



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Official Report

MEETING OF THE PARLIAMENT

Thursday 18 November 2010

Session 3

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Scottish Parliament

Thursday 18 November 2010

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

Care Home Costs

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson):

Good morning. The first item of business this morning is a Conservative party debate on motion S3M-7422, in the name of Mary Scanlon, on care home costs.

09:15

Mary Scanlon (Highlands and Islands) (Con):

There is no denying the changing demographics of Scotland. In the past 10 years, the number of people aged 75 and over has increased by 14 per cent and the number of people aged 60 to 74 has increased by 12 per cent. It is projected that, in the period up to 2031, the number of people aged over 75 will increase by about 80 per cent. The number of those aged 65 to 74 is projected to increase by 40 per cent in the same period. It is estimated that, in the next six years, the number of older people who need care and support will increase by 25 per cent. I hope that today's debate will help us to plan services, as part of the Government's reshaping care for older people process, to ensure that value for money is coupled with continuing high standards of care for our older people.

In March this year, there were 943 care homes for the elderly, providing 39,150 places, with more than 5,000 empty places. The independent and voluntary sector provides about 85 per cent of care home provision in Scotland, with the remaining 15 per cent in the council sector. All care homes must achieve equal quality standards, as set and regulated by the Scottish Commission for the Regulation of Care. Undoubtedly, there are excellent, good and not-so-good care standards in all sectors. We look to the care commission to take the necessary action against any home that is not performing to agreed standards of quality care; ultimately, that can lead to closure of a home.

Against that background, and in the current financial climate, questions need to be asked about the amount that councils pay for a placement in their homes, which is £800 a week on average, although the amount that is paid to the independent and voluntary sector for the same placement and standard of residential care is £480. I appreciate that local authorities pay higher wages and have significant pension provision for all employees, but some independent providers pay rates that are similar to those paid by local

authorities. As an MSP who represents the Highlands and Islands, I am also acutely aware that in remote and rural areas, councils provide care in smaller homes, which are more costly to operate due to the absence of economies of scale and which would not be viable in the independent sector. However, although the cost of providing care is a matter for each local authority, section 22 of the National Assistance Act 1948 requires local authorities to set fees in their homes at the full cost of providing care. Therefore, if the cost of providing care is around £800 per person, surely that would be the cost for all sectors to provide the same level of care to the same standards.

That takes me to my next point: how do independent care homes stay in business when they are paid almost half the amount per placement that is paid for the same level of care for a person in a council home? The answer for many is that care home providers enter into contractual agreements with self-funding clients. The self-funding person in standard residential care tends to pay a considerably higher rate than the £480 that is paid for a council-funded placement. That means that there is significant variation in payments for the same level and quality of care.

I am not proposing that the fees that the independent sector receives should increase from £480 a week to the council level of £800 a week. However, the Government's review provides us with an opportunity to look afresh at maintaining high-quality care, appropriate placements and value for money, especially given that £4.5 billion of the Parliament's budget is spent on care for older people.

As I mentioned in a speech last week, independent and voluntary sector care homes could be used to prevent hospital admissions. That would ensure that patients receive the rehabilitation that they need to retain independence and go home, instead of waiting for six weeks in a hospital bed and becoming a statistic for delayed discharge. It would also help to utilise the 5,000-bed spare capacity to which I referred. The fee to care homes in the independent and voluntary sector is £480 and £550 per week, compared with costs of £800 a week for council residential care, around £1,400 a week for general hospital provision and upwards of £2,800 a week for acute hospital care. In these difficult financial times, that is a significant factor.

Care homes could also provide significant amounts of day care and respite care, as well as home care. That would enable elderly people to become familiar with the care home and its staff and lead to a more joined-up service, enabling people to have temporary stays in care homes before returning to their home.

More support could be given to unpaid carers, and our care home sector could be utilised more for respite care. Greater volunteering and community support could be developed by better integration. Telecare and telehealth developments have real potential to enhance quality of life and to create even more efficiencies, as well as better-quality care. The situation could be improved by extending telehealth links to care homes and using technology to provide direct connections to clinics and hospitals, which would help to prevent unnecessary out-patient and in-patient visits. I understand that West Lothian is working on a project of that type.

The independent care sector employs more than 100,000 staff, with an annual turnover of more than £1 billion. It is only right that we utilise that capacity and knowledge to enhance care for the elderly. Although the coalition Government at Westminster is considering a range of ideas through its Commission on the Funding of Care and Support, including a voluntary insurance scheme, it is up to the Parliament to ensure that older people get the care that they need and deserve, at the time when they need it, and in the place of their choice.

The motion in my name asks the Government to review

“existing models of funding and provision”

as part of the reshaping care for older people process,

“to ensure that value for money is coupled with continuing high standards of care.”

I hope that all members will support it.

I move,

That the Parliament recognises the changing demographics of Scotland and the increasing financial pressures on services providing care for older people; notes that independent and local authority-run care homes in Scotland are regulated in accordance with standards set by the Care Commission; further notes the wide disparities that exist between different service providers with regard to fees and costs and the disparities in the amounts paid by or on behalf of service users for the same service, and accordingly calls on the Scottish Government to ensure that its public engagement process, Reshaping Care for Older People, reviews existing models of funding and provision to ensure that value for money is coupled with continuing high standards of care.

09:23

The Minister for Public Health and Sport (Shona Robison): I welcome the opportunity to debate care services for older people and the important programme of change on which we have embarked.

The current systems for delivering social care will not support increasing numbers of frail older

people. That is why, as outlined in the spending plans and draft Scottish budget for 2011-12 that we announced yesterday, we are making available £70 million to be used in partnership across health and social care to focus on delivering improvements in older people's services.

Residential care is just one of a complicated labyrinth of interrelated tough problems that we must tackle. We will tackle it, but we cannot do so in a disjointed, short-term way.

To help us to understand the complex issues that we are discussing today, I will touch on a few of the facts about care home provision for older people in Scotland. At the end of March this year, there were 943 care homes, providing 39,150 places. Almost 14 per cent of residents were in local authority homes, 75 per cent were in private homes and 11 per cent were in voluntary sector homes. However, the picture is changing. The number of residents in local authority homes has fallen by almost 15 per cent in the past 10 years, to just over 4,000. At the same time, more than 30 per cent of care home residents are self-funders, because they have capital in excess of £22,750. That number is increasing year on year.

Self-funders pay their own fees, over and above any entitlement to free personal and nursing care. Publicly funded residents have capital of less than £14,000, and the local authority pays for their care over and above the contribution that the individual makes from their pension, benefits and other income. It is clear from the statistics that local authorities depend to a very large extent on the independent sector for the provision of residential care to the older people in their areas—and I refer back to what I said about 14 per cent of residents being in local authority homes.

In response to long-running concerns about the stability of the care home sector and the quality of the care that is provided, the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities developed the national care home contract, in negotiation with Scottish Care, the body that represents the independent care home sector. The national contract was introduced in 2007-08, and the rationale for developing it was to standardise the terms, conditions and fees for publicly funded clients and to incentivise improvements in quality, through the grading system.

All the published research on care home costs shows that there is a wide variation in the weekly costs of residential care, regardless of who owns and manages the home. That is true for all sectors, drawing on comparisons within and across sectors. In spite of those wide variations, COSLA and the independent care home sector have successfully negotiated a standard national contract rate for publicly funded residents over the past few years, which has removed the need for

costly and time-consuming negotiations between each of the 32 local authorities and the care home providers in their areas. Importantly, that has been linked to driving up quality.

I know at first hand from the recent Scottish Care conference, which Mary Scanlon attended, just how strongly the independent sector feels about the apparent inequity in the charges for local authority care home provision, compared with the amount that local authorities pay for a publicly funded care home place under the national care home contract. As with most things, the situation is not quite as black and white as it first appears. Given the clear interdependence of local authorities and independent providers, an adversarial approach to the single issue of the cost of a care home place is not helpful.

Faced with the dual pressures of diminishing public sector funding and increasing numbers of frail older people, we need to work together to develop new models of providing and paying for care. That has to mean much better joint commissioning, because only when partners in health sit down with their counterparts in councils and bring in expertise from the independent sector will we start to see real innovation, both in business models and in service development.

The £70 million change fund, which I have referred to already, is a significant milestone on the road to securing high-quality, person-centred care for the future. Our long-term proposals will be set out in our reshaping delivery plan, which is to be published at the end of this year.

We will not miss the opportunity to review current arrangements on funding and charging for care to ensure the development of long-term, fair and sustainable new models of care. In doing that, it would be wrong headed to focus on only one care sector and one care setting. Reshaping care requires us to take a far more fundamental look at the way in which care services are delivered across the board. That is what we have set out to do with the reshaping care process. A number of public sessions have been held across Scotland, and they have been very positive in bringing forward suggestions.

I am totally committed to keeping up the momentum on this important change agenda, and I hope that that finds support from across the Parliament.

I move amendment S3M-7422.1, to leave out from first “notes” to end and insert:

“recognises the need to shift the balance of care; notes that independent and local authority-run care homes in Scotland are regulated by the Care Commission in accordance with standards set by ministers, and further recognises the opportunity through the Reshaping Care programme public engagement process to examine existing models of provision and funding across all care

sectors and care settings to ensure that value for money is coupled with continuing high standards of care.”

09:28

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): I, too, welcome the opportunity to debate the provision of care. Mary Scanlon has focused her motion on care home costs, and I will deal with that issue first. I share her view, however, that the debate should be wider and should consider the rich and diverse continuum of care that is provided in communities throughout Scotland.

Mary Scanlon’s central point—and indeed that of the minister—is that the cost of public sector care homes can be much higher than the cost of provision by the private sector. All else being equal in terms of quality, why is there a disparity? I know from experience that Argyll and Bute Council, which covers part of my constituency, can charge up to three times as much for its care home provision than the private sector does, so the question is a valid one.

The situation is not quite as simple as many people would have us believe, however. As Mary Scanlon rightly suggested, there will be variations in staff terms and conditions, in whether pensions are provided for staff and in how much an employer will contribute to those pensions. Providing for older people in remote and rural areas can be less attractive for the private sector. Whatever is the case, I have no doubt that local authorities will be considering how they secure best value for their limited resources. I welcome the development of the national contract to ensure that a partnership approach to the care of the elderly is taken between local authorities and the private sector.

I am disappointed that the motion does not mention the voluntary sector, with its rich history of providing social care, including in care homes. I accept, however, that Mary Scanlon covered that in her speech.

That brings me to the point about the diversity of care provision. There are a variety of care providers, including local authorities, voluntary organisations and the private sector, and they are engaged in delivering a variety of different levels of care. Increasingly, providers are developing models of care that sustain people in their own communities and in their own homes. That is what older people say they want, and that is borne out by the trend that is emerging across local authorities of an increasing emphasis on home care.

We face the challenge of changing demographics and I understand that, 20 years from now, there will be about 75 per cent more 75-

year-olds. As I look around the chamber, I see that to be true.

Members: Oh!

Karen Gillon (Clydesdale) (Lab): On the Tory benches, anyway.

Jackie Baillie: It is indeed the case on the Tory benches, Karen Gillon says.

We need to rethink how we do things. Doing more of the same in the face of those statistics will just not do. We should not view older people as a burden, who require to be cared for. The overwhelming majority of people—more than 80 per cent—do not come into contact with the care system at all.

We should be encouraging a healthy and active old age. Let us value the lunch club or the older persons' club that is delivered in the local village hall. Let us value the yoga class taken by an 87-year-old pensioner—and in case members think I mean a participant, I am referring to my constituent Lily Kennedy, who leads a yoga class of people half her age.

Care at home is one possibility—it is a matter of ensuring that the right level of support is provided by home helps and specialist staff. There is also sheltered housing and very sheltered housing, much of which is provided by specialist housing associations such as Bield. Sheltered housing enables older people to maintain their independence, balanced with the appropriate support.

We must value and support our carers—the army of relatives and friends who provide care for loved ones every day. They need access to respite care, not just in emergency situations—although some councils are restricting eligibility to that. We should encourage diversity in provision and we must not lose sight of the value of prevention. That means funding the lunch club, the yoga class and the befriending project, because we know that they sustain people in their communities.

To meet the challenge of the future we need the creation of a national care service, bringing together primary health and social care in one organisation, with one budget and one focus—on the person being cared for. In too many areas of Scotland, agencies are not working together. They are guarding their own budgets or, worse, cutting budgets in the expectation that somebody else will pick up the work, and it is the person who needs the care who suffers.

It is often said that a society is judged by how well it treats its older and vulnerable people. Let us ensure that our society is well judged.

09:33

Ross Finnie (West of Scotland) (LD): The sight of Jackie Baillie holding a mirror in front of her while she tried to gauge the average age of the members in the chamber is not an experiment that I shall repeat.

The debate is timely, and I am glad that it has been secured. In reality, it is difficult to disagree with much that has been said so far in relation to both Mary Scanlon's motion and the Scottish National Party amendment. The Parliament has placed an enormous emphasis on how we care for the elderly, and our policy in Scotland of free personal care for the elderly has not just been welcomed; it has had a radical effect on how care provision has been sustained. It has called on us all to examine critically exactly what goes on in the care sector. However, having put a spotlight on the sector in that way, we are finding out that, even 10 years on, there continues to be a huge disparity in costs. Mary Scanlon rightly pointed that out and, as Jackie Baillie said, there are not just differences in costs between local authorities and other providers; there are disparities within each group.

Each and every establishment is regulated by the Scottish Commission for the Regulation of Care, but there is quite a wide disparity in the range of services and standards of care in them, which is slightly worrying. That is not to say that they fall below the required standards—I am not accusing the care commission of being negligent—but a wide disparity exists. Of course, we are dealing with individual elderly people who require, demand and, rightly, should receive the highest quality of care.

I have some sympathy with the point that Jackie Baillie made at the conclusion of her speech. She spoke about integration of the model. We do not yet know what the outcome of the reshaping care for older people process will be, but there is a debate and we will not necessarily agree with the solution that is proposed. However, we understand that we must put the microscope on how care services are provided for all our elderly people.

There is a difficult interface. The intended purpose of free personal care was to ensure that more people would be able to stay in their home, but a burgeoning number are seeking places in care homes. There is also the unusual interface with the statistics, which show that the number of hospital admissions is still slightly increasing. We have to understand better the relationship between those three areas before we can be clear that our policy of providing adequately for the care of our older people is being properly directed.

That points to the issue that Jackie Baillie raised. There are concerns about care for the

elderly in homes, there is care for the elderly in their own homes and people are still seeking hospital admission. Therefore, an holistic approach is needed to the question of how to shape care in communities. The Liberal Democrats are absolutely clear that, notwithstanding issues relating to the appropriate level and standard of care and the appropriate cost measurement, the structural issue of how we shape care in our communities is behind dealing with individuals' needs. That means that we should try not to take a silo approach to care for elderly people; rather, we should look at the whole picture of care in the community. I am not sure whether that requires a new, separate organisation, which the Labour Party appears to posit—I look forward with interest to hearing more detail on its policy; instinctively, I feel that the creation of a separate institution is not necessarily attractive—but we must readdress how our elderly people and everyone else in our community are to be properly and financially dealt with. The efficacy of the approach that has been taken is quite worrying. Some statistics that Mary Scanlon has brought to our attention are not easily explicable. We are all aware of the different rates and costs, at different times, for no apparent difference in provision. Such an approach is not good value for the public purse.

We have no difficulty in supporting the general principle that we must consider reshaping care for older people and we hope that the Government will publish the results of the reshaping care for older people process fairly shortly so that we can have an intelligent debate about future provision and can consider the structure. The Government can be assured of Liberal Democrat support if that leads to far greater integration of services and far greater understanding of and openness and transparency about how we evaluate standards of care and how that relates to a more uniform level of costs. That would be much appreciated.

09:39

Sandra White (Glasgow) (SNP): As Mary Scanlon said in her opening speech, there are 943 care homes for older people in Scotland. Some 174 of them are run by local authorities, 637 are private and 132 are run by the voluntary sector.

Issues relating to care homes, their standards and costs have been raised with me as convener of the cross-party group on older people, age and ageing on numerous occasions. I attended the care conference that the minister mentioned with Mary Scanlon and Richard Simpson. Many issues pertaining to the care of older people were raised at it, and it was very good. I think that 450 providers attended it and they were very aware of the changing demographics, the need to consider

different care models and the need to work in partnership with all providers, such as local authorities and health boards. I was impressed by the range of ideas that came forward. Some, such as on telecare, which Mary Scanlon mentioned, were innovative, and some were based on plain common sense. People knew exactly what they were talking about and wanted to provide good care for older people.

The issue of the disparity of costs rumbled about the hall while we sat in it. I am sure that Richard Simpson and Mary Scanlon will remember that the issue came alive during the question-and-answer session. At the time, I said that it was the elephant in the room that people did not particularly want to address. Mary Scanlon's motion concentrates on the issue, and she spoke about it in her speech. I want to pick up on it.

We were asked questions at the conference and I offered to consider the comparisons between local authority and private provider costs. I have looked at some of the figures, and will refer to them. There is not so much disparity in the average gross weekly charges in care homes for older people figures as some people might think. The Aberdeen City Council charge has been £440 on average per week, whereas the independent figure in the area was £477. The Glasgow City Council charge has been £453 on average per week, whereas the independent figure in the area was £448. The City of Edinburgh Council charge has been £523, whereas the private provider figure in the area was £567. I have more figures and could go on, but I simply want to give members a taster. Things are not as clear-cut as they seem to be. We need to consider the figures. When I said that I would consider the comparisons, I was told that the Local Government and Communities Committee had taken evidence on the subject. Therefore, there is evidence. I hope that we can look at that evidence and that it can provide a basis for seeking further evidence.

It has been said that there is a lot more to the matter than simply providing care homes for older people. Homes can be used for things such as respite. As our population gets older and in need of care, it is our duty to provide it. I emphasise that we must work together to do that. Health boards, local authorities and others need to work in partnership. I am sorry that things have broken down in Glasgow City Council, but I hope that we can get back to working together. People cannot be admitted to hospital simply because there is no suitable accommodation for them with their family, in the community or in a care home. That is an example; I will not give a name. Admitting such people to hospital is not good for the person or the family, and it is certainly not good for the health service. Older people cannot be left to languish in

a hospital because a local authority has quotas, as Glasgow City Council has, and they cannot get into a care home or even a house. I know that Jackie Baillie had such a situation in her area. We cannot have such situations, which is why we must ensure that we work together. Doing so is good for the older person, the community and, obviously, the health board. It is obvious that, if someone is languishing in a hospital, they could pick up an infectious disease; indeed, things could be worse for them.

I think that Jackie Baillie mentioned that this is not just about care homes; it is about other things that they can do. We must consider different models. Care homes can be used for respite and other things.

The debate has been consensual and very good. We have explored various avenues. If we explore such avenues and get together with providers, we can look for better care for older people and better care in care homes in future.

09:43

Helen Eadie (Dunfermline East) (Lab):

Ensuring that there is good-quality provision of care for all of us in the future unites all members because we have a vested interest in it. We need to ensure that there is such provision for our constituents who require it at the moment, in particular.

Many of us had a variety of experiences in previous incarnations before we became MSPs. I was a full-time trade union organiser and negotiator for the GMB. I worked with care workers, private schools and many trade unionists in local authorities and the independent sector.

One the great things that we had at that time but do not have any more was the fair wages resolution. We also had the Employment Protection Act 1975, which established the Central Arbitration Committee. Schedule 11 of the act was also important. That all meant that a private sector worker could go to the Central Arbitration Committee—as I did on my members' behalf—which could award pay and terms and set conditions that matched those in the local authority sector. For whatever reason—I do not know the reason—that system has gone. It also provided for equitable holiday pay, sick pay and pensions. It is a huge miss that that is no longer part of employment law. In one instance, when I used the Central Arbitration Committee and went up against Queen's counsel, we won the case and our ladies from a private school were awarded a rate of pay similar to that of local authority cleaners. The Central Arbitration Committee could also be used in the care sector. However, I have to accept that we are where we are.

I have made great play of visiting the care homes in Fife. I was interested to hear what Sandra White said about the information that the Local Government and Communities Committee has gathered. I will have a look at that, because I am interested in it. In Fife, we have a bigger disparity than there is in the figures that she quoted. Figures have been quoted to me of the private sector cost per week being £585, as opposed to £785 in the local authority. I do not know whether Sandra White has information on Fife, but that is what I was told during my visits to the care homes.

Incidentally, I was hugely impressed by the care homes that I visited in Fife. Some of them are brand new homes and are places that I would not mind having to stay in. They struck me as providing quality care. That is equally the case for the local authority homes, which are very good.

There are cost issues that we need to address, but I am much more bothered by another issue: I know that the debate is not about delayed discharges, but Fife still has the highest number of delayed discharges in Scotland. That has happened before and it is happening again. That is not acceptable, because we now have to count every penny. Care must be top quality, but how can it be right to consider charging £300 per night—that is £2,100 a week—for a national health service hospital bed when the people in those beds want a care package and to be put into a home? That money should be taken from the local authorities, which are the bottlenecks that are holding up the system. It is the taxpayer's money irrespective of which budget it comes from. The difference between £2,100 a week and £585 or £700 a week is huge. We all need to get our heads round that issue at a time of such financial constraint.

I welcome what the minister said about the £70 million change fund and I echo the points that other members have made about telehealth. My father-in-law is over 90 and I am pleased that he is still at home. God willing, he will stay at home. He may be one of the people who needs a care home, but I hope not—I hope that his family will always be able to care for him.

09:49

Jamie McGrigor (Highlands and Islands)

(Con): I praise Mary Scanlon for lodging such an important motion.

I also put on record my praise for all the staff and managers of care homes in my region, who work hard day in, day out to provide excellent care for our elderly people. In my native Argyll and Bute, there are 24 care homes with more than 600

places for older people. Those homes fulfil a very important role.

I also welcome Scottish Care's recently published manifesto "Making the case for care: A Manifesto for the future of care and support services for older people in Scotland". It sets out clearly the extent and gravity of the challenges that face us as we try to reconcile increasing levels of demand and complexity of need, the rising costs of care and support delivery, and the continuing shift of the balance in care away from the acute health sector. Those challenges are set against a backdrop of very challenging public expenditure levels.

Because of all those factors and the need to ensure that available public resources achieve the most efficient results, the Scottish Conservatives will continue to speak out about the disparity that exists between the costs of local authority and independent sector care homes. Scottish Care indicates, as Mary Scanlon pointed out, that the average local authority cost per place per week for non-nursing care is around £800, while the equivalent cost for a place under the national care home contract is around £480. That is a massive difference. The cost per hour of care at home and housing support is estimated at £21 to £25 in the local authority, compared with £16 to £18 in the voluntary sector and £12 to £15 in the private sector.

Having spoken to the excellent Eventide care home in Oban, which is independent, I find that Argyll and Bute Council has done away with the enhanced rate, which added about £40 per week for clients who need extra care. However, the patients in that category still come to the home, which is paid the basic rate of £475, while a self-funding resident next door at the council's Eadar Glinn care home pays £903. That is an enormous discrepancy and is unfair on those who provide a vital care service on which many of us depend. I do not know whether other councils have also abandoned that category, but it is obviously a cost-cutting exercise rather than a care improver.

Although I recognise the current mixed economy of care home supply in Scotland, we should still scrutinise the 15 per cent or so of care home places—and, indeed, the 50 per cent of care at home and housing support—that local authorities provide and ask why it is so much more expensive than the provision that is offered by the independent and voluntary sectors.

Shona Robison: Will the member give way on that point?

Jamie McGrigor: As Scottish Care's manifesto suggests,

"it seems clear that",

where the private and voluntary sector can provide a stable system of care homes,

"pursuing a phased process of outsourcing has to be the most sensible option, potentially delivering higher volumes of care and support for the same or possibly reduced levels of expenditure."

Scottish Care also goes on to point out—rightly—that there is no evidence that, in general, local authority-delivered services are of higher quality, despite the higher cost. Why should they be?

That is not an attack on local authority provision for the sake of it; rather, it is about a genuine desire that as many of our senior citizens as possible benefit as much as possible while we ensure the most effective use of taxpayers' money.

However, it is not only about money: placing a relative in a care home is often an emotional event for their family members. Therefore, it is essential that an esteemed relative or friend be looked after in the best possible way. Confidence in our care system is one of the marks of a truly secure and civilised society.

I will take an intervention.

Shona Robison: It is about 10 minutes late.

Does Jamie McGrigor acknowledge that many local authorities, such as the City of Edinburgh Council, are looking closely at their care-at-home services? If they pay £21 an hour for their in-house services compared to £14 an hour for external services, for example, they are trying to work out what the added value is for the £21 an hour. The solution—I think this is the way those authorities are going—is that in-house care would be focused on more complex care, such as for people with dementia, for which the staff have a higher level of training, rather than some of the more routine tasks that other contracts may cover. Is that not a good way to proceed?

The Presiding Officer: You should close shortly, Mr McGrigor.

Jamie McGrigor: Of course that is a good way to proceed, but we must prove that the local authorities get extra value for the extra money that they spend. That is the point. At the moment, there is nothing to show that.

Representatives of the independent care sector have also asked me to raise the issue of bed blocking.

The Presiding Officer: I am sorry, Mr McGrigor, but you must be very brief. Your time was up when you took the intervention.

Jamie McGrigor: Okay.

Hospitals complained to me in 2007 about bed blocking. Why is it still a problem? The Scottish Government should act—

The Presiding Officer: Mr McGrigor.

Jamie McGrigor: All right, Presiding Officer. Bed blocking is still a scandal.

The Presiding Officer: It is fortunate for all of us that we have a little time in hand.

09:55

Rob Gibson (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): How can I follow that?

The legacy of ill health and hard lives is partly why we have had care homes of the sort that we have had in the past. The idea of a differentiated service is one whose time has come, and when it comes to the ways in which it is applied across the country, there must be a mixture of providers. I represent small communities in areas of the Highlands and Islands in which there is great pressure on the public authorities to provide that care—it is noticeable that people can run private sector care homes only where there are large numbers of people to be their clients. However, let us put that to one side and recognise the important role of the local authorities in the provision of care.

In the Highland Council area, there has been a long-running saga about whether the existing care homes should be modernised. For various reasons, some of the buildings are no longer fit for purpose. However, it is worrying to see that the way in which the council has gone about doing that has called into question the ability of the council-run care homes to deal with key issues that the private sector is often unable to cope with. For example, the council-owned care homes have been well geared up to provide respite care.

One such care home, Duthac house, which is in Jamie Stone's home town, has a section that was built in the 1980s and which has been given very nearly top marks by the care commission. If it were run properly and properly maintained, Duthac house would be able to cope with the general run of older people during the next four or five years, which will be a period of austerity. However, the Lib Dem-Labour led council has wasted quite a lot of money on trying to modernise: it has spent £2 million on plans for that, rather than on maintenance. The care commission has criticised some of the equipment, the kitchens and other areas of the care home. I wonder why that money could not have been spent on looking after the existing facilities in these rough, tough times.

I return to the question of disparity. The figures that Sandra White quoted, for which 2006 was the

final year, are not completely up to date, but show a clear trend. The disparity in the figures for 2004-05 shows that that was the point at which the local authority's expenditure increase was much greater than the expenditure increase—or, indeed, the costs—in the independent sector. In 2006, the average weekly cost of a place in a Highland Council care home was £612, whereas the cost of a place in the independent sector was £442—and we know that the disparity has since grown. We must ask ourselves what was going on at that time in the council-owned care homes that caused such an increase in costs. Were the extra costs due to the provision of pensions, better training and the higher quality of the staff in those care homes, compared with others? In private care homes not far from Tain, there are very poor standards that must be improved rapidly. Dingwall, in particular, has been in the news in our area. It bothers me that such examples seem to crop up again and again.

With the £70 million in the pooled budgets for service redesign and a shift in the balance of care, we must try to bring into play the parts of the health service that enable people to lead more healthy lives, just as much as provision for older people. That is worth considering as part of the debate.

10:00

Karen Gillon (Clydesdale) (Lab): I very much welcome the opportunity to participate in the debate this morning. As other members do, I recognise the complex picture of care and support that is available to older people throughout Scotland. Each of us will be aware of the wide variety of ways in which older people are supported.

Only last week, I was out with the Women's Royal Voluntary Service in my constituency. The WRVS provides volunteer drivers to help older people to get about and take part in various activities. Last week, they were swimming and using the local gym at Coalburn. The service allows them to get out and about and to stay active. Another project that supports volunteering enables older people to go into schools to support children who may not have grandparents. They provide role models for the children and it enables the older people themselves to stay active.

The care at home that members have talked about is what many older people want; they want to be able to stay in their own homes. However, it is difficult for many local authorities to provide such a service when Tesco can offer potential carers better wages and better hours. It will be increasingly difficult for councils to compete with such employers when one can work 16 hours a week at Tesco, between 4 and 8, rather than work

for two hours in the morning and two hours at night. The shifts at Tesco may be easier for someone who has a family to manage. It is, therefore, not always easy for local authorities to provide the care that is needed in rural communities, and it will become more and more difficult for them to find the staff.

Also, staff who have been trained and who have been in post for a few months or a few years sometimes get another job offer and move on. The council then has to go through that cycle again, which is particularly difficult in rural areas. Finding staff is becoming increasingly difficult for both the local authority sector and the private sector, and it will become a greater challenge as more people look for that kind of care. I acknowledge, too, the important role that cottage hospitals play in my constituency.

I represent a number of care homes that are run by the local authority or are in the private sector, and I very much welcome the invaluable role that they play. The decision to move into a care home is often not an easy one. It is often made after a long period of illness, either when the person has been in hospital or when they live at home but have come to the realisation that they cannot stay in their own home any longer. It can be a difficult decision to face.

Both the motion and the amendment talk about

“value for money ... coupled with continuing high standards of care.”

I do not have any difficulty with that. However, that is about best value, and the key to delivering best value in the sector is having well-trained, highly motivated and fairly paid staff. Of central importance is the whole health care team.

Today, we have seen the two faces of the Tory party. Mary Scanlon made a measured speech in which she talked about the whole range of issues. We also saw the real face of Jamie McGrigor, who talked about local authorities paying people too much. My mother, who worked in the private sector, got a pay rise only when the national minimum wage was introduced. That is wrong. I will not apologise for people who clean or do laundry in the private or public sectors being paid a proper wage. The reality is that, if we do not have cleaners doing a proper job, we will have infection in our hospitals, our care homes and elsewhere. It is right that they be properly paid for the job that they do.

Jamie McGrigor: Will the member take an intervention?

Karen Gillon: I do not have time. I am sorry.

We should have catering staff providing people with well-balanced meals that are appropriate for their conditions. We should have care staff

providing people with motivational programmes of activities, and we should have properly motivated nursing staff who are well trained and highly skilled. Yes, I will mention the level playing field, but I will not talk about the playing field being levelled at the expense of staff and their wages or terms and conditions. If we are going to do anything, we must do it fairly, across the board and in a way that treats everybody as equal citizens, whoever they are and wherever they come from. That includes the staff, whatever grade they are on and wherever they work.

10:05

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): I compliment Mary Scanlon on lodging the motion, and on her contribution. She painted an accurate picture of the changing demographics and how we should plan, and she pointed out the variation in care standards and disparity in charging. As my colleague Ross Finnie said, facts are chieftains that winna ding and those are solid facts that we have to look at to see what is happening. What Mary Scanlon said about support for unpaid carers was excellent and, as she also said, there are great opportunities to be realised from telehealth.

In her speech, the minister talked in detail about the independent sector, and acknowledged its contribution, which is important. Jackie Baillie mentioned a national care service, which is interesting to us all. Perhaps the minister will return to that idea in her summing up.

My colleague, Ross Finnie, talked about what I would describe as an holistic view of care, and about taking care for the elderly out of its silo. Opportunities could be realised in that area, and I will return to that topic shortly.

I was most interested to hear Helen Eadie's ringing endorsement of what is happening in her constituency. I venture to suggest that it will be some time before she needs to be looking to the sector for her own care.

David McLetchie (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Con): Oh, you sook!

Jamie Stone: No—I am not a sook.

I return to Rob Gibson's contribution, but not to take him up on what he said about Duthac house in my home town, which is a problem, although there are reasons for that. It was built in the early 19th century as Tain royal academy, and that was where I went to school. *[Laughter.]*

Ross Finnie: That explains a lot.

Jamie Stone: I pay no attention to sedentary interventions and comments from the member sitting on my right.

The design of a 19th century school is completely inappropriate for a care home for the elderly. That is true of care homes the length and breadth of the Highlands in the public and private sectors. Some private sector care homes find the design of the buildings in which they operate very difficult indeed, and the alterations that the care commission requires, such as en suite bathrooms and so on, can prove to be too expensive within a Victorian or older building.

I was glad to hear Karen Gillon talk about the supply of carers, and I think that she was the first member in the debate to make that point. That is crucial, and we see the problem in all our constituencies. Where are the carers to come from? It is proving to be increasingly difficult to recruit and motivate people. Karen Gillon was entirely correct to flag up the point. Part of the answer is to recognise the contribution that such people make.

Mary Scanlon talked about care home provision in remote areas such as my constituency, which is a seriously important issue. Elderly people who hail from remote and close-knit communities wish to spend their later years amid the sounds and scenery that they know and love, but that is not easy to achieve, as Jackie Baillie and others said. However, by bolting on day and respite care, as Mary Scanlon suggested, economies of scale could be realised that would make local care home provision more attainable. Furthermore, by co-ordinating local services as varied as social work, the NHS and private volunteer-based care organisations, we could extend achievable economies of scale that could make local care homes more possible.

The bottom line, as far as I am concerned, and representing the constituency that I do, is that local delivery is a goal that all agencies, including national agencies and local government, should strive for. I am most interested to see whether the minister has something to say about that. If she has not, I look forward to talking about it after the debate.

10:09

Dr Richard Simpson (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): I will not go into the demographics because they are very clear. There will by 2016 be a rise of 23,000 people who require care. The only thing that I take issue with in the programme outline is the fact that it begins by saying that Scots are enjoying better health; they are not. They are enjoying longer life, but not better health.

At one time, I ran two care homes in England on behalf of a Scottish merchant bank, so I have experience of the problems of cost differentials and the care commission requiring adaptation of

buildings. One home was excellent, but it was in an old building and the adaptations that the care commission required threatened its viability.

The Scottish Commission for the Regulation of Care is one of the best things that Parliament has created. It is driving up standards and, therefore, costs for the independent sector, but that is entirely appropriate. The debate is about costs, and in the social sector, they are approximately £4.5 billion, of which £1.4 billion is in the hospital sector. The debate is primarily about the variation in costs and whether local authority costs, when they are higher than those in the independent sector, add value, and it is about whether there are other reasons for those costs being higher. Mary Scanlon referred to remote and rural areas, where smaller homes can have higher costs.

Training provision with local authorities is statutory, and it is growing in the independent sector. The public sector provides occupational pensions, with contributions of 15 per cent to 18 per cent from the local authority, whereas the private sector sometimes does not provide pensions at all, although it will be required to do so in about 18 months.

Helen Eadie and Karen Gillon referred to pay levels, which are very important. The minimum wage is being paid in parts of the independent sector. Some of the differentials are accounted for and understandable, but Parliament's job should be to drive up the minimum wage that is being paid in some places to equalise them with the wages that are paid in other areas.

I turn to delayed discharges, which were raised by Jamie McGrigor and Helen Eadie. In July 2010, we were back up to 62 delayed discharges. We are all agreed that the target was zero discharges by March 2008, and we have achieved that since 2008. Each year, we achieve zero discharges by March, but as the year progresses and we enter the worst time of the year for the hospital sector, the number of delayed discharges increases. In the July 2010 survey, the number of delayed discharges had increased to 708 from 634 in July of the previous year. Those delayed discharges are predominantly within six weeks.

When there are 5,000 empty beds, and 17,000 beds in the hospital sector are being occupied by people whose discharges have been delayed, we have to wonder what we are doing, especially in a period of austerity. The median time for delayed discharges has risen from 19 to 21 days, and the mean time is 24 days. If we could clear some of those hospital beds, we could reduce the £1.4 billion cost and provide better wages for those who work in the public sector.

Care must be all about partnership. Our care sector, whether it be private, independent, or local

authority, must provide step-up and step-down care, palliative care, respite care, and enhanced care of the sort that Jamie McGrigor mentioned. The nursing homes that I ran did not have contracts with the local authority but with a hospital, in order to take people out of hospital quickly and provide them with enhanced care, which the nurses in the sector enjoyed providing. We must be able to share the risks, so that there are agreed levels of occupancy, and we do not have all those empty beds. We need joint commissioning.

We also need joint inspection. It is a disgrace that the local authority inspects a home on one day and the care commission inspects it a month later. I say to my Liberal colleagues that the Liberal member of the panel at the care conference in Glasgow actually tried to defend that particular piece of bureaucracy. We must get rid of it; it is a nonsense.

Karen Gillon and Jackie Baillie talked about lunch clubs, yoga classes, day care and social events. They should all be being provided across the sector, and it should not be purely a matter for the community or the care homes themselves.

I will finish by talking about the national care service. We believe that the time has come to enhance the excellent joint working that is being done in some areas by requiring that services be put together. We are not talking about creating a new superstructure at the top: we will work within the existing community health and care partnerships to enhance the excellent joint working that is already being done.

I welcome the opportunity to speak in the debate.

10:15

Shona Robison: This has been a largely consensual debate, and a very useful one.

Jackie Baillie was quite right to talk about the voluntary sector and support to unpaid carers. To reassure the chamber in that regard, I say that we have made it clear that when local partnerships are discussing how they are going to spend the £70 million of new pooled budgets in their local development plans, the voluntary sector must be around the table at the very start of the discussions, to ensure that its interests are represented in those plans.

There has been a lot of talk about the integration of health and social care, which, as I have said on a number of occasions, I wholeheartedly support. Further, this chamber—following a debate on another Conservative motion, I believe—previously endorsed the principle of the integration of health and social

care. However, we should think carefully about the model that we choose. I am pleased that Richard Simpson has clarified Labour's position, because I think that it would be a mistake to set up a new bureaucracy. In this financial climate, we can ill afford to spend more money on financial bureaucracy and less on the front line. I also think that we have to think about, for example, the cost of transferring 60,000 people on to agenda for change conditions, which would come with a huge price tag. However, other models could achieve the same outcomes that people want but could do so more quickly and less bureaucratically. I am open to discussing what those models might be.

Mary Scanlon: I remind the minister that Orkney has already set up a social care organisation that involves the NHS and the local authority working together. Would the minister like to consider how that model is working?

Shona Robison: We are considering that model, and a number of others. Good commissioning models have been tried and tested down south, such as ones that involve the council commissioning the health service to provide adult social care. All that I am saying is that we should think carefully about which model best serves the needs of Scotland.

Ross Finnie—actually, it might not have been him; I think that it was Helen Eadie—

Members: Aw!

Shona Robison: Ross Finnie made a number of good points, I have to say.

Sandra White talked about the other uses of the care home sector, such as respite and intermediate care. She was right to point out that the issue is not just permanent residential places; there are many other important uses.

Helen Eadie and Richard Simpson, as well as others, talked about delayed discharge. That is an important issue, and the Administration has given it some serious attention and has made it a priority. I point out to Richard Simpson that the previous Administration set the zero target but never achieved it—not once. We have achieved the zero target at the last three April census points. I accept, however, that there have been in-year challenges in certain areas, and I will be the first to say to those partnerships—

Dr Simpson: The minister will remember that the situation that we started with in 2001 was one in which there were 2,000 blocked beds of more than six weeks. We set a target of zero blocked beds by 2008, which the current Administration achieved, and I give it plaudits for that. However, the Administration set a new policy that the figure would remain at zero, and it has not succeeded in

that regard. It was the current Administration that set that policy, not us.

Shona Robison: When we took over, 650 people in blocked beds were over the six-week limit. We have dealt with that. However, we must sustain it. Richard Simpson is right to point out that some partnerships face challenges. I assure members that I have made it clear to those partnerships that they need to get back on track. We have made it clear that the pooled budgets have to be used to redesign services to make that sustainable. That will be one of the top priorities for the use of the pooled budgets.

Rob Gibson made one of the most important points in the debate when he talked about unlocking some of the resources that are caught up in providing services for older people in those acute hospital beds. He is right that those resources need to be released, which is why we will ensure that the pooled budgets can be used to do that. In that way, we can release another resource that can be used to keep people safely in their homes, which is what many members have said they want to happen.

I thank everyone for their speeches, particularly Jamie Stone, who made an excellent contribution. I assure members that the contributions that have been made in this debate will feed into the reshaping care programme that we are taking forward.

10:20

David McLetchie (Edinburgh Pentlands)
(Con): I, too, am grateful to all members for their thoughtful and informed contributions to the debate and for the local examples that they used to highlight some of their points. As Mary Scanlon said, this debate is not intended to be a matter of partisan political controversy; rather, it is intended to draw attention to the important issue of caring for our older citizens, having regard to the demographics of an ageing population and the demands on the public purse, of which we are all acutely aware.

In this case, we want specifically to focus on the situation of care providers in our care homes, whether the homes are run by councils, the private sector or the voluntary sector. Helpfully, the minister earlier set out some of the statistical background and talked about the fact that the overwhelming preponderance of homes are in the independent sector—three quarters of all care homes are in the private sector and 11 per cent are in the voluntary sector, compared with the 14 per cent of homes that are run by councils. In total, those 943 homes provide 39,000 places across Scotland. However, the number of homes has declined by more than 11 per cent over the past

10 years. For our older people who require to be looked after in a care home—notwithstanding our efforts to ensure that people can be looked after in their own homes, through care packages—the key questions to be addressed are how we fund and sustain care home provision and deal with some of the stark disparities and anomalies that exist today, which are neither fair nor equitable, between various categories of provider and between various residents. Those are the questions that we have posed in our motion.

As many have said, why is it that there is such a vast gulf between the amounts that are paid by councils when commissioning care from an independent sector provider, which is done in accordance with nationally determined rates and amounts to just more than £550, and the amount that is spent on care that is provided by a council in one of its own homes, which is funded on a full cost recovery basis and amounts to an average of more than £800 for every resident? Equally, someone who fully funds their own care out of their own savings may well ask why their care charges are significantly higher than those that the council pays on behalf of a fellow resident, in a neighbouring room, who is receiving exactly the same standard of care. Is one, in effect, cross-subsidising the other?

It appears that, at the recent care conference that was attended by the minister, Mary Scanlon, Sandra White, Richard Simpson and possibly other members, the matter that I have just discussed was, unsurprisingly, a hot controversy. Earlier, the minister talked about the controversy and said that we do not want to have an adversarial approach to the negotiation of rates between the providers and the councils, as that would not be helpful, and she is quite right. However, equally unhelpful would be an approach that led to care homes going out of business and the loss of places that we need for our older people, as that would serve only to put far more pressure on our national health service and on domiciliary care costs and would end up costing us more, not less, which is a point that Richard Simpson made effectively in his speech.

Some members tried to explain the disparities, but like Ross Finnie I did not find those explanations wholly convincing. Karen Gillon referred to rates of pay and made some valid points about the impact of the introduction of the minimum wage. She went so far as to suggest that somehow standards of cleanliness vary according to rates of pay and who the employer is. However, as we all know from the tragic instances that have been investigated in many hospitals throughout Scotland, it makes no difference who employs the people who clean the hospitals. We need to learn that sad lesson, rather than make assumptions

that are not based on the facts and an analysis of the situation.

Karen Gillon: I was making the point that we should seek to raise rather than lower the standards of pay for members of staff, particularly those at the lowest level, and make them valued members of the health care team rather than trying to devalue their work.

David McLetchie: That is a fair point, but Karen Gillon also criticised the standard of work and said that there was a disparity in that regard, and I was correcting that point.

Helen Eadie: Will the member give way?

David McLetchie: No. I am sorry, I must conclude.

In the consensual spirit in which the debate has been conducted—at least until the last 60 seconds—I am happy to accept on behalf of my colleagues the minister's amendment to our motion. We look forward to the outcome of the reshaping care for older people consultation and review.

All members will have received in their mailbag this morning a copy of the Scottish Care manifesto "Making the case for care", to which Jamie McGrigor referred. The manifesto draws attention to some of the problems in the independent care sector, which looks after 35,000 people and employs 100,000 people. We must address those problems and concerns, and ensure not only that those 100,000 people are properly paid but that they continue to work in a sector that is sustained and sustainable.

Prescription Charges

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Trish Godman): The next item of business is a debate on motion S3M-7423, in the name of Derek Brownlee, on prescription charges.

10:27

Derek Brownlee (South of Scotland) (Con): The Scottish Conservatives make no apology for returning today to a subject that Parliament has debated on a number of occasions.

There is a clear issue of principle around the question of whether or not to charge some people for their prescriptions. Before I turn to that issue, which divides the Parliament, I will outline some areas in which I think we are united.

Although the Treasury and the Scottish Government use the gross domestic product deflator of 1.9 per cent as an inflation estimate, inflation in health care costs has traditionally been assumed to run ahead of general price inflation. The combination of an ageing population, medical advances and rising public expectations means that since the creation of the national health service in 1948, no Government of any party has managed to limit health-care costs to inflation.

"Of course, with the costs of healthcare rising fast, it would be wrong to say that the NHS doesn't face any financial challenges. It does."

Those were Nicola Sturgeon's words when she addressed the Scottish National Party conference last month. She was not the only one to post a bleak warning on the NHS in October. Jackie Baillie told her conference:

"As the price of drugs rises and demand for services grows from an ageing population it will mean deep cuts in every hospital and every doctors surgery the length and breadth of Britain."

I had thought, therefore, that the opening line of my motion, which merely asks Parliament to note the financial pressures on the NHS, would provide common ground. Equally, I thought that we might have found common ground on the figures from the independent budget review that the SNP Government established—although admittedly because we told it to do so. I hope that neither Labour nor the SNP disputes the £25 million figure. If they do not dispute it, nor the funding pressures on the NHS, why do the Labour and SNP amendments seek to remove any reference to funding pressures on the health service or the cost of abolishing prescription charges?

I return to Jackie Baillie's doom-laden speech in Oban, which may well have been one of the lighter moments of the Labour Party conference. She said:

"the SNP are ... Cutting jobs and cutting nurses ... Well Labour won't stand for it. We will protect our NHS."

She is right. Labour will not stand for it—it will not stand up for the NHS and it will not stand up to the SNP. Labour members will carp and criticise, and then they will vote with Nicola Sturgeon anyway.

I wonder what has happened to the brave soul who pronounced on the issue of abolishing prescription charges only a month ago that

"At a time when Nicola Sturgeon is cutting 4,000 health workers in Scotland including 1,500 nurses, we need to seriously consider if this is the right priority at this time."

That was, of course, one Jackie Baillie. She has obviously concluded that it is the right priority at this time to cut 1,500 nurses, because by not abolishing prescription charges she could fund more than 1,000 extra nursing staff. However, that would mean that she would not be able to complain about the SNP cutting them, and it would mean taking a position on prescription charges that might be unpopular—even if it is the same position that Labour supported in the dark days when it was in power. It would mean standing up for the NHS, and that would never do for the only party ever to have cut the NHS.

Our argument is simple: to take the revenue that is raised from prescription charges away from the NHS is the wrong choice. It is a cut that is imposed not by the coalition in London, but by the coalition in Edinburgh. Labour and the SNP, the so-called left-wing parties, are taking money from the NHS and putting it into the pockets of people who can afford to pay.

If the issue is, as the cabinet secretary said in the debate in January, simply that some people are just over the income threshold and not in an exempt group, there is an answer: we could raise the threshold. If the central issue is the principle that there should never be charges in the NHS, we will presumably hear the SNP and the Labour Party discussing the abolition of charges for dental and optical treatment. The truth is that the issue is about one principle only: the SNP is trying to get re-elected, and the Labour Party is helping it.

I turn to the concerns that the cabinet secretary raises in her amendment. Abolishing prescription charges will indeed benefit those who currently pay for them, at least to the extent that they save the money that they would otherwise pay for prescriptions. However, that money comes from elsewhere in the NHS, and that has consequences for the poor and the sick. We never hear about those consequences, but they are consequences nonetheless. If 1,000 nurses lose their jobs to pay for the abolition of prescription charges, does that help the poor or the sick? Abolishing prescription charges takes money from the NHS, and that is

what the Government is intent on doing, with Labour Party support.

It is ironic. The Labour Party has spent the past three years condemning the SNP for breaking manifesto promises, and has been particularly vociferous in attacking the SNP for breaking those pledges that Labour did not support. It now appears, however, that Labour is prepared to vote with the SNP to deliver a manifesto promise with which, apparently, it does not even agree. The SNP has been lucky in the incompetence of its main opposition, but Labour's failure to oppose the SNP when it is wrong will hurt the poor, the sick and the NHS.

That is why the Conservatives have brought this debate to the chamber today. We will oppose the plans because we want to stand up for the NHS, even if Labour and the SNP will not. All those members who are intent on abolishing prescription charges must tell us where that money will come from and which services will be cut, which otherwise would not happen. They must explain what the consequences will be for the poor, the sick and the national health service.

I move,

That the Parliament notes the financial pressures on the NHS and that the Independent Budget Review established by the Scottish Government has estimated that the full abolition of prescription charges would remove a further £25 million of income each year from the NHS and accordingly calls on the Scottish Government to reconsider its position on prescription charges.

10:33

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing (Nicola Sturgeon): I welcome the debate, although it was only in January that the Tories last brought the debate to the chamber and failed to persuade Parliament of their position.

This morning, I have the opportunity once more to set out the Government's commitment to abolishing prescription charges and to remind members why that policy is so important to people throughout Scotland.

I believe that all of us in the chamber want to create a healthier country and tackle the health inequalities that blight Scotland. We want to support people to live longer and healthier lives, and to ensure that people have timely access to the health care that they need. Removing prescription charges is an important part of delivering all that.

The reality—whether the Tories choose to see it or not—is that prescription charges are a barrier to health for many people throughout the country. They can prevent patients from collecting their medication, and they even deter some people

from visiting the doctor in the first place. I have spoken to patients who have found themselves in that position. If we believe in a fair and equitable society, that situation is simply not tolerable. The policy will ensure that patients with long-term conditions are not prevented from collecting their medicines. We are now only one step away from removing the barrier for all patients, without the invidious exercise of weighing up which of them are more deserving and more worthy than others.

We know from the information that we have on prescription prepayment certificates that patients with long-term conditions are benefiting the most from the policy. We brought the cost of PPCs down more quickly than the cost of single prescriptions. As a result, sales of PPCs are up by 165 per cent. That benefits people who need multiple medications.

I know that there are people, led by the Tories, who say that we should not abolish prescription charges for all and that we should simply extend the list of exempt conditions, but that approach is not simple in reality. The Parliament has previously recognised that it would be fraught with difficulty. When we were considering our approach in the early days of the current session of Parliament, many concerns were expressed to us about the difficulty and delay that would be associated with defining a list that was comprehensive and complete and—more important—which avoided simply creating new anomalies and a new set of invidious choices. That reality has been recognised not just in Scotland but in Wales and Northern Ireland.

In any case, abolishing prescription charges only for people with long-term conditions would also ignore the needs of people on low incomes who are not exempt. Many patients who are not eligible for exemption struggle to pay prescription charges. Again, I have spoken to many people in that position. The Tories suggest time and again that only those who can afford to pay are charged for prescriptions, but that is not the case.

Derek Brownlee: Will the minister give way?

Nicola Sturgeon: I will give way in a moment.

The Tories need to recognise that 600,000 adults living in Scotland right now earn around £16,000 a year and they struggle to pay for medication that they have been prescribed. However, it is perhaps not surprising that the Tories, yet again, seem oblivious to the reality of poverty. I also think—and on this point I will take an intervention—that it speaks volumes that it was the Tory party's finance spokesperson and not its health spokesperson who moved the motion. The health spokesperson is not even in the chamber, which perhaps tells us what his view is.

Derek Brownlee: The health spokesman is at a funeral, for the cabinet secretary's information.

The point that I raised in my remarks is simply this: if there is an issue about people on low incomes, could it not be addressed by raising the threshold, rather than simply abolishing prescription charges for everyone, including people on £50,000 a year? Surely the rate of non-collection of prescriptions by people on £50,000 a year is negligible.

Nicola Sturgeon: Before I respond to that point, I apologise to Murdo Fraser. I was not aware of his personal circumstances today.

I think that Derek Brownlee makes the point that I am trying to make. We could extend the list of people who are exempt, to include those with long-term conditions, or we could raise the threshold, but in doing so we would simply create a new host of anomalies. The United Kingdom British Medical Association said recently:

"changes to the system short of abolition would still be unfair on the reduced number of patients who do not qualify for exemption ... We really have to question whether the small financial benefit of retaining charges outweighs the many disadvantages of taxing the sick."

That sums it up exceptionally well.

It has been suggested again today that, given that budgets are tight—and they are—we should spend the money in different ways. That is the very choice that we want to remove from patients, whose own budgets are ever tighter. As we know, the pressures on family budgets are increasing, principally because of some of the decisions that the UK Tory Government is taking. Prescription charges are one pressure that we do not want to impose on the tight budgets of families throughout Scotland.

For all those reasons, total abolition is not just right in principle but the fairest, most cost-effective and most sensible approach to take. That is why we remain committed to it. It is also important to point out that Scotland is not unique. We are not somehow in a stand-alone position on the issue. Wales and Northern Ireland are ahead of us. They have already abolished prescription charges, and I think that it is right that in April we will come into line with them. I hope that, today, the Parliament will reject the latest Tory attempt to play off one part of health funding against another. I hope that the Parliament will unite in supporting free health care for all.

I move amendment S3M-7423.1, to leave out from "notes" to end and insert:

"recognises that the abolition of prescription charges will benefit all those patients with long-term conditions and the 600,000 people on low incomes who are not entitled to exemption and further recognises that total abolition is in the best tradition of the NHS and that poor people and sick

people should not be made to pay the cost of the economic and financial situation that Scotland faces.”

10:40

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): I welcome the opportunity to debate prescription charges again. We last debated the issue in January, on the basis of a Tory motion. Not content with the response then, the Tories are back again today. They are nothing if not persistent.

I have to say that Derek Brownlee is at best confused and at worst deluded. Of course we recognise that there is a tough financial settlement. It is so tough that we have the smallest increase in the health budget since the creation of the health service way back in 1948, and it has been done by a Tory Government. We therefore need to ask what our priorities are and what can be afforded. However, I am flattered that Derek Brownlee listened so intently to all my conference speeches, and I look forward to his learning from them.

In January, we supported the introduction of free prescriptions, and today Labour members will support the ending of prescription charges. We previously favoured an incremental approach that would have meant extending free prescriptions to those with long-term chronic conditions and those on a range of top-up benefits as a result of low incomes. At present, 92 per cent of all prescriptions in Scotland are issued free. Wide categories of people are already eligible, including under-18s, the unemployed and pregnant women. However, there is an issue, because a substantial proportion of the remaining 8 per cent have chronic conditions and they might require substantial amounts of medication that some might struggle to afford. It is therefore not accurate to say that only people who can afford to pay for prescriptions are paying for them.

I repeat something that the cabinet secretary said, because it is valid: something like 600,000 adults in families in Scotland earn less than £16,000 a year, but that puts them slightly over the exemption level, so there are low-income families who are not exempt from paying prescription charges.

David McLetchie (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Con): Will Jackie Baillie explain why it is that, in the eight years of the Labour and Liberal Democrat Executive, when budgets were rising, Labour never once brought a proposition to reduce and abolish prescription charges, yet at a time when budgets, by her acknowledgement, are static or falling, all of a sudden Labour is in favour of free prescriptions? That makes no sense whatsoever.

Jackie Baillie: David McLetchie’s attempt to rewrite history is inaccurate. We did bring forward proposals to reduce prescriptions. If he had been listening—which is something that the Tories would do well to do—he would know that I described that incremental approach.

We could spend a lot of time today—as would suit David McLetchie—rehearsing old arguments, but that would not be valid. The cabinet secretary and the Scottish Government have reached a judgment about the value and affordability of prescription charges, and it is appropriate to question that policy robustly to ensure that it has been thought through. When we last debated the issue, the total recurring cost was set at £57 million from April 2011. I ask the cabinet secretary whether that figure remains accurate and whether it is in the budget.

Nicola Sturgeon: Yes.

Jackie Baillie: That is helpful. Given that we witnessed a one-year election budget yesterday, can the cabinet secretary provide assurances that the policy is sustainable? She knows the figures for the next three years. Will she tell us what has been set aside for 2012-13 and 2013-14 and whether percentage growth has been allowed for? There is a possibility of a general increase in demand, which needs to be factored in. That would assure not just the Parliament but the country that the policy is properly costed and sustainable beyond the current year.

Derek Brownlee: Will the member take an intervention?

Jackie Baillie: I do not have time.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You have time to take an intervention if you wish.

Jackie Baillie: Do I? Fine. I am always delighted.

Derek Brownlee: Is Jackie Baillie telling us that Labour members are going to vote for free prescriptions today but they have no idea whether the policy is sustainable?

Jackie Baillie: I do not know where Derek Brownlee was yesterday, but the problem is that the Parliament does not know the budgets for future years, in terms of the allocation of funds. On the basis of his question, he will not be voting for anything at all. We need to question the Government and ask it to come forward with those figures, so that the Parliament and the country can be reassured about the sustainability of the policy. I think that it is appropriate to ask for those figures.

Members will know that we encouraged the Scottish Government to introduce free prescriptions for cancer patients in Scotland, in line with the policy in England and Wales. Let us

be clear: we are not asking for that to be done instead of addressing prescription charges for other chronic conditions, and it is wrong to suggest so.

The SNP's manifesto pledge way back in 2007 was to

"immediately abolish prescription charges for people with chronic health conditions, people with cancer, and people in full time education or training."

We agreed with the approach of prioritising people with long-term illnesses by widening the conditions that are eligible for free prescriptions. However, while I welcome the ending of all charges and have sympathy with the cabinet secretary's reasoning, it remains the case that while charges for cancer patients were scrapped by the Labour UK Government in April 2009, cancer patients in Scotland were denied that benefit. It was absolutely right to abolish charges for cancer patients. It has transformed the lives of about 150,000 people, who have each benefited by saving up to £100 a year. We would have liked that to apply to Scotland, and it is a matter of regret that it does not.

Voting for the Tory motion will put in jeopardy free prescriptions not just for people with chronic illnesses but for all. We on this side of the chamber will not do that, because we support the abolition of prescription charges in Scotland.

I move amendment S3M-7423.1.1, to insert at end:

" , but regrets that free prescriptions for cancer patients in Scotland were not implemented by April 2009 in line with England."

10:46

Ross Finnie (West of Scotland) (LD): There has been a tinge of unreality about the debate so far. It is almost as if we had huge amounts of as yet undreamed of funding available to us, there was no funding crisis, there were no cuts nor any prospect of cuts to our health service and everything was going on as before, so this is a rather narrow and silly debate.

Liberal Democrats began to wonder whether abolishing prescription charges was the right priority only because of the change in financial circumstances. That is why last year we opposed the move to reduce further the level of prescription charges. Today, strangely, we are told that prescription charges are the only threat to those who are sick and those who have long-term conditions. That is not the world in which I live. There are already serious threats to the condition of many people because—this might be news to some—health boards are making cuts. Perhaps they should not be—perhaps they are making a mistake—but they are making cuts. They are

reconfiguring services. They use odd phraseology with nurses: "You will find another job but not necessarily 40 miles from where you live. You will be reconfigured and your grade 5 status will not be required." That is affecting not only nurses, but patients. Things are also changing for those in our communities, particularly poorer people for whom health care, general practice and other health provision in the community is especially important. Services are being reduced and that is affecting the health of those people.

Another issue is the change in the allocation of specialist nurses. The large number of specialist nurses make a huge contribution to the efficacy of drugs prescribed for patients. It is nonsense to suggest that there is no connection between the reduction in the number of specialist nurses and the efficacy of our drug and prescription policy. As far as Liberal Democrats are concerned, we are not looking at a blank sheet of paper. We are looking at the reality, which is that we have to make choices and we have to be sure about those choices. The decisions that I have talked about are being made before this year's allocations to health boards are taken into account. Liberal Democrats are very concerned that the claims that there may be adequate provision in the funding of our health service do not stand up to close examination.

We were interested in the proposal by the independent budget review panel that it was right and proper for us to look at the £25 million that would be used for the final step of abolishing prescription charges. In the present financial climate, we found that very difficult, indeed. There was some concern that linking prescription charges with the cost of providing drugs might stray outwith the competence of the motion, and I am grateful for your indulgence in the matter, Presiding Officer, because the independent budget review panel drew particular attention to the level of prescription charges and the fact that the total drugs bill is more than £1 billion. The two are inextricably linked in any consideration of ways in which to make more money available within the health service.

Dr Simpson: It looks like the Liberal Democrat position is now changing. To quote Ross Finnie, who seemed to be fond of quoting me the other day:

"The Liberal Democrats would support proposals to give protection to those who have long-term conditions."—
[Official Report, 21 January 2010; c 22953.]

The overwhelming majority of the 8 per cent who pay prescription charges have long-term conditions.

Ross Finnie: I am not sure of the date of that quote—

Dr Simpson: It was January.

Ross Finnie: I think that it has been quoted before and I am grateful for that second reading.

People with long-term conditions are the very people who have nurses assisting them with their drugs. Remove that assistance and we imperil how their health care is dealt with. These are not easy, choose one as against another, decisions. I know of many patients—Dr Simpson ought to know of many, too—for whom removing those nurses will not help them one jot to benefit from their prescribed drugs.

I was moving on to the issue—

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Alasdair Morgan): The member should perhaps move on to sum up.

Ross Finnie: That is exactly what I am doing, Presiding Officer.

We need to make savings on that £1 billion drugs bill if we are to preserve our position in relation to prescription charging. A 2.5 per cent reduction in that bill is imperative in the current financial circumstances. It is also a way of tackling misuse and abuse of the system. I know that the Government has addressed that, but we need to go further.

I move amendment S3M-7423.2 to insert at end:

“, prescribing practice, medicines management, adverse reactions to medicine and procurement and purchasing of drugs.”

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We come to the open debate. Members have up to five minutes each.

10:52

Jackson Carlaw (West of Scotland) (Con): I acknowledge Nicola Sturgeon's belligerent commitment to the principle of the abolition of prescription charges. She is misguided, but with the virtue of being consistently so. I know that she has been looking forward to the debate all year, probably with as much fervour as she did to her wedding in the summer, because it gives her the opportunity to dust down her Govan soapbox and paint the Conservative position yet again as being that of vampires rising from the grave to suck the last living blood out of the sick.

Nicola Sturgeon: While I welcome Jackson Carlaw back to the health debates, for the avoidance of doubt I wonder whether he will accept that I made no use whatsoever of my Govan soapbox during my wedding in the summer.

Jackson Carlaw: Sadly, the invitation to witness the proceedings not having arrived, I can only take the cabinet secretary's word for it.

I counter the cabinet secretary's earlier argument by pointing out that the Scottish Conservatives supported the reduction of the prescription charge in 2008 from £6.85 to £5. We supported the reduction in cost of the prepayment certificate, which at that point was £98.70. We did so for a couple of reasons. First, we accepted that there had been a significant increase in the overall contribution to the health service through the rise in national health insurance contributions from the public. Secondly, we accepted that the accelerated rate of increase in prescription charges had got to a point at which a multiple prescription cost for many people was a considerable financial burden. We supported—and our manifesto committed us to supporting—a reduction in the costs to those with long-term conditions.

I want to challenge a point that the cabinet secretary made and explain the argument in slightly more detail. She said that the Conservative position is that those who can afford to pay for prescriptions should do so and that they are the people who currently pay for prescriptions. I do not believe that that is the case: it is a much more complicated position than that.

The basis on which people currently pay for prescriptions is nothing to do with whether they can afford to pay. My mother is a higher rate taxpayer. She is nearly 80 years old. She could well afford to pay for her prescriptions, but because she is a pensioner she does not. There are millionaires who could well afford to pay for prescriptions for their children, but because the prescriptions are for children they do not.

Jackie Baillie made the not unreasonable point that there are people among the 600,000 who still pay prescription charges who do not have masses of money to dispose of and for whom paying a prescription charge is a considerable matter. That is why we supported the original reduction in the overall prescription charge. In an ideal world in which there was no financial consequence facing the NHS—another issue that I will come to—it could be argued that abolishing prescription charges would be a priority for spending, but we are not in that position.

The cabinet secretary has never addressed an issue that has come up in many of the debates. It is a point that I will illustrate with an experience relating to my wife—who said she hoped that I would at least be discreet enough not to say what her prescription was for. I went along to the pharmacy to pick up a repeat prescription on her behalf. The pharmacist said to me, “Mr Carlaw, the cost of this medicine as a retail item is cheaper

than what you pay for the prescription. It would be cheaper for you to buy it and tear up the prescription than to pay for the prescription." That is what I did.

Between the ages of 14 and 40, I was a long-term migraine sufferer. I picked up across-the-counter medicine for migraine—Migraleve—which now costs between £7 and £10, depending on whether someone buys 16 or 32 tablets. I presume that, when I suffered from migraine, I was sick as in the terms of the cabinet secretary's amendment. Once we have abolished prescription charges, what will be the incentive for people not to go to the doctor for a prescription so that they can get, free of charge, over-the-counter medicines that they currently routinely pay for? What is the cost to the NHS and to GP practices of individuals going to the doctor for a prescription for an over-the-counter medicine? To some extent, that practice has been experienced in Wales and Northern Ireland, and if the health secretary is determined to proceed she owes us at least an explanation of how she will deal with that point.

In the final analysis, I accept that, with all her customary grace, charm and intelligence, the cabinet secretary has been committed to the policy throughout. It was in her manifesto, the SNP supported it, and it intends to deliver it. That is the complete opposite to the position of the party that seeks to be in government next May. There is no principle in the Labour position; we have simply seen a politically expedient act on its part because it is frightened to stand up for what it stood for at the last election and for what Gordon Brown stood for in the rest of the United Kingdom. There is no principle underpinning Labour's support for the cabinet secretary's amendment, and it is a poor state of affairs to consider that it should ever be in charge of the nation's Government if that is how it seeks to operate.

10:58

Ian McKee (Lothians) (SNP): I will say why I oppose the motion before us this morning. First, I and members of my party believe in a health service free at the point of need. Of course it has to be paid for, but we do that out of our taxes according to our means, and not according to our illness.

There are few health needs greater than the dispensing of a prescription recommended as needed by a highly trained and competent doctor, so why should we select such a prescription for a charge? Where will it end? How many more direct health charges have the Conservatives in mind? Would they charge for self-referral to physiotherapy, which is not assessed by a doctor?

David McLetchie: In that spirit, will the member tell us when his Government intends to abolish all the dental and optical charges on the NHS?

Ian McKee: It certainly is a long-term aim to do that. I know that Mr McLetchie has great confidence in the SNP Government, but it is a bit much, even for us, to expect us to undo in less than four years the damage that unionists have done in 57 years of running the health service.

Then there is the unfairness of the charges. Although there are many exemptions, I know that there are also many families for whom a prescription charge is a hefty financial burden. Who does not pay the charge? Jackson Carlaw is right: the answer includes well-paid people such as you, Presiding Officer, me, Annabel Goldie, Mary Scanlon, Nanette Milne, Jamie McGrigor, Bill Aitken, Ted Brocklebank, Richard Simpson and Ross Finnie, among others. The Conservatives argue for prescription charges, but the truth is that more than half of the Conservative group in this Parliament who are arguing for others to be charged either are now eligible for free prescriptions or soon will be. As Jackson Carlaw asked, what about the children of millionaires? Are the Conservatives now recommending charges for pensioners? If that is what they intend, they should come clean.

Derek Brownlee: I will make it absolutely clear: we are saying that the Government should not proceed with the abolition of the prescription charges that exist; we are not suggesting that they be extended at all.

Ian McKee: I gather that Derek Brownlee says that in the motion, but Jackson Carlaw seemed to say that it is wrong that a lot of very rich people, including more than half of his party, do not pay prescription charges. If the Conservatives want to keep prescription charges, they will have to think of a system whereby people who earn large sums of money are not exempt from them just because of their age.

When there is a prescription charge, some people just cannot afford to have a prescription dispensed—ask any pharmacist working in a deprived area. Some critics even argue that if a prescription is not presented for dispensing it cannot be needed. Let us look at the ramifications of that argument in a little more detail.

The process of a medication being developed and prescribed is about as closely monitored as it is possible for it to be. No medicine is allowed to be used unless it meets the highest standards of safety, efficacy and affordability. Prescribers are highly trained in prescribing matters, and if treatment is prescribed inappropriately, the prescriber can be identified by the health board and counselled. Scrutiny is by expense and by

comparison with peers, so that outliers can be identified individually and asked to account for an abnormal prescribing pattern. We can therefore assume that most prescriptions are given appropriately.

Nanette Milne (North East Scotland) (Con): Will the member give way?

Ian McKee: I am sorry: I need to get on.

What happens if, at the end of that sophisticated process, the prescription is not dispensed? The illness might take longer to get better; it might even get worse. The result may well be more time off work, more sickness benefits paid, more expensive treatment later on to effect a cure, or even costly hospital admission. Charging for the prescription can easily prove to be a false economy, and it makes no sense.

It also makes no sense to expect the patient to decide which medicine to take and which to refuse on the grounds of cost. If members really feel that some prescriptions are not needed, it is the prescriber who should be chased—and that happens already. What the Conservatives are proposing is as scientific as tearing up one in every 100 prescriptions and making prescribing savings that way. At least that would risk the health of all patients equally, not just those in low-income brackets.

I want finally to turn to Jackie Baillie's amendment. I understand that she has to try to glean some comfort from the situation, but the fact is that, on analysis, absolving only cancer patients from prescription charges gives us the same problems as exempting other patients. Some people with cancer are not affected severely and have high incomes, while other people have conditions that are as debilitating as some forms of cancer. On those grounds, I support the cabinet secretary's amendment as the one that encompasses the best for all sections of Scottish society.

11:03

Helen Eadie (Dunfermline East) (Lab): I rise to speak in support of Jackie Baillie's amendment and all that she said.

I have a number of concerns. As the cabinet secretary said, health care should be free at the point of access for everyone. That is a founding principle of the NHS, but in Scotland today some patients are being denied any treatment whatsoever. In other words, we are seeing free prescriptions for all, but what is the price that some families have to pay? For some families and individuals, there is zero, nil, zilch treatment available if they happen to require certain NHS treatments. Two examples are infertility treatment

and bariatric surgery. I would have thought that it was against the law to deny patients NHS treatment when a consultant says that the patient can be treated—

Nicola Sturgeon: Will the member give way?

Helen Eadie: I will come back in a minute.

Politics is the language of priorities, and we have to examine that situation. I have a range of questions that I can write to the cabinet secretary about separately, because a lot of questions came up in my mind when I was preparing for today's debate.

Some of Jackson Carlaw's points were actually pertinent. When the cabinet secretary issued her first ministerial statement on the issue, on 5 December 2007, she responded to a question from Richard Simpson by saying that announcements about the minor ailments service would follow "in due course". However, I know from speaking to pharmacists at a recent community pharmacists dinner in Edinburgh that that point has still not been addressed. If costs rise in relation to minor ailments, will that mean rationing of more expensive drugs?

It is vital that the cabinet secretary says, at long last, what is to happen to the minor ailments service. Since the introduction of the service, anyone who receives free prescriptions has been entitled to register with a pharmacist and have a prescription issued to them for minor illnesses. Although the system benefits those who are currently on free prescriptions, if it is extended to the whole population, more people will ask for prescriptions for minor illnesses.

Nicola Sturgeon: Helen Eadie might have been absent from the chamber on all the previous occasions when I have answered that specific question, but will she accept that I have previously made it very clear that the minor ailments service will continue as it is now? The eligibility for it will continue to be the current eligibility, which is based on the prescription charge eligibility, even when prescription charges are abolished. As I have yet again answered that question, will Helen Eadie and her colleagues finally accept the point?

Helen Eadie: It is not me who needs to accept the point; it is the community pharmacists' representatives, with whom we have met and who say that the point is still not crystal clear to them. The cabinet secretary and her officials have a responsibility to pursue that.

I said earlier that politics is the language of priorities. How can it be right for well-off families to pay anything up to £30,000 for infertility treatment, but for some families, such as some of my constituents, to be denied completely any access to that treatment? How can it be right for the

Parliament to make choices that deny treatments such as bariatric surgery and infertility services to NHS patients? We are talking about important decisions.

Earlier this year, the *Western Mail*, reported on the future of the Welsh Assembly Government's flagship free prescriptions policy. It was once more called into question when it was shown that the number of items that were handed out to patients had reached an all-time high. The NHS in Wales is footing an increased bill for medicines following the abolition of prescription fees. The latest official figures show that the number of prescriptions that were issued last year hit 67.6 million items. GPs told the *Western Mail* that they probably see patients who would previously have bought medicines over the counter. So some of the points that Jackson Carlaw made are important.

Although the Labour Party can agree with the Government's policy, we need to know how it can be right that millions of items will be prescribed, including Tesco own-brand ibuprofen caplets, which are priced at just 28p on the shelf, but cost the NHS £3.75 for each prescription. There are important questions. We cannot simply accept the policy without careful scrutiny and questioning. I absolutely support Jackie Baillie's points, but I can see merit in some of the arguments that the Conservatives have made.

11:08

Christine Grahame (South of Scotland) (SNP): It will be difficult to bring something fresh to the debate, as we debated the issue in January and I am speaking late in this debate. However, I will try to bring a fresh angle.

I begin by laying it down that, as Ian McKee said, prescriptions are not free—they are paid for through general taxation, and the richer somebody is, thankfully, the more tax they pay. As I came into the chamber, I picked up a booklet from the Long Term Conditions Alliance Scotland, which has a display outside. There is an interesting section called, "Impact of the Economic Downturn on People with Long Term Conditions". As Jackie Baillie said in the debate in January, 92 per cent of prescriptions are free and 8 per cent are charged for. Many of the people who are charged have long-term conditions. I will try to drift away from the ageing aspect and not take it personally.

About 600,000 people are not eligible for free prescriptions but have an income of less than £16,000. Several issues arise out of that. People with long-term conditions have not only the costs of multiple prescriptions, but higher transport and child care costs because of the need to access services. Interestingly, the booklet by the Long-Term Conditions Alliance states:

"Citizens' Advice Scotland ... found that 41 per cent of their CAB debt clients listed sickness or disability as a reason for their debt. Furthermore, 'sick or disabled' CAB debt clients have greater financial problems and, on average ... Have six debts and owe an average of £20,588."

So for somebody who is maybe on or just above £16,000, no account is taken of the liability that they already have for debts and other payments that must be made, which greatly reduce the income that they have to pay for prescriptions. That issue has been missed in the debate.

Against that background, it is important to consider the impact of recession on people's health. There are all kinds of difficulties for people, such as job loss and marriage break-ups. It might be then that they need to go to their GP to access prescriptions. If they are earning above the threshold, they will have to pay for their prescriptions. As Ian McKee said, that might compound their illness and, at the end of the day, cost the NHS a great deal more.

Thresholds are fraught with difficulty. Derek Brownlee suggests raising the threshold, but to what level would he raise it? I invite him to respond.

Derek Brownlee: The Government could consider what the appropriate level was. Yesterday, for example, the Government had no problem at all with imposing a threshold of £21,000 for its cut-off for the public sector pay freeze. If the Government can do that for one thing, why can it not do it for another?

Christine Grahame: Let us say that Derek Brownlee has suggested that £21,000 should be the threshold. So somebody who was on £21,500 could not access free prescriptions. They might have substantial debts, which would not be taken into account. Raising the threshold is not a simple matter. There are injustices with thresholds, which is why it is better not to have them at that point, but to have them at the point of taxation and to bring in general taxation to pay for the NHS. That is the way to remedy the issue and it is far more just.

Endeavouring to extend the list of exemptions for long-term conditions is also fraught with difficulty, as we well know. The BMA has examined the issue carefully. In the debate in January—I must now refer to it—I pointed out that the BMA has said:

"Moves have been made to exempt patients with cancer from prescription charges, but already this looks set to create a new set of winners and losers depending on which side of an arbitrary line you fall. If the current system is to continue to exist, then we believe that consideration of more radical proposals is needed rather than a simple extension of the list of medical exemptions."

So that is not a solution and, for me, a threshold is not a solution.

The issue comes down to the question of why medication should be free for in-patients, when out-patients, who are taking it home, are charged. That seems unjust.

11:13

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab):

Although I support the principle of free prescriptions, I, too, have one or two concerns that I want to highlight. The Labour Party in Scotland has long advocated that the Government should make prescriptions free for cancer sufferers prior to the measure being extended to the whole population. Cancer patients in England and Wales now get free prescriptions, so it is a shame that those in Scotland will have to wait until next year before they are on the same footing. Through rebalancing of the phasing process, it would have been possible to extend the measure to cancer sufferers before now.

Nicola Sturgeon: I absolutely accept the sincerity of Rhoda Grant's point and the suffering and anxiety that go with a cancer diagnosis, but why would it have been right to have an early exemption for cancer sufferers but not, say, for people with Parkinson's disease? Is it not the heart of the matter that, if we start picking and choosing, all we do is create even more anomalies, which is why complete abolition is the fairest way?

Rhoda Grant: The evidence that we have received, certainly from cancer charities, tells us that cancer is a special case, because cancer patients tend to suffer from fuel poverty and, when they receive treatment for their disease, they have a lowered immune system, which makes them more susceptible to viruses and the like. Although I accept that people with many other conditions would benefit from having free treatment now, there is certainly a special case to be made for cancer.

The cabinet secretary said in an intervention on Helen Eadie that those who qualify for free prescriptions will continue to qualify for free treatment for minor ailments from a pharmacist. That statement means that those cancer patients who do not qualify for free medication now—as well as people with chronic illnesses who do not qualify for free prescriptions now—will not qualify for access to free minor ailments treatment through their pharmacist in the future. As I said, people who are undergoing chemotherapy have poor immune systems and are susceptible to minor ailments, as are many people with other chronic conditions. If they are to access free medicines for those minor ailments, they will need

to go to their GPs to get prescriptions and that will lead to a delay in their being treated and, indeed, to a greater burden on GPs. Although I am sure that that is not the cabinet secretary's intention, I ask her to consider amending the criteria for access to free minor ailments treatment now so that cancer patients and others with chronic diseases that lead to a predisposition to minor ailments will receive treatment free of charge.

Ross Finnie's amendment raises a number of good points about prescribing. In yesterday's health debate, Elaine Smith said that the prescription of thyroxine is problematic for people who require it because they need to be prescribed the same brand if they are to benefit properly. She told us that GPs and pharmacists are unaware of that and that people's health is being compromised because they are receiving different types of treatment. That issue should be considered. We have the same problem with other generic drugs in that some people are sensitive to a small change in their drug treatment. Although we need to encourage GPs and others to use generic drugs as much as possible, it might be worth pulling together some guidance on the drugs to which people are more sensitive, so that GPs are allowed to prescribe an alternative in such cases while considering generic drugs to be the norm.

Another issue that has been raised before in the chamber, and certainly by Mary Scanlon, is the recycling of underused medicines. Back when Mary Scanlon started raising the subject, there was a problem with the idea because medicines tended to come loose in bottles and could be tampered with easily or become contaminated in some way. However, drugs are now mostly dispensed in blister packs. With a little care, it should be possible to recycle them, which would help to cut costs. Others have touched on the cost of drugs and the inflation in the cost of drug treatments. We need to try to encourage health boards to buy together and look at ways of saving on those costs in order to tackle the inflation in the cost of drug treatments and get value for money for our services.

I ask the cabinet secretary to reflect on the points that have been raised today in a genuine attempt to improve prescribing practice and help the most vulnerable in our society to benefit most from their health treatment.

11:18

Jeremy Purvis (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD): I start with a point of clarification for Jackie Baillie, who referred to health spending across the United Kingdom. As there was some reference to rewriting history, I offer the fact that Alistair Darling's plans on behalf

of the Labour Party were to protect health spending in England and Wales for two years out of a four-year period, rather than for the whole period. I am sure that Jackie Baillie is aware of that, but it is worth getting it on the record.

Jackie Baillie: Rather than suggesting that what somebody planned did not come into effect, will the member address the fact that we have the lowest budget settlement ever since the creation of the NHS?

Jeremy Purvis: All I am saying is that, over the four years, health spending would have been lower because it would have been protected for only two years.

It is fair to look at the £25 million figure in the Scottish Government's budget statement yesterday. The Government said that the pay freeze for public sector staff earning over £21,000—given that it does not apply to college or council staff, it is by and large an NHS pay policy—will save approximately £300 million and that that equates to protecting 10,000 jobs. On that basis, the cost of £25 million for the free prescriptions policy equates to around 1,000 jobs in the health service. Although I do not want to labour the point, the Government needs to be consistent in its public messaging when it equates funding figures with job numbers.

The health secretary's principled argument is that free health care for all is her policy. Changing prescription charges from £3 to zero does not end the charging regime in dentistry other than for check-ups; it does not remove all other care charges; and it does not abolish other elements from the list of charges. Unless I am wrong about the current list of NHS charges, I would be grateful if the cabinet secretary would clarify that, of the items on that list that are charged for currently, only prescriptions will be set at zero.

Nicola Sturgeon: To build on Dr Ian McKee's point, does Jeremy Purvis agree that, on this point, as in life generally, just because we cannot do everything, it does not mean that we should not take a significant and important step in the right direction?

Jeremy Purvis: I understand that point. Supplying surgical tights, surgical brassieres, abdominal or spinal supports, stock wigs, partial human hair wigs or full, bespoke human hair wigs, which bring dignity to out-patients, is within the bailiwick of this Government's funding policy under the National Health Service (Charges for Drugs and Appliances) (Scotland) Amendment Regulations 2010, which the Parliament considers. We do not know what the Government's proposals are for items B to H of the charging regime; we have a Government policy for item A only.

All that I am asking for is an understanding. We heard from Christine Grahame that the difference between an in-patient and an out-patient prescription is unjust if what we get free in hospital we have to pay for as an out-patient. That applies to elastic hosiery, including stockings, and it applies to tights if, like my granny, someone is an in-patient or older person. She was supplied with those for free because she is a pensioner, but if someone is not a pensioner or in the exempt category, surely that injustice continues. All I am asking for is to know the Government's position. It is not a case of saying, "We would like to do it if we were independent"—

Nicola Sturgeon: That is not what I said.

Jeremy Purvis: It was Ian McKee's point. We are dealing with the charging regime that we have now and I just want to know what the Government's position is.

Choices are being made. I have had casework involving patients who could not understand why provision of hyaluronan injections for their arthritis had been removed by NHS Borders. They can still get the drug if they pay for it, but they can get free painkillers to treat the symptoms, although that could be a long-term situation because of the pain that they are in. However, they are asked to pay for injections that could mean being pain free for three months. That is the point that Ross Finnie made, which I support entirely. Health care is not just about the prescription transaction in isolation from all other parts of care and prescribing. That is why we have raised unashamedly issues to do with prescribing practice, the overall drugs bill, which has grown, and the current health care regime. It is easy to look at one aspect of the whole in isolation, but we would prefer to look at it holistically.

11:23

Dr Richard Simpson (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): We have rehearsed the history of prescription charges on many occasions and I do not think that we should do so again, except to say that they have been in and they have been out. The basic principle is that charging for health care is not regarded as appropriate in this country. On practical grounds, charges have been introduced from time to time and co-payment systems have been used. The privatisation of dentistry by the Conservative party created a massive charging system, whose potential for being rolled back has been difficult to examine.

Derek Brownlee: I wonder whether I have this wrong, but I thought that we still had NHS dentistry—I seem to be married to an NHS dentist. *[Laughter.]* Well, she tells me that she is an NHS dentist, but Richard Simpson tells me that she has

been abolished. What is the difference between an independent general dental practitioner and an independent GP? They have exactly the same status, do they not?

Dr Simpson: Contractually they do, but the number of private dentists who were established as a result of the charging system has been massive. Oral ill health has been a real problem as a result and our Government and the SNP have been trying to roll that back.

The problem with the prescription charges system is that it is hugely flawed, as many members have said. For example, an MP colleague of mine who does not get free prescriptions on the ground of age does get them because she has diabetes—she gets free prescriptions not just for diabetes drugs but for all drugs. Wealthy people are therefore exempt from all charges if they have certain specific conditions.

I am scarred by the fact that, when I was a general practitioner, one of my student patients died because he failed to fulfil the three prescriptions for asthma that had been prescribed for him, and chose the wrong one to drop. He did so because he was one of the 600,000 people who were marginally ineligible for exemption. That is an important group. Those people have low incomes and they are about to have an additional VAT charge of £200 a year on their lives as a result of the Con-Dem coalition. Therefore, measures that we can take to try to relieve that are appropriate.

The other point is that the system is hugely bureaucratic, given the massive administration costs. We spend time on addressing fraud in relation to prescription charges, which is a complete waste of time. There are substantial costs. The bureaucratic element is a problem.

Derek Brownlee: Will the member take an intervention?

Dr Simpson: I really do not have time. I am sorry.

We and the SNP both started from similar positions in our manifestos in 2007. On page 40 of its manifesto, the SNP pledged that it would immediately abolish

“prescription charges for people with chronic health conditions, people with cancer, and people in full time education or training.”

Nicola Sturgeon: Will the member take an intervention?

Dr Simpson: The cabinet secretary can respond in summing up.

The SNP then decided to change to a system of gradual abolition, which was the eventual policy that was to be introduced by 2012 and is now

being introduced earlier. The SNP therefore chose a different route when it came into government.

Ian McKee asked why we focused on cancer patients. Read the Macmillan Cancer Support report: when people get cancer, they are so financially challenged, because of their change in circumstances, that we felt that free prescriptions could be extended to that group, even if we could not extend them to all long-term conditions immediately.

Ian McKee: Will the member take an intervention?

Dr Simpson: No. I am sorry, but I do not have time. I am answering the question that Ian McKee asked. The Government should have introduced that.

In Wales, prescription charges were abolished for the under-23s immediately. That was sensible, because the proportion of under-23s who were not eligible for exemption on income grounds was tiny. Again, that step could have been taken immediately.

Ross Finnie referred to the Liberal policy that free prescriptions should have been extended to people with long-term conditions. Alasdair Allan made a very cogent point in the previous debate on prescription charges, that there were 2,623 prepayment certificates in the Western Isles. We are talking about people with long-term conditions. A high proportion of the 8 per cent of people who pay for prescriptions have long-term conditions. The policy is unfair and bureaucratic and it does not produce the income that could be produced from that area if there really were a fair policy of charging only the rich, as Jackson Carlaw has suggested. It is appropriate to get rid of the policy on principled and practical grounds.

The question of prescribing costs is important. We need to have generic substitution automatically. We need to reduce waste. We need to stop prescribing non-evidenced treatments such as homeopathic medicines, on the health service. We need to stop prescribing medicines that are found not to be working for the patient. There are many things that we can do, but the one thing that we should do now is abolish prescription charges.

11:28

Nicola Sturgeon: I guess that we just have to accept that there is a disagreement between us and the Tory-Liberal coalition on this issue. It is an honest disagreement. People out there will make their own judgment, but we have to agree to differ.

I will make an important point at the outset that I do not think is made often enough when any of us—myself included—talks about universal benefits, including in relation to prescriptions. We

have a tendency to talk about them as things that are free, but they are not free. People pay for these things through their taxes. Abolishing prescription charges simply ensures that they are not asked to pay for them twice. That point could do with being made more often.

I will respond directly to a couple of points. Jackie Baillie asked about the funding. This policy has been fully funded in every year of this parliamentary session, including in the budget that was published yesterday, with a built-in assumption for increased demand. The whole point of the policy is that if we argue that prescription charges are a barrier to people getting their prescriptions, we would expect to see demand increase if charges are abolished or reduced; otherwise, the policy would not be doing its job. If the SNP is re-elected next year, as I hope and expect that we will be, the policy will be fully funded for the future, too.

Jackson Carlaw said that, instead of paying for medicines over the counter, people will go to their GP. I have to be honest with him: I do not find the notion of people with busy lives who can afford to pay for over-the-counter treatments suddenly choosing to make an appointment with their GP to get a prescription a very credible one. If that were a credible notion—this might answer the point that Jackson Carlaw is leaping to his feet to make—as prescription charges have reduced, we might have expected to see a significant impact in the way that he suggests, but we have not. Of course, as with all aspects of this policy, we will monitor the impact.

Jackson Carlaw: Will the cabinet secretary give way?

Nicola Sturgeon: I might do later, but I want to make some progress. I want to stick with Jackson Carlaw, because his speech today reminded us of what we are missing in health debates. I am really sorry—I feel that I need to put this on record—that Jackson Carlaw did not receive the invitation to my wedding. I can only conclude that the invitation was lost in the same post as his wedding gift—we are quits.

However, Jackson Carlaw made an important point. He seemed to recognise that the prescription charges system that we have just now is not fair and that change is therefore needed. That leads us to ask what kind of change. The Tories and the Liberals—I think—have made two suggestions. The first is to extend the list of long-term conditions. I have been very open about the difficulty that we encounter with that. Richard Simpson is right to quote our manifesto because that was our starting position. However, when we looked at the reality of that, we realised that we would sort some anomalies but in the process

create others. Why should one long-term condition be more deserving or more worthy than another?

The other suggestion from the Tories was to raise the financial threshold. Christine Grahame asked the key question: what would they raise it to at a time when family budgets are already under so much pressure? A threshold of £17,000, £18,000 or £21,000 appears to be the suggestion from Derek Brownlee, but the reality is that the higher we go and the more long-term conditions we add to the list, the less cost-effective the remaining system of gathering prescription charges becomes. That is the very point that the BMA made in the quotation that I read out earlier on.

Derek Brownlee: Will the cabinet secretary give way?

Nicola Sturgeon: I do not have much time just now.

I want to address one of the other central points that have been made. I know all too well how tight times are, but I guess that the fundamental difference between this Government and the Tory UK Government is that we do not believe that it is right to make the most vulnerable in society bear the brunt of those difficult times. That is why we have protected the health service. It is also why we are directing more of the budget to the front line—with the 25 per cent reduction in managers, the higher efficiency targets for some of our special boards and efficiencies in prescribing, which are extremely important.

Ross Finnie said that the policy does not exist in isolation and he is absolutely right, but he has to accept that that argument cuts both ways. Richard Simpson made this point very powerfully: if people with long-term conditions do not take the appropriate prescription medicine, the knock-on effect on their health and on the NHS can be significant.

Jeremy Purvis: Will the cabinet secretary give way?

Nicola Sturgeon: I am coming to Jeremy Purvis's point. The Liberal argument appeared latterly to be that, because we cannot remove all charges, we should not remove any. Jeremy Purvis will be interested to know that the tights and wigs and so on that he mentioned will also be free and their cost has been reduced in line with prescription charges. This policy is the right one.

11:34

Nanette Milne (North East Scotland) (Con): The arguments for and against the abolition of prescription charges have been well rehearsed in this chamber in recent years, since the Scottish Socialist Party proposal was roundly defeated in

2006. Today, we have heard the same arguments again, save that the Labour Party's stance is radically different from its position at that time. In 2006, the Lib-Lab Executive robustly opposed the abolition of charges, with Andy Kerr, as health minister, describing the proposal as unfair on the NHS and unfair on the patients and saying that it would in effect rob the poor and the unwell and give to the rich. I am not normally very critical but, as with its U-turn yesterday on the Patient Rights (Scotland) Bill, Labour's attitude today smacks of opportunism and electioneering.

Jackie Baillie: Where was Nanette Milne in January, when we debated prescription charges on a motion from Mary Scanlon? Our position then was clear and it remains consistent today.

Nanette Milne: That position is nonetheless a radical departure from where Labour was in 2006, when it was in government. That is a significant change.

The Liberal Democrats initially agreed with their Labour colleagues, went on to support abolition and then returned to opposing it last year. I am pleased that the Liberal Democrats appear finally to have made up their minds and to have made a reasoned decision on the issue. Ross Finnie's speech was measured. He demonstrated clearly the harsh realities of the choices that the NHS faces in the present financial climate and the need to spend resource wisely throughout the service. We have no difficulty in supporting his amendment.

As we have said, removing prescription charges for everyone has superficial appeal. The existing exemption criteria have inequities and it would be nearly impossible to produce a fairer list of exempt categories, as the cabinet secretary said. That is why we supported the initial reduction of the charge in 2008 from £6.85 to £5, which brought the cost of a 12-month prepayment certificate down to £48. As that was less than £1 a week and more than halved the previous cost, it was affordable and a significant help to people who require multiple and long-term drug treatment. The increasing take-up of such certificates shows that that was the case.

The initial reduction cost the NHS about £17 million, which was justifiable at the time. We opposed further reductions because of the increasing loss of revenue, which amounts to about £32 million this year. We do not support the final move next year to a zero charge, because to remove a further £25 million a year from the NHS is inappropriate given that it is under severe financial pressure, although its budget is protected, and given that the report of the Government-commissioned IBR referred to

"a pressing need to reconsider the planned abolition of prescription charges".

As we know, the vast majority of people who require help to pay for prescriptions receive it. As 92 per cent of prescriptions are exempt from the charge and a further 6 per cent are issued to people with prepayment certificates, that leaves a small percentage of prescriptions subject to the full charge. Removing that charge completely would subsidise the prescriptions of people who can well afford to pay for them with money that could be better spent in the NHS. However, to avoid doubt, as Derek Brownlee said, we do not intend to put the clock back and to charge the elderly, the young or those who are in full-time education.

The cabinet secretary mentioned Wales. The Welsh experience of free prescriptions is of increasing demand for prescriptions for drugs such as paracetamol, Gaviscon and Calpol, which are readily available over the counter at low cost. That not only takes money out of the NHS but increases the demand on GP time that could be better used. I know that some members of the National Assembly for Wales regret the policy, particularly at this time.

Some people do not hand in a prescription that they have been given because they find—as Jackson Carlaw did—that buying the drug over the counter is cheaper. That is not uncommon.

Our resolve to keep prescription charges has, if anything, been strengthened by the current tough financial future that we face as a result of Labour's mismanagement of the UK economy. It is more important than ever to spend public money as efficiently and effectively as possible. If revenue is removed from the NHS to pay for free prescriptions, something else in the service must suffer.

Many health services could benefit from the income that is derived from prescription charges. As the Parliament knows, a priority for us is the restoration and development of a universal service of practice-based health visitors, which would be of incalculable benefit to many families and young people. When one hears of malnourished children presenting in hospital, surely it is more important to spend money on health visitors who can advise vulnerable families and pick up problems before they have a serious impact on a child's welfare than it is to spend scarce resources on providing free prescriptions.

Government is all about priorities, particularly in difficult times. Opening up the NHS to another indefinite spending commitment now is not the action of a responsible Government, so we oppose the move.

Scottish Executive Question Time

General Questions

11:40

Hospitals (Free Parking)

1. Mike Rumbles (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD): To ask the Scottish Executive whether it plans to revise its decision to introduce free parking at hospital car parks. (S3O-12046)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing (Nicola Sturgeon): There are no plans to revise the decision to introduce free parking at NHS Scotland-operated car parks.

Mike Rumbles: It is obvious that the cabinet secretary is unaware of the chaos that the Government's instruction to end car parking charges has caused at Aberdeen royal infirmary. The ARI has the barriers, the machines and the staff available to issue passes for people who genuinely need to use the car park free of charge, but it has simply thrown open the gates and allowed shoppers and everyone else to park there for the whole day, which prevents the elderly and the sick who have to use their cars to travel in from rural Aberdeenshire from accessing the ARI. Will she accept an invitation to join me at the ARI's car park and see the problem at first hand?

Nicola Sturgeon: I have visited the ARI many times. Mike Rumbles is perfectly entitled to argue for the reintroduction of car parking charges and I will let him do that if he so desires. The abolition of charges was right and it is wrong to ask people to pay to park in hospital car parks.

Mike Rumbles: That was not the point.

Nicola Sturgeon: I am coming to the point that I thought Mike Rumbles made.

The abolition of charges did not remove health boards' responsibility to manage car parks and car parking. As Mike Rumbles and all of us know, a feature of the society in which we live is that demand for hospital car parks and other car parks often outstrips supply. Many health boards, such as NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde, have put in place policies to manage car parks, which are often unpopular but are required to avoid the problems that he identified. I suggest that Mike Rumbles discusses with his local health board the appropriate measures to put in place to manage car parking better and deal with the problems that he identified.

Bob Doris (Glasgow) (SNP): I welcome the abolition of car parking charges at national health service hospitals. Will the cabinet secretary reassure me that we will not return to the provisions that the previous Labour and Lib Dem Executive laid, under which nurses would have paid £12 a day to park at hospitals?

Nicola Sturgeon: I assure Bob Doris that, as I said, the Government has no intention to reintroduce car parking charges at NHS-operated car parks. As he said, we inherited a proposal for car parking charges of £12 in parts of the country. First, we reduced and capped such charges; then we abolished them.

I repeat that it is important to have well-managed car parks, so that those who need to use them can access spaces. That sometimes leads to other initiatives that are unpopular but which—unfortunately—are necessary to deal with the issues that have been raised.

Lewis Macdonald (Aberdeen Central) (Lab): Is the cabinet secretary aware that one consequence of the volume of cars that are parking at Aberdeen royal infirmary is pressure on parking on nearby streets? Does she recognise that something has gone wrong when my constituents must pay up to £200 a year to park at their own doors while parking at the hospital site is free? Will she talk to NHS Grampian and Aberdeen City Council to try to put that right?

Nicola Sturgeon: I will always discuss such issues with health boards and I encourage Lewis Macdonald as a local member—as I encouraged Mike Rumbles—to do the same. The problem is serious in parts of the country and particularly in cities, and I do not take away from the point that Lewis Macdonald made, but it does not take much working out.

Many more cars are on the roads these days than car parking spaces can take, not just in the health service but in other sectors. That makes it all the more important that we as a Government encourage people to have alternative routes to work, but that also means that—as I have said—health boards must do what they can to manage their car parks as best they can. I will continue to encourage health boards to do that and I am sure that the local members who have made points today will do likewise.

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson): Question 2 has been withdrawn.

Public Service Design (Disabled Access)

3. Cathy Peattie (Falkirk East) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what steps it has taken to ensure that public services such as health services are made fully accessible to disabled

people, particularly when new facilities are designed. (S3O-12001)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing (Nicola Sturgeon): Building regulations apply to all new building work and seek to ensure that new buildings are accessible to as wide a range of people as possible. To deliver accessible environments, new planning regulations for national and major developments were introduced last year.

Cathy Peattie: In the last session of the Parliament, the Equal Opportunities Committee undertook a comprehensive review of the barriers that face people with disabilities. One issue that people raised was access to buildings, particularly old buildings. People were very clear that new buildings should be accessible. In our wonderful new hospital in Larbert—it is a wonderful hospital—the barriers still exist. There are heavy doors in the outpatient department and physiotherapy units, poor signage and problems with the loop system—

The Presiding Officer: Question, please.

Cathy Peattie: In line with the disability discrimination legislation requirements, will the cabinet secretary ensure that future planning for new builds is fully equality proofed?

Nicola Sturgeon: Cathy Peattie is right to make reference to the Disability Discrimination Acts. Health boards are as bound by those acts as any other public agencies are. I have made it clear that the new planning regulations are designed to ensure that all new buildings are as accessible as possible.

Like Cathy Peattie, I put on record what a wonderful new hospital the new Forth Valley royal hospital at Larbert is. If there are issues of the kind that Cathy Peattie has identified, I will be happy to raise them with the health board. I encourage Cathy Peattie to do that as well, as the local member. I am sure that she will find the board receptive to responding to the issues as constructively as possible.

Flooding (Edinburgh)

4. Sarah Boyack (Edinburgh Central) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what action it is taking to protect communities in Edinburgh from flooding. (S3O-11970)

The Minister for Environment (Roseanna Cunningham): We are helping to protect communities across Scotland from flooding by working with our partners to implement the Flood Risk Management (Scotland) Act 2009 and providing funding through the local government settlement for local authorities to continue to invest

in flood prevention schemes. As the member knows, that includes the City of Edinburgh Council.

Sarah Boyack: I welcome the work on early warning that the minister has put in place. My constituents are really worried about the delay to the flood management works in Edinburgh; they worry every time that we have prolonged rain. Will the minister agree to meet me to discuss the funding shortfall in Edinburgh, which the City of Edinburgh Council tells me is the result of changes in Government funding that her predecessor put in place? Will she meet me to see whether there is any prospect of finding a solution to accelerate the speed of the works, which are now spread into three phases? My constituents do not even have the certainty of a start date for the phase 2 elements of the works, never mind the phase 3 part.

Roseanna Cunningham: I am always happy to meet members who have particular concerns. The member need only ask and we will arrange a meeting. The question allows me to remind the chamber that, from 1999 to 2007, spending on flooding in Scotland was only £5.5 million per annum. In 2007-08, it went to £32.5 million and from 2008 to 2010, £42 million per year was included in the local government settlement for flood funding. I am always astonished when Labour members ask questions about flood funding, given that history.

I have only just opened the Braid burn flood prevention scheme in Edinburgh. As the member knows, the Water of Leith scheme is progressing—[*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Order.

Roseanna Cunningham: It has already received money and will continue to receive support. That support will be wrapped up in the global local government settlement, the details of which will be announced shortly.

Policing (Budgetary Pressure)

5. Bill Butler (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what action it is taking to protect front-line policing from budgetary pressures. (S3O-11972) [*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Before we hear from the Cabinet Secretary for Justice, I suggest that members who wish to have conversations might like to do so outwith the chamber—unless they are answering or asking a question.

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice (Kenny MacAskill): We are determined to put front-line services first. That is why we will maintain police officer numbers at their current level, which is at least 1,000 more than when we came into power.

It is also why we are examining the options for more fundamental reform of our police service to put bobbies before boundaries and to ensure that the excellent policing we have now is sustainable into the future.

Bill Butler: The cabinet secretary will be aware that, on his watch, the justice portfolio has taken the biggest cut in percentage terms of all departments at 13.3 per cent. Given that fact, and that police boards have announced cuts that the Scottish Police Federation has said are equivalent to reducing police numbers by 2,900 and that Mr Swinney's budget outlined a £31 million cut in the central Government grant to the police, where will the money come from to maintain police numbers? How will the cabinet secretary assure police boards that Mr Swinney's plan will sustain the funding to maintain new recruits, when Mr Swinney himself has refused to set out a three-year budget?

Kenny MacAskill: I refer Mr Butler not only to the comments that my colleague the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth made, but to the press release and comments from the general secretary of the Scottish Police Federation. The Scottish Parliament welcomed the commitments that the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth has made, which the police have accepted and, indeed, welcomed. Those who continually talk down Scotland and continually talk up other matters in the face of the highest-ever number of police officers in Scotland and the lowest recorded crime in 32 years should recognise a good thing when a good thing is announced.

Cathie Craigie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab): I am sure that the cabinet secretary agrees that police support staff play a vital role in forces across Scotland. Indeed, they are key to allowing police to get out on to our streets and to do the job instead of being stuck behind the counter on administration work. Police support officers in my constituency—

The Presiding Officer: Question, please.

Cathie Craigie: —are concerned that their jobs may be cut. What support is the cabinet secretary giving to staff who support our police?

Kenny MacAskill: I conjoin with Cathie Craigie in saying how excellent police support staff are. We are aware of their concerns as a result of the budgets that boards have provisionally brought in. Given the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth's announcement, many of the apocalyptic views that were voiced by some—certainly those on Opposition benches—will be shown to be groundless. Indeed, I look forward to police forces looking forward to recruiting more

and securing the position of those who give service as uniformed officers or in the back room.

The Presiding Officer: Question 6 was due to be asked by Bill Kidd, but he is not in the chamber. Members are aware of my disapproval of that. In this case, it is exemplified by the fact that we are all deprived of hearing Jamie Stone's supplementary question, which I now cannot call him to ask.

Carloway Review (Remit)

7. Robert Brown (Glasgow) (LD): To ask the Scottish Executive whether it has agreed a remit for Lord Carloway's review, which was announced in the context of the emergency legislation on the detention of suspects. (S3O-12037)

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice (Kenny MacAskill): Yes. The finalised terms of reference for Lord Carloway's review of law and practice have been agreed and published. A copy has been placed in the Scottish Parliament information centre under bib number 52072.

Robert Brown: In doing so, did the cabinet secretary consult outside interests on the terms of the remit? For example, did he consult the Scottish Human Rights Commission, which was so shortsightedly ignored in the passage of the emergency legislation? He did not consult Opposition spokespeople on the issue. Who did he consult in arriving at the remit?

Kenny MacAskill: I consulted Lord Carloway. At the end of the day, the remit is Lord Carloway's. We consulted him on the matter and he suggested some changes, which we accepted. It would be entirely inappropriate for me to seek to undermine the position of a High Court judge who was nominated by the Lord President to carry out a significant review into the law, practice and evidence that we have in Scotland.

Obviously, Lord Carloway will take on board those from other bodies to give him advice—we will discuss that with him—and he may, or may not, choose to select Mr Brown as one of them. I would have thought that Lord Carloway will take on board those from the defence agencies, the Law Society of Scotland, police officers and others with a remit. We should accept the significant stature of Lord Carloway and allow him to get on with his difficult job, which we expect him to deal with as expeditiously as possible given its critical nature in our criminal justice system.

Licensed Premises (Oversubscribed Areas)

8. Gil Paterson (West of Scotland) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what its position is on local authorities refusing additional alcohol licences in areas deemed to be oversubscribed in licensed premises. (S3O-12031)

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice (Kenny MacAskill): Effective enforcement of existing laws is part of the Government's alcohol framework for action and we encourage licensing boards to use their powers to their full extent. That is particularly important when alcohol misuse costs Scotland £3.56 billion every year, or £900 for every adult. The World Health Organization considers that restricting availability is one of the key ways of reducing consumption and harm, and availability of alcohol can be addressed by increasing price and by restricting outlet density.

The Licensing (Scotland) Act 2005 requires licensing boards to adopt a proactive approach to the overprovision of licensed premises. Having established such a policy, the board is in a position to refuse an application that has been made for premises in the localities that it has decided are overprovided for. The board must still, of course, consider each case on its merits and within the context of its overprovision policy.

Gil Paterson: The cabinet secretary will know that West Dunbartonshire Council decided recently to refuse to issue new alcohol licences in areas of overprovision. Will he encourage other councils in Scotland to consider taking that positive step to combat problems of alcohol abuse and easy access to the purchase of alcohol?

Kenny MacAskill: The member makes a valid point. I have heard about what West Dunbartonshire Council is doing. The council is acting within its remit to protect its communities from the harm that alcohol can do. It has also done extensive research into the medical harm that alcohol does and into its consequences for justice, society and the community in West Dunbartonshire. I support fully the drive and desire of West Dunbartonshire licensing board and the council as a whole to take steps to protect themselves. I do not doubt that other licensing boards will consider such measures. Where licensing boards take steps to protect their communities from the oversupply, excessive availability and—despite what has happened recently—ridiculous pricing of alcohol, they will have our full support.

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): The cabinet secretary is right to point to the Licensing (Scotland) Act 2005, which enabled action to be taken on overprovision and to restrict the availability of licences. However, he will be aware that not all licensing boards are adopting such measures fully. Will he commit himself to monitoring implementation of those and other measures for which the 2005 act provides and to publishing a report setting out the progress that has been made on the act's use?

Kenny MacAskill: I am surprised that Jackie Baillie should raise that issue. The 2005 act was

brought in by the previous Liberal-Labour Administration. There are some difficulties associated with it, but we supported it when we were in opposition because we thought that that was the right direction in which to go; if only others who are in opposition now would show the same sense and look to the national interest.

We have reviewed some matters. Immediately after we came into office, we were lobbied by the police about the fit and proper person test. We reinstated that immediately, because there were issues that needed to be addressed. In the Alcohol etc (Scotland) Bill, which was passed recently, we have taken action to deal with issues relating to licensing. We can review, consult and take all sorts of steps, but at the end of the day tackling the problem of alcohol abuse in Scotland requires three Rs. First, alcohol must be consumed responsibly; we are on a journey in that regard. Secondly, it must be promoted responsibly; action has been taken in that area. Thirdly, it must be priced responsibly; shamefully, action has not been taken on that issue.

Youth Violence

9. Margaret Smith (Edinburgh West) (LD): To ask the Scottish Executive what is being done to tackle youth violence. (S30-12048)

The Minister for Community Safety (Fergus Ewing): The Scottish Government is working with the violence reduction unit and other partners to tackle violent crime by young people. Recent figures published in the "Scottish Policing Performance Framework: Annual Report 2009-10" show that crimes of violence committed by young people fell by 17 per cent between 2008-09 and 2009-10. Overall levels of youth crime are down by 12 per cent over the same period, and violent crime is at its lowest level in more than 30 years.

Those successes have been achieved through a combination of tough enforcement, supported by record numbers of police officers, and innovative early intervention initiatives such as our groundbreaking no knives, better lives campaign, which has led to a 35 per cent reduction in knife carrying in Inverclyde over the period of the campaign. We have also committed £20 million to cashback for communities, with £500,000 going specifically to reducing violence.

Margaret Smith: I thank the minister for that fulsome response. He may be aware of a couple of recent cases of violence in or just outside secondary schools in Edinburgh; I am sure that he shares my concerns about those incidents. What is the Government doing with local authorities to address the issue of violence in our schools, especially our secondary schools, where it appears to be on the rise?

Fergus Ewing: One initiative that the Government has taken is to encourage medics against violence, which involves volunteers from the National Health Service, in their own time, providing information to schoolchildren. Medics against violence is particularly active in Inverclyde, but the initiative is being rolled out in other parts of Scotland to warn children of the consequences of carrying a knife; for example, maxillofacial surgeons show them pictures of the consequences of a typical knife wound to the face. Medics against violence is an excellent initiative. I am pleased to say that I will support it tomorrow evening when I attend its charitable event, which is a masked ball.

The Presiding Officer: Before we come to the next item of business, I know that members will wish to join me in welcoming to the gallery the ambassador of Iceland, His Excellency Benedikt Jónsson. [*Applause.*]

First Minister's Question Time

12:00

Engagements

1. Iain Gray (East Lothian) (Lab): To ask the First Minister what engagements he has planned for the rest of the day. (S3F-2708)

The First Minister (Alex Salmond): Engagements to take forward the Government's programme for Scotland.

Iain Gray: The First Minister has a woeful record on building consensus, but yesterday he managed it: he united all the Opposition parties in the chamber in agreement—agreement that his budget is a cynical, short-term stop-gap measure, made in a vain attempt to get re-elected. Everyone knows that he put the short-term interest of his party before the long-term interest of his country. Especially at a time such as this, is that not an abdication of his responsibility as First Minister?

The First Minister: I will refresh Iain Gray's memory with regard to the idea that this is the first time that Labour has been unified with the Tories and the Liberal Democrats. As I remember, there was unity on the Edinburgh trams project between the Labour Party, the Liberals and the Conservatives. I am surprised that Iain Gray, as the former minister who announced the trams project, cannot remember that.

The budget that was presented yesterday tackled the huge issue that faces this country, which is the thirteen hundred million pound cutback in the public finance that is available to Scotland this coming year. That is the largest decline in public expenditure not just in the history of devolution but in the history of public spending. That is what Mr Swinney faced, and that is what he faced down. That is why we have taken the tough decisions that are required, and that is why this Government will be re-elected next May.

Iain Gray: Mr Swinney said yesterday that the budget was

"more than a one-year challenge".—[*Official Report*, Wednesday 17 November 2010; c 30461.].

However, he then immediately failed his own test. Alex Neil admitted on television—I was standing right beside him—that, if the Scottish National Party gets past the election, it will bring out the three-year budget then. What is the First Minister hiding? What happens in years 2 and 3 of his spending plans that he will not tell us about now?

The First Minister: It is quite extraordinary—Andy Kerr used that line yesterday. That point is covered in the budget document. Andy Kerr could argue that he had only an hour or two to read it

yesterday, but Iain Gray has had 24 hours to read it. As the budget document says, Campbell Christie and his commission—[*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson): Order.

The First Minister: The Christie commission will examine structural change in Scottish public services and will present a report in order to take forward the Government's plans for Scotland. [*Interruption.*] I can see members on the Labour benches looking desperately. They have all had 24 hours. [*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Order.

The First Minister: Am I meant to assume that they cannot find the right section in the budget document? Do I need to draw it to their attention?

John Swinney has faced the biggest ever decline in Scottish public spending, and he has taken the decisions that are required to face up to it. Labour, the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats are united on something else, too: they have no alternative future for Scotland, except a generation of cutbacks led by the Westminster Government.

Let us remember that, while Labour condemns the Con-Dem coalition, two thirds of the cutbacks were promised by Alistair Darling in a regime that was to be deeper and tougher than under Margaret Thatcher. We are not only facing down the immediate challenge; we are saying to Scotland, "Give us the economic power to grow the economy and take us into a better future."

Iain Gray: I have indeed read the budget document, and not even it was as tedious as Alex Salmond's answers. It is full of commissions, reviews, contracts and concordats, but it has no answers in it. All budgets—

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth (John Swinney): What about your answers, mate?

The Presiding Officer: Order!

Members: What are your answers?

The Presiding Officer: Order! Sit down, please, Mr Gray.

I understand the political situation in the chamber, and it is entirely understandable that members are somewhat overexcited. However, I cannot tolerate the Presiding Officer not getting order when he or she asks for it. That situation cannot remain. I ask members that, when I ask for order, it is given.

Iain Gray: All budgets—especially the one that we have been discussing—are about priorities. Let us look at the First Minister's priorities. We have

obtained the information that, last year, as Scotland tried to recover from recession, he spent £0.5 million on the 16 members of staff in his speech-writing unit. I have heard his speeches. Can we have our money back, please?

The First Minister: It is well known that this Government's administration costs for special advisers are dramatically lower than they were in the Administration that Iain Gray was a member of and in the previous Administration.

Let us talk about the choices that Scotland faces. Yesterday, we announced a difficult policy of pay restraint in the public sector because we believe that it is right to maintain and save jobs in Scotland. That is not easy to do; it is tough. Iain Gray has said that he supports that policy. On 29 October, he said to the BBC:

"We have to have significant pay restraint, probably close to, or at, a pay freeze".

He added:

"Certainly over a couple of years, maybe two or three years."

Fine. However, yesterday, I saw him outside the Parliament demonstrating beside a banner that demanded no pay freeze. This morning, I heard him on the radio. He was asked whether he supports pay restraint. He replied that he does: he coughed, he said, "Excuse me," and he said that he does support it and that he has said that before. If he supports pay restraint to save jobs, what was he doing yesterday? He is the first Opposition leader in history to hold a demonstration against his own policy.

Iain Gray: I will stand alongside workers who are trying to save their jobs any day of the week. [*Applause.*]

The Presiding Officer: Order.

Iain Gray: The only job that the First Minister is really trying to save is his own. He should start to do that job. He has no idea about reform of the teaching profession. Someone else can sort that out in June. He has no idea about public service reform. Someone else can sort it out in June. He has no idea about higher education funding. Someone else can sort it out in August. The First Minister has no ideas and no answers, and there is no leadership from him. He used to fancy himself as a Celtic lion. Does not the budget show that he is just a cowardly lion instead?

The First Minister: Iain Gray was not outside demonstrating for jobs yesterday; he was out demonstrating beside a banner that demanded no pay freeze. That is diametrically opposed to his policy. However, we should not be too surprised. Where does he stand on the other choices that Scotland faces? The Government has proposed a social contract that would say to people that we

have made valuable gains in freezing the council tax and removing prescription charges in return for pay restraint. Where does Iain Gray stand on that? He has changed his mind about the council tax three times. First, he said that it was to rise. Then, in a BBC interview, he said that it was not to rise. Then, at his conference, he said that it was to rise, but that he was going to cap it. Rather than tell me what we should do over the next four years, why does he not make up his mind about what his policy is for next year?

John Swinney has taken the big decisions and faced up to the biggest decline in public spending in the history of devolution. He has put forward tough but fair policies to maintain jobs and protect workers in Scotland. Above all, like all Scottish National Party members, he has a vision of getting control over Scotland's economy to grow our way, as opposed to taking the cut, cut, cut approach of Labour, the Tories and the Liberal Democrats.

Secretary of State for Scotland (Meetings)

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

To ask the First Minister when he will next meet the Secretary of State for Scotland. (S3F-2709)

The First Minister (Alex Salmond): I have no plans to meet the Secretary of State for Scotland in the near future.

Annabel Goldie: Scottish Conservative plans would give more money to Scottish universities and greater support to the students who are most in need. We now know that Alex Salmond will give less money to our universities and less support to the students who are most in need. Will he tell me whether that is a five-month plan, a one-year plan or his long-term solution?

The First Minister: Yesterday's settlement for higher education—and many other aspects of education—was widely welcomed. The reason why student leaders and others across higher education welcomed it is that they have been glancing south of the border to the tender mercies of the Con-Dem coalition as far as higher education in England is concerned. I remind Annabel Goldie that higher education teaching budgets in England are to be cut by 40 per cent over the course of the comprehensive spending review. That is why the announcement yesterday that our higher education institutions—universities and colleges—had agreed to maintain student numbers on the settlement that John Swinney was able to give them was so welcome.

If Annabel Goldie thinks about that for a second, will she accept that being able to maintain student numbers in Scotland, against what is happening to teaching budgets south of the border, is a considerable achievement? Will she also accept that we have to find a distinctively Scottish solution

that does not put the entire burden of paying for higher education on future generations of students? That would not be fair, equitable or in the Scottish tradition of education.

Annabel Goldie: The First Minister does not want to be reminded of the facts, but they are that the Scottish National Party Government is cutting funding to our universities and support for those students who are most in need.

Before the First Minister gets carried away with his rhetoric about the reaction of universities, I point out that the convener of Universities Scotland, Professor Bernard King, is damning. He said today:

"universities have agreed to take on a significant number of students at a fraction of the real cost of teaching them. This is borne out of extreme circumstances for one year only and is not a sustainable position for universities to be in."

I repeat to the First Minister that Conservative plans are ready. They are for the long term, and they will—[*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Order.

Annabel Goldie: They will put more money into the sector and give greater support to those students who are most in need.

What about the SNP? How many more reviews, task groups, working groups, green papers and acres of long grass does the First Minister need before he delivers a real, lasting solution?

The First Minister: As I remember, it was Annabel Goldie's party that wanted the review of higher education funding with which we are proceeding at present. I am sure that her party will continue to make constructive contributions, despite the fact that unanimous Scottish opinion rejects the policy that it is imposing on students south of the border.

Annabel Goldie should really have completed the quotation from Bernard King. I have it in front of me:

"It's clear from this settlement that the Scottish Government has sought to protect universities from deeper and more damaging cuts."

What are the

"deeper and more damaging cuts"

to which Bernard King refers? They are the cuts of the Conservative Government on higher education south of the border.

Professor Anton Muscatelli, the principal of the University of Glasgow and somebody Annabel Goldie has quoted in her many Latin lessons to me, said:

"We are pleased that the Scottish Government has recognised the importance of universities at a time of major

demands on the public finances. We particularly welcome the ring-fencing of research funding and widening access funding in cash terms, which will help to keep our Universities' research competitive with other UK institutions."

There is recognition across the sector that this Government is fighting for the future of higher education in Scotland. We shall not go down the road pursued by the Conservative party south of the border.

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-2710)

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

Tavish Scott: On Sunday, the Scottish National Party in Glasgow criticised the city's council for having the wrong priorities. Mr Salmond's party said that it was simply unacceptable that the council was increasing wages for those earning more than £80,000 a year. It said that that was financial incompetence. Does the First Minister agree with all that?

The First Minister: I agree with what John Swinney set out in yesterday's budget: substantial efficiencies on higher salaries across the public sector in Scotland.

I also agree with the serious attempt that the Government is making—and has been making throughout our term in office—to procure better efficiencies across the public sector in a way that does not break contracts or have us up before employment tribunals or in the European courts, which would certainly have been our destination if we had listened to the advice of Tavish Scott and the Liberal Democrats.

Tavish Scott: The First Minister needs to make sure that what is right for Glasgow on Sunday is good for the rest of the country on Thursday. I have here figures that show that, across Scotland in the past year, public bodies have taken on hundreds of new people who are paid more than £80,000 a year. The total increase in high pay in just one year is £33 million. I want a cut in the top pay in the public sector, to save money and to invest in jobs. Last January, I agreed with the First Minister when he said

"those with the broadest shoulders should bear the heaviest burden".—[*Official Report*, 21 January 2010; c 23007.]

That was okay for Glasgow on Sunday; is it right for the rest of his Government now?

The First Minister: I refer Tavish Scott to what John Swinney said yesterday:

"The costs of the senior civil service will fall by at least 10 per cent by the end of 2011-12 and by 25 per cent by 2014-15. The Government is now operating the presumption that, when a non-departmental public body's chief executive resigns or retires, their replacement will start on a salary that is at least 10 per cent lower than that of the person whom they replace.

We are further reducing the number of chief executives who have access to bonuses from the level that we inherited in 2007. As I said, we will suspend bonus payments in 2011-12. We are working to reduce the number of board members of public bodies ...

We are committed to cutting the number of senior managers in NHS Scotland by 25 per cent over the life of the next Parliament."—[*Official Report*, 17 November 2010; c 30463-64.]

Presiding Officer—[*Interruption.*] I hear Mr Rumbles, from a sedentary position, ask how we know that we can do that. We know that we can do it because we have managed to hit, match or exceed every efficiency target that we have set in the past three years, in stark contrast to the performance of the previous Administration.

Asylum Seekers (Accommodation)

4. Anne McLaughlin (Glasgow) (SNP): To ask the First Minister what the impact on local communities across Scotland will be of the decision by the United Kingdom Border Agency to cancel its contract with Glasgow City Council. (S3F-2711)

The First Minister (Alex Salmond): Both Glasgow City Council and the city of Glasgow have a positive record of welcoming and working with asylum-seeking families. The Scottish Government has no jurisdiction in matters between the UKBA and Glasgow City Council. Nevertheless, the Parliament and the people of Scotland should not lose sight of the fact that the needs of the 1,300 asylum seekers—vulnerable people who have often been through very traumatic experiences—must be foremost in all considerations of what must be done next. All asylum seekers who are dispersed to Scotland must be treated fairly and humanely, and, while they are in Scotland, they must be welcomed and supported in local communities. I understand that many of them are visiting Parliament today, and I hope that that offer is made to them on a cross-party basis.

Anne McLaughlin: I, too, welcome the Glasgow asylum seekers and their friends who are in the public gallery and those who are watching in the public area.

I ask the First Minister to do two things. First, will he condemn the sickening, disgraceful letter that many asylum seekers received last week, telling them that they would have just three to five days' notice to pack no more than two suitcases and move to a location somewhere in Scotland?

Secondly, will he make the strongest representation possible to the Home Office, telling it that the UKBA must get round the table again with Glasgow City Council to ensure that the city whose Government, whose council and whose ordinary people—many of whom are in the public gallery today—have invested so much in providing the particular support that is needed by those who seek refuge is able to continue to provide that support?

The First Minister: As Anne McLaughlin knows, the matter is not within the Scottish Government's devolved competence. However, that does not mean that we have not acted. Scottish Government funds have been used in projects to improve the lives of asylum seekers and refugees, such as the Bridges Programmes in Glasgow, which helps refugees to overcome barriers to employment, and the Maryhill Integration Network, which provides language classes and activities to encourage integration.

I condemn in the strongest possible terms the nature of the letter that the asylum seekers received. I have constantly made it clear that asylum seekers should be welcomed and treated with respect and dignity in Scotland. I therefore share the concerns about the letter, which shows a lack of sensitivity and respect. It would be totally inappropriate in any circumstances, but it is reprehensible when dealing with vulnerable people. I will make those views, which I hope are shared by the whole Parliament, known to the Home Secretary, and I will make it clear that negotiations between the UKBA and Glasgow City Council should be reopened immediately.

Johann Lamont (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab): I welcome and agree with the First Minister's comments about the role that Glasgow citizens and Glasgow City Council have played in their long-standing support for asylum seekers.

The First Minister may be aware that young people from Lourdes secondary school in my constituency are at the Parliament today to highlight the impact of the issuing of those awful letters on individual school students and the school community. We know about the work that has been done on the matter by Glasgow MPs and the Scottish Affairs Committee and their broad approach to it, which the First Minister mentioned. Will he consider how he and his education minister might intervene in relation to their responsibilities for the young people whose schooling is being disrupted and for whom the actions that are being taken at UK level have huge personal, social and educational consequences?

The First Minister: As the member knows, on a number of occasions in the past, on education and other grounds related to our devolved activities, we have intervened to try to secure the position of

asylum seekers, and we will be delighted to do so again, in the hope of securing a better position for them.

I welcome the tone and the nature of these exchanges. It must be of encouragement to people in their extremity to see a Parliament that is united in seeking to defend the interests of vulnerable people.

Robert Brown (Glasgow) (LD): Does the First Minister share my view that the priority now must be to retain asylum seekers in their current homes and to keep their children in their current schools? Regardless of the management arrangements that are contracted for by the UKBA, stability and security are vital for such people, many of whom, as the First Minister touched on, have gone through horrendous experiences at the hands of oppressive regimes abroad.

Do the protocols regarding the treatment of asylum seekers that were arrived at with such great difficulty between successive Scottish Governments and the most recent UK Government give the Scottish Government the opportunity to discuss practical solutions to the issues at hand with the Border Agency and, indeed, the UK Government?

The First Minister: I must confess that I have never found the UK Border Agency to be among the foremost advocates of the respect agenda between Westminster and Scotland. Nonetheless, given that the important matter here is the treatment of people who are in a vulnerable situation, we will take up Robert Brown's suggestion and will seek to use the protocols to defend their position.

Coal-fired Power

5. Lewis Macdonald (Aberdeen Central) (Lab): To ask the First Minister to what extent new coal-fired power generation will support the Scottish Government's plans for a low-carbon economy. (S3F-2721)

The First Minister (Alex Salmond): Just this week, we issued a draft electricity generation policy statement that demonstrates that Scotland can generate 80 per cent of its electricity demand from renewables, supported by thermal generation with carbon capture and storage.

By progressively fitting full CCS to existing and new thermal plants, maintaining a minimum thermal capacity of above 2.5GW and making grid improvements over the next decade, we can secure electricity supply and ensure decarbonisation by 2030. As a result, we will be able to export large amounts of electricity from Scotland.

"A Low Carbon Economic Strategy For Scotland", which was published on Monday, shows that between 52,000 and 95,000 new job opportunities can be created in the energy sector by 2020, with 10,000 of those jobs coming from CCS development.

Lewis Macdonald: Carbon capture does, indeed, have significant potential, but does the First Minister recall that, in the national planning framework, his Government offered support for new base-load electricity generating capacity at Hunterston, but only if it was fuelled by coal, and without requiring that technology to capture all its carbon emissions should be in place first? In the context of the plans and proposals for a low-carbon economy that he has described, will he reconsider his insistence that new generating capacity at Hunterston should be fuelled by coal?

The First Minister: I point out that, as the member well knows, I cannot comment on a live planning application.

I am somewhat surprised by the member's comments, because the framework that we put forward for carbon capture in Scotland was identical to the framework that was put forward by one Ed Miliband when he was the secretary of state at the Department of Energy and Climate Change. I do not want to see the future career of the member damaged in any way, but it is a bit rich of him to condemn the Scottish Government for putting forward a framework for carbon capture that is identical to the one pursued by the new leader of the Labour Party.

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): The First Minister will be aware that the Labour-Tory coalition that runs Inverclyde Council, which borders North Ayrshire, has recently decided not to object to the Hunterston coal-fired power station application; indeed, it is in favour of it. Does he agree that that shows the hollowness and blatant opportunism of Labour's position in claiming to oppose an unwanted and unnecessary development while its elected representatives actively support it?

The First Minister: I must be careful not to express any view on a planning application, so, therefore, I will not. However, until Kenny Gibson asked his question, I thought that Lewis Macdonald was at variance only with the leader of the Labour Party. Now, however, I realise that he is also at variance with Labour's local representatives. That is a remarkable balancing act that, I am sure, only Lewis Macdonald can achieve.

Gavin Brown (Lothians) (Con): Last week, in this chamber, the Scottish Government's energy policy was torn apart by an industry expert, Rupert Soames, in a thoughtful speech. [*Laughter*]

Scottish National Party members may laugh, but Mr Swinney, who was there, looks rather sheepish and uncomfortable right now—

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth (John Swinney): Sheepish? Far from it!

The Presiding Officer: Order, Mr Swinney.

Gavin Brown: —and the Minister for Enterprise, Energy and Tourism is sitting right at the back of the chamber, out of the way.

Does the Scottish Government intend to reflect on that speech and take action, or will it ignore the warnings of a highly respected industry expert?

The First Minister: I would never ignore the warnings of highly respected industry experts, but I have taken the precaution of reading Rupert Soames's speech, a copy of which I have before me. I can see why I found some of its contents surprising, because, basically, it is all about United Kingdom energy policy. It is only in the second last paragraph that he refers to Scotland, when he says that we have to take account of what is happening in England and Wales.

The speech surprised me for a few reasons. First, Rupert Soames seemed to suggest that it is impossible to generate more than 10 per cent of a country's electricity from wind generation, but we in Scotland already do that—we are doing that right now, not in 10 years' time. He warned of the retirement of oil-fired power generation. We do not have any of that in Scotland, so we can probably relax in that regard.

Rupert Soames also warned that people were setting long-term targets that were meaningless. If I remember correctly—in fact, I do remember correctly—our first target for renewable generation is to achieve a situation in which 31 per cent of Scotland's demand is supplied by renewable generation by next year. We are going to go through that quite substantially. How do I know that? Because reaching that target depends only on the facilities that are already in production, the ones that have been licensed and the ones that are under construction.

Having read Mr Soames's remarks, I think that there is some evidence to back up his criticisms of policy in London. The member would be foolish not to take account of the different perspective and policies of the Scottish Government, which has licensed and approved 36 major renewables applications in the past three years.

Fishing Quotas 2011

6. Liam McArthur (Orkney) (LD): To ask the First Minister what effect the European Commission's 2011 fishing quota proposals will

have on Scotland's fishing industry if they are ratified. (S3F-2724)

The First Minister (Alex Salmond): Fishing is a vital Scottish industry and a priority for the Scottish Government. We will be working hard with the industry and other stakeholders to secure the best deal possible at the December talks.

However, the Commission's proposals as they stand are unacceptable and could cost the industry £7 million next year. That is why we have provided it with additional scientific information that we hope that it will take on board. We will also be pushing for a further development of our catch quota proposals, which could turn that £7 million loss into a £16 million addition for the industry.

I hope that the member agrees that the fundamental problem remains that the common fisheries policy is a broken and discredited system and that, as we read in the interim report of the inquiry into future fisheries management that was published last week, Scotland is "disadvantaged" by having to rely on Westminster in negotiations in Brussels.

Liam McArthur: The First Minister will be aware of the extremely precarious position in which many parts of our fishing industry, particularly the white-fish fleet, find themselves.

With the on-going European Union-Norway talks and the Commission's initial quota proposals threatening a cut in fishing opportunities of between 15 and 20 per cent and a cut in fishing effort of between 15 and 30 per cent, what reassurances can the First Minister provide that any deal that is struck in Brussels next month will not result in the bankruptcy of swathes of our white-fish fleet? In relation to the catch quota proposals that he referred to, will he ensure that, as work is done to deal with the economic and environmental scandal of discards, the industry will be fully involved at every stage so that a difficult situation is not made immeasurably worse?

The First Minister: The industry will be—and is—fully involved in the catch quota initiative. For members who are not from fishing constituencies, I explain that we are putting forward the argument that if we have quotas that are judged and allocated on what is actually caught and landed—so that everything that is caught is landed—we can end the criminal misuse of resources that discards represent.

There is some indication from the European Commission, given what it has allowed Denmark in the Baltic fishery, that it may be amenable to the proposals that we are putting forward, which are backed up by the sea trials that have taken place in the past year.

Liam McArthur will know that although we still face an extremely difficult position in terms of the scientific evidence on west coast stocks, some 40 per cent of the North Sea fishery has now been certified as environmentally sustainable. We have reached that position because of the substantial conservation efforts of Scottish—and, to be fair, Norwegian—fishermen during the past few years. I therefore think that it behoves the European Commission to recognise that level of sacrifice by accepting our catch quota initiative in order to protect the viability of the Scottish fleet.

12:31

Meeting suspended until 14:15.

14:15

On resuming—

Scottish Executive Question Time

Finance and Sustainable Growth

Local Government Funding

1. Nanette Milne (North East Scotland) (Con):

To ask the Scottish Executive what recent discussions it has had on reviewing the local government funding formula. (S3O-11956)

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth (John Swinney): The local government funding formula was reviewed in 2009 by a joint Scottish Government and Convention of Scottish Local Authorities group. It concluded that the existing needs-based indicators were reasonable and generally fair, and they should be retained for 2011-12.

Nanette Milne: Following yesterday's budget announcement, I am disappointed by the approach that has been taken by the Scottish Government, which continues to preside over the unfair distribution formula that has consistently consigned Aberdeen City Council and Aberdeenshire Council to the bottom of the funding league. In light of the further cuts that the councils have to face, it is clear that Scottish National Party ministers do not have any plans to address the situation and are happy to see the north-east being short-changed.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Alasdair Morgan): Question, please.

Nanette Milne: Can I give the cabinet secretary a final chance before the Holyrood election to take action to review the local government funding formula?

John Swinney: As I said in my original answer, the funding formula was reviewed by a joint group from local government and the Scottish Government. I appreciate that there are difficulties with distribution arrangements, but one of the key characteristics of any distribution formula is that the arrangements must be fair and evidence based. The evidence that underpins the distribution formula has been re-examined and retested in order to determine that it carries that characteristic of fairness. It reflects the base of indicators that take into account demography, deprivation, rurality, sparsity of population and island characteristics. All those factors were taken into account during the review.

Andy Kerr (East Kilbride) (Lab): Is it not the case that the Scottish Government's approach to

local government finance comes directly from the Tony Soprano school of negotiation, which involves the cabinet secretary saying to local government, "If you don't do this, I will remove an enormous amount of your budget"? How does that fit with the cabinet secretary's well-worn phrases about parity of esteem and respect for local government?

John Swinney: The Government's approach to local government issues is to engage in a dialogue with local authorities, as it has done for some time, and to discuss how we can address the significant challenges that we all face in public services and financing those services. As a consequence of those discussions, the Government has reached agreement with local government and has made it clear that, if the terms of that agreement are delivered, a certain resource base will be available to local authorities. It is entirely up to those local authorities to determine whether they wish to access those resources to deliver policy commitments that we and local government believe to be in the interests of the people of Scotland. That is the basis of the arrangement at which we have arrived, and I hope that local government will respond positively to a financial settlement that no local authority could have expected the Government to deliver. The reduction in the local government budget, in the face of a much more severe reduction across the Scottish budget, is a very beneficial settlement for local government in Scotland, and I hope that it receives a positive response. If Mr Kerr can do anything to help to facilitate a positive response, I would be grateful indeed.

Alison McInnes (North East Scotland) (LD):

As Nanette Milne said, the differences in funding levels are iniquitous. Yesterday, the cabinet secretary said that he is determined to protect front-line council services as far as possible, but he did not say that he intends to do that only for about 80 per cent of councils. Six councils will receive less than 90 per cent of the Scottish average, with the two lowest being Aberdeen City Council and Aberdeenshire Council. When is the cabinet secretary going to start treating the citizens of the north-east fairly?

John Swinney: I will not repeat the points that I made to Nanette Milne; I think that Alison McInnes was here and heard my answer. The Government has taken a particular approach to local government finance in providing a rising share of the Scottish budget compared with what was provided by our predecessor Administration, which Alison McInnes supported. As a consequence, we have improved the amount of resources that are available to local authorities across Scotland.

We cannot escape the fact that, for the distribution arrangements, we must have a formula

that is driven by evidence-based criteria. That is the exercise that the Government has reviewed in consultation with local government, and local government's position is that the formula that we have adopted is a fair reflection of the needs of individual authorities.

Taxation Powers

2. Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): To ask the Government whether it supports increased taxation powers for Scotland and, if so, for what purpose. (S3O-12009)

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth (John Swinney): Increasing the Parliament's financial and economic powers is central to unlocking Scotland's economic potential. The opportunity to create a more competitive tax regime would drive up investment, employment and economic growth. That, in turn, would increase tax revenues, allowing us to fund public services sustainably year after year. With greater financial responsibility we would have the opportunity to balance the pace and scale of fiscal consolidation with the need to safeguard the economic recovery. That would ensure that the United Kingdom Government's austerity measures do not undermine the actions that we are taking to support jobs and businesses across Scotland.

Patrick Harvie: I share the cabinet secretary's view that Scotland should have increased taxation powers, but we also need the political will to use them in order to raise revenue to defend public services against the UK Government's assault on the public sector. Will the cabinet secretary accept that those taxation powers are there right now for the taking, if he would only empower local councils? Local councils could raise higher bands on the council tax for very wealthy home owners, or they could be levying a land value tax, a hotel tax or a sales tax. Local authorities in other European countries have a range of taxation options. Will the cabinet secretary take the opportunity to empower local councils to raise their own revenue locally in order to defend the public services that all of us, in all political parties, say we want to maintain?

John Swinney: I agree with Mr Harvie that it is important to have financial arrangements in place to protect front-line services. That is precisely what my budget yesterday was designed to do.

As Mr Harvie went through his list of taxation powers that he wishes to be available to local authorities, I was struck by the similarity of that position with the basket of taxes proposal that the Labour Party has advanced. There might be a willing audience within the Labour Party for some of the proposals.

An Administration must consider the financial circumstances of its citizens when it takes any decision to increase taxation. As I made clear yesterday, the Scottish Government is mindful of the fact that a number of the tax changes that have been advanced by the United Kingdom Government will increase the tax liabilities of individuals. As a consequence of that it would, in our judgment, be inappropriate for the Government to recommend using the Scottish variable rate, but it would be appropriate for the Government to continue to work with local authorities to deliver a council tax freeze.

Christina McKelvie (Central Scotland) (SNP): I welcome the cabinet secretary's confirmation in the budget statement yesterday that he will not use the Scottish Parliament's tax-raising power, which is regressive and would hit only basic-rate taxpayers at a time when they are struggling. Does he agree that the Calman tax proposals that are on offer from the Opposition parties are also regressive, and that the Scottish Parliament needs powers that would allow it to set up a fair and progressive system of taxation that would not place a larger burden on basic-rate taxpayers, compared with people higher up the income scale?

John Swinney: I certainly agree with Christina McKelvie about the importance of the Parliament being equipped with the full range of financial and economic powers. There is a need for us to critically examine and consider the implications of the proposals that were contained in the Calman commission's report which, judging from the analysis that my officials and I have undertaken, and as we have made clear publicly, would expose the public finances of Scotland to considerable volatility.

Gavin Brown (Lothians) (Con): Yesterday, the cabinet secretary suggested a higher rate of tax for one sector in Scotland compared with the same sector in England. Has he conducted a business impact assessment on that measure?

John Swinney: The Government will set out the full details of its proposals in relation to the business rate proposition that I advanced in Parliament yesterday in good time to enable Parliament to consider them, along with any implications for the business community in Scotland.

Elaine Smith (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab): This might come as something of a surprise to some Scottish National Party members, but the council tax freeze benefits the wealthiest home owners by putting £45 in their pockets annually at the expense of services in our communities.

Has the cabinet secretary read yesterday's letter from Grahame Smith of the Scottish Trades Union Congress, which was sent to all MSPs, urging

"fair use of the tax powers that are available to you"?

Will the cabinet secretary admit that he has options other than to attack public sector pay and public services and that he could hit the people I have mentioned in their pockets to pay for the mistakes of the bankers?

John Swinney: It is not just the bankers' mistakes that we are clearing up; we are also clearing up the mistakes of the previous Labour Government in the United Kingdom and clearing up from the decisions that the current UK Administration has taken.

I have, of course, considered the correspondence from Grahame Smith, and I engaged in a substantial amount of dialogue with the trade unions over the summer. From that dialogue, it strikes me that the key issue that trade union members and officials are concerned about is the preservation of public sector employment. I share that concern. As a consequence, in having to operate a budget within a fixed financial envelope and having to be mindful, as I said in my answer to Mr Harvie, of the tax burden that individuals in Scotland are carrying as a consequence of decisions that the United Kingdom Government has taken, I have tried to protect public sector employment by asking public sector workers to work with us in delivering constraint in the pay bill. That is a reasonable proposition. In return, the Government must give commitments to public sector workers. That is why I seek to put in place measures that will provide benefits to individuals, such as the council tax freeze, and why I want to ensure that the Government's approach of there being no compulsory redundancies can be secured in the public sector in Scotland.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Question 3 has been withdrawn.

Budget (Highlands and Islands)

4. Mary Scanlon (Highlands and Islands) (Con): To ask the Scottish Executive how its budget will impact on the Highlands and Islands. (S3O-11961)

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth (John Swinney): Yesterday, the Scottish Government published a draft budget that, in the face of unprecedented cuts by the Westminster Government, prioritises our purpose of increasing sustainable economic growth. In that budget, we have protected spending on the national health service in Scotland and the share of the budget allocated to local authorities to help to maintain and continuously improve the services

that are used by the people of Scotland, wherever they live.

Mary Scanlon: In his post-budget deliberations relating to the Highlands and Islands, will the cabinet secretary guarantee that the £32 million construction contract that was previously given to Rok will go ahead? Will the retendering process be carried out as soon as possible? Will the cabinet secretary ensure that the subcontractors who are owed money from the contract are involved in completion of the work to avoid their losing money to Rok and then losing out on completion of the contracts?

John Swinney: I have every sympathy with the point that Mary Scanlon raises. Last week, I was at an event at which one of the contractors who have been affected by the collapse of Rok asked me a question about that issue. Mr Mather has been involved in extensive discussions about the matter, into the bargain.

I assure Mary Scanlon that the Government will do everything that it possibly can to try to protect the contracts that are in place and to ensure that subcontractors who have unwittingly become caught up in the difficulty are assisted in dealing with what I acknowledge to be acute financial and operational difficulties. If there are any specific interventions that Mary Scanlon wishes to draw to the attention of ministers, we would be happy to receive and act on them.

High-speed Rail

5. Pauline McNeill (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what discussions it has had with the United Kingdom Government regarding high-speed rail. (S3O-11994)

The Minister for Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change (Stewart Stevenson): I discussed high-speed rail directly with the Minister of State for Transport, Theresa Villiers MP, during a meeting on 4 November.

Pauline McNeill: I thank the minister for that up-to-date report.

The minister will be aware that the leaders of Glasgow City Council and the City of Edinburgh Council recently launched their campaigns for high-speed rail. I know that the minister is personally committed to the project, but has he been able to persuade the UK Government about the economic case? Has he persuaded it that building part of the network from Scotland makes economic sense, and that we should plan for that?

Stewart Stevenson: I believe that the inputs from many sources on the economic case, including from Glasgow and Edinburgh, supported by the analysis that was undertaken by Network Rail, are well understood. The challenge for all of

us now is to ensure that the UK Government responds to that economic case, which adds huge value to proposals to create the HS2 line. We definitely see starting with the inclusion of Scotland as an economic proposition that is of great value.

Sarah Boyack (Edinburgh Central) (Lab): Will the minister say what initial thoughts he has about what could be done in Scotland using his powers to begin advance preparation and, at least, do some of the thinking about how we might connect Scotland to the rest of the UK, which might cut the length of time that we might have to wait for the high-speed rail line to come to Scotland?

Stewart Stevenson: As members will be aware, Transport Scotland produced a report on that last year. It was part of the consultation that High Speed Two (HS2) Ltd conducted.

We are working with HS2 and we are observers and participants in a wide range of meetings on the subject. There is little doubt that the expertise that is necessary to take the planning of the project forward is captured within the company and we will continue to work with it to ensure that the appropriate work is done for Scotland.

Planning Decisions (Impartiality)

6. Robin Harper (Lothians) (Green): To ask the Scottish Executive what degree of impartiality public sector planning officials are expected to show towards planning developments under consideration. (S3O-12008)

The Minister for Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change (Stewart Stevenson): Chartered town planners, including those who hold membership of the Royal Town Planning Institute, are required to act with the impartiality that is demanded by their professional code of conduct. Town planners who are civil servants also observe the high standards of impartiality that are required by the civil service code.

Robin Harper: The minister will be aware that questions have been asked in the past about the wisdom of the Government chief planner's actions in relation to the billionaire Trump's development. Does the minister agree that Mr Mackinnon's apparent support for the already controversial proposal from Murray Estates for development on green-belt land near Edinburgh airport raises further questions?

Does the minister also agree that, if Government employees are allowed to express opinions on on-going planning matters, the transparency, independence and impartiality of the entire system will come into question? Does he further agree that it is urgent that a line now be drawn that will protect the planning system from any suspicion of outrageous bias and partiality?

Stewart Stevenson: It might be appropriate to remind the member of the question that he asked me in oral questions on 9 September:

"Will he meet me and representatives of those communities to discuss their concerns?"—[*Official Report*, 9 September 2010; c 28438.]

That related to an active planning application, so I invite him to consider his supplementary question today.

I put it absolutely and unambiguously on the record that our chief planner is a gentleman of impeccable professionalism and unimpeachable character. He is respected within and beyond our borders. He has been invited to assist other jurisdictions precisely because of those qualities. We have the utmost respect for everything that he does.

Business Rates (Angus)

7. Andrew Welsh (Angus) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Executive how much the decision to lower the poundage rate to match that of England has saved for businesses in Angus. (S3O-12034)

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth (John Swinney): The decision to match the English poundage rate will save Angus businesses an estimated £2.5 million in business rates in 2010-11.

Andrew Welsh: On behalf of the business community of Angus, I thank the cabinet secretary for his answer. That saving will be replicated in businesses throughout Scotland, unlike under any transitional rates relief scheme, which would have meant, in effect, that smaller businesses were subsidising larger ones.

Does the cabinet secretary agree that, on top of the range of rates relief packages that the Scottish National Party Government has offered, the decision to reduce the poundage rate to its lowest-ever level has been of major benefit to businesses in my constituency and throughout Scotland, regardless of how they were affected by the revaluation?

John Swinney: The point that Mr Welsh makes about the poundage rate is important. The Scottish Government chose to match the rate in England, which delivered the lowest poundage rate that there has ever been in Scotland. That is just one part of a £2.4 billion package of business rates relief that the Government will put in place as part of its support for the business community. An essential element of that package is the small business bonus scheme, which has been successful in protecting small businesses from the harsh effects of the economic downturn.

David Whitton (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Lab): For clarity, will the cabinet secretary

confirm that what might be called the Tesco tax—that is, increasing tax for large retail outlets—breaks his pledge to the Scottish business community that he would maintain parity of poundage rate between Scotland and England?

John Swinney: No, because the poundage rate is set at 40.7 per cent. If Mr Whitton had knowledge of the business rates regime, he would know that there are already supplements in place beyond that basic poundage rate, which were in place when the previous Administration was in office.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Members should try to phrase their supplementary questions so that they are supplementary to the question in the *Business Bulletin*.

Jeremy Purvis (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD): I will try my best, Presiding Officer. Last year, the Government allowed businesses that were seeing an inflationary increase in their business rates to defer part of the payment for that. The inflation rate is now being set as the trigger point, so businesses will know the inflationary increase coming in for next April. Will the Scottish Government do the same as it did last June?

John Swinney: The Government will consider that issue in due course.

Urban Regeneration Companies

8. Ross Finnie (West of Scotland) (LD): To ask the Scottish Government what discussions the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth has had regarding plans for the future of the urban regeneration companies. (S3O-12038)

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth (John Swinney): I have had discussions with ministerial colleagues about future funding for regeneration in the context of the 2011-12 draft Scottish budget. The Government will continue to support urban regeneration companies with priority investment in Clyde Gateway to support the delivery of the 2014 Commonwealth games. Support will, however, be reduced from previous years' levels in the light of budgetary constraints, which will require a co-ordinated approach with URCs and their partners.

Ross Finnie: It is no doubt welcome that the funding for Clyde Gateway is to continue. As the cabinet secretary will be aware, three of the urban regeneration companies—at Clydebank, Inverclyde and Irvine Bay—impact severely on the region that I represent. Those three areas have traditionally shown—and, regrettably, continue to show—signs of structural market failure. Can the cabinet secretary give me any assurance about whether any of the URCs' plans will require to be

radically changed as a consequence of the statement that he has just made?

John Swinney: I acknowledge the work that is going on within the three urban regeneration companies in the region that Mr Finnie represents. Ministers and officials will have discussions with those companies in the context of funding their business plans, to ensure that they continue to make a positive impact on the regeneration agenda, which has attracted support in the relevant localities and is of significance in ensuring that better outcomes are delivered for the communities that are covered by those organisations.

Renewable Energy (Financial Incentives)

9. Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what financial incentives are in place to promote renewable energy. (S3O-11981)

The Minister for Enterprise, Energy and Tourism (Jim Mather): The Renewables Obligation (Scotland) Order 2009 encourages the generation of electricity from a wide range of renewable sources and offers the United Kingdom's highest level of support for wave and tidal energy. The Scottish Government is providing a number of targeted grant funding schemes, including the £13 million wave and tidal energy: research, development and demonstration support—WATERS—fund. We have also provided £15.5 million over the past two years to support community renewables. Initiatives such as the Scottish low carbon investment conference and the recently announced £70 million national renewables infrastructure fund will stimulate significant levels of investment in Scotland's renewable energy sector.

Rhoda Grant: The minister will be aware of the recent difficulties of Skykon, which manufactured wind turbines in Kintyre. He will also be aware that the company received £2.4 million in regional selective assistance. Will that money be recouped so that it can be used to attract another manufacturer to the Kintyre site? That would protect jobs and ensure that we retained our turbine manufacturing base.

Jim Mather: That potential exists. Meanwhile, Skykon is seeing whether it can be refinanced, which is entirely the right thing to do. The potential in the west coast and in Machrihanish and the potential of that plant and the people in it are monumental. The offshore wind that is there to be capitalised on will be there for many generations to come.

Rob Gibson (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): Following the discussion about financial incentives, can the minister tell us what

percentage of Highlands and Islands Enterprise's budget is expected to support the development of offshore renewables in this financial year and in the next?

Jim Mather: I cannot give Rob Gibson an exact percentage, but I can tell him that HIE and Scottish Enterprise will be involved in the £70 million that we are putting behind the national renewables infrastructure fund and that HIE is very much aligned with renewables. Indeed, its former chief executive, Sandy Cumming, is now, in effect, our offshore renewables specialist and is driving that programme forward.

Gavin Brown (Lothians) (Con): On my reading of yesterday's draft budget, the energy line decreases by about 25 per cent, in real terms, in a single year. Will the minister explain to the chamber the implications of such a large hit? Why has energy been picked out for such a big hit in one year?

Jim Mather: We are going through a transition to the private sector, along with Scottish Enterprise and HIE—as the member heard from my answer to Mr Gibson—being much more involved in energy.

The momentum is with us, now that we have had the low-carbon investment conference and begun the process of long-term engagement with the private sector. Iberdrola is to invest £3.2 billion in Scotland over the next three years, and Scottish and Southern Energy is creating a focus around its engineering pipeline with the University of Strathclyde.

It is beginning to happen. As the member will know from his answer from the First Minister earlier today, rumours to the opposite effect are grotesquely exaggerated.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Question 11 is withdrawn.

Question 12 was lodged by Bob Doris, whom I do not see—my apologies; in my excitement to get to question 11, I missed out question 10.

Business Promotion (Environmental Credentials)

10. Bill Wilson (West of Scotland) (SNP): Now I know how it feels to be insignificant.

To ask the Scottish Government whether it considers that other sectors of the economy might benefit by following VisitScotland's example in encouraging tourism-related enterprises to use their environmental credentials to boost business. (S3O-12036)

The Minister for Enterprise, Energy and Tourism (Jim Mather): Yes—there are lots of opportunities right across the Scottish economy for

enterprises to use their environmental credentials to boost business, from improving resource and energy efficiency, which will increase resilience and sustainability and reduce overheads, to increasing market share and competitiveness, by reflecting sustainable business practices in marketing, branding and procurement processes.

Only last week, we published our low-carbon economic strategy, in which we highlighted the opportunities that exist and provided a framework for Government and the wider public sector to support businesses to take up those opportunities. The green tourism business scheme is a positive code for action that offers lots of opportunity for emulation.

Bill Wilson: Will the Scottish Government accept that abandoning the use of gross domestic product as the prime indicator of economic progress in favour of a measure that is more related to sustainability would send a clear message to the world about Scotland's commitment to sustainable, responsible long-term policies?

Jim Mather: The Scottish Government already uses a wide range of measures in addition to GDP to track economic progress. As the Government's economic strategy set out, the Government's purpose is to increase sustainable economic growth. Progress is measured through our purpose targets, which include targets for each of our desired characteristics of growth: solidarity and social equity; cohesion and regional equity; and sustainability and intergenerational equity. Those targets are further supplemented by the national outcome indicators that are set out in the national performance framework, which include a national indicator on the ecological footprint.

Nigel Don (North East Scotland) (SNP): Does the minister agree that, in that context, there is scope for use to be made not just of ecology, but of the historical environment? Should tourism be encouraged across the wide range of our cultural background?

Jim Mather: That is a compelling point. We are having a close dialogue with Historic Scotland and its new chief executive, Ruth Parsons, to effect such changes and developments.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Question 11 is withdrawn.

Bob Doris is not in the chamber to ask question 12. I draw members' attention to what the Presiding Officer said this morning, when a similar event happened. Failure to be present to ask a question is discourteous to the chamber and to other members who wish to ask a supplementary on the same issue.

Youth Unemployment

13. Ken Macintosh (Eastwood) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what measures the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth plans to take to tackle the record level of youth unemployment. (S3O-11990)

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth (John Swinney): Tackling youth unemployment remains a major priority for the Government. Our draft budget reflects that priority by protecting education maintenance allowance, guaranteeing existing levels of living costs support for students, safeguarding the number of core college and university places, and delivering 34,500 new training opportunities in Scotland.

Ken Macintosh: Is the cabinet secretary aware that youth unemployment in East Renfrewshire, for example, has risen by a staggering 450 per cent over the past year and a half? Is he willing to work with other partners, including colleagues in the Labour Party team that has come up with a plan to commission 10,000 new jobs under a Scottish version of the future jobs fund, to commit to guarantee the provision of apprenticeship places for all 16 to 18-year-olds?

John Swinney: As Kenneth Macintosh knows, I am always happy to work with other parties on their policy propositions, particularly at this time of year. His front-bench team know that I will be happy to engage on those questions, as we have engaged in the past on the question of apprenticeships, on which we reached an agreed conclusion, after a somewhat convoluted journey, if I may describe it like that. I would be happy once again to engage in, I hope, a less convoluted journey to enable us to make progress on the serious issue that Mr Macintosh raises.

I acknowledge the significance of the issue. That is why the Government took steps, particularly over the summer, to ensure that our college and training places capacity was expanded to deal with the problems in the youth labour market. We will continue to take steps to address what is a serious issue for the Scottish economy and every young person who is affected.

Budget (Central Scotland)

14. Margaret Mitchell (Central Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Executive what the implications of the Scottish budget will be for Lanarkshire, Falkirk and other areas in Central Scotland. (S3O-11963)

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth (John Swinney): Yesterday, the Scottish Government published a draft budget that addresses the challenges that we face in the public finances. The priorities are promoting

economic recovery, protecting public services and delivering progress on the low-carbon economy. As I said to Mary Scanlon earlier, within that, we have protected spending on the front-line national health service and local authority services that are used by the people of Scotland, wherever they live.

Margaret Mitchell: How will the £70 million change fund, allied to the reshaping care agenda that was announced in yesterday's budget, directly benefit carers and their families in the region that I represent? How will the Scottish Executive seek to involve local carer organisations in the implementation? How, for example, does the Executive plan to ensure that the agreement with local authorities leads to the implementation of the carers and young carers strategies, while recognising what carers centres in Central Scotland and throughout the country can contribute to achieving that goal?

John Swinney: I acknowledge the interest that Margaret Mitchell has consistently expressed on the issue of carers. The provisions within the agreement that we have reached with local government make specific reference to the requirement to make progress on the carers strategy. That has been a point of substantial agreement between the Scottish Government and local government for some time.

On the £70 million change fund, we have an exciting opportunity to reshape the way in which we deliver services, focused very much on the individual and the need to ensure that we find new and innovative ways of meeting the demands and coping with the pressures that are placed on public services by the increasing number of individuals who require support. The change fund will be administered through the NHS, and will involve extensive partnership and co-operation with local authorities. I look forward to seeing it make progress in every community in Scotland. It represents an exciting public sector reform that will benefit the people of Scotland.

Local Authority Budgets (Impact of United Kingdom Budget)

15. Peter Peacock (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what costs and reductions in budget, beyond those to the Scottish block grant, are being fed through directly to local authorities from the UK Government. (S3O-12000)

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth (John Swinney): Questions arising from any changes in the funding that is provided to Scottish local authorities by the UK Government are matters for the UK Government.

Peter Peacock: Extra costs are clearly coming through from, for example, the reduction in funding for housing benefit administration costs, the increase in the Public Works Loan Board charges and the new carbon tax. I hope that the minister will take account of those things when he comes to make his final settlement with local authorities, which was signalled yesterday. Of course, that settlement represents significantly reduced expenditure by the Scottish Executive on local government. However, the deal with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities also represents what I regard to be the final humiliation and emasculation of councils, which were once a proud and almost entirely independent group of organisations and are now reduced to being agents of the Government.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Can we have a question, Mr Peacock?

Peter Peacock: Will the cabinet secretary be adding anything to the grant settlement to cover the extra costs that are coming through from the UK Government, and will he publish his new definition of parity of esteem with local government?

John Swinney: First, I tell Peter Peacock that I will assume no responsibility for the implications of the United Kingdom Government's financial decisions. UK ministers should be held to account for the decisions that they take, and if they take steps to pass on responsibilities directly to local authorities they should ensure that the appropriate funding is in place. They should certainly not leave it to the Scottish Government to pick up the pieces.

Secondly, I do not recognise the narrative that Peter Peacock applies to local authorities. The Scottish Government has given local authorities unprecedented freedom and flexibility by removing ring fencing. We have sought to secure agreement that allows priorities that are precious to the people of Scotland to be delivered effectively by every local authority in our country. I hope that local authorities will respond positively to that.

Thirdly, the financial settlement that I offered local authorities yesterday is far superior to the settlements for many other areas of government. It represents a very good deal for local government, which I hope will respond positively.

Local Authority Budgets (Impact of Scottish Budget)

16. Nigel Don (North East Scotland) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Executive what the effects of the Scottish budget will be on local authorities. (S3O-12015)

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth (John Swinney): The draft

budget represents a very good deal for local government. Under our proposed settlement, the resource support that is available from the Scottish Government will fall by only 2.6 per cent in comparison with 2010-11. The average fall in resource budgets for non-protected areas of the Scottish Government in 2011-12 is 6.4 per cent.

Nigel Don: I thank the cabinet secretary for the information that his answer contained, which I am sure will come as a huge relief to local authorities throughout the country, despite the previous questioner's comments.

Will the cabinet secretary reflect on the situation in Scotland relative to that in England and Wales?

John Swinney: Nigel Don raises an important point. Not only is there a contrast between the settlement for local government and the non-protected areas in the Scottish Government, but the reductions in resource budgets in Scotland are very different from those in England. The average reduction in England is of the order of 7.1 per cent, in comparison with 2.6 per cent in Scotland. That is a very good deal for Scottish local government in anyone's book.

National Renewables Infrastructure Fund

17. Iain Smith (North East Fife) (LD): To ask the Scottish Executive from which budget lines the £70 million for the national renewables infrastructure fund will be taken and from what current projects or initiatives resources will be redirected. (S3O-12047)

The Minister for Enterprise, Energy and Tourism (Jim Mather): Having the right infrastructure around our ports is a critical step in ensuring that Scotland can benefit from the massive manufacturing jobs potential of renewable energy. In the absence of the fossil fuel levy funds being made available to support such developments, the Scottish Enterprise board, during its November budget planning session, recognised the national renewables infrastructure plan as a priority and approved a paper recommending that up to £70 million over four years be set aside to support it. Scottish Enterprise and Highlands and Islands Enterprise will work in partnership to deliver that fund. Decisions on competing priorities are matters for the enterprise agencies to determine.

Iain Smith: The minister will accept that no member in the chamber disagrees with the importance of investing that £70 million in supporting our renewables infrastructure. However, there is concern that the £17 million that the fund will receive next year has been taken from the Scottish Enterprise and HIE budgets, which will impact on the job creation initiatives that those agencies are able to run. Will the minister

give us more detail on what the impact of the change will be? Which projects will be lost as a result of transferring that money to the national renewables infrastructure fund?

Jim Mather: I welcome Iain Smith's recognition that the investment is important; it certainly is. However, the development of our renewables infrastructure is part of the complete economic system, therefore the investment will help every business in those areas and will help to rebalance them against other parts of the country as they tap in to the huge potential that renewables offer.

Maureen Watt (North East Scotland) (SNP): Does the minister believe that the harbours around the north-east, including Aberdeen, Peterhead and Dundee, have strong cases for funding from the national renewables infrastructure fund? Does he believe that that would provide a real boost to the renewables industry in the north-east of Scotland?

Jim Mather: Yes indeed—there is enormous potential in the north-east. The boost will be material, and the industries—particularly the North Sea service industry—understand that. We are on the cusp of a new beginning in economic development and activity in the north-east.

Renewable Energy Enterprises (Fife)

18. Jim Tolson (Dunfermline West) (LD): To ask the Scottish Executive what support is being given to new enterprises in the renewable energy sector in Fife. (S3O-12051)

The Minister for Enterprise, Energy and Tourism (Jim Mather): The business gateway, led by Fife Council, delivers a full range of support for both new and existing businesses, including start-up training and information on financial support. Scottish Enterprise is working closely with the council to support new enterprises in the renewables sector and to identify and develop opportunities in the renewable energy supply chain, with a particular focus on activity at Fife energy park.

Jim Tolson: The minister will be aware of Shepherd Offshore's recent announcement of investment in a project in my constituency, which will see a future focus on renewables. Does he welcome that investment? Will he confirm that the Government will do all that it can to support the project?

Jim Mather: We welcome every investment and we will work with anybody and everybody to ensure that we move things forward. I can also tell Jim Tolson that we ran a particularly successful business gateway session in Glasgow just last week, where we had a very much wider community, as well as the business gateway, to provide support. I went to an event on the Wednesday where I met representatives of the

Federation of Small Businesses in Fife who are looking to replicate that, which is heartening. There is a real opportunity to weave the company in question into that, and I think the member should be involved in it as well.

Alternative Vote Referendum Date

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Alasdair Morgan): The next item of business is a debate on motion S3M-7427, in the name of Jim Mather, on the alternative vote referendum and 2011 Scottish Parliament election clash.

14:57

The Minister for Enterprise, Energy and Tourism (Jim Mather): This is our first debate on electoral matters since I took portfolio responsibility for elections. It comes at a time when we are a mere six months away from the next elections to the Scottish Parliament. As always, the elections next May—the fourth since devolution—will be keenly contested. I know that I am not alone in hoping that the election and the debate that precedes it will capture the imagination of Scottish voters and that they will turn out in large numbers.

The elections will be important to the people of Scotland, for voting is the single most important action that citizens can take to ensure that their voices are heard, and the elections next May will give the Scottish public the opportunity to do just that. By voting for their preferred candidate or party, the Scottish people will choose the members who will sit in the Parliament and make decisions that affect them and their families every day. That is one of the direct benefits of the devolution that most of us fought and argued for, and it is a benefit that we must look to build upon.

As the current generation of politicians, we are all working for a high turnout next May, but a high turnout is not an end in itself. As well as encouraging and motivating large numbers of people to vote, we should also be looking to ensure that those who vote are able to do so on an informed basis. That is what is at issue in today's debate. In addition, and in support of that objective, it is important for democracy in Scotland that the elections to the Scottish Parliament are given the space and prominence that are required for the public to make their decisions. As things stand, however, that will not happen next year. As part of its first legislative programme, the United Kingdom Government has introduced legislation that will mean that the next Scottish Parliament election will not be given the space or prominence that it deserves.

As members know, the Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Bill provides for a referendum on voting reform for future elections to the Westminster Parliament. Today's motion and debate are not about the merits or otherwise of the alternative vote system. The problem is one of

timing. The UK Government plans to hold the referendum on 5 May 2011, which is the same day as elections to the Scottish Parliament and the other devolved legislatures in Wales and Northern Ireland. Whether that was intended or not, the consequences are that elections to the Scottish Parliament will have to share election day and the preceding campaign period with a UK-wide electoral contest. That cannot be a good thing for democracy in Scotland.

Robert Brown (Glasgow) (LD): Does the minister regard the American system, in which people vote for Presidents, members of Congress and everything down to dog-catchers on the same day, as a negation of democracy?

Jim Mather: There was a time when the American electoral system might have been held up as a good example here, but I am afraid that those days have gone.

There is precedent for movement on this matter. The UK Government has recognised real concerns about the coincidence of elections, and yesterday the Minister for Political and Constitutional Reform wrote to the First Minister and others to ask for views on a proposal to avoid a clash of dates in 2015. We will consider the proposal with others in this Parliament and respond shortly, but I point out that it relates only to 2015. The UK Government does not yet accept that similar problems will be caused in 2011—which is regrettable, given that those problems are palpable there.

The UK public went to the polls in May 2010 and, after some negotiation, a new coalition Government came to power with talk of a new way of doing business. On his first visit to Scotland on 14 May, the Prime Minister called for an

“agenda of respect between our Parliaments”,

saying:

“This agenda is about Parliaments working together, of governing with respect, both because I believe Scotland deserves that respect and because I want to try and win Scotland's respect as the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom”.

The fact that our elections are taking place in May next year should have come as no surprise to the new UK Government. After all, the Scotland Act 1998 provides that elections to the Scottish Parliament will be held on the first Thursday in May every four years. Given that the provision has been in place for more than 10 years, a simple check would have enabled the UK Government to realise that. Alternatively, it could have picked up the telephone, written a letter or sent an e-mail. However, despite knowing the date of elections in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, the UK Government still chose to hold a referendum next May. I fail to see the respect in introducing

legislation that will create a clash of dates and interfere with elections to this Parliament. On such evidence, Mr Cameron needs to try harder on that agenda, because he is not delivering so far.

I am sad to say that, to make matters worse, neither Scottish ministers nor this Parliament were advised of the UK plans in advance. As politicians, we have a vested interest in elections, and, as members of this Parliament, we have a vested interest in the Scottish Parliament's status, and the UK Government's actions run counter to both those interests.

More than anything else, though, elections must belong to the voters. More important than our concerns as politicians is the impact that the clash of dates next May might have on the voting public. Their needs must be paramount and the UK Government's proposals undermine the integrity of the campaign process and our elections as well as unnecessarily complicating matters for our voters.

Of course, it will not just be a question of different ballot papers on election day. With two separate electoral contests, one UK-wide and the other specific to Scotland, will come two simultaneous sets of quite different campaigns. There will be national and UK-wide yes and no campaigns for the alternative vote referendum, with the possibility of individual organisations running separate and additional referendum campaigns. In addition, we will have campaigns for individual MSP candidates and for their parties based on the Scottish Parliament's responsibilities.

Given the strong influence of the London-based media and in view of what happened earlier this year in the general election campaign, there is a real risk that the AV referendum will eclipse the debate on issues that are key to the Scottish parliamentary elections. Voting reform might be an academic issue for many voters, which might be reflected in the interest in the referendum, but the Scottish Parliament is the decision-making body for many of Scotland's key issues. For the majority of Scottish people, the predominant issues in the campaign will be our economy and jobs; the strength of our health and education services; the strength and resilience of our communities; and the future of this great nation. For our part, we should be encouraging the public to have views on those key issues and to use their votes accordingly. I am sure that we can all see the risk of multiple messages causing confusion and limiting the quality of debate and engagement that Scotland needs.

We are all aware of the difficulties in 2007 when the Scottish Parliament and local government elections were held on the same day. Following that experience, the Electoral Commission asked Ron Gould, the international elections

administration expert, to conduct an independent review, in which he concluded that separating the elections would prevent national issues from dominating local government campaigns and would give greater prominence to local issues. Moreover, he believed that separation would also minimise the potential for voter confusion caused by two elections being held at the same time for different institutions and using different voting systems.

In the light of those findings, the Scottish Government introduced, and the Scottish Parliament unanimously passed, legislation to separate local government and Holyrood elections. Now, in spite of that material and co-ordinated effort, the UK Government is recreating and imposing the same problem, thus negating earlier time and effort and undermining the focus and clarity that we have earned.

Under the current proposals, each voter will receive two ballot papers; the referendum will add a third. The public will be asked to vote for a constituency MSP and a list party or candidate and then to specify whether they wish the alternative vote system to be used.

As things stand, it is for the UK Government to act to avoid the difficulties that a clash of dates would cause in May 2011. The Scottish Government has made clear its opposition to the proposals for a combined poll next year. We have also made it clear that we are prepared to engage with the UK Government to find a way round the problem. It wants to talk about 2015; why not 2011 as well? In the absence of any reciprocal willingness to work with us, I urge the UK Government to hear the compelling arguments and simply change the date of the AV referendum, especially given that the Calman Commission on Scottish Devolution recommended that the secretary of state's responsibilities for the administration of elections to the Scottish Parliament should be devolved to the Scottish Parliament and the Scottish Government.

The UK Government has said that it will introduce a bill shortly to implement the Calman recommendations, but a restricted interpretation of the Calman proposals would still see Westminster being responsible for deciding the electoral system to be used for Holyrood elections, the franchise at parliamentary elections, the number of MSPs, the electoral boundaries to be used and the timing of the elections. In that case, the Scottish Government would be responsible simply for preparing the regulations under which elections to this Parliament were run, and it would then be for this Parliament to approve the regulations. All in all, that cannot be right, and we will continue to urge the UK Government to transfer full legislative

as well as administrative responsibilities for elections to this Parliament.

I move,

That the Parliament notes with real concern the UK Government's intention to hold a referendum on voting reform for UK Parliament elections on the same day as elections to the Scottish Parliament and other devolved institutions in May 2011; regrets the UK Government's failure to consult the Scottish Government or the Scottish Parliament on this matter, and calls on the UK Government to work with the Scottish Government to agree a new date that will avoid a clash with elections to this parliament.

15:07

David McLetchie (Edinburgh Pentlands)

(Con): In an ideal world, there would of course be no coincidence in the dates for holding elections to our Parliaments or councils or for the conduct of referenda. However, this is not an ideal or perfect world and there have been such coincidences on many occasions. Indeed, not so long ago, the Labour and Liberal Democrat parties, when in government in this Parliament, were insistent that Scottish Parliament and council elections should be held on the same day. They stubbornly resisted proposals from the Conservatives and the Scottish National Party to change the coincidence of dates.

Jim Mather: Is the member saying that an ideal world would mean no clash of dates?

David McLetchie: I said that, in an ideal world, it would be possible to timetable different dates. However, I also pointed out that this is not an ideal or perfect world, and there are occasions on which a coincidence of dates is fully justified.

The change in the timing of elections to this Parliament and councils was agreed only after the 2007 debacle and the high number of spoilt ballot papers. However, it is fair to say that when we examined the reasons behind the problems, the coincidence of dates was a minor factor; other factors relating to ballot paper design, for example, were of far greater significance. Indeed, so far as my party was concerned, the principal reason for decoupling Scottish Parliament and local government elections was not administrative but to ensure that council elections receive fair and separate consideration by voters and that councils and local issues have their own day in the sun and are not overshadowed by elections to the Parliament.

Margaret Curran (Glasgow Baillieston) (Lab): Will the member take an intervention?

David McLetchie: No. I want to make some progress.

Let us be clear that it was always possible to have dates that coincided, even when not by deliberate design: on many occasions in the past, elections to the UK Parliament were coincidental

with local elections in other parts of the United Kingdom. There is nothing particularly novel about the issue of coincidence that justifies anything like the volume of excitable criticism that it has generated.

We are in this situation because Nick Clegg had the courage to spurn the advice of his Labour-luvvie predecessors—most of whom were Scots, such as Steel, Kennedy and Campbell—and recognise that the country needed a stable Government with a Commons majority to take the difficult decisions that had to be taken to tackle the problems inherited from Labour, not least of which is the appalling state of the public finances. As we know from our experience in this Parliament, the foundation for any formal coalition is a partnership agreement, negotiated between the coalition partners. In such negotiations, the prospective partners will have policies on which they insist and others on which they are prepared to compromise, and so it is that agreement is finally reached on a programme for government.

As we all know, one of the concessions that the Conservatives made to our friends the Liberal Democrats in the coalition agreement was that the new Government would bring forward legislation to hold a referendum on changing the voting system for elections to the House of Commons, from the present first-past-the-post system to the alternative vote system. We were very pleased to accommodate our Liberal friends and allies in that respect, not because we like the concept of the alternative vote—we do not, and we will campaign against it—but because it was in the wider national interest that we have a coalition Government to tackle the real problems that Labour bequeathed to us.

There is of course a simple way to resolve the matter, and that is for our Liberal Democrat friends to drop their insistence that we have a referendum on a voting system in which they do not believe and have never believed; which will not deliver their holy grail of proportional representation; and which, if approved and enacted, would make a true PR system for elections to the Commons an even more distant prospect. However, I suspect that our Liberal Democrat friends will not change their minds and so, having agreed to legislate for the holding of a referendum, the next issue is the date. Given the constitutional significance of the decision, it is desirable to maximise the number of voters who will participate in it. Equally, it is clear that the intricacies of the alternative vote system are so mind-numbingly tedious that, on a free-standing basis, only the political anoraks would be in the least bit bothered about it one way or the other.

In that context, it makes sense for the referendum date to coincide with the date for

elections to the Scottish Parliament, the National Assembly for Wales and councils in many parts of England, which will involve more than 30 million voters. It is an insult to our intelligence to suggest that Scots voters are uniquely incapable of making up their minds on two matters on the same day. The Conservatives and our Liberal Democrat friends are prepared to treat our fellow Scots as intelligent adults; the patronising parties—the SNP and Labour—seem to think that they are stupid children.

Having decided for reasons of turnout and participation to hold an election and a referendum on dates that coincide, it is worth noting that holding the votes on the same day across the United Kingdom will save approximately £17 million.

Brian Adam (Aberdeen North) (SNP): Will the member give way?

David McLetchie: No, thank you.

I know that £17 million is small beer in the grand scheme of the gargantuan debts and deficits that were left behind by the Labour Government but, nonetheless, every little helps.

One of the more absurd arguments that I have heard against the coincidence of dates is that somehow the Scottish Parliament elections will be overshadowed by the referendum. The idea that a whimper from Tavish Scott on the subject of the alternative vote is going to drown out a roar from Alex Salmond on who should govern Scotland betrays an extraordinary lack of understanding of how the Scottish media work and how Alex Salmond works. It is even disrespectful to Tavish Scott, who I think would put the Scottish Parliament elections far ahead of any AV referendum in his scale of priorities for his party. The truth is that the AV referendum in Scotland is but a footnote to the main event, and everybody knows that that is the case.

The latest report from the Electoral Commission, which was published just last week, stated that it was

“broadly satisfied that sufficient progress has presently been made to enable the local Returning and Counting Officers to run the polls well and that voters will be able to participate in them.”

That conclusion was confirmed yesterday in evidence given by the Electoral Commission to the Parliament’s Local Government and Communities Committee.

Maureen Watt (North East Scotland) (SNP): Will the member take an intervention?

David McLetchie: No—I am in my last minute.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The member has time if he wishes.

David McLetchie: Do I? Thank you very much, Presiding Officer. By all means, then, I will take an intervention.

Maureen Watt: Will the member acknowledge that the Electoral Commission said:

“The rules on how the referendum will be conducted must be clear from at least six months in advance”?

Have we not passed that date?

David McLetchie: The member might want to get picky about a few dates here and there, but I do not really think that it will be too difficult, even for an SNP brain, to work out how to put a yes or no on one piece of paper to choose between first past the post and the alternative vote. We are capable of grasping the basic proposition. We then take that piece of paper and put it in a ballot box, which will say on the front of it “AV Referendum”, and the votes will then be counted. I just do not think that that is too difficult a task for us Scots to accomplish, notwithstanding what happened in 2007.

It is also worth noting that the AV referendum count across the United Kingdom will not commence until 6 May, allowing an overnight count of votes in the elections to this Parliament to take place. Her Majesty’s Government has willingly acknowledged that the Scottish Parliament count will take precedence.

In all of that there is no lack of respect. Any lack of respect is being shown by the Labour Party and the SNP, who want to insult the intelligence and capability of voters in Scotland. We certainly do not.

I move amendment S3M-7427, to leave out from first “with” to end and insert:

“that holding a referendum on voting reform for UK Parliament elections on the same day as elections to the Scottish Parliament and other devolved institutions in May 2011 will save the taxpayer £17 million and commends Her Majesty’s Government for its wise stewardship of public finances in this respect.”

15:15

Mike Rumbles (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD): The Scottish Liberal Democrats support the decision to hold a fairer vote referendum on the same day as the Scottish parliamentary elections. Holding the two polls simultaneously has two distinct advantages. First, as has been said, it will increase turnout, which I have no doubt that every politician in this chamber would like to see—[*Interruption.*] Does somebody wish to contradict me? Secondly, it would save £17 million to boot, as has been pointed out. Again, I would have thought that every MSP in this chamber would welcome that saving.

We have heard much about the respect agenda. I do not want MSPs to be so precious that they cost us £17 million, and I hope that everyone in this chamber—

Jim Mather: Will the member take an intervention?

Margaret Curran rose—

Mike Rumbles: I ask members to let me get started—we do not normally intervene in the first minute of a speech.

I hope that everyone in the chamber will think that saving through. Far from the Electoral Commission saying that the plan would be challenging, the chamber should note that it says that every election is challenging. It also says that, in this case, it is satisfied that both votes can take place without incident or disadvantage.

Margaret Curran: Will the member give way?

Mike Rumbles: Oh, go on.

Margaret Curran: I am so grateful to the member for taking my intervention.

On the respect agenda, if the member's arguments are so strong, surely he agrees that it was incumbent on the coalition Government to consult the elected Government of Scotland so that it could at least work out the impact of the simultaneous votes. Would that not have been at least respectful?

Mike Rumbles: I think that the so-called respect agenda is interesting and I will address it in more detail in just a minute.

Despite the misgivings of both the SNP and the Labour Party, we believe that the Scottish people are more than capable of distinguishing between a vote on who they want to represent them here in Holyrood and a vote on a fairer voting system. Heavens above, are the SNP and the Labour Party really saying that the Scottish people are so thick that they cannot put three crosses on voting papers? It would be a simple cross for their constituency MSP, a simple cross for the regional party that they want to support, and a simple cross to show their view on a referendum—yes or no. Is that attitude not so insulting? Where is the respect agenda now?

Brian Adam: Will the member give way?

Mike Rumbles: I have already given way.

Brian Adam: Once.

Mike Rumbles: I give way to Brian Adam.

Brian Adam: I am grateful to the member for giving way a second time.

Does the member agree that it is not just casting the votes on the day that is important, but the

debate around the issues? Does he agree that the UK media will be concentrating on the AV referendum, which might not allow a full and proper debate on Scottish Parliament issues?

Mike Rumbles: Are Brian Adam and his SNP colleagues really so lacking in confidence in their ability to articulate their views to the Scottish people? That is about the respect agenda—they are not treating the Scottish people with respect.

If the Electoral Commission says that it feels “broadly satisfied” that our returning officers are up to the task of running a joint poll, and if we know that it will increase voter turnout, what could be the reason for SNP and Labour Party objections to the proposal? Pretending that the issue is to do with the campaign is interesting—what is it about the campaign that the SNP is really worried about?

The Liberal Democrats believe that the benefits of holding the votes on the same day far outweigh reasonable objections. I challenge the myth, about which we have heard already, that the Gould report argued against the joint poll. What the Gould report actually said was that there are benefits to holding elections on the same day. It said that there was

“very little evidence to support the argument that the simultaneous local government election using STV contributed substantially to the higher rejection rates in the Scottish parliamentary election.”

I have no problem whatsoever with holding the UK general election and our Scottish parliamentary election on the same day in 2015. I think it is eminently sensible for the UK Government to ask us in this chamber about that—if two thirds of us want to change the timing of our elections, that should be up to us.

The Gould report said that the SNP's tactic of calling itself “Alex Salmond for First Minister” was confusing. That was raised consistently as a problem and it was one of the reasons for so many spoilt ballot papers at the previous election. Despite that, Nicola Sturgeon, who I know is not here, said:

“I don't accept that caused confusion”.

She also said that the nationalists played no part in what went wrong and called Mr Gould's point “ridiculous”. I did not hear that word being used about Mr Gould today.

I suppose that I should not be surprised by the SNP saying that the situation was not its fault. After all, we get that from Mr Salmond at First Minister's question time each week—and today was no different.

I am afraid that Labour's position is also bizarre to me. Labour, like us, rightly criticised the waste of taxpayers' money on the SNP's referendum plans—or rather, the SNP's lack of referendum

plans—while failing to recognise the savings of £17 million of taxpayers' money—

Jim Mather: Will the member give way?

Mike Rumbles: No, I have given way enough—unless I have time, Presiding Officer.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Trish Godman): You can take the intervention if you wish.

Jim Mather: Thank you.

When the member talks about cost, he might want to look at the wider picture. If holding the referendum on the same day as the election has the effect—which I believe it will have, given the dominance of the UK media—of lower turnout, reduced engagement, fewer active citizens and fewer people being aware of how they can make a difference in their own country and getting involved in the debate, will that not mean that other, dramatic costs will accrue to Scotland?

Mike Rumbles: I cannot believe that a minister responsible for elections in the Scottish Parliament has just said that he believes that, because there will be two votes on the same day, turnout will be reduced. I cannot believe that that is what I have just heard from the minister. I am sorry, but I just do not accept that.

I return to the Labour Party. Iain Gray asked Alex Salmond about his referendum plans, saying that, for the £9 million cost,

“Scotland could have 300 more teachers, 600 more nursery nurses or two new primary schools. I know what most Scots would rather have.”—[*Official Report*, 12 November 2009; c 21160.]

I could not agree more. That is why I am surprised at Labour's position. It has not lodged an amendment. I assume that it will support the Government.

When Labour was in charge of it, the Scotland Office said:

“The Government does not agree that it is always necessary to hold elections on separate days. Sometimes, as happened in the past, there is a positive advantage in combining elections on the same day in order to increase voter turnout and to reduce administrative burdens and costs.”

Boy, how times have changed. I certainly cannot fathom exactly why Labour is against this move to combine polls. Its position defies logic, because combining polls is the right thing to do.

Holding the referendum on fairer votes and the Scottish Parliament elections on 5 May next year is sensible in every way. It will save £17 million of taxpayers' money, increase voter turnout and engage the electorate even more. Every MSP in the chamber should support it for those reasons. All we have from the SNP and Labour are feeble

objections. They should put them to one side and support the Liberal Democrat and Conservative amendments to this pathetic excuse for a motion.

I move amendment S3M-7427.1, to leave out from “notes” to end and insert:

“believes that the people of Scotland are clever enough to manage to vote in a Scottish Parliament election and the AV Referendum on the same day”.

15:23

Pauline McNeill (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab): Labour will support the Government tonight because we believe that it is wrong to tag a referendum on to the most important Scottish elections since devolution and, importantly, because of the failure of the UK Government to consult the Scottish Parliament, which was elected to represent the voters on devolved matters. Its failure to respect the devolved settlement is unprecedented and it was by choice. David McLetchie would have us believe that it happened by accident, but it was by choice.

There will be not one but two clashes with the Scottish Parliament elections—one with the referendum next year and another with the general election in 2015. I do not think that either Mike Rumbles or David McLetchie is particularly comfortable with the position that they are arguing today. [*Interruption.*] I am afraid that Mike Rumbles was not convincing.

The clash of election dates in 2015 is unacceptable and unworkable, and it undermines the devolution settlement. It is disrespectful to Scottish voters. The critical point made by my colleagues, which I think the Liberal Democrats are deliberately ignoring, is that not a shred of consultation has happened on any aspect of the proposal.

The Parliament and the Scottish Government should have had a say in the proposed clash of election dates, and the Electoral Commission should have been asked for an opinion before a decision was taken. Our opinion should carry weight with a UK Government that claims to respect the Scottish Parliament.

The Tory-Lib Dem Government has been hell-bent on imposing the date of the referendum, despite what has been said. That smacks—whatever people think about changing the voting system—of a crusade of vested interests of the highest order.

People are not fooled by the red herring that £17 million will be saved. That is £17 million that the UK Government is choosing to spend, so it is not a saving.

I am not surprised that the Tories are trying to foist the proposal on Scotland, but I am genuinely

surprised at the behaviour of the Liberal Democrats in Scotland, who were key players in bringing about the devolution settlement and who claim to be in a federal party in which they make their own decisions. I call on Mike Rumbles to stand up for Scotland and to reject the clash of election dates. That is the right thing to do.

Mike Rumbles rose—

Pauline McNeill: Mike Rumbles wants to intervene, so I will ask him a question. If the Parliament votes tonight to reject the clash of election dates, will he respect the vote?

Mike Rumbles: I thank Pauline McNeill for giving way—it is so generous of her to do so. She says that the proposal is somehow anti-democratic and is being foisted on the country, but it is no such thing. As she knows well, it is going through the proper parliamentary process in our UK Parliament. We are very much a federal party and the right decision is being made in the right place for Scotland.

Pauline McNeill: Now I am concerned that Mike Rumbles, as a Scottish Liberal Democrat, does not think that the Scottish Parliament is the right place to discuss the Scottish elections. Shame on him.

It is interesting that the amendments in the names of Mike Rumbles and David McLetchie say nothing about consultation. The Scottish Government should register a formal dispute through the joint ministerial committee, because the matter is serious—Labour is taking it seriously. I ask the Liberal Democrats whether, if we vote tonight to reject the clash of election dates, they will respect that.

Michael Moore has written to the Presiding Officer to offer to give the Parliament the right to move the Scottish election date by six months either way. It is ironic that that is proposed to be provided for in the Fixed-term Parliaments Bill, because our moving our elections by six months—the implication is that that would be six months earlier or later than a UK election—would mean that our term was not fixed.

Mike Rumbles: Will Pauline McNeill take an intervention?

Pauline McNeill: I am sorry—I do not have time.

We might have to reduce our parliamentary term to three and a half years. Do the Liberal Democrats support that? Alternatively, we could extend it to four and a half years, which would shorten the following term. Labour rejects that. Michael Moore has sent a letter to Iain Gray; the Liberal Democrats can tell Michael Moore that that is the answer to that letter.

It is interesting that the *New Statesman* has highlighted the fact that the Liberal Democrats favoured a four-year fixed term. Why have they not argued their position in the Westminster Parliament?

The Scottish Constitutional Convention selected May and fixed terms for good reasons. Undermining that is a serious matter.

I will address the question whether voters can cope with voting on three ballot papers. My lasting memory of 2007 is of angry voters leaving polling stations and telling me that they would not come out to vote again. That feeling was replicated across the country. Nick Clegg describes 2007 as a mishap. It is clear that he does not understand the fiasco in 2007, when 146,000 ballot papers were rejected.

I will emphasise a point that Jim Mather made, which the Scottish Liberal Democrats are deliberately ignoring. [*Interruption.*]

Robert Brown: Will Pauline McNeill take an intervention?

Pauline McNeill: Presiding Officer, please can I have a little order? I will take no more interventions, because the time for my speech has been cut by three minutes.

Gould said that holding elections on the same day had benefits, but the Liberal Democrats choose to ignore his conclusion, where he came down in favour of separating the elections, whether we like it or not. The failure to recognise the importance of the Gould report is their failure.

Jim Mather is right that it is not just about voters choosing from the alternatives on ballot papers; it is also about the three-week campaign in the lead-up to the vote. The Tories and Liberal Democrats are kidding themselves if they do not think that a UK referendum will mean that UK broadcasters will devote their broadcasting time to the referendum and that the Scottish election will suffer as a result.

We know that voter confidence should be an important issue. Given the fiasco of 2007, it is all the more important that, at the next two Scottish elections, people are allowed to hold this Parliament to account, with pure, Scottish elections uninterrupted by any other issue. Stand up for Scotland, do the right thing and respect the vote today at 5 o'clock.

15:31

Maureen Watt (North East Scotland) (SNP): Having seen the amendments to the motion that have been lodged by the Liberal Democrats and the Tories, I can only say how disappointed I am to see that they have decided not to engage

seriously with this important issue. I am disappointed, but far from surprised.

For Mike Rumbles to suggest that the issues at stake are in some way related to the intelligence of people in Scotland, as he does in his amendment, clearly shows that yet again he either has missed the point or is being deliberately obtuse. This is a serious issue that deserves serious debate, not the ridiculous approach that the Liberal Democrats have taken.

For David McLetchie to be so dismissive of the arrangements to be made by the returning officers is insulting. We are so far out from arrangements being in place that we do not even know the electoral rolls that will be used. Will it be Westminster rolls for one and Scottish Parliament rolls for another? Can members imagine the chaos that is likely in polling stations?

The fact is that for as long as we share media coverage with the UK, the better-funded and more prevalent London-based media will, as Pauline McNeill suggested, always have the power to overshadow events in Scotland. We need look only to the Westminster election just past, when wall-to-wall coverage of the TV debates was broadcast across Scotland with no recognition of the specific political situation here. Scottish issues were marginalised at that election and people in Scotland were subject to constant coverage of issues that did not affect them and could serve only to mislead.

Robert Brown: Does the member not accept that, as it was a UK parliamentary election to elect a Government, a Parliament and, indeed, a Prime Minister, for the UK, that is different from the elections to the Scottish Parliament?

Maureen Watt: Not if parties in Scotland that are also standing in that election are not allowed their due position in the debates.

If the AV referendum goes ahead on the same day as the Scottish Parliament elections, does anyone in the chamber truly believe that we will not see similar wall-to-wall coverage of Westminster representatives of the UK parties putting their cases for and against AV? We all know that that is exactly what will happen and that it will inevitably overshadow the debate on what direction the next four years at Holyrood should take.

It has long been an article of faith that, because of the media's substantial power to influence people, there should be balance in television coverage, particularly during elections. That is not an abstract concept but a key component of a balanced and fair democracy. I hope that nobody in the chamber would wish to see the alternative, whereby TV stations are able to promote a particular political party, 24 hours a day, through

rolling news coverage. Allowing the AV referendum to proceed on the same day as devolved elections would irreparably shatter the balance.

What makes the hypocrisy of the Liberal Democrats and the Tories even worse is that their counterparts at Westminster know full well that the UK media circus would inevitably overshadow the debate in Scotland. Why else would they have accepted that there is a need to prevent elections to Holyrood and Westminster from clashing in 2015? I might find deplorable their high-handed way of decreeing that the devolved elections should move, but at least they have acknowledged that there is a problem.

What is good for the goose is good for the gander. If the election dates must be separated to prevent the London media circus from overshadowing the 2015 election, the AV referendum and Holyrood elections in 2011 must also be entirely separate. Any other approach can only be described as utter hypocrisy. The fact that the Liberal Democrats at Westminster are pushing so hard for the referendum to take place at the same time as the devolved elections is a sign of their desperation to show that they have achieved something—anything—by selling out and entering into a coalition with the Conservatives. Their support is in free fall and they hope that holding a referendum for a voting system that they do not even want at the earliest possible opportunity will somehow stop that slide. It simply will not work, and it is disgraceful that they seek to undermine the fairness of the Holyrood elections to achieve their desperate aims. They made the decision to enter government with the Tories without getting anything substantial to show for it, and they must face the consequences.

The integrity of the Scottish elections cannot and must not be sacrificed in the way that the UK Government wants. It is putting the worst kind of short-term political expediency ahead of the right of the people of Scotland to have a proper debate on the issues ahead of the coming election. The Liberal Democrats and Tories should think again, and accept that the dates for the election and the AV referendum must be separate.

15:36

Margaret Curran (Glasgow Baillieston) (Lab): This is a welcome debate. As many members know, I am now a member of Parliament at Westminster, and I have followed the debate there with great interest. In one of the many contradictions that I would like to make to what Mike Rumbles has said this afternoon, I have to tell him that the legislation is indeed controversial, and the Government has been challenged on many fronts about how it has introduced it. An

enormous number of technical amendments, for example, have had to be tabled. The idea that all is sweetness and light at Westminster is quite wrong.

Robert Brown: Does Margaret Curran nevertheless accept that one of the major complications is the Labour Party's volte face on the substantive issue of the AV referendum?

Margaret Curran: No, and I will make that clear as I go through my arguments.

It is vital that the Scottish Parliament takes a view, because I have been trying to articulate the view of Scottish politics when I am down there. I am staggered by the fact that the first engagement between the coalition Government and MSPs about the issue was with MSPs who were elected to the Westminster Parliament. That is insulting to the Scottish Parliament.

Since I went to Westminster, many people have asked me about my experiences of the two institutions. I could talk for a long time about that, but I will just focus on one point. The standing of the Scottish Parliament is high in Westminster circles. It is respected, and regarded as important and an interesting development in the body politic. That is why it is staggering that the coalition Government, within weeks of making an announcement about the respect agenda, apparently breached it. Not one plausible argument has been put forward today to explain why the coalition Government did not undertake the simple act of consulting the elected Government of Scotland. There has been no explanation of why that could not have been done.

The proposal has been made with no consideration of the impact or response that it will have in Scotland. I know that people want to characterise the debate by saying that only the Labour Party and the SNP are deeply concerned about the situation, but that is not true. There are concerns throughout institutions in Scotland about the way in which the proposal has been made and the impact that it will have. It would be foolish to disregard those concerns.

To hold both votes on the same day diminishes the importance of the Scottish parliamentary elections, and the importance of the AV referendum. It represents a dilution of the debate and a distraction from the key issues that are to be determined in the parliamentary elections. This evening, I hope that the Parliament will take the view that the centrality of the Scottish parliamentary elections, and their importance to the future direction of Scotland, should not be undermined in principle, particularly in such a cavalier fashion. I say that—and it has been said already—particularly because of our experience of the previous election. Before some of the Lib

Dems get up to say that the conduct of those elections was our fault, I stress that the critical point is to learn from them.

For the life of me, I cannot understand David McLetchie's argument. He asks, "How dare we insult the intelligence of the Scottish electorate by saying that they cannot make two decisions at the same time?" Apparently, however, it was wrong at the previous Scottish parliamentary elections to ask people to make their decision in the council elections at the same time. That is a completely illogical position.

That, however, is the sort of assertion that we hear from the Deputy Prime Minister all the time: that those of us who object to the decision are somehow implying that the electorate are stupid. That is such a misunderstanding of the context in which the elections will be held. Ron Gould told us in his report that one of the big mistakes was that the voter was "treated as an afterthought", and that the institutions were thinking too much about their own processes.

Mike Rumbles: Will Margaret Curran give way?

Margaret Curran: No—I would love to, but I do not have time.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You do.

Margaret Curran: Do I? Well, then.

Mike Rumbles: Let me emphasise this point. What we are asking voters to do next May is to put a cross on a ballot paper for their constituency MSP, a cross on the regional ballot paper and a cross against a question. Is that too difficult?

Margaret Curran: That point flies in the face of what we know about why it went so wrong last time. Let us be clear about what we are asking people to do. We are asking people to vote in the Scottish Parliament elections, and there are two parts to that question. We are also asking the voter to determine the voting system for a completely different election and a completely different institution. I think that that is unfair. *[Interruption.]* I would prefer it if Mike Rumbles did not shout at me from a sedentary position. You might get away with shouting at other people, Mike, but you will not get away with shouting at me.

At our last elections, there was real confusion because we combined the decisions about different forms of government and different institutions. That was one of the conclusions of the Gould report. Further, there are some real, practical difficulties, as a number of members have said. How will the media shape the debate? How will we ensure proper focus on the Scottish Parliament election and on the AV election? How will the different stakeholders behave? How will

political parties behave, with their different positions?

David McLetchie: Will Margaret Curran give way?

Margaret Curran: As long as I have confirmation that I will get all my time, as I still have other things still to say.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I am sure you have.

David McLetchie: I point out that we are talking about an election and a referendum. The point about the coincidence of elections, which was covered by the Gould recommendations, has effectively been implemented, so avoiding a coincidence of elections is what Her Majesty's Government proposes for 2015. All that we are dealing with here is a simple referendum question—it is not a coincidence of elections at all.

Margaret Curran: That is to argue on the head of a pin. The electorate will go to the ballot box wanting to know what decisions they have to make and how many votes they have. The last time, they went into polling stations with three decisions to make and mistakes took place. This time, they will have three decisions to make. The member's attempt to highlight some subtle difference does not translate into practice.

We have to think about the practicalities, and we must ensure that there is not a distraction from the key issues of the Scottish Parliament elections. As many people have said, we have no idea how the media will behave and we do not know how the various stakeholders will behave, including the political parties, which have different views about the AV referendum. We do not know how election materials will be dealt with. We still have to wait for clarification about which election materials will be paid for and which will not.

The debate on the AV vote will take a different shape in different parts of the country. In Northern Ireland, where there are to be three elections, there will be a very different debate about AV compared with the debates in Scotland and in England. That undermines the validity of the AV referendum, as those arrangements mean that it will not be fair and transparent.

I cannot believe what has happened to the Lib Dems during the short time that I have been at Westminster. Nick Clegg, who seems to eat his words on a daily basis, used to describe the AV referendum as a "miserable little compromise" that he would not accept. Now, all of a sudden, the Lib Dems have done a somersault and are pulling out all the stops to ensure that it happens.

The Lib Dems in Scotland have changed remarkably, too, perhaps with the honourable exception of Jim Tolson, who I believe has taken a

principled decision on the matter. They seem to have changed so much. They used to be a distinct political party within a coalition arrangement, with a distinct agenda that had been properly negotiated. Now, they are turning everything on its head all of a sudden. Even Mike Rumbles has been muzzled to the point that he will defend the Government line at any cost. That is not the Mike Rumbles that I used to know—never loved, but used to know.

Now that the Lib Dems are with the Tories, they are turning themselves inside out. I cannot accept politically that they have sold so short the cause of proportional representation, which matters so much to them. They have harped on about that cause all the time that I have been in Scottish politics, but they have sold it short for an AV referendum and attached it to a political fix with the Tories. They are undermining their own cause. I would be open-minded about a referendum, but I am so offended that the Lib Dems have undermined Scottish legitimacy that I certainly would not associate myself with anything that they propose.

In conclusion, I will tell members about the real experience at Westminster. What has been proposed has all the hallmarks of a political fix. We are talking about a significant bill being rushed through the Westminster Parliament. That demonstrates a disregard for the Scottish Parliament and is completely unacceptable. I hope that the Scottish Parliament will send a strong signal to Westminster that it will not put up with it. I think that I have the Lib Dems on record as saying that the Scottish Parliament reflects the opinions of the Scottish people. I will go down to Westminster and argue for Scotland, even if other Scottish representatives will not do so.

15:46

Anne McLaughlin (Glasgow) (SNP): If, as the Con-Dems of this Parliament sincerely desire, we are to continue to operate here only within the straitjacket of devolved powers, surely they should ask their colleagues south of the border to show at least a little respect. If they are not worried about the level of disdain that London's imperial Parliament in Westminster shows to the Scottish Parliament, they should be.

There are two issues at the heart of the motion: the effect of having two different votes on the same day, and respect for the institution of the Scottish Parliament as the democratic voice of the Scottish people. I will address the former issue first.

I do not doubt that those who vote are capable of reading and comprehending a ballot paper. Of course, Mike Rumbles's amendment suggests that

I doubt their capabilities, but I certainly do not, and that is not the issue in question. However, no one who attended a count in May 2007—I recall that the election night was a glorious night in Scotland's history—can doubt that there was confusion about the voting methods on some ballot papers. Who can forget the large number of unintentionally spoilt ballot papers that were incorrectly filled out and the problems that were caused by the counting machines? It is not a question of capability. Mike Rumbles may find this difficult to believe, but many people who vote quite rightly have concerns that are far more pressing than the technicalities of ballot papers. When we make things complicated for whatever reason, that makes it easier for folk to make mistakes on their ballot papers.

Pauline McNeill talked about angry voters leaving polling places in May 2007. Mike Rumbles and the other Liberal Democrats who support his amendment would describe those voters as stupid just because they did not understand the ballot paper. I find that deeply offensive. Given the trend for declining turnouts in most of the western world, surely it is our job to make the voting process as user friendly as possible. If the evidence from May 2007 is anything to go by, the absurd London Government referendum date proposal will clearly hamper our elections in Scotland and have an impact on the number of votes that are validly cast. If the Tories disagree with that, why did David McLetchie say that that would not happen in an ideal world?

Let us not doubt that, given the British media, our election will not be highlighted or publicly debated in the way that it should be if the referendum proposal goes ahead. When Maureen Watt made that point, I heard Mike Rumbles mumbling, "Oh, so this is what it's all about." That point is probably the most important point, and it is not ideological; rather, it reflects the current realities. Let us take the example of the recent "Question Time" programme from Glasgow, in which David Dimbleby declared that matters of relevance to Scotland are of no interest to people elsewhere in the UK. We can undoubtedly be assured that debates on the referendum in the media will completely overshadow the debates on our elections. If Mike Rumbles is not concerned about that, I am concerned about him. To the British media, our piddling little Scottish elections will be of no relevance for the UK. They will be of no relevance to the BBC, but they are our national elections, and the people of Scotland deserve to know about them.

David Dimbleby's declaration on the BBC's flagship political debate programme is worrying for Scottish democracy, particularly when such a rule seems to apply only to Scotland. If we couple that with the absurd timing of the AV referendum that

the coalition Government has proposed, we have a ticking time bomb. We are talking about two competing campaigns. A referendum campaign and an election campaign would occur at the same time and votes would be cast on the same day. Of course that is a recipe for confusion. Anyone would think that it was deliberate. Not I, for I am not a conspiracy theorist, although I paused for a moment and smiled when I heard a suggestion that next year's royal wedding might also coincide with our elections. I do not think that that is likely, because too many members will be too busy that day putting out the union flag bunting and donning their tiaras to fight an election.

The Liberal-Conservative oxymoron of a Government has been an advocate of fixed-term Parliaments. Scotland has led the way with such a system, so how on earth can the London Government not have known that we have an election in May? In the years since devolution, the Scottish Parliament has been transformed into the primary forum for Scottish public debate and regained some of the esteem, if not yet all the powers, that it once had.

Let us be clear—the decision actively to clash with the Scottish parliamentary elections may not be conspiracy, but it is not mere coincidence either: it reflects the level of contempt that exists among not only London ministers but, I suggest, Whitehall civil servants towards this Parliament. The imperial Parliament of Westminster still believes that it has an empire and is still trying to crack the whip to show this Parliament who is boss. We are being told that we, the Scottish Parliament, and we, the Scottish people, are so low down its agenda that the London Government would hamper our national elections so that a fudged, compromised attempt at electoral reform can be decided upon.

That reflects badly on Michael Moore and David Mundell, who have been shown to be utterly incompetent at standing up for Scotland on the matter. However, the real villains of the piece are, of course, the Liberal Democrats, because they foisted the Conservative Government on Scotland. At least the 1707 parliamentarians were

"bought and sold for English gold",

but modern Liberal Democrats are content to support Osborne's cuts at the price of a fudged piece of electoral reform that they do not even support and which will damage our electoral process. That will send a message to the Scottish people that the imperial Parliament does not believe that their elections, opinions or aspirations are worth a jot. I look forward to hearing the Liberal Democrats' justification for that.

15:52

Duncan McNeil (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab): I welcome the debate as an opportunity to discuss the concern that voters in Scotland have not been adequately consulted on holding the Scottish Parliament elections and the AV referendum on the same day in 2011, or on holding the UK elections and Scottish Parliament elections on the same day in 2015.

As there is no convention for a committee convener to be allocated time in such a debate, I ask for the indulgence of my colleagues on the Labour Party back benches, because I intend to speak from a convener's point of view rather than take a party position.

As members are aware, following the debacle in 2007, the Local Government and Communities Committee carried out an inquiry into the elections and made many recommendations. Subsequently, we were the lead committee for the Scottish Local Government (Elections) Bill, which decoupled the local government and Scottish Parliament elections. Only this week, we began scrutiny of the Local Electoral Administration (Scotland) Bill, which picks up on some of our recommendations.

Those who were at the committee earlier this week heard the Electoral Commission in Scotland speak about the challenges that it recognises that the combined referendum and elections and the combined Westminster and Scottish Parliament elections will present. They also heard from the interim electoral management board for Scotland about the concerns that returning officers have raised in respect of those matters, which have still not been resolved.

The committee worked closely with the Scottish Government in holding a voter turnout seminar in the Parliament in June this year. Also, as recently as 30 September, it held a meeting with the UK Parliament Scottish Affairs Committee to discuss common ground and share the work that both Parliaments have done on the issue. Although, as we have heard in the debate, there were differences of opinion, emphasis and concern about the risks, there was also consensus among the committee members who met the Scottish Affairs Committee that holding the AV referendum on the same day as the Scottish Parliament elections raised a number serious concerns and gave rise to serious reservations.

In July, on the basis that the Secretary of State for Scotland wanted to work with those who expressed an interest in the matter, we wrote to the Presiding Officer, expressing our interest. On 7 October, we wrote to the Secretary of State for Scotland and the Deputy Prime Minister, Nick Clegg, on the issue, outlining our involvement in these matters and expressing an interest in being

contacted and involved. To the Deputy Prime Minister's shame, he has not responded to the committee, despite the press reports that we read and the fact that ministers are dealing with Scottish MPs, Scottish Government ministers and party leaders on the matter. The Parliament needs to be brought back into the discussions; the fact that we have not been involved is not very satisfactory. Nevertheless, I hope that members agree that the committee has carried out a significant body of work that will help to inform our choices as we move forward on the issue.

Regardless of the impact on our elections, the decision to proceed with a referendum on a fixed-term UK Parliament was disrespectful not only of our practice and procedures, but of the principles of openness and transparency that we have in the Parliament. I know that the Parliament can do better. We know that we can make informed choices, as we have done, and learn lessons. The committee knows that it can work across the parties and with the Scottish Government. Parliament surely recognises that there must be an opportunity for scrutiny of those who have created this situation. There must surely be scrutiny of those who support the decision, and there must be scrutiny of those who will have responsibility for running the election, because they know about the practical differences that we heard about earlier this week—the practicalities of the postal ballot, the different registers, the three ballot boxes and the reconfiguration of polling places that will be necessary. Those are practical issues that the Parliament needs to understand before we come to a view.

Finally, there must surely be an opportunity for individuals and organisations that have long taken an interest in the matter to be heard. I therefore look forward to the minister carrying out what he announced in his statement when he said that proposals from the UK Government would be considered jointly with others in the Parliament. I expect the Scottish Government to continue to work with the committee to bring before the Parliament a report that will allow us to take a majority, considered view in our response to the UK Government and decide how we want to proceed in the best interests not of the Parliament and the parties, but of the electorate of Scotland.

15:58

Robert Brown (Glasgow) (LD): I can tell the chamber that the timing of the AV referendum is not the talk of the steamies where I come from or, I dare say, where most members come from.

There is a different tone to this debate, which is coming particularly from the Labour Party.

Jamie Hepburn (Central Scotland) (SNP): Will the member take an intervention?

Robert Brown: Do you mind if I get started first?

We must recognise that, for the Labour Party and the SNP, the debate is about raw politics. SNP members see the debate as a superb opportunity to agitate against the Westminster Government and the union. For the Labour Party, which appears to be joined together on the issue in a pretty uneasy coalition with the SNP, it is not about AV but about the equalisation of constituencies, which Labour members have been making such a fuss about at Westminster.

The reality is that the problems that we had in 2007 related primarily to the ballot paper, which, it should be mentioned, was under the control of, and subject to arrangements that were made by a Labour Secretary of State for Scotland. It may be true that Labour has repented and learned its lessons, as Margaret Curran said—if so, I welcome Labour's coming to a new realisation—but the issue was the ballot paper, not the holding of the two elections on the same day per se.

Back in 1997, the people of Scotland voted to support the establishment of the Scottish Parliament. They did so, apparently without difficulty, in a referendum that had two questions. Both were simple to answer, with yes/no choices, but both had substantial constitutional, administrative, financial and legal arguments of some complexity behind them.

Today, the ambition and the confidence of the Scottish Government and the Labour Opposition in this Parliament have diminished to such an extent that they believe that the people of Scotland, who voted so clearly and so enthusiastically in that earlier referendum, are incapable of handling an election and a straightforward voting-reform referendum on the same day.

Cathie Craigie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab): I find the member's comments quite insulting. I am sure that there is not one member who believes that the electorate in Scotland cannot make up their minds at any election, but this is different.

We live in a representative democracy. When elections are held, each of us has to make our case and say why people should vote for us, but we are talking about the holding of a referendum and an election on the same day. At that referendum, people will be asked to make an important decision about how they will elect their representatives in future. That deserves its own space, as does the Scottish Parliament election, when the issues in our manifestos will come up. We deserve to be given the space to deal with each of those important matters on different days.

Robert Brown: Ms Craigie must have the record for the longest-ever intervention in the Parliament. The point that she made was not a particularly good one, but I will deal with it nevertheless.

Voting reform for the UK Parliament is an important issue. As far as Scotland is concerned, the vagaries of the first-past-the-post system survive in Westminster elections alone.

Paul Martin (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab): Will the member take an intervention?

Robert Brown: No—let me make some progress.

Elections to this Parliament, to the European Parliament and to local authorities are now conducted along more proportional lines, using systems that give more value to the vote of each citizen and which provide a more proportional result across the country.

I make the point—because I want to widen the debate—that that has importance, in particular, for the constitution and the future working of the UK. There are, of course, differences in political sentiment in the different nations of the UK and in different parts of the UK, but they are grossly exaggerated by the current Westminster voting system. Scotland is normally a bit more Labour and England a bit more Tory than the norm, but Labour has never gained a majority of votes in Scotland and there has not been a Conservative majority of votes in England in recent times. Apart from its other deficiencies, the current voting system tends to undermine the union and to emphasise what divides us rather than what unites us.

Margaret Curran: I understand why Robert Brown, as a Liberal, wants to get into the referendum argument on why we should change to a PR system, blah, blah, blah, but, as a member of the Scottish Parliament—that is the institution that he has been elected to—he must address the central point, which is whether he agrees that it is disrespectful for the coalition Government at Westminster to make a decision about how elections to this Parliament are to be conducted without consulting Scotland's elected Government. Will he answer that directly?

Robert Brown: I do not regard that as disrespectful, nor do I regard a debate about the fairness of Westminster elections as being a particularly bad backcloth to an election to the Scottish Parliament.

Let us keep the matter in proportion. We are talking about a narrow, largely self-contained issue, which, in my view, will hardly push the Parliament election off the front pages. That election will be dominated by issues of unusual

importance to Scotland, not least the failure of the outgoing SNP Government to lay out any financial framework that would allow the police, the councils and the voluntary sector to plan ahead.

The Electoral Commission is satisfied that both votes can take place without incident or disadvantage, and international experience supports that view. I am referring not just to the multiple elections and referenda that have been held in some US states, which I mentioned earlier, but to the parallel experience in New Zealand in 1993, when the holding of a referendum on voting reform and an election on the same day produced a much-increased turnout in the election and the referendum.

Let me turn back to the SNP's little helpers in the Labour Party. They want to impose the additional cost on the hard-pressed taxpayer of £17 million for what they presumably see as the vital priority of holding the two polls on different days.

Paul Martin: Will the member give way?

Robert Brown: I will not take a further intervention.

The sum of £17 million would build a couple of secondary schools, employ 700 teachers or support nearly 1,000 apprentices—all of which, it would appear, are lesser priorities for Labour. Oddly, it was exactly that analogy that Labour used when objecting to the cost of the SNP's vanished neverendum on independence. The final irony, of course, is that at the election it was only the Labour Party that supported the particular form of voting reform that is now on offer. Now, however, for reasons of higher party strategy, it is doing its best to sabotage it. A feeble SNP Government is matched by a feeble Labour Opposition that lacks any sense of principle in these matters.

Reform of the Westminster voting system is in the interests of Scotland, because it is part of our democracy in a modernised United Kingdom. The adoption of the AV system would not conclude business, but it would certainly be another step on the journey towards a modernised democracy. Liberal Democrats would be campaigning for a yes vote, and I hope that we will be joined in that campaign by Labour, which travelled a good distance on the constitutional reform journey but got off at the last station, and by the SNP, which jumped on the reform train halfway through the journey but constantly threatens to jump off it unless it goes where no one else wants to go—off the main line and up the siding to hit the independence buffers.

This is a debate about not very much, as it is only about the timing. We need to finish it and get on with the real business of the issues that are

involved in next May's election and the important referendum on voting reform that will go with it.

16:06

Bob Doris (Glasgow) (SNP): I normally enjoy listening to Mr Brown, whether or not I agree with him, but I thought that his speech was, by his standards, quite poor.

Duncan McNeil gave a well-balanced and considered speech on behalf of the Local Government and Communities Committee. I might come back to it later.

This Parliament has taken steps to ensure that lessons were learned from the organisation of the May 2007 Scottish Parliament elections. As we have heard, the Local Government and Communities Committee, on which I sit, conducted an inquiry into those elections and took extensive evidence on the matter, including from Professor Ron Gould, who undertook the Electoral Commission's inquiry into the elections. The Local Government and Communities Committee and Ron Gould recommended that there be a decoupling of the Scottish Parliament and local government elections. That recommendation was made for a number of reasons, not least of which was the need to ensure that the count would run as smoothly as possible and that there would be less confusion for voters when casting their votes.

There were other reasons, of course. We must ensure that there is parity of esteem with regard to the various sets of elections that we have in Scotland. There was a feeling that the council elections were overshadowed by the fact that the Scottish Parliament elections were held on the same day. It is probable that a significant section of the electorate voted for a party based on who they wanted to form the next Scottish Government and that they did so not only when they voted in the Scottish Parliament elections, but when they voted in the council elections. In other words, for some, there might have been little consideration of the issues in the council elections because the understandably intense media focus on the Scottish Parliament elections squeezed out any meaningful debate on the various merits of individual council candidates or the track record of council administrations across the country.

That is why the Scottish Government, supported by the Parliament, decoupled those elections. The Parliament and its committees united to act in the best interests of running our democratic process as effectively as possible. I emphasise that unity because, although members of the Parliament have very different visions of how to take forward democracy in Scotland, following the 2007 elections we managed to work together, consider the evidence base and act to find a Scottish

solution to the problems that existed at that point. Decoupling was an essential part of that approach. However, at a stroke, the UK Con-Dem Government has ridden roughshod over that Scottish democracy. To have a UK referendum on electoral reform on the same day as Scotland's elections to its national Parliament is a gross insult to Scotland's re-emerging democracy and is, in effect, an attempt to marginalise not only the democratically elected Parliament of Scotland, but the Assemblies of Wales and Northern Ireland, which will also hold their elections on that day.

It is clear that the UK media will hook on to and provide wall-to-wall coverage of the UK AV referendum. Indeed, we have only to look at the leaders' debates during the recent UK election, in which questions and answers routinely focused on day-to-day devolved issues that related only to England.

Another example is the recent edition of "Question Time" to which Anne McLaughlin referred. The chair, David Dimbleby, ruled out of order a discussion on the construction sector in Scotland because that area is devolved to the Scottish Parliament. However, the following week the same Mr Dimbleby allowed an extensive discussion on tuition fees in England, despite the programme being broadcast throughout the UK. We cannot have confidence that our UK broadcast media will give due respect to the Scottish elections, and the Conservatives and Lib Dems cannot escape from that issue, much as they try.

Now we are to hold an AV referendum that applies across the UK on the same day as Scotland's national elections. I do not think that any Conservative or Lib Dem member really believes that the electorate will be fully informed as a result of the clash; I just do not buy the argument.

I suspect that the Lib Dems and the Conservatives very much hope that the AV elections will overshadow the Scottish elections, as they know that they cannot put up with the scrutiny that they will face in the latter.

Robert Brown: Will Bob Doris explain to members the complications that he envisages arising from the issues surrounding the AV elections?

Bob Doris: I am pretty sure that I laid those out quite clearly.

The Electoral Commission thinks that it can meet the challenges of the election process—in other words, putting a cross on a ballot paper—which the Lib Dems and Conservatives have patronised members in the chamber by trying to point out. The issue, however, is that people need to understand the consequence of the cross that

they put on the ballot paper and what it means for their country.

Tricia Marwick (Central Fife) (SNP): Does the member recall that the Electoral Commission made it clear in the run-up to the 2007 elections—which were a total debacle—that it could carry those out?

Bob Doris: That point is well made. It is worth pointing out that the Electoral Commission believes that it can get the process right, but is not sure whether it can get the message right. In the previous Scottish elections it thought that it could get everything right, and nothing went right. That is an important point.

I will address the UK Government's lack of consultation of this Parliament, its committees and the Scottish people. It is an absolute farce and shows disrespect to our nation—not to our Parliament or its committees, but to the Scottish people. I give a tiny bit of credit to the Scottish Affairs Committee, which did its best at the last minute to come and speak to the Local Government and Communities Committee and get our views, despite the UK Government not caring one jot what those views were. Things must change, and quickly.

We have heard that Ron Gould considered that the voter at the previous Scottish elections was "treated as an afterthought". For next year's elections, the voter has not been considered at all. I believe that the electoral management board that will be set up in Scotland this year will eventually take power over European, UK, Scottish and local elections, and it will be accountable to this Parliament on an annual basis.

My final plea is for some parliamentary committee—perhaps the Local Government and Communities Committee—to have a remit to scrutinise all elections in which the Scottish voter participates, to ensure that we get it right for the voters of Scotland. One thing is for sure: the Lib Dems and Conservatives will get it wrong every time.

16:13

George Foulkes (Lothians) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to follow such a thoughtful speech by Bob Doris; I never thought that I would find myself saying that.

I say to Mike Rumbles and Robert Brown that the debate has been useful; it was out of order for Robert Brown to dismiss it as an irrelevance. The Westminster bill has not yet been enacted—it is still a bill, and it has not yet been agreed by the House of Lords. Amendments are this very day being tabled in the House of Lords, including one that changes the date of the referendum—if any

referendum is agreed, of course. I know that independent-minded Tories—and, yes, Liberal Democrats—in the House of Lords will support that amendment, unlike the puppets that we have here today.

I say to Mike Rumbles that there are two major issues of confusion—campaign confusion and voting confusion. Let us take campaign confusion first. For the election, there will be party campaigns, but for the referendum, there will be cross-party campaigns. Does David McLetchie recall that, when he was a young man, he and I campaigned in the referendum in favour of Europe? Indeed, I sent him all round Scotland delivering leaflets. I can tell members that he did it very well. He and I would be on the same side again. We would be against the alternative vote system. Imagine David McLetchie chapping on doors in Wester Hailes and saying, “Vote for me for this constituency.” He would also have to say, “Vote for me for the list,” because he is not too sure about winning the constituency, by the way. Then he would say, “Vote against AV, and, by the way, George Foulkes agrees with me on that.” The voter would say, “But he doesn’t want you to be elected.” David McLetchie would say, “Oh no, he doesn’t want me elected here.” Imagine the confusion.

Think about the campaigns that we are all involved in. We would have lots of loudspeakers going round saying, “Vote McLetchie,” and others saying, “Vote no.” People will say, “Wait a minute. Vote McLetchie? Vote no? I don’t quite understand this. It’s confusing.” We would have posters up saying “McLetchie. No.” People would say, “Wait a minute. Do they not want McLetchie?” We would have leaflets going round. Imagine the confusion. If nothing else, his message would be somewhat clouded.

The referendum is not really necessary. The Liberal Democrats do not want the alternative vote system. Robert Brown admitted that. They want STV. The referendum is a battering ram, or the thin end of the wedge. As Margaret Curran said, Clegg described it as a “miserable little compromise”. Imagine the enthusiasm: “Vote for our miserable little compromise!” I say to Robert Brown that that will not get them all out into the streets.

The Tories are against the referendum. Deep down, they do not want it. I also say to David McLetchie that it would save an awful lot more than £17 million if we did not have a referendum at all, because we would save money on not just the voting, but the campaign.

There was a question—I think it came from Mike Rumbles—about Labour’s position. Labour’s position is quite clear. *[Interruption.]* If you listen, you might actually learn something.

Mike Rumbles: I am all ears.

George Foulkes: I noticed.

We were in favour of a pre-legislative referendum, not a post-legislative referendum. There is a big difference. We were in favour of an advisory referendum, not a binding referendum. There is a substantial difference.

Mike Rumbles: I—

George Foulkes: No! Wait a minute. Do not talk, Rumbles. I met someone who thought his Christian name was Belly, by the way. Anyway, he talks a lot. If he listened occasionally, he might learn something.

Let us come to voting confusion. We are not saying that the Scots electors are any more stupid or clever than anyone else. What we are saying—Maureen Watt is the only person so far who has put her finger on it—is that there are two different franchises. There is the parliamentary franchise for the referendum and the local government franchise for the election. What difference does that make? The parliamentary franchise includes overseas voters. The local government franchise includes citizens of other European countries. There is huge confusion about who will vote. I presume that you have all got copies of the Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Bill. David, have you got a copy of the bill? If you turn to page 220, you will see—*[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Order.

George Foulkes: The bill costs only £14.50, so members can get copies quite easily.

If you do not have two registers, you can have one register. The bill states:

“In a case where a referendum ballot paper, and a constituency ballot paper and regional ballot paper, are delivered at the same time, a single mark must be placed in the register against the number of the elector under ... the referendum rules, and ... the Scottish Parliamentary Election Rules ... In any other case, a mark must be placed in the register against the number of the elector identifying the poll to which each ballot paper delivered relates.”

Is that not clear? The presiding officer would be scrabbling around to find which one the person was voting for. They would say, “Are you French? Oh yes. You can vote for this.” They would ask the next person, “Are you from overseas?” Members can imagine the confusion and delay.

You might remember that in Nick Clegg’s seat in Sheffield some electors were unable to vote because they did not have enough time to get in. Next year we will have queues at voting booths of people confused about the system.

As others have pointed out, we decided to move the council elections away from the Parliament elections to separate the campaigns and ensure

that there would be no confusion in voting or campaigning. We wanted people to vote for local councils, not according to what they thought of the Parliament. I find it really crazy to reverse that decision and add the referendum to next year's elections, simply to satisfy Nick Clegg's vanity. The Con-Dems might have vanity photographers and valets on the taxpayer, but our vital and precious democracy should not be sacrificed to their vanity.

16:21

Jamie Hepburn (Central Scotland) (SNP): I congratulate George Foulkes on that entertaining and energetic performance.

On 5 May 1961, Alan Shepard became the first American astronaut. Twenty days after that historic mission, before a joint session of the US Congress, President Kennedy made his historic pledge to put a man on the moon before the end of the decade and safely return him to earth. You will be relieved to know that that is not a set-up for some space cadet pun, but I have to wonder about the circumstances in which an AV referendum on 5 May next year could in any way be described as historic. It is a referendum on a policy that no political party supports unconditionally and for which, from speaking to the people whom I represent, I hear no great clamour. Robert Brown made great play of the fact that the timing of an AV referendum is hardly the talk of the steamie. That statement is absolutely true, but nevertheless I find it extraordinary. A referendum on AV would hardly be the talk of the steamie at any time.

On 5 May next year, people will have to make a historic decision: to re-elect the first ever Scottish National Party Government and consider the decisions that the Parliament and the elected Scottish Government will have to take in the coming years. Voters in Scotland should—indeed, must—be allowed to focus on such matters next May. Decisions about the electoral system at Westminster should, quite literally, be left for another day and members have highlighted many good reasons for that. First, the Gould report, which was unanimously endorsed by the Parliament, clearly stated that different kinds of elections should take place on different days. One of Gould's key findings was that separating out elections would prevent wider issues from dominating local government campaigns. I would have thought that there was a real danger of the AV referendum overshadowing Scotland's general election because of the dominance of UK and London-based media but, according to David McLetchie, the referendum will be the footnote to the Scottish Parliament election. I see him nodding his head at that, but I would have thought that anyone out there who actually supported AV and

wanted to make the case for it—whoever they might be—would not want to risk the debate on AV being overshadowed by the Scottish Parliament elections.

Contrary to what the Liberal Democrat amendment suggests, there are certain widespread and legitimate concerns about the administration of these two polls on the same day that have nothing to do with the Scottish people's capability to vote on a referendum on the same day as voting in an election to this Parliament. Having been told that opposition to the holding of both ballots on the same day is patronising to the Scottish people, I find the Liberal Democrats' argument in that respect to be patronising in the extreme. As for the Tories, if they are as concerned about value to the public purse as their amendment suggests—and, indeed, as David McLetchie argued with Mike Rumbles's eager backing—surely we should be thinking about saving not £17 million but the £90 million to £120 million that the AV referendum will cost across the UK by ditching the whole thing. I find it extraordinary that David McLetchie should advance the proposition that the Tories do not want this referendum when they seem willing to spend nearly £120 million on holding it.

As Maureen Watt and George Foulkes have made clear, there is a danger that, if the referendum is conducted under Westminster voting regulations, the two polls will be conducted on different boundaries and possibly under different franchises, which will cause only confusion.

There were suggestions that returning officers would be told that the referendum would take priority in the counting process, which would have led to a delay in establishing the shape of our Parliament and who would form the Scottish Government. We heard from David McLetchie that that will not be the case and that the UK Government has somehow graciously conceded the point, which is evidently something that we should be grateful for. I must say that anything other than that position would have been a total and utter disgrace, and we have nothing to be grateful for from the UK Government in this regard.

As Pauline McNeill set out, there has been no genuine consultation and no discussion in advance. Anyone with the most basic grip of Scotland's political system knows that this Parliament has fixed terms, and the dates of our future general elections are clear. As Jim Mather suggested, perhaps the Tories and Liberals have not looked at next year's calendar—and who can blame them for not wanting to think too much about next year's elections, such will be the judgment cast against them? Anne McLaughlin

asked how the UK Government could not have known that there is a Scottish election next year. It does know, but the truth is that it does not want to think about it too much.

The clash of the election and referendum on 5 May 2011 is not the only potential clash of polls. The UK Government's Fixed-term Parliaments Bill will establish a UK general election on the first Thursday in May 2015 and on the same day every five years thereafter. This Parliament will also be up for election on the first Thursday in May 2015. I understand that the UK Government has conceded some ground on the issue—although I am not particularly grateful for it, Mr McLetchie—and that this Parliament may be empowered to change the date of its election to prevent such a clash.

I have two responses to that. First, by 2015, we will be operating in circumstances in which Westminster elections no longer figure in Scotland's politics because we will be independent. Secondly, and in relation to today's debate, if the Government is prepared to concede that there should not be a clash of Scottish and Westminster parliamentary elections, surely it stands to reason that it is not appropriate to have a clash with an AV referendum either, given that to all intents and purposes it is a Westminster election too.

All that speaks to a complete lack of respect for Scotland's democratic processes and structures on the part of the UK Government. It is not so much that the coalition sees what goes on in Scotland as a distraction from its agenda; our issues and concerns do not even feature on its radar. When the coalition Government first announced the plan for fixed-term parliaments, concern was immediately raised about the possible clash of elections in 2015. Despite that concern and the Government having several months to think about it, it went ahead and announced that the AV referendum would take place at the same time as the Scottish Parliament elections next year.

In conclusion, the merits of the alternative vote—whatever they may be—are the real distraction on 5 May next year. Robert Brown says that constitutional reform at Westminster is important to the people of Scotland. The genuine alternative that is open to people in Scotland—the constitutional reform that will really improve democracy, accountability and the future prospects of the country—is independence and Scotland's withdrawal from Westminster.

Some members who vehemently oppose a referendum on independence want to cheer on a referendum on an obscure voting system and risk obscuring the important issues that we need to discuss in our next general election. A successful

referendum on independence would give us the powers to grow our economy and develop our public services to find the best way to help Scotland emerge stronger from the global economic downturn. That is the referendum denied to voters in Scotland, and that is the referendum that people in Scotland need.

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson): We come now to closing speeches. I can offer each closing speaker one minute more than they were advised—it may become mandatory later on.

16:28

Nicol Stephen (Aberdeen South) (LD): There has been a lot of hype, hyperbole and hypocrisy today from members on the SNP and Labour benches. Let me remind Labour members that they supported two different elections on the same day in Scotland at every election from 1999 onwards. The 2007 electoral arrangements, which they have so resoundingly criticised this afternoon and which were indeed resoundingly criticised by the Gould report and many other observers, were masterminded by the Labour Secretary of State for Scotland, Douglas Alexander. Let me tell the SNP members that if they were offered an independence referendum on any election day—Scottish, UK, European or local—they would be like the cats that had got the cream.

Jim Mather: Will the member give way?

Nicol Stephen: Go on, then.

Jim Mather: Does the member recognise the fact that, against what he is proposing, an independence referendum coinciding with a Scottish election would be one institution talking to one electorate through one medium? Compare and contrast.

Nicol Stephen: There we have it: this is all about politics and positioning, and nothing about principle.

Jamie Hepburn: Will the member take an intervention?

Nicol Stephen: No, thank you.

I recall my first visit to the United States, when I went to California and studied the voting system there. Voters were issued not with ballot papers but with a booklet showing all the votes that they could make on the one day—for the President, for the state Congress, federal Congress and federal state representatives, for judges, for police commissioners and for things that they called propositions. There was not just one proposition on that one polling day; there were endless propositions, on environmental, equalities and taxation issues.

Jamie Hepburn: Will the member give way?

Nicol Stephen: All those were taken to the voters on that occasion because the electorate had decided democratically that it wished those propositions to be voted on on that day in California.

I am happy to give way.

Jamie Hepburn: Finally—thank you very much. It is interesting that the member talks about the American system. Is the former leader of the Liberal Democrats suggesting that there has never been a problem with an American election? I seem to remember one in 2000.

Nicol Stephen: I assure the member that that problem had nothing to do with the voting system that I studied in California. It has worked successfully for many decades and is absolutely the normal system for voters in America. The issues in Florida were very different.

In this country, the Electoral Commission says that the proposal can work. It has stated:

“we believe that it should be possible to deliver the different polls proposed for 5 May”.

For me, the issue is vital and we have to get on with it. We have to ensure that the nation has a new and fairer voting system for Westminster in place for 2015, and there is much to do.

I would like other changes to be made to create less confusion and greater fairness for the electorate. Our Scottish Parliament election system continues to cause confusion and should be reformed. We should introduce the single transferable vote in multimember constituencies. That would be a single, fair and proportional vote for Scottish elections. As far as I can see, the only reason why that was rejected by the Labour Party when the Scottish Constitutional Convention considered the voting system back in the 1990s was that it was supported by the Liberal Democrats.

In time, I believe that the same fair system should be introduced for Westminster. The single transferable vote would give a proper proportional system for the Westminster election. However, for now, the best prospect for greater fairness is to back the fair votes referendum and to support AV.

Duncan McNeil: Does the member accept that the differences that have been expressed today and his vision for any future changes should be dealt with appropriately through the procedures, principles and committees of this Parliament and that such measures should not be imposed on the Parliament?

Nicol Stephen: As has been said repeatedly, we are talking about a UK issue to do with the voting system for the UK House of Commons. It is important that it is dealt with appropriately, and

that is being done, in the House of Commons and the House of Lords. There has been great controversy and heated debate, but I believe that the issue will shortly be resolved. In my opinion, it must be resolved speedily.

The fair votes campaign needs to be won. It will be good for democracy if there is a high turnout for the election. Members should ask themselves whether the people of Scotland would thank the Labour Party and the SNP if they were asked to vote in May 2011 in the election for the Scottish Parliament and then to vote again in July 2011 in an AV referendum. Would people thank the Labour Party and the SNP if those parties put back the introduction of fair votes for the House of Commons in the UK?

Tricia Marwick: Will the member give way?

The Presiding Officer: He is in his last minute.

Nicol Stephen: Scots are intelligent, capable and discerning individuals. Many intelligent Conservatives will vote in favour of fairer votes at Westminster, while others, including David McLetchie, will not, but none of that will confuse them about voting for their party in the Scottish elections. This afternoon, Labour and the SNP are together in the chamber. How swiftly and smoothly they work together. However, they protest too much. My summary is simple: two issues, on one day, simple and straightforward. Let us get on with it.

16:35

Alex Johnstone (North East Scotland) (Con):

This has been an interesting debate, but I had hoped that it might be slightly more light-hearted. I hoped to get some entertainment out of the debate; in fact, there would have been none at all had George Foulkes not pulled the cat out of the bag at the last minute and produced something that entertained us, even though it may not have served to inform us further.

The issue of whether we can hold a referendum on the same day as the Scottish Parliament election is interesting to discuss and good to debate. In his opening speech, Jim Mather said that he had a strong opinion on the issue, but he kept his remarks reasonable and rational. I will begin by addressing the points that he made.

Jim Mather wanted to ensure that people were able to deal with the vote on an informed basis. I have heard nothing in today's debate that tells me that the people of Scotland cannot vote in a referendum on an informed basis on the same day as a Scottish Parliament election. The argument against that seems to be based on the fact that we had some problems on the day of the 2007 election, but there seems to be some confusion or

misunderstanding about what happened on that day.

As has been mentioned, the Labour Party was perfectly happy for local government and Scottish Parliament elections to take place on the same day in 1999 and 2003. Those election days were successful because the electoral systems that were used did not lead to confusion. In 2007, the same two elections took place on one day, but a different electoral system was in place. When electors cast their votes, they knew perfectly clearly for whom and for what they wanted to vote, but they applied the wrong electoral system to the wrong ballot paper. We lost a lot of votes because of that. However, I do not suggest for a moment that people did not understand what they were doing when they set out to cast their votes.

It is proposed not to hold two elections on the same day but to have a referendum on the same day as the Scottish Parliament election. There will be a simple question, to which the answer will be yes or no. The Scottish electorate is perfectly qualified and able to make up its mind about that question.

I am rather more concerned about something that has been running through the debate at a deeper level. I accept that, when such issues come along, the SNP will use them as an opportunity to raise the temperature of political debate, to set out its arguments for independence and to try to drive a wedge between Holyrood and Westminster. What has surprised me about today's debate is how vociferous the Labour Party has been in trying to do the same thing.

Jamie Hepburn: You mentioned independence. In this instance, your proposition seems to be that you support a referendum on a principle that you do not support. Why will you not support a referendum on independence on the same basis?

Alex Johnstone: That would involve rewinding the argument slightly. You will realise that I am not necessarily in favour of the proposition that is being put forward. We have agreed that a referendum should take place and are delighted for it to do so on the basis of that agreement. The SNP once had a policy to hold a referendum but chose not to bring that proposition to the Parliament—it was that party that withdrew the proposition.

I return to my concerns about the Labour Party. The argument that Labour members such as Pauline McNeill and Margaret Curran presented today was dangerous and divisive in nature. I was disappointed by their use of hyperbole, their partisan stand against the proposal and the disproportionate way in which they attacked it. I had expected Labour to present a rational, reasonable argument, but I saw Labour jump on to

the same bandwagon that the SNP before it had been so happy to jump on to. I saw a change of attitude and direction from the Labour Party—one that seems to take it back to the days before 1997 when it appeared to try to outflank the SNP in its desire to move Scotland forward in its own direction. That is why I believe that the turning point today is so dangerous.

Margaret Curran: Who is accusing who of hyperbole now? You are claiming that we have all sorts of motivations. Can you not understand the fundamental principle that I tried to articulate: people are deeply offended because the coalition Government started by saying that it would respect Scotland but its first act was to disrespect Scotland? Do you not understand the deep feelings that exist about that?

Alex Johnstone: Do I understand? I have to say that in a certain respect, I do not, because I personally am not deeply offended. You appear to be, but I am not. I am concerned about that.

Maureen Watt raised a concern about the effect of the media. The suggestion that Scottish voters cannot discern the difference between the campaigning issues in a Scottish election and the campaigning issues in the referendum is disrespectful of the ability of the Scottish electorate to separate those issues.

Maureen Watt: Will the member give way?

The Presiding Officer: He is in his last minute.

Alex Johnstone: The media are so intertwined in this country today that there will always be news broadcasts from south of the border. We need to respect the ability of our individual electors to make a constructive decision.

We are not trying to run two elections on the same day; we are running a referendum with a simple question—yes or no? The Scottish people are able to deal with that. We should take the opportunity to have the referendum on the same day as the Scottish elections, for the reasons that have been set out. We will therefore be supporting the amendment in the name of David McLetchie and the amendment in the name of Mike Rumbles, because they make good common sense.

The Presiding Officer: I remind members that they should speak through the chair at all times. There has been a great tendency not to do so this afternoon, which is regrettable.

16:42

Paul Martin (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab): A number of powerful speeches have been made this afternoon, none more so than the one from George Foulkes. I say that not because he congratulated Bob Doris on his speech, which I

know will do him no good in his constituency party, but because he forensically examined a number of the challenges that we will face throughout Scotland and a number of practical considerations for electioneering on election day next year, if the bill is passed.

I declare an interest in this issue. I hope that, if the AV referendum is held, it results in a massive no vote. I am sure that that comes as no surprise to the likes of Mike Rumbles, Iain Smith and Nicol Stephen—at least I am clear about my position. I would like to see the issue put to bed once and for all. I do not see it as a priority—in fact, it is a total waste of good public money. I can think of better things to do with millions of pounds.

That said, if we are going to go to the trouble of holding a referendum, it should be done properly, not in the sloppy and rushed way that the Con-Dem Government has done it. Given that the Con-Dem Government feels so strongly about this important issue—Robert Brown referred to it as that—I find it alarming that it seeks to bring forward the referendum at any cost, no matter whom it affects. Let us be clear: holding the referendum on the same day as the Scottish Parliament elections will cause confusion throughout Scotland.

Robert Brown: If those sentiments are correct, why was the proposal for an AV referendum in the Labour Party manifesto?

Paul Martin: It is a fact that the proposal was included in the Labour Party's manifesto, which contained a number of commitments. However, we do not see it as a priority in the current climate, given the challenges that many people in our communities face. The issue for the debate is the timing of the referendum and the contempt that the Con-Dem Government is showing the Scottish Parliament.

In the stage 3 debate on the Scottish Local Government (Elections) Bill on 17 June last year, David McLetchie said:

"local authority elections deserve to have their own day in the sun so that there can be a greater focus on local issues in determining the outcome."—[*Official Report*, 17 June 2009; c 18461.]

I will pose a question to him, which he can answer in an intervention if he likes. If local councils should have their day in the sun, why is that principle not accepted for the AV referendum?

David McLetchie rose—

Paul Martin: I will bring in David McLetchie if he is willing to answer my question.

David McLetchie: I am willing to answer, because the argument is fairly obvious. We were dealing with two sets of elections of representatives to democratically elected bodies.

We will avoid the coincidence of those elections as a result of the changes that the Gould report recommended and we wish to avoid such a coincidence of the elections to this Parliament and the Westminster Parliament in 2015.

The proposal that we are now debating is to add a simple referendum question at the same time as the election, which will create no major problem. That will be just one more issue in a broader campaign that will cover many issues.

Paul Martin: Conservative members are again unconvincing. They fail to mention the challenges that we face.

David McLetchie is concerned to make potential savings by holding the referendum on the same day as the elections. Did he deliver that principle when he argued against holding council elections on the same day as the Scottish Parliament elections? Holding those elections on the same day would make savings. He made a different argument on council elections last year.

The Gould report is one of the most comprehensive reports ever to be presented to the Parliament. Its recommendations were robust, it did not hold back on criticism and it took input from several parties. On combined elections, the report said:

"we are convinced that combined elections are not only a disservice to the local councils and candidates but also to the electorate as well."

If that principle is accepted for combined Scottish Parliament elections and local council elections, why should the referendum be treated differently? The principle is stated several times.

If the referendum has the X-factor that Nick Clegg believes that it has, why should it not be given the prominence of a stand-alone referendum debate? He could tour the country and attend mass public meetings at which I have no doubt there would be standing room only. The airwaves would be taken up with chat about the future of our voting system, and pubs and clubs would buzz with excitement. Let us be honest—as Conservative and Liberal Democrat members know fine well, the issue would have been a damp squib at the polls. Conflating the polls has provided cover for the commitment to spend an astronomical amount of public funds in these difficult times. Few of us can turn on Sky News or the other news channels without seeing George Osborne advising us of the difficult economic times that we face, yet we are willing to spend £120 million of good public money on a waste of time.

Several members have talked about respect. Annabel Goldie has said:

"We will build an agenda of mutual respect between Scotland's two Parliaments and Governments, because Scotland needs co-operation, not confrontation."—[*Official Report*, 27 May 2010; c 26626.]

Today—some months later—we have that confrontation.

David McLetchie: You were committed to having a referendum on AV. If the election arithmetic had worked out slightly differently, I presume that you might have had a coalition with the Liberal Democrats—

The Presiding Officer: Through the chair, please.

David McLetchie: I beg your pardon, Presiding Officer.

If Mr Martin's party had had a coalition with the Liberal Democrats, you—[*Laughter*—that party would have had a referendum, which would have cost the same £100 million that he complains about, so what is your beef?

The Presiding Officer: My beef is nothing, Mr McLetchie, other than that people do not talk through the chair.

Paul Martin: The challenge in the motion is the timing, which the members opposite have failed to deal with. When the referendum issue arose, they forgot or did not consider that the so-called respect agenda is worth following. I do not think that they considered that issue as carefully as they should have. I do not know how many statements I have heard from David Cameron and Annabel Goldie since the UK elections on the so-called respect agenda. They have had the opportunity to consider this Parliament's concerns—Duncan McNeil made a powerful point when he referred to the opportunities that were afforded to the Con-Dem Government—but they have failed on a number of occasions to grasp the opportunity to show that they have respect for the Parliament. The members opposite have failed on a number of occasions to deal with that point.

A number of powerful points have been made by SNP—I do not say that very often—and Labour members. It has been shown once again that the members opposite have failed to respect the processes of the Parliament. I call on the Parliament to support the motion in the name of Jim Mather.

16:51

Jim Mather: I thank members from across the chamber for their contributions to the debate. The ideas and arguments that have been put forward are very interesting and it will be well worth analysing the *Official Report* to look at them in greater detail. I hope to refer towards the end of my speech to the points that have been made.

The Scottish Government has made known its opposition to the UK Government's proposals since they were first announced. The UK Government says much about respect, and that now needs to be proven by respectful actions. The status of this Parliament has to be recognised: it is the key legislative body for Scotland and the importance of the issues that we make decisions about here needs to be given proper regard. Sadly, if the clash of dates is allowed to stand, that status would be undermined, with the people of Scotland being asked to vote on other issues on the same day as they decide the make-up of this Parliament.

For our part, we have already recognised the need for issues of importance to be given the space and time that they deserve. That is why we legislated in 2009 to separate local government elections from the Scottish Parliament elections. There now seems to be common ground that elections should not take place on the same day and that it is vital that each Administration should have the opportunity to gain the clearest of mandates.

Jim Tolson (Dunfermline West) (LD): The minister has made a key point. Having sat through the Local Government and Communities Committee's inquiry into the 2007 election fiasco, I am at one with Professor Ron Gould when he said in 2007 that the voter was "treated as an afterthought". I am a keen supporter of ensuring that voters throughout the UK have a right to a fairer voting system for Westminster. That is why I fully endorse the UK Government's agreement to hold a referendum on AV.

The Presiding Officer: Could you make your point, Mr Tolson? This is not a speech.

Jim Tolson: Yes, I will.

However, where I disagree with my colleagues is on having that referendum on the same day as the Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish elections and a third of English council elections. As we saw in 2007, any combination of elections, or, indeed, referenda, causes confusion and overwhelms the important issues—in the case of May 2011, the Scottish Parliament election.

The Presiding Officer: Mr Tolson, you must please make a point.

Jim Tolson: Does the minister agree that, although the AV referendum is welcome, having it on the same day as the Scottish, Welsh and Northern elections is a mistake?

Jim Mather: Yes, I agree with the points made by Jim Tolson in his intervention, and I thoroughly commend him for making them. The clash of dates is avoidable. The movement that we are seeing on the 2015 clash is also a factor.

Another factor is the issue of clarity. We need to give the election the prominence that it deserves. In principle, that means that there should not be campaigns from more than one legislature at the same time—especially with votes on the very same day. That is particularly the case when there is a real risk, given the strong influence of the London-based media, that UK-wide elections or referendums could eclipse any Scotland-only campaign. Indeed, that is proven by the coverage of and around the party leader debates in the run-up to the 2010 UK election.

Mike Rumbles: Will the minister take an intervention?

Jim Mather: I think that I have taken enough Lib Dem interventions for the moment, and I have heard the voice of Lib Demmery that I want to hear today.

The fact is that we owe it to the voting public to be absolutely clear about what they are voting on, and we have an obligation to do all we can to deliver that. Self-evidently, we can do so only by having a clear campaign space and total clarity about why the public's participation and votes matter. We need to put the voters first, as Gould—echoed by Jim Tolson—said.

There are also issues around proper administration. We have to make sure that people know whether they are eligible to vote, that those who are eligible to vote are able to do so, that voters are clear about the issues that they are deciding on, and that the votes are counted and the results are accurate and timely. The case is strong and, in the interests of time—I see that time has stopped, Presiding Officer.

The Presiding Officer: Only half of it, minister.

Jim Mather: Mr McLetchie talked about an ideal world—he agreed that there would be no clash in an ideal world. He also talked about coincidence, but deliberate cause and effect are no coincidence. He also ignored the role of the UK media, which was particularly poor of him. A lawyer advocating that we should not be picky about due process amazed me, as did the fact that he was prepared to be cavalier and forget previous count problems.

Mike Rumbles ignored the movement of elections because of the clash in 2015, and the damaging effect of the media circus in Scotland.

Mike Rumbles: Will the minister take an intervention on that point?

Jim Mather: I have lots of words for Mike Rumbles, but he can just sit down now. He used the word “precious” about our aspirations for Scotland and fair elections. He used the term 10 times.

Pauline McNeill made a fantastic speech, and her female intuition about the discomfort of certain members was spot on.

Pauline McNeill: Will the minister confirm on the record what communication he has had with the UK Government in relation to consultation on the clash between the election and the referendum?

Jim Mather: There have been numerous contributions and letters. Pauline McNeill's key point was about registering a formal complaint. The joint ministerial committee dispute process is a possible tactic, and I have asked Fiona Hyslop to consider the options around that.

Pauline McNeill made another important point about our priority being voter confidence. I say to Mr Rumbles that that is the precious issue that we face.

Maureen Watt made an excellent speech about how our focus is on the integrity of our elections, and she again castigated Mr McLetchie for his cavalier attitude to that issue and to due process.

Margaret Curran exposed an interesting point when she said that the Scottish Parliament's first engagement on the matter involved the MSPs who are elected to Westminster. She also pinpointed how there is likely to be a simultaneous devaluation of the Scottish parliamentary elections and the referendum process.

Anne McLaughlin highlighted an important point apropos media coverage. She referred to David Dimbleby's recent declaration about the diminution in the coverage of Scottish affairs, which, along with the magnification of UK events in the run-up to the referendum, would be damaging to Scotland.

Speaking as convener of the Local Government and Communities Committee, Duncan McNeil highlighted the considerable body of work that will have to be done, and pinpointed the fact that a committee of the Parliament has written to the Deputy Prime Minister but has not yet had a response. That is revealing. It is not satisfactory and it is utterly disrespectful of what happens here.

Robert Brown tried the old Lib Dem trick of the false analogy by comparing 1997 with 2011. The 1997 referendum was one referendum, and it involved one institution. This time around, two institutions, a referendum and an election will be involved—plus the UK media, which will be dominated by the referendum issue. That is some analogy.

Bob Doris summarised it all rather neatly by pinpointing the fact that this Parliament decoupled local government elections from Scottish Parliament elections. The UK Government has

now given the green light to decoupling the 2015 elections. However, there is no decoupling for the 2011 clash.

George Foulkes—unharnessed and allowed to run free—pinpointed the fact that party campaigns and cross-party campaigns do not go well together. He also described voters of a Tory persuasion saying, in the same sentence, “Vote McLetchie; vote no.”

There are quite a few weaknesses in the argument that has been put. The essential representation of the Lib Dem proposition is: “Vote for our miserable little compromise.” That is where we are: there is “a miserable little compromise” on the table, and I expect this Parliament to vote the right way—very soon.

Decision Time

17:00

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson):

There are nine questions to be put as a result of today’s business. I remind members that, in relation to this morning’s debate on prescription charges, if the amendment in the name of Nicola Sturgeon is agreed to, the amendment in the name of Ross Finnie falls.

The first question is, that amendment S3M-7422.1, in the name of Shona Robison, which seeks to amend motion S3M-7422, in the name of Mary Scanlon, on care home costs, be agreed to.

Amendment agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S3M-7422, in the name of Mary Scanlon, on care home costs, as amended, be agreed to.

Motion, as amended, agreed to.

That the Parliament recognises the changing demographics of Scotland and the increasing financial pressures on services providing care for older people; recognises the need to shift the balance of care; notes that independent and local authority-run care homes in Scotland are regulated by the Care Commission in accordance with standards set by ministers, and further recognises the opportunity through the Reshaping Care programme public engagement process to examine existing models of provision and funding across all care sectors and care settings to ensure that value for money is coupled with continuing high standards of care.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S3M-7423.1.1, in the name of Jackie Baillie, which seeks to amend amendment S3M-7423.1, in the name of Nicola Sturgeon, on prescription charges, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Aitken, Bill (Glasgow) (Con)
 Alexander, Ms Wendy (Paisley North) (Lab)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Baker, Richard (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Edinburgh Central) (Lab)
 Brankin, Rhona (Midlothian) (Lab)
 Brocklebank, Ted (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Brown, Gavin (Lothians) (Con)
 Brown, Robert (Glasgow) (LD)
 Brownlee, Derek (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Butler, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab)
 Carlaw, Jackson (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Chisholm, Malcolm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab)
 Craigie, Cathie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab)
 Curran, Margaret (Glasgow Baillieston) (Lab)
 Eadie, Helen (Dunfermline East) (Lab)
 Ferguson, Patricia (Glasgow Maryhill) (Lab)

Finnie, Ross (West of Scotland) (LD)
 Foulkes, George (Lothians) (Lab)
 Gillon, Karen (Clydesdale) (Lab)
 Glen, Marlyn (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 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)
 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)
 Macdonald, Lewis (Aberdeen Central) (Lab)
 Macintosh, Ken (Eastwood) (Lab)
 Martin, Paul (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney) (LD)
 McAveety, Mr Frank (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab)
 McConnell, Jack (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)
 McGrigor, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 McInnes, Alison (North East Scotland) (LD)
 McLetchie, David (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Con)
 McMahon, Michael (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab)
 McNeil, Duncan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab)
 Milne, Nanette (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Munro, John Farquhar (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD)
 Murray, Elaine (Dumfries) (Lab)
 O'Donnell, Hugh (Central Scotland) (LD)
 Oldfather, Irene (Cunninghame South) (Lab)
 Park, John (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 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)
 Stewart, David (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Stone, Jamie (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)
 Tolson, Jim (Dunfermline West) (LD)
 Whitefield, Karen (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab)
 Whitton, David (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Lab)

Against

Adam, Brian (Aberdeen North) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Western Isles) (SNP)
 Brown, Keith (Ochil) (SNP)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Livingston) (SNP)
 Crawford, Bruce (Stirling) (SNP)
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perth) (SNP)
 Don, Nigel (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP)
 Fabiani, Linda (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee West) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gibson, Rob (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)

Grahame, Christine (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Christopher (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Lothians) (SNP)
 Ingram, Adam (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacAskill, Kenny (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Mather, Jim (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 Maxwell, Stewart (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 McKee, Ian (Lothians) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 McLaughlin, Anne (Glasgow) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Morgan, Alasdair (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Neil, Alex (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Paterson, Gil (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee East) (SNP)
 Russell, Michael (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Salmond, Alex (Gordon) (SNP)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Lothians) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banff and Buchan) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Govan) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (North Tayside) (SNP)
 Thompson, Dave (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Watt, Maureen (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 Welsh, Andrew (Angus) (SNP)
 White, Sandra (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Wilson, Bill (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Wilson, John (Central Scotland) (SNP)

Abstentions

Harper, Robin (Lothians) (Green)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 72, Against 45, Abstentions 2.

Amendment agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S3M-7423.1, in the name of Nicola Sturgeon, as amended, which seeks to amend motion S3M-7423, in the name of Derek Brownlee, on prescription charges, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Adam, Brian (Aberdeen North) (SNP)
 Alexander, Ms Wendy (Paisley North) (Lab)
 Allan, Alasdair (Western Isles) (SNP)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Baker, Richard (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Edinburgh Central) (Lab)
 Brankin, Rhona (Midlothian) (Lab)
 Brown, Keith (Ochil) (SNP)
 Butler, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab)
 Chisholm, Malcolm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Livingston) (SNP)
 Craigie, Cathie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab)
 Crawford, Bruce (Stirling) (SNP)
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perth) (SNP)
 Curran, Margaret (Glasgow Baillieston) (Lab)
 Don, Nigel (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow) (SNP)

Eadie, Helen (Dunfermline East) (Lab)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP)
 Fabiani, Linda (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Ferguson, Patricia (Glasgow Maryhill) (Lab)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee West) (SNP)
 Foulkes, George (Lothians) (Lab)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gibson, Rob (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Gillon, Karen (Clydesdale) (Lab)
 Glen, Marlyn (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 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)
 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)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacAskill, Kenny (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Macdonald, Lewis (Aberdeen Central) (Lab)
 Macintosh, Ken (Eastwood) (Lab)
 Martin, Paul (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab)
 Marwick, Tricia (Central Fife) (SNP)
 Mather, Jim (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 Maxwell, Stewart (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 McAveety, Mr Frank (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab)
 McConnell, Jack (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)
 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)
 Morgan, Alasdair (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Murray, Elaine (Dumfries) (Lab)
 Neil, Alex (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Oldfather, Irene (Cunninghame South) (Lab)
 Park, John (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Paterson, Gil (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Peacock, Peter (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Peattie, Cathy (Falkirk East) (Lab)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee East) (SNP)
 Russell, Michael (Dundee Scotland) (SNP)
 Salmond, Alex (Gordon) (SNP)
 Simpson, Dr Richard (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Smith, Elaine (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Lothians) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banff and Buchan) (SNP)
 Stewart, David (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Govan) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (North Tayside) (SNP)
 Thompson, Dave (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Watt, Maureen (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 Welsh, Andrew (Angus) (SNP)
 White, Sandra (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Whitefield, Karen (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab)
 Whitton, David (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Lab)
 Wilson, Bill (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Wilson, John (Central Scotland) (SNP)

Against

Aitken, Bill (Glasgow) (Con)
 Brocklebank, Ted (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Brown, Gavin (Lothians) (Con)
 Brown, Robert (Glasgow) (LD)
 Brownlee, Derek (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Finnie, Ross (West of Scotland) (LD)
 Goldie, Annabel (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Hume, Jim (South of Scotland) (LD)
 Johnstone, Alex (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Lamont, John (Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney) (LD)
 McGregor, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 McInnes, Alison (North East Scotland) (LD)
 McLetchie, David (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Con)
 Milne, Nanette (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Munro, John Farquhar (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD)
 O'Donnell, Hugh (Central Scotland) (LD)
 Pringle, Mike (Edinburgh South) (LD)
 Purvis, Jeremy (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD)
 Rumbles, Mike (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD)
 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)
 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 89, Against 31, Abstentions 0.

Amendment, as amended, agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: Ross Finnie's amendment is pre-empted. Therefore, the next question is, that motion S3M-7423, in the name of Derek Brownlee, as amended, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Adam, Brian (Aberdeen North) (SNP)
 Alexander, Ms Wendy (Paisley North) (Lab)
 Allan, Alasdair (Western Isles) (SNP)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Baker, Richard (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Edinburgh Central) (Lab)
 Brankin, Rhona (Midlothian) (Lab)
 Brown, Keith (Ochil) (SNP)
 Butler, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab)
 Chisholm, Malcolm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Livingston) (SNP)
 Craigie, Cathie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab)
 Crawford, Bruce (Stirling) (SNP)
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perth) (SNP)
 Curran, Margaret (Glasgow Baillieston) (Lab)
 Don, Nigel (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Eadie, Helen (Dunfermline East) (Lab)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP)
 Fabiani, Linda (Central Scotland) (SNP)

Ferguson, Patricia (Glasgow Maryhill) (Lab)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee West) (SNP)
 Foulkes, George (Lothians) (Lab)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gibson, Rob (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Gillon, Karen (Clydesdale) (Lab)
 Glen, Marlyn (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 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)
 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)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacAskill, Kenny (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Macdonald, Lewis (Aberdeen Central) (Lab)
 Macintosh, Ken (Eastwood) (Lab)
 Martin, Paul (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab)
 Marwick, Tricia (Central Fife) (SNP)
 Mather, Jim (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 Maxwell, Stewart (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 McAveety, Mr Frank (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab)
 McConnell, Jack (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)
 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)
 Morgan, Alasdair (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Murray, Elaine (Dumfries) (Lab)
 Neil, Alex (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Oldfather, Irene (Cunninghame South) (Lab)
 Park, John (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Paterson, Gil (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Peacock, Peter (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Peattie, Cathy (Falkirk East) (Lab)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee East) (SNP)
 Russell, Michael (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Salmond, Alex (Gordon) (SNP)
 Simpson, Dr Richard (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Smith, Elaine (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Lothians) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banff and Buchan) (SNP)
 Stewart, David (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Govan) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (North Tayside) (SNP)
 Thompson, Dave (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Watt, Maureen (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 Welsh, Andrew (Angus) (SNP)
 White, Sandra (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Whitefield, Karen (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab)
 Whitton, David (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Lab)
 Wilson, Bill (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Wilson, John (Central Scotland) (SNP)

Against

Aitken, Bill (Glasgow) (Con)
 Brocklebank, Ted (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Brown, Gavin (Lothians) (Con)

Brown, Robert (Glasgow) (LD)
 Brownlee, Derek (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Finnie, Ross (West of Scotland) (LD)
 Goldie, Annabel (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Hume, Jim (South of Scotland) (LD)
 Johnstone, Alex (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Lamont, John (Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney) (LD)
 McGrigor, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 McInnes, Alison (North East Scotland) (LD)
 McLetchie, David (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Con)
 Milne, Nanette (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Munro, John Farquhar (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD)
 O'Donnell, Hugh (Central Scotland) (LD)
 Pringle, Mike (Edinburgh South) (LD)
 Purvis, Jeremy (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD)
 Rumbles, Mike (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD)
 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)
 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 89, Against 31, Abstentions 0.

Motion, as amended, agreed to,

That the Parliament recognises that the abolition of prescription charges will benefit all those patients with long-term conditions and the 600,000 people on low incomes who are not entitled to exemption and further recognises that total abolition is in the best tradition of the NHS and that poor people and sick people should not be made to pay the cost of the economic and financial situation that Scotland faces but regrets that free prescriptions for cancer patients in Scotland were not implemented by April 2009 in line with England.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S3M-7427.2, in the name of David McLetchie, which seeks to amend motion S3M-7427, in the name of Jim Mather, on the alternative vote referendum and 2011 Scottish Parliament election clash, 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)
 Brown, Robert (Glasgow) (LD)
 Brownlee, Derek (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Finnie, Ross (West of Scotland) (LD)
 Goldie, Annabel (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Hume, Jim (South of Scotland) (LD)
 Johnstone, Alex (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Lamont, John (Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney) (LD)

McGrigor, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 McInnes, Alison (North East Scotland) (LD)
 McLetchie, David (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Con)
 Milne, Nanette (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Munro, John Farquhar (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD)
 O'Donnell, Hugh (Central Scotland) (LD)
 Pringle, Mike (Edinburgh South) (LD)
 Purvis, Jeremy (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD)
 Rumbles, Mike (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD)
 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)
 Stephen, Nicol (Aberdeen South) (LD)
 Stone, Jamie (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)

Against

Adam, Brian (Aberdeen North) (SNP)
 Alexander, Ms Wendy (Paisley North) (Lab)
 Allan, Alasdair (Western Isles) (SNP)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Baker, Richard (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Edinburgh Central) (Lab)
 Brankin, Rhona (Midlothian) (Lab)
 Brown, Keith (Ochil) (SNP)
 Butler, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab)
 Chisholm, Malcolm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Livingston) (SNP)
 Craigie, Cathie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab)
 Crawford, Bruce (Stirling) (SNP)
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perth) (SNP)
 Curran, Margaret (Glasgow Baillieston) (Lab)
 Don, Nigel (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Eadie, Helen (Dunfermline East) (Lab)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP)
 Fabiani, Linda (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Ferguson, Patricia (Glasgow Maryhill) (Lab)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee West) (SNP)
 Foulkes, George (Lothians) (Lab)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gibson, Rob (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Gillon, Karen (Clydesdale) (Lab)
 Glen, Marilyn (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 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)
 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)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacAskill, Kenny (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Macdonald, Lewis (Aberdeen Central) (Lab)
 Macintosh, Ken (Eastwood) (Lab)
 Martin, Paul (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab)

Marwick, Tricia (Central Fife) (SNP)
 Mather, Jim (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 Maxwell, Stewart (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 McAveety, Mr Frank (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab)
 McConnell, Jack (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)
 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)
 Morgan, Alasdair (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Murray, Elaine (Dumfries) (Lab)
 Neil, Alex (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Oldfather, Irene (Cunninghame South) (Lab)
 Park, John (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Paterson, Gil (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Peacock, Peter (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Peattie, Cathy (Falkirk East) (Lab)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee East) (SNP)
 Russell, Michael (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Salmond, Alex (Gordon) (SNP)
 Simpson, Dr Richard (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Smith, Elaine (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Lothians) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banff and Buchan) (SNP)
 Stewart, David (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Govan) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (North Tayside) (SNP)
 Thompson, Dave (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Watt, Maureen (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 Welsh, Andrew (Angus) (SNP)
 White, Sandra (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Whitefield, Karen (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab)
 Whitton, David (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Lab)
 Wilson, Bill (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Wilson, John (Central Scotland) (SNP)

Abstentions

Tolson, Jim (Dunfermline West) (LD)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 30, Against 89, Abstentions 1.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S3M-7427.1, in the name of Mike Rumbles, which seeks to amend motion S3M-7427, in the name of Jim Mather, on the AV referendum and 2011 Scottish Parliament election clash, 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)
 Brown, Robert (Glasgow) (LD)
 Brownlee, Derek (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Finnie, Ross (West of Scotland) (LD)
 Goldie, Annabel (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Hume, Jim (South of Scotland) (LD)
 Johnstone, Alex (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Lamont, John (Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney) (LD)

McGrigor, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 McInnes, Alison (North East Scotland) (LD)
 McLetchie, David (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Con)
 Milne, Nanette (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Munro, John Farquhar (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD)
 O'Donnell, Hugh (Central Scotland) (LD)
 Pringle, Mike (Edinburgh South) (LD)
 Purvis, Jeremy (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD)
 Rumbles, Mike (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD)
 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)
 Stephen, Nicol (Aberdeen South) (LD)
 Stone, Jamie (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)

Against

Adam, Brian (Aberdeen North) (SNP)
 Alexander, Ms Wendy (Paisley North) (Lab)
 Allan, Alasdair (Western Isles) (SNP)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Baker, Richard (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Edinburgh Central) (Lab)
 Brankin, Rhona (Midlothian) (Lab)
 Brown, Keith (Ochil) (SNP)
 Butler, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab)
 Chisholm, Malcolm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Livingston) (SNP)
 Craigie, Cathie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab)
 Crawford, Bruce (Stirling) (SNP)
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perth) (SNP)
 Curran, Margaret (Glasgow Baillieston) (Lab)
 Don, Nigel (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Eadie, Helen (Dunfermline East) (Lab)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP)
 Fabiani, Linda (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Ferguson, Patricia (Glasgow Maryhill) (Lab)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee West) (SNP)
 Foulkes, George (Lothians) (Lab)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gibson, Rob (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Gillon, Karen (Clydesdale) (Lab)
 Glen, Marlyn (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 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)
 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)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacAskill, Kenny (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Macdonald, Lewis (Aberdeen Central) (Lab)
 Macintosh, Ken (Eastwood) (Lab)
 Martin, Paul (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab)

Marwick, Tricia (Central Fife) (SNP)
 Mather, Jim (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 Maxwell, Stewart (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 McAveety, Mr Frank (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab)
 McConnell, Jack (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)
 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)
 Morgan, Alasdair (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Murray, Elaine (Dumfries) (Lab)
 Neil, Alex (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Oldfather, Irene (Cunninghame South) (Lab)
 Park, John (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Paterson, Gil (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Peacock, Peter (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Peattie, Cathy (Falkirk East) (Lab)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee East) (SNP)
 Russell, Michael (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Salmond, Alex (Gordon) (SNP)
 Simpson, Dr Richard (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Smith, Elaine (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Lothians) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banff and Buchan) (SNP)
 Stewart, David (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Govan) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (North Tayside) (SNP)
 Thompson, Dave (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Watt, Maureen (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 Welsh, Andrew (Angus) (SNP)
 White, Sandra (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Whitefield, Karen (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab)
 Whitton, David (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Lab)
 Wilson, Bill (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Wilson, John (Central Scotland) (SNP)

Abstentions

Tolson, Jim (Dunfermline West) (LD)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 30, Against 89, Abstentions 1.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The final question is, that motion S3M-7427, in the name of Jim Mather, on the AV referendum and 2011 Scottish Parliament election clash, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Adam, Brian (Aberdeen North) (SNP)
 Alexander, Ms Wendy (Paisley North) (Lab)
 Allan, Alasdair (Western Isles) (SNP)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Baker, Richard (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Edinburgh Central) (Lab)
 Brankin, Rhona (Midlothian) (Lab)
 Brown, Keith (Ochil) (SNP)
 Butler, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab)
 Chisholm, Malcolm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Livingston) (SNP)

Craigie, Cathie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab)
 Crawford, Bruce (Stirling) (SNP)
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perth) (SNP)
 Curran, Margaret (Glasgow Baillieston) (Lab)
 Don, Nigel (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Eadie, Helen (Dunfermline East) (Lab)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP)
 Fabiani, Linda (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Ferguson, Patricia (Glasgow Maryhill) (Lab)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee West) (SNP)
 Foulkes, George (Lothians) (Lab)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gibson, Rob (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Gillon, Karen (Clydesdale) (Lab)
 Glen, Marilyn (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 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)
 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)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacAskill, Kenny (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Macdonald, Lewis (Aberdeen Central) (Lab)
 Macintosh, Ken (Eastwood) (Lab)
 Martin, Paul (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab)
 Marwick, Tricia (Central Fife) (SNP)
 Mather, Jim (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 Maxwell, Stewart (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 McAveety, Mr Frank (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab)
 McConnell, Jack (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)
 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)
 Morgan, Alasdair (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Murray, Elaine (Dumfries) (Lab)
 Neil, Alex (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Oldfather, Irene (Cunninghame South) (Lab)
 Park, John (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Paterson, Gil (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Peacock, Peter (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Peattie, Cathy (Falkirk East) (Lab)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee East) (SNP)
 Russell, Michael (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Salmond, Alex (Gordon) (SNP)
 Simpson, Dr Richard (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Smith, Elaine (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Lothians) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banff and Buchan) (SNP)
 Stewart, David (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Govan) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (North Tayside) (SNP)
 Thompson, Dave (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Tolson, Jim (Dunfermline West) (LD)
 Watt, Maureen (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 Welsh, Andrew (Angus) (SNP)

White, Sandra (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Whitefield, Karen (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab)
 Whitton, David (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Lab)
 Wilson, Bill (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Wilson, John (Central Scotland) (SNP)

Against

Aitken, Bill (Glasgow) (Con)
 Brocklebank, Ted (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Brown, Gavin (Lothians) (Con)
 Brown, Robert (Glasgow) (LD)
 Brownlee, Derek (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Finnie, Ross (West of Scotland) (LD)
 Goldie, Annabel (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Hume, Jim (South of Scotland) (LD)
 Johnstone, Alex (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Lamont, John (Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney) (LD)
 McGrigor, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 McInnes, Alison (North East Scotland) (LD)
 McLetchie, David (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Con)
 Milne, Nanette (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Munro, John Farquhar (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD)
 O'Donnell, Hugh (Central Scotland) (LD)
 Pringle, Mike (Edinburgh South) (LD)
 Purvis, Jeremy (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD)
 Rumbles, Mike (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD)
 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)
 Stephen, Nicol (Aberdeen South) (LD)
 Stone, Jamie (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 90, Against 30, Abstentions 0.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament notes with real concern the UK Government's intention to hold a referendum on voting reform for UK Parliament elections on the same day as elections to the Scottish Parliament and other devolved institutions in May 2011; regrets the UK Government's failure to consult the Scottish Government or the Scottish Parliament on this matter, and calls on the UK Government to work with the Scottish Government to agree a new date that will avoid a clash with elections to this parliament.

Anticoagulation Therapy

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Alasdair Morgan): The final item of business is a members' business debate on motion S3M-6654, in the name of Nanette Milne, on increasing access to self-monitoring and self-management of anticoagulation therapy. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament notes that the levels of self-monitoring and self-management in Scotland for anticoagulation therapy are considerably lower than in England and the rest of western Europe; notes that the Royal Hospital for Sick Children (Yorkhill) in Glasgow, which looks after all young people on anticoagulation therapy, has achieved considerable success with the training of young people to self-monitor and self-manage their anticoagulation therapy but that there is no support for them when they move to adult clinics; notes that authoritative studies confirm the cost-effectiveness of self-monitoring and self-management; further notes the Cochrane Review meta-analysis confirming the clinical benefits and outcomes of self-monitoring and self-management; challenges the view of some NHS boards and clinicians that anticoagulation monitoring and management require to be undertaken in secondary care; points to what it considers to be the costly and time-consuming practice of bringing patients from outlying areas to hospitals rather than manage them in primary care; reminds the Scottish Government that its policy document, *Better Health, Better Care*, states that "patients living with long-term medical conditions and their carers should have the information and support that they need to manage their condition on a day-to-day basis, in the knowledge that the NHS is there for them when they need it", and would welcome encouragement being given to NHS boards to increase access to self-monitoring and self-management of anticoagulation therapy for those patients in north east Scotland and the rest of the country who, with the endorsement of their clinicians, wish to do so.

17:08

Nanette Milne (North East Scotland) (Con): I welcome to the gallery several visitors who have a particular interest in the debate, one of whom has self-managed her anticoagulant treatment for a number of years.

It has been estimated that there are currently around 1 million people in the United Kingdom with various medical conditions who receive anticoagulation therapy to thin their blood. It is expected that that figure will rise by 10 to 15 per cent year on year as the population ages and more effort is made to identify cardiac arrhythmias, notably atrial fibrillation. To ensure the efficacy and safety of that therapy, which is usually given orally as warfarin, and to ensure that its effect stays within the defined therapeutic range, regular monitoring is essential. The dosage is adjusted according to the time it takes for a blood sample to clot.

Because serious complications can arise if

warfarin is poorly controlled, it is vital for patient welfare that the clotting time is frequently checked. Traditionally, that has been done via hospital-based anticoagulant clinics. There is often quite a long time lag between the blood sample being taken from the patient, after which it is processed in the laboratory, and the result reaching the clinician and the patient's dosage being adjusted. Even if the general practitioner takes the sample and posts it to the lab, there will be a wait of several days before the dose can be adjusted. The clinics are extremely busy and overcrowded.

Thanks to modern technology, portable devices are now available that allow patients to self-monitor their blood without having to visit a hospital or their general practitioner, or to wait for results—because the result is available in minutes. It allows patients to manage their warfarin dosage themselves. Alternatively, they can contact their physician with the result of the blood test; their physician will then interpret it and adjust the dose accordingly. I saw a portable meter in use this afternoon. It is impressively compact and seems to be extremely easy to use.

It has been found that around a quarter of patients would be willing to self-monitor but, so far, national health service boards generally do not provide support for self-monitoring or self-management. In Scotland, only one health board—NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde—does it, and only for children.

We lag behind England—where 60 hospitals support self-monitoring—and the rest of Europe. That is a pity, because there is clinical evidence to show that self-management results in a better quality of anticoagulation as well as a better quality of life for patients. It gives them control of their treatment: testing can be done at home and results are immediate. Self-management means that fewer hospital visits are needed. That could be a significant advantage to patients—particularly in rural areas—who currently must take time off work to attend hospital and bear the expense and time cost of travelling there.

A portable meter costs only £300 and is currently either purchased by the patient or provided by a charity, because the cost is not reimbursed. The annual cost of test strips is around £65. If that cost is set against the £60 to £100 cost to the NHS of each clinic visit and the need for the patient to attend hospital anything between four and 12 times per year—or even more—it is easy to see the advantages to the NHS, as well as to the patient, of self-monitoring the treatment.

As I said, there is little support in Scotland for self-monitoring. The NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde service for children at Yorkhill is very well received—more than 100 young patients are self-

testing—but when they move on at age 18, few adult services will be available to them.

NHS Fife has run a pilot study on self-monitoring and continues to support a small number of patients from the pilot, but the service has not been rolled out. NHS Grampian has a few self-monitoring patients. At present, it does not formally support them, although it is looking to develop a system to do so. Following the transfer to NHS Lanarkshire of a patient from Yorkhill, that health board is now setting up a service, having acknowledged the need to support self-monitoring.

There is growing awareness of the possibility of self-monitoring and self-management of anticoagulation therapy in Scotland but, unfortunately, the Government does not collect appropriate data on young people. That is a pity because although Yorkhill has more than 100 young people who are self-testing, the Minister for Public Health and Sport indicated in response to a parliamentary question that very few people on anticoagulant therapy would be eligible for the approach.

The Government's document "Better Health, Better Care: Action Plan: What it Means for You" states:

"patients living with long-term medical conditions and their carers should have the information and support that they need to manage their condition on a day-to-day basis, in the knowledge that the NHS is there for them when they need it."

Key aims of "Better Health, Better Care: Action Plan" are to

"Enable and support patients to be partners in their care ... Make health care in Scotland safer ... Modernise the NHS"

and

"Deliver the quickest treatment ever available in Scotland's NHS".

Self-testing and self-management of anticoagulation therapy fit well with that strategy. They are of great benefit to the patients who use them but, beyond that, they seem to be very cost effective for the NHS.

In this day and age we look to use scarce resources as effectively and efficiently as possible. Therefore, I urge the Government to look closely at how anticoagulant therapy is managed and to consider investigating the potential of increasing self-management with a view to rolling it out across health boards to suitable patients. That would save the NHS money and improve the quality of care for the large and increasing number of people in Scotland who need long-term anticoagulation therapy. I commend that approach to the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing.

17:14

Maureen Watt (North East Scotland) (SNP): I congratulate Nanette Milne on securing the debate. I, too, have previously written to NHS Grampian about self-monitoring and self-management of anticoagulation therapy on behalf of patients. It is important to debate it.

I am sure that we all wish to encourage the principle of empowering patients with long-term conditions to take control of their own treatment. As Nanette Milne said, it is a key part of "Better Health, Better Care".

Clear quality-of-life issues are involved when the self-management of conditions might allow patients to enjoy greater freedom in their day-to-day lives. Requiring patients to attend clinics regularly for their treatment also has implications for time and cost. That is a particular concern for people in rural areas, who may face longer journey times and, therefore, may see more of their day-to-day life sacrificed to managing their condition. Even if such visits are relatively infrequent, there is still inevitable inconvenience to the patients involved. Therefore, I believe that, where possible, it is right to consider alternatives.

It seems strange that youngsters are encouraged to self-monitor and self-manage their anticoagulation therapy but that, when they reach adulthood, they are considered unable to do it. Given yesterday's budget and the severe cuts that have been passed down from Westminster for this year and the coming years, members will require no convincing of the need for treatments to be cost effective. A shrinking pot of resources is available to the Scottish Government, so the cost of change must, of course, be weighed against the benefit to those with long-term conditions. That said, I believe that we must be prepared to change current practice and I hope that the cabinet secretary will be prepared to examine the merits of the proposal in detail.

Developments in health care move ever faster as every year passes. More and more ways of treating patients are being developed. Keeping up with the pace of change can be a challenge, but when treatments are developed that can provide people with long-term conditions greater freedom from their conditions, I believe that it is right to look long and hard at adopting them if they are cost effective. Encouraging greater independence among people with long-term conditions is always desirable when it can be achieved. I believe that greater self-monitoring and self-management of these treatments has the potential to do that, and I hope that encouragement for such practices will receive the consideration it deserves.

17:17

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): I, too, congratulate Nanette Milne on securing the debate. I also congratulate her on lodging probably the longest members' business motion in the history of the Parliament—certainly, it must be one of the longest. More important, there appears to be consensus in the chamber on its substance.

I have no doubt about the value of self-management of long-term conditions. People with long-term conditions want information and support so that they can take control and, when appropriate, be responsible for part of their own care. As Nanette Milne has said, a million patients in the UK receive anticoagulation therapy, and it is interesting to note that there are an estimated 10 to 15 per cent more year on year. That, in itself, puts pressure on the system.

We have had described to us the visit to the hospital-based clinic, the taking of the blood sample, the analysis in the lab, the results coming back, the interpretation by the physician and, finally, at the end of that process, the dose being adjusted if necessary. It seems a long and complicated process, particularly considering that the portable devices that are now available to enable people to self-monitor do away with the need to visit hospital and then wait for results. The use of such devices therefore strikes me as eminently sensible.

The clinching argument for me is that using the portable devices makes financial sense, too, considering the cost of each hospital visit—between £60 and £100—and the number of times per year that people need to go to hospital, never mind the loss of salary for those who need to take time off work. The cumulative total is well in excess of £1,000, whereas the cost of a portable meter is just below £300 plus the cost of the strips each year. It makes financial sense.

I realise that self-monitoring is not for everybody and that some patients will not be comfortable doing that, but we should enable those patients who want to do that to do it.

As someone who represents a constituency that is served by NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde, I am pleased that it supports self-management of anticoagulation therapy at Yorkhill hospital. However, like Nanette Milne, I regret the fact that that stops when the patient turns 18 and becomes an adult. It would have been sensible to roll the initiative out so that adults could access self-management, too. I hope that that is considered.

As the numbers are increasing, the pressure on the system will increase, so self-management makes financial sense for the NHS and, probably more important, for the patient. It means no travelling and no waiting. Empowering and

enabling patients to participate in the management of their own care is quite a powerful thing to do, and it is the direction of travel that we should take with all long-term conditions.

I again congratulate Nanette Milne and, in doing so, indicate my support for her motion.

17:20

Mary Scanlon (Highlands and Islands) (Con):

I thank my colleague Dr Nanette Milne for securing the debate and admit that my knowledge of anticoagulation therapies is considerably greater than it was two hours ago, when I sat down to write my speech.

Like others, I know of people who are on medications that have been found to be effective in preventing thrombosis and embolism but, despite their effectiveness, I understand that they can have several shortcomings. I have learned that many commonly used medications interact with warfarin, as do some foods, and that its activity must be monitored by blood testing using the international normalised ratio to ensure that adequate but safe doses are taken.

As Nanette Milne said, blood samples are sent to labs through the operation of a centralised anticoagulation clinic. There is no doubt that hospital-based services can be inconvenient for patients and expensive to the taxpayer, and Nanette Milne mentioned the time delay. If better care can be achieved through greater emphasis on self-management, we should encourage that.

I understand that stable patients will make visits to the hospital or GP about every 12 weeks but that unstable patients might have to do so every week. The provision of self-monitoring equipment—which is now far cheaper than it was in the 1990s—to patients for use in their own homes has two substantial benefits: the first is in cost and time, and the second relates to control. Regular INR testing is essential in providing patient stability, and home-based units can be used as frequently as necessary.

As Jackie Baillie said, it must be acknowledged that not all patients will adapt to self-management, but many will and they should be given the opportunity to do so. Putting patients in the driving seat on their own health is undoubtedly empowering and might even help them to understand the cause of the changes in their readings. It is about treating patients with dignity, trust and respect, and allowing them to adjust their drug levels depending on the results.

Earlier today, I picked up an NHS Quality Improvement Scotland evidence note on the issue from the back of the chamber. It may be a bit out

of date—it is dated May 2009—but I would still like to quote from it. It says:

“Recent systematic reviews and meta analyses indicate that for selected and well trained patients, self-monitoring of oral anticoagulation therapy (OAT) is safe, more effective than usual care provided by family doctors and as effective as monitoring undertaken in specialised anticoagulation clinics and laboratories.”

That is the good news. The bad news, on which I trust that the cabinet secretary will provide clarification, is that

“Two recent economic models concluded that patient self-monitoring and testing of OAT was not cost effective compared to clinic-based usual care.”

I hope that the cost of anticoagulation therapy will be compared with the cost of hospital admissions and clinical care.

It seems incredible that only one health board has made provision for self-testing and self-management in adults, and that Scotland lags behind England and the rest of Europe on levels of self-monitoring and self-management. Given that it is estimated that a million patients in the UK receive such therapy, the figure for Scotland is likely to be around 100,000.

I hope that tonight's debate will raise awareness and assist in increasing access to self-monitoring and self-management of anticoagulation therapy.

17:24

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing (Nicola Sturgeon): I, too, congratulate Nanette Milne on securing the debate, which will have the effect of raising awareness of an issue that I know is important to large numbers of patients.

Notwithstanding the comments that I will make about the current situation and the reasons for it, I want to make it clear at the outset that I will examine all the points that were made in the debate tonight. I am particularly keen to examine the position in England, which a couple of members have mentioned, to see whether there are any lessons that we can learn and apply here.

As other members have said, warfarin is an effective medication for patients with conditions that involve an increased risk of clotting. However, it needs careful management. Too high a dose can cause major internal bleeding, and that could be fatal; too low a dose increases people's risk of a heart attack or stroke.

As the motion makes clear, and as has been said by all the speakers in the debate, the Government supports the self-management of long-term conditions, not only because of its benefits to patients but because of its benefits to the NHS. Self-management is an integral part of

our quality strategy and, as Nanette Milne pointed out, it is at the heart of the action plan in our “Better Health, Better Care” document. There should be no doubt about the Government's commitment to promoting self-management where that is right and proper for patients.

I am sure, however, that members will agree that, when it comes to deciding the correct approach to any individual condition, those decisions should never be political and should always be guided by the best clinical evidence. Given the serious safety issues that are involved in anticoagulation therapy, we need to be wary about the self-management of warfarin. The self-management programme in the Government's long-term conditions unit has produced a film using warfarin as an example to illustrate the dangers that are caused by misunderstanding and poor communication in medicines management. Warfarin is also the subject of a safety improvement pilot project in primary care, as part of the Scottish patient safety programme. I hope that both those examples give an indication that warfarin is very much on our agenda with regard to the issues that we are discussing.

Nanette Milne: We can agree that self-management might be a little way down the road, but self-monitoring is a good start, as patients can get the results of their blood-clotting tests at home, instantly, and can then get advice from a consultant.

Nicola Sturgeon: Nanette Milne is right to point out that self-monitoring involves people checking the results of their tests and then sending them to a clinician who makes the decision about dosage and that self-management involves people calculating their dose themselves. Everyone in the chamber knows that, but it is an important distinction, and I appreciate the point that Nanette Milne makes.

I want to refer to the evidence base that lies behind the fact that boards do not more generally support the self-monitoring or self-management of anticoagulation therapy. In doing so, I am not suggesting that anything is set in stone—such matters must always be kept under review.

The guidance that was produced by the chief medical officer and the chief pharmaceutical officer in 2002 makes it clear that there are a number of conditions that must be met before self-management can be recommended. Patients must be able and willing to perform self-management, their competence to do so must be assessed, they must have given their informed consent in writing and they must have gone through rigorous training.

Self-monitoring is an option for only some patients, as everyone who has spoken has

acknowledged. That is borne out by the evidence note that was published by NHS QIS in May 2009, and which Mary Scanlon has already quoted from. It points out that, for every 100 people who are eligible, only about 14 would be able to undertake effective, long-term self-monitoring. To come back to Nanette Milne's distinction, the number of people who are able to self-manage is likely to be even smaller.

The motion discusses clinical and cost-effectiveness and Mary Scanlon asked some specific questions about that. I am aware of the results of a trial that was reported last month in the *New England Journal of Medicine* that suggest that people who self-monitor are more often within target range and enjoy a better quality of life. They did not, however, show that they have better clinical outcomes than those having monthly monitoring at clinics. Further, as the NHS QIS evidence note points out, two recent economic models concluded that patient self-monitoring was not cost effective compared to clinic-based care. However, that situation is not static and is likely to change over time.

I stress that such decisions should always be taken on an individual basis and, where it is appropriate for individual patients, they should be appropriately supported.

Before I continue, I welcome those who are in the public gallery this evening.

To pick up on Maureen Watt's point, the evidence note acknowledges that self-monitoring and self-management can have particular advantages in remote and rural areas, such as the north-east, by reducing the number of journeys in the patient pathway. For that reason, there has been a shift away from hospital clinics towards monitoring as the responsibility of primary care, which is more convenient for patients than hospital attendances.

The motion refers specifically to the Yorkhill service and its success in training young people to self-monitor and self-manage. Those are mainly children with congenital heart disease who may have had a heart valve replacement, so the numbers involved are fairly small.

The motion suggests that there is no support for young people to continue self-monitoring when they move to adult clinics. Young people in NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde who make the transition are supported by the Glasgow and Clyde anticoagulation service in self-monitoring and self-management.

For those with congenital heart disease who make the transition from Yorkhill to adult services, care is provided by the Scottish adult congenital cardiac service, which is a national service that is based at the Golden Jubilee national hospital.

There is no doubt that a clear protocol must always be in place to cover the transition from Yorkhill to the adult service. There must also be a proper referral pathway back to people's board of residence for anticoagulation therapy follow-up.

In considering the issue, we need to think about the impact of the new drugs that are on the way to replace warfarin. Just this week there were reports of research by Scottish scientists into one of the drugs, rivaroxaban, to treat people with atrial fibrillation. It was shown to be simpler to administer, and those who were taking it had fewer strokes and blood clots than those on warfarin.

The new medications are considerably more expensive, so they will have an impact on drug budgets. However, they do not require blood level monitoring, which would lead to significant changes in the delivery of anticoagulation services. They might reduce the number of hospitalisations, given that warfarin is third on the list of drugs that cause hospital admission through adverse effects. The Scottish Medicines Consortium has set up a short-life working group to help boards to understand the actions that they must take to introduce those new medications safely and effectively.

I stress that we enthusiastically support the self-monitoring and self-management of long-term conditions, when that can be done appropriately and safely. We will always seek, as is the case with warfarin, to consider what else boards should be doing to ensure that individuals for whom it is appropriate are properly supported.

For those for whom it might not be appropriate, we will continue to encourage warfarin monitoring through GP practices, supported by wider primary care teams rather than by hospital attendances. In most cases, the results from the blood samples that are taken by a GP practice are available on the same day. That model is available in NHS Grampian, and it is generally regarded as successful. It provides reassurance that the therapy is being delivered conveniently, safely and effectively for patients.

I thank Nanette Milne for raising an important issue, and I thank those who have joined us in the public gallery, who are living proof that the therapy can be delivered in this way. I give an assurance that we will examine carefully all the points that have been made in the debate.

Meeting closed at 17:33.

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