commonwealth Games Council for Scotland would make to support the bid to bring the games to Glasgow.

One of the major infrastructure projects that was included in the document was, of course, the Glasgow airport rail link. It was there in black and white. Helpfully, so too was a letter from the parties in the Parliament that supported the bid, in all its detail and complexity. Ms Sturgeon, in her capacity as deputy leader of the SNP, signed that letter and seemed pleased to do so. Indeed, there was unanimous support across the parties that are still represented in the chamber.

It was not only the front bench of the SNP that understood the value of the Glasgow airport rail link; in the final stage debate in November 2006, Sandra White, an SNP backbencher, stated:

“The benefits of the link are overwhelming, but one of its greatest benefits is that it will be a major feature in Glasgow's bid for the 2014 Commonwealth games. I believe that, with such an asset, we will win the bid.”—*[Official Report, 29 November 2006; c 29844.]*

Mrs White was right on that occasion—we won the bid, and our joined-up approach to transportation and the accessibility of all the venues in Glasgow was a key factor in that win.

The SNP Government has not only reneged on a commitment to Glasgow, the west of Scotland and to tourism providers, travellers and businesses across Scotland; it has broken a solemn undertaking that was given to the Commonwealth Games Federation.

As is the way with such organisations, the Commonwealth Games Federation has been diplomatic about the cancellation. It has, understandably, said little publicly, as it is a body that takes seriously its responsibility for the delivery of the games and the standards that are set, but as the person who was charged with the ministerial responsibility for Glasgow's bid in the previous Administration, I regret the cavalier decision of the SNP Government and sincerely hope that it will reconsider and not give the Commonwealth reason to believe that we are a nation that does not keep its word.

The previous British host of the Commonwealth games was Manchester. It is a sad irony that a Scot can travel from Waverley station direct to Manchester airport but cannot travel directly to Glasgow airport.

An editorial in yesterday's *Evening Times* quite rightly made the point that 17 Glasgow MSPs working together should be able to secure a better deal for Glasgow from this SNP Government. Those MSPs should also be able to persuade the Government that it must change its mind about GARL. Glasgow MSPs on this side of the chamber will try to do so. Unfortunately, tonight's debate would seem to indicate that, although we have the support of many of our colleagues, we will not have the support of those in the SNP. That is a fact that I genuinely regret, but is one that the people of Glasgow will remember—not just next Thursday, but for a long time to come.

17:29

Robert Brown (Glasgow) (LD): This must be the first members' business debate in which the two most senior cabinet ministers in the Government have stayed behind to reply to the debate.

The decision by the SNP Government to cancel the Glasgow airport rail link has no redeeming features. It is wrong in principle, wrong in practice, wrong politically and commercially and flawed in method. Indeed, it is unnecessary.

There must be something about airport rail links that casts a red film over the eyes of SNP ministers, but I must confess that it is still unclear to me why they have cancelled the GARL project. It is to Bill Butler's credit that he has expressed himself in moderate terms in tonight's debate, in the motion and in his speech. I hope that such an approach will produce a positive response from Mr Swinney and his colleagues as the days and weeks go by.

Margaret Curran (Glasgow Baillieston) (Lab): Robert Brown commented on the presence of two cabinet ministers. I ask him to comment on the absence of the Minister for Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change—as I wish to reflect on the minister's role in the matter—and on the absence of a number of SNP Glasgow back benchers.

Robert Brown: I will leave the facts to speak for themselves, as that is the best way to deal with them.

There is a plaintive cry from ministers and their back benchers that their opponents must say what they would cut, but that will simply not work: GARL was in the 2009-10 and 2010-11 capital budgets and it was deleted by the SNP. That signifies two things. First, the SNP Government has, with no process of review or appraisal, unilaterally decided that the outstanding economic case that was accepted by the Parliament when it approved the project was wrong. Secondly, the employment benefits in the current financial and economic crisis of a major infrastructure development such as GARL are to be cast aside, along with the 1,300 jobs and the £3 million of investment that go with it.

It is the way in which the SNP Government has gone about the cancellation that bothers me most. We can leave aside the fact that there was no proper reappraisal process and that the transport minister did not see fit to tell other stakeholders of the cancellation until 20 minutes before the announcement—perhaps he himself had not been told; the real gripe that people in Glasgow have about the cancellation is that there was no attempt to sit down with other stakeholders and ascertain whether, against the future pressures that Bill Aitken mentioned, which we all accept, the project could be progressed, perhaps in a more satisfactory fashion. Perhaps the timescales could be recalibrated, or the costs reduced. Perhaps other stakeholders would contribute, or other ways could be found to fund the project.

The transport minister—whose absence from today's debate has been mentioned—is in the process of finalising a private-sector-funded design, build, finance and maintain funding model for the Borders rail link, the cost of which is not dissimilar to the £175.7 million cost of the abandoned GARL branch link. In broad terms, a privately funded DBFM model might have a revenue cost to the public purse of around £10 million or £15 million per year, some of which should be offset by the passenger revenues that the line would create when it opened. Why was that option not examined? Why were alternative funding models not considered? I do not accept Mr Swinney's dismissal of that idea at the Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change Committee. What was needed was political will but, unfortunately for Glasgow and for Scotland, the Government has not got what it takes. The abandonment of manifesto pledges has entered into the very iron of its soul and affected much of its actions. The cancellation of GARL lacks transparency, justification and common sense.

In the words of Glasgow airport's managing director, the Government has created “a gaping hole” in Glasgow's and Scotland's transport infrastructure. No Government worth its salt should have done that; no Government with even the glimmerings of a commitment to a coherent transport strategy would have failed to consult and to examine options. The SNP Government has failed the basic test of competence, and in doing so it has badly let down Glasgow and Scotland. I hope that it has the common sense to think again.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The member's time is up.

17:33

Charlie Gordon (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab): I congratulate Bill Butler on bringing to the chamber a debate on a project that is essential to the city of Glasgow. I anticipated with pleasure what I thought would be the opportunity, on my return to the front bench tonight, to renew my acquaintance with my opposite number: Stewart Stevenson, the SNP Minister for Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change. Another time, perhaps.

I can, however, renew my acquaintance with the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth, John Swinney; we had a good go at the same subject yesterday at the Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change Committee.

I have said that I, and Labour, regard the project as essential to the city of Glasgow. We always regarded it as desirable, but as we are not yet fully out of recession it is essential for the sake of maintaining and creating employment that we

invest in skills and infrastructure, particularly transport infrastructure.

Yesterday, the cabinet secretary told the Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change Committee that he regarded the project as desirable but not essential. He went on to say that even if additional resources could be found to reinstate the project, it would not be something that he wanted to do. That is a strange definition of "desirable".

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth (John Swinney): I would be grateful if Mr Gordon would complete the explanation that I gave him at the committee yesterday: I agreed with his colleague, Mr Gray, that if there is more accelerated capital the greatest priority has to be social housing. I thought that that was Mr Gordon's view into the bargain.

Charlie Gordon: I made it clear that Labour has a strong commitment to additional expenditure on social housing, but we do not see it as a question of either/or. Accelerated capital might indeed be part of the solution to the reinstatement of GARL, but as the cabinet secretary knows, at yesterday's committee meeting we also discussed several other options for funding the reinstatement—indeed, Robert Brown has just made yet another suggestion—but the cabinet secretary turned me down when I suggested that he call a meeting of all the relevant stakeholders and interested parties.

This is emphatically not a question of getting a hack's brief from a party resource centre and playing some kind of political game; this is about doing the right thing by the people of Glasgow and the people of Scotland in very difficult times. People are still losing their jobs and many others are worried about losing theirs. Surely investment in a project such as GARL is absolutely relevant at such a time, as so many of the organisations that represent businesses are saying.

The project is essential and not just desirable, but even if the Government believes that it is only desirable surely we must find a way in which to get it back on track. We are considering the draft budget for 2010-11, when the project would require expenditure of £62.6 million. Are we seriously saying that that is not manageable within the ambit of a budget of £31 billion, given the examples of all the other financial solutions that it might be possible to bring into play? The debate is only just getting under way.

17:37

Stuart McMillan (West of Scotland) (SNP): As I have only four minutes, I will not be taking any interventions. I congratulate Bill Butler on securing

this evening's members' business debate, even though I disagree with his motion.

At the outset, I pose a question to all those who support GARL. What would they scrap to reintroduce the project? As the Parliament's committees are undertaking the budget scrutiny process, I look forward to reading how supporters of the GARL project would reintroduce it and by what means they would fund it. If GARL goes ahead, how many communities the length and breadth of Scotland will suffer as their funding is cut to pay for it? GARL supporters need to remember that, and they should also prepare their explanations of why they have cut local projects to fund a scheme that will transport a mere 11 passengers per train.

The costs of GARL were increasing long before the SNP came to power—from £140 million to about £160 million, then to the figure that Tavish Scott gave in an answer to the Parliament, when he said:

"The Glasgow airport rail link is on target to cost £170 million to £210 million".—[*Official Report*, 16 March 2006; c 24050.]

It is obvious that the costs of the project were wholly underestimated from the outset and, as a result, were not sustainable.

Some constituents have told me that they welcome the decision because they do not want another Parliament building fiasco to take place. I do not want that either, as it would do nothing to build confidence in the people of Scotland.

Glasgow has consistently done well from the Parliament. In 2009-10, Glasgow City Council received from the SNP Government the highest share of funding per head of population of any mainland council. Its share was 22 per cent above the Scottish average. Glasgow received more than £2,500 per head compared with the Scottish average of just over £2,000 per head. Aberdeen and Edinburgh receive just over £1,700 per head and Dundee receives just over £2,200. Glasgow is doing tremendously well from this SNP Government. I should also mention the money for the M74 extension; the Commonwealth games; the M80 upgrade; the new £842 million southern general hospital; which will be built with money from the public purse, not from the shameful public-private partnership and private finance initiative system; and the £1.164 billion for the Glasgow to Edinburgh railway improvements programme. I could go on, but I do not have the time.

Glasgow has done and is doing very well from this Parliament and this SNP Government. It is getting a better share of resources than any other mainland authority, so this "Poor Glasgow" political campaign is simply not factually accurate. In fact,

the more that new Labour goes on about poor Glasgow, the more votes the SNP gets across the rest of the country, including the west of Scotland region.

Archie Anderson, the chairman of the Paisley north community council, got it right. In welcoming the decision on GARL, he said:

"Common sense has prevailed. This is the right decision for the local area.

It is good that the Scottish Government realise that the rail link was simply a case of the emperor with no clothes. There was no economic case for the project."

In the future—[*Interruption.*]

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Order.

Stuart McMillan: In the future, let us have a GARL. Let us have a GARL that we can be proud of and can shout about. Let us have a GARL that actually takes people off the roads, compared with the 11 passengers per train that this project would have operated with. Moreover, let us have a GARL that will not require a £3.1 million subsidy every year. What we need is a GARL that is not a symbol of inadequacy and lack of ambition.

17:41

Paul Martin (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab): Like other members, I congratulate Bill Butler on his excellent speech. He showed not only that he cares about ensuring that Glasgow gets a fair deal, but that he is not willing to stand aside and let the city continue to be ripped off by this SNP Government.

This might be a habit of my new role as shadow business manager but I note that, this evening, eight of the nine Labour MSPs who represent Glasgow's constituencies are present in the chamber, and Pauline McNeill has provided medical certification to clarify why she cannot attend. That says something for those Glasgow members who, even when they were in government, were unwilling to stand aside and kept making the case for Glasgow.

Sandra White: On a point of order, Presiding Officer.

Paul Martin: I am very happy to give way to Sandra White or any other SNP member.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I will take Sandra White's point of order, although I ask that we get back to the debate on the motion. I would appreciate it if Mr Martin did so as well.

Sandra White: That is what I was going to ask, Presiding Officer. Mr Martin has not yet mentioned GARL.

Paul Martin: I thought that it would be helpful to refer to members' speeches. Indeed, Sandra

White herself mentioned the Glasgow *Evening Times*. The fact is that sometimes the truth hurts. We need to remember that the same things were said not only by the journalists who wrote the *Evening Times* articles, but by those who contributed to blogs and letters pages and the many other people in Glasgow who are concerned about this SNP Government.

Sandra White: On a point of order, Presiding Officer.

Paul Martin: It would be fair to say that, over the years, Glasgow has faced—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Hang on, Mr Martin. Sandra White has a point of order. [*Interruption.*] Can Sandra White's microphone be turned on, please?

Members: No.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Order.

Sandra White: My point of order is the same as my previous one. We are now two minutes into Paul Martin's speech and he has not yet mentioned GARL. Will you ask him to stick to the subject?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I will decide whether a contribution is relevant.

Paul Martin: I will follow your guidance, Presiding Officer.

Members have already raised a number of points and, in his summing up, John Swinney has to clarify why he was unwilling to get round the table with the various stakeholders that Charlie Gordon and others have mentioned. Perhaps he will also confirm my understanding that Councillor Steven Purcell was willing to provide additional funding to allow the project to go forward, because that would have been a very important move for GARL.

As members throughout the years have argued in this chamber, a good transport infrastructure is crucial to tackling many of the economic challenges that the city of Glasgow faces.

The Glasgow City Council briefing confirms the possibility of more than 1,300 job losses. Some SNP members might find that amusing, but it is not amusing for the men, women and children who will be affected by the Government's decisions and the issues that face us.

It is clear that the SNP Government has its priorities wrong. If members really want to make the case and stand up for Glasgow, they should get behind the motion in the name of Bill Butler.

17:45

Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): I am happy to congratulate Bill Butler on a continued high rate of success in bringing members' business motions to the chamber. He said that he hoped to hear a compelling case for the Glasgow airport rail link from members of all parties but, although he will certainly not hear a case against it from me, he will hear a rather more lukewarm case in favour. I highlight the difference between Bill Butler's speech and that of the next Labour speaker, Lewis Macdonald. Bill Butler attempted to make the environmental case and then Lewis Macdonald talked about the need to generate ever more air traffic. The Labour Party cannot have it both ways—either position is consistent, but it needs to choose one or the other.

Charlie Gordon: Does Patrick Harvie believe that John Swinney has made the case for the cancellation of the project?

Patrick Harvie: John Swinney has not made the case for the cancellation of the project. I will come on to that.

Bill Butler talked about the potential for a 20 per cent modal shift from road to rail if the project goes ahead, but that will bring a benefit only if, at the same time, we constrain aviation growth so that we have the same total number of journeys to and from the airport. If the number of journeys goes up, we will have a double whammy, with increased emissions from surface journeys and from the larger number of flights. At some point, we will have to get beyond that contradiction.

When the Glasgow Airport Rail Link Bill was introduced, I argued consistently that crossrail was the top priority. It should always have been the top priority, as it would have the maximum benefit for the maximum number of rail users in Glasgow and the wider region. It still should be the priority. I voted for the GARL bill simply because it would have been irrational to vote against it on the basis that projects were being pursued in the wrong order.

Although my support for the GARL project was lukewarm, my support for cancellation would be bizarre when set against the substantial and continually growing road-building project that the Government and its predecessor Administration have pursued. There are projects on the books that I would not build even if they were free to build and those should have been the targets for cancellation. Sadly, it is too late to cancel some of them, but there are other road projects that could be targets if savings are needed.

Some of the arguments on the project have been rehearsed at the Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change Committee and will continue to be debated as we draft a report for the Finance

Committee. There are issues on the timing of the decision and its announcement and on the process, which, in effect, prohibited rational discussion of alternative approaches by stakeholders. There are also issues on the presentation. The Government could have floated a proposal or recommendation from Government, with a willingness to discuss alternatives. However, we were merely presented with a decision. There is also the dispute about the figures and the management of costs. No doubt, the committee will address all those issues in our report.

Before I finish, I will address a longer-term issue, which is that, although we all expect that there will be funding constraints in the future, the far greater constraint arises as a result of Government priorities, because of the idea that a single vast project with a vast price tag—the additional Forth road bridge—should be the top and only priority. GARL will not be the last project to suffer because of that perverse priority. At a time when we need to invest in the low-carbon infrastructure through small measures, medium ones such as crossrail, and what is potentially the most expensive public investment programme—in electric charging points—that is a perverse priority.

17:49

Christopher Harvie (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP): I will accept no interventions until I am finished. I congratulate Bill Butler on securing a members' business debate on what is quite a controversial topic.

Yesterday was an historic day for rail transport. Warren Buffett, the sage of Omaha, has spoken. He bought the Burlington Northern Santa Fe Railway's 3,000 miles of track for \$26 billion. Had he bought at the rate at which the GARL project was calling on our finances, he would have got about 200 miles of track.

We should remember—I address Charlie Gordon in particular—that, in 1999, Sir Alastair Morton, who was the first and, in effect, only chair of the Strategic Rail Authority, went to Gordon Brown with proposals for major high-speed developments for Britain's railways that would have cost £30 billion. However, Gordon Brown—with Lady Vadera, the dark lady of the London Underground, standing beside him—slapped him down. Had we gone ahead with modernisation then, we would not be having this debate today, just as the town council of Marseilles does not have debates about more flights to Paris because the train à grand vitesse, or TGV, which is the fast express train on French railways, can get people there in three hours. We are suffering from the prudence in spades of a decade ago. Only in the mid-2020s will we get what every major European

nation, down to and including Spain, has got now. That is the penalty of having had the Labour Government in power.

The GARL project would only marginally, if at all, enhance accessibility to Glasgow airport. As one who travels quite frequently to the airport, I know that I can reach the airport from central Glasgow in about 15 minutes by bus, which takes a more direct route than what is proposed under GARL—

Johann Lamont (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab): Will the member take an intervention?

Christopher Harvie: No.

The estimated cost for the airport rail link has increased from £170 million at the point of parliamentary approval to almost £400 million.

Charlie Gordon: That figure is for two projects.

Christopher Harvie: Yes, that figure is for the two projects, but the branch at the end of the line would still cost £175 million for about 1.5 miles of track.

Anyway, I do not think that Glasgow airport's passenger numbers will double in the next decade because we will hit peak oil within about 10 years. We have already seen oil rebound from about \$30 per barrel to upwards of \$80 per barrel. My guess is that, by 2020, the price might be as high as \$300 per barrel. I wrote the history of North Sea oil, so I think that I know a bit about that. Therefore, the Labour members' notions of the importance of air traffic in Scotland will be sadly diminished by that time.

Brown's prudence has brought in the cuts—his failure to handle our banking system has led to the decision—but, as Charlie Gordon will be aware, the rot goes far further back. It takes me two-odd hours to come up here from the Borders, but what did I read on Monday? That day's edition of *The Scotsman* was deeply hostile to the Borders rail project, on which the Labour Party is advancing what is, let us say, a very sceptical view.

17:53

James Kelly (Glasgow Rutherglen) (Lab): I welcome the opportunity to take part in tonight's debate. I congratulate my colleague, Bill Butler, on securing it. As ever, he made a very strong and articulate case for retaining the Glasgow airport rail link.

In my comments, I want to look at what contribution the GARL project would make to the Scottish economy. From my early days on the Parliament's Finance Committee, I remember Alex Neil time and again reminding us that the SNP Government's prime policy was economic growth, with the aim of achieving by 2011 a growth rate greater than that of the UK. On each occasion on

which the Finance Committee has visited other parts of Scotland and held away days—interestingly, it will meet in Glasgow next Monday—committee members have pointed out the importance of connectivity and transport links for economic growth.

The Glasgow airport rail link would not only make an important contribution to Glasgow's economy, but would provide a link to other parts of Scotland. It would ensure greater movement of people and resources not just through Glasgow, but to other parts of Scotland. That view is shared by the business community, as we have seen from the submissions from the Confederation of British Industry Scotland, the Institute of Directors and others.

Comments have been made tonight about the number of jobs that will not be gained if we do not go ahead with the project: 1,300 jobs are likely to be lost.

As Patricia Ferguson eloquently pointed out, one of the big successes in recent years has been the bringing of the Commonwealth games to Glasgow. An infrastructure that will be sustainable in the future, which will involve building strong transport links, is central to that. The Glasgow airport rail link had the opportunity to contribute to making the games successful. We want visitors who arrive in the city to be able to get from the airport to their hotels and the Commonwealth games venues as quickly as possible. The decision that the SNP has taken will prohibit that.

Some SNP members have asked where we would take the money from. In previous contributions to finance debates, I have made suggestions about how money could be cut from the budget. I will make just one suggestion this evening: the Government should scrap the Scottish Futures Trust. At a cost of £23 million, it is a waste of public money and has brought no new projects into the Scottish infrastructure.

The SNP's attitude to the Glasgow airport rail link has been inconsistent to say the least. We have heard from others how the clarion calls came from the SNP in 2006 in support of the airport rail link, but tonight it is almost like we have the silence of the lambs. It is time that the SNP took its blinkers off. It should stop ripping off Glasgow and move forward with a decision that would support not just Glasgow but Scotland's economy. It must move forward now and support the airport rail link.

17:57

Des McNulty (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab): I congratulate Bill Butler on securing the debate. Many excellent speeches in support of the Glasgow airport rail link have been made.

The SNP is very fond of drawing comparisons with other small European countries. Some of the small northern European countries with which it makes comparisons, such as Norway, Sweden, Denmark and Ireland, all have rail links to their airports. The only exception in the SNP's arc is Iceland, but, of course, Reykjavik has particular problems, because it does not have a railway and it has lava fields between the airport and the centre of the city. There really should not be a problem in connecting Scotland's biggest city and its airport through the rail link. That should be a natural thing for a country to do in support of its own economic development.

Steven Purcell described the decision as "a dagger in the heart of Glasgow".

I disagree slightly, for the reasons that Jack McConnell mentioned. This is not just a Glasgow project—it is national project. The airport rail link would have brought many people closer to Glasgow airport by public transport.

I say to Mr Swinney that a Government that is unwilling to act in the interests of Scotland's largest city, which is at the centre of the conurbation where nearly half the people live, is not really fit to be governing Scotland.

There are a number of absentees this evening, to whom others have referred. Where are Bob Doris, Bill Kidd and Anne McLaughlin? More important, where is Stewart Stevenson? The SNP has been keen to insulate him from questioning about the decision. The reason for that is straightforward. In July, he was asked what was happening to the project and he said that it was on track and on target. If that was so, the question that I want to ask him, but which I will ask Mr Swinney, is this: When was Mr Stevenson told that the project was to be cancelled? Was he told one month before, one week before, on the same day or after the decision? I would like to know the answer.

The decision is wrong. In 2006, Parliament reached the right conclusion—that GARL should be built. The project has not been downgraded from "essential" to "desirable" in the meantime. I say that because Mr Swinney has provided no evidence to support his decision. At the Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change Committee meeting yesterday, he made it clear that the decision was his. He did not follow a review process for the GARL project or a review process that would have set out transport options and allow him to choose the least-damaging option. Any business that faced a financial problem would ask systematically what were its options and alternatives. The SNP has made a political decision, which is why Bob Doris, Bill Kidd and Anne McLaughlin are not here.

The process by which the decision was reached was flawed. I have an additional question to ask Mr Swinney. He has said that the decision was driven by a budgetary shortfall. I accept absolutely that there is a financial hole; the question is whether it is GARL shaped—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I am afraid that the member's time is up, so the question will have to wait. We must move to the final speech. I call John Swinney to wind up the debate.

18:01

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth (John Swinney): I congratulate Bill Butler on securing the debate. He also secured important congratulations from somebody who does not always congratulate him, and I am not talking about me.

I seem to cause a lot of trouble with Margaret Curran when I attend Parliament. She complained about my speaking in a debate the other week and wanted to know why I did so. The debate was on the school building programme and the Scottish Futures Trust, in which it was appropriate for me to participate. Equally, she should have no complaint about my presence tonight. I would have thought that a serious response from a Cabinet member to Mr Butler's debate would be welcome.

Margaret Curran: I say with no disrespect to the cabinet secretary that he should not flatter himself; I criticised not his presence, but the absence of others. The ministers who are responsible for decisions are not being held properly accountable to the Parliament. Fiona Hyslop should have faced the questions and Stewart Stevenson should face Parliament, too.

John Swinney: I say with the greatest respect to Margaret Curran that no one could in any way question my entitlement to respond to a debate that is the consequence of a decision that I took in bringing the Scottish Government's draft budget to Parliament. The responsibility for the decision rests on my shoulders and it is entirely appropriate that I should be here to answer for it.

As a matter of fact, Stewart Stevenson cannot be here because he is representing the Government to promote the Climate Change (Scotland) Act 2009, which the Parliament agreed, at an international summit in Barcelona. Of course, choices about diaries are made, but I judged that it was appropriate for him to fulfil that long-term commitment to support and explain the climate-change position, given the significance of the discussions on the subject that will take place in the next two months until the Copenhagen conference. I made that judgment and thought that

it was entirely appropriate for me to stand here to respond to the debate.

Mr Brown—and others, to an extent—asked why more extensive consultation of and dialogue with stakeholders did not take place before the decision was taken. Again, the decision on that was mine and I will give the reason for it. I sit in Parliament and frequently hear Opposition members complain that Parliament is not told first about Government decisions. If I had shared the news with stakeholders—who it is clear would have been aggrieved at the decision that the Government proposed to take—I could not have guaranteed that I would be in a position to assure Parliament that I had handled the communication and explanation of the decision properly. My conclusion was that it was important that Parliament was given its place and that it heard the Government's decision.

Johann Lamont: Does the cabinet secretary accept that the issue is not how he reported the decision once it was made, but how he reached the decision and what alternatives he might have explored with stakeholders before he came to that decision? The issue is not about protecting the rights of the Parliament once the decision was made, but about reflecting on the Parliament's view that GARL should have gone ahead.

John Swinney: With respect to Johann Lamont, the complaint that has been made is about the fact that stakeholders were not involved before the decision was explained to Parliament. I am simply sharing with Parliament why I decided to take that particular route.

Points have been raised about the process. I want to explain, as I did to the Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change Committee, exactly how the decision was arrived at. I maintain regular monitoring of the Government's capital budget. That is entirely my duty. I supervise the progress of projects and I determine the way in which projects will be timetabled to fit within the financial envelope that exists. Members will know—they do not need any lecture from me—that we have a fixed capital budget that cannot be breached and must be balanced every year. The importance of ensuring that capital budgets can be afforded is therefore central to the decisions that I must make.

In all the discussion that we have had tonight, there has been scant attention to the overall financial position. The reason why the GARL project was cancelled—

Charlie Gordon: We discussed yesterday in the Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change Committee the possibility that the cabinet secretary could seek an alternative funding route through the regulated assets of Network Rail,

something that allows him greater flexibility than the financial envelope to which he referred. Why did he not see that through?

John Swinney: I did not see it through because it would have meant that I would have had to re-open the commitments that I have asked Network Rail to deliver through the regulatory settlement, which include improvements to the Edinburgh to Glasgow rail link so that we can have greater connectivity between our two great cities, reduce journey times to 35 minutes between them and have trains stop at the new station that will be built in close proximity to Edinburgh airport and which will provide much greater capacity on the Edinburgh to Glasgow route. If I had asked Network Rail to accept the GARL project on to the regulated asset base, which I cannot be assured would have been possible, I would have had to re-open the regulatory settlement on Edinburgh to Glasgow improvements, Edinburgh and Glasgow to Aberdeen improvements or Inverness to Glasgow and Edinburgh improvements, which are major strategic projects to encourage modal shift in our country.

Apart from Mr Aitken, no member who has spoken in the debate has paid attention to the fact that we are dealing with a budget for 2010-11 that is lower than we expected it to be. Further, no account has been taken of the fact that there will be massive pressure on the public finances of Scotland in the years to come.

Patrick Harvie: I hope that the cabinet secretary recognises that I made comments on the expectation that funding for the Scottish Government will be constrained in the future, and on the much bigger factor of the Government's decision to prioritise one vast project that threatens every other transport intervention that the Parliament might choose to prioritise.

John Swinney: If we do not take the steps that we are taking on the Forth replacement crossing, there will be an even greater threat to the prospects of the Scottish economy—on a much wider and more significant level than any economic impact that could be surmised about the Glasgow airport rail link.

I have to make judgments within the financial position that is available to me. As we all know, the prospects on public finances are very difficult in the forthcoming five years. I therefore had to take a decision that would enable the capital budget to be affordable and sustainable. That was a very difficult decision, but it was taken in the best interests of the sustainability of our capital programme. The Government will assert that position throughout the budget process that is before Parliament.

Meeting closed at 18:09.

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