



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Official Report

MEETING OF THE PARLIAMENT

Thursday 15 April 2010

Session 3

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Printed and published in Scotland on behalf of the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body by
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Thursday 15 April 2010

CONTENTS

	Col.
SUPPORTING BUSINESS	25299
<i>Motion moved—[Jeremy Purvis].</i>	
<i>Amendment moved—[John Swinney].</i>	
<i>Amendment moved—[Derek Brownlee].</i>	
Jeremy Purvis (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD)	25299
The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth (John Swinney)	25302
Derek Brownlee (South of Scotland) (Con)	25306
Lewis Macdonald (Aberdeen Central) (Lab)	25308
Iain Smith (North East Fife) (LD)	25310
Aileen Campbell (South of Scotland) (SNP)	25312
Mary Mulligan (Linlithgow) (Lab)	25314
Jim Hume (South of Scotland) (LD)	25316
Ian McKee (Lothians) (SNP)	25317
Ms Wendy Alexander (Paisley North) (Lab)	25319
Gavin Brown (Lothians) (Con)	25320
David Whitton (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Lab)	25322
John Swinney	25323
Alison McInnes (North East Scotland) (LD)	25325
FUEL PRICES	25328
<i>Motion moved—[Liam McArthur].</i>	
<i>Amendment moved—[Stewart Stevenson].</i>	
<i>Amendment moved—[Alex Johnstone].</i>	
Liam McArthur (Orkney) (LD)	25328
The Minister for Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change (Stewart Stevenson)	25332
Alex Johnstone (North East Scotland) (Con)	25334
Charlie Gordon (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab)	25336
Mike Rumbles (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD)	25338
Maureen Watt (North East Scotland) (SNP)	25339
Duncan McNeil (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab)	25341
Rob Gibson (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)	25342
Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)	25344
Charlie Gordon	25346
Stewart Stevenson	25347
Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)	25349
SCOTTISH EXECUTIVE QUESTION TIME	25352
GENERAL QUESTIONS	25352
Scottish Information Commissioner (Court Case)	25352
Domestic Heating (Older People)	25353
Energy-efficient Behaviour (Education)	25354
Healthy Eating	25355
Crown Estate	25356
Insulin Pumps	25358
Further Education Colleges	25359
Oral Health (Children)	25359
FIRST MINISTER'S QUESTION TIME	25361
Engagements	25361
Prime Minister (Meetings)	25365
Cabinet (Meetings)	25366
Anti-English Sentiment	25369
Liquor Licences (Suspensions)	25371
Nuclear Waste (Storage)	25372
SCOTTISH EXECUTIVE QUESTION TIME	25375
FINANCE AND SUSTAINABLE GROWTH	25375
Scottish Futures Trust	25375
Derelict Land (Glasgow)	25376
Public Transport (Fife)	25377

Caledonian MacBrayne	25378
Manufacturing Jobs and Investment (Glasgow)	25379
Fossil Fuel Levy Account.....	25380
Construction Industry	25381
Boiler Scrappage Scheme.....	25382
Glasgow Subway	25383
Bervie Braes (Stabilisation Work).....	25385
"National Renewables Infrastructure Plan"	25385
Jarvis Rail and Fastline (Job Losses).....	25387
Budget	25387
Aberdeen Western Peripheral Route	25389
West Dunbartonshire Council (Audit Scotland Report)	25389
GAELIC (ACTION PLAN)	25391
<i>Motion moved—[Fiona Hyslop].</i>	
<i>Amendment moved—[Pauline McNeill].</i>	
<i>Amendment moved—[Ted Brocklebank].</i>	
The Minister for Culture and External Affairs (Fiona Hyslop)	25391
Pauline McNeill (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab)	25395
Ted Brocklebank (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)	25398
Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)	25401
Alasdair Allan (Western Isles) (SNP).....	25403
Peter Peacock (Highlands and Islands) (Lab).....	25407
Dave Thompson (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)	25411
Rob Gibson (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)	25415
Jamie Stone.....	25417
Jamie McGrigor (Highlands and Islands) (Con)	25419
Pauline McNeill.....	25422
The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning (Michael Russell)	25424
VOLCANIC ASH CLOUD	25429
<i>Statement—[John Swinney].</i>	
The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth (John Swinney)	25429
POINTS OF ORDER	25436
DECISION TIME	25437
REFORMATION (450TH ANNIVERSARY)	25451
<i>Motion debated—[Nigel Don].</i>	
Nigel Don (North East Scotland) (SNP)	25451
Michael McMahon (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab)	25453
Dave Thompson (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)	25454
Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con).....	25456
Alasdair Allan (Western Isles) (SNP).....	25457
Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)	25459
Christopher Harvie (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)	25461
The Minister for Community Safety (Fergus Ewing).....	25462

Scottish Parliament

Thursday 15 April 2010

[The Presiding Officer *opened the meeting at 09:15*]

Supporting Business

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson):

Good morning. The first item of business is a debate on motion S3M-6140, in the name of Jeremy Purvis, on supporting business.

09:15

Jeremy Purvis (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD): Yesterday, I asked the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth whether there should be a limit on tax increases on businesses at this time. He refused to answer the question, which was interesting, if only because it confirmed that the Scottish Government is aware that many businesses in Scotland have received tax increases of more than 100 or 150 per cent during the past week.

I start by making a point about which I hope that there is no disagreement among members. The revaluation of business rates is a necessary part of the rating system. There are debates about the rating system, but revaluation is necessary. It is an independent process, and as a result of every revaluation some businesses benefit and some lose out.

Members can also agree that every revaluation since 1985 has been accompanied by a transitional relief scheme. There are many options for such schemes, which come in many different versions. Every argument against a transitional scheme that the Conservatives and the Scottish National Party will make in the debate will have applied in every revaluation since 1985. In 1985, 1990, 1995, 2000 and 2005, the Conservatives—whether they were in government or in opposition—and the SNP supported a transitional relief scheme. In addition, they supported the discussions with the business community about transitional relief that took place in advance. We must question why the Conservatives are now in total agreement with the SNP in Parliament in being against a transitional relief scheme.

It is helpful when members of other parties publish their speeches the day before a debate. Mr Brownlee did exactly that, for the Conservatives. He has chosen to attack the Liberal Democrats rather than attack the horrendously high tax increases that will happen without transitional support. The operators of the many local businesses, hotels and petrol stations

to whom I have spoken in recent weeks will make their minds up from today's debate and the votes at 5 o'clock.

I agreed with what Mr Brownlee said in Parliament last year, when he asked the cabinet secretary:

"On the vexed issue of transitional relief for business rates, will he ensure that whatever his decision, he will minimise the distortion in the business community?"—[*Official Report*, 26 November 2009; c 21564.]

Hotels, petrol stations, auction marts and other businesses think that the tax increases of more than 100 per cent that they have received represent a distortion. I agree. Auction marts made their views clear yesterday, when they told us that they are operating at an economic disadvantage compared with their counterparts in England. In written evidence to the Economy, Energy and Tourism Committee, for the committee's budget consideration, the Scottish Retail Consortium said:

"Transitional relief will be essential to retail's recovery from the recession, which is also a pre-requisite to its role in acting as an engine of wider economic recovery."

Let us consider the SNP and Conservatives' arguments against any transitional support to limit the increases. They say that retail would be worse off, but the Scottish Retail Consortium disagrees—I know who I support. The Conservatives said in a press release yesterday that small businesses would

"have their rates increased to subsidise the public sector and large supermarkets".

That is factually wrong in many regards.

There are a number of transitional scheme options. Three weeks ago, we said to the Government that it was not too late to consult the business community urgently on the options. The precedent for such consultation was set clearly in 2005. All business groupings are aware that there are a number of transitional scheme options. That is why the Confederation of British Industry's budget submission to the Parliament called for a consultation on a transitional scheme. Businesses in the small business bonus scheme would not be affected by a transitional scheme. The 24-hour Asda store in Galashiels in my constituency, which is one of the biggest supermarkets—if not the biggest—in the south of Scotland, and whose rates bill will increase by 12 per cent this year, would not be involved in any transitional scheme anyway. However, because of the revaluation, a small hotel nearby has found that its bill lifts it out of 100 per cent relief for small businesses. The hotel will be asked to pay a bill of £11,000, in one go, from now, and without any transitional support at all. What business tax increase in one go would be fair? That is the point.

There is a precedent, which was set as recently as June last year by the Government, when it said that a 5 per cent increase in bills would hurt business. Then, the Government said:

"On 1st April 2009 most non-domestic (business) rate bills in Scotland increased by 5%. In response to the difficulties facing businesses as a result of the economic crisis, the Scottish Government and all 32 Scottish local authorities have implemented a new business rates deferral scheme for 2009-10 to minimise the impact of this increase, help cash flow and provide a 'much-needed boost' for the Scottish economy."

If preventing businesses from having a 5 per cent increase was the right thing to do for all businesses, regardless of their size, is it not right to help the businesses that Government knows are facing increases of more than 100 per cent in their bills in one go? If a 5 per cent increase was crippling businesses last year, what on earth will a 100 per cent increase do to businesses this year? That has nothing to do with pitting small businesses against big ones; it is simply a recognition that key local businesses, such as hotels, which are critical to the success of economic recovery in Scotland, are facing crippling tax increases.

People will see through John Lamont, who told the *Berwickshire News and East Lothian Herald* that there should be transitional relief for petrol stations but will vote in Parliament against transitional relief. They will see through John Scott, who told *The Press and Journal* that there should be transitional relief for auction marts but will vote in Parliament against such relief. I know that Derek Brownlee will spend all his speech attacking me and the Liberal Democrats. I am sure that he will promote the leaflet that the Conservatives have issued throughout Scotland, which says:

"The SNP keep pumping out false promises ... Under an SNP Government petrol station owners have seen their business rates go up significantly, leading to higher prices at the pumps ... The SNP can do nothing about fuel taxes at Westminster but they can do something about rates in Scotland because they are in Government—why don't they?"

Why do they not, indeed? Perhaps because the Conservatives will vote against transitional relief.

The British Hospitality Association, chambers of commerce—from the Borders to north-east Scotland—the CBI, the Scottish Retail Consortium, business organisations and individual businesses to whom I have spoken this week all know that the increases cannot be sustainable. I spoke to the people who run a key local hotel in a rural part of my constituency on Monday, who said that the 66 per cent increase in their bill will be crippling and will have an effect on jobs.

By all means let the Conservatives and the SNP attack us. Let them say that businesses can

appeal, without explaining the grounds for appeal. Let them try to ignore the genuine concern about the issue. They may do all those things and defend the unacceptable; we will not do so.

I move,

That the Parliament notes the crippling increases in non-domestic rates bills in Scotland, particularly in hospitality, tourism, auction mart and petrol station businesses; further notes the increases in the Scottish Budget resulting from the 2010 UK Budget, and calls on the Scottish Government to cap 2010-11 business rates increases at 12.5%, or 5% for small businesses, while allowing those who gain under the revaluation to see the benefits immediately.

09:24

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth (John Swinney): Let me make it clear that on 10 February I announced the outcome of the 2010 business rate revaluation and an accompanying package of measures, to ensure that business in Scotland can remain competitive. As a result of that package, the support that we will provide to businesses in Scotland in 2010-11 is worth more than £700 million.

Let me explain why I think that the package that is in place is fair to and appropriate for the business community in Scotland. First, as Mr Purvis said, individual valuations of properties are carried out independently of Government by the Scottish assessors, as has been the case throughout the business rates regime. Ratepayers may challenge those valuations through an independent appeals system, but I acknowledge that there are concerns in certain cases about the levels of valuation that have been set. In those circumstances, I encourage people who are concerned about the business rates valuation assessment that has been made by the assessors to take the necessary steps to appeal those valuations.

Iain Smith (North East Fife) (LD): I accept that there is a right of appeal for businesses that are affected by huge increases in their rates bills. However, can the cabinet secretary tell us how long it is likely to take a business to appeal its rates and what rates bill it will have to pay in the interim, while it awaits the outcome of that appeal?

John Swinney: Businesses are liable for the business rates that are set in the valuation as of 1 April. Once an appeal has been heard, if there is any adjustment to the valuation it will be backdated to 1 April. Any appropriate charge of interest will also be paid to the affected ratepayer. Obviously, the independent appeals process will seek to resolve any appeals as expeditiously as possible.

Bills will be offset by the reduced poundage rate that we have set and the extensive package of

reliefs that we have put in place. For 2010-11, we have the lowest ever national rate poundage in Scotland.

Iain Smith: That is irrelevant.

John Swinney: From a sedentary position, Mr Smith says that that is irrelevant—Mr Smith is talking complete rubbish, as usual. The rate poundage is absolutely fundamental to the calculation of business rates for which individuals are liable. Had we set a rate poundage using the approach that the previous Administration used for the 2005 revaluation, it would have been much higher. The lower rate is worth well over £200 million in benefits to the business community in 2010-11 alone, and every ratepayer in Scotland will benefit from that lower rate poundage.

Overall, the package of reliefs that is now available is worth more than £2.4 billion over the next five years. In 2010-11, we will be the first country in the United Kingdom to offer a dedicated renewable energy relief scheme that will offer discounts of up to 100 per cent. A key element of our relief package is the uplift and expansion of our small business bonus scheme. On 24 March, as part of the UK budget, the Chancellor of the Exchequer announced new help for small businesses south of the border. However, businesses here will still be better off by up to £3,050 this year. Not a single recipient of our small business bonus scheme would be better off under the chancellor's proposals, which will, in any case, not come into force until October at the earliest, subject to UK legislation.

Robert Brown (Glasgow) (LD): I raise with the cabinet secretary the particular situation regarding areas such as Byres Road and Great Western Road in Glasgow. Those are relatively high-rated areas where the small business relief is of no use to people and where small shops face considerable difficulties because of the rise in rates resulting from the revaluation. Will the cabinet secretary have a close look at that situation?

John Swinney: I am happy to do that. However, if Mr Brown's constituents have concerns about the valuations, he should advise them to make the necessary appeals against them. That is the key thing for them to do.

If, in this debate, the Liberal Democrats had called for transitional relief, their motion might have made more sense. I will explain why. By its nature, transitional relief must be cost neutral. Under transitional relief—which is available in England but not in Wales, and which was made available in Scotland following the 2005 revaluation—businesses that gain most from the revaluation give up those gains to offset the rates bill rises for those whose bills go up the most.

Jeremy Purvis: Will the cabinet secretary give way?

John Swinney: I have given way generously and have a lot of ground to cover. We considered carefully—

Jeremy Purvis: Is there only one possible—

John Swinney: If Mr Purvis gives me the opportunity to marshal my arguments, I might give way to him in a second. Perhaps if he had disciplined his other colleagues to allow me to make progress I would have been able to cover more ground.

We considered carefully whether to have a further transitional relief scheme in Scotland in 2010. We took into account the benefit to Scottish businesses of setting a lower rate poundage, which is not available to businesses south of the border, and the levels of relief in Scotland, which are significantly more generous than those south of the border. We also looked at the impact on businesses in individual sectors. The majority of businesses in Scotland have seen their business rates bills fall this year by, on average, double the amount by which bills have fallen in England, where savings were cut to fund transitional relief. Had we introduced a similar transitional relief scheme to that which was introduced in England, many businesses here would have lost out. The small and medium-sized business sector would have ended up subsidising the public sector and some key large industries by almost £75 million. That is what Mr Purvis must explain to those to whom he argues that we should support a transitional relief scheme.

Jeremy Purvis: For the record, can the cabinet secretary make it clear whether only one possible transitional relief scheme is available to the Government and why the Government did not consult the business community on the options last autumn, as we asked it to do?

John Swinney: I engage in a great deal of dialogue—as do my officials, on my behalf—with the business community on such questions. We have had a range of discussions and I have listened to a range of views from the business community on transitional relief, and we have come to our conclusion on the subject in the light of that.

Mr Purvis's question—whether there is only one type of transitional relief scheme—brings me to one of the key points that I want to make about the Liberal Democrat motion. As I have said, by its nature, transitional relief should be cost neutral—that is the objective of any transitional relief scheme. What the Liberal Democrats propose is not a transitional relief scheme. The motion tries to get round the problem of cross-subsidy, but at a substantial cost to the Scottish budget. The cost of

funding a 12.5 per cent cap without doing so by taking savings from people who have gained from the business rates revaluation could amount to £195 million in 2010-11 alone. Parliament must address the question of why on earth we are again presented with such uncostered propositions by the Liberal Democrats.

A difficult set of decisions must be made regarding business rates revaluation. The independent valuations have been undertaken and I encourage individuals to appeal against them if they are concerned about them. I ask Parliament to remember that the Government has provided £700 million of support for the business community through reliefs and support in the current financial year alone, which reflects our determination to ensure that the business community in Scotland remains competitive in every respect.

I move amendment S3M-6140.1, to leave out from “crippling” to end and insert:

“measures that the Scottish Government has put in place to support Scottish businesses as part of its economic recovery plan, including setting the lowest business rate poundage ever, saving businesses well over £200 million in 2010-11 alone, and putting in place a package of relief measures worth around an additional £2.4 billion over the next five years, including a new renewable relief scheme and extending the small business bonus scheme, which means that half of all businesses will receive a discounted bill this year and well over a quarter of businesses properties will pay no rates at all; recognises that the merits of a transitional relief scheme are outweighed by the disadvantages, and recognises that the measures that have been put in place, taken together, represent the most generous package of business rates support available in the United Kingdom.”

Jeremy Purvis: On a point of order, Presiding Officer. Can you give members of the Opposition parties some support regarding how the Scottish Parliament information centre is treated? On a number of occasions, requests have been made to SPICe for information on the costings of the subjects of Government statements. The Government previously said that there would be a £70 million bill for small businesses under a transitional relief scheme, but it is now saying that the bill would be £195 million. Yesterday, SPICe was told by Government officials that information that they had would be released only in due course. That was consistent with the answer to a freedom of information request that I made, when the Government used a public interest test and said that the information would be published within three months, yet information has just been revealed by the cabinet secretary that officials refused to give to SPICe yesterday. What protection are you able to provide to SPICe when it cannot get information from the Government that the Government then releases the day after?

The Presiding Officer: I ask Mr Purvis to write to me or e-mail me on that subject and I will look into it.

09:33

Derek Brownlee (South of Scotland) (Con): I congratulate the Lib Dems on bringing to Parliament a debate on supporting business. That is entirely appropriate, as the departure of the Liberal Democrats from government in Scotland has been a great support to business—and, indeed, to every other sector of Scottish society. *[Interruption.]* We remember their record of imposing higher business rates in Scotland than existed in the rest of the UK and of opposing small business rates reductions when they were turfed out of office. They are now changing their minds on a seemingly daily basis on what should happen about the revaluation. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Order. We have had enough sedentary comments from the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats for the time being.

Derek Brownlee: Only a few weeks ago, Mr Purvis praised the transitional relief operations in Wales and warned of dire consequences if Scotland did not follow suit. The minor detail that Wales has no transitional relief scheme did not trouble Mr Purvis. Nevertheless, as he has said today, there are winners and losers from the transitional relief scheme.

Let me give members an example. There is a large Tesco store in Galashiels, which is in Mr Purvis's constituency. He will know it well: it is where Christine Grahame holds her surgeries. I am sure that that is enough in itself to send him across the road to Asda. That Tesco store has seen its valuation rise from £1.2 million to £1.7 million, and the Asda store across the road has seen its valuation rise from £1.1 million to £1.5 million. Last month, the Lib Dems, who spent yesterday wittering on about fair taxes, demanded that Tesco's rates rise be phased in and that every small business that sees its rates bill fall pay extra tax to fund that. Therefore, hundreds of small businesses in the Borders would pay more to help Tesco, which made a profit of £3.1 billion last year. That is what the Lib Dems call fair taxation. However, today, there is a different policy.

Jeremy Purvis: Mr Brownlee has calculated Tesco's and Asda's rates increases, as I have done. Will he confirm that the Tesco increase, which includes the car park underneath, is 13 per cent and that it would gain by 0.5 per cent by what has been proposed, and that the Asda increase is 12 per cent and that it would not gain at all under any transitional scheme? As he has been looking

at the figures, will he confirm what the nearest hotels' rates increases are?

Derek Brownlee: Perhaps Asda would not benefit under today's Liberal Democrat scheme, but that scheme is, of course, different from what we had two weeks ago. Under today's scheme, the Government should cap Tesco's rates rise, but everyone who is better off should benefit. How would that be paid for? Was not it Vince Cable who said:

"you simply can't propose cutting tax revenue unless you spell out exactly how you are going to pay for it"?

There are two very minor flaws in the Lib Dem motion. First, the Lib Dems have no idea how much their plan would cost, so they cannot be sure that the Barnett consequentials that are mentioned in their motion would cover it. Secondly, they spent yesterday afternoon fawning over the Government on the extra spending on housing, green initiatives and further education, seemingly not having noticed that the source of the largesse was the self-same consequentials that Mr Purvis wants to spend again today. Other than there being no idea about how much the plans would cost or about how they could be funded, they are as financially robust as anything else that we have heard about from the Liberal Democrats. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Order. I am sorry to single out Mr Tavish Scott, but we have had a persistent running commentary from him since the beginning of the debate. I would be grateful if that ceased.

Derek Brownlee: At least Mr Scott is consistent about something.

Some businesses will face rates increases as a result of revaluation. Those increases would have been much higher if the thresholds for small business reliefs had not been increased and parity with England's poundage rate had not been insisted on.

Iain Smith: Will the member take an intervention?

Derek Brownlee: No, I will not. I want to make progress.

In our amendment, we say that the Government should examine the scope to extend business rates relief within the existing yield outturns and focus on extending the existing small business and rural rate relief schemes. That would help petrol stations, hotels and post offices. Those are better solutions. They would provide real benefits within the existing business rates regime, and would not rely on additional funding from non-existent sources or increasing bills elsewhere.

All the nonsense that we have heard from the Lib Dems would have been bad enough, but there is also the stuff in yesterday's Lib Dem manifesto about giving control over business rates to local councils. What would that do to local councils and to business rates?

Tavish Scott (Shetland) (LD): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. In the past, you have been keen to chastise some of us for talking about issues that have nothing to do with the Parliament. What Mr Brownlee is on about has nothing to do with the Parliament.

The Presiding Officer: That is not a point of order. Mr Brownlee is speaking to the motion. You should wind up now, please, Mr Brownlee.

Derek Brownlee: I am winding up.

The Lib Dem proposals would put up business rates by 69 per cent in Aberdeenshire, 110 per cent in East Dunbartonshire, 96 per cent in the Scottish Borders and 190 per cent in East Renfrewshire. If the Liberal Democrats believe that that is supporting businesses, let us hope that they never decide to oppose them.

I move amendment S3M-6140.2, to leave out from first "notes" to end and insert:

"recognises that some businesses have seen significant increases in their pre-appeal valuations as a result of revaluation and encourages those businesses to appeal their valuation where appropriate; welcomes the fact that the policy of the previous Scottish administration to levy a higher rate poundage than in England has been abandoned; welcomes the reductions in small business rates from 2008, delivered despite the opposition of some in the Parliament; does not believe that small businesses should see their rates bill increase to cross-subsidise the public sector or very large commercial organisations such as the major supermarkets; believes that any further reductions in business rate liabilities should be targeted by extending the small business rates relief and the rural rate relief scheme, and calls on the Scottish Government to assess the scope within the projected business rate income for this and future financial years to finance such an extension and to report to the Parliament the results of that assessment."

09:38

Lewis Macdonald (Aberdeen Central) (Lab): On Friday morning, Aberdeen and Grampian Chamber of Commerce will hold a business breakfast in Aberdeen to give local businesses the chance to grill candidates from the main parties who are standing in the general election. Although the matter is clearly not reserved, the Scottish National Party's decision to drive through rates revaluation with no transitional relief and no cap on annual increases is certain to be high on many people's agendas, not least because it stands in sharp contrast to the approach that has been taken by the Labour Government at Westminster.

The Tories' decision to back the SNP is also certain to be of interest.

Four weeks ago, I opened for Labour in the tourism debate by highlighting the impact of the tax hike on businesses in the Scottish hospitality sector. In my constituency, for example, it seems that every single hospitality business—large and small—is being hammered. The rates bill for the Carmelite hotel has gone up from just over £33,000 to just over £66,000, which is a big hit for a small business. Copthorne hotel Aberdeen is facing a 40 per cent rates increase. Skene House (Aberdeen) Ltd, which provides hotel suites and serviced accommodation across the city, faces a valuation that is up 99 per cent. Its payable rates are up by more than 70 per cent, or nearly £100,000 a year.

When we debated tourism last month, I mentioned my meeting with Aberdeen City and Shire Hotels Association. Hotels were the first to react, but the impact goes much further. For example, the Charles Michie chemist shop on Union Street in Aberdeen is facing a rates increase of more than 18 per cent. Other local businesses that are engaged in all manner of trades—even in the motor trade, which is hard hit by the recession—face such increases.

A rising tide of anger has spread far beyond the hotel sector. Aberdeen and Grampian Chamber of Commerce has surveyed its members and is currently analysing the results of that survey. I am certain that ministers will hear from it about the deep concerns that many of its members have expressed, and I have no doubt that other chambers of commerce in other parts of Scotland will express the same concerns—unless, of course, ministers want to tell me that Aberdeen and the north-east are uniquely hard hit by the increase in business rates. I listened carefully to what John Swinney said, but he should think carefully before he brushes off those concerns by claiming that most businesses are better off. That answer will not satisfy the many businesses in Aberdeen city, Aberdeenshire and throughout Scotland that face huge increases in their rates bills for the current year.

It has been said that every other Scottish Administration has offered transitional relief to businesses. The Labour Government at Westminster has set a 12.5 per cent cap on rates increases this year and will phase in increases over five years. If ministers had formally consulted on the issue, as they ought to have done, they would have been told that transitional arrangements are exactly what businesses want.

The Tory amendment says that transitional relief should not be a priority for the Scottish Government. Like Mr Swinney, the Tories say that businesses that are hit by the tax hike should

“appeal their valuation where appropriate”,

as if somehow it is all about miscalculations by the assessors who conduct individual evaluations. That is not the issue at all, of course. Businesses can and should appeal if they have grounds to do so, but lodging an appeal against a revaluation does not allow a business to go on paying the old rate, and appeals are not at all likely to reverse the upward revaluation of large groups of businesses in regions of the country. Appeals would be the right way to go if we were talking about one or two small businesses being harder hit than their peers and competitors, but we are talking about whole groups of businesses, large and small, in whole sectors of the economy and whole regions of Scotland. The appeals route will not reverse the impact on those groups of businesses. It is not the revaluation that is fundamentally flawed; the issue is the lack of transitional support.

Ministers need to listen to what business say. For example, they should listen to what is said at the Aberdeen and Grampian Chamber of Commerce hustings meeting in Aberdeen on Friday morning. I know that Alex Johnstone will be present at that and that he will listen closely to what is said. I hope that SNP members will also listen.

Ministers should think again. They should put transitional arrangements in place now before businesses go under and jobs are lost.

The Presiding Officer: We come to the open debate. I ask members to stick tightly to four minutes, please.

09:43

Iain Smith (North East Fife) (LD): Unfortunately, two pretty dreadful speeches—from the cabinet secretary and Derek Brownlee—have been made in the debate so far. They did nothing to place the facts on the table.

Let us be frank. I challenged the cabinet secretary on the issue of appeals and on what the impact would be on businesses today. Would they have to continue to pay their bills? Lewis Macdonald rightly said that they would, but many businesses will be unable to pay their bills. Being able to appeal and perhaps being able to get money back with interest in a few years' time will be of no comfort to businesses that will have to shed jobs today or even go under. They will be out of business before the result of the appeal comes through. That will do them no good whatsoever; it will be too little, too late.

Derek Brownlee: If appealing would be of no comfort to businesses, why would it be of any comfort to a business whose rates bill had

significantly increased simply to pay that a bit later on? How would that help it?

Iain Smith: The point that I am making—Mr Brownlee would know this if he had any understanding of how businesses' cash flows work—is that anyone who faces a huge increase in their bill will suffer. A transitional scheme would allow the transition to work its way through, so that, by the time that the appeal came through, the full bill would not yet be being paid. Businesses would benefit from an appeal in a way that they might not benefit otherwise, because they might already be out of business.

We are not talking about a piffling amount. Hotel businesses in my constituency tell me that they would have to increase their turnover by £300,000 just to meet the increase in business rates. A small electrical appliances company in my constituency tells me that it will have to sell more than 100 more washing machines a year—that is two more machines a week—just to meet the increase in the bill. It is simply impossible to do that. Redundancies will be the result. In my constituency, small shops, which the cabinet secretary keeps telling me are being protected by the scheme, are facing increases of up to 62 per cent in their rates bills. Those businesses will suffer, but this Government is doing nothing about it.

Of course, there are alternative transitional schemes. The one to which the cabinet secretary referred, which is the traditional one, whereby those who gain most help those who lose most, is only one approach. The schemes do not have to be self-funded; the Government can put money in. We have suggested that the consequential from Westminster's small business rate relief scheme could be used for that purpose.

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

Iain Smith: I have only a short time left, so I will not give way. I am coming on to attack the Conservatives for their hypocrisy in a moment.

The point is that the Government would not even consult. It would not even ask businesses what the way forward was. It would not put the information into the public domain. It still refuses to do so and will, no doubt, continue to refuse to do so after the election. It is impossible to have a proper debate on the issue, because the Government refuses to put the information out there and to consult.

The Conservatives have shown bare-faced cheek in coming to the chamber with their amendment, which bears little resemblance to the reality of history, at the same time as they are issuing leaflets in constituencies throughout Scotland that say:

"The Conservatives believe that the new rates valuation brought in under this SNP Government is unfair ... The SNP can do nothing about fuel taxes at Westminster but they can do something about rates in Scotland because they are in Government—why don't they?"

The SNP does nothing because the Conservatives support it every time we try to make it do something about rates. The SNP does not do anything, because the Conservatives do not let it do anything, or do not make it do anything along with us. I say to the Conservatives, come on—work with us and make this SNP Government do something about a transitional scheme, which will mean fair business taxation for local businesses and will save jobs. But oh, no; the Conservatives will vote with the SNP Government today to block any attempt by this Opposition party, which I hope will be supported by the Labour Party, to make the Government see sense and bring in a transitional relief scheme, which will benefit businesses throughout Scotland.

09:47

Aileen Campbell (South of Scotland) (SNP):

The first and most important thing that any of us can do to support small businesses during this recession is to be honest with them. So, for the Liberal Democrats to try to pretend that the Scottish Government is somehow in receipt of increased funding, when everyone knows that, in fact, we face the first real-terms budget cut in the history of devolution, does not in any way suggest that they are interested in supporting small businesses.

The Scottish Government, on the other hand, can and should be proud of its support for businesses of all shapes and sizes right across the country. More than 200,000 businesses in Scotland may be eligible for support under the small business bonus scheme, which has increased and expanded since it was introduced. Plenty of businesses in the South of Scotland region, which I represent, have felt the benefit of it. When I first consulted local businesses in the region about the impact of the scheme back in 2008, one local artist, whose studio had benefited from the relief, even felt moved to refer to the First Minister as the "blessed Alex Salmond" because of the difference that it had made.

Jim Hume (South of Scotland) (LD): I know that, like me, the South of Scotland member takes a particular interest in Clydesdale. What will she tell businesses such as the Royal Bar in Larkhall, which will face a 238 per cent increase in rates? I could give several more examples.

Aileen Campbell: As others have said, there is the opportunity to appeal in relation to such issues.

Because of the dramatically different economic situation that exists now compared with in 2007, the Scottish Government has uplifted and expanded the small business bonus scheme and rural rate relief so that an additional 3,600 Scottish business properties are eligible for relief.

There has been an independent revaluation of business rates in Scotland. The valuation is carried out by the Scottish Assessors Association, not the Scottish Government or local authorities, and the independent nature of the revaluation is entirely appropriate. Of course, the revaluation takes into account the changing nature and circumstances of businesses and, in particular, takes account of increases in turnover or expansion of the business since the previous valuation.

Even after all that, 60 per cent of businesses will be better off as a result of the exercise. That is before different reliefs have been applied or appeals have been processed. The appeals system means that any business that feels that its rates have been increased unfairly or inappropriately has the opportunity to have the decision reviewed. It is, therefore, disingenuous of the Lib Dems to quote rate increases that have not yet been through the full process and finalised.

On top of that, businesses throughout Scotland have felt the benefit of the Scottish Government's support in other ways. I recently visited William McCafferty Butchers in Forth, in my region, which has received grants from Scottish Enterprise to replace the shop units and refresh the shop entirely. Carlisle town centre is benefiting from a £500,000 injection from the town centre regeneration fund. The innovative soft play facility that that money is helping to provide will not only boost the local economy, but will increase footfall to the surrounding shops and local traders. A similar effect can be expected in Biggar, whose corn exchange is also receiving a boost from the Scottish Government fund.

Two weeks ago, I visited Irvine to see the first tranche of small businesses receive their awards from the enterprise development fund, which was established by GlaxoSmithKline to help the local community to adapt to the loss of jobs caused by its restructuring. That is the sort of responsible corporate behaviour that I am sure the Scottish Government is keen to encourage and is another glimmer of hope among the doom and gloom that Opposition parties are attempting to spread.

When the Lib Dems call for the Scottish Government to provide relief on top of the wide range of support that we have heard about in the debate, they do so knowing not only that the Scottish Government's budget is declining but that their own UK leader has called for savage cuts to public sector spending. If further savage cuts are

to be inflicted on Scotland's budget, that will leave even less money to support not only our small businesses but our schools, hospitals, police system and every other area in which the Lib Dems in Scotland continue to call for increases in spending.

The fact is that the SNP Government is making sometimes difficult but absolutely necessary decisions to use the powers and budgets that it has to help all sectors of our economy get through the downturn and grow stronger as a result.

The Presiding Officer: You must close, please.

Aileen Campbell: That will not be achieved by scaremongering and it will certainly not be achieved by savage cuts to our budget. That is why the business community needs SNP champions at all levels of government.

The Presiding Officer: You must close, please.

Aileen Campbell: It is why our Parliament needs the full powers of independence to get Scotland out of the Downing Street downturn.

09:52

Mary Mulligan (Linlithgow) (Lab): I am always happy to take part in debates in this Parliament that have supporting business as their theme. However, I am not sure why the Scottish Government has allowed a situation to arise in which it very clearly is not supporting business. As Jeremy Purvis's motion states, some hospitality and tourism, auction mart and petrol station businesses are seeing crippling increases in rates. That is even more puzzling, given that the SNP has been so swift to boast of reducing the business rate for small businesses, as Mr Swinney does in his amendment. One has to ask whether it is a cock-up or yet another example of the SNP Government talking up its support for business but letting it down by its action or, indeed, inaction.

I will give another example of the SNP Government's support for business not living up to the rhetoric. Members will know that my constituency of Linlithgow includes the town of Bathgate. I was very proud when, after a great deal of hard work by local business people and a successful ballot, Bathgate became the first business improvement district in Scotland. That resulted in local businesses paying a levy, which was then match funded by local government and used to make improvements to the town's environment. The improvements were designed to benefit all the businesses and were based on the businesses' own choices. In establishing the business improvement district, Enterprising Bathgate had received a lot of support from the previous Labour-Lib Dem Scottish Executive. It was optimistic about receiving on-going support

from the Scottish Government when Mr Swinney decided to visit to see what was being done. To his credit, Mr Swinney did acknowledge the progress that he saw in businesses, particularly retail establishments that had suffered from the presence of major retail developments in towns nearby.

Although other towns such as Inverness and Kirkcaldy have also become business improvement districts, the Scottish Government has not built on the initiative as might have been expected. When, after pressure from Labour following last year's budget, the Scottish Government established the town centre regeneration fund, unbelievably, Bathgate's bid to the fund was not successful. I and, more important, the hard-working business people of Bathgate could not understand.

Bathgate was successful in the second phase, although I have to say to the cabinet secretary that giving businesses four months to spend the money is not ideal. At the behest of the Scottish Government, Enterprising Bathgate is working up a scheme to make Bathgate the first wi-fi town in Scotland. I do not profess to understand the minutiae of the plan, but I recognise how such a scheme will help and support business. Far from being the sort of businesses that ask for subsidies or rate cuts, businesses in Bathgate have made a financial contribution to delivering common improvements that will benefit them all.

What has been the response and the support from the Scottish Government for that? Not the most enthusiastic. Because of the deal that the Government did with the Conservatives on this year's budget, it contains no town centre regeneration fund. I am sure that Aileen Campbell will be telling the people of the South of Scotland that. I am pleased to point out to members that Labour's general election manifesto includes a clear commitment to fund town centre regeneration.

I return to the issue of non-domestic rates.

Gavin Brown: Will the member give way?

Mary Mulligan: I have only 15 seconds left.

I was surprised to read in the briefing from the auction marts that the Scottish Government has turned its back on a transitional relief scheme, which has left Scottish auction marts at a disadvantage compared with those in England. I do not understand the SNP Government's business strategy. Do the SNP ministers have one? Let us hope that today's debate will make them think again about how they can and should be supporting Scottish business.

09:56

Jim Hume (South of Scotland) (LD): There is a dark cloud coming over Scottish businesses, and I am not talking about the one coming from Iceland—it is the lack of a transitional rate relief scheme for our businesses and the huge hike in rates. It is not just we who are talking about the damage that will be done to businesses and employment; small business owners themselves are calling for a rate relief scheme.

Let us hear some of the facts that the Liberal Democrats have discovered in the South of Scotland. Newton St Boswells mart in the Borders will face an increase of 140 per cent in rates, meaning that more than £44,000 extra must be found this year. Craig Wilsons mart in Ayr faces a 38 per cent increase, equal to an extra £17,000. For a hotel in Irvine, the increase is £31,000; for a hotel in Troon, it is £33,000; for a pub in Longniddry, it is £17,000; for a pub in Dumfries, it is £16,000; and for the New Lanark Mill hotel, it is nearly £10,000. The position applies not just to auction marts and hotels, but to every kind of business. Two high street shops in Ayr face an increase of £6,000 in rates each year, and such rises are unbearable for very small businesses.

I have the details of well over 50 businesses whose owners are worried. Many of them cannot absorb the cost of increased rates. The owner of a medium-sized hotel in Galloway says that he will have to find £400 of cuts per month to pay for the rise. He says that he will try to appeal, but he has been told that it is unlikely that he will be successful. He has said:

"I will have to look at redundancies ... I will now be less likely to invest in my business".

That is not a good prospect if we want a flourishing economy. He goes on to say:

"Yes, the SNP Government should have consulted on a transitional rate relief scheme, and yes, the steep rise should have been phased in ... this introduction of such a hike in rate bills will have a damaging effect on this business".

Those are not my words, but those of a hotelier in the South of Scotland.

Two hotels in the region, one in North Berwick, which employs more than 20 people, and another in Dumfries, which employs more than 40 people, are now withdrawing investment and will have to let staff go. Did they know about the rate rise? No—because there was no consultation.

The Tories should wake up to what is happening in the Ayr constituency that they hold—for now. The two high street shops there that I mentioned earlier will have to find an extra £500 a month, and their owners found out about the rise only by word of mouth. One of the shop owners said:

"I am now deciding whether or not to close my business which would mean a loss of jobs of 3 local people and also that of myself".

That is not just tragic; it is criminal of the Government, supported—bizarrely—by the Tories.

Gavin Brown: Will the member give way?

Jim Hume: Sorry, but I have only a minute and a bit to go.

The other shop owner says that her expansion plans are now on hold, which is preventing new recruitment. She has said:

"I will not get anywhere appealing ... The rate should have been phased in".

I return to farming—my old life. I have already mentioned St Boswells mart, which has an extra £44,000 to find, whereas its sister mart in Wooler will face no more than the English maximum rise of 12.5 per cent. We can guess where those who run the mart are considering moving their business. That is from the words of the people concerned, not my words.

We need a show of real support for Scottish businesses from SNP ministers. They are responsible, and they must introduce a transitional scheme. Or will they instead take the arrogant risk of hiding in the safety of the chamber, making damaging decisions for our economy, and then, out in the real world, promoting their saltire whitewash to try to fool the public? The public are not stupid, and the SNP needs more than the clichéd romanticism of "Braveheart" to prop it up. After tonight's vote, we will see if they are again propped up by their Tory pals.

A transitional rate relief scheme is needed now. Otherwise, there will be no town centre regeneration, but instead an increase in town centre degeneration.

10:00

Ian McKee (Lothians) (SNP): First, I make a declaration of interests. The small self-catering property of which I am joint owner, and which is recorded in my register of interests, is in receipt of business rate relief under the small business bonus scheme.

Before us today is a motion of startling hypocrisy, even by traditional Lib Dem standards. The debate is entitled "Supporting Businesses", yet where were the Liberal Democrats when, in the 2008 budget, John Swinney announced the most generous support for Scottish small businesses since this Parliament was created? What was their response when the cabinet secretary announced not only that the small business bonus scheme was to be introduced, as promised, but that its full implementation was to be

advanced? What was their response to the suggestion that up to 120,000 small business premises would pay no business rates at all, and that a further 30,000 would benefit from reductions of between 25 per cent and 50 per cent? I will tell you.

Robert Brown: Will the member take an intervention?

Ian McKee: No—if Robert Brown is going to apologise, I ask him to do so in his own speech.

I will tell you. Their response was to refuse to support those measures. In true Lib Dem fashion—and along with their former coalition colleagues—they fingered their abstention buttons. Rather bizarrely, Labour members abstained from the motion that they had just successfully amended. They left it to the SNP and the Conservatives to recognise the needs of small businesses and place the reform on the statute book. Today, the Lib Dems have the nerve to portray themselves as the defenders of business.

Let us be clear about what is happening with the business rate revaluation. As Aileen Campbell so cogently explained, it is being carried out by members of the Scottish Assessors Association, a body that is, rightly, totally independent of Government. It is estimated that about 60 per cent of Scottish businesses will actually be better off as a result of revaluation. Broadly speaking, the sectors that are to gain most from revaluation are small and medium-sized businesses such as shops, pubs, offices and industrial property. It is true that some premises will be worse off, perhaps because turnover has increased or a petrol station now has a supermarket attached.

As I have said, the decisions have been made by an independent assessor, and they are open to appeal. I hear that the Scottish Assessors Association is presently conducting a dialogue with filling station owners on the methodology involved.

No one likes rates and taxes, but they have to be levied. It is important that they are levied fairly, and that is what the system achieves. It might not be perfect, but it is difficult to think of a better way.

It is instructive to consider the reaction of business leaders to business rate revaluation, and not just those who have been quoted already. Let us take Andy Willox of the Federation of Small Businesses in Scotland. On 10 February he said:

"By continuing its work to develop a fairer rates system, the Scottish Government and the Finance Secretary have shown insight and are leading the rest of the UK."

On 5 February, John Drummond of the Scottish Grocers Federation said:

"this will secure the future of small shops which is good news for communities across Scotland."

The motion calls for business rate increases to be capped

“at 12.5%, or 5% for small businesses”

without detriment to other businesses, as would be incurred under a traditional relief scheme—which Jim Hume has just been discussing. However, the money is simply not there. If we accept, as the business leaders whom I have just mentioned do, that regular business rate revaluation is fair and desirable, it is questionable whether direct intervention to distort the result of that revaluation is an appropriate mechanism for supporting businesses.

The Government has expanded further the small business bonus scheme to include more businesses. That is planned, proportional help, which is welcomed by businesses more warmly than electoral gimmicks of the kind that are contained in the Liberal Democrats’ sorry motion.

10:04

Ms Wendy Alexander (Paisley North) (Lab):

The Liberals should be congratulated on bringing this important debate to the chamber. The issue under scrutiny is whether the Government was right to reject a transitional relief scheme, the consequence of which is that there is no cap whatever on the additional sums that many businesses, particularly in the hospitality industry, might be expected to pay. In England, a business has the certainty that it will face a hike of no more than 12.5 per cent in any one year. However, in Scotland, the hike could be 50, 60, 70, 80 or 90 per cent; indeed, there is no limit at all.

The Government’s case against a transitional scheme, which it has helpfully laid out this morning, appears to be founded on two bases: first, that we have a low poundage in Scotland; and secondly, that moving to a transitional scheme would involve some cross-subsidy. I will deal with those two issues in the time available.

What matters to businesses is not the low poundage rate but the bill that they have to pay. I draw the chamber’s attention to the fact that last year the Scottish Government was the first ever in Scotland’s history to collect more than £2 billion from Scottish businesses. No other Administration has ever taken that amount of rates income. We should recall that that additional 5 per cent—more than double the rate of inflation—was taken from Scottish businesses at a time when they were coping with recession and a 5 per cent fall over the previous two years in the country’s national income. In taking the highest yield in cash ever—as I have said, more than double the rate of inflation—this Government certainly had some headroom to cushion the blow for the worst affected businesses if it had wished to do so.

John Swinney’s second defence this morning for why he is not prepared to consider any sort of transitional scheme—and I concur with other members that there is more than one variety of such scheme—was that he is against the principle of cross-subsidy. Frankly, I find that extraordinary. After all, his own small business bonus scheme is founded partly on a poundage supplement on all businesses, which involves cross-subsidising businesses large and small. I simply note that under this Government the cross-subsidy involved in its own small business rate relief scheme has doubled from 0.3p to 0.7p. It seems that the principle of cross-subsidy is sometimes accepted and sometimes not.

As other members have pointed out, the SNP’s rhetoric of being local champions will ring a little hollow for every tourism business that knows that it has absolutely no protection whatever and that the playing field in Scotland is now tilted against us. The situation is entirely of the Government’s making, and it should think again on the matter.

A more fundamental point is that, beyond the election rhetoric, this episode tells Scotland something about the increasingly imperious style of government that we are being subjected to in this country. This Government claimed that it would listen. Instead, it has been reduced to withholding data from SPICe, failing to consult the business community at all about this very big choice and failing to bring the issue to the Parliament. Whatever side of the debate people end up on, that is what they will remember as they reflect on this episode.

10:09

Gavin Brown (Lothians) (Con): A look at their time in Administration shows that the Liberal Democrats do not have a happy record of dealing with business. Moreover, they do not have a happy record of discussing taxation issues. Who can forget last year’s proposal to rip £800 million out of the heart of the Scottish budget and slash public services in order to fund their tax cut? They seem to have very short memories in that respect. Most of them were uncomfortable with the proposal at the time, and they are even more uncomfortable with it now.

The transitional scheme that the Liberal Democrats want to bring in would create more losers than winners, and most of the losers would be smaller and medium-sized enterprises while most of the winners would, as Derek Brownlee pointed out earlier, be larger enterprises, the public sector and supermarkets.

Jeremy Purvis: Will the member give way?

Gavin Brown: Not at this stage. I also point out that no Liberal Democrat has taken any of my interventions today.

There is a more fundamental issue that we need to consider. Anyone who wants their proposals to be taken seriously needs to cost them. We have heard no suggestion from the Liberal Democrats of what this scheme would cost. On the other hand, the cabinet secretary mentioned a figure of £195 million. I have not seen that in writing, but I note that no one from the Liberal Democrats has challenged it or put forward another figure.

Let us look even closer at the proposal. According to their motion, the Liberal Democrats propose to fund the scheme from the budget's Barnett consequentials, which, as we heard yesterday, amount to £70 million in cash terms. When the cabinet secretary outlined how that money would be spent, the Liberal Democrat speaker's to a man welcomed all the funding. Iain Smith, for example, said:

"Additional capital expenditure is welcome, and I hope that it will help to promote new jobs."—[*Official Report*, 14 April 2010; c 25254.]

Perhaps Mr Smith will tell us which of the expenditure announced yesterday he wants to claw back to fund his transitional relief scheme. Ross Finnie said:

"The cabinet secretary has made some sensible decisions. Our construction industry, which faces difficulties, will undoubtedly be helped by the additional sums ... put into the affordable housing budget."—[*Official Report*, 14 April 2010; c 25252.]

Finally, Jeremy Purvis, who opened for the Liberal Democrats this morning, said in relation to yesterday's announcement:

"The cabinet secretary made a strong case on that."—[*Official Report*, 14 April 2010; c 25233.]

Yesterday, the Liberal Democrats accepted all the funding from the Barnett consequentials and the ways in which it would be spent. Today, however, they come to the chamber trying to pretend that they want to spend the money on their transitional rate relief scheme. The money can be spent only once—and it was spent yesterday. Although the Liberal Democrats welcomed every item of expenditure that was announced, they are trying to pretend today that it can be claimed again.

Just to add more measure to the strength of Mr Purvis's argument, the Liberal Democrats yesterday also called for additional spending. Mr Purvis himself wanted more money for the Glasgow airport rail link; Ross Finnie wanted more money for Scottish Enterprise and Highlands and Islands Enterprise; and Iain Smith wanted more money for Scottish Development International and VisitScotland. The Liberal Democrat motion is an

absolute shambles, and we will not be supporting it.

10:13

David Whitton (Strathkelvin and Bearsden)

(Lab): As Gavin Brown has mentioned, yesterday we debated the local government finance order and the SNP Government's economic recovery plan. We listened as Mr Swinney again defended his zero council tax increase policy and repeated that the main priority is still sustained economic growth. However, what we have heard this morning will be a sharp reality check for many Scottish businesses with regard to the true meaning of SNP rhetoric—a reality of record rate rises.

Mr Swinney has already managed to fall out with major business organisations over some of his budget decisions and now he is simply rubbing salt into the wounds. Just as business begins to come out of the recession, the SNP hits it with rates increases that are in some cases more than double with no transitional relief scheme to ease the pain.

The First Minister and Mr Swinney have shouted long and loud about fiscal stimulus. What sort of stimulus is it for businesses to land them with rate rises of the kind that we have heard about today? Mr Swinney's solution is that they can appeal. It will come as no surprise to him to hear that four out of five firms surveyed by the Scottish Chambers of Commerce in Edinburgh alone are set to challenge their new business rates. Dr McKee might also like to note that 79 per cent of its members will appeal their new rate levels, particularly given that some firms are facing rises of more than 100 per cent. As has been mentioned, those increases will still have to be met until the appeals are heard.

Prestonfield House hotel in Edinburgh is one of the hardest hit. Owner James Thomson has been told that his rates bill will double this year. According to Mr Thomson, it means that he will have to find £17,386 for each of the hotel's 23 rooms and suites every year until the rates are recalculated in 2015. That represents a more than £200,000 a year increase on his previous bill. Mr Thomson is right when he says:

"On the one side, the Scottish Government wants to support tourism and on the other they appear to be penalising those that are successful."

What kind of economic strategy is that?

Not just hotels are affected. Like other MSPs, I received the briefing from the Institute of Auctioneers and Appraisers in Scotland, which is horrified at the impact that SNP policy is having on its members. As other members have said, the IAAS is asking why the SNP has not done what

Labour has done in England and introduced a transitional relief scheme that would have capped any rates increases at 12.5 per cent.

As Mr Purvis noted, the IAAS said:

"We are operating at an economic disadvantage compared to our counterparts in England."

What kind of SNP economic strategy is that? The huge increases in rates bills for some firms could result in job losses and business collapse.

If that is not enough, the thresholds for business rate relief for small businesses and rural rate relief have been raised. That means that some businesses that previously benefited will no longer qualify for relief, which will hit people who need the most support. Let us not forget that rates bills are based not only on notional rental values but on turnover—specifically turnover as at 1 April 2008, when the world was a significantly different place.

As I mentioned, the appeals system is coming under siege. In Edinburgh, the 19 staff who deal with rating valuations are suffering

"both abusive phone calls and fairly aggressive reactions"

from rate payers. That is not surprising considering the exchanges between the Liberals and the Tories this morning. The chief assessor, Joan Hewton, said:

"The disposal of appeals is proving to be a major burden on the staff, with many more appeals proceeding to formal hearing than in previous years. The cost in terms of staff time, legal costs and staff morale is concerning. It is the volume of appeals and that the litigation will probably continue for some time that is of concern."

Mr Swinney will no doubt be supported again today by his pals, the Tories. Mr Brownlee says that there should be no help for major supermarkets—no doubt a slap in the face for those captains of industry who he claimed yesterday support Tory economic policy. However, those supermarkets create jobs. The other companies affected by this SNP policy create jobs. A blanket refusal to introduce a transitional relief scheme will cost Scotland jobs. What kind of economic policy is that?

10:17

John Swinney: The debate has been characterised by arguments from the Liberal Democrats and the Labour Party that are based on the parts of the debate that create a negative proposition and by an unwillingness to contemplate any of the positive aspects. That was best exemplified by Mary Mulligan, who argued—not on the issue of business rates—that Bathgate had been singled out for harsh treatment by the town centre regeneration fund, only to reveal that, in the second round of funding, Bathgate was successful. If there ever was a contribution of

completely churlish proportion, it was Mary Mulligan's this morning—but it had many rivals.

Dr McKee made a cogent speech—

Liam McArthur (Orkney) (LD): Just one example.

John Swinney: No wonder the Liberal Democrats are laughing. I do not think they enjoyed Dr McKee's speech one little bit because he argued that the Liberal Democrats have been completely hypocritical about support for the business community and the measures that I have taken as finance secretary over the past three years.

Jim Tolson (Dunfermline West) (LD): The cabinet secretary talks about hypocrisy. Is he aware that Lauriston nursery in my constituency faces a 150 per cent increase in its rates bills? The nursery's owner, who is in the public gallery, built a brand new, green, nursery, which was recently visited by the First Minister. It is a crippling increase.

John Swinney: The owner of that nursery is perfectly entitled to appeal. Mr Tolson should be prepared to knock on the doors of all the businesses in Dunfermline West that would see their business rates rise as a consequence of a transitional relief scheme. The Liberal Democrats are simply playing games with the business community of Scotland; they are suggesting that it is possible to temper the increases in business rates for some companies without any pain for others. That is a piece of utter parliamentary hypocrisy—hypocrisy that we have seen in spades from the Liberal Democrats in the debate. To compound that, Iain Smith and Mr Purvis's motion suggest that the Liberal Democrats' proposals could have been paid for from the consequential from the United Kingdom budget. The Liberal Democrats have been demanding that we take forward affordable housing projects. Indeed, the Labour Party has been at the front of the queue demanding that we increase affordable housing expenditure. I delivered that yesterday, but if I heard Mr Macdonald correctly he will vote for a proposal from the Liberal Democrats that will take money away from affordable housing and give it to a business rates revaluation scheme. It is utter hypocrisy.

Lewis Macdonald: When John Swinney has calmed down a little, will he tell us what consultation he carried out with representatives of business organisations before he decided not to have a transitional relief scheme?

John Swinney: I engaged in a number of discussions with the business community on revaluation. I have had correspondence from the business community. Representations have been made to the Government and my officials are

taking those discussions forward. The Government has taken its decisions. We have introduced as part of this independent valuation process a package of support to business in Scotland that in 2010-11 will be worth more than £700 million. That makes my point about the extent to which the Opposition parties have today been prepared to argue that no one will be better off as a result of the business rates revaluation.

Ms Alexander: Will the cabinet secretary take an intervention?

John Swinney: I am drawing my remarks to a close.

The Opposition parties argue that resources can be taken painlessly from businesses that benefit from revaluation and given to others. That is a poor argument to marshal in front of Parliament. I have set out the approach that the Government is taking to ensure that we deliver the support that is required.

I hear Wendy Alexander muttering “£2 billion”.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Alasdair Morgan): Mr Swinney, I am afraid that you must conclude there.

10:22

Alison McInnes (North East Scotland) (LD): This has been a bad-tempered debate because those of us who want fairness are angry that those who oppose a transitional relief scheme have been more interested in covering up the damage caused to businesses than listening to the real hardship. Business leaders will have watched in dismay as Swinney, Brownlee et al paid more attention to name-calling and cheap electioneering than to the real problems outlined by my colleagues Jim Hume and Iain Smith and Labour members such as Lewis Macdonald. While Wendy Alexander's analysis was a welcome contribution to the debate, the SNP's contribution has been dire. Its only solution to the problem is to tell people to appeal. It is wrong for a minister to suggest that appealing is a solution without explaining the grounds of such an appeal.

During the Easter recess, I visited some local businesses that are hit hard by rates revaluation—businesses such as Deans of Huntly and Aberdeen and Northern Marts, which are based locally but are of local and national standing. I have surveyed hotels in my region and have been in contact with the Aberdeen and Grampian Chamber of Commerce. I have found out about some massive hikes in rates.

I have also learned of owners' and managers' fears for their businesses in light of the increases. The Liberal Democrats have used their time in the chamber this morning to give those businesses a

voice in Parliament. Obviously, any revaluation has winners and losers, but in the past there has been a transitional relief scheme to soften the blow—businesses did not suffer the full force of the rate rise in one go. It is different this time around because the SNP Government has refused to put a transitional relief scheme in place. Businesses throughout Scotland find themselves left alone to deal with huge increases in their bills just when, having perhaps managed to weather the recession so far, they might expect to look for support from the Government.

Gus Stewart, a rating partner at Ryden, summed up the mood:

“It is strange that at a time when transitional relief would probably have been at its most helpful for those seeing significant increases and ratepayers already struggling in the face of a recession, that it has been removed. The Government has publicised the fact that the reduction in the uniform business rate (UBR) will itself cushion the increases, but this is the same uniform business rate as applied in England and it will have a transitional relief scheme. Scottish businesses are once again the poor relations.”

As we have already heard this morning, auction marts across Scotland are facing astronomical business rate increases and Inverurie's Thainstone mart is the hardest hit of them all. Aberdeen and Northern Marts has seen its business rates soar 70.7 per cent to £248,400.

The president of the IAAS, John Gregor, has said:

“The Scottish Government professes to be a strong supporter of the livestock industry in Scotland. However, by not re-introducing transitional relief, they are letting the industry down and threatening its very existence.”

He went on to say that we cannot allow the livestock industry to suffocate under such charges.

Hotels have been badly hit too. Ivor Finnie, director of EDC hotels in the north-east explained to me that his rates will rise by 45.87 per cent, which represents an increase of £280,000. He said that that was

“an astronomical sum for our business and in the absence of transitional relief in my opinion, a wholly unfair increase.”

Further, Malmaison in Aberdeen, a welcome newcomer to the hotel scene, has been sent a bill for a 66 per cent increase. Agriculture and tourism are vital to Scotland's economy, yet the Government has refused so far to lend a hand.

Jim Tolson mentioned Lauriston Nursery in Dunfermline that saw its rates rise by 150 per cent and finds itself paying more than Dunfermline Football Club. Mr Salmond was happy to have his photograph taken at the nursery last month; I wonder whether he will now be happy to vote for the introduction of a transitional relief scheme to ease the burden on Ms Crush's business.

Alex Salmond is always quick to pronounce on economic issues that are the preserve of Westminster, but there has been an uncomfortable silence from him on business rates in Scotland, which are entirely within his power to do something about. In the First Minister's constituency, Meldrum House hotel faces an increase of 161 per cent; Thainstone mart 71 per cent; Meldrum Motors 94 per cent; Strathburn Hotel 56 per cent; and Dean's of Huntly 23 per cent. Those massive rises are unfair, yet the First Minister has nothing to say on the topic. The SNP's latest public relations campaign tries to kid us that electing SNP politicians is akin to electing local champions. The businesses of Gordon do not have a local champion in their local MSP in this matter. Alex Salmond has not been heard articulating the concerns of local businesses in Inverurie, Meldrum or Huntly.

The refrain from the Government that 60 per cent of businesses will be better off is no consolation to the 40 per cent of them who are hardest hit. Jeremy Purvis, our finance spokesperson, warned the Government last year about the difficulties that this revaluation would cause and the Lib Dems have been calling for action for months. The SNP has blithely ignored those calls and turned its back on some of our most important businesses. It is not just me who thinks that; CBI Scotland director, Iain McMillan, recently said:

"We're not happy that (finance secretary) John Swinney has rejected the business community's advice. We're living in times of severe economic restrictions".

Before the revaluation in 2005, the previous Scottish Government consulted widely and introduced a transitional relief scheme to limit the increases in business rates. In 2010, the UK Government is doing that for English businesses, yet at a time of deep recession the SNP does not think that there is any need for a transitional relief scheme. I say that it is unfair to put Scottish businesses at a competitive disadvantage compared with businesses in England. It is time for the SNP Government to think again. It is not too late to introduce a transitional relief scheme to limit the increase in bills. In the end it comes down to fairness.

The Conservatives and the SNP voted down our first attempt to introduce a transitional relief scheme; today we give them another chance. I know where I stand on this matter.

Fuel Prices

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Alasdair Morgan): The next item of business is a debate on motion S3M-6142, in the name of Liam McArthur, on fuel prices.

10:29

Liam McArthur (Orkney) (LD): It has been a year since this Parliament had an opportunity to debate fuel duty and the disproportionate impact that higher fuel costs have on Scotland's rural communities. Again, today, it is the Scottish Liberal Democrats who lead the debate.

As last week's report by the Automobile Association highlighted, fuel costs nationwide are now at an all-time high, so this debate could not be more timely. In the AA's report, Stromness in my constituency came out top of the pile at £1.30 per litre. That represents a 40 per cent increase over 2005 prices. Worrying though that undoubtedly is, not least because it is an upward trend that looks set to continue, the AA report rather glosses over the fact that in more remote rural parishes, and certainly in outlying islands, prices at the pumps are higher still. In effect, our remote rural and island communities face a triple whammy: higher fuel prices, longer distances and little or no public transport alternative.

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): What is the Liberal Democrat position on the increase in fuel duty that was introduced on 1 April, announced by the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Alistair Darling? Do the Liberal Democrats support or oppose it?

Liam McArthur: As I understand it, Liberal Democrat MPs voted against that latest announcement by Alistair Darling. We can exchange views on voting intentions. I will come to the Tories' voting record in just a minute.

When one considers that the average wage and household income in many remote rural and island areas is lower than it is elsewhere in the United Kingdom, the claim for a fairer deal on fuel duty becomes compelling. It is that claim that demands a response from this Parliament and a collective commitment from us to make the case and continue making the case at UK and European Union levels—wherever—until a satisfactory outcome is achieved. I recognise that the SNP's favoured option is for a fuel regulator. As I said in last year's debate, my concern about that option is that it fails to address the premium that is paid by people who live and work in remote rural communities. That was acknowledged by the minister's colleague, Stewart Hosie, who has also accepted that the regulator would keep prices artificially high at times, such as we witnessed last

year, when the price of oil falls back. I know that that concerns my constituents and I dare say that it concerns many who are represented by others.

I do not oppose the minister's amendment as it asks merely that the option of a fuel regulator be looked at. It would be strange if, having urged Parliament to unite to make progress on the issue as a matter of urgency, I insisted on ruling out consideration of any potential solution, albeit in the context of the need to introduce measures as quickly as possible. That could even extend to the fuel price stabiliser, wheeled out proudly, if not entirely convincingly, by the Tories. Their proposal seems to suffer from the same shortcomings that I identified in relation to the SNP's regulator, with the added complication that it asks us to pin our hopes on George Osborne's being able to guesstimate an appropriate base rate for fuel—an heroic assumption, most would agree.

In last April's debate, Alex Johnstone admitted that there were "significant similarities" between his party's approach and that of the SNP. He went on to say in that debate:

"When fuel costs are high, it is natural that they should be even higher in remote areas".—[*Official Report*, 30 April 2009; c 16930.]

Although that statement struck a rather discordant note at the time, I accept that Alex Johnstone qualified his remarks and that he did not seek to justify the disparity between the cost of fuel in rural and urban areas by comparing it with the mark-up paid by drinkers in central London for a pint of beer. Rather unadvisedly, former Labour Treasury minister John Healey tried that approach several years ago in response to a Liberal Democrat amendment to the Finance Bill that sought to introduce a rural fuel discount scheme. Not satisfied with joining forces with Labour MPs to defeat that amendment, not just in that year but on each occasion it has been tabled, Tory MPs now appear intent on deploying some of the worst possible arguments used by Labour ministers to resist such a scheme.

Charlie Gordon (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab): In the unlikely event that the Liberal Democrats are in a coalition after the UK general election, will insistence on the measure proposed by the member be a deal breaker for his party?

Liam McArthur: The case for our proposal is recognised across the board and was even recognised by some of Charlie Gordon's colleagues when we last debated the subject. On that basis alone it deserves more serious consideration than it has been given by Labour ministers to date.

According to one Tory MP in a debate in the House of Commons last May:

"One could, however, make the argument ... that people pay more for beer in London and the south-east, so the taxation system should provide a London discount."—[*Official Report*, House of Commons, 13 May 2009; vol 492, c 932.]

Given the surprise and outrage caused by his comments, it is perhaps fitting that the Tory MP in question goes by the name of Mr Gauke. No doubt Mr Johnstone is thinking what I am thinking and will wish to offer Mr Gauke some suggestions as to where he might like to deposit his London discount.

The fact remains that the Tories did not support our motion last year that called for a rural fuel derogation. They went on to vote against our proposal for a transitional relief scheme that would have assisted many small rural petrol stations clobbered by the eye-watering rises that they now face in their rates bills. Now, Tory candidates claim that they want fairer fuel prices and a better deal for struggling fuel providers. That simply will not wash.

Despite the Tories' indifference, last April, the Parliament supported our motion that committed the Scottish Government to working with its UK counterparts

"to construct a derogation under the EU energy products directive".

Petition PE1181, which *Am Pàipear* in Benbecula promoted, made a similar call. However, since last year's vote, in which they supported our motion, the vigour with which the Scottish ministers have pursued the case has been somewhat underwhelming.

When the Scottish Parliament information centre contacted Scottish Government officials last Thursday, it was told that a letter from John Swinney to the UK Government on 14 November 2008 was

"the most recent action taken by Ministers on this issue."

I acknowledge that it has since emerged that Mr Swinney wrote again to the chancellor last month and that he received a reply on 9 April. Perhaps that is further evidence of Government officials withholding information from SPICe—after the revelation in the debate on rates. Whatever is the case, that level of activity does not convey the urgency that one might expect from the Scottish Government. That is disappointing, not least because the Scottish Government has a strong case to make. The arguments that Mr Swinney marshalled in his letter of 19 March to Alistair Darling were excellently put. As Mr Swinney said,

"securing a rural fuel derogation"—

not a fuel regulator, of course—

"could go some way to offsetting the significantly higher fuel costs in rural Scotland and put consumers and businesses

in such areas on a more equal footing with those in urban regions."

Mr Swinney cited the example of France, which has been granted permission to apply a reduced duty rate in the region of Corsica, to argue that

"a similar arrangement in Scotland could help alleviate the price pressures faced by those communities most affected by high fuel costs."

Indeed. Likewise, Greece and Portugal have used such a derogation under EU law. Despite supporting that approach in other EU member states, UK Labour ministers believe it to be too "administratively burdensome" to implement here. I am surely not alone in being puzzled—if not a little alarmed—by the notion that the Greek civil service and tax authorities are capable of managing such administrative complexity but those in the UK are not.

Lib Dems have led the campaign for a rural fuel duty derogation for several years. At Westminster, my colleagues have developed and sought to introduce a rural fuel discount scheme, which has precedent elsewhere in Europe. The case for such a derogation is compelling and based on the principle of fairness. Unlike the proposals that other parties have made, our approach—which NFU Scotland has this week supported—addresses the overall cost and the premium that those in remote rural and island areas pay.

The costs of such a scheme are modest, but not so the potential benefits to people who live and work in rural Scotland. Less than 3 per cent of the UK's population lives in remote rural areas, but that figure is 10 per cent in Scotland. If we do not make the case for a fuel duty derogation consistently, persistently and with renewed urgency, we cannot expect others to do so for us.

I have pleasure in moving the motion. I move,

That the Parliament notes the AA report of 8 April 2010 that indicates that the average price of petrol in the United Kingdom has reached an all-time high and is likely to rise still further; recognises the high premium over the national average paid for fuel at filling stations in remote rural and, particularly, island communities; regrets the damaging financial and social impact that this has on individuals and businesses in these areas; further regrets the lack of progress that has been made on efforts to find a mechanism to reduce the price of fuel in specified remote rural and island areas of Scotland, and calls on the Scottish Government to hold urgent discussions with the UK Government and the European Commission to construct a mechanism, under the EU energy products directive or otherwise, to reduce the fuel price differential between remote rural and island communities and urban areas of the UK.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: If proceedings go to plan, I can allow members about a minute more than they expected.

10:38

The Minister for Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change (Stewart Stevenson): I assure Parliament that we can make common cause on the issue with our colleagues in the Liberal party. Liam McArthur talked of a rural fuel derogation, which is a broad term that encompasses a range of possible options. Let us not become unduly fixated on how to do that—let us unite around the principle that it must be done.

Jeremy Purvis (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD): As with transitional relief?

Stewart Stevenson: Despite Mr Purvis's unhelpful intervention—he appears to have forgotten that the previous debate has been completed—let us unite around the idea that duty should be reduced.

Jeremy Purvis: I make a serious point to the minister. If he says that the principle is to have overall support for a derogation, why cannot the same principle of overall support apply to transitional relief for other businesses that are affected, which include rural petrol stations? Such relief would have an impact on precisely those businesses.

Stewart Stevenson: Mr Purvis knows that the small business bonus scheme has delivered benefit to 66,000 businesses throughout Scotland. No party and no previous Government have made the efforts that we have made to support small businesses and particularly to benefit businesses in rural areas.

I return to fuel duty. I welcome the fact that Liam McArthur has initiated the debate again, although I regret that it appears to be an annual event. We have yet to see movement by the UK Government to recognise the concerns in remote rural and island areas of Scotland about the effect of fuel duty and of high fuel prices on those communities. As I said in the debate in April last year, the issue affects the people of Cumbria, Northumbria, Cornwall, Devon, Wales and other parts of the United Kingdom. I am sure that they will be interested in what we say.

As Liam McArthur said, as a high proportion of our population lives in rural and remote areas, the effect on such communities cannot be overestimated. A disproportionate burden is placed on households and businesses, particularly in these difficult economic times.

Liam McArthur acknowledged that we have again recently engaged by letter with the UK Government. He should not imagine that our engagement is limited to an exchange of letters. We regularly meet and have telephone conversations with ministers from the UK Administration. The subject is raised on a wide

range of fronts and forms part of the dialogue that ministers for a range of portfolios present in speeches and at meetings with a wide range of people.

Writing to the chancellor is of course important to put formally on the record the need to reduce the fuel price differential between urban and rural households and businesses throughout Scotland.

Liam McArthur: It is helpful that the minister sets out the representations that have been made, but does he accept that the direct response to SPICe from Scottish Government officials was that the letter of 14 November 2008 was the most recent representation that the Government had made on the issue?

Stewart Stevenson: I am certainly happy to explore why SPICe had that view, but Liam McArthur should be aware that not all correspondence between the Government and the UK Administration is necessarily or routinely put before SPICe. I am happy to ensure that members are well aware of our activity on the subject and I hope that the debate and my speech have provided clarity.

It is important to examine the evidence of the disparity in fuel pricing between rural and urban areas. Mr McArthur is of course aware that a disparity of about 10p exists between prices in Kirkwall and in Glasgow. That varies from day to day and week to week, but it endures and is of that order. Similarly, the Western Isles and the Shetlands have large burdens from the cost of fuel.

The purchase of beer was referred to. I am sure that that is more expensive in London, but it is a voluntary purchase, whereas the provision of fuel for vital rural services is not a discretionary buy for businesses or people who must travel to their work and transport themselves around. Throughout Scotland, we must all consider whether every journey is necessary. However, when the public transport options are fewer—as they inevitably are in rural areas—fewer journeys are discretionary and more are necessary, so more are affected by the high taxation regime.

The latest letter to the chancellor, which was sent on 19 March, asked him to reconsider his decision not to take corrective action through the tax system. Any derogation of whatever character—be it that proposed by the Conservatives or by us or the Liberals' variant—would do if it delivered the result. I am not partisan about that. A derogation would make a difference and put rural areas on a more equal footing with urban areas, which would reduce the competitive barriers of high fuel prices.

The chancellor's latest rejection has let down thousands of households and businesses in

remote parts of Scotland that face high fuel costs, despite the actions—to which Liam McArthur referred, as other members no doubt will—that have been permitted throughout the European Union in places where national Administrations have made and argued the case for them. I refer, in particular, to the example of Corsica, an island that is greatly affected by high fuel prices and is now benefiting from the actions of the French Government.

With the price of petrol having risen by 27 per cent in the year to March 2010, it is important that we get the early action that is needed. There has been a change in the way in which increases are phased, but there will still be increases. It is time for action. On behalf of my party, I will support the Liberals' motion and my amendment.

I move amendment S3M-6142.2, after second "mechanism" to insert:

" , including consideration of a fair fuel regulator".

10:45

Alex Johnstone (North East Scotland) (Con):

It is nice to return from the recess to find that this lovely, friendly Parliament is turning into something of a bear pit. I hope that the debate does not progress in the same way as the previous one.

I welcome the fact that the Liberal Democrats have brought to the chamber a motion that allows us to talk about fuel prices, especially their impact on some of our rural and peripheral communities. Back in 1997, when we last had a Conservative Government, the UK major brand average pump price was only 61.7p per litre, according to the UK Petroleum Industry Association. As we speak, there is no shortage of places around Scotland where the price displayed on the forecourt is double that price.

Given the state of the public finances, it would be irresponsible of any member to make any commitment to reduce fuel duty at this stage, but—as has been mentioned—the UK Conservatives are consulting on the introduction of a fair fuel stabiliser. I admit that there are certain similarities between the proposal and proposals that other parties have made. The fair fuel stabiliser would ensure that the economy was less exposed to the instability of international oil markets and would keep prices at the pump more consistent. Under the proposal, fuel duty would fall when fuel prices went up. When fuel prices went down, fuel duty would rise again. The Government would save in the good times in order to help in the bad times.

The approach has a practical offer to make in relation to the road haulage industry and the costs

to industries in peripheral areas that are associated with road haulage. I have talked to the industry and its representative organisations on many occasions. They indicate that the industry experiences two problems: first, the price of fuel; and secondly, the volatility of that price. If we address the volatility by creating some stability in fuel prices, we will deal with one of the problems from which the industry suffers. That is why we have approached the matter in this way.

Liam McArthur: Will the member take an intervention?

Alex Johnstone: I will carry on for the moment.

I turn to the subject of business rates relief. The Scottish Conservatives have called on the Scottish Government to think again about the way in which filling stations in rural areas are subjected to business rates; I do so again today.

Mike Rumbles (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD): Will the member give way on that point?

Alex Johnstone: Not at the moment.

It is wrong to ignore the distinction between independent filling stations and those that are operated by big oil companies and large supermarkets. Independent retailers have less bargaining power, and it is unfair to assume that independently run filling stations operate at the same levels of profit as their larger rivals. We believe that, in the recent revaluation, business rates assessors have not taken that factor sufficiently into account in the case of filling stations and should look at the matter again. Hopefully, that would reduce business rates for independent filling stations across Scotland. It is essential that businesses that find themselves in such a position take the opportunity to appeal urgently.

Mike Rumbles: I will try again. Will the member give way on that point?

Alex Johnstone: No, I will not.

Not much has happened in the year since the previous Liberal Democrat debate on fuel duty, which was held on 30 April 2009. During that debate, I moved an amendment that called

“on the Scottish Government to report back to the Parliament on the extent to which a fuel duty derogation for rural areas would be permissible under EU law and what impact such a derogation would have on carbon emissions and the Scottish budget.”

Regrettably, that day the SNP and—yes—the Liberal Democrats voted against the amendment, which fell. It is somehow disingenuous for the Liberal Democrats to come to the chamber today bemoaning the lack of progress that has been made on finding a measure to reduce fuel prices in

rural areas when this time last year they called a halt to the process of finding a solution. If we had received the advice for which the amendment called and knew today what it was, we would be in a position to progress the matter, had we not done so earlier.

The concept of a rural fuel derogation is attractive. It is essential that we realise that rural fuel prices and fuel prices throughout Scotland are geographically regressive. People in rural areas need to use more fuel because they travel further and more often. As we know, many people in difficult circumstances must run two cars when others in less rural areas would run only one. It is, therefore, essential that we address the issue. We look forward to taking the opportunity later today to vote for a combination of the motion and amendments.

I move amendment S3M-6142.1, to leave out from “and calls” to end and insert:

“as a result of the Liberal Democrats and the Scottish National Party voting against Conservative amendment S3M-4006.1 on 30 April 2009, which called on the Scottish Government to report back to the Parliament on the extent to which a fuel duty derogation for rural areas would be permissible under EU law and what impact such a derogation would have on carbon emissions and the Scottish Government, and welcomes the commitment of a future Conservative government at Westminster in relation to the introduction of a fair fuel stabiliser.”

10:51

Charlie Gordon (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab): We welcome the debate. This is the third spring in a row in which the Scottish Parliament has debated fuel prices. We acknowledge that high fuel prices are of long-standing concern to Scotland's remote communities. There can be increased hardship in such communities when further spikes in fuel prices affect people who often have no public transport alternative to car use or no access to mainstream networks for domestic energy and whose other living costs are adversely affected by high distribution costs.

If we take the view that the reserved issue of fuel duty and the associated issue of value added tax, set by the UK Treasury at standard rates throughout the UK, must be derogated in some form in Scotland's remote communities, we can consider the Tories' fuel duty stabiliser, the SNP's fuel duty regulator and the Liberal Democrats' press release. The problem with the stabiliser and regulator models is that, although both are based on the principle that fuel duty should go down when the price of fuel goes up, there is no guarantee that retailers would pass on the benefits of lower duty via prices at the pump. Of course, when oil prices dropped, fuel duty would rise again. In focusing on duty, we should not ignore

other, global factors, such as the current relative weakness of the pound against the US dollar.

The latest Liberal Democrat push includes Tavish Scott's so-called Highland manifesto, in which he spoke out on the issue. Surely Angus, the Borders or, for that matter, Cornwall or the Norfolk fens are not to be ignored in the Liberals' outpourings?

Jamie McGrigor (Highlands and Islands) (Con): Will the member give way?

Charlie Gordon: I have only four minutes.

Vince Cable, as well as that boy Clegg whom we always see with him, supports high fuel prices for environmental reasons. In March 2008, Norman Baker—it was his turn that week to be the Liberal Democrats' UK shadow transport spokesman—said:

"The problem with variable fuel duty is that it would be too difficult to operate."

However, Labour will support the Liberal Democrat motion tonight—not just because Vince Cable once gave me a Werther's Original or because the motion will not do any harm, unlike the Tory and SNP amendments, for reasons that I have already stated, but because Labour has an open mind about finding additional, practical measures to bring permanent mitigation of high fuel costs at the pump in remote communities. We want to build on the record of the previous, Labour-led Scottish Government, which developed the rural petrol stations grant scheme that has already afforded some mitigation.

Clearly, there is an on-going role for rates relief. I am surprised the minister did not mention it because I know that the convener wrote to him after this week's meeting of the Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change Committee, which endorsed the Scottish Government's proposal to seek suggestions from island communities on other possible mitigation measures. I am at one with the minister's emphasis on practicality. There is more than one way to skin a cat, as long as the cat gets skinned in the end.

Labour will take an active interest in the process of consulting island communities for additional suggestions.

Jamie McGrigor: The member is speaking about island communities. This morning, I spoke to my constituents on the Isle of Coll, where the price of petrol is £1.39 per litre.

Charlie Gordon: That is a good illustration of the problem. I have happy memories of Coll and all that I was able to assist them with when I was convener of Strathclyde Regional Council's roads and transport committee in a previous incarnation.

We will take an active interest in the new process that focuses first on the worst-affected communities, such as Coll, and we will keep an open mind on further mitigation that is practical, permanent and at the pump. We will leave the posturing to others. There must be an election somewhere.

10:56

Mike Rumbles (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD): The fundamental problem with fuel duty for many of my constituents, particularly those in west Aberdeenshire, is that the car is a necessity, not a luxury.

At the start of the debate, the Tories had the nerve to ask whether the Liberal Democrats voted for or against the increase in fuel duty resulting from the UK budget. Just to enlighten my Conservative colleagues, I say that, in the vote on the recent budget, my Westminster colleague Robert Smith, together with 42 other Liberal Democrats, voted against the measures to increase fuel duty, while only one Conservative, the member for the Vale of York, joined them. All the other Conservative MPs either absented themselves from the vote or abstained. I thought that I should make that point to the deputy leader of the Tories.

Murdo Fraser: Will the member give way?

Mike Rumbles: I will give way in a moment.

What I find particularly galling is the ignorance of many Conservative MPs on the issue of fuel duty. We have already heard how, last May, one Tory MP, David Gauke, compared the problems caused by fuel duty for people who live in remote and rural areas, such as my own, to those caused by the duty on beer in London. The Conservatives just do not understand that, unlike beer, fuel is a vital lifeline product for many of my constituents.

The Conservative position on rural petrol stations is equally galling. Alex Johnstone would not give way to me when he was making his speech, so I will reply to him now. Alex Johnstone cannot say that he advocates relief for our rural petrol stations when he voted against such relief as recently as three weeks ago. Alex Johnstone is standing for election to another place and he says to people in my constituency that he supports help for rural petrol stations, but he voted against it in the Parliament. We cannot have that level of hypocrisy in the Scottish Parliament. He and his Conservative colleagues voted against a Liberal Democrat amendment instructing the Scottish Government to implement a business rates relief scheme. Such hypocrisy brings politics and politicians into disrepute. When the Conservatives had the chance to help our rural petrol stations by supporting a transitional rates relief scheme, they

fluffed it, and they will fluff it again in tonight's vote. They did not have the courage of their convictions. Just because the Liberal Democrats proposed it, they decided to vote against it, hoping that no one would notice. That level of hypocrisy on the part of the Conservatives has to be seen to be believed.

We need a derogation for rural areas from the worst effects of fuel duty. The Liberal Democrats advocate that with a passion. The European Commission allows it. It already happens in France, Portugal and Greece, and it could happen here, if only the Conservatives would vote for it.

Why is the UK Government so reluctant to do it? Is it because such a derogation would affect only 3 per cent of the UK's population? If that is the case, it is a shameful neglect of Scottish interests, as it would affect more than 10 per cent of the Scottish population. A derogation from fuel duty for our rural areas would be a real help for people who, I emphasise, need to use their cars.

Stewart Stevenson: Does the member believe that if we had the powers here, we would have different outcomes?

Mike Rumbles: I certainly believe that if the Liberal Democrats were in power in Westminster—of course, everyone has the opportunity to vote Liberal Democrat on 6 May—we would have such opportunities. We do not need any change in powers per se to achieve that if we get the right result on 6 May.

It would be particularly helpful to my constituents in west Aberdeenshire, for whom I speak here. Out of necessity, that area has the highest level of car ownership in the country because of its difficulties with public transport.

I urge the Conservatives in particular to get real, to put petty politics behind them and to vote for a solution to rising fuel prices for our rural motorists, who have no option but to use their cars as essential tools for modern living.

11:01

Maureen Watt (North East Scotland) (SNP): This is a timely debate, given that petrol prices are at the forefront of many people's minds because of the recent price increase. The first part of the Liberal Democrat motion has little in it that one can disagree with.

The SNP has long championed the case of people who live in rural communities where remoteness and lack of public transport make a car a necessity rather than a personal choice. With fuel duty due to rise again by 2.76p in the current financial year, it is the rural motorist who will pay the heaviest price. The situation is totally unfair, and I know that the SNP group at Westminster has tried repeatedly to change it. While the current

Liberal Democrat claims of support for the SNP's position on fuel prices are welcome, it is a shame that they have not been backed up by action when the Liberal Democrats have had the opportunity to make a difference to people who live in rural areas. The situation of Liberal Democrat elected representatives in rural Scotland is often made completely untenable by the utterances of their London-based colleagues, who construct their policies from a London perspective.

In 2009, Liberal Democrat MPs voted to increase the money that people must pay in fuel duty, but every time the SNP has tried to introduce a fuel regulator into Westminster's budget, they have failed to support it. As ever, it is a case of the Liberal Democrats saying one thing to their electorate and ignoring it when it is time to take action.

Liam McArthur: I have already set out the shortcomings in the SNP's fuel regulator, which might explain why my MP colleagues voted against it. Will the member explain why SNP MPs did not press to a vote the tax rises that were announced last September?

Maureen Watt: The member brought the debate to Parliament today, but 37 Liberal Democrat MPs voted for the UK budget, which included the fuel duty increases. Of those, 24 Liberal Democrat MPs, including some from Scotland, were not there to vote on behalf of their constituents. The hypocrisy of the Liberal Democrats in the chamber this morning is unbelievable.

It is true that a fuel duty regulator would be a welcome measure for the reasons that have been set out. It would help motorists by putting an end to the wild fluctuations in fuel prices, and it would help businesses, such as the road haulage industry and those in the fishing and farming sectors, by allowing them to plan their operating costs with some certainty. The other parties have failed to back such a regulator when given the chance, which undermines any shred of credibility that they have on fuel prices.

The latest example of that failure occurred earlier this week with the chancellor's rejection of the Scottish Government's call for a derogation for fuel prices in rural areas, which would recognise and mitigate the premium that remote locations pay for their fuel. Given that the Labour UK Government backed such measures for France, its opposition to implementing them here can only be described as utterly hypocritical. People in rural areas and the businesses that rely on fuel to operate deserve much better than that.

What is the difference between the SNP's long-held fuel regulator policy and the Tories'—what do they call it?—fair fuel stabiliser? The Tories

recognise that there is little difference. It is another example of the Johnnys-come-lately to sensible SNP policies.

Once again, the SNP's consistency has been shown to be right. That is why the people of Scotland need the SNP as their champions in Westminster so long as we remain there.

11:05

Duncan McNeil (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab): The impact of fuel prices cannot be overestimated and the disproportionate impact on remote and rural areas has been acknowledged in the debate. Liam McArthur acknowledged that impact well.

Although it is predictable that, in a pre-election period, politicians who are not in power would seek to gain political advantage on the issue, there is no evidence to suggest that if any of those parties was in power, the situation would be radically improved any time soon.

The proposition that fuel duty is the cause of the problem and its solution is opportunistic and fundamentally dishonest. It conveniently ignores the uncertainty of currency fluctuations, crude oil costs, refining costs and distribution and marketing costs. If there is one certainty, it is that fuel is not more expensive in Shetland, Orkney or the Western Isles because of fuel duty, as the duty is the same right across the board.

Stewart Stevenson: Can Duncan McNeil tell me the difference in refining costs between fuel that is delivered to Stornoway and fuel that is delivered to Glasgow?

Duncan McNeil: No, I cannot. Perhaps the minister will put the answer in SPICe if he knows it, but I cannot. The idea that distribution costs do not come into the equation is wrong. I am surprised that a transport minister would make such a frivolous intervention.

There is no doubt that people living in Shetland, Orkney or the Western Isles suffer a greater challenge when fuel prices peak. Not only the UK Government, the Scottish Government and EU institutions but the parties in this Parliament need to come together. We are all at one in recognising that, as an elected Parliament, we have a responsibility to come together and offer solutions rather than score points on the issue if we are to make progress on it in the longer term.

My purpose in taking part in the debate is of course to point out that the rising costs of fuel and the differentials in price in urban Scotland are also a bone of contention, not least in Inverclyde in my constituency, where we consistently pay above average to subsidise lower prices in other areas. Lack of competition is the issue there. That

problem is recognised by the Competition Commission, which undertook a two-year inquiry into the situation and recommended a competition test, which aims to prevent one retailer from gaining a dominant position with larger stores in a local area to the detriment of consumers.

That recommendation was made to the Scottish Government six months ago and there has been no indication of progress or of a statement from the Government since then. There is an opportunity for the Government to show that it is serious about the rising costs of fuel by using its powers under planning legislation to enable the creation of local markets that would benefit consumers and, I hope, produce a level playing field that does not currently exist. To concede the possibility that the matter be dealt with under competition law—which, as we all know, is a reserved matter and, therefore, would be dealt with by the UK Government—would be a strange decision for an SNP Government.

I hope that the minister will be able to address some of the situation in his closing speech. I challenge the Scottish Government to begin formal consultation on the recommendation as soon as possible with a view to introducing a competition test under planning legislation. To do anything less would be to miss an opportunity to challenge the power of the large supermarkets. It is time for the SNP Government to do its bit to support hard-pressed motorists who are being ripped off at the petrol pumps.

11:10

Rob Gibson (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): It is always a delight to take part in debates that reflect the rural and island communities, on which this debate focuses. I am sorry that none of the rural and island members from the Labour Party has been here to take part, but I am not surprised because their position is entirely untenable.

Richard Simpson said on "Brian Taylor's Big Debate" in Aviemore just before the SNP conference that the fuel escalator should continue. That was a central belt member speaking in the Highlands and telling us that the London Government's fuel duty should continue to rise. In other words, it was the exact opposite of trying to find solutions, which Charlie Gordon tried to suggest today Labour wants to do.

Charlie Gordon: I pointed out that there is more than one way to skin a cat and that the mitigation that we all claim to seek will not necessarily come through changing fuel duty.

Rob Gibson: It sounds to me as though Labour proposes a very scabby cat, if I may say so. We need to try to deal with the 90 island communities in Scotland. England may have only about six

inhabited islands, but we have areas that are severely disadvantaged. Many of them are represented by people who have been seeking solutions to the problem for a long while.

It is welcome to have converts, as my colleague Maureen Watt said, but we must understand the chancellor's argument about this issue a little more. He says in his letter to John Swinney on 9 April:

"I understand that fuel prices are typically higher than the UK average in remote or rural parts of the country, including the Highlands and Islands of Scotland, but this is not the result of the fuel duty regime, rather it is the product of market forces".

Right. My contention at the Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change Committee has been that market forces have failed. It is not a question of being able to have competition between two different petrol stations on islands, because the same supplier takes the fuel to the islands. Competition does not work, so we have to intervene by some means to ensure that market forces are dealt with.

I have suggested that we consider bulk buying by local councils in such areas. I proposed that for the Highland Council area, but John Laing, the councillor in charge of the council's transport, environmental and community services committee, said that it would be too complicated. Well, I am sorry. It is an idea that people on islands want to be implemented. As the cabinet secretary is looking for ideas, I hope that that might be considered because, in certain areas, we must ensure that local petrol stations are supplied at competitive prices. If there has been a disadvantage of 10p in terms of fuel duty, that has not helped either, but intervening on the market is an important part of the solution.

The Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change Committee threw out—or closed, we should say—a petition from the Western Isles because the Labour members and the Green convener considered that the wording of it was such that it could be closed because the cabinet secretary and the Government had been asked for their responses. I am sorry to say that it was closed despite the Liberal and two SNP committee members voting against that and for keeping the subject live.

If this debate is anything, it is a means to keep the issue alive and ensure that we find solutions. If there is good will, the first part of our approach must be to consider the proposed fuel duty regulator. We have had all the arguments about that.

If we are going to be four-square on the matter, the Liberal Democrat members from the Highlands and Islands in the UK Parliament have to stand on

their feet and fight for this. So often, when it comes to a vote, they are not present. Yes, Sir Robert Smith has been present and Alan Reid was there for one of the most recent votes, but where were Charles Kennedy, Viscount Thurso, Alistair Carmichael and Danny Alexander? They were not there to vote. A regulator is precisely the kind of matter on which it is important for us to speak with one voice but, when it comes to the bit, the Liberal Democrats do not back us up. Their abstentions throughout the process have not helped, and although we wish to support their motion in principle, we look for more guts from them in the future.

11:15

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

The debate has been better tempered than the one that started the morning—at least, so far—perhaps because we are missing the running commentary from a sedentary position of Mr Tavish Scott, who has no doubt gone off to hone his witticisms for First Minister's question time. We will find out shortly whether it was worth it, although from past experience I fear that we will be disappointed again.

We are grateful to the Liberal Democrats for giving us the opportunity to discuss the important issue of fuel prices. Many of us have been horrified to see the rising prices at the pump in the past few weeks, with prices of at least £1.20 a litre in many rural areas, and in some places much more. As was pointed out earlier, that has a major impact in rural areas where there is no realistic and affordable public transport alternative and the motor car is a necessity of modern life.

It is interesting that the Liberal Democrats have concentrated on

"a mechanism to reduce the price of fuel in specified remote rural and island areas of Scotland".

Perhaps surprisingly, there was no mention in Mr McArthur's opening remarks of Alistair Darling's fuel duty hike, although Mr Rumbles subsequently referred to it. I am glad that he did, because I am genuinely confused about the Liberal Democrat position on fuel duty taxation. I had the misfortune to watch "The Politics Show" on BBC Scotland on 21 March and I enjoyed the sight of somebody called Nick Clegg, who is apparently the leader of the Liberal Democrats at Westminster, being asked to confirm the Liberal Democrat position on the fuel duty rise. He confirmed that Liberal Democrat policy was not to seek to reverse the increase.

Moments later on the same programme, we heard an interview with somebody called Danny Alexander, who apparently holds the elevated title of Mr Clegg's chief of staff. Mr Alexander said:

"I don't think that the Government should be pressing ahead with trying to increase fuel duty yet again in April with prices going up so far and so fast over the past few weeks."

Glenn Campbell asked Mr Alexander:

"Do you want the Chancellor to postpone or cancel the planned increase from April 1st?"

Danny Alexander replied:

"Yes, I do."

When it was put to Mr Alexander that that contradicted what his boss Mr Clegg had said a few moments before, he was left floundering and embarrassed. [*Interruption.*] Perhaps the Liberal Democrats who are here today could confirm the Liberal Democrat position on the rise, instead of shouting at me from their seats. Are they on Mr Clegg's side or Mr Alexander's side? The two are far apart.

Mike Rumbles: If the deputy leader of the Conservative party had listened to the debate, he would know that I have already said that 43 Liberal Democrat MPs voted against the budget increases in fuel duty. We do not want to see them. It is quite different from Nick Clegg turning around and saying, "Well, we voted against it." It is a completely consistent approach from our MPs.

Murdo Fraser: If that was supposed to provide clarity in the debate, it was an absolute joke. None of us is any the wiser as to the Liberal Democrat position. Nick Clegg says, "We can't reverse it." Danny Alexander says, "Yes, we can." For goodness' sake, let them make up their minds.

For our part, the Conservatives are clear that measures need to be taken to help to protect those who live in rural Scotland, in particular, from the impact of rising fuel prices. As Alex Johnstone pointed out, we have said that we will consult on the introduction of a fair fuel stabiliser to help to keep prices at the pump more consistent. Our proposal was warmly supported by Edmund King, the president of the AA, who said:

"It is right that political parties are addressing the problem of fuel duty now we have record prices at the pumps."

A major advantage of our proposed fair fuel stabiliser is that, unlike with the Liberal Democrats' proposal, there is no doubt about its legality. As we have heard, both today and in earlier debates on the subject, there are questions about the legality of having a derogation in different parts of Scotland. Surely we should concentrate on what we know we can do rather than on what might be possible. It is a pity that, in the year that has passed since our previous debate on the issue, the Liberal Democrats are no further forward on trying to convince us about the legal position on a derogation. They would have been more

convincing in this morning's debate if they had done that.

Another dimension to the debate about fuel that has become particularly acute in recent weeks is the business rates that are paid by filling stations in rural areas. That, too, was mentioned earlier. Just before the recess, the transport minister, Mr Stevenson, told me in the chamber that we have lost a third of the rural petrol stations in Scotland in the past 10 years.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The member should wind up.

Murdo Fraser: Many more are going to close, and the Government must take some action on the matter.

11:21

Charlie Gordon: It has been a reasonably good debate. As I said, this is the third year in a row that we have discussed the subject. Let us hope that we make some practical progress before this time next year.

Liam McArthur posed the issues fairly well and in a fairly balanced way. It is the generic issue of mitigation—or, if you will, derogation—that was the focus of the serious aspects of the debate. Stewart Stevenson, my usually conscientious adversary, departed from his standards later in the debate, in his intervention on Duncan McNeil about refining costs. A recent SPICe briefing on the issue for the Public Petitions Committee identifies refining costs as one of five principal factors in the problem. Perhaps the minister was trying to make a more obscure point—that has been known on his part—but he can clear that up when he sums up.

I will own up. I like Alex Johnstone of the Tories too, and not just because, like me, he is a transport spokesperson. There was something about him this morning that seemed to infuriate Mike Rumbles. I thought that Maureen Watt rather phoned it in. Duncan McNeil made the interesting suggestion that land use and planning might be one possible route for bringing additional mitigation to bear.

I will be scrupulously fair to Rob Gibson, who reiterated the point that he made in the Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change Committee earlier this week that local market failure is at work, which is a distinct issue from that of fuel duty itself. He made an interesting practical suggestion about bulk buying, but he came dangerously close to misleading the Parliament about what was decided by the committee earlier this week. Although we technically closed down a petition, that does not mean that the committee closed down the issue—far from it. Sadly, the convener of the committee is no longer present, but I quote

from his letter of 14 April to John Swinney about what was decided in committee:

"The Committee has now concluded its consideration of Petition PE1181"—

incidentally, the committee considered the petition three times—

"but will continue to maintain an interest in the issue of high fuel prices in rural and island communities. I would be grateful if you could undertake to inform the Committee, on an ongoing basis, of any significant developments on this subject."

It is not helpful, either, to cast aspersions about the nature of constituencies that members represent. I make no apology for being a constituency MSP for Scotland's largest city, but I am also Labour's transport spokesperson. I think the issue is important, and that is why I am here.

I hope that, when we have another debate on the subject next year, we will be able to say honestly to people who are adversely affected by the problem, "In the past year, we have made real progress with additional mitigation."

11:25

Stewart Stevenson: The debate has had running through it a strand of agreement on the definition of the problem. I do not think that anyone has suggested that there are not problems in rural areas. That at least gives us a consistent basis on which to argue about what some of the solutions might be.

Agreement on the solutions is perhaps less widespread, but there is a consistent thread. Alex Johnstone highlighted the fact that, in 1997, the price of fuel was 61p a litre. As I look round the chamber, I think that I may be the only member present who remembers when it was half a crown a gallon.

Charlie Gordon: I remember when lager was half a crown a pint.

Stewart Stevenson: Mr Gordon should not pretend that he is the same age as me and that he remembers that—it seems somewhat unlikely.

The fair fuel stabiliser that the Tories have proposed at least has the merit of providing an opportunity for discussion and debate. I note that Murdo Fraser said that there would be consultation on that idea. Ultimately, we should coalesce around whatever can be shown to work. That is the important thing.

Alex Johnstone mentioned that, according to road haulage interests, in essence the problem is the price of fuel and the volatility of that price. It is likely that we all agree on that. He highlighted the fact that independent filling stations have less buying power. That is where Duncan McNeil failed

to grasp the nettle in relation to rural areas when he spoke about possible amendments to the planning system to increase competition. On many of our islands and in many of our remote communities, the issue is not competition. There is simply not the volume to support multiple outlets, and there never will be.

Duncan McNeil: I fully accept that. I made it clear that I was making a plea for the situation that urban communities face to be addressed. When will the Scottish Government respond to the Competition Commission's recommendation? Does the Scottish Government intend to progress it through planning legislation rather than competition legislation?

Stewart Stevenson: I will come to that in a minute, but I want to finish my remarks on what Alex Johnstone had to say. We did indeed vote against the Conservative amendment to the Liberal Democrat motion for the debate to which he referred on the basis that, as Liam McArthur described, it appeared to move the issue from centre stage.

I thought that Charlie Gordon was rather unwise to talk about the weakness of the pound making a significant contribution to high prices when the weakness of the pound is, of course, a reflection of the weakness of the economy over which the Labour Government has presided. We accept that there are global difficulties, but relative differences affect relative valuations of currencies. The pound has sunk against the dollar. That tells us that, in relative terms, the UK Administration has been less effective in engaging with the world's economic problems.

Charlie Gordon talked about my role as transport minister. It is a great pleasure to stand before members as the UK's longest-serving transport minister. There is a sense of déjà vu—we have had the reference to skinning a cat on previous occasions.

Mike Rumbles correctly made the important point that in rural areas, the purchase of fuel for cars and for goods transport is a necessity and not the luxury that the purchase of beer might be.

Reference has been made to the correspondence between John Swinney and Alistair Darling. I will quote from Alistair Darling's letter of 9 April, in which he said:

"different fuel duty rates for some parts of the country would be administratively burdensome both for fuel sellers and for the Government."

I do not think that that shows a willingness to engage constructively to solve the problem of rural fuel prices, as has been done elsewhere in the European Union. It can be done: if the Greeks can do it, I hope that the UK Government can do it.

I turn briefly to the competition issue that Duncan McNeil raised. One of the great difficulties of saying when planning permission is granted that a filling station may be operated only by, for the sake of argument, Shell, because BP runs all the other filling stations in the area, is that that would reduce the economic value of Shell's investment, because it would be forbidden from selling the filling station to another operator. In saying that, one would make development less likely. However, if one is blind to the company that makes a planning application—that is a principle of the current planning system—there is nothing to stop the planning permission being transferred to someone else. That would be the case even if account were taken of the company that made the application.

It is important to understand that refining costs are the same, wherever in Scotland fuel is sold.

It has been a good debate, in which we have been united in defining the problem in a similar way. Rural areas of Scotland have substantially higher fuel prices than urban areas do. I hope that the debate has illuminated some of the issues and opportunities that exist, and that all members will unite with political colleagues in other jurisdictions in their efforts to remedy the situation.

11:31

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): On behalf of my constituents who, like those of Liam McArthur and other members, face crippling prices, I thank colleagues for what has been a relatively thoughtful and consensual debate.

Some thought-provoking speeches have been made in a truly constructive spirit. I accept that Duncan McNeil's points on planning at least bear some examination. Such work lies before us. I note and am grateful for Charlie Gordon's conciliatory remarks, in which he looked forward to how we might make progress on the issue in future.

As all members have said, the price of fuel has a huge impact. For my constituents, it affects everything from the price of a tube of toothpaste to the price of a fence post. It affects the cost of public services and our ability to deliver them. It affects crofting, agriculture and tourism. What drives people who care about the issue is that its effect comes right down to the price of a pensioner's supermarket basket of messages, to which it adds. It affects people on the lowest incomes.

I want to make specific reference to my constituency. Setting aside the context of the problems that are faced across the board in the UK, we face the challenge that the continuing

decommissioning of Dounreay presents us with of putting in place suitably high-quality replacement employment opportunities. In that regard, the crippling price of fuel militates strongly against the best efforts of Government, its agencies and individuals who care about the issue.

I will paint in the background scene to the problems that we face. The taking out of the post bus service on the north coast is an issue that members and the minister have heard me talk about on many occasions. That illustrates the fact that public transport is not available to replace the use of cars, which is essential. Sadly, we still see rural petrol stations closing. The one at Helmsdale stands empty and unused. Those factors form part of the background to the situation.

I accept that prices are very high in Liam McArthur's constituency and on the island of Coll, but in Thurso unleaded fuel costs £1.29 a litre and prices in Caithness vary between £1.24 and £1.29 a litre. In my constituency, distance is a huge issue. In the context of Scotland's land mass, the distances that my constituents have to travel to filling stations to fill up with the motor fuel that is essential to them and without which they cannot function are among the biggest in the country. They are paying an extra tax because of the fuel that they have to use to go and fill up.

As members will know, my colleague in Westminster, John Thurso, brought forward a paper that illustrates and fleshes out what Liam McArthur's motion speaks about—an area-based derogation. The paper is detailed and is now a matter of record in Westminster.

Alex Johnstone: On the subject of an area-based derogation, I notice that there is a reference in the motion to

"a mechanism to reduce the price of fuel in specified remote rural and island areas of Scotland".

Will the member enlighten us as to where the boundaries between such areas would exist and which areas he hopes would benefit from such a scheme?

Jamie Stone: Of course, that would have to be decided as the scheme was introduced, but the boundaries would surely be based on the areas of greatest need. That crystallises something of the difference that lies at the heart of what we are debating. As a party, we are unashamedly saying that any scheme should be area based and should target the people who face the most crippling prices. I accept that other parties are making other suggestions, but there is a difference between the broad-brush approach that would affect the whole of Scotland and the more directly targeted approach. However, it is right and proper that we should debate the issue, and I welcome the fact that we are talking about it today.

When John Thurso was a member of the Treasury Select Committee, he put it to the then Chancellor of the Exchequer that such a derogation should be looked at. He received a flat refusal, but for the record I say that the Treasury has accepted more recently that it should at least be considered. We will see what comes back from that.

As Liam McArthur has said, derogation works in an EU context. France uses such a scheme for the island of Corsica, and in EU law it is absolutely workable. To that extent, we say that we should just pick up something that is proven to work and look at how we could introduce it in Scotland. To that end, I have written to the EU to ask for the details of how derogations are applied in parts of the EU. I await the reply with the greatest of interest.

It is my considered view that a mark of a civilised society is how it treats its disadvantaged members. I put it to the chamber that my constituents are being greatly disadvantaged by prices that they simply cannot afford for what is a necessity of life. The question is whether the Government will simply allow outlying communities to wither and die—I sincerely hope that it will not—or whether it will show imaginative support that will allow future generations to live, work and rear families in my constituency.

We have a workable scheme. I accept that there will be a debate with other parties about their schemes, but at least there will be that debate. I believe that we have a recognition throughout the chamber today of the severe nature of the problem that my constituents face. I hope that we can all coalesce around my colleague Liam McArthur's excellent motion.

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson): I suspend the sitting for two minutes.

11:38

Meeting suspended.

11:40

On resuming—

Scottish Executive Question Time

General Questions

Scottish Information Commissioner (Court Case)

1. Elaine Murray (Dumfries) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what its position is on the use of public money in its appeal to the Court of Session regarding the Scottish Information Commissioner's access to Government documents. (S3O-10092)

The Minister for Community Safety (Fergus Ewing): The Scottish Government is asking the court to clarify the responsibilities of public bodies under the Freedom of Information (Scotland) Act 2002. That is consistent with the Scottish Government's support for the proper functioning of freedom of information in Scotland and is an appropriate use of public money.

Elaine Murray: In November last year, one of my researchers requested, under FOI, information relating to a ministerial visit to my constituency. Despite the advice of the Scottish Information Commissioner on how to make his request, he became embroiled in a bizarre exchange of correspondence with the minister's private secretary in which increased focus was demanded before information could be released. It now transpires that others, including the commissioner himself, have had similar experiences.

The minister's party voted for the Freedom of Information (Scotland) Act 2002, and the Scottish Government's website states that it is committed to open government and freedom of information. Why, then, is the minister's Government trying to thwart the intentions of that act by not releasing information that would previously have been released by other Administrations?

Fergus Ewing: I have no knowledge of the "bizarre" exchange or the ministerial visit to which Elaine Murray refers. However, I can say that the Scottish Government has dealt with more than 1,600 requests in 2009, and in most cases we provided some or all of the information that was requested. Less than 5 per cent of our decisions on requests are appealed, and we rejected only a very small proportion of requests as invalid. Therefore, we have a strong record on freedom of information. We recognise the principles and are putting them into practice.

The court action, which is of course sub judice, will have the advantage of clarifying the law in an area in which there are some uncertainties and may therefore bring about savings in future in the conduct of meeting our duties under the freedom of information legislation.

Domestic Heating (Older People)

2. Helen Eadie (Dunfermline East) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what assistance is available for older people with intermittently working heating systems. (S3O-10069)

The Minister for Housing and Communities (Alex Neil): Every household can apply for help under the energy assistance package. As well as getting advice on saving energy, people can ask for a check of whether they are getting all the pension credits and tax credits to which they are entitled, their electricity supplier can check whether they can get a cheaper tariff or a cheaper payment method, and some people will be eligible for free insulation.

If the heating system is working and the standard assessment procedure rating is less than 55, the householder may be eligible for stage 4 of the energy assistance package. If the system is working and the SAP rating is 55 or above, the dwelling is not eligible for stage 4 of the EAP unless the system is condemned as unsafe. I would advise householders with a heating system that they believe is working intermittently to seek appropriate advice from a gas safe registered engineer.

Helen Eadie: The minister will be interested to learn, following my raising of this matter with him recently, that my 90-year-old constituent is still left, in one of the coldest winters that we have had in recent times, to endure the unpredictability of whether her boiler will work or not. Is she to be left, as many others have been left, simply to freeze while less than half of the Scottish National Party's fuel poverty budget has been spent? Whatever way the minister spins the statistics, the fact is that central heating systems have collapsed under the Government's scheme. There were 3,528 applications from Fife under the energy assistance package, but only 263 people have had central heating installed.

Alex Neil: I deplore the disinformation and misinformation that the Labour Party is putting out about the energy assistance package. The reality is that the energy assistance package is designed to help people in fuel poverty—rich retired bankers do not qualify for a central heating system under our scheme. When the statistics are published, I believe that we will be able to demonstrate that we have spent the budget and achieved our targets. Indeed, last year, when the official statistics on the central heating programme for private housing

were published, they showed that we had a record unmatched by Labour at any time in the previous 10 years.

John Scott (Ayr) (Con): The minister will recall from our recent correspondence that I raised with him the possibility of making people with chronic illnesses, such as cancer, eligible for enhanced measures under the energy assistance package, and that he advised me that he had asked the Scottish fuel poverty forum to consider the matter. What progress has been made with that? The move would be extremely positive and would be welcomed by many households in which someone suffers from chronic illness and which are in danger of sliding into fuel poverty.

Alex Neil: John Scott asks an extremely valid question. As he said, I have asked the Scottish fuel poverty forum to examine the issue of chronically ill people who are living in fuel poverty. I am advised that it expects to report to me within the next few weeks, and I will study its recommendations carefully, because we are empathetic to the points that John Scott and others have made.

Energy-efficient Behaviour (Education)

3. Christopher Harvie (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Executive what measures are being undertaken to train primary and secondary school children about energy-efficient behaviour and provide them with a general understanding of scarce resources and fuel poverty. (S3O-10112)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning (Michael Russell): The curriculum for excellence puts a strong emphasis on developing responsible global citizens and includes specific outcomes on energy sources and sustainability at every stage. Pupils also benefit greatly from participating in the hugely successful Scottish Government-funded and world-leading eco-schools Scotland programme, in which more than 97 per cent of local authority education establishments are registered, and make use of the global footprint resource to understand and act on energy use. A range of resources are available through Learning and Teaching Scotland and other partners, and schools regularly use energy as a context for enabling young people to make informed, ethical choices.

Christopher Harvie: Is any specific support available to organise small school workshops or courses to further the understanding of energy efficiency and renewable energy and to exhibit and publicise installations and achievements that result from such workshops?

Michael Russell: As I have said, energy is a specific topic in the eco-schools programme.

Through that, schools assess the impact of energy use and demonstrate plans to improve efficiency. Some of the eco-schools that I have visited have working wind turbines; others experiment with a variety of energy generation sources.

The Government funds two school renewable development officers to work with local authorities to promote and support the increased uptake of sustainable energy measures in schools, specifically microrenewables and any accompanying energy efficiency measures.

The global footprint resource is available to all schools and should lead to innovation in schools on energy matters. In addition, many schools receive funding directly through Mr Lochhead's department's climate challenge fund, and many wider community projects include the participation of local schools in the climate challenge fund. In all those regards, and many others, the point that Professor Harvie raises, which is a good one, is being met.

Sarah Boyack (Edinburgh Central) (Lab): Has the Scottish Government yet set a target to implement its manifesto commitment that every school would have a renewable device fitted? How many schools have had renewable devices installed since the Scottish National Party came to power?

Michael Russell: We learned the lesson of not being target driven. [*Laughter.*] It has been an important lesson to learn, considering the failure of the previous Administration to meet any of its education targets. [*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson): Order.

Michael Russell: I like to view these things in a green and organic way. I am sure that the member would agree with that approach, as I know that she is green and organic herself and has those enthusiasms.

We are making good progress. Many schools are innovating in this area and are installing new generation sources, from photovoltaic panels to wind energy, and many more will do so in the years ahead.

Healthy Eating

4. Aileen Campbell (South of Scotland) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what steps it is taking to encourage people to eat five portions of fruit and vegetables per day. (S3O-10103)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing (Nicola Sturgeon): We currently have a number of initiatives under way to encourage people to eat a

healthier diet and to increase the provision of fresh fruit and vegetables in local convenience stores.

Aileen Campbell: Does the cabinet secretary agree that, despite the study in the *Journal of the National Cancer Institute*, which found little evidence of a link between eating fruit and vegetables and reducing cancer, eating healthy, locally grown produce, such as the apples in the Clyde valley, whose trees will soon be in blossom, has a range of benefits, not only for health but for the environment and the economy, and that we should continue to encourage folk to keep eating their five a day?

Nicola Sturgeon: I am aware of the study that Aileen Campbell refers to but, in spite of that study, the Scottish Government still recommends that people should eat five portions of fruit and vegetables a day. Eating a healthy and balanced diet, including fruit and vegetables—such as Clyde valley apples—can offer many health benefits, which is why we strongly encourage people to do so.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): Has the cabinet secretary had discussions with education colleagues about ways of encouraging schoolchildren to grow and eat their own food at school, which can be great fun for all concerned, as well as being healthy?

Nicola Sturgeon: I have many discussions with my education colleagues. Jamie Stone makes a good point. I am aware of some schools that encourage children to grow their own produce, which not only educates them about how healthy food is grown but encourages them to adopt a healthy diet. I am sure that we would be delighted to have further discussions with all interested parties to see how we could encourage that further.

Crown Estate

5. Peter Peacock (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what its assessment is of the conclusions of the Treasury Committee's eighth report of session 2009-10, "The management of the Crown Estate", in relation to the management and development of Scottish waters. (S3O-10095)

The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and the Environment (Richard Lochhead): I welcome the Treasury Committee's acknowledgement of the frustration in Scotland with the extent to which current arrangements for the Crown Estate commissioners take account of Scottish interests. Building on the Treasury Committee's recommendations and working constructively with the Crown Estate, we will be seeking to ensure that full weight is given to Scottish interests.

Peter Peacock: As the minister says, the committee's report is extremely interesting. Does the minister share my view that it is important that the Crown Estate commissioners study it and consider its implications and, in the short term, engage meaningfully with local authorities and others in Scotland to consider how the potential resources and revenue from offshore renewables developments can be shared with Scottish communities? Does the Scottish Government have any plans to discuss the report with the Crown Estate commissioners?

Richard Lochhead: We share the member's sentiments and hope that the Crown Estate takes forward some of the actions that he suggests. I assure the member that Scottish ministers are actively considering our options and are paying close attention to some of the recommendations in the report. We have no doubt that the people of Scotland, this Parliament and our local authorities would much rather that the Crown Estate was accountable to the Scottish Parliament than elsewhere.

Rob Gibson (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): What sums of money have the Crown Estate commissioners extracted from Scottish harbours and coastal waters to convey to the Treasury since the Scottish Parliament's recall in 1999?

Richard Lochhead: That is a fair question that concerns an issue in which the Scottish Parliament should take a close interest. Given that, since devolution, the Crown Estate has contributed to the United Kingdom Treasury £1.8 billion, of which we estimate the Scottish contribution to be £100 million, and given the widespread view that there is little visible benefit from that £100 million that has flowed to Westminster from Scotland's seabeds and land that is under the control of the Crown Estate, we should pay attention to some of the changes to the current arrangements that are being proposed by many commentators and the Treasury Committee.

Jamie McGrigor (Highlands and Islands) (Con): Does the minister agree that the Crown Estate's decisions to reduce rents for Scottish shellfish producers by an average of 15 per cent from January 2010 and introduce new leases for the more attractive period of 25 years rather than 15 years will provide a boost for our aquaculture sector?

Richard Lochhead: I welcome any step in the right direction by the Crown Estate. Of course, over the past few years, we have seen a more constructive dialogue between the Crown Estate, the various sectors, the Scottish Parliament and the Scottish Government. However, there is a widespread belief that there is a long way to go in that regard, and I am sure that the sectors to which the member refers would much rather that

the rent that is being paid flowed to the Scottish Government or local authorities and did not leave Scotland and go elsewhere.

Insulin Pumps

6. Bill Butler (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive when it will make public each national health service board's planned investment for the next three to five years in insulin pumps and the associated structured education. (S3O-10065)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing (Nicola Sturgeon): All the geographical NHS boards have now provided us with details of their plans for investment in insulin pump therapy and structured education up to March 2013. Those will be included as a table in the revised diabetes action plan, which we expect will be published shortly. That will give a Scotland-wide picture of planned investment, against which we will be able to measure progress.

Bill Butler: I recently made representations on behalf of a constituent in respect of securing an insulin pump, which proved a long and at times tortuous process. The experience indicated to me that there is a disparity in pump provision across Scotland. For example, Greater Glasgow and Clyde NHS Board had comparatively few people on pumps, compared with other boards. Given that, will the Scottish Government find ways to incentivise health boards to deliver insulin pump services? Has the cabinet secretary considered ring fencing budgets for intensive insulin treatments, including insulin pumps?

Nicola Sturgeon: I thank Bill Butler for his interest in the matter, which is of course a matter for NHS boards. Boards have increased investment and must decide how to use that investment to best meet the needs of local communities.

The issue is important and Bill Butler is right to say that there is a disparity in the provision of insulin pumps across the country. We are not doing as well as we should do in that regard, which is why in the first instance we asked boards to provide information on planned investment over the next few years. It is also why we will monitor the matter on an on-going and board-by-board basis. The diabetes survey monitoring group will be asked to record the information—including the age group of people who are on insulin pumps—in future.

I ask Bill Butler to accept that we take the issue seriously and I expect members who have an interest in it to look carefully at progress, as the Government will certainly do.

Further Education Colleges

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

To ask the Scottish Executive what support it is giving to further education colleges to meet Scotland's skills needs. (S3O-10094)

The Minister for Skills and Lifelong Learning (Keith Brown): Even in these difficult times we have increased college sector funding in 2010-11 by no less than 6.9 per cent—a rise of 4.6 per cent above inflation. Decisions on the funding of individual colleges are a matter for the Scottish Further and Higher Education Funding Council.

John Park: The minister might be aware of the situation that faces Carnegie College in Fife in relation to its ability to meet the needs of business and students during the next academic year. Given the vital role that the college will play in providing the skills that Scotland will need for the new aircraft carriers, the new Forth crossing and renewable energy opportunities in the Forth estuary, I would appreciate it if the minister looked into the issue and agreed to meet the college, to explore concerns and try to find a way forward.

Keith Brown: John Park is right to identify a serious issue, which we are taking seriously not just in relation to Carnegie College but throughout Scotland. I have been asked by the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning and the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth to oversee a task group that is considering the issue.

I have spoken to the principal of Carnegie College and have agreed to meet him—although I await his formal invitation. Our problems are the budget cuts and the increase in demand for college courses. Our contribution to that is to pay a higher proportion of our budget towards colleges than has been paid by any previous Administration and to increase student support, as a number of members, including Claire Baker, asked us to do. I think that Carnegie College found out yesterday that it will have a 15.6 per cent increase in student support funding this year. We are doing our bit; our problem is the pressure that Labour's recession has put on our budgets and the college sector.

Oral Health (Children)

8. Paul Martin (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab):

To ask the Scottish Executive what steps it is taking to improve oral health in children. (S3O-10082)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing (Nicola Sturgeon): Since 2005, the Scottish Government has been working on a number of ways to tackle poor oral health in children. We have launched a number of Government-funded successful projects

across Scotland, from healthy eating schemes in primary and secondary schools to the comprehensive childsmile programme.

Paul Martin: A young person in my constituency recently had 10 tooth extractions, which is unacceptable, and there are many other such cases throughout Scotland. What action has been taken to inform parents, to ensure that they take responsibility for their children's oral health? What action is taken to deal with parents who do not accept the message that they must ensure that their children have good oral health?

Nicola Sturgeon: A range of education and awareness programmes make clear to parents their responsibility for looking after their children's health in general—and for the purposes of this question, their children's oral health in particular. The childsmile school programme is important in ensuring that all children have access to preventive care interventions in primary 1 and 2. The programme is operating successfully in schools throughout Scotland.

Although I would never downplay the seriousness of constituency cases such as that which Paul Martin has just raised, the figures throughout Scotland give us optimism that children's oral health is improving. In 2008, almost 60 per cent of primary 1 children were found to have no obvious dental decay, which is the best result for that age group in Scotland since records began. There is a considerable amount of work still to do, but I am encouraged by the fact that we are going in the right direction.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes general questions. Before we move to the next item of business, Parliament will wish to note that I have written to the consul general for Poland, asking that he pass on the condolences of the entire Parliament to the Polish people, both here and in Poland, following the tragic plane crash in Smolensk last week.

First Minister's Question Time

12:00

Engagements

1. Iain Gray (East Lothian) (Lab): To ask the First Minister what engagements he has planned for the rest of the day. (S3F-2320)

The First Minister (Alex Salmond): My engagements for today will now be taken up by the emergency and contingency committees dealing with the volcanic ash issue that is causing disruption to airspace across the United Kingdom. Following a volcanic eruption in Iceland, an ash plume has entered UK and Scandinavian airspace overnight. At 4 o'clock this morning, the National Air Traffic Service took the decision to cancel all Scottish flights due to safety concerns, and that cancellation will be in force until further notice. At 12 noon, the rest of the United Kingdom has followed suit, and that cancellation will also be in force until further notice. The Scottish Government's resilience room was activated at 5.45 this morning, and officials from a variety of policy areas have been meeting since then. I convened the Cabinet sub-committee at 11 o'clock this morning, and a further sub-committee meeting will be convened at 3 o'clock.

The current situation is that airports are closed. An update will be provided at 6 o'clock this evening. The Scottish Ambulance Service has advised that guidance provided by the aviation authorities is that no aircraft should fly above 5,000ft. All aircraft that are flying are flying under visual rules only. The ambulance service, supported by the Ministry of Defence and the Maritime and Coastguard Agency, will, as far as possible, continue to undertake missions where patients are in a life-threatening condition. Any missions in respect of non-life-threatening conditions are being deferred to ensure that the resources are utilised effectively. However, where that is not possible due to cloud or visibility restrictions, the patients must be cared for in the locality, and territorial national health service boards are ready to support that. Helicopter flights to the North Sea have also been suspended.

The quantity of ash that has been emitted is still unknown, as is the height to which the ash has been elevated. The meteorological forecasts indicate that the ash may be present over the United Kingdom today, tomorrow and perhaps into the weekend. Contingency travel plans are being put in place to keep the population and essential air travel moving across these islands, and emergency plans are being developed to deal with health service issues—in particular, cases in which patients must be transferred. The

indications from the Scottish Environment Protection Agency's monitoring across the country are that there is no immediate threat to air quality at ground level. Forecasts and reports are being issued on an hourly basis.

A statement and briefing will be offered to the spokespeople of the Opposition parties at 5 o'clock this evening, after the next Cabinet sub-committee meeting.

Iain Gray: I thank the First Minister for that update. Clearly, the whole chamber will support the Government in its efforts to deal with the problem that has developed.

This week, the Justice Committee stood up for knife crime victims throughout Scotland in backing Labour's policy of carry a knife, go to jail. The number of knife murders in Scotland is more than double the number in the rest of the United Kingdom. Will the First Minister finally listen to the victims and to our communities? Will he respect the Justice Committee of the Parliament?

The First Minister: The Parliament will have the opportunity to decide on the issue as a full Parliament. Of course I respect the seriousness of an issue that affects the livelihoods and lives of many people, but I do not respect the wish to play party politics with it.

I am not at all sure what the Labour Party is suggesting. I have seen the amendment in question, but I also have copies of the various petitions that the Labour Party has brought forward. The first said:

"Carry a Knife, Go to Jail".

That petition called for a minimum sentence for knife criminals. The second petition changed that; the proposal became a mandatory sentence for knife criminals in Scotland. The amendment that the Justice Committee considered argued that there should be a sentence unless there were exceptional circumstances. The Labour Party's story varies north and south of the border, the wording of its petitions has changed, and at every stage it seems to be more concerned with politicking on a serious matter of public safety than with respecting the voices of those who work to make our communities safer.

Iain Gray: Tens of thousands have supported Labour's carry a knife, go to jail campaign and petitioned the Parliament. They are clear about what they want: they want those who have been convicted of carrying a knife to be sure that they will go to jail. The amendment to the Criminal Justice and Licensing (Scotland) Bill is clear, and following the Justice Committee's meeting this week, it has been included in that bill. Will the First Minister respect that decision, or does he intend to

try to remove that amendment from the bill when it comes to the chamber?

The First Minister: The Parliament will decide on that matter, and I am sure that Iain Gray will want to respect its views. When the full Parliament discusses the issue, members will remember that the average length of custodial sentence for carrying an offensive weapon has more than doubled from 2005-06, that the percentage of those who are given a custodial sentence of more than six months has doubled, and that the number of persons who are convicted and given a custodial sentence has increased by almost 40 per cent. Those are the facts and that is the reality behind how the Government has dealt with the serious issue of knife crime, as opposed to the previous Administration's record of inaction.

Iain Gray: It is a fact that only 70 per cent of convicted knife criminals go to jail. That is bad enough, but it is worse that Alex Salmond wants to end six-month sentences and get the percentage of convicted knife criminals who do not go to jail up to 90 per cent. Only one in 10 convicted knife criminals would face a jail sentence. The Justice Committee rejected that, too.

Alex Salmond has been around Scotland saying that Scotland needs local champions to articulate community concerns. We know that he loves to articulate at great length and at even greater volume, but exactly which community in Scotland is telling him that it wants to see knife criminals released on to its streets?

The First Minister: It is absolutely right that the Scottish National Party should offer community champions to the people of Scotland, just as it is right that communities throughout Scotland are celebrating the fact that there are 1,000 more police officers on the streets and in the communities of Scotland, as opposed to the zero record under the Labour Party and its offer of no extra police officers at the previous election. The communities of Scotland are celebrating the lowest level of recorded crime for a generation. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson): Order.

The First Minister: They are also celebrating the fact that they have a justice policy and a Government that takes action on policing and solving crime, as opposed to the inaction of the previous Administration.

While I have been going round Scotland and celebrating with community champions who articulate the voices of communities, Iain Gray has been launching a manifesto. The English version of that manifesto does not propose the action that he has proposed in the chamber. Why did the Labour Party, when it was in government, not

propose such a policy? Why should we be persuaded by Labour members' arguments today if they cannot even persuade Gordon Brown that they are on the right course?

Iain Gray: I think that the First Minister rather missed the point that knife murders are running at double the rate in Scotland that they are in England. That is why we need special action here in Scotland. There is not much point having those 1,000 extra police officers if, when they arrest and convict knife criminals, the First Minister lets those criminals out.

John Muir, whose son was murdered; Kelly McGhee, whose brother was killed; Christine Halley, whose son died at the hands of a knife criminal—Alex Salmond is not their champion.

Whether it is Alex Salmond on knife criminals, Nicola Sturgeon on a benefit fraudster or Kenny MacAskill on the Lockerbie bomber, the SNP is all too ready to champion those who commit the crimes, not those who suffer the consequences. When the time comes and the bill comes before the chamber, will the First Minister choose to champion the criminals or our communities?

The First Minister: Let us listen to the people who are actually working with this issue, as opposed to trying to make an issue work for them politically. At the Public Petitions Committee knife crime debate, Detective Chief Superintendent John Carnochan of the violence reduction unit opposed mandatory sentences by saying:

"I have been a cop for 34 years. If I thought that it would work to give people four years in the jail the first time they are caught carrying a knife, I would be your man".

He went on to say that jail does not work and that we need early intervention and to reduce access to alcohol and knives. The people who are dealing with these issues in Scotland and making our communities safer back the Government's approach to them.

Iain Gray talks about England and Wales. The sentences for knife crime in Scotland are higher than they are in England and Wales. He thinks that the people of England will accept that they do not have a problem with knife crime. Of course they have a problem with knife crime, but what they will not accept is a Labour Party that is saying something different in opposition from what it was prepared to do in office; which says something different north and south of the border because it thinks that it suits it politically; which seeks to persuade this Parliament when it cannot even persuade the Prime Minister, who wanted no extra police in Scotland, as opposed to the 1,000 extra who were delivered; and which talks about law and order and public services when the Chancellor of the Exchequer—a Scottish Labour MP—is promising the people of this country cuts in public

services that will be deeper and tougher than those of Margaret Thatcher.

When the Labour Party starts to back our police and our public services, Iain Gray can come to this chamber with a shred of credibility. If he ever gets any consistency in his policies, he will be fit to be First Minister, instead of not being fit to be an Opposition leader.

Prime Minister (Meetings)

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

To ask the First Minister when he will next meet the Prime Minister—the current one, that is. (S3F-2321)

The First Minister (Alex Salmond): I would have loved to have met the Prime Minister this evening, but I understand that he will be otherwise engaged. I have no plans to meet the current Prime Minister in the near future.

Annabel Goldie: Earlier this week, Nicola Sturgeon, the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing, said that progress on the national health service in Scotland is threatened by what she described as

“the cuts agendas of the London parties”.

The Conservative party has confirmed that a Conservative Government at Westminster will increase NHS funding in real terms every year. Will the First Minister give the same pledge to Scotland? Will he confirm that in his next budget he will also increase NHS spending in Scotland in real terms?

The First Minister: I will continue to protect the national health service and other front-line services in Scotland. However, the Conservative party and all the London parties will now have to face the reality of what their spokesmen are suggesting and what they are trying not to reveal in this election campaign. In addition to the dramatic cuts in public spending that the Labour Party is proposing, the Conservatives want to cut earlier and, indeed, they are planning a special cut—a Cameron cut—in Scottish public spending. Therefore, if the London parties in this election campaign are making forecasts—and implicit in their assumptions are reductions in public spending of 10 to 15 per cent over the next few years and of much greater than that over the next 15 years—it will be difficult for any MSP representing those parties in this Parliament to say that they are the defender of public services when the budgets being pursued by Westminster threaten to cut Scotland's public services faster and deeper.

Annabel Goldie: I asked a specific question about the health service, and I failed to get a specific response. We now know the truth about

the SNP: it is more nats, more cuts. It is utterly disgraceful that the First Minister is unable to give a pledge to protect the Scottish NHS. He might want to play politics in the chamber, but he cannot play fast and loose with our NHS patients. I ask him once again: in light of the Conservative pledge on the health budget, will the First Minister increase Scottish NHS funding?

The First Minister: Yes—I gave the answer the first time. Yes, we will, because we will continue to protect front-line services in Scotland. As we have defended the health service this year, we will defend it to the utmost extent throughout the next few years, and indeed over the many years in which the SNP will be in government.

Annabel Goldie chose not to pick up the key point that the spokesman for her party, David Cameron, and her shadow chancellor, have been making over the past two weeks: the revelation that, in addition to the billions of pounds of cuts that are to be “tougher and deeper” than those of Margaret Thatcher, according to the Chancellor of the Exchequer, the Conservative party is planning cuts that are earlier and deeper. In that context, with the London parties competing to make cuts that are tougher and deeper, how can Annabel Goldie come to this or any other chamber and tell us that she is intent on defending the national health service? If public spending is cut, that threatens vital services in Scotland. When the Tories accept the reality and join the rest of us in really defending Scottish public services, they will have an ounce of credibility with regard to the health service in Scotland.

Cabinet (Meetings)

3. Tavish Scott (Shetland) (LD): To ask the First Minister what issues will be discussed at the next meeting of the Cabinet. (S3F-2322)

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

Tavish Scott: Today in Parliament an event will highlight the Cancer Research UK relay for life, an inspirational demonstration by many Scots of their commitment to cancer relief. The Shetland representative cannot attend the event, because his Loganair flight has been cancelled as plumes of volcanic ash drift across northern Europe. What steps is the Government taking to reinforce the advice that passengers should not travel to Scotland's airports and should instead contact their airlines? What steps is the Government taking to assess the impact on transport and to help forms of transport other than air to take up the burden?

The First Minister: I gave a statement to Parliament in an answer a few minutes ago. We

are considering particular contingencies for emergency flights. Tavish Scott will be aware that an emergency patient could not be transferred from the northern isles today. Contingencies have been made to ensure proper treatment. There is a possibility—it has been used already at least in the case of one patient—of flying by helicopter under 5,000ft, using visible means only. That option will be deployed on a case-by-case basis, for dealing with emergency cases.

Regarding transport across these islands, contingencies are being worked on with regard to how long the aircraft and airport ban is likely to stay in place. We have substantial additional capacity for north-south travel on the railways, but the longer the situation pertains, the more difficult it will be to sustain transport, not just from the islands but across these islands in terms of the volumes that presently apply. As far as Tavish Scott's representative is concerned, John Swinney will be glad to give a briefing after the second Cabinet sub-committee meeting this afternoon.

Tavish Scott: I am grateful for that. I will pursue a couple of those points. Air transport is clearly the service that has been hardest hit, but there will be implications for other transport modes today and over the coming days. Has the Government contacted Highlands and Islands Airports Ltd? What steps are being taken to extend airport opening hours and to allow flights to catch up and aircraft to be repositioned once airspace is clear? Has the UK Border Agency been asked to take special steps should flights from overseas arrive in quick succession, once airports reopen? Are there any indications of disruption to mail delivery across Scotland, without Royal Mail flights? Edinburgh airport has a large mail operation. Have Network Rail and ScotRail been contacted to ensure that weekend engineering works are kept to a minimum so that people can use the trains with confidence? The challenge for Government is surely to clear the in-tray and to do all that it can to assist people at this time.

The First Minister: That is exactly what we have been doing today. All the issues that Tavish Scott has mentioned are being dealt with in the Cabinet sub-committee and by our officials on an on-going basis.

Picking up on one such issue, I point out that there is capacity for 20,000 additional places a day on existing north-south rail services. In comparison, roughly 57,000 people fly from Scottish airports but, of course, not all of them are going from north to south. We are looking at that additional capacity in the railways as well as examining additional capacity from extra bus services.

I will seek to update Tavish Scott on the detail of the measures that are being taken. I am very

sympathetic and sensitive to the particular issues with regard to island transport in the northern isles, the Western Isles and other islands in Scotland and the fact that essential, not discretionary, services are jeopardised when airports are closed.

That said, I am sure that, like everyone else, Tavish Scott understands that safety must be paramount in evaluating when airports can be reopened. Aircraft cannot fly unless there is absolute satisfaction about the safety of the mode of transport. We hope that by this afternoon we will have a better evaluation of the likely timescales that we are working to. However, Mr Scott must accept that the issue is extremely difficult at the moment.

Lastly, I reiterate that according to the information that we have to date, which appears pretty solid, the present atmospheric conditions make it unlikely that ash will descend below 5,000ft and there is no immediate danger to ambient air quality in Scotland. The situation is being kept under strict hourly monitoring and, again, if circumstances change, I will ensure that Tavish Scott is updated.

Willie Coffey (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Will the First Minister join me in expressing condolences to the family of the workman who died this week while working on Stewarton viaduct in my constituency? He will recall that consideration is being given to the proposal for the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Office to have powers over all fatal accidents in Scotland, including those related to rail services. Will he ask the Cabinet Secretary for Justice to raise the issue with the UK Government and request that this fatality and others related to rail services are brought within the scope of fatal accident inquiry legislation?

The First Minister: I—and I am sure the whole chamber—join the member in expressing those condolences. I will arrange for the Cabinet Secretary for Justice to address with Willie Coffey the detail of his specific points. There is an argument to be made here, and we would obviously want the facility of fatal accident inquiries, which provide flexibility in the examination of fatalities, to be as widely available as possible. As I said, I will get the cabinet secretary to consult the member on the detail of his proposal.

Ms Wendy Alexander (Paisley North) (Lab): The First Minister will be aware that earlier this week BASF Ciba in my constituency announced 232 planned redundancies. I welcome the Minister for Enterprise, Energy and Tourism's recent visit to the site and am sure that the Government will want to ensure that all possible assistance is offered to those affected by the redundancies. However, the First Minister might also be aware

that Scottish Enterprise is currently undertaking a study into the site's economic future. Will he ensure that that study is published when it is completed later this summer?

The First Minister: As the member knows, the Minister for Enterprise, Energy and Tourism visited the site on Monday. Everything is being done to maintain employment both on the site and in the company, and I will consult the minister on the nature of the study in question and seek to accede to the member's request.

As the member knows, I was able last week to make a very positive jobs announcement in Renfrewshire and I am very aware of the challenges that that community and other such communities in Scotland are facing. However, everything will be done, including mobilising the partnership action for continuing employment team that has been successful in other areas and other issues, to find continuing employment for the people affected by this announcement. As I said, I will discuss with the Minister for Enterprise, Energy and Tourism whether we can accede to the member's specific request for the report to be published.

Anti-English Sentiment

4. Ian McKee (Lothians) (SNP): To ask the First Minister what the Scottish Government's response is to the report from the University of Edinburgh's department of sociology, published in the *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, that finds that anti-English sentiment expressed toward undergraduates from England has the potential to weaken the capacity for Scotland to retain highly skilled graduates from that country. (S3F-2329)

The First Minister (Alex Salmond): We should be careful before we accept a characterisation of Scots' attitudes towards our neighbours on the basis of one report, and still less on newspaper articles on that report. The recent press articles are based on interviews carried out in 2005 with some 80 graduates who completed their undergraduate course at Edinburgh University in 2000. It is therefore hardly representative of Scottish society today.

We are proud of our reputation as a welcoming nation for students from any country and background, grateful for the contribution they make and keen that our own students can benefit from the opportunities that are offered by a diverse student population. The attraction of Scotland is reflected in the numbers of international students choosing to come here—about 40,000 overall. Looking specifically at English entrants to higher education in Scotland in 2008-09—the latest data that are available—the number has increased by almost 6 per cent since the previous year.

In a race equality statement published in December 2008, we are clear that we want a Scotland where people from all backgrounds—irrespective of race, faith, belief and place of birth—feel respected, have a sense of belonging and are confident that they can achieve their full potential in our country.

Ian McKee: I am grateful to the First Minister for his answer and for confirming that Scotland welcomes and values the contribution of students from England and other countries to the academic, cultural and social life of Scotland. Indeed, if I may declare an interest, I am one such immigrant and have experienced nothing but positive support since coming to this country many years ago. Does the First Minister agree that the key to successful assimilation of newcomers in any nation is a sense of national self-confidence and purpose among all citizens, and that the more Scotland is able to control its own future, the more likely we are to progress towards that goal?

The First Minister: I agree with that. I would also agree that Scots have a long history and tradition of extending a warm welcome to migrants coming to Scotland to work, study and live. The Scottish Government welcomes the contribution that everyone makes to the economic and cultural life of Scotland and we remain committed to an independent Scotland in which Scots from all backgrounds feel respected and have a sense of belonging.

I am grateful to Ian McKee for raising the issue, particularly because I noticed that the co-author of the report, Ross Bond, wrote to *The Scotsman* yesterday about the media coverage, which he saw as a misrepresentation. He criticised *The Scotsman* for encouraging

"the very conclusions we"—

the authors of the report—

"took pains to avoid".

It is right and proper that Ian McKee raised the issue because we should take every opportunity in this national Parliament to emphasise the nature and characteristics of what is best in Scotland and our attitude to people coming from overseas, and indeed to make the connection between Scottish self-respect and Scottish self-government. We should all respect our internationalist, outgoing attitude.

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): The report to which Dr McKee refers confirms that anti-English sentiment in Scotland appears to increase during major sporting tournaments such as football's world cup. In that context, I welcome the example being set by the First Minister in saying that he will support England at the world

cup, and ask him whether he will encourage the rest of his party to follow his lead.

The First Minister: I have many and various responsibilities as the First Minister of Scotland, but when it comes to supporting football teams, I take the responsibility for my own words and my own actions. I would not dare to tell any member of Parliament, least of all Murdo Fraser, which team they should support at a national or international level.

Liquor Licences (Suspensions)

5. Dr Richard Simpson (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): To ask the First Minister how many retailers have had liquor licences suspended for selling alcohol to children since 2007 and what the average fine has been. (S3F-2324)

The First Minister (Alex Salmond): There were 29 licences suspended in 2007, a figure that was up considerably from 2005. There were 60 and 116 convictions for selling alcohol to underage persons in 2007-08 and 2008-09 respectively. The average fine in those years was £305 and £244. Data collection has been suspended to avoid unnecessary burden on local authorities because new legislation is being implemented, as the member well knows.

The Parliament recognises the urgent need to rebalance Scotland's relationship with alcohol. The framework for alcohol contains more than 40 measures, many of which focus on our children and young people.

In relation to Dr Simpson's specific point about effective enforcement, that is indeed part of the solution. Six months into the new legislation, we are beginning to see the police and licensing boards taking the tough action that is required against rogue retailers.

Dr Simpson: Presiding Officer,

"It's time to get tough on the irresponsible sale of alcohol ... The sale of alcohol to underage Scots will result in the loss of a premises' license".

That was an SNP manifesto promise in 2007, yet from answers to me just now and answers from the Cabinet Secretary for Justice, we know that of the 561 recorded offences in which a licensed person sold alcohol to a person under 18 in 2008-09, only 202 were proceeded against. As the First Minister just indicated, there has been no collection of any data from the courts on the suspended licences, which I cannot understand. Is that yet another broken promise by the SNP?

Does the First Minister have any comment on the situation in Perthshire, in my constituency, where no such offences were recorded and where there were no prosecutions in 2008-09? Are there really no underage drinkers in Perthshire?

The First Minister: The reason for the interruption in the data is that the Parliament introduced the Licensing (Scotland) Act 2005, which put in place a range of measures, including test purchasing, that has prompted a tightening up of sales to underage young people. As that act is implemented, as is happening at present, the data will come forward, as the member very well knows.

I cannot help but encounter the unworthy suspicion that the reason for Richard Simpson's pursuing that aspect of alcohol policy, which is hugely important as the whole chamber agreed, is the embarrassment, shared by many of his colleagues, that they have been unable or unwilling to find the courage to confront minimum pricing and recognise that as long as supermarkets and other establishments in Scotland are awash with alcohol that is cheaper than water, we will have a problem that will be prevalent among many sections of Scottish society. When Richard Simpson finds the courage to back the Government and others who want to confront that problem, he will be listened to with even more respect when he raises other aspects of the anti-alcohol agenda.

The Presiding Officer: We came to First Minister's questions quite late, so I will take question 6 from Liam McArthur.

Nuclear Waste (Storage)

6. Liam McArthur (Orkney) (LD): To ask the First Minister what the Scottish Government's policy is regarding the storage of nuclear waste. (S3F-2335)

The First Minister (Alex Salmond): The Scottish Government is consulting on its policy for the storage of higher activity radioactive waste. We are against the deep geological storage of that waste and want to ensure that the need for transporting it over long distances is kept to a minimum.

The waste is the result of Scotland's nuclear legacy. The Scottish Government—with others in this chamber, I hope—is committed to enhancing Scotland's generation advantage in the future of electricity based on renewables, fossil fuel with carbon capture and storage, as well as energy efficiency, as the best solution to Scotland's energy security.

Liam McArthur: I thank the First Minister for his answer, much of which I agreed with. However, in 2007, the SNP promised to

"say no to new nuclear-power stations or dumps."

The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and the Environment described burying nuclear waste as an

“out of sight, out of mind policy”.

Will the First Minister therefore explain why his Government and its advisers appear to be advocating to the Dounreay stakeholder group and others that disposal of some nuclear waste will now take place to depths of up to 100m?

The First Minister: I saw the report in one of the Sunday newspapers. Given that we are consulting on that very aspect and seeking people’s views on it from a clear Government position that we

“support long-term near surface, near site storage facilities so that the waste is monitorable and retrievable”,

would it not be best to base views on the Government’s clearly stated policy and objective and respond to the consultation rather than to quote a newspaper report of what an official might have said to an individual meeting somewhere in Scotland?

I am responsible for Government policy along with the rest of the ministerial team. That is the Government policy and I am glad that Liam McArthur is prepared to back it.

Elaine Smith (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab): On a point of order, Presiding Officer.

The issue of volcanic ash is extremely important, so much so that surely the First Minister should have requested under the standing orders to make an emergency statement to Parliament this afternoon so that all members would have the opportunity to question him about the matter, rather than spending nearly five minutes of First Minister’s questions making what he called a statement and eating into the only time during the week that members have to question him. For example, the lack of time meant that I could not question the First Minister on a current constituency issue that relates to the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers dispute. I hope that you will consider that and whether a request for a statement would have been more in order, Presiding Officer.

The Presiding Officer: I say with respect, Ms Smith, that you could not ask your question because I did not call it and not because we ran out of time. It is now five minutes past the normal finishing time; I allowed time because the First Minister gave an update on the situation. It is entirely open to him to request a statement if he wishes to do so. The update did not affect the time that was available for First Minister’s question time.

The First Minister: I—

The Presiding Officer: Is this a point of order, First Minister?

The First Minister: Further to that point of order, Presiding Officer. I make it clear that we have offered a briefing to Opposition party spokespeople. If members would prefer a statement to be made in the chamber—perhaps before the close of business—the Government would be perfectly prepared to do that.

I tried to be as helpful as possible to Parliament during First Minister’s question time. If some party leaders chose not to ask questions about this most serious issue, that is their responsibility and not mine. I acknowledge that at least one party leader asked about the matter.

12:36

Meeting suspended until 14:15.

14:15

On resuming—

Scottish Executive Question Time

Finance and Sustainable Growth

Scottish Futures Trust

1. Des McNulty (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive when ministers last met representatives of the Scottish Futures Trust. (S3O-10090)

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth (John Swinney): Scottish ministers meet representatives of the Scottish Futures Trust on a regular basis and continue to work closely with them on delivering value for money for our vital infrastructure investment.

Des McNulty: Has the cabinet secretary asked representatives of the Scottish Futures Trust what they are doing, bearing in mind the amount of resources that they are consuming? I understood that 14 new schools were to be brought forward but, as far as I can see, no school has been commissioned so far and we are at the tendering stage for only two new secondary schools. There is no word on new primary schools. Will he bring us up to date on the progress of the SFT's work?

John Swinney: The Scottish Futures Trust is taking forward a range of projects, which include the schools development programme, the hub approach to public service provision, involvement in the Borders rail project, tax increment financing and a variety of other projects, including mental health projects in Tayside. The SFT is actively involved in all those programmes and is working with the Government to deliver improvements in value for money. Given Mr McNulty's long service with me on the Finance Committee over the years, I would have thought that he would have had an interest in the aspirations of the Government to deliver value for money in that respect.

Shirley-Anne Somerville (Lothians) (SNP): I welcome the work of the SFT and the Scottish Government to establish the national housing trust, in which 10 councils, including the City of Edinburgh Council, have expressed an interest. I hope that the approach will allow Edinburgh to expand its social housing programme, after years of inaction by the previous, Labour Administration. Will the cabinet secretary tell us about the scale of the financial benefit that there will be for the construction sector? Will he also say how many homes he hopes will be created for Scotland?

John Swinney: Shirley-Anne Somerville has identified another project in which the Scottish Futures Trust is involved, which I did not mention in the list that I gave to Mr McNulty. The financing model of the national housing trust is expected to leverage in approximately £140 million of external funding, to provide up to 2,000 mid-market homes, which will initially be available for rent. That is a positive contribution to tackling the significant challenge in relation to affordable housing in Scotland.

Jeremy Purvis (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD): I met the chief executive of the SFT in the Borders to discuss the hub initiative and to discuss concerns, which have been expressed locally, that there will be no opportunity for construction companies in the Borders to bid for works in relation to NHS Borders health centre developments. I did not receive a satisfactory reply. Can the cabinet secretary confirm that, if there are health centre developments in the Borders under the hubco initiative, local construction firms will be able to bid for works?

John Swinney: As Mr Purvis knows, we must ensure that the procurement of public infrastructure is compliant with the requirements of the European Union in that respect. All our procurement activity is structured in that fashion and the approach that is taken to work in the Borders in relation to the hub project will be no different from the approach that is taken to all Government contracts.

Derelict Land (Glasgow)

2. Mr Frank McAveety (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive whether the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth has been approached regarding the provision of additional funding to deal with derelict land sites in Glasgow. (S3O-10083)

The Minister for Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change (Stewart Stevenson): We currently allocate Glasgow £4.5 million per annum from the vacant and derelict land fund. I can confirm that the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth has not been approached for additional funding to deal with derelict land sites in Glasgow.

Mr McAveety: I hope that, if the cabinet secretary were to be approached by Glasgow City Council, he would welcome the opportunity, because the vacant and derelict land fund relates to an agenda that the council and the Government share, which is to do with bringing in areas that have been derelict for a long time. Does the minister accept that utilising those resources would help, given that many of the transformational regeneration areas—including the M74 extension and the Commonwealth games

venue development, which are in my constituency—benefit from the vacant and derelict land fund? I hope that he is willing to listen to pleas for further funding.

Stewart Stevenson: We are always willing to discuss matters of mutual interest with local authorities and others. The vacant and derelict land fund is already contributing £13.5 million to Glasgow over the period 2008 to 2011. We are also working on urban regeneration and have, so far, contributed more than £40 million to the Clyde Gateway urban regeneration company, the town centre regeneration fund and the Clyde waterfront regeneration partnership, for which 75 per cent of the £1.46 billion in funding has come from the private sector. That is a substantial public investment, but we will, of course, continue to work with interests.

Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): One of the other mechanisms that are being considered to bring in additional funding for developments in Glasgow is tax increment financing, which would stake large amounts of public money on a gamble that retail units will be filled despite the fact that we see retail units lying empty as a result of the economic circumstances of the past few years. Would it not be wildly irresponsible to approve any such tax increment finance requests at this time?

Stewart Stevenson: That is among a range of ways forward that will be considered when a business case is to hand.

Public Transport (Fife)

4. Marilyn Livingstone (Kirkcaldy) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive, in light of its reduction in support for concessionary travel from 73.6p to 67p in the pound, which equates to a £1.3 million reduction in funding for public transport in Fife, how it will support the transport industry there. (S3O-10081)

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson): I should have said that question 3 was not lodged.

The Minister for Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change (Stewart Stevenson): That has taken me slightly by surprise, Presiding Officer.

The Scottish Government remains committed to supporting the bus industry, as was demonstrated by the recent agreement that was reached with the Confederation of Passenger Transport, which will deliver another three years of substantial investment. The change in the reimbursement rate for the national concessionary scheme is intended to deliver the agreed principle that bus operators should be no better and no worse off as a result of the scheme. The agreement with the CPT includes an increase in the separate bus service operators grant, which is intended to help the industry to

drive down fares and encourage more routes—all to the benefit of the travelling public.

Marilyn Livingstone: The minister will be aware that, for the network to be maintained, local government will have to make up the shortfall with no extra funding. That equates to £25 million in cuts throughout Scotland. Without that additional funding, Fife could see a shortfall of 25 to 30 buses. Given that other parts of the United Kingdom are continuing with the reimbursement rate of 73.6p in the pound, how can the Scottish Government justify these massive cuts to a scheme for the most vulnerable people in our communities?

Stewart Stevenson: I was not aware that the rate in England was anything remotely like 73.6p in the pound—in many cases, it is substantially less than 50p in the pound. The Labour transport spokesperson pointed to the long-term sustainability issues associated with a rate of 73.6p in the pound, and we agreed to a rate of 67p in the pound. The Confederation of Passenger Transport understands that.

When the reimbursement rate was set at its original level, a significant proportion of the money was for start-up costs. The start-up period will end with the completion of the installation of electronic ticketing, which will happen in the next few weeks. It has, therefore, been appropriate to revise the figure to meet the real costs to the bus companies. The increase of 10 per cent in the bus operators grant—which is guaranteed over the next three years—will play a key role in ensuring that we sustain the important network of bus routes across Scotland.

Caledonian MacBrayne

5. George Foulkes (Lothians) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what recent discussions ministers have had with the management of Caledonian MacBrayne and what subjects were discussed. (S3O-10071)

The Minister for Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change (Stewart Stevenson): The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth and I last met with the chairmen of David MacBrayne Ltd and Caledonian Maritime Assets Ltd in November 2009, to discuss ferry matters.

George Foulkes: Do the minister and the cabinet secretary share my concern that a publicly owned company has a tax avoidance scheme that uses a Guernsey-based subsidiary? Will the minister raise that matter with Caledonian MacBrayne and insist that it accepts full responsibility for paying employer contributions to national insurance for all its employees in the United Kingdom?

Stewart Stevenson: Mr Foulkes is sometimes not entirely wise in choosing subjects. The change that was made to create Caledonian MacBrayne Crewing (Guernsey) Ltd was, of course, entirely an initiative conducted under the previous Administration for the purposes that Mr Foulkes has just described. If he has not already done so, he will receive a written answer from me very shortly that shows that the subject has not been one on which concern has been expressed until now. However, I am interested that the Labour Party has resiled from its previous decisions.

Manufacturing Jobs and Investment (Glasgow)

6. Patricia Ferguson (Glasgow Maryhill) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what action it is taking to secure manufacturing jobs and investment in Glasgow. (S3O-10070)

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth (John Swinney): The Scottish Government provides a wide range of support to manufacturing companies, including in Glasgow, which is delivered through Scottish Enterprise, Scottish Development International, local authorities and Skills Development Scotland. We are committed to supporting all manufacturers in Scotland to improve their productivity and to ensure that they can compete globally. The Scottish manufacturing advisory service, which was delivered by Scottish Enterprise, has helped Glasgow manufacturers to make an estimated £7.5 million-worth of annualised efficiency savings. Glasgow has received major investment from a number of Scottish Government programmes and initiatives to support businesses in the manufacturing field. I expect that work to continue in the fields of regeneration, skills and innovation, as well as in projects associated with the 2014 Commonwealth games.

Patricia Ferguson: The cabinet secretary will recall that, during the debate in the chamber on Diageo on 17 September 2009, he made clear commitments to the communities and workers affected by that company's decision to close its plants. To follow up on those commitments, can he advise members how many meetings of the task force have taken place since September, what discussions have taken place between the minister and Diageo on the regeneration of the sites at Port Dundas and Kilmarnock, what the Scottish Government has secured from Diageo by way of a legacy for those communities, and what training or employment opportunities the Scottish Government has secured for Diageo workers?

John Swinney: As Patricia Ferguson knows, in all circumstances in which employees lose employment, the Government makes available the support of partnership action for continuing employment to ensure that individuals are given

the advice and support that they require to find alternative training opportunities or alternative employment. PACE has an admirable record over the years of delivering successful outcomes to individuals. I appreciate that there is clearly now a much greater challenge in the labour market as a consequence of the current economic conditions with which we are dealing.

On Diageo, the Government agreed with the task force that the most appropriate steps were to be taken forward in local dialogue about legacies. The Government continues to have a dialogue with Diageo about on-going issues, and we will continue to have that dialogue to ensure that regeneration projects are taken forward. I would be delighted to continue to update members on that.

The Presiding Officer: Question 7 has been withdrawn and question 8 was not lodged.

Fossil Fuel Levy Account

9. Andrew Welsh (Angus) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Executive what progress it has made on securing the release of funds from the fossil fuel levy account from the United Kingdom Government. (S3O-10126)

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth (John Swinney): The First Minister raised the issue of the fossil fuel levy surplus at a meeting with the Chancellor of the Exchequer on 31 March 2010. As a result, the chancellor has agreed to consider the matter in the next spending review. The Scottish Government welcomes the chancellor's approach in that respect, although we are continuing to press for a more urgent resolution of the issue. The fund, which stands at more than £180 million, represents money raised in Scotland and provides an opportunity for us to promote renewable energy development in Scotland.

Andrew Welsh: Would the cabinet secretary reiterate the amount involved, indicate what that means in terms of lost investment and say what its effect will be on employment and investment in Scotland's industry and infrastructure?

John Swinney: Mr Welsh will be aware that the Government, through its work with Scottish Enterprise, has recently published the "National Renewables Infrastructure Plan", which has set out a number of the key pillars of infrastructure that will be required to ensure that we can maximise the economic benefit to Scotland of the renewable energy opportunities. That has been a helpful publication, because it gives structured guidance to the industry about where the Government sees developments being taken. It allowed Mr Mather to make announcements earlier this week about the development of the

BiFab company at Fife energy park in Methil and it structures many of our interventions in this respect.

The £180 million that sits in the fossil fuel levy surplus is a useful resource that could be deployed to further assist the development of Scotland's involvement in renewable energy, with significant economic benefit to the country. The Government regrets the fact that we cannot access that money without there being essentially a negative consequence for our departmental expenditure limit. I hope that, in the immediate future, the chancellor will consider the many representations that the Government has made to try to ensure that we can have access to that resource to invest exclusively in renewable energy development without in any way undermining the departmental expenditure limit total that the Scottish Government holds from the United Kingdom Government.

Construction Industry

10. Ms Wendy Alexander (Paisley North) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive how it is responding to the slump in the construction industry. (S3O-10059)

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth (John Swinney): We accelerated £347 million of capital expenditure to help Scottish construction companies through the recession. We would have done more this year had it not been for the chancellor's refusal to make provision for it. However, we are taking action on a number of other fronts, supporting apprenticeships and encouraging prompt payment. We want the construction industry to play its part in building the Scotland of the future. In addition, I made announcements yesterday of consequential funding from the United Kingdom budget, much of which is allocated to construction projects in Scotland.

Ms Alexander: It is now three years since the Government pledged to replace public-private partnerships with an alternative model of public procurement. When can we expect that alternative public procurement model to be unveiled?

John Swinney: As Wendy Alexander knows, the Government is taking forward its intervention in the construction industry and in capital markets through a range of different approaches. We have our traditional capital budget, which is being fully spent and utilised. We have taken forward a range of projects that we inherited from our predecessors and we have taken forward a range of other initiatives, which I explained to Mr McNulty a moment ago, through the work of the Scottish Futures Trust. That is the Government's approach. We are working to ensure that we do all we can to support the construction industry in these difficult

economic times. The Government will sustain that approach in the period to come.

Andy Kerr (East Kilbride) (Lab): Many years ago—in the summer of 2007—I shared a television interview with the cabinet secretary in which he said that the Scottish Futures Trust would be available in October 2007. Does he recall that interview and that commitment? Will he answer the question that was asked previously: when will the model of funding that was promised in his manifesto, and subsequently, be available?

John Swinney: Mr Kerr will forgive me for not having an encyclopaedic recollection of all my television interviews. I will check the record to find out what words of wisdom he and I exchanged on that occasion. I am sure that it was one of the many pleasant encounters that we have had in the television studios of the country—I look forward to many more in the years to come.

The point that I made to Wendy Alexander was that the Government is pressing ahead with an ambitious capital expenditure programme. We are doing that in the context of a very difficult economic situation, but we are determined to ensure that we deliver an ambitious programme for the people of Scotland.

Jeremy Purvis (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD): The cabinet secretary will recall that, subsequent to 2007, the Government's own business case for the Scottish Futures Trust said that it would have two iterations, the second of which would be one in which it delivers finance itself. Will that still happen before 2011?

John Swinney: Those are elements of the operating plan that the Scottish Futures Trust is progressing. The SFT is involved in a range of ways in raising funds to invest—Shirley-Anne Somerville gave the particularly welcome example of the national housing trust earlier—and the Government will continue to take that approach.

Boiler Scrappage Scheme

11. Karen Whitefield (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive on what date it expects to publish details of a boiler scrappage scheme. (S3O-10099)

The Minister for Enterprise, Energy and Tourism (Jim Mather): The exact details of the scheme, including the launch date and delivery mechanism, are being developed and will be published soon.

We are already supporting the replacement of inefficient boilers. Since the launch of our energy saving Scotland home loans pathfinder scheme last October, we have offered interest-free loans worth nearly £390,000 for the replacement of G-rated boilers with efficient models. In addition, our

energy assistance package has supported the installation or upgrading of 7,271 central heating systems—including boilers—up to the end of February 2010, and a range of other energy efficiency measures for fuel-poor households.

Karen Whitefield: I am grateful to the minister for his answer, but I hope that he will not be too surprised to learn that I take his assurance of “soon” with a pinch of salt; the Government uses that terminology for many of its promises. As was discussed in the previous question, the Scottish Futures Trust has been coming “soon” for quite some time, and it still has not put a brick down in any part of the country.

Since January, 150,000 households south of the border have been eligible for assistance to replace old band G boilers. Will the minister tell members when exactly “soon” will be? When will the first household in Scotland benefit from the Scottish Government’s scheme? Can he guarantee that the Scottish scheme will be of equal value to the scheme that is already operating in other parts of the United Kingdom?

Jim Mather: Karen Whitefield should take it from me that “soon” means what it says. We will use the full £2 million of consequential from the UK Government for the boiler scrappage scheme, and the member should recognise “soon” when it comes with such a positive message.

We have had so much that is unacceptable from the Westminster Government, in the shape of cuts, the fossil fuel levy that we have just heard about and the failure to give us proper Barnett consequential in many areas. That is in addition to the overall mismanagement of the economy that has put us in the parlous state in which we find ourselves just now.

Glasgow Subway

12. Pauline McNeill (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what recent discussions it has had with Strathclyde partnership for transport regarding the Glasgow subway. (S3O-10089)

The Minister for Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change (Stewart Stevenson): I met David Fagan, the vice-chair of Strathclyde partnership for transport, and senior officials of the partnership on Tuesday, when I was given a presentation on its outline business case for modernisation of the subway. Government officials have been discussing the subject with SPT in recent months.

Pauline McNeill: The minister will be aware of the importance of Glasgow’s subway system not only for the city itself but for the whole of Scotland, as 14 million passengers pass through the underground each year, and, as he outlined, he

has heard about the modernisation works that SPT is planning, which will be the first since the 1970s. Does he agree that £67 million of additional investment in SPT each year, as reported in the media this week, is a price that is worth paying to deliver a modernised subway—which has cross-party support—for Scotland’s largest city? Will he confirm today that he will assist the SPT modernisation scheme by bringing that £67 million forward?

Stewart Stevenson: We are in slight danger of getting ahead of ourselves. The SPT board meeting that will receive the same presentation that I received as a courtesy on Tuesday will take place tomorrow, and it is important to see what comes from that.

I acknowledge that the subway is important to people well beyond Glasgow—indeed, Tuesday’s presentation included a survey of subway users that showed that 400 people from Fife travelled on the subway on a particular day. We value the subway’s contribution to the transport infrastructure of Glasgow and the benefit that is derived beyond that, and we will continue to work with SPT.

Andy Kerr (East Kilbride) (Lab): In referring to the Scottish National Party’s vow to boost subway services, the Deputy First Minister said:

“We want to deliver fresh ideas to build a transport system fit for the 21st century; not an antiquated out of date public transport network”.

She was supported by Sandra White and John Mason, who was then leader of the SNP group on Glasgow City Council. Avoiding the word “soon”, can the minister advise the chamber with regard to the on-going discussions when this Government will put in place that funding and fulfil those commitments?

Stewart Stevenson: Let me go back to what I have just said. The board is meeting tomorrow to consider what was put in front of ministers this week.

As far as timetables and the use of the word “soon” are concerned, I need look no further than the Labour Party in Scotland’s manifesto for the next election, which has just been published and in which the sole commitment to one of the most important projects for Glasgow and Edinburgh in a generation—high-speed rail—has been relegated to a wishy-washy commitment to build and submit at some time in the future a business case on the issue. This Government has convened a group of stakeholders to do the necessary work and has already submitted a business case to supplement and complement the work that has been carried out in many other places. With regard to supporting the development of infrastructure in Glasgow, Edinburgh and across Scotland, we are

absolutely on the case in a way that the Labour Party has not yet dreamed of.

Bervie Braes (Stabilisation Work)

13. Maureen Watt (North East Scotland) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government when it estimates that engineering work to stabilise the Bervie braes will commence. (S3O-10125)

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth (John Swinney): On 19 March 2010 I announced a funding package of £3 million to take forward stabilisation works at the Bervie braes in co-operation with Aberdeenshire Council. Taking forward these works is now a matter for Aberdeenshire Council.

Maureen Watt: The cabinet secretary promised to make a swift decision on carrying out work at the Bervie braes, and residents of Stonehaven and Aberdeenshire Council were delighted when he did so and decided that it should go ahead. Does he agree that it is important that legal agreements and the tendering process be completed as quickly as possible to ensure that the work on making the braes safe can begin at the earliest opportunity? Does he expect Aberdeenshire Council solely to take forward this work or will his directorate play an on-going role?

John Swinney: My officials will obviously keep in touch with Aberdeenshire Council, with which we have had very good discussions over some time. I welcome Maureen Watt's acknowledgement that my indication to the people of Stonehaven that a decision would be taken swiftly was undoubtedly delivered. Indeed, I made the decision within a couple of weeks of my visit to the site, which happened a few weeks after the first landslip. I hope that that reassures some of the sceptics in the Parliament about the timescales for Government decision making in this country. I am delighted that we have been able to take that decision and very much welcome and pay tribute to the cooperation that my officials received when they discussed this issue with Aberdeenshire Council's officials.

"National Renewables Infrastructure Plan"

14. Duncan McNeil (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what investment it will make available to proceed with stage 2 of the "National Renewables Infrastructure Plan". (S3O-10088)

The Minister for Enterprise, Energy and Tourism (Jim Mather): Just this week, as part of the economic recovery plan, the Scottish Government was delighted to announce that £3 million will be made available to facilitate further essential development of plant and equipment at the Arnish industrial estate on the Isle of Lewis.

The proposed accelerated recladding at the main fabrication shop works will assist in meeting Highlands and Islands Enterprise's objectives for increased activity and diversification at the site.

In addition, detailed work is under way to identify how much further investment will be made available to support phase 2 of the "National Renewables Infrastructure Plan". The final level of investment available will depend on which sites secure sufficient market interest and on type of use. The plan's delivery group, which is currently working on the further investment needed for the identified sites as well as other related delivery issues, will provide a draft stage report to the Scottish energy advisory board on 18 May 2010 and report back formally with potential investment plans in June.

Any pump priming for sites will be drawn down from an infrastructure fund that will include Scottish Government funding, as well as potential European sources of funding and possible resources from the United Kingdom offshore wind site infrastructure competition that was announced in last month's budget.

Duncan McNeil: I share the minister's enthusiasm for what is an emerging and exciting industry and I agree that it is necessary to support it through investment. He will know that we have a site in Greenock that meets all the requirements of the "National Renewables Infrastructure Plan", with land available, sufficient lengths of quayside, high loading clearance, sufficient depth of water and one of the biggest working dry docks in Europe. That site is ready to go with little investment required, so the minister will imagine the dismay and horror when we discovered that it had been left off the list of preferred sites in the plan. Does the minister agree that we require scrutiny of the findings in the plan? Will he give an assurance that on-going discussions will be held with the Inverclyde renewables alliance to ensure that we are not excluded from future investment opportunities in renewables manufacturing, particularly if market interest is shown?

Jim Mather: The merits of Inchgreen and the strength of the wider Inverclyde area are part of Scotland's strong offer to the industry in its early days. The member is right that the market will decide which sites are suitable for use. We will certainly encourage on-going dialogue and we will encourage Inverclyde to ensure that it gets its entry into the competition that the Department of Energy and Climate Change has got under way. We will also encourage talks with other locations to maximise the scope for collaboration as we go forward into the new phase of renewables.

Sarah Boyack (Edinburgh Central) (Lab): Will the minister speculate on the rate of growth for household renewables as part of his renewables

action plan? I understand that he thinks that we will get a proportionate share of the United Kingdom's 750,000 home renewables installations. Will he tell us how fast we will get those in Scotland in the next three years?

Jim Mather: I would love to do that, but I would have to consult Alex Neil and get his feedback. It is not in my gift to give the member that information. I will talk to Alex Neil and get back to her in writing.

Jarvis Rail and Fastline (Job Losses)

15. Charlie Gordon (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what representations it is making to Network Rail and other interested parties regarding recent decisions that have contributed to the loss of 1,200 jobs at Jarvis Rail and Fastline, which are in administration. (S3O-10074)

The Minister for Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change (Stewart Stevenson): We deeply regret the news of the failure of Jarvis and the resulting job losses. However, the decisions that led to Jarvis going into administration are not devolved to the Scottish ministers. Scottish Government support for the railway underpins significant growth in employment, with more to come as our on-going programme is delivered. Our investment of £3.8 billion in the operation of the Scottish rail network between 2009-10 and 2013-14 also directly supports around 3,000 Network Rail employees in Scotland and many thousands more among Network Rail's contractor base.

Charlie Gordon: At least 70 of the jobs that I mentioned are based in Scotland. The Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment) Regulations do not apply because the companies are in administration. Will the minister ask the Scotland-based contractors to whom some of the work previously done by Jarvis employees has been diverted to consider employing those sacked Jarvis workers?

Stewart Stevenson: I have been engaged in the subject since meeting the Scottish Trades Union Congress last year. I wrote to Network Rail and the Office of Rail Regulation seeking assurances on renewals deferrals and seeking confirmation that the situation would not have implications for the skills base in Scotland. We will of course continue to ensure that we have skills in Scotland and that we have progress in renewals and development of the rail network. I am happy to do what the member suggests.

The Presiding Officer: Question 16 has been withdrawn.

Budget

17. Anne McLaughlin (Glasgow) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what stage discussions are at with the Opposition parties regarding potential changes to the Scottish budget after the general election on 6 May 2010. (S3O-10118)

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth (John Swinney): We have made strong representations to all parties seeking their assurances that the 2010-11 Scottish budget will not be reduced by an incoming United Kingdom Government following the general election. The First Minister met Alistair Darling, George Osborne and Vince Cable last month. Mr Darling and Dr Cable have given commitments that no further reductions to the Scottish budget will take place in 2010-11 under their plans. Mr Osborne has indicated that the implications of reductions to the budget for Scotland for 2010-11 as part of Conservative efficiency plans could be delayed until next year. We continue to press for further information.

Anne McLaughlin: In light of that answer and the potential seriousness of cuts in future years, does the cabinet secretary agree that Scotland would be better served out of the bankrupt British state, free from the union's debt and destructive wars and free from the poisoned chalice of Westminster's patronising pocket-money funding mechanism, something that can happen only when this chamber has the full powers of a normal and independent Parliament?

John Swinney: I am delighted to confirm that I agree very much with Anne McLaughlin that Scotland would be better off as an independent country. We would certainly be able to take decisions that are appropriate to Scotland and to create the bold economic opportunities that our country needs at this time.

Derek Brownlee (South of Scotland) (Con): Will the cabinet secretary confirm whether it is still the Government's intention not to exercise one of the powers that it currently has and raise the Scottish variable rate of income tax? What are the Government's reasons for that decision and for how long will that decision be in place?

John Swinney: I know that Mr Brownlee is a keen reader of the Government's budget document, so he will know that it says that we are required to make a statement about whether we intend to use the Scottish variable rate. I confirmed during the budget process that that would not be the case. Obviously, the Government considers the question in every budget and we will consider it in the ordinary fashion whenever we have information from the United Kingdom Government on the likely scale of our budget

settlement. I say to Mr Brownlee, however, that the Government's perspective has been not to use those tax powers since it came to office and I do not envisage that changing.

The Presiding Officer: Question 18 has been withdrawn.

Aberdeen Western Peripheral Route

19. Nanette Milne (North East Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government when ministers will make an announcement regarding the funding for the Aberdeen western peripheral route. (S3O-10135)

The Minister for Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change (Stewart Stevenson): We expect, subject to value for money, to fund the Aberdeen western peripheral route through a privately financed non-profit-distributing contract.

Nanette Milne: The minister might be aware that numerous guesstimates of the likely cost of the AWPR are circulating in Aberdeen, put about by groups that are fundamentally opposed to the road. Will he give an assurance that accurate figures will be given to the north-east public at the earliest possible opportunity, with those figures to include the likely financial implications of the on-going objections from opponents of the road development?

Stewart Stevenson: There will be a cost if objections proceed in some of the ways that have been suggested. We will share any updates that come to hand, particularly with the two councils that are each responsible for 9.5 per cent of the funding. When we go to the market we will have to provide figures within which we expect bids to be made and, of course, those will be put into the public domain at that time.

The Presiding Officer: The abnormal number of questions that have been either withdrawn or not lodged allows me to say something for the first time in this Parliament—question 20 is from Jackie Baillie.

West Dunbartonshire Council (Audit Scotland Report)

20. Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): I am delighted that I got here in time to ask it.

To ask the Scottish Executive what action it has taken following the Audit Scotland report on the performance of West Dunbartonshire Council. (S3O-10060)

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth (John Swinney): I am glad that Jackie Baillie deprived us of our opportunity to woo at the fact that she was not here in time.

The Accounts Commission first identified concerns with West Dunbartonshire Council's progress in 2006. It is for the council to address those concerns, and ministers have made that clear. The Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and the Improvement Service continue to provide support to the council in implementing its plans.

Following the commission's latest report on 11 March, I wrote to the council's leader to urge elected members and senior officers to work together to make on-going, sustained and rapid progress. He has recognised that, corporately, the council still requires to demonstrate best value, but has reassured me that they are taking appropriate steps to address the issues raised by the Accounts Commission.

Jackie Baillie: The cabinet secretary is right to point out that it has been four years since Audit Scotland first reported its concerns about the leadership in the council, staff morale and demonstrating best value. It must be of concern to the Government, therefore, that four years on, the capacity of West Dunbartonshire Council to change the situation is surely in question.

I invite the cabinet secretary to consider providing practical support from the Government to help council officials and councillors to make the changes that are clearly required in West Dunbartonshire.

John Swinney: In a sense, I do not disagree with Jackie Baillie, but as I said in my original answer, COSLA and the Improvement Service continue to provide support to the council in implementing its plans. That represents practical assistance to the local authority. It is a point of debate whether it is effective in bringing about the necessary outcomes as a consequence of the Accounts Commission's findings following the further analysis that has been undertaken.

I will of course continue to monitor the situation. As I said in my original answer, I have written to the council's leader to express my concerns. When the Accounts Commission has been involved in supervising the work of other local authorities, that has led to a set of actions that has improved the authorities' performance. Aberdeen City Council comes to mind as an authority that has demonstrated the ability to respond positively.

I will continue to monitor the situation. If Jackie Baillie wishes to raise any issues with me, I will be happy to consider them.

Gaelic (Action Plan)

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Alasdair Morgan): The next item of business is a debate on motion S3M-6143, in the name of Fiona Hyslop, on an action plan for Gaelic.

14:56

The Minister for Culture and External Affairs (Fiona Hyslop): Feasgar math, a chàirdean. Seo iomairt chudromach, agus tha mi toilichte a bhith an sàs anns an deasbad seo an-diugh.

Gaelic is more than a language—Gàidhlig, còrr is cànan. The motion emphasises Gaelic's value to Scotland, its fragile condition and the need for urgent action. The Parliament has collectively supported Gaelic. All the parties that are represented here have contributed to and supported Gaelic initiatives at national and constituency levels. Just last week, Glasgow City Council launched its Gaelic plan, the University of Glasgow established a chair of Gaelic, Sabhal Mòr Ostaig announced record numbers for its Easter courses and an exhibition of the work of Gaelic pupils opened at the Fruitmarket gallery in Edinburgh.

However, despite all parties' efforts, a challenge still faces Gaelic. Last year, the Scottish Government said that we wished to develop an initiative that is aimed at increasing the numbers of Gaelic speakers, to safeguard the language's future. We have found widespread support for that in our many discussions with interested parties.

Our request to Bòrd na Gàidhlig for an action plan emerged from the desire to create a secure future for Gaelic in Scotland. That must remain our goal. If we have an impressive Gaelic infrastructure, yet speaker numbers continue to decline, that will not serve us well. I acknowledge the bòrd's support and co-operation in the process and thank it for its work in providing the action plan, which was published earlier this week.

Our aim is to increase the number of Gaelic speakers. The bòrd has identified action areas, which are key areas of Gaelic development, and initiatives that can help to make the progress that is needed. The Scottish Government fully agrees with the bòrd's analysis of current needs and about the importance of the action areas that are identified.

The bòrd's action plan contains five priority action areas. We expect that several important actions in the plan, including parent support and Gaelic promotion, can be included under the three headings of Gaelic-medium early years provision, Gaelic adult education and Gaelic-medium

education in schools. Our response focused on those categories.

The initiative does not undermine the efforts and campaigns of many Gaelic interests over the years, but it means a renewed emphasis and a refocusing of effort. We will continue to recognise the crucial importance of Gaelic plans, Gaelic broadcasting, Gaelic publishing, Gaelic arts and Gaelic education at all levels. Our aim will be to strengthen them.

Our top priority must be a focus on initiatives that have the potential to increase the learning and—most important—the use of Gaelic. We agree with the bòrd that early years promotion is critical. More young people need to learn Gaelic from an early stage and go on to Gaelic-medium education in primary school. To achieve that, a new initiative is needed in the sector to support early years Gaelic provision and support councils in relation to Gaelic pre-school provision. We look to the bòrd to develop practical proposals on how progress can be made with the new initiative in early years Gaelic learning.

The Scottish Government also agrees with the bòrd that momentum needs to be maintained on a range of matters that relate to Gaelic-medium education. My colleague Michael Russell will develop that subject in his speech. We need to ensure that good support is in place to assist with the progress that we would like on establishing Gaelic classes and schools.

A number of council Gaelic-medium projects have benefited from support over recent years. We are keen to find ways of supporting new projects that will assist the sector to expand and contribute to our overall aim of increasing the number of Gaelic speakers. We are confident that the strategic use of available Gaelic funding and closer working with the bòrd will enable us to make progress in that area.

To support our focus on early years and Gaelic-medium education, I am pleased to announce an additional £100,000 to support primary education and the bòrd's work in early years. The funding will be used, first, to address pressure at Edinburgh's Tollcross primary school, where a record intake of 43 pupils is set for enrolment this August, by providing a second Gaelic primary 1 class, and, secondly, to help to kick-start the bòrd's work in early years. The funding demonstrates our commitment to acting quickly on the measures that are outlined in Bòrd na Gàidhlig's action plan, which was published this week. We are confident that the action plan is a strong foundation for support in education. Working with the bòrd, we will consider how further legislation could assist in making Gaelic-medium education more accessible in the future.

We agree with the bòrd's assessment that adult Gaelic learning is essential. Work in that area will cover a wide range of activity, including addressing ulpan's current development needs, Gaelic e-learning, workplace learning and parent learning. It is vital that Gaelic learning at further education and higher education level and distance learning opportunities should be part of any adult learning strategy.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): I am sure that the minister is too young to remember a successful Gaelic teaching programme on television called "Can Seo", but will she agree to consider that approach? The programme disseminated Gaelic in a popular and interesting way.

Fiona Hyslop: Use of broadcasting and work with BBC Alba, in particular, will provide opportunities. That is one of the areas in which there can be early action to ensure that there is coverage. I am not sure that I recall the television programme to which the member refers, but I recognise that the use of broadcasting is important in mainstreaming the availability of Gaelic. We should recognise the impact that Gaelic has had in the early years, in particular.

We will look to the bòrd to take forward work on adult education, to allow ulpan to develop more, and to consider what practical structural proposals should be put in place to support ulpan and other Gaelic adult learning opportunities.

In its action plan, Bòrd na Gàidhlig indicates that it is important that current delivery mechanisms operate as an effective network for the promotion of Gaelic. We expect the bòrd to ensure that the funding that it allocates to Gaelic groups is achieving its purpose. I note the comments in Pauline McNeill's amendment. It is important that we constantly review funding and delivery, and I will ask the bòrd to review its funding of and delivery by the organisations that it supports. I will also ask it to consider where we can make quick progress. For example, there is potential for demonstrating quick progress with ulpan, working with MG Alba on the planned learners website and more.

Further to Jamie Stone's point, I note the development that has taken place and the technology that is now available. The website was not available previously, but we can now link together different media to draw people into learning Gaelic. We should use contemporary means and methods to do that. We understand that work with MG Alba can move forward quickly, so we expect quick progress in that area and on ulpan. We would welcome the bòrd's clear views on the initiatives that offer the potential for prompt delivery.

As the bòrd takes forward work in the key areas of early years provision, adult learning and school learning, we expect it to ensure that those have a central place both in the Gaelic plans that are being developed and in community initiatives. The point of the progress that we are making and of the action plan is to ensure that there is momentum, pace, a sense of urgency and an emphasis on delivery in what we do on Gaelic. A great deal has been achieved, and the Parliament has put in place a great deal of institutional support. We now need practical measures. The bòrd has come up with a series of such measures in its action plan.

I also want to use this debate to express the Scottish Government's concern about the BBC trust's recent decision to delay its decision on BBC Alba and Freeview. The Parliament agreed to a motion that made clear its unanimous cross-party support for putting BBC Alba on Freeview. Our position remains that BBC Alba should have access to Freeview, and I will continue to pursue that with the BBC trust.

Our reasons for asking the bòrd for an action plan are straightforward. The Scottish Government recognises that Gaelic is more than a language—Gàidhlig, corr is cànan—and, as such, it strengthens and enriches many aspects of Scotland's social, cultural and economic life.

In New York during Scotland week, while promoting Scottish design and fashion, I met two Scottish designers, Judy Clark and Alison Macleod, whose designs are deeply rooted in Scotland while clearly appealing to an international audience. Alison's designs feature Gaelic prose sewn and embroidered into the garment. In that way, Gaelic can truly be described as part of the fabric of Scottish society. In Tennessee, I was delighted to hear Dundee-born Laura McGhee's music, which in one song combined a Gaelic waulking song with traditional American gospel music. Such musical links are another example of the ability of the Gaelic language to enrich our culture. Gaelic is more than a language.

Most of those wider aspects depend on the continued existence in Scotland of a living language. It is right that wider aspects of Gaelic should be valued and should continue to be promoted, but our current focus is on initiatives that have the potential to increase the size of the speech community. It is, therefore, our strong view that specific initiatives need to be put in place that are designed with the clear purpose of increasing the numbers of speakers and thus securing the future of Gaelic in Scotland.

We believe that Gaelic is more than a language and that, as such, it enriches many aspects of Scottish life. If we lose that language community, we will lose more than a language; we will lose a

speech community that enriches our current cultural life and gives us an enduring link to our land, our heritage and our past. Mòran taing.

I move,

That the Parliament recognises that Gaelic is more than a language and, as such, it strengthens and enriches many aspects of Scotland's social, cultural and economic life; also recognises that the current condition of Gaelic needs urgent attention, and welcomes the programme of action provided by Bòrd na Gàidhlig, which is designed to achieve the outcome of increasing the number of Gaelic speakers and bring renewed attention to the important place that Gaelic holds in Scotland.

15:07

Pauline McNeill (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab): I welcome the debate and fully support all those members, such as Alasdair Allan, who have the right to choose to speak Gaelic—their own language—and have it translated into English, so that people such as me can understand the good value of their speeches.

We are all proud of the Gaelic Language (Scotland) Act 2005 and the key role that it has played in working out how we can sustain and promote the Gaelic language and Gaelic culture in Scotland. The case for Gaelic is well made, and we are all committed to taking it forward in the way in which the act intended. In previous debates, we have all celebrated the importance of Gaelic. Those of us who had not spoken the language in the past have indulged in speaking it, and we have talked about its historical and economic importance. The Labour Party gives the Government its full support in taking the action plan forward.

BBC Alba has been a critical instrument in spreading the availability of Gaelic and Gaelic culture—we have debated that many times in the Parliament.

We are making progress, and the action plan is about how to make that progress a reality. However, this debate is about getting down to the business of putting the language plan into action, and getting into the detail of how we can deliver for the Gaelic community and for Gaelic. The Labour amendment simply seeks to ensure that Bòrd na Gàidhlig's key role is supported by the Scottish Government, because the bòrd's plans are ambitious and they are to be achieved within existing resources. We simply wanted the Government's assurance that it will keep the position under review, and I am pleased to hear that it will.

We will also support the Tory amendment in Ted Brocklebank's name. There is no harm in learning from other countries. Although I have no specific knowledge of the New Zealand experience, my

colleague Peter Peacock will probably mention it in his speech.

It is important to have a baseline so that we know where we started from. In my research for the debate, I found it difficult to establish a baseline so that I could measure the progress that we have made since the 2005 act was passed. From the 2001 census, we know that we have just under 60,000 Gaelic speakers, and many performance indicators in the action plan are very ambitious, so it is important to have a critique of them. I suggest in the nicest possible way that some of the targets are perhaps overambitious. We need to go through them in some detail to ensure that we have focus.

I would have liked to have seen a summary of the progress that we have made to date. Although I scanned the Scottish Government's website and spoke to our own information service, I really have a difficulty with the 2005 starting point. I do not know whether the minister will be able to assist with that, but it is important that she is able to measure what the action plan will achieve.

I would like to think that, in signing off the action plan, ministers have tested each and every target, because we need to keep our feet on the ground and focus on delivering what can be achieved. I would also like to hear from ministers the reasons for the delay in the publication of the Scottish Government's own language plan. I know that it is due to be published soon, but the wrong signal is sent if the Government has not published its language plan when the Parliament has already published one.

I will talk about some of the detail in the action plan. I have read through it and it appears to me that a key theme is the role of schools in growing the language. I welcome what the minister said this week about trebling the number of Gaelic-medium schools. I declare an interest in that, as the Glasgow Gaelic school, which has been a good model, is in my constituency. Created in 2006, it has proved to be a remarkable success not only as a primary and secondary school but as a resource for the growing number of Gaelic-speaking families. I also welcome the recent grant allocation of £500,000, which the school was able to put to very good use. The money enabled it to create and open up more classrooms to improve the school environment.

With 102 pupils in the secondary part of the school, we are beginning to see the challenges that having six secondary years—we now have a sixth year—brings to Gaelic-medium teaching. It brings into sharp focus our lack of progress in persuading teachers to teach their subjects in Gaelic.

The school is thriving, and my dream is that the people whom I represent in Anderston, where the school is located, will choose it as their local school, as evidence shows that teaching five-year-old children to speak Gaelic means that they are more predisposed towards learning other languages.

However, there is a developing crisis in sports facilities at the school. The children are now being bussed to the Kelvin hall sports arena just down the road, which is not ideal. It would be a disaster if, in the long run, a lack of sports facilities detracted from the school, with parents not wanting to choose it because their children would not get their two hours of physical education a week. Is the minister able to say something about work with Glasgow City Council, which is trying to resolve the matter? Is there any scope for dipping into further capital allocation? She may already be aware of the issue, but I wanted to draw it to her attention.

The development of Gaelic-medium schools is clearly key to the growth of Gaelic in all age groups. Such schools are not just about the children who go to learn Gaelic; they are also a key driver for parents who are learning the language and want to keep up with their children. They bring Gaelic into the family.

Fiona Hyslop: It is important that Pauline McNeill highlights the wider family. Does she recognise that, within the action plan, Bòrd na Gàidhlig specifically tries to identify easy and accessible support for parents to help the family learning that she has identified? The children might draw the parents in, but we need to ensure that the family is supported.

Pauline McNeill: Yes, I acknowledge fully that the action plan discusses early years and adult learners, but it strikes me that school is also a focus for adult learners. Developing Gaelic-medium schools is just one of the ways in which we can encourage, and are encouraging, adults to learn Gaelic.

We have a crisis in the number of teachers who are coming through the system, which concerns us all greatly. According to the statistics that the Scottish Parliament information service gave me, from 2007 onwards the numbers of teachers who choose to teach in Gaelic have been in single figures. We need to make more progress in that regard.

We must also ensure that we give teachers opportunities to move around the country. That is why new Gaelic schools throughout Scotland are vital not only for the children who can attend them but to create the opportunities for teachers to teach.

We have two schools at the moment, but there are plans for a new school in the Highlands, which must be a central focus of the development of Gaelic schools. Work has started, but it seems to me that we need to make more progress in that area, so I would like to hear more about the Government's plans in that regard.

As it states, the action plan is intended urgently to address how we can meet the targets, but I would like to see a more focused programme of what the Government believes will be achievable within the many laudable but ambitious aims in the plan, such as the aim to convert six non-Gaelic-speaking teachers per year. It is not clear to me how we can bring that about. There was an announcement today on encouraging Irish speakers to convert to Gaelic. I am not convinced about the viability of that, but I stand to be persuaded. I am also not clear about the incentives for teachers to enter Gaelic-medium education. What kind of incentives are they? Are they salary incentives? We need to hear more detail about how the plan will be delivered on the ground.

Glasgow has been a good model of a local authority that is committed to Gaelic education, but I would say that. We are well on the way to reaching the target of a 50 per cent increase in the number of pupils who continue with Gaelic rather than another modern language and the target of having 10,000 pupils leaving elementary level with Gaelic as a second or third language. I accept that there is a sense of urgency about making more progress and ensuring that we have more growth in the number of Gaelic speakers. The key to that is schools. I would like to hear more detail on how ministers intend to bring that about.

As the minister said, Gaelic is not just a language. It is part of our culture and it is of key economic value. If the Parliament works with the Government on the action plan, we can show that the act that we passed in 2005 has delivered something for Scotland.

I move amendment S3M-6143.2, to insert at end:

"and calls on the Scottish Government to keep the funding for Bòrd na Gàidhlig under review in light of the Gaelic language targets."

15:17

Ted Brocklebank (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Mòran taing, Presiding Officer, agus feasgar math, a chàirdean.

Following is the simultaneous interpretation:

Thank you, Presiding Officer, and good afternoon, colleagues.

The member continued in English.

The publication of the action plan that has been prepared by Bòrd na Gàidhlig could represent a pivotal moment in the fortunes of Scotland's original language and one of the oldest tongues in Europe. The wording of the motion is important. We agree that Gaelic is much more than a language. Indigenous languages and cultures can also be powerful economic drivers. That has happened in Iceland and the Faroes, and it is happening with the Maori language in New Zealand, as we recognise in our amendment. There are examples from around the world in which economic success follows when indigenous languages and cultures are allowed to flourish again. In saying that, Scotland is a richly diverse country, and just as no one should be denied the opportunity to learn Gaelic, neither should the language be forced on pupils in parts of Scotland where no interest is apparent.

The new plan rightly seeks to make Gaelic widely available at pre-school, primary, secondary and adult levels, with particular emphasis on the early years, as we heard. However, nobody who has the future of Gaelic at heart would want to see it foisted on unwilling recipients. Gaels of an older generation are all too familiar with the enforced learning of a foreign language—English—to wish similar coercion on future generations. Equally, few believe that we should reduce financial support for our threatened first language, but the Government and the various Gaelic bodies must be particularly careful, especially in the current economic climate, to avoid profligacy and provide ammunition to those who do not have Gaelic's best interests at heart.

As I have argued previously, television is one of the principal weapons in the fight to develop the language and culture, and MG Alba continues its excellent work in that respect. As the minister said, it is a great pity that the BBC trust has postponed its decision on transmitting the channel on Freeview, but given the cross-party support for that, we remain optimistic that it will be achieved, hopefully before the end of the year.

The channel continues to deliver on quality and diversity. An example of that is the current series on the Gaelic diaspora, which reworks familiar ground by providing fresh insights into and expert commentary on the importance of the Gaels worldwide, particularly in the building of Canada. All the principal figures in the Canadian fur and pemmican wars were Gaelic speaking, as were Canada's founding premiers. They were people of character, fortitude and intelligence, as the Earl of Selkirk—who was a self-taught Gaelic speaker—recognised when he placed Gaels from Lewis and Kildonan at the heart of his Red River settlement. This was to be the new Scotland, and Gaelic and Gaels were to be the drivers.

The descendants of the original settlers are now prominent all over the prairie province of Manitoba and largely run its great commercial capital, Winnipeg. Perhaps that is why the empty glens of the Highlands seem so tragically wasteful to visiting Gaels from the new world. If their people were able to achieve so much on distant continents, why do they seem to have been unable to do the same in the Gaidhealtachd?

I remember discussing those matters more than 30 years ago with a young Edinburgh merchant banker, who had just bought himself 20,000 acres of bog and moorland on the southernmost tip of Skye. His name was Iain Noble. Sir Iain is not in the most robust health at the moment, and I pay tribute to the contribution that he has made to Gaeldom over the years.

Sir Iain had worked for the Scottish Council for Development and Industry and had seen at first hand in Iceland and the Faroes what a powerful role linguistic and cultural regeneration could play in economic and social regeneration. He taught himself Gaelic and, with huge drive and imagination, began the remarkable task of revitalising his part of Skye, using as his principal driver cànan nan Gàidheal—the tongue of the Gael. He founded the Gaelic college of Sabhal Mòr Ostaig, which now plays a key role in the UHI Millennium Institute—the university of the Highlands and Islands—in an old barn on his land.

History shows that Sir Iain's initiative has now transformed Skye's Sleat peninsula culturally, socially and economically. In fairness, it should be recorded that Brian Wilson's *West Highland Free Press*, which was founded on Skye at around the same time, also played a key role in promoting Gaelic and contributed hugely to the task of restoring the self-confidence of the wider Gaidhealtachd. It was no coincidence that top Gaelic bands such as Runrig and Capercaillie rose to national prominence at around the same time and proved that cànan nan Gàidheal could not only bring economic success, but could be cool.

It seems to me that the Bòrd na Gàidhlig action plan is in that tradition and should be commended, along with the previous Government's groundbreaking Gaelic legislation of 2005. I also commend the current Government's language plan. Within existing budgeted costs, the ambition should be to restore Gaelic to a position of similar strength to the one that is enjoyed by the Welsh language in Wales and Irish Gaelic in the Republic of Ireland.

In that connection, I commend to the Parliament the excellent work that is being done in New Zealand to advance the Maori language. As I discovered on my recent visit to Australia and New Zealand with the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, the Maori tongue is going from

strength to strength. From a low point of some 30,000 speakers in 1987, when the Māori Language Commission was set up, most of the 650,000-strong Maori community now have a working knowledge of their own language, and an estimated 136,000 people are fluent in it. Gaelic's progress has been disappointing by comparison—according to the most recent census, there are fewer than 60,000 fluent speakers in Scotland.

It is no coincidence that the growth of the Maori language and culture has been accompanied by a similar increase in the social, economic and political status of the Maori people, which Gaels in Scotland might envy. I believe that we should study the Maori experience closely. Bòrd na Gàidhlig's action plan is an important staging post, but I am sure that, as the minister and Pauline McNeill have indicated, the journey back for Gaelic still has a long way to go. Mòran taing.

I move amendment S3M-6143.1, to insert at end:

“and recommends that the Parliament and Bòrd na Gàidhlig pay close attention to the New Zealand Government's successful initiatives to increase the numbers of Maori language speakers.”

15:24

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): I wish everyone a good afternoon.

I am pleased that we are taking the time this afternoon to debate Gaelic and how we can continue to preserve and cultivate the language. As an advocate for the Gaelic language, I am encouraged by the fact that the Scottish Government sees the need for what it calls “urgent action” to halt the decline in the number of Gaelic speakers.

The priority action areas outlined in the action plan are praiseworthy ambitions. They cover the areas that are essential to the positive encouragement of Gaelic as an integrated part of a modern Scotland. I am pleased that the plan outlines the importance of supporting parents in giving their children the opportunity to involve Gaelic as part of their education and lifestyle. We all know that modern families are busy and face a whole host of pressures, and it would be easy for Gaelic to take a back seat in families as they juggle the practical demands of the day. Therefore, any measure to make it easier for parents to encourage and support their children in Gaelic learning must be acknowledged and welcomed.

Many have attributed the decline of Gaelic to a lack of awareness, which in turn breeds indifference. It is for that reason that I am happy that the action plan has ambitions to promote

Gaelic both locally and nationally. It is important to invigorate Gaelic in the areas in which the language has a history and tradition. However, it is also important to promote Gaelic outside those areas to create a national appreciation of this rich part of our culture.

My party has always been about education, and therefore I am sure that it will come as no surprise that I am pleased that the action plan places renewed emphasis on Gaelic education. I am sure that we all see that as one of the most effective ways to protect and promote the language, and that is especially true during the early years of a child's educational development. As the saying goes, ionnsachadh òg ionnsachadh bòidheach—learn young and learn well. With the imminent introduction of the curriculum for excellence, we have an opportunity to advance Gaelic learning.

As Pauline McNeill hinted, it will be interesting to see how the Government interprets the action plan's aspiration for a 100 per cent year-on-year increase in the number of teachers being trained to provide Gaelic-medium education. The number of Gaelic teachers has remained pretty much static since devolution, and we are all more than familiar with the recent overall decline in teacher numbers, so that will be a real challenge.

I am supportive of the aims and objectives of the action plan, and I am pleased to see that the Government has responded positively to it, particularly with regard to the importance of an educational focus. Aims are aims and targets are targets, but what is important is that the Government and all of us take the action plan extremely seriously.

In concluding, I want to say two things. First, I want to emphasise how important broadcasting is in the context of the aims of the Gaelic action plan, as the minister acknowledged. The plan calls for “practical and urgent steps” to make Gaelic “attractive and accessible”, as well as rightly hailing Gaelic as a language of the “home and community”. Good media play a key part in that, presenting the language in relatable contexts and to a variety of different audiences by entering home, school and family life.

There is no question but that BBC Alba has exceeded all expectations since it was launched in September 2008. Its Gaelic programmes—not least its news, current affairs and community information programmes—have a weekly audience of more than 70 per cent of the Gaelic speakers and learners who are able to receive the channel.

The debate is about who is able to receive the channel. There is, and always has been, cross-party support in the Parliament for BBC Alba being available on digital terrestrial television, or

Freeview, at the earliest opportunity. It is simply not acceptable that the channel is available only to those who have access to satellite-based platforms. That is not the case for S4C in Wales, and it will not be the case for the Irish language channel TG4, which will be available on Freeview in Northern Ireland following the digital switchover. Scots Gaelic should surely be on an equal footing with Irish Gaelic and Welsh, and BBC Alba as the primary Gaelic language channel should be available as a main channel on Freeview Scotland.

My party and I are firmly of the view that that should not be at the expense of other BBC channels, as is currently the suggestion. We simply cannot accept that the only way to provide BBC Alba on Freeview is to take down other BBC services. That has not happened for S4C in Wales and will not happen for TG4 in Northern Ireland, so the question is why it is necessary for BBC Alba in Scotland. There is space on the spectrum for BBC Alba; it is simply a case of making that space available. Perhaps the cabinet secretary can touch on that in his summing-up.

My second concluding point is simply this: I very much regret that John Farquhar Munro is not with us today. As a true son of Gaeldom, he is a fluent Gaelic speaker—so is Mr Alasdair Allan, whom I look forward to listening to. John Farquhar Munro has back trouble. We had hoped that his back was better but, unfortunately, he is not feeling too well today. With your permission, Presiding Officer, I will pass on to him the best wishes of the Parliament and its regret that he cannot be here to speak to us in his mother tongue.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We now move to the open debate. I should inform members that there will be a ministerial statement at half past 4, so the amount of spare time available is on average—I stress on average—about one minute per person until the end of the debate.

15:29

Alasdair Allan (Western Isles) (SNP): Tha mi toilichte gu bheil cothrom eile againn an-diugh a bhith a' bruidhinn anns a' Ghàidhlig anns an t-seòmar, ge bith dè tha an *Daily Mail* a' smaoinneachadh mu dheidhinn sin. Ach, tòrr nas cudromaiche na sin, tha mi toilichte gu bheil rudeigin cho susbainteach againn airson cuspair deasbaid—am plana seo aig Bòrd na Gàidhlig.

Tha e furasta a ràdh “Bha tòrr phlanaichean ann airson na Gàidhlig roimhe. Dè tha eadar-dhealaichte mun fhear ùr?” Ach tha rudeigin eadar-dhealaichte ann gu dearbh. Tha mi toilichte a ràdh gu bheil na ceuman anns a' phlana seo soilleir agus practaigeach, agus tha iad a' tòiseachadh leis a' phrionnsapal seo: chan eil fad

an latha againn. Is dòcha gur e seo an teans mu dheireadh againn airson na Gàidhlig.

Tha e tòrr nas soilleire a-nis far a bheil Bòrd na Gàidhlig a' dol, a chionn 's gu bheil amas làidir aige. Bho seo a-mach, mus tòisich am bòrd air pròiseact sam bith ùr, faighnichidh e a' cheist seo: ciamar a bhiodh am pròiseact seo a' cumail suas nan àireamhan a tha a' bruidhinn na Gàidhlig ann an Alba? Tha Mgr Brocklebank ceart gum feum sinn a bhith ag ionnsachadh bho eisimpleir nam Maori ann an New Zealand. Nam biodh Jim Mather a' stiùireadh Bòrd na Gàidhlig, tha mi cinnteach gum biodh e a' cleachdadh an fhacail “alignment” airson feallsanachd den t-seòrsa sin.

Bidh e inntinneach a leantainn mar a bhios am plana air a leasachadh agus a' fàs, ach tha rud no dhà gu sònraichte a' leum a-mach às an duilleig an-dràsta. Airson aon rud, tha am plana a' toirt taic mhòr gu pàrantan a tha a' smaoinneachadh mu fhoghlam tro mheadhan na Gàidhlig airson an cloinne. Carson a tha misneachd den t-seòrsa sin feumail fhathast? Uill, cho fad 's a tha sgoiltean a' bruidhinn mu “foghlam Gàidhlig” agus “foghlam mainstream”, bidh cuid de phàrantan a' fàs eagalach dè seòrsa mì-àbhàisteachd 's a tha ann ann am oghlam Gàidhlig. Chan e a' Ghàidhlig an roghainn “default”. Mar sin, feumaidh cuideigin a bhith a' soisgeulachadh air a son. Sin an iomairt nàiseanta anns a' phlana, tha mi an dòchas.

Tha e cudromach gu bheil am bòrd a-nis airson a bhith a' bruidhinn le teaghlaichean cho luath 's a tha an leanabh air a bhreith, agus a' mineachadh dè seòrsa cothroman a tha a' tighinn le foghlam Gàidhlig. Tha e gu tric a' cur iongnadh air daoine a chluinntinn nach eil ach aon sgoilear a-mach à ceathrar a' dol tro fhoghlam tro mheadhan na Gàidhlig anns na h-Eileanan an Iar, mar eisimpleir. Tha e inntinneach gu bheil am plana ag aideachadh gu bheil cnapan-starra ann fhathast airson tòrr phàrantan—cnapan-starra a tha stèidhichte ann an seann “hang-ups” mòra mun chànan. Tha e inntinneach cuideachd gu bheil am bòrd den bheachd gum biodh ceartas ùr fon lagh a' briseadh sìos cuid de na beachdan seo co-dhiù—ceartas gu foghlam tro mheadhan na Gàidhlig far a bheil iarrtas reusanta ann.

Airson inbhich a tha a' feuchainn ri Gàidhlig ionnsachadh, tha am plana misneachail cuideachd. Canaidh mi seo gu h-onarach: cha robh e furasta dhòmhsa Gàidhlig ionnsachadh agus tha mi ga h-ionnsachadh fhathast. Chan eil mi airson dragh a chur air duine sam bith a tha ag èisteachd a tha ag ionnsachadh na Gàidhlig. Chan eil mi a' ciallachadh gur e cànan doirbh a tha anns a' Ghàidhlig fhèin—ged nach eil facal ann airson “Yes” no “No”, agus nach eil an t-ìolra ag obair ach le trì nithean ann, agus gu bheil am facal “boireannach” fireann agus am facal “feusag” boireann.

Tha mi dìreach a' ciallachadh nach eil cothrom furasta ann gus an cànan a chleachdadh nuair a tha duine a' tòiseachadh, fiù 's air a' Ghaidhealtachd, air sgath 's nach eil mòran Ghàidheal—gu traidiseanta co-dhiu—a' creidsinn nuair a chanas cuideigin gu bheil e ag ionnsachadh na Gàidhlig agus ag iarraidh a' Ghàidhlig a chleachdadh mura bheil e fileanta mar-thà. Tha a h-uile duine ro mhodhail. Bidh mòran luchd-ionnsachaidh anns an t-suidheachadh seo a' toirt fàilte dhan taic anns a' phlana airson cùrsaichean ulpan agus a leithid. Bha mise a' tadhail air clas den t-seòrsa sin ann an Steòrnabhagh o chionn ghoirid, agus bha e gu math inntinneach a bhith a' faicinn cho nàdarrach 's gun robh daoine ag ionnsachadh—gun fhacal gràmair agus gun fhacal Beurla air a chleachdadh. Tha am plana ag iarraidh gum biodh 2,000 neach air cùrsaichean den t-seòrsa seo a dhèanamh taobh a-staigh dà bhliadhna.

Tha am plana làidir a thaobh foghlaim san fharsaingeachd. A-rithist, tha amas gu math sònraichte ann: gum bi an àireamh de chloinn a' dol gu "early years Gaelic groups" a' dol suas 20 às a' cheud taobh a-staigh dà bhliadhna, agus gum bi na h-àireamhan dhiubhsan a tha a' dol a-steach do dh'ionadan Gàidhlig anns na sgoiltean a' dol suas 15 às a' cheud aig an aon àm.

Tha am plana deònach sùil a thoirt air dòighean obrach ùra—mar eisimpleir, mar a thuirt buill eile, tidsearan fhaighinn à Èirinn. Tha am plana a' feuchainn a bhith a' dèanamh cinnteach gu bheil clann a' cumail am fileantais an dèidh dhaibh am bun-sgoil fhàgail, agus gu bheil iad a' tuigsinn nach eil a' Ghàidhlig dìreach airson na sgoile aca fhèin.

Is toiseach tòiseachaidh a h-uile rud, gun teagamh, ach gu pearsanta tha earbsa agam gu bheil Bòrd na Gàidhlig ann an staid tòrr nas fhallainne agus nas làidire airson na h-obrach mòire a tha roimhe. Tha mi a' cur fàilte chridheil air a' phlana agus a' toirt taic don mholadh ann an ainm a' mhinistear.

Following is the simultaneous interpretation:

I am pleased to be able to speak about Gaelic in the chamber today, notwithstanding the comments of the *Daily Mail*. Much more important, I am pleased that we have something so substantial to debate today: this new plan of Bòrd na Gàidhlig.

Because there have already been a lot of plans for Gaelic, it is easy to ask what is so different about this one. But there is something different about it. I am pleased to say that the steps in the plan are clear and practical. They start with this principle: we do not have all day; this may be our last chance.

It is now much clearer where Bòrd na Gàidhlig is going, because it has a much stronger aim. From

here on in, before the board starts any project, it will ask how the project will maintain the number of people who speak Gaelic in Scotland. Ted Brocklebank is right to say that we need to learn from the Maori example. If Jim Mather were leading Bòrd na Gàidhlig, I am sure that he would use the word "alignment" for this sort of philosophy.

It will be interesting to follow how the plan will develop and grow. However, a few particular points leap off the page. For example, the plan gives a lot of support to parents who are thinking about Gaelic-medium education for their children. Why is that sort of encouragement still required? It is required because, as long as schools still talk about Gaelic-medium education as being different from mainstream education, some parents will still be frightened about the unusualness of Gaelic education. Gaelic is not the default choice, so people must act as advocates for it. That is the function of the national initiative in the plan.

It is also important that the board wants to speak to families as soon as a child is born to explain what sort of Gaelic education opportunities are available. It often surprises people when they hear that, in the Western Isles, only one pupil in four goes through Gaelic-medium education. It is interesting that, as the plan recognises, the old hang-ups around the language still act as a stumbling block for many parents. It is also interesting that the board believes that a new legal right to education in the medium of Gaelic, where reasonable demand exists, would overcome at least some of those negative opinions.

For adults who are trying to learn Gaelic, the plan is encouraging as well. I will say this honestly: it was not easy for me to learn Gaelic, and I am still learning. I do not mean to worry anyone who is learning Gaelic at the moment—I do not mean to suggest that Gaelic is a complicated language, even though there are no words for "yes" or "no", nothing is plural unless there are three or more things, the word for a woman is masculine and the word for a beard is feminine. I simply mean that there is no easy opportunity to use the language when one starts to learn it, even in the Gaelic heartland. That is partly because many Gaelic speakers do not understand when someone who is learning Gaelic but is not already fluent asks them to speak Gaelic to them—everyone is too polite to do so. Many learners in that situation will welcome the support in the plan for open courses and the like. I visited one such course in Stornoway a while ago, and was interested to see how naturally people were learning, without a word of grammar or English being used. The plan wants 2,000 people to be on such courses within two years.

The plan is strong on education in a wider sense. Again, there is a specific aim to increase the number of children going to Gaelic-medium early years education by 20 per cent within two years, and for the number of children going into Gaelic units to increase by 15 per cent at the same time.

The plan is willing to consider new ways of working, such as the example of attracting teachers from Ireland. The plan tries to ensure that children remain fluent when they leave primary school and ensure that they understand that Gaelic is not to be used only when they are in school.

Without a doubt, a start has been made. I believe that Bòrd na Gàidhlig is in a much stronger and healthier state than previously to tackle the work that is ahead of it.

I give a warm welcome to the plan, and support the motion in the name of the minister.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Tapadh leibh.

15:35

Peter Peacock (Highlands and Islands) (Lab):

Like other members, I very much welcome the action plan, which I regard as an attempt to bring more focus to the work of Bòrd na Gàidhlig and the previously agreed national plan and to drive specific action to increase language acquisition more quickly than would otherwise be the case. I welcome all that.

I know from comments that were made to me during my time as a minister with responsibility for Gaelic that Bòrd na Gàidhlig has not had an easy start in life, to put it mildly. There were many key personnel changes at key moments—and the board is currently looking for a chief executive. Many people in the Gaelic community were frustrated with the progress that the board was able to make. A criticism that I used to hear was that everything was a priority. That is easy to understand, because when we are trying to save a language there is an awful lot to be done. If the action plan is successful in providing a better focus for the board and its work, I will very much welcome that.

However, the action plan is pretty broad and contains a curious mix of outcomes that are highly specific and measurable and outcomes that are not at all specific or measurable. In key respects it is highly ambitious. That is not a bad thing. It is important to be ambitious for the language. However, I wonder how realistic and achievable some of the targets are. Having said that, given the broad intention that is expressed in the objectives, I very much wish the approach well.

An attempt to reverse the decline of a language presents a big challenge, but I remain more optimistic than ever about the prospects of success. I will cover some of the ground that Ted Brocklebank covered, because I have been reflecting, in much the same way as he has been doing—that must be a feature of men of our age, although I am much younger than Ted, as members can see—on the past 25 years, during which time I have had some involvement in Gaelic development.

Twenty-five years ago, Gaelic development as a concept was in its infancy. I well remember visiting the offices of An Comunn Gàidhealach in Church Street in Inverness, to talk to the officials about their work, which focused on the Mod but also supported adult learning programmes and a number of Gaelic societies across the Highlands and Islands and in Glasgow and other cities.

I remember the work that was done by Grampian Television and I pay due tribute to Ted Brocklebank for his important role in that. The BBC, too, was responsible for some important Gaelic programming in those days, even if programmes sometimes went out very late at night or early in the morning.

I have watched—and helped a bit with—the growth of Gaelic-medium education. I remember the scepticism about the issue in the early days, not least from Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education. I am glad that that has changed over the years. I have watched Gaelic-medium education grow and grow; there are now more than 60 units. I watched the start and growth of the Gaelic playgroup movement, which is to be encouraged. The first secondary school, in Pauline McNeill's constituency in Glasgow, is a relatively recent and important development. The first stand-alone primary schools are beginning to emerge. Gaelic-medium education teacher numbers have grown and grown, although there remain challenges.

Fiona Hyslop: Does the member agree that one of the arguments for Gaelic-medium education is to do with the strength that bilingualism brings? I think that that shows the progress that has been made in recent years, in which the member played a part when he was Minister for Education and Young People.

Peter Peacock: I absolutely agree with the minister. Alasdair Allan is a good example of that. Once someone has mastered one language, they can master many languages—it becomes much easier to do so. That is a good thing in a modern European society, let alone in a wider, global society.

I have watched Sabhal Mòr Ostaig grow from that small, rather dilapidated barn into a campus

that is superb by any standards, anywhere in the world. I have helped a bit with that at various times, in various different roles, by providing the odd cheque—not a personal cheque, I must say, but a Government or council cheque. Like Ted Brocklebank, I pay tribute to Sir Iain Noble for his work in that regard. Sabhal Mòr Ostaig is not just a further education college but a centre for a series of important activity around Gaelic. As Ted Brocklebank said, a whole area of Skye has been regenerated on the back of that work.

We have also seen various spin-offs from Sabhal Mòr Ostaig, through Cànan, Tobar an Dualchais, and so on. Lots of projects have spun out from that. I have seen Comunn na Gàidhlig, Cli Gàidhlig and Comann nam Pàrant develop over the years. Stòrlann Nàiseanta na Gàidhlig, which publishes books and other publications to support education and wider access to the language, has also been growing over the years. There have been new forms of adult learning, and ulpan, to which Alasdair Allan referred, has been an important part of that. I should also mention the impact of Runrig in modernising pride in the language and the wider culture at a particularly important time. The *West Highland Free Press* also takes the people, the land and the language as its theme.

I have watched the development of “Eòrpa”, which is a fantastic programme about contemporary European affairs that is made in the medium of Gaelic. In addition, the fèisean movement has had a huge impact on access to the language. There are umpteen important arts projects in which Mike Russell took part at a much earlier time in the Uists, when he was much slimmer than he is today. There is also MG Alba and the Gaelic Language (Scotland) Act 2005, which made Bòrd na Gàidhlig a statutory body with language plans. There is a vibrancy about Gaelic development that we have never seen before, which is to be welcomed. All those institutions and organisations have a lot of capacity and exist to address the decline in Gaelic that we all want to see addressed, and that is where my optimism comes from.

Part of the thinking behind making Bòrd na Gàidhlig a statutory body was the need to get all the resources marshalled and moving in the same direction, marching together, with the board providing some leadership for that. I hope very much that the new strategy will help to achieve that. If it does so, we can look forward to the number of new Gaelic speakers growing at a faster rate than the rate at which the indigenous language speakers are dying out. That is the crucial changeover that needs to take place.

I referred earlier to the ambitiousness of the targets in the report. I will illustrate that briefly by

reference to three things: teacher numbers, pupil numbers and the specific grant. By any standards, achieving a 100 per cent increase in teacher numbers, year on year, is ambitious. It is not the first time that we have had a recruitment initiative—I initiated one as well—and it will be a tough challenge to deliver that, especially as it appears that there are currently few vacancies in Gaelic-medium education in the system. I checked websites about that through my office today. Why would someone train as a Gaelic-medium teacher if there are no vacancies? There are challenges in that, which I hope that ministers will address in order to improve the process.

Equally, although I agree with the objective of increasing pupil numbers by 15 per cent, that will not be easy to achieve in the short term unless we have the teachers. The two things are obviously connected. The target of increasing pupil numbers by 15 per cent is predicated, to some extent, on the Gaelic-specific grant being used to expand the provision. It has always been the intention to use the Gaelic-specific grant to do that and some of it has helped with that, but a large part has gone into mainstream funding for Gaelic-medium education. In the present financial climate, it will be very tough for councils to mainstream that funding and release the specific funding for new development. I hope that the matter is handled sensitively but firmly so that progress can be made. That said, I see progress being made on all those fronts.

I turn to something that Pauline McNeill touched on. The text of the report—but not the specific targets that I could find—talks about the 80 per cent drop-off in Gaelic-medium education between primary and secondary school. That is a crucial part of the development process that we must tackle. It is a key issue. Glasgow has the first Gaelic-medium secondary school and is showing how that can be done, but we need to move things forward. I am sorry that the report does not contain a specific target relating to how we can do that. Reference is made to it, but it is an issue that we need to look at. I wish the report well, although I have some reservations about the detail. That is why I also support our amendment, which proposes to keep the available resources under review—that is all that we are asking.

I associate myself with what Ted Brocklebank said about New Zealand. I had the opportunity to visit New Zealand when I was the Minister for Education and Young People, and I spent some time in looking at how Maori-medium education was being delivered. I spoke to the New Zealand equivalent of Bòrd na Gàidhlig and was hugely impressed by what it was doing. I remember speaking to Allan Campbell, who is sitting in the public gallery today, about that and trying to ensure that the board learned lessons from New Zealand. I also associate myself with what Ted

Brocklebank said about confidence in the language making so much else happen in economic development and the regeneration of communities.

With that, I close my remarks, as I know that we are running short of time. I welcome the report and hope that it will lead to progress in the spirit that I have suggested.

15:44

Dave Thompson (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): Faodaidh mi tòiseachadh le ràdh gu bheil e na nàire mhòr nach eil Gàidhlig aig ach aon Albannach a-mach à 50. Gun teagamh, is ann mar sin a tha cùisean anns a' Phàrlamaid seo cuideachd, le dithis bhall Pàrlamaid gu leth anns an t-suidheachadh sin. Is iad Alasdair Ailean agus Iain Fearchar Rothach a tha a' cunntadh mar an dithis agus mi-fhìn a tha a' dèanamh suas an leth eile, a chionn 's gu bheil mi fhathast beagan air falbh bho fhileantas. Tha e sònraichte, co-dhiù, gu bheil dithis gu leth againn ann idir nuair a bheachdaicheas duine air an dòigh-làimhseachaidh a tha Gàidhlig air fhaighinn anns na bliadhnaichean a chaidh seachad, ach tha seo a-nis ag atharrachadh.

Tha am foillseachadh "Ginealach Ùr na Gàidhlig: Plana Gnìomha gus àireamh luchd-labhairt na Gàidhlig a mheudachadh" bho Bhòrd na Gàidhlig an t-seachdain seo na cheum mòr eile air an t-slighe air adhart ann am planaichean gus ginealaichean ùra Gàidhlig a chruthachadh, agus bu chòir dhuinn fàilte mhòr a chur air.

Co-dhiù, ma tha sinn ag iarraidh gum bi a' mhòr-chuid fhathast còmhla rinn, feumaidh sinn coimhead air factaran eile cuideachd, mar na buannachdan eaconamach a gheibh sinn bho chumail na Gàidhlig beò agus an cultar agus dualchas beartach a tha a' dol còmhla ri the. Is e turasachd tè de na gnìomhachasan as cudromaiche ann an Alba. Ged a tha mòran dhaoine a' tighinn don Ghàidhealtachd gus ar seallaidhean àlainn agus ar n-iomadach bheathaichean fhaicinn, is e briseadh-dùil dhaibh a bhith a' faicinn nan aon soidhnichean-rathaid a chitheadh iad aig baile ann an Leamington Spa, Doncaster no Basingstoke. An aghaidh na chanas an fheadhainn a tha neo-chàirdeil ris a' Ghàidhlig agus a tha a' feuchainn ri ràdh gu bheil soidhnichean-rathaid dà-chànanach cunnartach airson dràibhear, airson mòran dhaoine tha iad a' cur ri cultar agus cruth nan àiteachan far a bheil iad air an taisbeanadh.

A bharrachd air an tlachd a bhios muinntir an àite a' gabhail bho na h-ealain Ghàidhlig agus ceòl Gàidhlig, tha an cultar beò sònraichte a tha sna h-eileanan seo na adhbhar cudromach eile a bhios a' Ghàidhealtachd is na h-Eileanan cho

tarraingeach do luchd-tadhail à pàirtean eile den Rìoghachd Aonaichte. Ged a bhios mòran dhaoine toilichte a bhith a' dol air an saor-laithean agus a' fuireach taobh a-staigh campa saor-laithean fad na tìde, is fheàrr leis a' mhòr-chuid a bhith a' fuireach am measg muinntir an àite agus a bhith a' faighinn blas de na beathannan aca.

O chionn beagan bhliadhnaichean, agus air sgàth taic luchd-poilitigs agus luchd-taic bho gach pàrtaidh le sùil air an àm ri teachd, tha Gàidhlig air a bhith a' dol tro bheagan de dhùsgadh agus sinn a-nis ag aithneachadh nam buannachdan foghlaim a tha aice cuideachd. Tha barrachd pàrantan a-nis a' cur luach air na buannachdan foghlaim a tha rim faotainn tro fhoghlam dà-chànanach airson na cloinne aca. Tha fèill mhòr air a bhith air foghlam tro mheadhan na Gàidhlig, le barrachd teaghlacha a' mothachadh gu bheil làmh an uachdair aig clann a tha air foghlam dà-chànanach fhaighinn an coimeas ri clann eile aig a bheil dìreach aon chànan.

Anns an rannsachadh a rinn an t-Ollamh Richard Johnstone bho Oilthigh Shruighlea air sgoilearan dà-chànanach, thug e fa-near gu bheil clann ann an sgoiltean le foghlam tro mheadhan na Gàidhlig buailteach a bhith a' dèanamh nas fheàrr na clann ann an sgoiltean le foghlam tro mheadhan na Beurla. Tha luchd-foghlam cuideachd ag aithneachadh gu bheil comas a bu mhotha aig clann a tha fileanta ann an dà chànan a bhith a' dèiligeadh le raon nas fharsainghe de phròiseasan smaoineachaidh agus, a bharrachd air seo, dh'fhaodadh dà-chànanachas a bhith a' cur ri comas neach-cloinne a bhith ag ionnsachadh cànanan eile.

Is i tè de na buannachdan as cudromaiche a thàinig a-mach à stèidheachadh na Phàrlamaid gu bheil sinn air tòiseachadh cur às don bheus sin air a bheil an "Scottish cringe"—a bhith a' coimhead air ar duthaich mar àite nach eil cho math ri dùthchannan eile air feadh an t-saoghail. Is i an fhìrinn, gu mì-fhortanach, gu bheil feadhainn a' coimhead air cànan ar sinnsirean mar rudeigin nas lugha na Fraingis, Danish, Finnish no Korean. Feumaidh gu bheil seo a' toirt buaidh air a' bheus sin, agus feumaidh gun cuir toirt air ais na Gàidhlig gu ìre far a bheil i a' faighinn meas agus aithneachadh ri toirt air ais misneachd chailte na h-Alba.

Gun teagamh, chan ann dìreach ar clann a dh'fhaodadh a bhith a' faighinn buannachdan bho ionnsachadh na Gàidhlig. Air an adhbhar sin, tha an cùrsa sònraichte Gàidhlig ulpan, airson luchd-tòiseachaidh aig gach aois, ag èirigh ann am meas an t-sluaigh. Bidh na cùrsaichean sin gan leasachadh agus gan cur air adhart a bharrachd.

Taobh cudromach eile den dùsgadh Ghàidhlig, chì sinn ann an cruthachadh MG Alba. Tha an craoladair spaideil ùr Gàidhlig sin a' dearbhadh

inbhe na Gàidhlig mar chànan a tha dìreach cho cudromach ri cànan sam bith eile. Tha soirbheachas an adhartais seo, a tha math dha-rìribh, air a bhith air a chur sìos beagan, ge-tà, a chionn 's nach eil cothrom aig BBC Alba a' faighinn do luchd-seallaidh tron t-seirbheis Freeview, a tha aig a' BhBC. Tha an argamaid aig Urras a' BhBC gum feumadh e a bhith ag obair a-mach dè a' chiall a tha aig "universality" airson a' BhBC mar bhuidhinn mus dèan e co-dhùnadh air BBC Alba. Chan eil sin a' dèanamh ciall. Feumaidh Urras a' BhBC beachdachadh a-rithist. Tha seo cudromach a chionn 's nach eil cothrom aig tòrr daoine a tha ga iarraidh a bhith a' coimhead air an t-sianail. Tha cron ga dhèanamh air leasachadh na Gàidhlig anns an roinn chraolaidh air sgàth sin.

Tha cor na Gàidhlig ag atharrachadh airson a' chiad uair ann an linntean agus tha e cudthromach gu bheil Alba anns an 21^{mh} linn ag aithneachadh dìreach dè cho lag 's a tha an t-ath-bheòthachadh agus gu bheil sinn a dèanamh a h-uile rud a b' urrainn dhuinn a bhith a' cumail Gàidhlig suas agus beò.

Following is the simultaneous interpretation:

It is a shame that only one in 50 Scots has a decent knowledge of Gaelic. That is reflected in the Parliament, of course: only 2.5 MSPs are in that position. Alasdair Allan and John Farquhar Munro count as two and I count as a half, as I am still some way from fluency. It is remarkable that there are even 2.5 of us, considering how Gaelic has been treated in the past. However, that is now changing.

The publication of "Ginealach Ùr na Gàidhlig: Plana Gnìomha gus àireamh luchd-labhairt na Gàidhlig a mheudachadh" by Bòrd na Gàidhlig this week is a further major step forward in plans to create a new generation of Gaelic speakers, and it is to be warmly welcomed. However, if we are to continue to take the majority with us, we must consider other factors, such as the economic benefits to be gained from the continued survival of Gaelic and the rich culture and heritage that accompany it.

Tourism is one of Scotland's most important industries. People flock to the Highlands to marvel at our spectacular scenery and abundant wildlife, but many are disappointed to be brought back to earth on their holidays by seeing exactly the same traffic signs and street names that they can see at home in Leamington Spa, Doncaster or Basingstoke. Contrary to the constant refrain of those who are hostile to Gaelic that bilingual signs are a confusing driving hazard, for many people they add to the texture and culture of the areas in which they are displayed.

In addition to the local population's enjoyment of Gaelic music and arts, the existence of a thriving and distinct culture in these isles is an important reason why the Highlands and Islands are such a draw for visitors from other parts of the United Kingdom. Many people who are on holiday may be content to stay within the confines of a holiday camp, but most prefer to live among the local population and sample something of the lives of the people in that population.

In recent years, thanks to the support of forward-thinking politicians and supporters from all parties, Gaelic has seen something of a revival, and its educational benefits are now being recognised. More and more parents have come to appreciate the educational benefits that are available to their children through bilingualism. The popularity of Gaelic-medium education has soared as more and more families have come to appreciate that children who are brought up to be bilingual have a competitive advantage over their peers who go through life with just one language.

In his study of bilingual pupils, Professor Richard Johnstone of the University of Stirling noted a tendency for children who are educated in Gaelic-medium schools to outperform their contemporaries in English-medium education. Educationists must recognise that children who benefit from fluency in and understanding of two languages have a greater ability to handle a wide range of thought processes. On top of that, bilingualism can enhance a child's ability to learn other languages.

One of the key benefits of the establishment of the Scottish Parliament has been to minimise the characteristic of the national psyche known as the Scottish cringe—the tendency to regard our country as less good than others around the world. The fact that some even regard the language of our forebears as inferior to French, Danish, Finnish or Korean must have a bearing on that. Gaelic's restoration to a position of respect and acceptance must surely play a part in giving Scotland back its lost self-confidence.

Of course it is not only our children who can benefit from learning Gaelic. That is why the acclaimed ulpan Gaelic courses for beginners of all ages have been increasing in popularity and are to be further promoted and improved.

Another key aspect of the encouragement of Gaelic's revival has been the formation of BBC Alba, a high-quality Gaelic-medium broadcaster, which confirms Gaelic's status as a language that is as important as any other. However, the success of that extremely positive development has been hampered by the fact that BBC Alba is not provided to viewers through the BBC's Freeview service. The BBC trust's argument that it must sort out what universality should mean for

the BBC as a whole before it makes a decision on BBC Alba just does not add up. It should go away and think again. That is important, because many of those who wish to use the channel cannot access it and the progress of Gaelic is being unfairly hampered because of that.

The fortunes of Gaelic are changing for the first time in centuries. It is important that modern Scotland recognises just how fragile its recovery is and that we continue to do all we can to maintain it.

15:52

Rob Gibson (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): Tha mi a' cur fàilte air "Ginealach Ùr na Gàidhlig". Welcome to the action plan to increase the numbers of Gaelic speakers. We have a very practical set of plans here at a time when we have recognised that the thrust of developing the number of Gaelic speakers will of course come from education and from the home and community from early years right through to adult learning. That focus is excellent. I am delighted that in leading Bòrd na Gàidhlig, Arthur Cormack has homed in on those central parts of the action that must be taken to try to increase the number of speakers.

We must welcome the fact that the issue is being considered at a time when the financial circumstances of belt tightening are being used as an obstacle to doing anything. In arguing against that, we have the opportunity to say that we must think about individuals', communities' and the country's self-esteem and identity. If we cut away the basis of what it is to be the people who live in Gaelic's heartlands and the new learning communities, we will make it more difficult in future for them to have that distinctiveness, which makes Scotland what it is. Scotland is a changing place but, nevertheless, it has those kinds of roots, which Gaelic allows us to share with the rest of the world. Gaelic is recognised more widely as a language, such as in the European charter for regional or minority languages.

I could not believe it when I heard a presenter on BBC Scotland this morning say that Gaelic is not really a language. One of the board's development officers said, "Of course it is." The problem that we have is that out there, appreciation of the language has to develop along with the effort to teach more people to become Gaelic speakers. Out there in the community, there are a lot of misconceptions about what is going on.

A couple of weeks ago I had the pleasure—and, at times, the pain—of taking part in a debate in Caithness on the place of Gaelic in that county. It was a civilised affair that had been billed as if it

was going to be a shooting gallery with those of us on the panel as the targets.

Although, fortunately, the non-Gaels were polite, they sent some barbs in the direction of Gaelic. One panellist said:

"It's a minority movement, with the backing of the Gaelic Act—they are ramming it down our throats."

I do not think that that is the case. The trouble is that people do not even have the self-esteem to understand that their own Caithness dialect is a dialect of Scots, and that it will benefit from debate about the other language: Gaelic. We must encourage people to recognise who they are and to understand that the diversity of languages in this country is something to celebrate and which gives people a good feeling.

The Royal National Mod in Caithness later this year will not only encompass Gaelic but recognise the Norse heritage in the Caithness dialect of Scots. As members have mentioned, the census is coming next year; we have been dealing with it in the Economy, Energy and Tourism Committee, and the language questions are in there once again.

The language question on Gaelic has been in the census for 100 years. I am delighted that it has been included again, and we hope that this time round, we will get a realistic picture of the number of Gaelic speakers, in the hope that it is going up. For the first time, in an attempt to bolster that information, the census will include a question on the number of people who speak Scots. As the convener of the cross-party group on Scots, I view the two languages together, supporting the recognition that Scotland is a diverse place and that Gaelic and Scots have big parts to play in the self-esteem of our country as we move forward.

I hope that if today's debate does nothing else, it will send a message to people who, in a very curmudgeonly way, say, "Why are we going to waste money on these past languages?" Some do say such things; I will not go into detail, but such reactionary attitudes against Gaelic and Scots can fill newspaper pages. We must have a good argument that explains why it is far better for people to be open-minded and welcoming.

It was interesting to hear the arguments that were made at the Sutherland summit for why Sutherland is an attractive place for people to visit. Dave Thompson mentioned the scenery and the wildlife, and other people recognise that. German visitors had the opportunity to see the Gaelic language on road and street signs, and to hear it spoken, and that was one of the attractions for them. That diversity, and the ability of people to recognise it—as those from Germany did—could be much more widespread.

The Gaelic plan allows for the possibility that a lot more people will come to the country because they choose to see a living culture, not just the remnants of a dead one that one can find in the piles of *fuair làraichean*: the piles of stones that used to be houses in the villages that were cleared so long ago.

I am delighted to support the action plan, but I am concerned that we make the argument for the money that is required to extend the schools. I am keen that the councils in areas in which Gaelic is widely spoken do not in any way stop recruiting Gaelic teachers at present or water down the conditions under which they are recruited. I am concerned that those things might happen because of the cuts, and I make a plea to council leaders to ensure that in these straitened times, Gaelic is not unnecessarily a victim of cuts.

The Gaelic plan has a lot to do. This is a time of financial belt tightening, but also a time of hope for this country. I believe that that hope is encapsulated in plans such as the one that we are discussing today and in the belief that our variety of languages gives many of our citizens a life with a good deal more depth and enjoyment. We are arguing about Gaelic as one of the family of languages in Scotland. A language is a means to say so much more, and that is what we are here to underpin today.

15:59

Jamie Stone: The forthcoming Royal National Mod in Thurso will be a great achievement, and it is a tribute to the organisers who are bringing the event to the county of Caithness. It will instil an awareness of Gaelic and of the culture and music of that language. It will also do a great deal for tourism in that far-flung part of Scotland.

I am keenly aware of the poignancy of the fact that, in my constituency, Gaelic only just hangs on. It never ceases to amaze me that there is still a handful of native Gaelic speakers who come from the east coast of Sutherland. I find that astonishing in this day and age, but the language only just hangs on there—it is almost gone. Today's debate is about many things, and one of them is protecting that inheritance—it is hanging there by its fingertips.

This has been a good, interesting and important debate, and I thank all colleagues, including the Minister for Culture and External Affairs, for their contributions. I am sure that we shall move forward consensually on the action plan. In my opening speech, I made it clear that I support the aims of the plan and the priority areas that it outlines. I am particularly pleased to note the emphasis on supporting parents and on education. Gaelic is very much a language of the community,

and it starts in our homes and schools, with the dedication of families and teachers.

The Scottish Government has chosen education as the main area that it would like to progress in its response to the action plan, and I hope that it does not end there. I hope that the contents of the plan are not just words but are translated into visible, measurable actions. I do not say that because I doubt the Scottish Government's dedication to the Gaelic cause. The legislation that was passed under the previous Government has continued to be built upon under the present Government. I say it because it is common knowledge that the Government faces difficulties on the education front, which I have alluded to already.

There are ambitions in the action plan that will require a concerted effort on the part of local and national Government to ensure their success. The action plan recommends continuing support for local authorities in providing Gaelic education, and I hope that the Scottish Government will take the necessary steps to ensure that that support is forthcoming. Everyone knows that local authorities face some of the tightest financial times over the next few years, as Peter Peacock has said.

In my opening speech, I touched on the important role that the media play in Gaelic language promotion and on how the Scottish Government should do all that it can to encourage the United Kingdom Government to ensure wider, more accessible broadcasting of Gaelic television. That is an easy step, which can be incorporated into and can complement Gaelic education. Television is an instant, accessible medium, and it places the language in a practical and useable form. One need only consider the success of the Welsh-language channel S4C, for example.

I echo an important point that Ted Brocklebank made. I emphasise the importance of the promoters of Gaelic taking Scotland's people and communities with them as they go about their business. That point has been alluded to in other speeches. That is particularly true in parts of Scotland that do not have a tradition—or a particularly strong tradition—of Gaelic being spoken.

Alas, the apparent imposition of decisions from very far away—as it is often felt—regarding Gaelic signage and so on can be viewed as clumsy and insensitive by communities. As colleagues have suggested, that has caused controversy in the Caithness part of my constituency, controversy that surely does not serve the best interests of preserving and promoting the language, particularly when public finances are severely stretched and when the Royal National Mod is about to come to Caithness.

Wherever humanly possible, it is far better to seek the community's approval before spending scant resources on such projects. We should not be afraid of asking local communities what they think when it comes to sensitive issues. Indeed, a refusal to ask communities what they think can unfortunately be interpreted as arrogance, something that should have no place in the protection and promotion of Gaelic, which is part of our national heritage. Gaelic is a mother tongue that, for centuries, has all too often retreated in the face of the arrogant imposition of English. Sensitivity is required, and we should take people with us. That way, the language will flourish.

I have one Gaelic saying to quote, which I use quite often. Togar càrn mòr de chlachan beaga—the great cairn is built of wee stones. It is an important thought that small steps, all in the right direction, can achieve a great result.

16:04

Jamie McGrigor (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I am pleased to close the debate for the Scottish Conservatives, as it is of real interest to many of my constituents in the Highlands and Islands. I am proud of the excellent record of previous Conservative Governments in helping to sustain the Gaelic language. The first time that I stood in an election was in the Western Isles. I insisted that part of my electoral address be written in Gaelic, and in it I pointed out that the Conservative party had put £16 million into Gaelic broadcasting. Unfortunately, my translator got one word wrong, which resulted in a daily newspaper saying that the Conservatives were putting £16 billion into Gaelic. That did me no harm, because our votes went up, although I had to admit my mistake.

My colleague Ted Brocklebank said that the Scottish Conservatives broadly welcome Bòrd na Gàidhlig's action plan for Gaelic. I pay tribute to all those who have worked to produce the action plan. We are clear that the best way in which to maintain and strengthen Gaelic is through broadcasting and education. A good supply of books, such as is available in Ireland, would also be a good idea. I am impressed by the tourist information office in Tyndrum, which has poems by the famous local poet Duncan Ban MacIntyre on the walls. That is a good idea.

Many members have rightly raised the subject of the availability of BBC Alba on Freeview, for which I have argued many times. My constituents in the Highlands and Islands are understandably disappointed that the BBC trust has postponed its decision on the matter. The Parliament should send out a strong and united message that there should be no further delay. My constituent Allan Campbell, who is the chairman of the Gaelic

Society of Inverness, has written to the chairman of the BBC trust. As Mr Campbell points out in his letter, the society believes that the Gaelic Language (Scotland) Act 2005 and the resulting national plan for Gaelic give significant cause for optimism, but a Gaelic digital service is fundamental to that optimism. He also highlights the strong sense of injustice among Gaelic users at being required to pay more to access publicly funded programmes in their language. That issue should be remedied as soon as possible.

A lot of good work takes place in education. The action plan is right to focus on support for parents and adult learning. I commend innovative projects such as the link between pupils of the bun-sgoil on Sleat and Tollcross primary school in Edinburgh, which has resulted in the wonderful Air Iomlaid exhibition of artwork by pupils that is currently on show at the Fruitmarket Gallery in Edinburgh. That is on until 9 May, and I suggest that as many members as possible go.

In preparing for today's debate, I consulted the Gaelic expert in Argyll, Brigadier John MacFarlane, who sings in a Gaelic choir along with my wife Emma. He made several good points. He emphasised the importance of Radio nan Gàidheal as well as the need to develop and support what he called the Gaelic diaspora of potential new learners in Europe, Australia and New Zealand. As I was in the USA last week for Scotland week, I am even more keenly aware of the interest in all things Scottish, including our Gaelic language. We must encourage that important aspect of bringing people to Scotland.

The action plan is right when it talks about
"national pride, a sense of history"

and

"a desire to better understand the place-names of Scotland".

Those play a part in making the learning of Gaelic accessible. That applies in Scotland and among the Gaelic diaspora. I agree with John MacFarlane's desire for a better structured approach to adult part-time learning with the development of a modern national curriculum for adult Gaelic learning. He also suggests that we should have a Sabhal Mòr Ostaig for the central belt. I am interested in what the minister might say on that.

I must raise one negative point in connection with Gaelic choirs. I have recently discovered that An Comunn Gàidhealach has raised the required level of passes in Gaelic language speaking among members of choirs. Apparently, if a choir does not have the required number of passes, it cannot compete in certain competitions in the national Mod. That seems to me to be counterproductive in all kinds of ways. We have

already said that it is the Gaelic arts and culture that keep Gaelic going, so we want to encourage as many people as possible to sing the songs and read the poetry. However, people have told me that, if their choir is not allowed to take part in the national Mod, they will not bother to take part in the choir. If someone is in full-time employment or looking after children, they might have time to sing in the choir once a week but not have time to study the language. On the other hand, their very proximity to the language while singing it will almost certainly interest them in trying to learn what the words and place names mean.

In that regard, I congratulate An Comunn Gàidhealach on sponsoring Gaelic lessons for members of Gaelic choirs. However, as I said, it is entirely counterproductive to put up barriers to people who are willing to take part in those choirs or to insist on any academic qualifications. After all, one need not learn German, French or Italian to sing an opera in those languages, so why on earth should people need to learn the Gaelic language? If someone has a beautiful voice, that is all that is needed. I do not suppose that the Italian maestro Luciano Pavarotti had to take German lessons to sing "Die Fledermaus" and I doubt that the great Swedish tenor Jussi Björling had to take Italian lessons to sing "Carmen", so why should people need to have Gaelic lessons to sing in a Gaelic choir?

Gaelic music is free and inspirational. It comes from the sounds of the sea, the sounds of the wind, the sounds of the skylark, the curlew, the oystercatcher. It is about a beautiful sound and freedom of the mind and spirit. It is nothing whatever to do with academic passes and linguistic skills, and I humbly beg An Comunn Gàidhealach to take the requirements away. Surely it is musical merit that defines a good choir rather than a grasp of the grammar of the language.

Alasdair Allan: I am in a Gaelic choir, and I think that the member's wife is in one as well. I am slightly puzzled about where he is going. I am not aware that An Comunn Gàidhealach forces people to take qualifications. I understand that choirs as a whole have to have a certain number of people who are reasonably proficient, but individuals are not forced to take any courses, as far as I am aware.

Jamie McGrigor: As the member says, choirs have to have a certain number of passes in order to take part in certain competitions in the Mod. I am saying that that is not necessary and that the requirement should be done away with.

We recognise the investment that has gone into Gaelic but we share the concern that, although much good work is going on, it has not yet been matched by a corresponding increase in the

number of Gaelic speakers. The action plan plots a way forward to address that, so I support the Government's motion. We Conservatives will support it along with the amendment in the name of my friend Ted Brocklebank, obviously, and the amendment by Pauline McNeill.

16:12

Pauline McNeill: It is up to us to get down to the brass tacks of delivering the action plan and focus on what we are actually going to do in the next few years. I have enjoyed the debate, as I enjoyed the previous debates in which we examined why we are committed to Gaelic, but it is time for action that makes a difference.

As I said in my opening speech, it would be helpful to have an analysis of where we have come from since we unanimously passed the Gaelic Language (Scotland) Bill in 2005. I would like to know exactly what progress we have made. I believe that we have made a great deal of progress, but it is always good to get evidence of that.

I whole-heartedly endorse the comments that Jamie McGrigor, Dave Thompson, Jamie Stone and indeed the minister have made. This afternoon, we unite once again to call on the BBC trust not to delay further the decision on transmitting BBC Alba on Freeview. I hope that the message has come across loud and clear, once again, from all parliamentarians who have spoken in the debate. As others have said, BBC Alba makes a critical contribution for families who want to learn and take part in their own language, and there must be no further delay.

Learning and speaking Gaelic is a choice, but it must be a real and practical one. It must be a choice that individuals can make in the knowledge that they can educate their children or take part themselves. Ted Brocklebank was right to point out in the previous debate and today that it should be a choice. I am not a Gael, my family does not speak Gaelic, and we have a distant connection with the culture, but as a Scot I have always felt strongly that Gaelic is part of our Scottish heritage and culture and for that reason I stand up for it.

The Tory amendment refers to the Maori experience, which is worth examining. We should be prepared to consider the experience of any country that has tried to sustain a minority language.

Jamie Stone was right to say that we have missed John Farquhar Munro this afternoon. I think that this is the only Gaelic debate that he has not attended. We send him our best wishes.

I always enjoy listening to the simultaneous interpretation—although I do not speak Gaelic,

something about it makes me feel part of the debate. Alasdair Allan talked passionately about how we grow the number of Gaelic speakers and reminded us that only one in four pupils in the Western Isles speak Gaelic, which is always a surprise. That shows us how far we must go.

Peter Peacock mentioned that we have 60 Gaelic-medium units. That is a respectable number, so we should be proud of what we have achieved. He is right to say that the debate about Gaelic has a vibrancy that did not exist before the 2005 act was passed.

As I have said, I agree whole-heartedly with the minister that the key point about Gaelic is bilingualism, but we need to promote that more. If it is true that learning the Gaelic language in addition to English predisposes people to learning other languages, we must get that message out there, because that is an important aspect of the investment.

Dave Thompson talked about how Gaelic has been treated and about a new generation of Gaels. He made the point that speaking Gaelic provides a competitive advantage: we need to make more of that. He also talked about the fragile recovery.

Rob Gibson referred to misconceptions about Gaelic that must always be challenged. He is right to say that we must always be open-minded about the language.

As ever, Jamie McGrigor made an impassioned speech, about Gaelic choirs. I am sure that the £16 billion that he promised would be well used by Bòrd na Gàidhlig.

There are many reasons to promote the language. It is part of our heritage and of economic sustainability, and it gives our children a competitive advantage. After all, using the language should be a choice.

I have talked about teacher training numbers. Figures from SPICe show that we trained four secondary teachers in 2008-09, one—a biology teacher—in 2009-10 and that we will train five secondary teachers in 2010-11 in Gaelic-medium teaching. Those low numbers are poor and we must do better. We might not be able to have Gaelic-medium teachers in every subject—people from Glasgow Gaelic school tell me that chemistry is quite difficult to teach in Gaelic, at which I hear laughter—but it is important to recognise that the teacher can speak in Gaelic around the main subject and address the main teaching in English.

I, too, think that Gaelic is an important part of our culture. When I attended the traditional music awards, I saw the influence of Gaelic on traditional music. It is important that that is seen as part of

the mix of the wider brilliance of traditional Scottish music.

I genuinely took time out to read the action plan in detail. I have read just about every one of the recommendations, all of which are good. However, I stand by what I said: I would like a more focused and shortened document that sets out what the Scottish Government thinks it can achieve in the shorter term, because we cannot do all that is in the plan, even in the next 10 years. For delivery, it is important to work out for the shorter term and in a more focused way where our best chances are of achieving the growth in speaker numbers. The plan must be achievable and practical—it is too important to get wrong.

16:19

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning (Michael Russell): Tha mi air leth toilichte a bhith a' bruidhinn mu Ghàidhlig a-rithist. Seo cuspair cudromach, agus iomairt cudromach. Tha mi gu pearsanta air a bhith taiceil dhan Ghàidhlig airson ùine mhòr agus ann an iomadh dòigh, ann am foghlam, craoladh agus tron lagh fhèin. Cuideachd, tha mi air a bhith a' sgrìobhadh ann an Gàidhlig, ag obair ann agus ag iomairt às leth a' chàinain. Tha mi air leth toilichte a bhith a' bruidhinn mun adhartas a nì sinn dhan Ghàidhlig. Tha e an-còmhnaidh a' toirt toileachas mòr dhomh a bhith ag obair agus a' cuideachadh na Gàidhlig. Tha teachdaireachd shìmplidh againn an-diugh: feumaidh sinn àireamhan luchd-bruidhinn na Gàidhlig fhàs. Tha mi den bheachd gu bheil dùbhlann mòr romhainn, ach bu chòir dhuinn uile a bhith air an aon ràmh. Sin an obair a tha romhainn.

Following is the simultaneous interpretation:

I am happy to speak Gaelic again. The subject is important, as is the initiative. I have supported Gaelic for a long time and in different ways—in education, broadcasting and legislation. I have written and worked in Gaelic and campaigned on behalf of the language. I am again happy to speak about the progress that we should make on Gaelic. It always gives me great enjoyment to work for and to help Gaelic. Today we have a simple message: we must increase the number of Gaelic speakers. In my view, there is a great challenge ahead of us. The task before us is to be together on that.

The member continued in English.

Today's debate and the motion that is before us are uniquely important. The motion is of paramount importance to four people, none of whom have taken part in the debate. I refer to Arthur Cormack, the convener of Bòrd na Gàidhlig, and the triumvirate that is presently running the bòrd, two members of which—Hugh Dan

MacLennan and Jo MacDonald—are here today. They are the people on whom the burden of turning this focused plan into reality will rest.

I do not want to put too great a burden on their shoulders, but the challenge that they face is nothing less than to ensure the survival of the Gaelic language. The entire chamber and the Government also face that challenge. There must be a sense of urgency about the task that lies in front of us. Peter Peacock addressed the issue well when he pointed to the progress that has been made. If we were to write that story, we would go through all of the things that the member mentioned in his speech. I am grateful for receiving a small mention, even in a slimmer incarnation. However, now the questions that require the most urgent answers are those that Pauline McNeill asked: how well have we done, and how well do we need to do to make the language survive?

There is an urgency to the issue, because the answers to Pauline McNeill's questions are, at best, mixed. We know how many Gaelic-medium education units there are in schools and how many pupils are in those units. We know how many children are at Gaelic-medium pre-school and how many Gaelic speakers there are, although the figure is difficult to assess because we run from census to census. We know how many ulpan students there are. Rightly, much reference has been made to ulpan, as it is a major initiative. However, we know that there are not enough Gaelic speakers and that we are not bringing forward enough people to speak it. We also know that those who speak Gaelic cannot speak it in all circumstances. Alasdair Allan gave great testimony to the fact that, at present, Gaelic does not have the normal reach of a language that allows it to be spoken, to live and to develop in all circumstances.

We face a challenge to which we need to respond. The action plan is the answer to that challenge and requires urgent implementation, which must be based on present resources.

Pauline McNeill: I acknowledge the fact that the minister, too, realises that it is important to know where we have come from. From the information that is available to him, does he have any sense of whether we have halted the decline of Gaelic? It would be useful to know that.

Michael Russell: It is difficult to be certain. The next census may show a continued decline, but at a slower rate, or we may have halted the decline. The way in which we collect statistics on Gaelic speaking is not precise or accurate. We need to get a better hold on what we are doing and to drive that forward. That is not a criticism of our predecessors or ourselves. It is clear that we need to create a new generation of Gaelic speakers. If

we do not do that, there will not be Gaelic speakers in Scotland in a generation or, I suspect, two generations. That is the challenge that the plan addresses.

Some of the answers lie elsewhere. I am more than happy to rub noses with Mr Brocklebank, because the Maori nation and others, such as the Hawaiian nation, have addressed the question and looked into the abyss. Languages die every day, week or month in this world. There is no reason why Gaelic should not be one of those dying or dead languages. We as a nation need to take action to drive forward the language and to make it survive.

Today, we are addressing the future of the language, which is an urgent matter. We have a plan that says that we can do something. It is focused on education at every level: at pre-school level—involving generational transmission, which is extremely important—at school level and at adult level. At each of those levels, if we take action, if the plan is observed and if Bòrd na Gàidhlig has the resources, we can make the language survive, so I share Mr Peacock's optimism. It can be done, but none of us should be in any doubt that it is a challenge.

With the greatest respect to my good friend Jamie McGrigor, it is not a question of whether people can sing in Gaelic choirs. That is wonderful, and there is nothing wrong with it, but the language is at a point at which we have to be honest and straightforward and say that, unless we take certain actions, it might not outlive some of us who are in the chamber today. It is important to be blunt about that. I know that the minister for Gaelic has been very active on this point. When we are blunt about it and place the survival of the language as an issue before the people of Scotland, they respond.

I was interested in Mr Stone's point about Caithness and the Mod. We could wax eloquent about the economic benefit of about £2.5 million that the Mod will bring to Caithness, and about the fact that almost every hotel is already booked. We could wax eloquent about the Caithness dialect and Gaelic, which enrich the three-voiced county, just as Scotland is a three-voiced nation. However, the most important thing that people who go to the Mod in Caithness will have to confront is the issue that we are confronting today, which is the point that the Mod might simply be a series of concerts for a dead language, unless we take action to make the language applicable and living in every single set of circumstances.

Jamie McGrigor: My point about the choirs is that they are still popular, but they should in no way be used as a social engineering tool to meet targets for Gaelic speakers.

Michael Russell: I cannot imagine being able to socially engineer any Gaelic choir that I know.

Nigel Don (North East Scotland) (SNP): Jamie Stone made the point that we need public engagement with the process, and that will depend on where we are in Scotland. I represent North East Scotland. Doric has had an impact on the area in which I live and work, and we need to be careful that we do not try to impose a language, which I accept Gaelic is, where there is already a dialect, which is what I suggest Doric is.

Michael Russell: It is certainly true that we cannot force Gaelic down people's throats, and given the resources that we have to apply to Gaelic, it would be a waste of money to do so. We have to encourage those who want to learn to be part of the new generation of Gaelic speakers. Television and the new media have a role to play in that, and I hope that they will be part of the activity under the action plan.

I will focus on concluding, Presiding Officer, because I know that you want the debate to be finished by half past 4. I will address three points quickly.

Dave Thompson made a point about road signs. Transport Scotland is researching the current signage on the roads and ferries in the west, and further progress needs to be made with that. I am pleased that some trains are now branded with Gaelic; that is very positive.

Peter Peacock raised the issue of specific grants. We aim to use those strategically for new developments, such as the opening of new Gaelic-medium classes, but the Government is not the only agency that funds Gaelic; there is a wider responsibility.

We want to send many signals from this debate today, the strongest of which is that Gaelic will live if we work hard to ensure that the plan is implemented. It is therefore heartening to see unanimity in the Parliament. I know that those in Bòrd na Gàidhlig and other agencies who have responsibility for implementing the plan will take heart from that, but they will also need to see continued political backing at every level if they are to make it happen. They will also need to see the willing buy-in of other agencies.

Finally, I echo what everyone has said about the BBC. It is a great disappointment that, despite constant lobbying, there is still delay. It is vital that Gaelic television is seen on Freeview; there should be no further delay, and there should be no diminution of service for other users. The minister for Gaelic will write to the BBC shortly to tell it about the unanimity in this chamber once again.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: As we have finished early, I suspend this meeting until 20 to 5, when we will have a statement.

16:29

Meeting suspended.

16:40

On resuming—

Volcanic Ash Cloud

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson): Under rule 13.2.2 of standing orders, I have agreed that the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth may make a statement on the volcanic cloud. The statement will take five minutes; 15 minutes will be available for questions.

16:40

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth (John Swinney): Following a volcanic eruption in Iceland, an ash plume entered United Kingdom and Scandinavian airspace overnight. As a result, National Air Traffic Services has closed parts of United Kingdom airspace. Similar decisions are now being taken in other European and Scandinavian countries.

At 04:00, NATS took the decision to cancel all Scottish flights because of safety concerns. That decision will remain in force until further notice. At 05:45, the Scottish resilience duty officer was informed by Transport Scotland that all Scottish flights were cancelled, at which point the Scottish Government resilience unit was activated. The SGoR unit, Transport Scotland and the Met Office, as well as people in health and environmental policy areas, are considering the current situation. Two meetings of the Cabinet sub-committee on SGoR have been held today. They were attended by ministers, representatives of the Met Office and Transport Scotland, and Scottish Government officials from a number of business areas.

The current situation is that UK airspace and the airspace of some other European countries has been closed and all flights cancelled. The Civil Aviation Authority has advised that wind direction is unlikely to change and can give no indication of the likely timescale of the restrictions.

The Scottish Ambulance Service will continue to receive requests for emergency and non-emergency evacuations and transfers between health boards and will seek to identify alternative methods of transport to support non-emergency patients. Local board clinicians and paramedics working in the co-ordination centre will undertake appropriate triage to ensure that only emergency missions are carried out.

The Scottish Ambulance Service carried out one planned mission this morning, which involved the evacuation of a patient from Campbeltown to the Royal Alexandra hospital. Two emergency missions have now taken place—one from Banff and one from Langholm. Air ambulances should

be used with caution, but there is no such thing as a typical day in the Ambulance Service. Emergency missions account for around 10 to 15 per cent of air ambulance activity, which translates to around one or two missions per day.

The Scottish Ambulance Service has advised that guidance from the Civil Aviation Authority advises that no aircraft should fly above 5,000ft and that all aircraft should fly only under visual flight rules. That guidance applies to civilian and Ministry of Defence aircraft. The Ambulance Service, supported by the MOD and the coastguard, will continue to undertake missions when patients are in a life-threatening condition. Assessments of non-life-threatening missions are being deferred to ensure that resources are utilised most effectively.

Helicopter flights to and from North Sea oil rigs have been suspended, but the North Sea sector has to wrestle with that on a regular basis because of weather conditions.

It is not yet clear how much ash has been emitted or to what height it is being elevated. Global and 12km models give a consistent meteorological picture. Forecasts indicate that ash may be present over the UK today and tomorrow. The analysis that we have of emissions from volcanic eruptions is that the ash is not poisonous and has the potential only to irritate those who may suffer from skin or asthmatic conditions.

The other issue that must be addressed is contingency transport arrangements, as there is significant disruption to the air networks. The Government has been in touch with the transport operating companies to encourage the expansion of rail services. Two additional northbound services from London to Scotland have been provided today, which have been arranged in collaboration with train operating companies. As it is likely that the air disruption will continue for some days, plans will be made to expand that capacity. Bus services are also being expanded to an extent to support that work.

All Caledonian MacBrayne services report that capacity is available on services on the west coast routes. Under the current NorthLink arrangements, a vessel will depart Aberdeen as scheduled this evening at 17:00. No sailings are planned for the weekend, but we are in dialogue with NorthLink to arrange services to meet the needs of the community if the situation continues for a prolonged period.

The Government is working to ensure that on the key issues of making contingency arrangements, of trying to draw to a conclusion the air transport disruption and of giving reassurance on public health we continue to promote those

messages to the wider public. I hope to be able to do that in the questions that follow this statement.

The Presiding Officer: As the cabinet secretary indicated, he will now take questions. We will get through as many as possible in the time available.

Andy Kerr (East Kilbride) (Lab): This is clearly a very serious situation, but it is reassuring to hear from the cabinet secretary that the cloud is not considered poisonous, although it will present some dangers to some members of the population, particularly those with chronic conditions such as asthma. For people in business, the disruption is sizeable, but I commend the Government for its response in applying the precautionary principle to ensure that there are no unnecessary dangers to members of the public.

Considering the information that is available to the cabinet secretary and the matters that are being discussed, how will he keep the Scottish public up to date on what will be an on-going and changing situation? How best will he keep the Scottish public and business community informed of the extent of the delays and disruptions that we may see over the next short period? As flight travel is particularly important for the business of Scotland, when does he expect flights to resume—if he can possibly predict that?

John Swinney: I thank Mr Kerr for his comments. The Government's website already contains information similar to that which I have shared with Parliament today. We will provide on the website links to information about the different arrangements and transport alternatives for members of the public. If members of the public are concerned about access to health care services, particularly patients from island communities who may be travelling to the mainland for elective procedures, the dialogue with the health service is clear.

The transport information signage that we have around the country was updated earlier today to indicate the fact that there were flight delays at the airports. We will use that communication system to disseminate information to a wider audience. Clearly we will continue in regular briefings to advise the public about any emerging issues.

Mr Kerr's question about when air travel may resume with some form of normality is difficult to answer. The judgment about the extent of the plume and the implications for safe air travel is governed by international regulation, and those who advise the Government from NATS, the Civil Aviation Authority and the Met Office look at all of those regulations and the evidence that they have. A flight is being undertaken at 7 o'clock tonight to gather some empirical evidence about the nature of the plume to corroborate the analysis that has

been undertaken by modelling, and further decisions will be taken in the light of that. I stress that those decisions are taken by the Civil Aviation Authority and NATS.

Alex Johnstone (North East Scotland) (Con): I thank the cabinet secretary for the statement and will take the opportunity to take him back to an issue that he raised during it—the implications for the North Sea oil and gas industry. He made it clear that all flights have been suspended and that that is not unusual in the North Sea operation, but is there a point at which disruption to the industry may take place? Our concern is the impact on high-speed gas turbine engines such as are used in many aircraft including helicopters. I am sure that the cabinet secretary is aware that such motors are also used widely at St Fergus and on many offshore installations to pressurise the gas system. Is there any prospect of disruption of energy supplies should the dust find its way into the mechanisms that are used to pump gas from the North Sea?

John Swinney: The North Sea oil and gas network is accustomed to being regularly unable to access rigs because of weather conditions and has contingency plans in place. If there were a prolonged period of disruption, there are alternatives for rig supply and servicing.

I do not envisage there being any disruption to energy supplies, but if anything in that respect emerges, the Government will keep Parliament and the public advised.

Jeremy Purvis (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD): It is clear that there will be considerable disruption for passengers and businesses, which will cause difficulty and economic loss. It is quite right that the Government has activated its contingency procedures. Can the cabinet secretary confirm that those procedures are conducted jointly at a UK level, given the fact that the regulatory bodies that make decisions on how the events are affecting travel throughout the UK operate at a UK level? Further, will he confirm that those joint decisions will be communicated equally to those who are travelling to Scotland and those who are travelling from Scotland?

A sulphurous odour is already being reported in my colleague Tavish Scott's constituency in Shetland. What preliminary information is to be provided to the public in the northern isles and in the Highlands, in the first instance, by public health officials in national health service boards? What is the source of information and advice that should be consulted by members of the public, who could well have genuine questions about the issues that have been raised in regard to the plume? Will they receive that advice from the

Scottish Government's website or from the local health boards?

When does the cabinet secretary believe passengers who are booked on hospital flights for Monday and Tuesday will receive advice about disruption to their flights?

Many passengers and businesses who have already been in contact with insurance companies have received mixed responses with regard to how their claim might be treated. What advice is the Scottish Government providing to businesses and people in Scotland on how the insurance claims will be processed?

John Swinney: As I said in my statement, the analysis that we have so far—I stress that I am talking only about the initial analysis, as we are still at an early stage—is that volcanic ash is not poisonous but might cause irritation to those with health conditions such as asthma. The advice to which the member refers will ordinarily be available through the health board network and there might well be information on the Government's website to reinforce some of those points.

Mr Purvis asked about flights for health care services at the start of the week. Judgment will be applied to when information can be reliably given to the public about the resumption of normal flight services. Nobody wants the services to be disrupted for any longer than is absolutely required; we will monitor the situation extremely closely. However, I reiterate what I said to Mr Kerr: the judgment on these questions involves the assessment that is made in relation to the safety of air travel, which is driven by the Civil Aviation Authority. I am sure that we all accept that that is the appropriate way for the matter to be handled.

Myriad questions can be asked about insurance claims and there are myriad details in insurance policies, but the Government would want the insurance industry to act responsibly and understand that this is a set of circumstances that no policy holder of travel insurance could conceivably have envisaged when they planned their travel arrangements.

The Presiding Officer: We come to open questions. At least five members want to ask a question and we have five minutes in which to accommodate them.

Alasdair Allan (Western Isles) (SNP): Can the cabinet secretary provide any more information on what measures might be taken in the islands of Scotland to mitigate disruption to island life? He mentioned the situation with regard to medical emergencies, but can he say more about the economic importance of lifeline flights to island communities?

John Swinney: Clearly we want the difficulties to be minimised and to last for as short a period as possible. A resumption of safe flying will be in everyone's interests. I have commented on the health network and I can comment on the capacity of ferry connections. We are advised by Caledonian MacBrayne that, with the exception of one sailing from Islay, all routes on its network on the west coast have capacity, which we aim to utilise during the next few days.

Charlie Gordon (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab): This unusual situation could be mitigated by increased use of the rail network. In the central belt, for example, it is possible to serve users of Prestwick, Glasgow international and Edinburgh airports by rail, to a substantial degree. That will be substantially more the case in future if Glasgow crossrail is completed. Is the Scottish Government considering the use of the rail network and the lessons for the future?

John Swinney: As the First Minister said today, ordinarily—although not in all circumstances—about 20,000 places are available for cross-border rail travel. That is the existing capacity. As I said, two additional services from London to Scotland will operate this afternoon, to meet additional requirements. Some services that would normally terminate in Newcastle will be extended to Edinburgh and other services are starting in Edinburgh, so that passengers can be moved south.

Earlier today, Mr Tavish Scott asked about Network Rail's engineering works. There is nothing in Network Rail's engineering works programme that will cause disruption to cross-border travel over the weekend.

John Scott (Ayr) (Con): As the cabinet secretary is aware, millions of tonnes of volcanic dust have been introduced into the atmosphere by the eruption. The dust will eventually be brought to earth by gravity or, more quickly—and more likely—by precipitation. The jet stream is currently carrying much of the ash further east, but I am concerned about the health issues in relation to irritation to humans and livestock and in relation to food production.

If sulphuric ash lands in Scotland, what is likely to be the effect—beyond irritation—on livestock that consume contaminated grass? What would be the effect of an uptake by crops of contamination? Would such uptake be likely to affect Scottish, UK and European food production?

John Swinney: I have just come from an emergency discussion on the phone—it took place a few moments ago. We had an update from the livestock sector; there are no anticipated concerns at this stage. The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and the Environment is in touch with the

livestock and agriculture sectors to ensure that the issues are kept under active review. Further reassurance will be given as the information becomes clearer.

Margo MacDonald (Lothians) (Ind): No one wants to make a drama out of a crisis, but the event has huge implications for the economic wellbeing of the UK. This has happened at an unfortunate time in the political cycle. Will the cabinet secretary undertake to form a small group with his equivalents in the Treasury, in Wales and in Northern Ireland, to keep an overview on what is happening to the economy?

Jeremy Purvis mentioned insurance. It might be wise of the Governments of this country to make an approach to the insurance companies.

John Swinney: Mr Purvis made a point that I did not answer: we have had discussions with the Department for Transport on relevant issues in relation to the UK Government, and that co-operation will continue.

Margo MacDonald is absolutely correct to say that there is the potential for significant economic disruption—there has been such disruption already today. We will actively co-operate to resolve the issues as quickly as possible. It would be a tad difficult to form a committee at this stage in the political cycle. Nevertheless, I assure Margo MacDonald that the dialogue that goes on between the Administrations of the United Kingdom on such issues is productive and constructive.

The Presiding Officer: I am afraid that I must close the session. I apologise to the three members whom I was unable to call.

Points of Order

Dr Richard Simpson (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I seek your guidance on the MSP code of conduct—specifically rule 7.2.5, which states:

“Members must treat other MSPs ... with courtesy and respect.”

Can you confirm whether that courtesy and respect should be extended to the members of the United Kingdom Parliament? I ask the question in view of the behaviour last week, in Dollar, of the Minister for Skills and Lifelong Learning, Keith Brown. I believe that Mr Brown’s behaviour was in breach of the code of conduct—

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson): I am sorry, but I must interrupt you, Dr Simpson. You were kind enough to give me the wording of your point of order, which I very much appreciate, but I think at this stage that rule 7.2.5 of the code of conduct for members of the Scottish Parliament applies only to how members of the Scottish Parliament treat each other—it does not cover behaviour towards United Kingdom ministers. I caution you against continuing with your point of order.

Dr Simpson: Thank you.

Bill Wilson (West of Scotland) (SNP): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. Is it appropriate for a member to raise unfounded allegations about other members of the Parliament?

The Presiding Officer: That is not a point of order for me and I think that I have already covered the point.

Decision Time

17:01

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson):

There are nine questions to be put as a result of today's business.

The first question is, that amendment S3M-6140.1, in the name of John Swinney, which seeks to amend motion S3M-6140, in the name of Jeremy Purvis, on supporting business, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Adam, Brian (Aberdeen North) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Western Isles) (SNP)
 Brown, Keith (Ochil) (SNP)
 Campbell, Aileen (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Livingston) (SNP)
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perth) (SNP)
 Don, Nigel (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP)
 Fabiani, Linda (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee West) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gibson, Rob (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Christopher (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Lothians) (SNP)
 Ingram, Adam (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacAskill, Kenny (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Marwick, Tricia (Central Fife) (SNP)
 Mather, Jim (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McKee, Ian (Lothians) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 McLaughlin, Anne (Glasgow) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Morgan, Alasdair (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Neil, Alex (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Paterson, Gil (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee East) (SNP)
 Russell, Michael (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Salmond, Alex (Gordon) (SNP)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Lothians) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Govan) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (North Tayside) (SNP)
 Thompson, Dave (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Watt, Maureen (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 Welsh, Andrew (Angus) (SNP)
 White, Sandra (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Wilson, Bill (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Wilson, John (Central Scotland) (SNP)

Against

Aitken, Bill (Glasgow) (Con)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Baker, Richard (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Edinburgh Central) (Lab)
 Brankin, Rhona (Midlothian) (Lab)
 Brocklebank, Ted (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Brown, Gavin (Lothians) (Con)
 Brown, Robert (Glasgow) (LD)
 Brownlee, Derek (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Butler, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab)
 Carlaw, Jackson (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Chisholm, Malcolm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab)
 Craigie, Cathie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab)
 Eadie, Helen (Dunfermline East) (Lab)
 Ferguson, Patricia (Glasgow Maryhill) (Lab)
 Finnie, Ross (West of Scotland) (LD)
 Foulkes, George (Lothians) (Lab)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Godman, Trish (West Renfrewshire) (Lab)
 Goldie, Annabel (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Gordon, Charlie (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab)
 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)
 Johnstone, Alex (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kelly, James (Glasgow Rutherglen) (Lab)
 Kerr, Andy (East Kilbride) (Lab)
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab)
 Lamont, John (Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Livingstone, Marilyn (Kirkcaldy) (Lab)
 Martin, Paul (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab)
 McAveety, Mr Frank (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab)
 McConnell, Jack (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)
 McGregor, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 McInnes, Alison (North East Scotland) (LD)
 McLetchie, David (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Con)
 McMahon, Michael (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab)
 McNeil, Duncan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab)
 McNulty, Des (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab)
 Milne, Nanette (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Mulligan, Mary (Linlithgow) (Lab)
 Murray, Elaine (Dumfries) (Lab)
 O'Donnell, Hugh (Central Scotland) (LD)
 Park, John (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Peacock, Peter (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Peattie, Cathy (Falkirk East) (Lab)
 Pringle, Mike (Edinburgh South) (LD)
 Purvis, Jeremy (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD)
 Rumbles, Mike (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD)
 Scanlon, Mary (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)
 Scott, Tavish (Shetland) (LD)
 Simpson, Dr Richard (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Smith, Elaine (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab)
 Smith, Elizabeth (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Smith, Iain (North East Fife) (LD)
 Smith, Margaret (Edinburgh West) (LD)
 Stephen, Nicol (Aberdeen South) (LD)
 Stone, Jamie (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)

Tolson, Jim (Dunfermline West) (LD)
 Whitefield, Karen (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab)
 Whitton, David (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Lab)

Abstentions

MacDonald, Margo (Lothians) (Ind)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 44, Against 68, Abstentions 1.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The question is, that amendment S3M-6140.2, in the name of Derek Brownlee, which seeks to amend motion S3M-6140, in the name of Jeremy Purvis, on supporting business, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Aitken, Bill (Glasgow) (Con)
 Brocklebank, Ted (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Brown, Gavin (Lothians) (Con)
 Brownlee, Derek (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Goldie, Annabel (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Johnstone, Alex (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Lamont, John (Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 McGrigor, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 McLetchie, David (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Con)
 Milne, Nanette (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Scanlon, Mary (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)
 Smith, Elizabeth (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)

Against

Adam, Brian (Aberdeen North) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Western Isles) (SNP)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Baker, Richard (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Edinburgh Central) (Lab)
 Brankin, Rhona (Midlothian) (Lab)
 Brown, Keith (Ochil) (SNP)
 Brown, Robert (Glasgow) (LD)
 Butler, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab)
 Campbell, Aileen (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Chisholm, Malcolm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Livingston) (SNP)
 Craigie, Cathie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab)
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perth) (SNP)
 Don, Nigel (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Eadie, Helen (Dunfermline East) (Lab)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP)
 Fabiani, Linda (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Ferguson, Patricia (Glasgow Maryhill) (Lab)
 Finnie, Ross (West of Scotland) (LD)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee West) (SNP)
 Foulkes, George (Lothians) (Lab)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gibson, Rob (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)

Godman, Trish (West Renfrewshire) (Lab)
 Gordon, Charlie (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab)
 Grahame, Christine (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Gray, Iain (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Harper, Robin (Lothians) (Green)
 Harvie, Christopher (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Henry, Hugh (Paisley South) (Lab)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Hume, Jim (South of Scotland) (LD)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Lothians) (SNP)
 Ingram, Adam (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Kelly, James (Glasgow Rutherglen) (Lab)
 Kerr, Andy (East Kilbride) (Lab)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab)
 Livingstone, Marilyn (Kirkcaldy) (Lab)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacAskill, Kenny (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Martin, Paul (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab)
 Marwick, Tricia (Central Fife) (SNP)
 Mather, Jim (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAveety, Mr Frank (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab)
 McConnell, Jack (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)
 McInnes, Alison (North East Scotland) (LD)
 McKee, Ian (Lothians) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 McLaughlin, Anne (Glasgow) (SNP)
 McMahon, Michael (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab)
 McMillan, Stuart (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 McNeil, Duncan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab)
 McNulty, Des (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab)
 Morgan, Alasdair (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Mulligan, Mary (Linlithgow) (Lab)
 Murray, Elaine (Dumfries) (Lab)
 Neil, Alex (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 O'Donnell, Hugh (Central Scotland) (LD)
 Park, John (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Paterson, Gil (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Peacock, Peter (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Peattie, Cathy (Falkirk East) (Lab)
 Pringle, Mike (Edinburgh South) (LD)
 Purvis, Jeremy (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee East) (SNP)
 Rumbles, Mike (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD)
 Russell, Michael (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Salmond, Alex (Gordon) (SNP)
 Scott, Tavish (Shetland) (LD)
 Simpson, Dr Richard (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Smith, Elaine (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab)
 Smith, Iain (North East Fife) (LD)
 Smith, Margaret (Edinburgh West) (LD)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Lothians) (SNP)
 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)
 Whitefield, Karen (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab)
 Whitton, David (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Lab)
 Wilson, Bill (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Wilson, John (Central Scotland) (SNP)

Abstentions

MacDonald, Margo (Lothians) (Ind)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 16, Against 96, Abstentions 1.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The question is, that motion S3M-6140, in the name of Jeremy Purvis, on supporting business, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Baker, Richard (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Edinburgh Central) (Lab)
 Brankin, Rhona (Midlothian) (Lab)
 Brown, Robert (Glasgow) (LD)
 Butler, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab)
 Chisholm, Malcolm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab)
 Craigie, Cathie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab)
 Eadie, Helen (Dunfermline East) (Lab)
 Ferguson, Patricia (Glasgow Maryhill) (Lab)
 Finnie, Ross (West of Scotland) (LD)
 Foulkes, George (Lothians) (Lab)
 Godman, Trish (West Renfrewshire) (Lab)
 Gordon, Charlie (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Gray, Iain (East Lothian) (Lab)
 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)
 Livingstone, Marilyn (Kirkcaldy) (Lab)
 Martin, Paul (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab)
 McAveety, Mr Frank (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab)
 McConnell, Jack (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)
 McInnes, Alison (North East Scotland) (LD)
 McMahon, Michael (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab)
 McNeil, Duncan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab)
 McNulty, Des (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab)
 Mulligan, Mary (Linlithgow) (Lab)
 Murray, Elaine (Dumfries) (Lab)
 O'Donnell, Hugh (Central Scotland) (LD)
 Park, John (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Peacock, Peter (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Peattie, Cathy (Falkirk East) (Lab)
 Pringle, Mike (Edinburgh South) (LD)
 Purvis, Jeremy (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD)
 Rumbles, Mike (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD)
 Scott, Tavish (Shetland) (LD)
 Simpson, Dr Richard (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Smith, Elaine (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab)

Smith, Iain (North East Fife) (LD)
 Smith, Margaret (Edinburgh West) (LD)
 Stephen, Nicol (Aberdeen South) (LD)
 Stone, Jamie (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)
 Tolson, Jim (Dunfermline West) (LD)
 Whitefield, Karen (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab)
 Whitton, David (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Lab)

Against

Adam, Brian (Aberdeen North) (SNP)
 Aitken, Bill (Glasgow) (Con)
 Allan, Alasdair (Western Isles) (SNP)
 Brocklebank, Ted (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Brown, Gavin (Lothians) (Con)
 Brown, Keith (Ochil) (SNP)
 Brownlee, Derek (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Campbell, Aileen (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Carlaw, Jackson (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Livingston) (SNP)
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perth) (SNP)
 Don, Nigel (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP)
 Fabiani, Linda (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee West) (SNP)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gibson, Rob (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Goldie, Annabel (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Grahame, Christine (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Harper, Robin (Lothians) (Green)
 Harvie, Christopher (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Lothians) (SNP)
 Ingram, Adam (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Johnstone, Alex (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Lamont, John (Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacAskill, Kenny (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Marwick, Tricia (Central Fife) (SNP)
 Mather, Jim (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McGregor, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 McKee, Ian (Lothians) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 McLaughlin, Anne (Glasgow) (SNP)
 McLetchie, David (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Con)
 McMillan, Stuart (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Milne, Nanette (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)
 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)

Abstentions

MacDonald, Margo (Lothians) (Ind)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 50, Against 62, Abstentions 1.

Motion disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The question is, that amendment S3M-6142.2, in the name of Stewart Stevenson, which seeks to amend motion S3M-6142, in the name of Liam McArthur, on fuel prices, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Adam, Brian (Aberdeen North) (SNP)
 Aitken, Bill (Glasgow) (Con)
 Allan, Alasdair (Western Isles) (SNP)
 Brocklebank, Ted (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Brown, Gavin (Lothians) (Con)
 Brown, Keith (Ochil) (SNP)
 Brownlee, Derek (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Campbell, Aileen (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Carlaw, Jackson (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Livingston) (SNP)
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perth) (SNP)
 Don, Nigel (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP)
 Fabiani, Linda (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee West) (SNP)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gibson, Rob (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Goldie, Annabel (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Grahame, Christine (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Christopher (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Lothians) (SNP)
 Ingram, Adam (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Johnstone, Alex (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Lamont, John (Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacAskill, Kenny (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Marwick, Tricia (Central Fife) (SNP)
 Mather, Jim (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McGrigor, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 McKee, Ian (Lothians) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 McLaughlin, Anne (Glasgow) (SNP)
 McLetchie, David (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Con)
 McMillan, Stuart (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Milne, Nanette (North East Scotland) (Con)

Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Morgan, Alasdair (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Neil, Alex (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Paterson, Gil (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee East) (SNP)
 Russell, Michael (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Salmond, Alex (Gordon) (SNP)
 Scanlon, Mary (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)
 Smith, Elizabeth (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Lothians) (SNP)
 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

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Baker, Richard (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Edinburgh Central) (Lab)
 Brankin, Rhona (Midlothian) (Lab)
 Butler, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab)
 Chisholm, Malcolm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab)
 Craigie, Cathie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab)
 Eadie, Helen (Dunfermline East) (Lab)
 Ferguson, Patricia (Glasgow Maryhill) (Lab)
 Foulkes, George (Lothians) (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)
 Livingstone, Marilyn (Kirkcaldy) (Lab)
 Martin, Paul (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab)
 McAveety, Mr Frank (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab)
 McConnell, Jack (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)
 McMahon, Michael (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab)
 McNeil, Duncan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab)
 McNulty, Des (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab)
 Mulligan, Mary (Linlithgow) (Lab)
 Murray, Elaine (Dumfries) (Lab)
 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)
 Whitefield, Karen (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab)
 Whitton, David (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Lab)

Abstentions

Brown, Robert (Glasgow) (LD)
 Finnie, Ross (West of Scotland) (LD)
 Hume, Jim (South of Scotland) (LD)
 MacDonald, Margo (Lothians) (Ind)
 McInnes, Alison (North East Scotland) (LD)
 O'Donnell, Hugh (Central Scotland) (LD)
 Pringle, Mike (Edinburgh South) (LD)

Purvis, Jeremy (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD)
 Rumbles, Mike (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD)
 Scott, Tavish (Shetland) (LD)
 Smith, Iain (North East Fife) (LD)
 Smith, Margaret (Edinburgh West) (LD)
 Stephen, Nicol (Aberdeen South) (LD)
 Stone, Jamie (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)
 Tolson, Jim (Dunfermline West) (LD)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 60, Against 38, Abstentions 15.

Amendment agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The question is, that amendment S3M-6142.1, in the name of Alex Johnstone, which seeks to amend motion S3M-6142, in the name of Liam McArthur, on fuel prices, as amended, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Aitken, Bill (Glasgow) (Con)
 Brocklebank, Ted (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Brown, Gavin (Lothians) (Con)
 Brownlee, Derek (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Goldie, Annabel (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Johnstone, Alex (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Lamont, John (Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 McGrigor, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 McLetchie, David (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Con)
 Milne, Nanette (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Scanlon, Mary (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)
 Smith, Elizabeth (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)

Against

Adam, Brian (Aberdeen North) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Western Isles) (SNP)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Baker, Richard (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Edinburgh Central) (Lab)
 Brankin, Rhona (Midlothian) (Lab)
 Brown, Keith (Ochil) (SNP)
 Brown, Robert (Glasgow) (LD)
 Butler, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab)
 Campbell, Aileen (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Chisholm, Malcolm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Livingston) (SNP)
 Craigie, Cathie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab)
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perth) (SNP)
 Don, Nigel (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Eadie, Helen (Dunfermline East) (Lab)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP)
 Fabiani, Linda (Central Scotland) (SNP)

Ferguson, Patricia (Glasgow Maryhill) (Lab)
 Finnie, Ross (West of Scotland) (LD)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee West) (SNP)
 Foulkes, George (Lothians) (Lab)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gibson, Rob (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Godman, Trish (West Renfrewshire) (Lab)
 Gordon, Charlie (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab)
 Grahame, Christine (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Gray, Iain (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Harper, Robin (Lothians) (Green)
 Harvie, Christopher (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Henry, Hugh (Paisley South) (Lab)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Hume, Jim (South of Scotland) (LD)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Lothians) (SNP)
 Ingram, Adam (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Kelly, James (Glasgow Rutherglen) (Lab)
 Kerr, Andy (East Kilbride) (Lab)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab)
 Livingstone, Marilyn (Kirkcaldy) (Lab)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacAskill, Kenny (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Martin, Paul (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab)
 Marwick, Tricia (Central Fife) (SNP)
 Mather, Jim (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAveety, Mr Frank (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab)
 McConnell, Jack (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)
 McInnes, Alison (North East Scotland) (LD)
 McKee, Ian (Lothians) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 McLaughlin, Anne (Glasgow) (SNP)
 McMahon, Michael (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab)
 McMillan, Stuart (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 McNeil, Duncan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab)
 McNulty, Des (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab)
 Morgan, Alasdair (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Mulligan, Mary (Linlithgow) (Lab)
 Murray, Elaine (Dumfries) (Lab)
 Neil, Alex (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 O'Donnell, Hugh (Central Scotland) (LD)
 Park, John (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Paterson, Gil (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Peacock, Peter (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Peattie, Cathy (Falkirk East) (Lab)
 Pringle, Mike (Edinburgh South) (LD)
 Purvis, Jeremy (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee East) (SNP)
 Rumbles, Mike (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD)
 Russell, Michael (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Salmond, Alex (Gordon) (SNP)
 Scott, Tavish (Shetland) (LD)
 Simpson, Dr Richard (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Smith, Elaine (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab)
 Smith, Iain (North East Fife) (LD)
 Smith, Margaret (Edinburgh West) (LD)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Lothians) (SNP)
 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)
 Whitefield, Karen (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab)
 Whitton, David (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Lab)
 Wilson, Bill (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Wilson, John (Central Scotland) (SNP)

Abstentions

MacDonald, Margo (Lothians) (Ind)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 16, Against 96, Abstentions 1.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The question is, that motion S3M-6142, in the name of Liam McArthur, on fuel prices, as amended, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Adam, Brian (Aberdeen North) (SNP)
 Aitken, Bill (Glasgow) (Con)
 Allan, Alasdair (Western Isles) (SNP)
 Brocklebank, Ted (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Brown, Gavin (Lothians) (Con)
 Brown, Keith (Ochil) (SNP)
 Brown, Robert (Glasgow) (LD)
 Brownlee, Derek (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Campbell, Aileen (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Carlaw, Jackson (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Livingston) (SNP)
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perth) (SNP)
 Don, Nigel (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP)
 Fabiani, Linda (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Finnie, Ross (West of Scotland) (LD)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee West) (SNP)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gibson, Rob (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Goldie, Annabel (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Grahame, Christine (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Christopher (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Hume, Jim (South of Scotland) (LD)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Lothians) (SNP)
 Ingram, Adam (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Johnstone, Alex (North East Scotland) (Con)
 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)

McInnes, Alison (North East Scotland) (LD)
 McKee, Ian (Lothians) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 McLaughlin, Anne (Glasgow) (SNP)
 McLetchie, David (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Con)
 McMillan, Stuart (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Milne, Nanette (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Morgan, Alasdair (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Neil, Alex (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 O'Donnell, Hugh (Central Scotland) (LD)
 Paterson, Gil (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Pringle, Mike (Edinburgh South) (LD)
 Purvis, Jeremy (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee East) (SNP)
 Rumbles, Mike (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD)
 Russell, Michael (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Salmond, Alex (Gordon) (SNP)
 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

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Baker, Richard (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Edinburgh Central) (Lab)
 Brankin, Rhona (Midlothian) (Lab)
 Butler, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab)
 Chisholm, Malcolm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab)
 Craigie, Cathie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab)
 Eadie, Helen (Dunfermline East) (Lab)
 Ferguson, Patricia (Glasgow Maryhill) (Lab)
 Foulkes, George (Lothians) (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)
 Livingstone, Marilyn (Kirkcaldy) (Lab)
 Martin, Paul (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab)
 McAveety, Mr Frank (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab)
 McConnell, Jack (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)
 McMahon, Michael (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab)
 McNeil, Duncan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab)

McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab)
 McNulty, Des (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab)
 Mulligan, Mary (Linlithgow) (Lab)
 Murray, Elaine (Dumfries) (Lab)
 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)
 Whitefield, Karen (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab)
 Whitton, David (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Lab)

Abstentions

MacDonald, Margo (Lothians) (Ind)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 73, Against 38, Abstentions 1.

Motion, as amended, agreed to,

That the Parliament notes the AA report of 8 April 2010 that indicates that the average price of petrol in the United Kingdom has reached an all-time high and is likely to rise still further; recognises the high premium over the national average paid for fuel at filling stations in remote rural and, particularly, island communities; regrets the damaging financial and social impact that this has on individuals and businesses in these areas; further regrets the lack of progress that has been made on efforts to find a mechanism to reduce the price of fuel in specified remote rural and island areas of Scotland, and calls on the Scottish Government to hold urgent discussions with the UK Government and the European Commission to construct a mechanism, including consideration of a fair fuel regulator, under the EU energy products directive or otherwise, to reduce the fuel price differential between remote rural and island communities and urban areas of the UK.

The Presiding Officer: The question is, that amendment S3M-6143.2, in the name of Pauline McNeill, which seeks to amend motion S3M-6143, in the name of Fiona Hyslop, on an action plan for Gaelic, be agreed to.

Amendment agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The question is, that amendment S3M-6143.1, in the name of Ted Brocklebank, which seeks to amend motion S3M-6143, in the name of Fiona Hyslop, on an action plan for Gaelic, as amended, be agreed to.

Amendment agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The final question is, that motion S3M-6143, in the name of Fiona Hyslop, as amended, on an action plan for Gaelic, as amended, be agreed to.

Motion, as amended, agreed to,

That the Parliament recognises that Gaelic is more than a language and, as such, it strengthens and enriches many aspects of Scotland's social, cultural and economic life; also recognises that the current condition of Gaelic needs urgent attention; welcomes the programme of action provided by Bòrd na Gàidhlig, which is designed to achieve the outcome of increasing the number of Gaelic speakers and bring renewed attention to the important place that Gaelic holds in Scotland; calls on the Scottish Government to keep the funding for Bòrd na Gàidhlig under review in

light of the Gaelic language targets, and recommends that the Parliament and Bòrd na Gàidhlig pay close attention to the New Zealand Government's successful initiatives to increase the numbers of Maori language speakers.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes decision time. I was overtaken by the amount of consensus at the end.

Reformation (450th Anniversary)

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Alasdair Morgan): The final item of business is a members' business debate on motion S3M-5759, in the name of Nigel Don, on the 450th anniversary of the reformation. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament welcomes the World Reformed Fellowship conference in Edinburgh; notes that 2010 marks the 450th anniversary of the reformation in Scotland; considers that the reformers' passion for opening up the scriptures to all Scots led to a drive towards improved literacy and that within one hundred years schools were established in parishes across Scotland; further considers that the reformers' emphasis on free thinking and an individual's relationship with God arguably helped pave the way for the enquiry, investigation and freedom of conscience associated with the Scottish enlightenment, and therefore pays tribute to the men and women of the reformation for their contribution in laying the foundations of modern Scottish society.

17:09

Nigel Don (North East Scotland) (SNP): The third general assembly of the World Reformed Fellowship is taking place this week at the University of Edinburgh. This year's meeting in Scotland is of particular significance as it marks not only the 450th anniversary of the reformation in Scotland but the 100th anniversary of the world missionary conference, which was held here in 1910. Both those events will have been reflected on by some of the 200 or so delegates from across the world who have been attending to discuss the theme of this year's meeting—continuing the reformation: a missional theology for the 21st century global church. I see that some delegates are here this evening and I welcome them to the gallery—I trust that they have had a successful conference.

I imagine that others will recount the events of the reformation crisis in Scotland of 1559-60. I have no doubt that there will be a discussion of the consequences of those reforms. I would like to address the issues that preceded those days. My theme will be the availability of the Bible in accessible translations.

By way of general introduction, I note that the process of the reformation must have involved two distinct steps: first, the questioning of papal authority to interpret the Bible and, secondly, the rediscovery of the significance of personal faith within it.

The books of the Bible were written in many hands over a significant period, but it is clear that almost all the New Testament must have been written in the first century. It appears that St

Athanasius, the bishop of Alexandria, listed the now accepted 27 books of the New Testament in 367. Not long after, in the early fifth century, Jerome produced the Vulgate Bible in Latin, which was to be the standard edition for a millennium. During that period of the dark ages, the faithful were dependent for teaching on their priests, who might or might not understand Latin. It will come as little surprise to any student of human nature that the church of that period, often uncorrected by reference to scripture, increasingly resembled a monopolistic corporation well interested in storing up treasure on earth.

We can perhaps chart the decline in papal authority from 1305, when a French pope decided to base himself away from Rome, in Avignon. His successors stayed in France for the next 70 years or so, with the result that, by 1378, there were three rival popes—and it took a while to pension them off and restore some order.

Political machination was endemic. In 1492, Rodrigo Borgia quite simply bought himself the papacy, no doubt accompanied by the occasional threat. Never inclined to forgive or forget, his family seem to have preferred to poison their enemies, and quite possibly, themselves. He was followed by Pope Julius II, who seems to have modelled himself on his namesake, Caesar, waging war on anyone who opposed his ambitions for an Italian empire. His successor Leo X had 76 relatively peaceful years in which to rebuild the church's balance sheet and St Peter's through the sale of indulgences. Whatever one's background, it was not difficult at the time to see that there was scope for reform of one sort or another.

One other significant event must be noted. Around 1450, Johannes Gutenberg developed the printing press. His most famous production was of course the Gutenberg Bible—as it turns out, one of the Paris versions of the Vulgate.

Against that backdrop, I will briefly call the roll of those who spread the biblical text across Europe to such great effect. By 1384, John Wyclif had translated the Vulgate Bible into English, not only preparing these isles for things to come but influencing, in particular, eastern Europe, where the cause of questioning papal authority was taken up by Jan Hus at Prague university. I note in passing that Hus's martyrdom in 1415 sparked one of many episodes of serious bloodshed, as the questioning of papal authority over biblical interpretation stood opposed to established political power.

In 1440, one Lorenzo Valla, generally recognised as a very fine scholar but a pretty disagreeable kind of man, demonstrated that the donation of Constantine, under which the Roman church claimed much political power, was an eighth-century forgery, rather than a fourth-century

original. If that could not be trusted, what else might be false? His greater contribution, however, was his work on annotating the New Testament, which exposed many errors in the Vulgate and was to be crucial when, in 1516, Erasmus produced corrected Greek and Latin translations. Matthew, chapter 4, verse 17 no longer read “Do penance” and instead read “Be penitent”—the more modern New International Version now reads simply “Repent”.

In 1526, William Tyndale completed a fine English New Testament translation from the Greek. By 1534, Martin Luther—of whom I have no doubt we will hear much in the next few minutes—had translated both the Old Testament and the New Testament into vernacular German. His legacy also includes comprehensive reformed liturgy and hymns that reinforce the biblical truth.

To that list of translators we must surely add Jean Cauvin—or John Calvin, as we would prefer to have him in the English-speaking world. His great literary achievement was not a translation but the “Institutes of the Christian Religion”, which was first produced in Latin in 1536 and in French in 1541, with final versions—appropriately—in 1559 and 1560. It was translated into English the following year, by which time—as I am sure we will hear—Scotland had entered a new era.

17:16

Michael McMahon (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab): I congratulate Nigel Don on bringing to the chamber a debate on the 450th anniversary of the reformation, and ask to be excused if I appear to be more of a poison in the punch bowl than a concelebrant of what some observers have described as a visionary—indeed, utopian—blueprint for what religion in Scotland should be.

Although it is difficult to argue that the motivation behind what John Knox and his colleagues drew up in 1560 was the establishment of a better society, I have to say that any judgment on that outcome is a very subjective matter. Everyone has a different perspective on the impact of the reformation; I am told that my great-great-grandfather died at the battle of the Boyne—an event that is one of the more contentious aspects of the history and development of Protestantism in the British isles. Apparently, my ancestor died because he was camping in the field next door and was killed when he went over to ask them to keep the noise down.

I often make light of such things as the battle of the Boyne and its on-going celebrations, because it is often the best way to address the consequences that often accompany the divisions

that persist in the wake of the reformation and its birth pangs.

I would like the anniversary of the reformation to be recognised because it provides us all with an opportunity to look anew at what it delivered, where it has taken us and what type of Scotland it has shaped, especially for those of us like me whose history and background are not within the Protestant faith but are clearly affected by it.

I believe that it is vital that the Catholic church in Scotland should officially take part in celebrations to mark the 450th anniversary of the reformation. Its involvement would help to address any concerns that may exist—rightly or wrongly—that celebrating the reformation would result in Protestant triumphalism.

Whatever view one takes of faith, it is incontrovertible that the reformation is one of the most singularly important events in the history of Scotland. It undoubtedly altered the nation's Christian heritage, and created the structures that shaped our schools, universities, democratic institutions and laws. Catholic countries have all those institutions too, and they are also shaped by the predominant church in those countries.

However, I often sense that the Church of Scotland is almost apologetic about the impact that it has had, while the church of Rome glorifies in its impact. That should not be the case, but one wonders why the Scottish Government has not done more to promote the positive side of the recognition of Scotland's Christian traditions. Perhaps it is in thrall to the secularist tradition that now permeates society.

All Christians, and all Scotland, should recognise the reformation in order to appreciate Scotland's Christian heritage. I would welcome the minister telling us tonight that the Scottish Government will throw off its self-imposed shackles and take forward a much more positive agenda to help the Church of Scotland to celebrate its birthday.

17:19

Dave Thompson (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): I congratulate Nigel Don on securing the debate, on a subject of great importance to Scotland. It is particularly important for the Church of Scotland. I suppose that, before I go any further, I must declare an interest as a member of that church.

It is indeed 450 years since the reformation, an exciting, dangerous and transforming experience, which shaped the history and future of Scotland. The Church of Scotland will celebrate the anniversary and the life of our church today at this

year's general assembly. I look forward to its also being commemorated in the Parliament.

The Roman Catholic Church, which is perhaps most entitled to take offence at any reformation commemoration or celebration, as it marked the end of its complete, total influence over Scotland, has already indicated, I believe, that it welcomes such events—and Michael McMahon's remarks are also to be welcomed.

In a recent article in the *West Highland Free Press*, Professor Donald MacLeod summed up the reformation well, I thought. He said that its emphasis on the Bible and on the congregational singing of psalms gave a new impulse to literacy, which pointed us towards a national system of education that brought basic schooling to the most remote parts of the Highlands. He also said that it sowed the seeds of democracy in Scotland. Professor MacLeod went on to say:

"But what matters most is that for 400 years the Reformation gave Scotland its soul; and even if that soul had its own neuroses it was, nevertheless, what we were, and it's made us what we are. It gave us our view of the world, our moral code and our work ethic. It canonised frugality, industry, honesty and liberality and it gave us a nation of engineers, shipbuilders, doctors, nurses and missionaries who adorned Scottishness all over the world."

Being a member of the Church of Scotland is of course a great privilege, but it is even more important for me that I have a direct and personal relationship with God. It is also important for me that I can embrace all fellow Christians, irrespective of denomination, as brothers in Christ.

I have respect for all religions and beliefs, and I firmly believe in the right to freedom of religious worship, which is a fundamental building-block of our modern Scottish democracy. All people are entitled to their beliefs, and they should be free to believe in God or not believe in God. None of us should ever try to stifle the views of others just because we do not agree with their viewpoint or with what they believe. None of us should ever try to force our religious views on others.

In Scotland in the past, there has been an intolerance between religions, whereas there now appears to be a growing intolerance in our society of religion as a whole. It is concerning that Christians and other people of faith are facing increasingly hostile attacks on their right to express their faith, and I worry about where we are going with that.

Tolerance must always be the watchword of a civilised society, but I fear that the intolerant are gaining ground, and that we are heading down a slippery slope. People already face the wrath of the law for displaying their faith and for innocently offering to pray for others. I hope that sense will prevail, and that we do not face a future where

people of faith will be restrained from expressing their views. Time will tell.

I am sure, however, that my concerns are misplaced and that, on the 450th anniversary of the reformation, we can all learn lessons and not repeat the mistakes of the past.

17:23

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I commend Nigel Don for his well-worded motion, and I congratulate him on securing the debate. Over the past year, I have expressed my regret that the Scottish Government was not intending to mark this important anniversary in a suitable fashion. Like my separated brother, Michael McMahon, I hope that the minister will give us some good news in that regard in his winding-up speech.

Presiding Officer, if you look down at the cobbles under the bell tower of the chapel of St Salvator at the University of St Andrews, you will see that they spell the initials P H. In 1528, Patrick Hamilton, a student at St Andrews, became Scotland's first Protestant martyr, and those stones mark the spot where Hamilton was burned at the stake after having confessed to charges of heresy. With a Bible in his hand he went to the pyre but, due to the dampness of the wood, it took him an horrific six hours to die.

The example of Hamilton, a good young man whose only fault was to put forward ideas contrary to those of the clergy, was acknowledged by the people in the crowd. One observer famously commented:

"the reek of Maister Patrik Hammyltoun has infected as many as it blew upon."

Nevertheless, it would be 30 more years before the reformation, one of the most significant events in Scottish history, the 450th anniversary of which we celebrate this evening.

Although the ideas of Luther and Calvin had been present throughout Europe and in Scotland for some years, it was not until John Knox's return to Scotland in 1559 that widespread opposition to the Roman Catholic Church began. In May 1559, Knox travelled to Perth, where in the parish church of St John's, which is still standing, he gave his first of many inflammatory speeches against idolatry and roused what he called the "rascal multitude" to riot. They destroyed the charter house and two of the town's friaries in two days. The sole remnant of Catholicism that remained was the banner of St Bartholomew, which happened to be at the mender's.

At the beginning of the 16th century, Scotland was a Catholic nation, but by the end of the century, we would be a Presbyterian country.

When the reformation Parliament met in August 1560, it abolished the authority of the Pope and forbade the practice of mass. By the end of 1561, of the thousand or so parishes in Scotland, a quarter had either a Protestant minister or a reader. By 1574, almost all the parishes had a Protestant ministry and, in 1592, the golden act would establish the Presbyterian kirk with its three-tier court system of kirk session, presbyteries and general assembly, which is still in place today.

The reformation changed more than just the nature of religion—it was a social and political revolution, too. The reformation was the beginning of a new era in education, highlighting the need for a school in every parish. Before the reformation, there were approximately 100 parish schools in Scotland. Between 1560 and 1633, almost 800 schools were established, with almost half of them being in or nearby a parish. What had been outlined in Knox's books of discipline continued to be used even in the 19th century as a point of reference for Government and the church when developing their respective education policies.

It was not solely the education of children that was the imperative, but the continued education of the literate commonality. The ideas of Luther—that every individual's conscience was capable of determining God's will—inspired the reformation movement, which demanded that scriptures should be available to the commonality in their language, so that people might read and debate the nature of their religion, rather than have it dictated to them from the pulpit. Although progress was slow, by the 1630s, the Bible was widely available at a reasonable price and in a language that the commonality could understand.

The reformation radically changed the nation's religious practices. It signalled a change in the way in which children were educated and the poor were provided for and it was the beginning of a new era in foreign relationships. However, the reformation was also a revolution of thought. The ideas of the reformation—of freedom of thought and of one's relationship with God and one's monarch—would be felt long after 1560, through to the covenanters and to the philosophers, scientists and writers of the enlightenment and beyond. Ultimately, the reformation would shape the Scottish national identity and encourage the Scots to become a people of which Patrick Hamilton would have been proud.

17:28

Alasdair Allan (Western Isles) (SNP): I congratulate Nigel Don on securing what is an important debate. Perhaps the best place to start is by saying what, in my view, the debate is not about. I need to do that because Scots have traditionally learned abnormally little about their

history at school. A friend of mine recently questioned with me the wisdom of the Parliament marking something as bloody and divisive as the Scottish reformation. It became clear that he was thinking not of the Scottish reformation, but of the English one and of events in Ireland some 100 years later. It would be utterly wrong of us to overlook the fact that, as has been mentioned, people lost their lives in the Scottish reformation, too, and there were martyrs on both sides. However, that does not make it wrong for us to remember or to consider the motivations for the reform at the time.

I am sure that other members will talk about the profound effect of the reformation on Scotland's spiritual life, its democratic instincts and its extraordinary literacy rate—which, as others have mentioned, was at 75 per cent by 1750—and the impact that all that had on a generation of thinkers from Robert Burns to David Hume. However, it is worth saying how completely different the reformation was in Scotland from the story in Ireland or England. In Scotland, one religious group was not planted in the midst of another by Government policy and nor did the monarch take over the church. In Scotland, arguably, the church was taken over by the laity and then the church took over the state, for good or ill.

We should certainly not mark all that in the bombastic way that I suspect we did on the 350th or 300th anniversaries, but we should pause and think. If we do not mark the reformation for what it was, others will mark it for what they would like it to have been. If I may, let me reassure Mr McMahon, who made a very considered speech, that as far as I am concerned marking the reformation is certainly not the same as celebrating the battle of the Boyne.

In few parts of Scotland do people hold such profound yet varied Christian beliefs as in the Western Isles, which I represent. In Barra, Vatersay, Eriskay and South Uist, it would be fair to say that, compared with in the rest of Scotland, the reformation hardly happened at all. Benbecula is mixed in religious tradition, whereas North Uist, Harris and Lewis underwent not one but, arguably, several reformations.

Recently, I visited a constituent in Benbecula whom I know to be a devout Catholic, as evinced by a portrait of the Pope on his kitchen wall. On the same wall, there is also a Rangers calendar. That may surprise colleagues from some other parts of Scotland, but happy religious co-existence of that kind is not, or should not be, such a big deal—and not just in the Western Isles. I come originally from the Borders. It never even crossed my mind that there was anything unusual about my grandfather being both a kirk elder and a lifelong Celtic fan. In fact, such things—or their

equivalents—can, and regularly do, happen across Europe.

I mention all that because it is only possible to explain to an outsider why people from different religious traditions on the whole get along very well in the Western Isles if they are first led through 450 years of religious history. It will probably be possible to sort out situations in Scotland in which people do not get on only if we likewise untangle misconceptions on both sides about the past 450 years.

With that in mind, it is right that the Parliament marks this important anniversary. In conclusion, in the words of Edwin Morgan, we should

“Deplore what is to be deplored,
and then find out the rest”,

because the rest, it should be said, is worth finding out about.

17:32

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): I congratulate Nigel Don on lodging the excellent motion before us today. The debate is in the best traditions of the Scottish Parliament.

Murdo Fraser talked about Patrick Hamilton’s death in 1528. I have stood and looked at those cobbles, which it is taboo for undergraduates—and, indeed, anyone in St Andrews—to stand on. In addition to what Murdo Fraser told us about Patrick Hamilton’s slow and terrible death, which lasted more than six hours from noon till 6 o’clock at night, legend has it that the face of an angel appeared in the stonework above the initials P H. If one looks up, there is what looks very like an angel’s face—of course, it is erosion due to the wind and rain. His last words were:

“Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.”

That remains for me a haunting image. He was the first martyr of the reformation.

The stories and history that accompany the reformation are what I find absolutely fascinating. Alasdair Allan has touched on the fact that some parts of his constituency went unreformed. Probably, that was because the reformers did not reach South Uist, Eriskay and so on. It is also true to say that, historically, the reason why the Catholic church is as strong as it is in Beaully and Kiltarlity in Inverness-shire is because the Fraser family—the Lords Lovat—were, if not Roman Catholic, at least given to dalliances with Rome. They protected their tenants, and that is why the faith is still there.

Similarly, one Charles Peter Kennedy—a former leader of my party—is a Roman Catholic, whose family have been Roman Catholics for a very long

time. A group of Catholic families were untouched by the reformation because the Camerons of Locheil, who were and remain today of high Anglican persuasion, tended to protect them. I guess that, if Locheil had to raise his sword in another 1745-type rebellion, Charles Kennedy would probably be under some obligation to follow him out with his own sword.

Going further back, I know that the patron saint of my home town of Tain is St Duthus, or St Duthac, who lived from 1000 to 1065. His relics and his memory led to Tain becoming an incredibly important place of pilgrimage, particularly during the reign of James IV, who came to the town for almost 20 years in succession to pay homage at the shrine of St Duthac. The royal accounts, which record what was spent on a piper, on wine and on all the rest of it, are quite fascinating.

St Duthac’s relics mysteriously disappeared in about 1560, at the time of the reformation. It is thought that the Earls of Ross took them into protection at Balnagown castle, but they have never been seen again. Mohamed Al Fayed—who lives there now—might have them secreted somewhere; if he does, we should know. However, the relics were not very effective. James IV wore Duthac’s shirt at the battle of Flodden, but it did not save him. The shirt was recovered from his corpse.

It is interesting to note the difference between the English and Scottish reformations. It is said that Henry VIII was born and died a Catholic. The reformation that he instigated in England concerned his argument with the papacy about his marriages and was about the dissolution of monasteries and about their money being taken to him and to noble families. He clung fiercely to the main tenets of the Catholic faith as it then was throughout his life. We can compare that and the more evolutionary process that took place in England with the dramatic events in Scotland, which culminated in 1560, as the motion notes.

Alasdair Allan asked why the reformation is not taught more, as it should be. The history is fascinating and is crucial to why Scotland is what it is today. Why did Jenny Geddes throw her stool? Why did Archbishop Laud try to reimpose on Scotland episcopacy, prayer rails and all that? The history is genuinely interesting and I am at a complete loss to know why our children are not taught more of it. They get the clearances, the industrial revolution, the 1715 and 1745 rebellions and much else besides—T C Smout teaches much in his books—but there is a curious silence about the reformation. That fascinating history should be taught—it made us what we are today.

17:36

Christopher Harvie (Mid Scotland and Fife)

(SNP): I, too, thank Nigel Don for lodging this timely motion. The 450th anniversary of the reformation falls this summer. It was a great religious change from Catholicism to Calvinism and a diplomatic change away from the auld alliance with France and towards an entente with England that broke down only in the wars of the three kingdoms between 1639 and 1653.

The anniversary is one of three events that we should celebrate—the others are Catholic emancipation, which took place just over 180 years ago in 1829, and the tercentenary in 2011 of the birth of David Hume, who is the greatest philosopher to write in English. He was not exactly an ornament to the kirk, but he did not take faith lightly.

Today, only a tenth of Scots are active churchgoers, which is probably average for western Europe and is nearly double the rate in England, yet dogmatism is increasing in our materialistic world. There are even dogmatic atheists and celebrity atheists these days. Church establishments of all sorts are plagued with behavioural and doctrinal conflicts and by revelations of bullying, crime or closeness to terrorism.

However, a kirk that is rooted in consent, which one celebrates in our reformation—which was carried out in the Scots Parliament and not by the fiat of a ruler—can greet the visit of Pope Benedict XVI between 16 and 19 September with dignity and friendship. The commemoration initiative must not pass to sectarians or the profound theologians of the terraces. We could use the occasion to assess the relationship between faith, ideas and government and the ways in which the diplomacy of a semi-independent nation might advance that.

Scotland's reformation—of which see my friend Harry Reid's excellent account—was bloodless in comparison with that in England and most of Europe. It placed self-government and theology, rather than greed or political power, at the centre of the church. That was the aim of the earlier conciliar movement in Rome. It emphasised covenants—federal Calvinism—and co-existence by agreement. As Nigel Don said, it started the move to create an authorised version of the Bible in English. In 1601, the authorised version was settled on in my constituency, in Burntisland, and its influence affected all religious traditions.

The reformation had an enriching if ironic European input. For two centuries, my Scottish university—Edinburgh—in the Calvinist tradition has exchanged students with the evangelical Lutheran Stift in Tübingen. After the reformation,

colleges of Scots Catholics were established in Douai, Salamanca, Regensburg and Rome.

Scotland's Episcopalian tradition, which is separate from Anglicanism and has a democratic culture that is derived in part from the Calvinists' supervisors—their name for bishops—was crucial in creating the American Episcopal Church in 1786, as the Anglican clergy were not allowed to lay hands, in the theological sense, on their American brethren.

We should also think of what Scots Calvinists have done for other world religions. The first great translation of the Chinese classics, including the teachings of Confucius, was produced by a Huntly man, James Legge, in the late 19th century. Another north-eastern clergyman, Robertson Smith, wrote the classic "Lectures on the Religion of the Semites", on Mohammedanism.

Our commemoration ought to be not just a religious commemoration but a commemoration of what religion has done for reason in Scotland and of its power to bind people together. I would like to think that some time in late June we could have a session, under the patronage of the Presiding Officer, at which MSPs could be joined by religious and civic leaders and for which a programme, narrative and declaratory, could be devised. Interestingly, when I mentioned the idea to Cardinal O'Brien, I received an enthusiastic letter in support of it. With that sort of open agenda, we could do something to enhance the value of the intellectual nature of theological argument. I remember hearing from a man in telecoms that the industry needed not more engineers to tell it how great systems work but people such as theologians, because they provide an amalgam of logical strength and awareness of the role of the human animal in such systems.

As we approach the 450th anniversary of the reformation and a papal visit, let us think again of the values that underlay federal Calvinism: the values of respect, concord and covenant.

17:41

The Minister for Community Safety (Fergus Ewing):

I thank Nigel Don for proposing this interesting debate, which has allowed us to reflect on the impact that the Scottish reformation has had, at home and abroad, from the perspective of its 450th anniversary. I welcome to the chamber the moderator of the Church of Scotland, the Right Rev Bill Hewitt; the moderator designate, the Rev John Christie; and the principal clerk to the general assembly, the Very Rev Dr Finlay Macdonald, who is standing down this year after 14 years of dedicated service. We are grateful that they have come to witness this evening's debate.

The debate has been extremely interesting, with diverse contributions—intellectual, learned, informative, diverting, colourful and sometimes, to me at least, unexpected, not to say far from predictable. It has illustrated the benefits that some members have touched upon and which we celebrate perhaps as a result of the reformation 450 years ago. As Dave Thompson argued, there is no doubt that the reformation has helped to shape the character of Scotland and its people to this day. It is not overstating the case to say that the roots of educational change came from an appreciation of democracy and literacy that developed from the Scottish reformation—a theme on which both Dr Alasdair Allan and Murdo Fraser touched.

Education is at the heart of so much that we all wish to achieve as a Parliament and as a nation. Through education, we develop our understanding of the world and our understanding of and passion for culture and the arts, are inspired to undertake scientific research and engineering, and are enabled to imbue our young people with the social responsibility that prepares them for life. Most important—and at its most fundamental—education teaches our young people how to read. Reading opens the mind to new ideas, philosophies and beliefs, and allows us to broaden our minds, to understand the minds of others and to see ourselves as others see us. In that way, we develop our appreciation of difference and individuality, and learn better to value the world that we share. At our core as humans, we are, or should be, thinking beings, and those who led the Scottish reformation seemed to understand that implicitly.

Nigel Don chose to focus his remarks on a colourful history of the Bible. The reformers wanted everyone to be able to read so that they could read the Bible, and they recognised that basic education was required to allow people to do that, which was why they set themselves the goal of establishing a school in every parish in the land. A century and a half after the reformation, most parishes, particularly in lowland Scotland, had a school, and the establishment of parish schools led to general respect for learning in Scottish society and an appreciation of the value of learning that, although obvious now, would not have been obvious then.

Although, in the beginning, attending school was neither compulsory nor free of charge, that basic education system eventually led to Scottish society being more comfortable with matters of the mind. Although the kirk initially desired that everyone should have an education so that they could read the Bible, once someone could read they could read anything. It is worth noting that, from the early 1700s, Scotland had the highest levels of literacy in the world.

However, I argue that the reformation's biggest impact on Scottish society was in laying the foundation stones on which the enlightenment was built almost a century later. Through that, Scotland made a huge contribution to developing the ideas that formed the modern world. Christopher Harvie referred to next year's celebration of the tercentenary of David Hume.

With the passing of the Education Act 1696 by the old Scots Parliament—1696 is a busy year for legal scholars, because a huge variety of bills was passed then—Scotland became the first nation on earth to provide universal public education. While Scots invented things as varied and valuable as penicillin, the fax machine and even the bicycle, universal education is the greatest of them all.

We in modern Scotland can truly be said to be children of the enlightenment. We welcome all cultures and faiths, and celebrate the contribution that all faiths and philosophical beliefs make to our society. Scotland is indeed a diverse and inclusive society that is built on equality and justice. We aspire to those values. I welcome Michael McMahon's remarks about the willing participation of the Catholic church in this year's events to mark the reformation.

I would like to relieve members of their suspense on the issue that Michael McMahon and Murdo Fraser—Scotland's answer to the Chuckle brothers in this debate—invited me to talk about, which is the Scottish Government's position on marking the reformation. We are pleased to be able to do so by working with the kirk to hold an event to mark and celebrate the reformation and to remember, as Alasdair Allan mentioned, the benefits that it brought. We are proud and pleased to do so, and details will be announced in due course. I am pleased to say that other Christian denominations will be involved, and, we hope, other faiths, which will reflect the diverse and inclusive Scotland to which we all aspire.

I conclude by taking this opportunity to wish the kirk well as it looks forward to its 450th meeting this year. I am looking forward to attending this year's general assembly. I am aware that throughout the year the Church of Scotland will hold some impressive events to mark the anniversary of the reformation. For example, there will be a special commemorative session of the general assembly, which will make good use of the reformation psalms and include readings from the records of the Parliament of Scotland of August 1560 and the records of the first general assembly, which was held in 1560. That event will allow an opportunity to debate the influence of the reformation on Scottish life and culture. There will also be lectures by Dr Douglas Galbraith on the reformation and worship and by Professor Ian Hazlett on the Scots confession. Both those events will provide

opportunities to consider the lasting impact of the Scottish reformation.

Meeting closed at 17:51.

I pass on my best wishes to all the other churches and denominations—whether in the Western Isles or elsewhere in Scotland—that look to the 1560 reformation as their origin and will, no doubt, hold their own events to commemorate this important anniversary.

If anyone is in any doubt about the impact that the reformation and enlightenment have had on the world, we need look no further for external corroboration than the words of Sir Winston Churchill, who said:

“Of all the small nations of this earth, perhaps only the ancient Greeks surpass the Scots in their contribution to mankind.”

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