



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Official Report

MEETING OF THE PARLIAMENT

Thursday 13 January 2011

Session 3

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Scottish Parliament

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

Education

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson):

Good morning. The first item of business is a debate on motion S3M-7692, in the name of Des McNulty, on education. The debate is heavily subscribed, and there is very little time in hand.

09:15

Des McNulty (Clydebank and Milngavie)

(Lab): Over the past year, the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning has tried his best to convince parents, teachers and the wider Scottish public that his Government is delivering on education. His amendment today is a litany of deceit. It is intended to obscure the repeated abandonment or downgrading of policy commitments, the growing pressure on school and local authority budgets, the continuing downward trend in teacher numbers, the burgeoning sense of grievance among recently qualified teachers who are unable to find jobs and, increasingly, a postcode lottery in levels of provision.

Under the Scottish National Party, Scottish education is rudderless. Under the concordat arrangement with local government, ministers have lost control and are unable to deliver key policies. School and early education provision is being compromised and the current and future prospects of our young people are being jeopardised.

Teachers and parents in Edinburgh, Aberdeen, East Renfrewshire and West Dunbartonshire—indeed, in every part of Scotland—know that our education system is creaking at the seams. However, despite this Government's failures, there is outstanding work and outstanding achievement. Michael Russell is utterly shameless in seeking plaudits for the achievements of others while simultaneously seeking to evade his responsibility for the shortcomings of his Administration.

In her amendment, Elizabeth Smith sets out

"the SNP government's failure to deliver on its education pledges".

In education, the SNP has not just failed on some of them; it has delivered on none of them. On student debt, class sizes, teacher numbers, extra support for early education and school building, this Government has emphatically and undeniably failed. It delayed implementation of the curriculum

for excellence under Fiona Hyslop, who was then replaced by Michael Russell 14 months ago, following the publication of statistics that showed a slump in teacher numbers and a corresponding reduction in the proportion of newly qualified teachers who were getting jobs in the profession.

Regrettably, ever since then, the number of teachers has plummeted faster than ever. The percentage of newly qualified teachers who get permanent jobs is at a record low. The cabinet secretary and his officials have belatedly taken steps to bring the curriculum for excellence back on track, but examination arrangements are not yet in place. Getting all teachers—not just those who are in the vanguard—to the state of preparedness and confidence that is required for the reform to be a success remains a huge task. It could have been so much better had the previous cabinet secretary been more focused on implementation and the current cabinet secretary less prone to political gimmickry.

The great fear among teachers out there is that things are about to get worse. Relative to other portfolios, education has been disproportionately hit in the Government's budget. Many other services are facing serious cuts next year as the overall budget declines for the first time. Caught up in the machinations of the concordat, education has suffered repeated cuts every year since 2007. The alarm bells are being sounded loud and clear by teachers organisations such as the Educational Institute of Scotland and the Scottish Secondary Teachers Association. Only last week, the EIS said that the consequences of the local government settlement will lead to the decimation of education services the length and breadth of Scotland. We are long past the stage at which it is the desirable extras that are being sacrificed. Next year, schools face staffing levels being cut to the bone, the abandonment of average class sizes in mathematics and English at secondary 1 and S2, supplies budgets being squeezed dry and the paring back of specialist services that support the learning of our most vulnerable youngsters.

Before Christmas, it was revealed that the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and Scottish Government officials were developing proposals on changes to teachers' conditions. That was done in advance of any discussions with teachers' representatives through the national negotiating mechanism and yet savings from the changes that the Government intends should be imposed were factored into budget considerations as though they had been agreed.

Meanwhile, SNP-run Renfrewshire Council will decide at a meeting today on a proposal to replace qualified teachers for part of the school week with sessional staff who will have been given very limited training. As Judith Gillespie points out in

The Herald today, every primary school in Renfrewshire will lose

“a qualified teacher ... for 10% of every week, so that some 30% of children in P1-3 can enjoy classes of 18” —

—a political decision that has no support in Renfrewshire. It is not certain whether the proposal is legal. Surely the fact that it would set a very far-reaching precedent gives the cabinet secretary grounds to intervene, preferably in his ministerial capacity. However, given the approach that he adopted in Argyll and Bute, perhaps he will e-mail members of the SNP group to ask them to change their minds.

Under Labour, very substantial progress was made in reducing class sizes and pupil teacher ratios, as there was in new school building and refurbishment and in developing the conceptual framework that led to the curriculum for excellence reform. Similar progress was made in expanding early education entitlements and introducing the education maintenance allowance.

Mike Rumbles (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD): Does the member acknowledge that it was not just Labour, but the Liberal Democrats, too?

Des McNulty: I am very happy to do so. I will make the point again in a moment.

The SNP inherited from the previous Administration a legacy of sustained improvement and trashed it. Had the SNP kept teacher numbers at the level that Labour and the Liberal Democrats achieved in 2007, there would have been huge progress on class sizes—the SNP’s key pledge. However, fewer teachers means higher teacher pupil ratios, increased rather than reduced class sizes and less support for all young people, particularly those who are in greatest need.

When the SNP entered office in 2007, it inherited a programme to replace sub-standard accommodation with new school buildings that outstripped the rest of the United Kingdom. The new schools that have been completed since 2007 are overwhelmingly those that the previous Administration commissioned—the funding and contracts were put in place by the Labour-Liberal Democrat coalition. When the SNP is removed from office in May—and it will be—its legacy will be a hiatus in school building. Two years of the school programme has been lost through delays and flaws in the Scottish Futures Trust. Some authorities in areas where the Government had recently announced new school projects have even more recently been told that the capital allocations that had previously been agreed have been withdrawn and that they can expect a much smaller contribution in the form of revenue funding. Will the cabinet secretary tell the chamber today which authorities are being asked to accept

those new funding arrangements, what the funding package is, which schools will be affected and what implications that will have on cost and timetable?

Of course, the weaker his case, the louder the cabinet secretary speaks and the more aggressive his approach. However, on speaking privately and quietly to directors of education the length and breadth of Scotland, one hears that they are genuinely fearful about their ability to maintain even basic, core statutory provision. They are genuinely frustrated with a Government that seeks to micromanage things for which it has no locus of responsibility while failing to tackle the major policy areas in which leadership is genuinely required. Before Christmas, the cabinet secretary took time to write to headteachers across Scotland asking them to ensure that pupils were given additional work to make up for time that had been lost because of adverse weather conditions. Every headteacher would do that as a matter of course—there is no requirement for the cabinet secretary to get involved in such matters. Yet, in areas where the interests of education need to be advanced, whether in securing resources round the Cabinet table or driving forward national policies, the cabinet secretary is posted missing. He is looking after his own responsibilities instead of those of Scottish education.

As all members know, Mike Russell tries to take credit for everything and anything in Scottish education. Judgment of his stewardship will rest on the outcomes of those activities that are most directly the responsibility of the cabinet secretary—those that can be taken forward only by him. The financial allocations in the budget tell us that he has been unsuccessful as an advocate for Scottish education in the Cabinet. As the occupant of the policy driving seat, he has mainly been in reverse gear.

Yesterday, the cabinet secretary gave us an extensive, if incomplete, account of his activities in Argyll and Bute. I am sure that he was strongly advised to insulate himself from the school closure considerations; surely, he would also have been advised to avoid making public pronouncements on the matter. To be blunt, the people who go along to see him do so not because he is a party candidate, but because they know that he is the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning. That is the reality of the situation. Everything else that he said was simply window-dressing around that point.

The ministerial code, which covers such matters, makes specific provision for constituency members who have an obligation to their constituents to act on their behalf, but Mr Russell was under no such obligation. Even if he was invited to usurp Mr Mather’s role by Mr Mather,

surely the correct thing to do would have been to decline. As we have seen, enough fires demand his attention in the education portfolio for him to leave aside tending one in his own backyard.

Labour members recognise that the next few years will not be easy and that difficult choices will have to be made. We will look carefully at the current structures for managing education provision and aim for greater efficiency, but also for improved accountability and more flexibility. We do not share the Conservatives' enthusiasm for free schools, but we are open to giving greater powers to all those who are involved in the management of our schools, not narrowly to headteachers. We want schools and colleges to work together more closely in opening out the potential under the curriculum for excellence to provide curricular content and choices that are more attuned to the needs of all pupils, including those for whom the current way in which schools are organised does not provide sufficient support and encouragement for them to achieve their full potential.

We will not pay lip service, as the current Government does, to the importance of literacy and numeracy; rather, we will make the delivery of literacy and numeracy central objectives for every school and carry that objective into the workplace and the community. I look forward to reading the recommendations in Graham Donaldson's report, which will be published later today, because I believe that building the capacity of teachers is vital if we are to improve attainment and get the best outcomes for pupils.

We will take seriously the evidence most recently provided to the Finance Committee on the importance of early early intervention that focuses on the most vulnerable zero to three-year-olds and their parents. We will face up to the huge challenge in post-school education, where a strong political consensus is needed on the way forward. That could and should have been more easily arrived at through a proper independent review rather than through the stresses and strains of an election process. I have no doubt that the cabinet secretary will provide a rumbustious defence of his custodianship, but facts are chieftains that winnae ding. Most people have stopped listening to him, however loud he speaks. The clock is ticking during his final days in office, and this emperor—this panjandrum—has no clothes.

I move,

That the Parliament condemns the reduction in the number of teachers under the SNP by almost 3,000 since 2007 and the sharp rise in the proportion of recently qualified teachers who cannot obtain permanent or even temporary employment; notes that the percentage of newly qualified staff who have obtained full-time permanent posts has fallen to just 16.1%, a record low; expresses concern that pupil/teacher ratios are rising across Scotland and

many colleges have insufficient bursary funds to meet demand, and calls on the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning to apologise for getting involved in local authority decisions outwith his regional constituency instead of tackling the impact that fewer teachers, more unemployed recently qualified teachers, higher pupil/teacher ratios and a shortfall in bursary funding will have on education in Scotland.

09:28

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning (Michael Russell): I am delighted to have the opportunity to speak to the amendment in my name and to set out the Government's excellent record on education. However, before I go any further, I stress my sincere wish that both here today and in moving forward, we can have a positive, civil discourse about Scottish education. That should not be beyond us, given that we have an education system that is based on settled principles enshrined in the curriculum for excellence, on which there is now little, if any, disagreement, despite last year's attempts by all the Opposition parties to create disagreement. That political consensus is long standing, and I believe that it will survive. That marks a significant strength in Scotland in comparison with other countries, and it is incumbent on us all to nurture that broad consensus rather than risk losing it.

We should look forward to a vigorous civil discourse and debate in the run-up to the Scottish election, based on vision and achievement rather than negativity. The debate must be based on two other prerequisites, one of which is the bringing forward of clear policies. I regret that it took Mr McNulty 11 minutes to get to a policy, and that all the policies that he mentioned in the final minute of his speech are already happening. Secondly, the debate must be based on truth. I regret that even the former leader of the Labour Party has difficulty with matters of fact. In his new year message in the *Wishaw Press*, Mr McConnell said that there is

"growing anger at the Scottish Government's abolition of EMA's".

Education maintenance allowances have not been abolished. I hope that Mr McConnell will withdraw that statement prominently in the *Wishaw Press* and perhaps even in the chamber.

Let me put the matters that are raised in the motion into a factual light, as opposed to the rather dismal and dim light that Mr McNulty has shone on them. I will start with teacher numbers. I cannot deny that teacher numbers have fallen over recent years, but I regret that. Members are well aware, of course, that teacher recruitment is a matter for local authorities. I have some sympathy for local authorities as far as teacher numbers are concerned and strong sympathy for the young

people who have been affected, whom I support. However, to put things bluntly, it is not realistic for anyone to suggest that we or any other Government might aspire to restoring the numbers to the 2007 levels. Employing 3,000 teachers, which is roughly the number that local authorities have shed, would cost in the order of £120 million a year. I challenge those who are so critical of the current position—which none of us wishes to be in—to point to where that funding will come from. Back in 2007, authorities employed record numbers of teachers, and that was a problem in itself. Those numbers were unsustainable in any circumstances, let alone in the financial circumstances in which we now find ourselves.

The motion seems to overlook completely that we have, fortunately, turned the corner as far as teacher employment is concerned. Most people in the profession have welcomed that. There were hints and signs of that happening a few months ago, but they have now grown into compelling evidence. The first sign was in September 2010, when—for the first time for more than two years—fewer teachers claimed jobseekers allowance than in the same month a year before. That was reinforced by the October and November figures, which again showed that there were fewer jobseekers allowance claimants than in the corresponding month of the previous year. Indeed, in November 2010, the figure was lower than the November figures in 2009 and 2008. One swallow does not make a summer, but three consecutive months of fewer JSA claimants certainly amounts to more than just a ray of sunshine.

Des McNulty: Will the minister give way?

Michael Russell: Talking of rays of sunshine, I give way to Mr McNulty.

Des McNulty: Why has West Lothian Council written to people on its supply list to say that they will have to be reinterviewed for that list and that there will be very few jobs in the coming year?

Michael Russell: The actions of West Lothian Council and every other council are for them to justify, but I am sure that there are good reasons for what happened. Perhaps those reasons are related to the savage cuts to budgets that have come from the Con-Dem coalition and were presaged by Labour.

The next piece of evidence on teacher employment came with the teacher census, which was published on 1 December. That census showed a further drop in teacher numbers, which was immensely regrettable, but the drop was significantly smaller than the previous year's drop. A week later, the General Teaching Council for Scotland published the results of its post-probation teacher employment survey, which quite clearly demonstrated that the four-year falling trend of

post-probation teachers gaining employment has bottomed out and that the four-year rising trend of those not securing employment has peaked. Taken together, I believe that those statistical facts—they are facts—add up to compelling evidence that we have indeed turned the corner. That has been achieved by making tough decisions about student teacher intakes. Having cut intake numbers in 2009 and in 2010, I recently confirmed to the Scottish Further and Higher Education Funding Council that I envisage student numbers staying at that baseline level in 2011.

The teacher census is also helpful in that it supplements the immediate post-probation employment data that the GTCS survey provides. That census allows us to track probationers each year rather than just in the first year after probation. It is heartening to note that 74 per cent of the probationers who finished in the summer of 2009 were teaching in our schools in September 2010, compared with 59 per cent in September 2009.

The motion refers explicitly to rising pupil teacher ratios. Labour is clutching at straws. The pupil teacher ratio in our schools has risen marginally, by 0.1, in the past year, but let us be clear about our success. We have driven down pupil teacher ratios in primary schools since we came into office. Of course, the motion fails to acknowledge the fact that other hugely encouraging data have come out of the pupil census. In particular, it confirmed that local authorities had exceeded the revised target that we agreed with COSLA in the spring of 2010. Opposition parties told me that that target could not be achieved, but it was achieved and exceeded by the local authorities.

Hugh Henry (Paisley South) (Lab): Does the cabinet secretary still have the aspiration of every school pupil having two hours of high-quality physical education each week, delivered by specialist PE teachers?

Michael Russell: I am glad to say that we are making very good progress in that regard, and we are getting much closer to that aim—very much closer than any previous Administration did. I remain confident that that will be achieved in Scotland.

Before moving on from pupil teacher ratios, I make brief reference to our agreement with COSLA in relation to next year's draft budget. It commits us to maintaining the excellent primary 1 to 3 pupil teacher ratios. The agreement is also directly relevant to much of what I have said in the past few minutes about teacher numbers, given its firm undertakings on protecting teacher posts. At a time when school rolls continue to fall—it is important to note that—demand for teachers has, of course, fallen. However, local authorities have

agreed that they will provide places for all probationers who require a place under the induction scheme in August 2011, sufficient posts for all those probationers who successfully complete their probation in summer 2011 to apply for, and an overall reduction in the total number of unemployed teachers.

Given the very harsh Westminster budget from the Lib Dem-Conservative coalition, cutting too far and too fast, and given the fact that the former Chancellor of the Exchequer said that Labour would make cuts more savage than Thatcher's, the agreement represents a huge achievement for the whole of Scottish education.

I turn to the subject of supporting college students, which is also referred to in the motion. We recognise the pressure on colleges in the current climate, but our funding allocation for this academic year represents a substantial increase in student support. The £84 million that was available was 6 per cent up on the academic year 2009-10. In addition to that record level of funding, the Scottish Further and Higher Education Funding Council announced on 21 December that it will make available a further £3.5 million for student support this academic year. EMAs, which have not been abolished, despite what Mr McConnell has said—the Government has maintained them—benefit a number of college students, too.

I do not intend to say anything more about Argyll and Bute—I gave a very full account yesterday—except this. Yesterday, I was very pleased to see a newspaper report from April 2000 about a previous round of school closures in that area. I was pleased to see it because of the consistency of my views, and I am pleased to endorse this remark:

“A school tends to lie at the heart of the community and acts as a magnet. Every time you take one away, you rip out the heart of the community ... One of the great advantages of rural schools is smaller classes and quality teaching. The kids tend to perform very well.”

I commend that remark from 11 years ago—from George Lyon, who is now the Liberal election co-ordinator, and who has been supporting 25 school closures in Argyll and Bute.

Margaret Smith (Edinburgh West) (LD): The point that we were making yesterday was not that rural schools are not worth defending—they clearly are. It was that the manner by which the cabinet secretary conducted the defence of rural schools was questionable to say the least.

Michael Russell: In my book, the manner of defending rural schools does not include voting to close 25 of them. That is a curious definition of defending rural schools.

Mike Rumbles: Just nine!

The Presiding Officer: Order.

Michael Russell: There are 25 of them.

I could give a whole list of the achievements that have been made in education, not necessarily by this Government but by the educational community in Scotland, supported by the Government. Instead, however, I will simply move the amendment in my name.

Mr Rumbles has asked me to read it, so I will read it; I think that I have just enough time.

Mike Rumbles: I do not think so.

Michael Russell: The amendment states that the Parliament

“recognises the difficulties caused by the previous administration's unsustainable approach to teacher unemployment; urges local authorities to take full advantage of the resources offered to stabilise teacher employment in this year's local authority settlement; further recognises the fact that the teacher claimant count in Scotland is lower than in any other part of the United Kingdom and is now declining year on year; congratulates Scotland's pupils on achieving a record Higher pass rate in 2010; further congratulates teachers, pupils and parents on the recent international attainment results showing that Scotland has turned the corner and halted the years of decline under Labour administrations; welcomes the focus on the critical early years of education with an increase of almost 20% in nursery provision, increased access to General Teaching Council for Scotland-registered teachers in nurseries and record low primary school class sizes giving more one-to-one time for pupils with their teacher; further welcomes the reduction in primary school pupil-teacher ratios”—[*Interruption.*]

This is proving difficult, Presiding Officer; I probably need another minute and a half but, as you are rightly indicating, I am almost out of time. That proves the salient point of the debate: the SNP Government has brought ideas, energy, enthusiasm and achievement to education. They are all there in the amendment, and I am afraid that anyone who would vote against them does not understand the Parliament, education or Scotland.

I move amendment S3M-7692.3, to leave out from “condemns” to end and insert:

“recognises the difficulties caused by the previous administration's unsustainable approach to teacher unemployment; urges local authorities to take full advantage of the resources offered to stabilise teacher employment in this year's local authority settlement; further recognises the fact that the teacher claimant count in Scotland is lower than in any other part of the United Kingdom and is now declining year on year; congratulates Scotland's pupils on achieving a record Higher pass rate in 2010; further congratulates teachers, pupils and parents on the recent international attainment results showing that Scotland has turned the corner and halted the years of decline under Labour administrations; welcomes the focus on the critical early years of education with an increase of almost 20% in nursery provision, increased access to General Teaching Council for Scotland-registered teachers in nurseries and record low primary school class sizes

giving more one-to-one time for pupils with their teacher; further welcomes the reduction in primary school pupil-teacher ratios since the last year of the last Labour administration; applauds the Scottish Government and local authorities' completion of 330 school projects, lifting more than 120,000 pupils out of sub-standard accommodation by the end of this parliamentary session far outstripping the previous administration's plans; further applauds the positive approach to rural schools demonstrated by the SNP government while noting that the previous Labour-Liberal Democrat administration did not save a single rural school from closure; commends the help given to the hardest-pressed families with the extension of entitlement to free school meals; further commends the range of positive developments delivered by the Scottish Government including 20,000 apprenticeship places, the introduction of the Scottish Baccalaureate, preserving the Educational Maintenance Allowance despite its abolition elsewhere in the UK, persevering with the roll-out of the Curriculum for Excellence despite opposition from Labour, the Liberal Democrats and Conservatives, the promotion of Scottish history and literacy in schools, the reform of the Children's Hearings system, introduction of improved safeguards for vulnerable people through the new Protection of Vulnerable Groups disclosure system, roll-out of kinship care allowances, reduction in school exclusions, improved support for young people through the More Choices, More Chances initiative, record levels of school leavers entering positive destinations such as training despite the recent recession and introduction of the first national literacy action plan; reaffirms Scotland's commitment to free education, established by the abolition of the graduate endowment, and rejects any move to shift the burden of cost of universities onto students' shoulders."

09:39

Elizabeth Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife)

(Con): I remind the cabinet secretary that most members in the chamber can read.

It is another year, another Thursday morning and another education debate—a debate that is probably puzzling the voters. Just what, they will rightfully ask, is the main subject to be discussed in this, the first education debate of our election year? I, too, was a bit puzzled, especially when I saw the motion and the other amendments. I sought guidance from the chamber desk on what would or would not be declared competent business this morning. Education was the theme, I was told, so let me use the debate to set out why I believe we are right to be critical of the SNP's record in education, but also to set that against some tasters from the Tory education stall for the elections in May. That is what the voters deserve and what they will be expecting us to do.

Education was something for which Scotland was once renowned, across the world. Scotland was the home of the third-oldest university in the English-speaking world, the home of the European enlightenment and the home of intellectual giants such as Adam Smith, Adam Ferguson and William Robertson; we even boasted of having three universities in the top 100 in the world in 2009. I want educational excellence to be a thing of the

future as well as of the past, and I am sure that that is the aspiration of every member, never mind every party, in the Parliament. However, that will not be the case unless we confront the facts—all the facts, not just the ones that the cabinet secretary has read out this morning. That is not to deny or to diminish some of the excellent features of what is happening in our Scottish schools on a daily basis.

Some of the unacceptable facts are as follows. Since 1999, successive Scottish Administrations have doubled input spending on our schools, yet the overall standards of the outputs have not been so good. That important fact has been central to the considerations in the Donaldson report, which will be published today. Two thirds of S2 pupils are struggling with literacy, and 13,000 pupils still leave school each year unable to read or write properly. Only 30 per cent of pupils in S2 are reaching the required standard in maths, despite the figure being 85 per cent in P3. Scottish pupils are now ranked below the global average in maths and science.

Aside from the basic attainment issues there are concerns, as some Labour members have mentioned, about poor discipline in some schools, about a lack of PE and extra-curricular activities, about the availability of some higher and advanced higher courses and about whether headteachers have too little power when it comes to running their own schools. More recently, our world-class universities tell us that the Scottish Government has presented them with a financial situation that is unsustainable beyond the next academic year.

Some people will argue that that is to do with the proficiency of two SNP education secretaries. Just as important have been the unrealistic and uncostered election pledges that they made in 2007, which raised expectations well beyond the ability to deliver them. Those pledges were specific in terms of numbers: 18 or fewer pupils in all primary 1 to 3 classes, a guarantee of maintaining 53,000 teachers, two hours per week of quality PE, and so on. Those are very rigid national targets, which, notwithstanding the concordat, have provided huge headaches for local authorities—and they were encouraged by the SNP Government to be much more flexible in setting their priorities. That is a real tension within the system, which, I suspect, is behind much of the recent fiasco in Argyll and Bute.

This year, 2011, is an election year, and it is incumbent upon all of us not to dwell on other parties' failings but to say what we, as Opposition parties, would do. Scottish Conservatives firmly believe that Scottish education can be excellent once more, but not if there is the pretence that all is well in the current system and if there is an in-

built resistance to change. That is an option that can increasingly be encountered in the educational world—it is held by Graham Donaldson, Keir Bloomer, Lindsay Paterson, the EIS and Universities Scotland to name just a few.

That change must embrace the true spirit of devolution, so that decisions are taken, as far as possible, by the people who are most skilled to make them: by teachers and headteachers, who know far better than local authorities what is best for the needs of individual pupils in their schools; and by parents, who want the assurance that every local area will have a good taxpayer-funded school on their doorstep and that they will have more freedom to choose which school best suits their child and more flexibility when it comes to spending nursery care entitlements. There must be the opportunity for groups other than local authorities to set up new schools, more autonomy for our colleges and universities and more assistance, whether through pupil premiums or increased college and university bursaries, for pupils who might not otherwise have access to the best possible education.

Nothing will change if the Government in Scotland continues to be obsessed with a one-size-fits-all policy for local authorities, which stifles parental choice, perpetuates the monopoly of state provision of schools and all too often leads to contentment with academic mediocrity rather than excellence. I look forward to lunch time, when we will be able to see the full detail of Graham Donaldson's recommendations, particularly on how teacher training can play its role in raising standards, especially in relation to literacy and numeracy.

The Parliament's Education, Lifelong Learning and Culture Committee will shortly review the process of school management, just as the cabinet secretary wanted to do when he wrote his seminal book, "Grasping the Thistle", when he hoped that SNP back benchers would move away from the outdated view that SNP councillors know better than headteachers—maybe he meant cabinet secretaries.

Education, whether in the earliest years or at postgraduate level, is at a watershed in Scotland. There is great need for change, and voters realise that. Let us give them a robust debate, which is worthy of the political process.

I move amendment S3M-7692.1, to leave out from "condemns" to end and insert:

"notes the SNP government's failure to deliver on its education pledges; further notes that many of them were unrealistic, uncoded and the wrong priorities for pupils and parents; regrets that the Scottish Government has failed to bring forward any substantive reforms to school management, but recognises the educational benefits of 'free schools' and of giving more decision-making powers

and greater financial control to head teachers of all other publicly funded schools."

09:46

Margaret Smith (Edinburgh West) (LD): I had wondered whether Mr Russell would make a new year's resolution to bring to the Parliament a new, come-clean approach on the state of education in Scotland, good and bad, and to own up to some of the SNP's broken promises and failures on this most important subject. It seems not. This morning we heard from the cabinet secretary another string of excuses and an even longer run of rhetoric than I anticipated.

I thought that after Christmas we would see the end of comedy reruns, until I read the SNP's amendment, which beggars belief. The truth is that the SNP Government cannot be trusted to get education in Scotland right. This is the first week back after the parliamentary recess, and we have already had a ministerial statement on the cabinet secretary's actions over school closures in Argyll. Parents throughout Scotland are left with the undeniable view that in relation to school closures there is one rule for parents in Argyll and another rule for the rest of parents, who care just as deeply about their schools as parents in Argyll do.

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): Why are you shutting them, then?

Margaret Smith: I heard someone ask why we are shutting them. The bottom line is that the mess to which the cabinet secretary referred in his statement yesterday is a mess of the SNP's and independents' making. People have had to come in and pick up what happened beforehand, but the mess is not of their making; it is a mess of the SNP administration in Argyll's making.

As budget discussions progress, we will continue to ask why Mr Russell seems content for education to take a bigger-than-average hit in funding cuts. Perhaps instead of bouncing around coffee mornings and house parties in Argyll, Mr Russell should have been sitting down with John Swinney to make the case for more funding for education.

Education has been one of the most disappointing areas of SNP delivery for Scotland since 2007. Class size reduction targets have been all but abandoned, teacher numbers have dropped by nearly 3,000, thousands of unemployed teachers cannot find employment and the development of the curriculum for excellence has given rise to concern among teaching unions, parents and the curriculum for excellence management board. A lack of clarity still hangs over the new national qualifications and what they will mean for the breadth of Scottish education,

which we all want to continue and which is worth fighting for.

When he spoke at the Scottish learning festival at the end of September, Mr Russell said that his priority was to protect core front-line services. I do not think that many members disagree with that approach. However, the most recent public sector employment statistics show that the teacher head count in Scotland has fallen by 3,500 since 2007, with the full-time-equivalent number falling by 2,900.

Hugh Henry: Will the member give way?

Margaret Smith: No.

It is fundamental to the delivery of quality education that we have the right number of teachers in our schools. I accept that there are positive signs, but there is no place for complacency when the GTCS survey of post-probationer teachers reveals that the number of people who are able to secure full-time, permanent teaching posts is again plummeting and that, on average, six probationers are chasing every position.

The SNP seems to refuse to acknowledge any responsibility for the number of teachers in Scotland, whether we are talking about employed or unemployed teachers. The SNP's stance is strange, given its manifesto pledge to keep teacher numbers at the record high of 53,000 that it inherited from the Liberal Democrats and the Labour Party. The cabinet secretary said that the previous Administration's position was not sustainable, so why did the SNP promise to sustain it?

Hugh Henry: Does Margaret Smith agree that teaching during the school week in Scotland should be delivered or supervised by qualified teachers?

Margaret Smith: I think that the member's question contains a bear trap for me in relation to the situation in Renfrewshire. I spent time in the Parliament yesterday having a go at the cabinet secretary for interfering in the decisions of locally elected councillors, so I cannot the next day turn round and say that the Renfrewshire Council members who are making those decisions and taking account of everything of which they must take account can be second-guessed by me in the Parliament in Edinburgh. The reality is that in schools we need not just teachers but specialists, who on occasion will bring greater breadth to the quality of teaching than teachers can bring.

A decision of the Administration that we supported was the setting up of the Donaldson review of teacher education in Scotland, the report of which will be published today. No doubt there will be much focus on concerns about the future of

the teaching profession, but I have spoken to Graham Donaldson and I know that there are also many good stories to tell. We should not lose sight of that. The issues that are highlighted and the recommendations that emerge from the review will need to be considered carefully by the Government and the Parliament, and by the Government in the next parliamentary session, to ensure that the profession can flourish, that struggling teachers are helped to improve, that a diverse range of people are attracted to and kept in teaching, that concerns about teachers' literacy and numeracy are addressed through better selection processes, and so on.

The previous Administration made a great contribution to the future of the teaching profession in Scotland through the McCrone agreement. We should all be concerned about any rowing back from the achievements that were made. We must ensure that they are not dismantled but are built on, so that we can improve quality and leadership in teaching.

Teachers are the foundation of much of our education system. The SNP's flagship education policy on class sizes depended on teacher numbers, and there has been an equally dismal performance in that regard. I will not go through the litany of the figures again—I have spent many Thursday mornings going through the statistics.

Liberal Democrats are committed to improving Scottish education and to focusing on pupils from the poorest backgrounds and giving them extra support through a pupil premium. We are committed to giving headteachers the power to make decisions that support those pupils in their schools.

Liberal Democrats are committed, too, to supporting Scotland's further and higher education system. We will play our part in the green paper process and in finding the Scottish solution that we all seek. We need a solution that reflects not only where we are but where we have come from. It must reflect the culture of higher education in Scotland and the importance for the future of Scotland and every member of society of ensuring that it is the business of Government, not graduates, to fund further and higher education.

We must remember that we are experiencing a period of change in Scottish education. The curriculum for excellence is one of the biggest challenges of the past decade for teachers and schools. The cabinet secretary talked about his disappointment with Opposition parties in that regard. Let me put aside all the rhetoric and say that one of the things that I find most disappointing in the SNP amendment is the extremely misleading suggestion that Opposition parties have opposed the roll-out of the new curriculum. We have done what we are elected to do. We

have questioned and we have expressed concern, as have teaching unions and others. That is our job and that is what we will continue to do, to ensure that Scotland gets the education system that it deserves.

I move amendment S3M-7692.2, to insert at end:

“; notes the inconsistent comments of the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning in relation to his role in local school closures, and calls on the Scottish Government to clarify the rules governing the involvement of the cabinet secretary in decisions to close local schools.”

09:53

Hugh Henry (Paisley South) (Lab): Margaret Smith was somewhat inconsistent in some of her arguments. On the one hand she said that it is not for her to intervene in or comment on decisions that specific local authorities make; on the other hand she spent a substantial amount of time castigating the cabinet secretary about class sizes, which are the responsibility of local authorities. She cannot have it both ways.

Margaret Smith was right, however, when she said that I was trying to address an issue that is confronting Renfrewshire Council. The council meets today to decide whether to remove teachers from classrooms for 10 per cent of the school week and replace them with unqualified staff.

Before I go into the detail of that, I will reflect on some of what the cabinet secretary said in his speech. He said that the numbers of teachers in 2007 were unsustainable. However, in the SNP manifesto in 2007, he and his colleagues pledged:

“We will maintain teacher numbers in the face of falling school rolls”.

Either they are sustainable or the cabinet secretary misled people in the manifesto promise that he made. We really should know whether the SNP knew in 2007 that teacher numbers were unsustainable and whether it had no intention of maintaining them.

The cabinet secretary also said that he was making progress on the target of every pupil having two hours of quality PE each week, delivered by a specialist PE teacher. In Renfrewshire, I presume that we will have those two hours delivered by a quality PE teacher, plus two and a half hours of education delivered by unqualified staff, so there will be four and half hours in which pupils will be removed from mainstream curriculum work. That is a worry for parents as well as teachers.

The cabinet secretary said that he wanted to develop political consensus. One of the agreements that had been reached in Scottish education across political parties with teaching

unions and with parents was that Scottish education would be delivered by qualified, trained, skilled and experienced teachers, unlike what had happened in England and Wales for many years, where unqualified staff and teachers not trained in the relevant specialisms often taught children. We set our face against that and said that education would be delivered by teachers.

What is happening in Renfrewshire turns that consensus upside down. The council is diluting the quality of education. For 10 per cent of the school week, education will be delivered by unqualified teachers. It is a disgrace, a dilution of education and, potentially, the thin end of the wedge.

If Margaret Smith and others think that what is happening in one specific authority is nothing to do with them, they should open their eyes. They should listen to the worries of the EIS about what that means for Scottish education because it is the start of a process that says that, for purely financial reasons—as the director of education and the leader of Renfrewshire Council have indicated—we can take teachers out of the classroom and replace them with unqualified staff.

Renfrewshire Council has already shed proportionately more teaching jobs than most authorities in Scotland—nearly 250. It proposes to remove 60 teachers from the classroom and replace them with unqualified staff.

I tell members to listen not to me, any of the Labour members or anyone else in the Labour Party but to parents and teachers. I had an e-mail from a constituent whom I do not know, who says:

“I am writing to express my absolute disgust both as a parent and a teacher at Renfrewshire’s decision to create non-teaching jobs to replace qualified teachers.”

She is one of the teachers who may lose their job, and she goes on to say:

“to be told ... that my position is on the line again after almost six years is soul destroying, especially when I will be displaced by a non-teaching person.

The fact the proposals are being rushed through so quickly is scandalous ...

We are looking for education, not a baby-sitting service ... It makes a mockery of the level of scrutiny newer teachers have to endure to become qualified teachers ... How do we ensure they—”

those non-teaching persons—

“are up to GTC standards ...

The message Renfrewshire is sending out is to save as much money as possible but to hell with our children’s education.”

It is shocking that parents and teachers are being put in that position.

Des McNulty appealed to Mike Russell to use his influence. The leader of Renfrewshire Council

listens to Alex Salmond and Alex Salmond listens to him. I appeal to Alex Salmond to use his influence over the leader of Renfrewshire Council to stop that ill-judged, retrograde step, which threatens the quality of Scottish education. We want qualified, experienced teachers to deliver education, not unqualified staff—or possibly even, as Renfrewshire Council's director of education said, volunteers.

10:00

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): Although many of us have contrasting opinions on education, we must never lose sight of its importance to the people of Scotland. Therefore, the debate is welcome.

Scotland has a proud educational tradition. It is the key that unlocks many doors and the primary reason why our small country has, for centuries, punched far above its weight in so many fields. Scotland was home to the enlightenment and can lay claim to an exhaustive list of mankind's greatest inventions and discoveries. We owe all that to the Scottish belief in quality and universal education. Our greatest natural resource is our people, and our education system is fundamental to ensuring that they can achieve not only for themselves but for their country.

On taking office in 2007, the SNP made a firm commitment to education. Successes can be seen across the education spectrum, from early years and nursery education through to school leavers and students, as well as adults who wish to return to some form of education.

All areas of education are critical and intertwined in a complex way. That is why the SNP has worked to improve educational standards and availability across the board.

In early years education—the most critical years for a child's development—the SNP has worked to make great improvements. Through our concordat with COSLA, local authorities now deliver 475 hours of nursery education per child, which is a substantial increase on the previous figure of 380 hours.

The latest statistics also show that almost 22 per cent of pupils in primary 1 to primary 3 are now in classes of 18 or fewer. That exceeds the agreement that was reached with COSLA in December 2009, when we set a target of 20 per cent. Under our most recent agreement with COSLA, that ratio will be maintained.

In secondary schools, pupils have also reaped the rewards of SNP investment, governance and co-operation with local authorities. The higher pass rate is the highest that it has ever been, with 47.3 per cent of school leavers attaining one

award or more in 2008-09 compared with 43.6 per cent in 2007-08.

In 2008, the universities entry body, the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service, conducted an expert study of the standards of Scottish highers and advanced highers. It found that the value of highers against English A levels had increased, and therefore highers were uprated in comparison with A levels for university entry throughout the UK. That is praise indeed for the Scottish secondary education system, as it comes from an entirely independent education organisation.

The increased level of attainment is good not only for our country but for hard-working pupils. In 2009-10, 87 per cent of school leavers went to positive destinations—that is, work, training and further or higher education. That is the highest level ever recorded and is due to, in no small part, our 16-plus learning choices scheme, which guarantees a suitable offer to all young people at that crucial stage in their lives. The same cannot be said of the situation under the previous Lib-Lab Administration, when we witnessed a year-on-year increase in the number of young people who were, as that Administration put it, not in education, employment or training.

Scotland has an enviable university education system. We are home to some of the most prestigious seats of learning in the world and our young people are guaranteed free education should they wish it. The SNP recognises the importance and status of our higher education establishments and has ploughed unprecedented levels of funding into our seats of learning, in sharp contrast to what is happening south of the border.

Scotland currently spends a higher share of its gross domestic product on university research than any other country in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. In the last UK-wide Government research assessment exercise, which worked on a subject-by-subject basis, all Scottish universities were ranked as producing world-leading research.

The SNP is committed to maintaining and building upon the world-class standards of our universities and to making university education available to all Scots who want it. That is why we abolished the graduate endowment fee and oppose the reintroduction of Labour's tuition fees. Education is a right and should be based on the ability to learn, not the ability to pay. That policy will be recognised in years to come as one of the SNP's greatest achievements.

Of course, education is not all textbooks and academia. We must also remember that an ever-increasing number of our young people are

entering practical training programmes and apprenticeships. In 2009-10, we exceeded our target of 20,000 new apprenticeship starts, and maintained it in 2010-11 with the help of European Union funding. That turned around a year-on-year declining trend of starts. Beginning in 2004-05, the number was 21,349. That fell to an unimpressive low of 15,772 in 2007-08—a fall of a quarter—under the previous Labour-Lib Dem Executive.

Last July, we announced the step forward Scotland campaign—a £6.5 million package of support to help the additional young people who expected to leave school and college that summer. It included 800 vocational pathway opportunities for 16 and 17-year-olds and a £1,000 incentive for up to 2,000 employers to offer modern apprenticeships to young people facing specific barriers to securing such an opportunity, including care leavers.

Despite the impact of Labour's recession, the SNP has done what it can to improve Scottish education. However, we still want to achieve many things and would like to have the means to achieve them at our disposal. If we want to maintain and improve our enviable, world-class education system, we must secure the fiscal powers to enable us to do so, and that can best be achieved by independence.

We have heard about what is happening in Renfrewshire; I leave other colleagues to comment on that. However, although Hugh Henry has shed crocodile tears recently about the reduction in teacher numbers, it does not appear that tears were shed between 2004 and 2007 in Glasgow when Labour cut 64 nursery teacher posts and replaced them with nursery nurses. Labour must be consistent if it is as concerned about the issue as it claims to be.

10:06

Karen Whitefield (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab): It has to be said that the Labour motion that we are debating merely scratches the surface of the list of failures and broken promises that have been presided over by the SNP Administration in relation to the education of our children and young people. Even within the rather clunky grammatical rules of motion drafting, it would have been just too big a task to compile a readable list of Government failings and put it into today's motion.

However, we had to start somewhere. The SNP came into government on the back of a manifesto promise to maintain teacher numbers and thereby increase teacher pupil ratios. It rightly recognised the success of the previous Labour-Liberal Executive, which had increased teacher numbers from 48,927 in 2000 to 53,416 in 2007, thereby improving the pupil teacher ratio from 15.4 to 13.

To its credit, at that point, the SNP Administration understood the importance of that achievement and the need to consolidate and build on it. It recognised that education is one of the key concerns of the Scottish people and one of the key drivers in the long-term economic regeneration of our country.

When the SNP won the election in 2007, the people of Scotland put their trust in it to deliver on its manifesto promises. Unfortunately, as we know, the reality of the SNP in government differs greatly from its campaign rhetoric. The reality is that, since coming to power in May 2007, the SNP has presided over a substantial reduction in teacher numbers and an associated increase in national teacher pupil ratios.

Ian McKee (Lothians) (SNP): Does the member accept that, in 2007, Labour councils were responsible for the employment of about 40 per cent of the teachers in Scotland, and that Labour councils are responsible for 60 per cent of the diminution of the number of teachers in Scotland?

Karen Whitefield: No matter how much Mr McKee tries to blame someone else for the situation, the reality is that in 2007 the SNP promised the people of Scotland that it would maintain teacher numbers. It is simply not good enough now to blame councils for the SNP's failure to give local government sufficient money to pay for those numbers to be maintained in our schools.

This week, Alex Neil sent a calendar to my constituents in Airdrie and Shotts telling us about anniversaries to celebrate. I think that he might have done better to tell us to celebrate the maintaining of teacher numbers; instead, the calendar says that, on 19 April, we all have to celebrate the anniversary of the SNP's consultation on setting the legal limit at 25 for primary 1 classes. What an exciting commitment—a consultation! I am sure that the people of Airdrie and Shotts will be delighted.

We have already heard from my colleague Hugh Henry—I am sure that we will hear this from Wendy Alexander, too—about the reality of SNP councils' commitment to education, with teachers being replaced by unqualified workers. That is not only a betrayal of the commitment that the SNP gave to the pupils and parents of Scotland but a catastrophe for the ever-increasing number of newly qualified teachers who are unable to find full-time employment.

Those newly qualified teachers entered a bond of trust with the previous Scottish Executive, only to find that trust betrayed by an inept and faltering Scottish Government. They entered teacher training colleges in the expectation that

employment opportunities would be waiting for them at the end of their studies. Instead, they find reducing teacher numbers, far fewer jobs and frightening levels of competition for those jobs that remain.

I suppose that we could excuse the Government's failure to keep its promise on teacher numbers and teacher pupil ratios as being a blip or a slip-up in an otherwise unblemished path of educational policy commitments. Unfortunately, as we all know, that is not the case. It is just one in a litany of failures to deliver on promises and improve our education system.

We need only look at the pledge to match Labour's school building programme brick for brick for further evidence. I am not sure whether there was some reference to Lego in the small print of that commitment. What we have seen is a commitment to build a quango, not schools.

Jamie Hepburn (Central Scotland) (SNP): Will the member take an intervention?

Karen Whitefield: Not at the moment.

The ironically titled Scottish Futures Trust has failed to deliver any future for Scotland's school estate and it has completely undermined the trust of the electorate in the SNP's promises. However, it has been successful in consuming £23 million of public money—funding that sustains the most expensive advice agency in Scotland. It is, in effect, the mother of all consultancies.

All of that leaves the Scottish Government pathetically claiming credit for school building projects that were not only commissioned but, in many cases, begun before it came to power. Whereas the Labour-Liberal coalition built more than 320 new schools during its eight years in government, this Government will enter the next election having completely stalled the school building programme, leaving 150,000 pupils in buildings that are not fit for purpose. I remind Mr Hepburn that in my constituency in central Scotland, we built schools in Caldercruix, Chapelhall, Plains, Airdrie and Clarkston. Not one school has been built in Lanarkshire since Mr Hepburn's party came to power.

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

Karen Whitefield: To conclude, Presiding Officer—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I am afraid that the member will have to conclude very quickly.

Karen Whitefield: The people of Scotland need a Government that is fit to deal with Scotland's education system.

10:12

Christina McKelvie (Central Scotland) (SNP):

I thought that the performance of the SNP on education was an excellent choice of subject for debate. It is a brilliant debating subject that gladdens the hearts of SNP members and causes clouds to gather on the horizon for the poor wee downtrodden members to my left—to my left in physical terms only, of course—who wish that they, collectively, had half the ability of any one of the SNP's Cabinet members. Although most of Scotland has welcomed the advances in education under the current and previous education secretaries, Labour MSPs have not been able to find the grace to congratulate the SNP on those advances—nor, indeed, the pupils and staff in our schools who deliver them.

Karen Whitefield need not bother getting to her feet; I will answer her points now. The SNP Government has built more schools—330 of them—than Labour dreamed of in its 2007 manifesto. The SNP has brought class sizes down to their lowest-ever levels, introduced the baccalaureate and abolished university tuition fees, is reforming the exam system and is moving Scotland forward, but all we hear from the Labour benches is a long—very long—high-pitched whining sound.

Labour members complain when ministers and cabinet secretaries do not intervene, but cry foul when a minister or a cabinet secretary intervenes. Their complaints seem to be never ending, but they are always without foundation, logic, reason, or structure. They have complained that Mike Russell took the time to explain the Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010 to people who are campaigning to save their school. It is not quite clear whether they are objecting to his making sure that the consultation on the schools is carried out properly or to his taking the time to help parents.

The Opposition seems to find it surprising that a busy politician would take the time to meet school campaigners when there are only a few children at the school. That, I suggest, points to the difference between SNP and Opposition members. Whereas their concern is only for votes, our concern is for the people who are affected.

I found it enlightening that Mr Russell made sure that the campaigners knew about the Scottish rural schools network—a fine campaigning organisation that cannot be said to be in the pocket of any political party and which, I am sure, gives him no quarter when the subject of rural schools comes up. It gives no one any quarter in its actions to keep rural schools open.

Labour's call for an inquiry into Mr Russell's actions, this time in the form of a complaint to the

Scottish Parliamentary Standards Commissioner, is not a new tactic. We have had a series of spurious Labour complaints about SNP ministers, each of which has been turfed out. In fact, the two former Presiding Officers who serve as the independent scrutineers of the ministerial code made it clear in January that they are tiring of complaints being made that have no substance.

The point for Labour members is, of course, not to prove any case but to get themselves a newspaper headline. They do not care whether anything wrong has been done; they just want a story. That is cheap and petty politics at its cheapest and most petty, but it is the standard that we have come to expect from Labour members, which is a great shame. They roll in the gutter and call it opposition. Scotland is ill served by people who stand for election but offer no alternatives; people who want to run the country but cannot offer a vision; and people who want to be in office not for what can be done, but for the trappings of office. Any reason to disagree is an ungraceful place for Scottish Labour to be.

SNP ministers are not perfect. SNP cabinet secretaries are capable of making mistakes but they do their best to deliver, to make Scotland a better place in which to live. *[Interruption.]*

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Order.

Christina McKelvie: They contribute to driving Scotland forward, and that is what the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning does. At a time when everyone else has abandoned the principle—or even the pretence of the principle—of free education, it was the SNP that abolished the graduate endowment. Labour has no idea how to ensure the principle of free education, as Iain Gray proved on “Newsnight Scotland” the other night. When others were giving up on Scottish education and being content just to talk it down, it was the SNP that turned round attainment and got us climbing back up the programme for international student assessment rankings.

After years of declining apprenticeship numbers under the Labour and Lib Dem coalitions, the SNP Government started to grow those numbers. Kenny Gibson cited the numbers earlier, so I will not cite them again, but there have been more apprenticeships under the SNP. Hugh Henry asked about the target of every pupil getting two hours of PE a week. The figure has risen from 5 per cent under Labour to 55 per cent under the SNP—a rise of 1,000 per cent. That is progress indeed—progress that that lot couldnae even imagine. Scottish education is not flourishing yet, but it is getting its first chance in generations to grow and to look towards blooming because the SNP Government has been clearing the weeds of years of Labour misrule. The suffocation is being

lifted and there now is a chance for sunlight to reach the shoots.

Scottish education is in good hands now. It is in the hands of a party and a cabinet secretary who actually care about making it better, improving Scotland and moving her forward. We have ambition and hope for Scotland and for Scottish education, which Labour lacks. We look forward to continuous improvement in education, always looking for better attainment performance and improved learning and teaching conditions from nursery to university. Scotland is moving forward with the SNP and Scottish education is moving forward, too. I am absolutely delighted to support the amendment in the name of my colleague.

10:18

Jamie McGrigor (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I am pleased to speak in this debate. The Scottish Conservatives have consistently argued for an education system that sees much more power and decision making passed to schools, parents and teachers and an end to the top-down, centralised, Government-knows-best attitude of the past, which the SNP Government, with its numerous national targets imposed on teachers, is making even worse. A more free, more diverse and more locally responsive system has a great deal of support among parents and an increasing number of education experts and stakeholders at all levels. If we had that type of system, in which local priorities based on local needs were the key, we would perhaps not be in the situation that we are in regarding the cabinet secretary's handling of the Argyll and Bute schools issue. The national targets and policy impositions of his own Government have made the serious challenges that Argyll and Bute councillors and officials face even more difficult.

I will not add a great deal on the specifics of the cabinet secretary's involvement in the Argyll and Bute issue. I thank him for complimenting me, during yesterday's statement, for defending the Argyll schools. I am delighted—and I compliment him—if he is intent on saving the Argyll schools from closure. After all, he is a cabinet secretary and gets far more publicity than a mere MSP and candidate such as me.

Mike Rumbles: Will the member take an intervention?

Jamie McGrigor: Not just at the moment.

Nevertheless, I again refer to his statement in an e-mail that nine of the schools in Argyll and Bute could be closed with minimal difficulty and ask him to name those schools in the interests of openness and of my constituents. To add further to that openness, would he be prepared to publish all his correspondence with the SNP councillors on

the issue? He has made it clear in public—including during oral answers in the chamber—that it would be “quite improper” to comment on the proposals or the process. However, we know that, behind the scenes, he was e-mailing the SNP councillors in detail on the matters, not only commenting on them but suggesting alternative closure proposals, so what would be wrong with putting all of that on the record?

The Argyll and Bute schools issue has caused and continues to cause worry to parents and pupils in dozens of rural communities. That should be the focus of the debate, and we should be seeking to achieve the best possible education for our children in all the communities that we represent. That is a particular challenge in Argyll and Bute, given the special needs of such a dispersed rural and island constituency. It should be pointed out that, despite the current position, the proposals to close the 26 primary schools were unveiled to the public on 26 October and were the plans of the SNP and independent-led council. I am glad that the whole process has now been postponed until March. Why is it, though, that Argyll and Bute Council achieved such a dismal settlement in its negotiations with the Scottish Government compared with those of other councils? That obviously affects how much money the council can spend on education.

Although the Scottish Conservatives are aware of the pressure that council budgets are under and the need for efficiencies, we believe that each individual school should be judged on its educational and social merits. We believe in maintaining rural primary schools because of the role that they play in sustaining community life and the attainment levels of those who attend the schools, which is well above average. In looking to the future of rural communities, we must surely look not just at the cost of schools today, but at the appearance of tomorrow and the future for the young people who live in those communities. Education is a key factor in self-improvement. That should be pointed out emphatically to pupils who want to get on in life and emulate some of the Scottish giants on whose shoulders we stand, whom Liz Smith mentioned.

Ian McKee: Is the nub of the member's complaint the fact that the SNP Government has not shown any favour towards an SNP-led council in the amount of money that it has distributed for education?

Jamie McGrigor: My point is that the closures were proposed by an SNP-dominated council.

A theme that continually emerges among parents in Argyll is the inaccuracy of the council's closure proposal documents, which were wrong on a wide range of issues from pupil roll projections, which are for only one year, to estimated travel

times to other schools and anticipated savings. The same concern has also been voiced by Argyll rural schools network, and I pay tribute to that body for the work that it has done. It is surely a matter of real concern that experts say that the expected financial saving of £24,000 a year on which the proposal to close North Bute primary school was based was incorrectly calculated and that the closure of the school would actually cost the council £50,000 a year due to the loss in grant-aided expenditure for the funding of rural primary schools. Furthermore, what is behind the proposed closure of Barcaldine primary school, which is at 96 per cent capacity, is in the top third of primary schools with the lowest per-pupil cost, is rated as the county's most cost-effective school building and has an A rating for educational suitability? Who on earth would want to close a school like that?

Michael Russell: The Liberal Democrats.

Jamie McGrigor: Well, the cabinet secretary has said it.

I emphasise the importance of rural schools in attracting new families to areas to take up jobs. Landcatch, a fish farming entity in my constituency, which is soon to be taken over by the world-leading Hendrix Genetics, is a major employer in rural mid-Argyll. I support the company in arguing strongly that its local school, Achahoish primary school, is fundamental to attracting and expanding its workforce—something that we all want to see. We must listen to the words of businesses and all the community groups in our constituencies.

10:25

Ms Wendy Alexander (Paisley North) (Lab): The cabinet secretary will make many statements today—some in the chamber, some outside it—and, no doubt, he will respond to the Donaldson report. However, the most important decision that Scotland's Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning will take today is whether, at the end of this debate, he should lift the phone to the director of education in Renfrewshire and his SNP colleagues and ask them to delay the decision that they plan to take at 1 o'clock to replace 60 qualified primary teachers with 120 part-time, unqualified sessional workers. The plan is that from August, those non-teachers will supervise 10 per cent of the schooling of all children in Renfrewshire primary schools. Whether he makes that call or simply sits on his hands will be a defining moment not only for his tenure as the minister with responsibility for education but for all of Scotland's parents and pupils in the years to come.

The issue that is at stake goes beyond party. All parts of this chamber should unite in calling on the cabinet secretary to make that call and urge delay. Let me explain to the minister why I think that he should make that call. For 40 years—dating back to the time of Willie Ross—every Scottish secretary and education minister, of all stripes, has consistently supported the professionalisation of our classrooms. Children were to be taught by ever more qualified teachers, regulated by the General Teaching Council. For 40 years, every Scottish secretary and education minister has supported that position. None of them has ever turned the clock back. All of them have moved us forward. However, if the minister today says that anything goes when it comes to who is in our classrooms and the amount of time during which our children can be taught by unqualified non-teachers, decades of progress for greater professionalism, higher standards and common capabilities will be reversed. That alone is enough reason for the cabinet secretary to make that call today.

The second reason is the total absence of consultation, locally or nationally, on these retrograde plans. They were published literally less than a week ago, and there has been no consultation. As this debate ends, parents will be starting to gather outside the education board offices, begging—I use that word advisedly—local councillors to pause and think again.

The third reason involves the confusion over the legal entitlement of all children in Scotland to an education. If Renfrewshire goes ahead, 10 per cent of the week will be handed over to unqualified staff. The new recruits are to be paid less than half the going rate for teachers, and there is no obligation for them to be trained.

Today's decision is the thin end of a potentially extremely long wedge. I genuinely believe that no one in this chamber wants to set off a race to the bottom in terms of how few hours in the school week actually need to be taught by a qualified teacher. However, once the dam is broken, anything could go in terms of part-time teachers and classroom assistants. The tragedy is that, as it currently stands, the law has no bottom line in terms of how much of the school week has to be taught by a qualified teacher. That is a frightening loophole in the law that has been exposed by the plans in Renfrewshire. The cabinet secretary should commit today to fixing that loophole and affirm that there will be no de-skilling of schools on his watch.

The Minister for Skills and Lifelong Learning (Angela Constance): The member will be well aware that the 2001 teaching agreement commits teachers to working a 35-hour week, 22.5 hours of which must be teaching time, and that teaching

time, according to the regulations that were passed by this Parliament, can be delivered only by qualified teachers.

Ms Alexander: The issue is that there is no obligation for most of our children's school week to be taught by teachers. In my view, this Parliament should pause over and reflect on that. We should decide, on a national basis, what the bottom line should be. Indeed, when Michael Russell was the—very able—convener of the Education Committee, he would have urged that pause on any individual occupying the position that he currently holds.

Michael Russell: I thank Ms Alexander for awarding me a promotion, but I have never been the convener of an education committee in this Parliament.

Ms Alexander: I concede that point. The issue is, will he call Renfrewshire Council today and get it to put its plans on ice, instruct it to talk to parents and teachers and promise to close the loophole that is now allowing a race to the bottom in Scottish classrooms? I make the case to the minister that that decision on how much of a school week is taught by a teacher should be brought back to this place, where it belongs, and be placed on his desk. Will he make that call today or will he say that a free-for-all is fine by him? I appeal to him to make that call by lunch time.

10:31

Ian McKee (Lothians) (SNP): Dear, oh dear, we are into the election season, are we not? This tired motion and the speeches of the Opposition members bear all the hallmarks of a desperate scrabble for public attention and the desire to harvest votes by any means possible.

I gently say to Wendy Alexander that sermons on how teachers are deployed come fairly poorly from a party whose councils have shed more teachers than any other councils.

Ms Alexander: How many hours of our children's school week does the member believe should be taught by a teacher, and does he think that that should be a matter of national regulation?

Ian McKee: I think that decisions regarding education in a local area should be made by the local education authority and the teachers and headteachers in that area. However, I cannot help but notice that Labour councils have been getting rid of teachers left, right and centre, whereas non-Labour councils have been doing their best to keep teacher numbers up.

The personal attack on the cabinet secretary is a clear example of the sporting aphorism that if one cannot win the ball, one should go for the man. What has happened is that the attention of

Mr Russell, in his role as a prospective parliamentary candidate for Argyll and Bute, was brought to a situation in which 26 schools in that constituency were proposed for closure by the council—a proposal that upset a great many people living in the area.

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): Will the member give way?

Ian McKee: I must make some progress.

Candidates are often consulted in that way. However, Mr Russell is also the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning, so how should he act?

George Foulkes (Lothians) (Lab): With propriety.

Ian McKee: The Opposition parties imply that he should go into some form of purdah and that he should refuse even to discuss—

George Foulkes: Exactly.

Ian McKee: I do not know which school Lord Foulkes went to, but it did not teach him to listen to whoever is talking.

Michael Russell: For the record, I can inform Dr McKee that Lord Foulkes went to the Haberdashers' Aske's school.

Ian McKee: I thank the cabinet secretary for that clarification.

George Foulkes: Will the member give way?

Ian McKee: I must make some progress.

George Foulkes: I have been referred to—have the courtesy to let me reply. I want to make two points. First, as well as Haberdashers' I also went to Keith grammar school—I say that just to put the cabinet secretary in his place. Secondly, I was a minister, and I know the propriety of being a minister, and I can say that the cabinet secretary should not have intervened. He should separate his role as a minister from his role as a parliamentary candidate.

Ian McKee: The point that I was making was that, often, Lord Foulkes intervenes from a sedentary position in a way that tends to spoil debates.

If Labour believes that candidates cannot respond to issues that are raised with them before an election, it is not surprising that it lost the last election, just as it will lose the coming one.

It is clear, not only from yesterday's statement by Mr Russell but also from the comments in the press of those who met him during their campaign to save the schools, that not only did Mr Russell say on every occasion that he met protesters that, as a minister, he was unable to take up a position

on the specific school closure programme, but he made it quite clear that he would play no part in any Scottish Government decision regarding the proposed closures. He was, however, able to advise them on their rights and the rights of their communities under the Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010—a helpful interpretation of the law of Scotland that could have been given legitimately by any interested person. I challenge anyone—

Mike Rumbles: Will the member take an intervention?

Ian McKee: Mr Rumbles will make a speech shortly, so he can make his points then.

I challenge anyone to say that that was not a totally honourable way of dealing with the issue. In my opinion, the electors of Argyll and Bute are fortunate to have the opportunity to choose such a person to represent them in the Parliament.

Opposition members should be ashamed of themselves—especially Labour and Lib Dem members, whose Administration between 2003 and 2007 closed a school on every single occasion that a request was submitted for ministerial approval. They are doing themselves a grave disservice by raising this issue and reminding the electorate so close to the coming election of their actions when they were in government.

I turn to the rest of the motion, which is a classic example of the Opposition's focus on process rather than outcome. Yes, we have to cope with the previous Administration's unsustainable approach to teacher employment, although it is fair to point out that the teacher claimant count in Scotland is lower than in any other part of the UK and is still falling. Our teacher unemployment rate is 9.6 per 1,000, which is still too high, but better than the rates of 12.5 per 1,000 in England and 29.7 per 1,000 in Northern Ireland.

Yes, we have to cope with the dual burden of financial pressures that have been caused by Labour maladministration at a UK level and by some unco-operative local authorities, which seem to value fighting the Government more highly than looking after the educational needs of local children. However, members can see from the Government's amendment what has been achieved. Let us congratulate our teachers and pupils and all those who are involved in Scottish education, and let us ignore completely the negativity of the motion that is before us.

10:37

Mike Rumbles (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD): Before I focus on the main point of my speech, I must comment on the

education secretary's astonishing contribution to the debate. He criticised everyone else in Argyll and Bute except for his own SNP council colleagues, when—let us not forget—it was their proposal to consult on closing up to 26 schools that was the issue in the first place.

Mike Russell himself said in a leaked e-mail sent to his SNP council colleagues—which was obviously leaked by his SNP colleagues—that “eight or nine” Argyll and Bute schools—*[Interruption.]*

I will repeat that, because Mr Russell is not listening. He said that “eight or nine” Argyll and Bute schools could be closed—those are his words. Yet when repeatedly asked—as he was again by Jamie McGrigor in the chamber today—which eight or nine schools he wants to close, he has consistently refused to identify them. He will still not identify which schools he thinks should close.

That type of behaviour, and that lack of openness and transparency, has completely undermined Mr Russell's role as education secretary. He has no standing whatsoever in the chamber now, because of his unwillingness to be open and transparent. The questions that Des McNulty asked yesterday were very relevant, but Mr Russell dismissed them with a laugh, which does the Parliament a huge discourtesy.

I welcome this debate on the SNP's education policy, as it allows me to focus on one particular aspect of it. I have corresponded with the education secretary on behalf of parents whose children are being educated at Banchory academy in my constituency. I know Banchory academy very well, as I taught there back in 1994 and both my sons went to school there.

There is a real national issue in this regard, although it has been raised locally. The Government amendment highlights the roll-out of the curriculum for excellence and criticises Liberal Democrat, Labour and Conservative MSPs where they have raised concerns as I have. However, it is the parents who are concerned that schools such as Banchory academy will further limit the number of subjects for which children will be allowed to be examined in S4, so that children will not be able to be examined in eight subjects in one year as they are at present. If that happens, it will dramatically limit the choices that are available for bright students when they come to take highers.

Joe FitzPatrick (Dundee West) (SNP): Will the member take an intervention?

Mike Rumbles: I will not at the moment.

Joe FitzPatrick: Will the member take an intervention on the point that he is making?

Mike Rumbles: I will not at the moment.

As a result of all that, I am told that students are already being withdrawn from the state sector and are moving to the private sector, where eight subjects in one year will still be available.

The education secretary has said in correspondence to me that there are case studies on the Learning and Teaching Scotland website that illustrate how five to eight subjects can be taken. I accept that, but it misses the point, in that the practicalities make it extremely unlikely that schools such as Banchory academy will be able to offer that.

Michael Russell rose—

Mike Rumbles: I want to know whether the education secretary is sufficiently aware of the implications of what he is presiding over, and I gladly give way to him.

Michael Russell: This is a serious matter, and I am glad that Mr Rumbles has raised it; Margaret Smith also raised it in a letter to me. I simply say that it is quite clear that it is perfectly possible for any school to offer between five and eight subjects—that is obvious from the material.

In order to be helpful, I am happy to meet Mr Rumbles, Margaret Smith and any other members whom the matter concerns, and to bring along staff from the Scottish Qualifications Authority and Learning and Teaching Scotland to discuss the matter with them. I am also happy to visit the school in Banchory and to talk to parents if necessary, because I believe that there is a misapprehension.

Mike Rumbles: I thank the education secretary for offering to do that—I would warmly welcome him to my constituency and to Banchory academy, and I would like to take him up on that offer. I will write to him on that point.

However, Mr Russell misses the point: he says that five to eight subjects are available, but that is not in one year—Banchory academy has said that it cannot do that.

I would like to know, on a national basis, how many schools the education secretary believes are in the same boat as Banchory academy. How many schools does he think will be able to offer bright students the choice of taking eight subjects in a single year as they have at present? I suspect that once schools have examined the implications in respect of the curriculum for excellence—because they have not looked at it yet—they will see that they do not have a curriculum for excellence but the reverse, and that is a genuine concern.

I am glad that the education secretary has offered to come to Banchory, because that will be

helpful to him and to the parents and children at Banchory academy. Once we get this element right, and if we can ensure that the choice is available throughout the country, that will be a real plus for the whole of Scotland. At the moment, it is a real problem, and I am delighted that the education secretary will come with me to Banchory academy to tackle the issue. If we get a result from that, it will be superb.

10:42

David Whitton (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Lab): I welcome the opportunity to participate in today's debate and speak in support of the Labour motion.

As we all know, education offers many advantages and can open many doors. Education and life skills are interlinked, along with employment and productivity. As President Obama said:

"no matter what you want to do with your life, I guarantee that you'll need an education to do it."

The benefit of a good education is all the more important for those who have to deal with the disadvantage of being born into poverty. That is why the SNP's consistent failures in education policy at all levels—nursery, primary, secondary and tertiary—are so damaging. If we all agree that a good education is a must and that skills are a necessity, why does a study that was published last week by the National Union of Students show that nearly two thirds of colleges did not have sufficient bursaries to cope with demand in 2009-10? The real-terms cut of £1.7 million to college bursaries that was announced in the draft budget will make the situation worse next year. The NUS says that bursary funds for the current year will be £3.5 million less than last year and that demand for bursaries will outstrip supply by £9 million. How can that be an example of a Government that wants Scotland's disadvantaged young people to have the best opportunities and the best chance to succeed in life?

The cabinet secretary recently told the Education, Lifelong Learning and Culture Committee during its budget deliberations that he was committed to

"protecting access to education based on the ability to learn and not the ability to pay".—[*Official Report, Education, Lifelong Learning and Culture Committee*, 1 December 2010; c 4403.]

The question remains, is he?

We accept that our colleges and institutions face a huge challenge, but many are trying to adapt by providing demand-led courses, aligning provision with the current and future skills requirements of the economy and updating courses to reflect future needs.

Businesses of all sizes throughout Scotland have told me that what they want are new recruits with work-related skills, in particular the soft skills such as communication and self-confidence. In my experience, and as I know from speaking to employers, employees with vocational qualifications are in many cases better developed than recruits with academic qualifications in the vital areas of attitude and enthusiasm, team working, business and customer awareness, and self-management. Teaching work-related skills in schools is vital, but many of the youngsters who move on from school to vocational courses need all the support—financial and educational—that can be brought together.

We accept that today's economic climate is not the most conducive to helping youngsters to find work, but without skills and vocational training many will end up on the scrap heap. We all know that many employers will be hit hard by the recession and they will want to ensure that their workforce is operating at the optimum level. To do that, employees need skills and to obtain skills, training and education. Through improved skill levels should come improved productivity.

Vocational qualifications have a huge impact on all businesses, and our young people need the right training to ensure that Scotland can work its way out of the global recession. How can we do that if the colleges that support our vocational training cannot provide bursaries to enable our poorest students to participate? Cumbernauld College, which has a campus in my constituency of Strathkelvin and Bearsden, had a funding shortfall of £100,000 for bursaries last year, but was able to find the money from other areas. This year, that is not going to happen. Students will suffer, travel allowances will be curtailed and additional items will soon disappear.

There is a huge scaling down of what students on vocational courses can receive in support of their learning. There is a reduced and reducing pot, and in many cases the colleges have to spread it too thinly to maintain numbers. It is important to realise that bursary funding lies at the very heart of college provision. As I have said, local further education colleges work with some of society's most vulnerable individuals who are trying to better their lives and those of their families. They need financial and other forms of support to access learning and to maintain their attendance at college.

Another key organisation in preparing future employees for the world of work is Skills Development Scotland, whose budget has been slashed by £21 million—a 10 per cent cut—and which has to find 125 volunteers for redundancy. Mr Russell was annoyed that Labour asked for a statement on that just before the Christmas

recess, but although he clearly has difficulty with the concept that it is the role of the Opposition to hold the Government of the day to account, as the person who sought the statement I was pleased to hear the new skills minister, Angela Constance, give an unequivocal guarantee that the reduction in budget and staffing at SDS will have no negative impact on service delivery and that the commitment to provide 34,500 training places of different types will be maintained. I assure Ms Constance that I will be monitoring that commitment closely.

This is not rocket science. A better-skilled workforce is more employable and more productive. We all know that Scotland's skills base has improved considerably in recent decades. Unfortunately, however, that has not yet translated into higher productivity and economic growth. We need to keep growing skills and vocational learning in areas that will encourage economic growth, especially construction, the low-carbon economy, the creative industries, retail and the services sector. The ability to capitalise on that skills base must not be constrained by a lack of individuals with the right skills, and public-private co-operation is essential in delivering the appropriate training opportunities.

That is why Labour is progressing with plans for a Scottish future jobs fund to create 10,000 training places, which we will introduce within 100 days if we are successful in forming a Government after the elections in May. If we are serious about preparing youngsters for the 21st century economy, we have to ensure that all youngsters, regardless of ability and financial backing, get a chance to grab the opportunities.

10:49

Alasdair Allan (Western Isles) (SNP): The motion that Labour has brought to the chamber today characteristically expresses little, save perhaps its on-going internal psychological struggle between SNP loathing on the one hand and self-loathing on the other. I hope that I may therefore be permitted to stray a little from the spirit of Labour's motion and talk instead about another subject, which should be of interest to us all, namely education.

The Government's amendment lists some of the reasons—it is not an exhaustive list—as to why Scotland has positive reasons to be proud of its education system and its educational achievement. Of course there are many things that we can seek to improve, but much work is being done that deserves to be celebrated. Others have already touched on many of those areas—the increase in nursery entitlement, the re-establishment of free tuition at university, the extension of the entitlement to free school meals,

the promotion of Scottish literature and history in schools and, perhaps most telling of all, the fact that we have never had a higher proportion of school leavers going into work, education or training.

However, I will focus on one area that means a lot to me: the future of rural schools. I declare an interest in that I went to a primary school in the Borders with a roll that fluctuated between a dozen and two dozen—a school that subsequently closed. [*Interruption.*] I do not know why George Foulkes laughs—I can assure him that it was not under the current Administration.

The Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010—legislation that was brought forward by the current Government—recognises, without in any way minimising the importance of all schools to their communities, that another factor comes into play in rural Scotland. If a rural community loses its school, a question arises as to whether that community can survive as more than a designated retirement zone. The 2010 act is clear in giving ministers the power to call in school closure decisions by local authorities where the Government believes that material factors have not adequately been taken into account during the council's closure process. Crucially, those factors include whether the council has really considered alternatives to closure and whether attention has been given to the economic and social consequences for the affected community.

Yesterday, above all the irrelevant baying and yelling of some members, we heard crucial evidence of that legislation being put to work and a clear sign of the Government's commitment to ensuring that rural schools are given a fair chance. I am pleased to say that the education secretary announced that, as well as calling in a school closure decision in Shetland, he had used his powers under the act to keep four schools in the Western Isles open. With the Parliament's forbearance, I will pay tribute to the campaigns that were run by those four communities.

First, I pay tribute to all those in the west side of Harris who argued so strongly that the local council had no right to close their school without heeding the Herculean efforts that were being made there to ensure a future for their community, which deserves the description "fragile" more than any other place I can think of in Scotland. The decision to keep the school open will serve as a significant boost to all those who are seeking to bring new life to the place following a successful community buyout.

Lionel and Shawbost are two schools in the north and west of Lewis where secondary 1 and 2 pupils are taught locally rather than being sent on the long journey to Stornoway. Despite two successive attempts to close those secondary

units in recent years, the communities have won their argument. I have seldom seen a larger or angrier crowd of people in the Western Isles than in Carloway recently, where people were arguing passionately for the role that their school has in ensuring that there is life in the west side of Lewis.

In the Western Isles, like everywhere else, there is a recognition that schools cannot have an eternal guarantee about their future and that some schools will have to close. However, schools deserve a chance. I do not relish falling out with my local council, which I believe exercises sincerely its difficult task as an education authority in difficult times. However, I believe that the minister was right to intervene in the four cases that I have mentioned. I doubt that many people in the west side of either Harris or Lewis would disagree with me on that.

We can justly be proud of Scotland's new legislation on rural schools. We should celebrate many things about our education system. We should celebrate the more than 300 school building projects that have been completed since May 2007, which have lifted about 120,000 pupils out of poor conditions. We should celebrate the new opportunities that the curriculum for excellence brings for both teachers and pupils. Above all, while some members in the chamber fail to realise that the pantomime season is generally over by the old new year, perhaps we should celebrate the fact that Scotland's Government has done something practical to show faith in some of Scotland's most rural schools.

10:54

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): First there were 26, then there were 25. Now there is none, although that is only temporary, and the cabinet secretary believes that eight or nine would be fine. I am, of course, referring to the school closures that Argyll and Bute Council has proposed. Whatever the number, we know that those school closure proposals will re-emerge in the next two months and, given the really tight timetable for consultation and decision making, I make no apology for focusing on Argyll and Bute.

Before I do so, however, I want to deal with the smoke and mirrors that the cabinet secretary is always so keen to conjure for us. The school closure proposals came from the SNP-independent administration in Argyll and Bute Council; indeed, the convener of education overseeing all this was a very well-respected member of the SNP. Although I understand absolutely why Mike Russell might not like me pointing out that fact, it is all absolutely true: the SNP was a key architect in the school closure proposals for Argyll and Bute. Let us have no

more pretending that somehow it was not involved. The people of Argyll and Bute deserve honesty from their politicians—and, indeed, their aspiring politicians. Nevertheless, I welcome all converts to the cause and the action that the new Lib Dem-independent administration has taken in removing the proposals from the table for review.

I want to give the chamber a flavour of the Argyll and Bute proposals. A total of 25 school closures were proposed for consultation, including four schools in my area: Kilcreggan, Rosneath, Luss and Parklands, the last of which is a special needs school dealing with children with profound and complex disabilities who would really struggle in mainstream education. There were huge and significant flaws and errors in the process, the first of which related to pupil population projections. Those projections looked only a year ahead and, at the beginning, covered all children from four to 18, even though only primary schools were under consideration. As a result, they needed to be adjusted to cover only primary-age children. Moreover, they missed a huge population increase that will happen at Her Majesty's Naval Base Clyde at Faslane. Although we know that a significant number of new families will move into that area, those figures have not been properly factored in.

The second error related to capacity calculations. In one school, for example, corridors—corridors, I ask you—were counted as teaching space. This must be a new take on reduced class sizes. Clearly I had not understood that the policy meant that teaching would take place in corridors.

The third error concerned travel routes, which were not accurately timed or properly specified. There was also no idea as to what form of transport would be used. We were asking parents to send children as young as four years old to school in buses that had no seat belts or adult supervision beyond the bus driver. Frankly, I do not think that that is acceptable.

The fourth error related to the financial assumptions, which were woeful. Sometimes I struggle to imitate some of my colleagues in the chamber who are accountants but I—and the families—have worked out that it will cost more to close Luss primary school than it will to keep it open. That is simply absurd.

I will not go through the whole litany of errors, but I think that two in particular stand out. Argyll and Bute Council missed two of the statutory requirements in the Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010: first, there was no community impact assessment; and, secondly, there was no consideration of alternative options. Will the cabinet secretary confirm that, if any local authority—not just Argyll and Bute, because I

recognise his difficulty in that respect—fails to meet the requirements of the act in the way that I have described, ministers will call in the closure proposals for consideration?

Michael Russell: I am happy to give the member a clear response to that question. In yesterday's statement, I indicated that, although the act works well, some areas require to be strengthened. One such area is the verification of original proposals; under the present act, there is no requirement for inaccurate proposals to be withdrawn. Clearly in this particular case the proposals were inaccurate. In other places, proposals have been withdrawn and reissued. There is a serious case for making a change to the act, and it will require attention.

Jackie Baillie: I thank the cabinet secretary for that information. Of course, both the Argyll and Scottish rural schools networks, to which my colleague Jamie McGrigor has paid tribute, have been meticulous in exposing the flaws in the proposals. In fact, they have submitted to the Public Petitions Committee a petition suggesting those very areas of improvement that I understand might be considered before Parliament rises.

We know that the proposals will come back and that they might well feature the eight or nine schools that the cabinet secretary believes should close. Whether or not they do, only he knows, unless he is sufficiently brave to publish his list. When those proposals come back, they will need our attention. After all, we need to protect rural schools that are thriving, that are at the centre of their local communities and that matter to the economic vitality of their areas. I suggest that, if the cabinet secretary wants to continue his campaign to be MSP for Argyll and Bute, he lobby John Swinney to give Argyll and Bute Council some helpful flexibility over how it uses its resources. After all, it has the worst local government settlement of the 32 local authorities. If he managed to get additional funding for Argyll and Bute, even I would find it possible to welcome the announcement.

I look forward to future discussions, to the meeting with Angela Constance about Argyll and Bute schools and to the cabinet secretary's lobbying of John Swinney.

11:00

Jamie Hepburn (Central Scotland) (SNP): It is in the very nature of Scotland's education system to pursue excellence and to strive always to do better and achieve more and I think that the system seeks to imbue such ideals in our children and young people. No matter their background or means, they should, with a good education, strive to go on and achieve their goals. It might be easier

to say so in rhetoric than it is to achieve in every case but, nevertheless, it should always be our aim.

We should never be content with things as they are or be complacent; we should always be willing to examine what is necessary to ensure that the principle of excellence in education is maintained. I believe that that has been central to the SNP Government's vision of and ambition for education in Scotland over the past four years. Karen Whitefield and Des McNulty referred—wrongly—to a litany of failure in education. Instead, we should focus on the litany of achievement under the SNP including the extension of entitlement to free school meals; 20,000 apprenticeship places; the preservation of the education maintenance allowance, despite its abolition elsewhere in the United Kingdom; the promotion of Scottish history and literacy in schools; the reduction in school exclusions; and, of course, the abolition of the graduate endowment. Those are just some of the many achievements in education that have happened under the SNP.

In education, it is crucial to get things right early on. Given that investment in early years pays dividends throughout the educational experience, we can be proud that class sizes are at a record low of 23 in primary schools, with around 22 per cent of P1 to P3 pupils in classes of 18 or fewer. Legislation has delivered a statutory limit of 25 pupils in P1 classes across the country—that, too, is an achievement. Smaller classes mean more contact time between individual pupils and their teachers, providing more interaction, easier discipline and, above all, a greater opportunity to learn.

The Government's amendment also notes the positive impact of the extension of free school meal entitlement on some of Scotland's hardest-pressed families and I welcome its recognition of the principle and practice of extending free nutritious meals to our youngest pupils. That demonstrates the investment in the early years and a confidence that the benefits will be seen in years to come.

Since May 2007, the Scottish Government has worked to lift 120,000 pupils out of poor school conditions. It is a simple fact that more than 300 school building projects have been completed in the same period. Despite the rhetoric that we have heard from the Labour benches, I was interested to read in Labour's 2007 election manifesto:

"We will accelerate the school building programme and re-build 250 more Scottish schools in the next term of the Scottish Parliament."

We have, in fact, delivered 300-plus. During the lifetime of the Parliament, the Scottish Government will have spent an average £700 million a year on school buildings whereas, in the

previous eight years of devolution, the average spend per year was £531 million.

Of course, many local authorities are struggling with the legacy of the private finance initiative. In many areas, as much as 5 per cent of the education budget is being used to pay fees and debts to PFI consortia.

Des McNulty: Will the member ask the cabinet secretary why he is withdrawing capital allocations from new schools that are on the list and replacing them with revenue support?

Jamie Hepburn: I think that Mr McNulty is well capable of asking his own questions.

Members: Answer the question!

Jamie Hepburn: Members on the Labour benches might be surprised to find that I am not the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning, at whom I believe the question was directed and who I am sure will answer it.

The annual cost of education private finance initiative and public-private partnership schemes in 2008-09 was more than £240 million. Hundreds of millions of pounds have been paid to PFI consortia, many of which are backed by banks that have enjoyed a bail-out from the previous UK Government. Taxpayers are, in effect, paying twice and, while the bankers grow rich, the local authorities feel the squeeze and funds are being removed that could be put to good and effective use in Scotland's education system.

Local authorities have a key role in ensuring that our education system fulfils our aspirations for it. Many residents of North Lanarkshire were disappointed when the Labour-led council decided to press ahead with the school closure programme last year. Parents, pupils and the wider community were sorry to see the loss of St Francis of Assisi primary school in Cumbernauld and two nurseries in the Abronhill area of the town. I thank the cabinet secretary and the previous Minister for Skills and Lifelong Learning for their answers to parliamentary questions last year as I helped campaigners to oppose the closures. Like Alasdair Allan, who paid tribute to the campaigners in his area, I pay tribute to the campaigners in North Lanarkshire. It is a matter of regret that the Labour-led council went ahead with the closures.

Worryingly, the leader of North Lanarkshire Council has suggested that there might be further closures. However, any future proposed closures would be subject to the enhanced scrutiny and protection afforded by the Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010—another significant achievement by the Scottish Government in the past four years.

Cathie Craigie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth (Lab): I, too, regret the closure of two nurseries

and a school in the Cumbernauld and Kilsyth constituency. However, does the member acknowledge that North Lanarkshire Council used the principles of the act for its consultation? Even at the end, despite requests from parents and from me, the minister did not intervene on the school closures.

Jamie Hepburn: I acknowledge that the council followed the principles of the act. I hope that the member acknowledges that there was nothing in the act that compelled the council to go ahead with the closures. It was the Labour Party that closed those establishments and not the SNP Government.

I was hoping to turn to higher education, but I am running out of time. I welcome the debate and look forward to hearing what the minister has to say at the end of the debate. There have been no positive suggestions from the Labour benches about how to take Scotland's education system forward. Labour members would rather use the issue as a political football.

11:06

Hugh O'Donnell (Central Scotland) (LD): I make an unusual offer. Given Christina McKelvie's comments with regard to the perfection of others, I am happy to give way to her if she wishes to identify which ministers she believes are less than perfect. She should bear in mind that I have only six minutes.

Christina McKelvie: All of them. They are all less than perfect. [*Laughter.*]

Elizabeth Smith: Ask her what the imperfections are.

Hugh O'Donnell: I have only six minutes.

The Government has a track record on education but, as members have indicated this morning, it is not one of which any Government would be especially proud, let alone a Government—and a party—that claims to stand up for Scotland. Speaker after speaker—the Conservatives, my Liberal Democrat colleagues and Labour members—has highlighted many examples of situations in which resources have been changed, building programmes have been cut and teacher numbers have been reduced, yet, again and again, the Government has sought to place the blame and responsibility anywhere other than where it belongs, which is with this failing Administration.

Hugh Henry: Will Hugh O'Donnell take an intervention?

Hugh O'Donnell: I would like to make a little progress if the member does not mind.

That is to be regretted. While the flowery rhetoric of the cabinet secretary seeks to divert attention from the failures of the Administration, the reality on the ground is far from the rosy picture that he paints in his somewhat extensive amendment to the motion. Slightly more than three and a half years in, we have reached a stage in the life of the Parliament at which others can no longer take the blame.

Although I do not know much of the detail of the school closures in Argyll and Bute, it is clear from the contributions of Jackie Baillie and other members that there is an issue there. However, I was pleased to hear the cabinet secretary mention that, where documents are inaccurate, proposals will in future be called in—I think that that was an issue that Margaret Smith raised.

Michael Russell: On an important point of detail, there is no power in the act to call in a decision before it is made. By definition, a document exists before a decision is made. The point that I was making was that the legislation needs to be revisited. I believe that Margaret Smith lodged an amendment to the Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Bill on how the veracity of information could be guaranteed in the process.

Hugh O'Donnell: I thank the cabinet secretary for that clarification.

Leaving aside the inevitability that members' speeches will reflect the fact that we are rapidly approaching the election, I think that Liz Smith made a very considered speech on the role of teachers and the issues on which we should focus. As we approach the election, it is incumbent on all parties in this Parliament, including mine, to tell the public what their proposals are.

Hugh Henry: I welcome Hugh O'Donnell's commitment to telling the public what his party proposes. Do the Liberal Democrats support the idea of replacing qualified teachers with non-qualified staff in Scottish schools?

Hugh O'Donnell: I am not aware that that is a national policy, although I was interested to see that David Miliband has taken up a post as a non-teacher teaching in a school. That is an interesting reflection of the Labour Party's position on the issue.

David Whitton made a well-considered speech on further and higher education, particularly on the role of our colleges. Having visited a number of colleges, including Cumbernauld College in my home town, I have a great deal of sympathy with many of the points that he raised. I recognise the challenges that those colleges face. I recently visited the dental school at Coatbridge College in Elaine Smith's constituency. It is an excellent facility of which Scotland has every right to be proud. I would recommend to any member who is

interested in further education that they have a look at that facility.

However, there are serious issues that we need to address. I am concerned about what I see happening in Lanarkshire on the issues of teachers, school mergers and so on. I am particularly concerned—this reflects my contribution to the debate on the Autism (Scotland) Bill yesterday—when I hear about a merger of Ridgepark and Kittoch schools in South Lanarkshire, which deal with some of the most difficult young people in Scotland. It would appear from the outside to be a merger driven by financial savings. Jackie Baillie mentioned another area of activity on special educational needs—it is clear that such facilities are under pressure. I am not convinced that the Government's contribution and the gun at the head of local authorities are helpful ways of encouraging the most effective use of resources.

On the issue of the colleges, it is my understanding that the cabinet secretary's department recently surveyed colleges on the number of people to whom they could not allocate places. I wonder whether the information that I have been given is accurate. If so, when will the information that was returned by the colleges be put into the public domain?

11:13

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

This has been a rather bad-tempered debate, with more heat than light. With the whiff of an election in the air, perhaps that is to be expected. Things will probably get no better over the coming weeks.

In his opening speech, in what was quite an effective critique of the SNP Government's failures on education, Des McNulty referred to falling teacher numbers, class size targets not being met and the lack of investment in school buildings. In the amendment in her name, and in her speech, Elizabeth Smith identified that the key problem facing the SNP is not so much what it has failed to do, but that it promised so much in advance of the previous election that it has not delivered.

The SNP made unrealistic and uncostered pledges that have come back to haunt it. I know people—many of whom are connected with education, such as teachers and parents—who at the previous Scottish election in 2007 voted SNP for the first time because they wanted smaller class sizes and more teachers to be employed. All those people have been let down and they all tell me that they will not be voting SNP again.

The cabinet secretary's defence, which was articulated as he spoke to an amendment that is almost as long as the list of SNP broken promises, is to say that it is all the fault of the Government at

Westminster because of its cuts. However, he neglects to mention that, for the first three years of his Government in this parliamentary session, the budget was not affected by any cuts from Westminster. There was plenty of money and we had record levels of spending compared to those under any previous Scottish Administration, yet still the SNP failed to deliver on its promises on class size reduction and teacher employment. As Mr O'Donnell fairly said, the defence of, "It wisnae me—it's all somebody else's fault," does not hold water. Sooner or later, the Government and the cabinet secretary must start taking responsibility for their actions and failures and stop blaming others.

Many members have raised concerns about teacher employment, which is one of the Government's biggest failings. As somebody who is married to a recently qualified teacher who, like many of her contemporaries, has not been able to find a permanent job since qualifying, I am painfully aware of the issues. The situation is a desperate waste of talent. Many people came from other careers to retrain as teachers because of the promises that were made to them, but they are not being utilised and will potentially be lost to the teaching profession.

Many Labour members raised that subject but, although they were strong on critique, they were light on solutions. I will briefly give three suggestions that might help. First, why do we continue to train so many teachers to add to a pool of unemployment? There has been a reduction in the number of people going through teacher training, but I question whether that has gone far enough. We have to consider that. Secondly, we need much better information in the marketplace on supply of and demand for teachers, and on vacancies. Thirdly, because we support better local decision making, we believe that if headteachers had greater flexibility in their budgets, that might create opportunities for more employment. Those are serious suggestions to the cabinet secretary, which I hope he will take on board.

Overall, the speeches from Labour members were long on criticism and light on alternatives. What will Labour do if it is successful in the election in May and faces the problems that we are discussing? Where will Labour find the money to deal with the problem of teacher unemployment? I hope that Mr Macintosh, in winding up the debate, will shed light on what Labour will actually do after 5 May if it forms the Administration.

Overall, the debate has missed the point. There is a real debate to be had about the future of Scottish education but we have hardly touched on it today. Among the opening speakers, only

Elizabeth Smith addressed the issue. In Scotland, we are not as good as some claim we are, and we are failing too many pupils. Even Labour-connected commentators such as John McTernan and John McLaren now accept that Scottish education has a long way to go. We have had a huge injection of additional money in the past decade, but with no commensurate improvement in outcomes. On international comparisons, Scottish education has stagnated.

So we have to change things. Instead of throwing mud at one another, we should be having a debate about how to make changes and what they should be. As Elizabeth Smith said, the Conservative view is that we need to go down the road of greater school autonomy, greater diversity, more parental choice and greater emphasis on basic skills. In relation to that debate, I was disappointed with the cabinet secretary's speech. Consumed with insomnia the other night, I turned to my well-thumbed copy of "Grasping the Thistle", which was co-authored by the cabinet secretary in his younger and more interesting days. In the section on education, I read praise for the private sector delivering public service and for the idea that Swedish-style education vouchers should be made available to all. Indeed, the book suggests that those could be topped up by parents to purchase private schooling. Then there is the classic remark:

"Choice and diversity are the hallmarks of a mature and confident society and this system will encourage the emergence of new types of private provision".

How disappointing it is that, 14 months after taking office, the cabinet secretary has pursued none of those interesting ideas. As we enter the twilight of Mr Russell's career as cabinet secretary, we should reflect on how far he has retreated from his once-bold vision for Scottish education. For that alone, he stands guilty of failing Scotland's parents, pupils and teachers, so I support the amendment in Elizabeth Smith's name.

11:20

The Minister for Skills and Lifelong Learning (Angela Constance):

The Scottish Government is not short on ambition for all our young people and children, irrespective of their background or start in life. Although we will happily participate in robust political debate—after all, as Mr Russell highlighted, we have a record to be proud of—we will always honestly and pragmatically acknowledge that there is more to do. Our number 1 priority should be to shine a light and showcase and celebrate the success of Scotland's children and our education and learning community.

Before I address some of the issues that members from across the political spectrum have

raised, I will take time to reiterate some of the key achievements of which we should all be proud. We have improved the start that we give to our children in the early years through giving significantly more children an entitlement to free school meals and by increasing free nursery entitlement. We are getting many more children into small primary 1, 2 and 3 classes to give them better pupil teacher interaction. We have maintained record low primary class sizes and made regulations to do away with the largest primary 1 classes. We have driven down primary school pupil teacher ratios from 16.2 to 15.8. All in all, on early intervention, those are examples of the Government acting before it is too late.

Mr McNulty, Mr Henry and Ms Alexander spoke at length about the Renfrewshire proposals on using non-teachers to enhance the curriculum. The point that I tried to make earlier to Ms Alexander is that the regulations and the 2001 teacher agreement protect the standard of education in our schools. There is a minimum of 22.5 hours a week of teaching time and teaching can be delivered only by GTCS teachers. That is stated in the regulations. Of course, we should all welcome the opportunity for other people with specialist expertise, whether that is David Miliband, some sporting personality or another appropriately qualified individual, to enhance the curriculum in addition to the core curriculum and the 22.5 hours of teaching.

If there is a genuine issue that members want to discuss pragmatically and sensibly, rather than inflaming concerns and sowing unnecessary doubts in the minds of parents, we in the Government are always happy to hear concerns from members from across the political spectrum about their constituencies.

Ms Alexander: The minister has helpfully influenced that limit of 10 per cent on the time that can be handed over to non-teachers. I want that issue to be debated publicly. Given that, will the minister simply call for a delay of the decision at 1 o'clock today, which I mentioned earlier and which would for the first time hand over 10 per cent of time to non-teachers? Will she or her colleagues make the call to delay that decision at 1 o'clock today and legally clarify how much of the school week must be taught by teachers?

Angela Constance: I reassure Ms Alexander that the regulations, in combination with the 2001 teacher agreement, are clear about what the minimum standards are—22.5 hours a week. If she and others wish to have a sensible, genuine, proactive and positive dialogue, we will welcome it. At the heart of all our work we want to maximise opportunities for young people. At the heart of our interests is the education and long-term wellbeing of all our young people.

There was much mention in the debate of the two-hour PE target. As many of my colleagues reiterated, 55 per cent of children in primary schools throughout Scotland are getting at least two hours of physical education a week, compared with a rather meagre 5 per cent in 2004-05. The previous Labour-Liberal Administration introduced that target, but I am pleased that this SNP Government is making progress on it, which is a job that we intend to finish. For members' information, 23 per cent of secondary schools are delivering the PE target compared with 7 per cent in 2004.

Rhona Brankin (Midlothian) (Lab): Will the minister take an intervention?

Angela Constance: If the member does not mind, I want to move on to talk about school buildings, mentioned by Karen Whitefield and others. Despite claims by Opposition parties, no authority, including North Lanarkshire Council, will get less money for schools than has been announced. Unlike the UK Government, this Administration has not and will not cancel any school projects. Of the 330 schools that will be completed by April 2011, 163 have been started since May 2007. I had hoped that members across the spectrum would have celebrated that 120,000 children throughout Scotland have now been lifted out of substandard accommodation. It is a great achievement.

Des McNulty: Will the minister confirm that the previously announced capital allocations for Garnock academy and Wick high school will still be handed to the respective authorities?

Angela Constance: As I said, no authority is getting less money for the schools in its area than has been announced. I thought that many local authorities would have been thankful for the accelerated capital previously announced by this Government.

Cathie Craigie: Will the minister take an intervention?

Angela Constance: No, thank you; I would like to make progress—I am already at seven minutes.

I thought that there would have been more discussion this morning about the curriculum for excellence. The great irony is that, due to the Labour and Liberal parties' delay and stalling in the previous Administration, it is this Administration that has made progress.

Michael Russell: Absolutely—I see one of the guilty parties over there on the Labour benches.

Angela Constance: Thank you. We should all recognise that the curriculum for excellence is the most radical reform in a generation and that it will equip our children for the future.

I listened with interest to Mr Whitton's comments. I am pleased to hear that he will be shadowing me closely. I look forward to spending much time in his company.

Michael Russell: I cannot imagine why.

Angela Constance: Mr Whitton should recognise that we are maintaining student support at a record high. Last year, student support budgets were increased by 6 per cent. In times of savage cuts, we are protecting students from the worst of them. We would like to do more for all students in the college and higher education sector but, however much as a woman and a nationalist I dislike the fact, I rely on Westminster for my pocket money.

The Labour Party shows great audacity and cheek in raising the funding issue. As I recall, it was the Labour Party that ran away and left us at the mercy of a Tory Government. The Labour Party had an opportunity to form a progressive alliance, but so blinded was it by its dislike—or should I say hatred—of the Scottish National Party, it walked away from its responsibilities. We will get on with the job of governing while it gets on with girning and greeting. There is a phrase, “Vote Labour and you'll get the Tories.”

This Government has heavily invested time, energy and money in the early years, the curriculum for excellence, reducing class sizes and the school estate and we are leading the world in applying technology to enhance learning, all with a view to preparing children and young people for their transition into adulthood and achieving far more positive destinations than have been the case previously. However, all that early and sustained investment in the early years will be for nothing if access to higher education is not based on the ability to learn, as opposed to the ability to earn. This Government has reinstated unequivocally the principle of free education and we will not cut off opportunities for our young people while they are in their prime. As long as we have breath in our lungs, the democratic intellect—the heart of the Scottish education system—will remain alive and well.

11:31

Ken Macintosh (Eastwood) (Lab): The trouble with being offered a progressive alliance is that the offer has to come from a progressive party. As I have argued before, this Government has demonstrated by its actions that it is not one. I listened to the words of the reactionaries on the SNP benches, which prove my point.

Murdo Fraser: Will the member give way?

Ken Macintosh: I will try to make some progress, tempting though Mr Fraser's offer is.

This is a worrying time for all those concerned about education in Scotland: parents, pupils and, perhaps most of all, those wrestling with the immediate difficulties—the teachers. It is a period of change with the introduction of a new curriculum and new examinations. It is a period of retrenchment and cutbacks rather than the expansion and investment that we were so accustomed to over the previous decade. Instead of building new schools, we are closing them. Instead of hiring new teachers, we are firing them. Instead of class sizes decreasing, they are increasing.

The outlook is equally worrying for those leaving school. Since the establishment of the Scottish Parliament we have raised a whole new generation with the expectation that they will go on to further and higher education. Now they find the door being shut in their faces. The Government reduced the number of places at university last year and thousands of this year's places will not be fully funded. We have held out the promise that no matter what someone's background or the obstacles in their way, education can be the liberator, the way to transform themselves and their future. However, now students are faced with the prospect of ever-higher costs if they wish to go to university or college. We are lumbering students and their families with ever-increasing bills and debt for the supposed privilege of making the most of their abilities.

It is chastening to think how far we have travelled in four short years, from a country that prided itself on its public commitment to education, education, education, to one where teachers are anxious about their job prospects and their future in the profession, where students are demonstrating on the streets and where parent support groups are springing up all over the country to fight cuts, whether in learning support, music tuition, or proposed school closures.

I do not lay all the blame for this worrying situation on the SNP. Certainly, as we deal with this and next year's public finances, the Scottish Government will be subject, as will we all, to circumstances outwith our control: a recession brought on by irresponsible banking and a level of cuts imposed not because they are necessary for the economy, but delivered for ideological reasons by a UK Government opposed to the public sector and which wishes to promote austerity as a virtue. I agreed with Mike Russell when he said that the Con-Dems are cutting too far and too fast. I think that that was the only point on which I agreed with Mr Russell.

The SNP cannot escape its responsibility, which is a theme that my colleague Des McNulty and others, including Murdo Fraser, developed. My abiding memory of this Administration and its

commitment to education will be one of false and broken promises. Elizabeth Smith opened her remarks by referring to the most cruel deception that this Government played on voters. She said that the SNP's uncoded election pledges in 2007 raised expectations only to dash them. I could not agree more. The SNP promised the sun, the moon and the stars, but it has brought us all down to earth.

Murdo Fraser: Like his Labour colleagues, Mr Macintosh has been long on the critique of the SNP Government. Will he tell us what Labour will do if it wins the election?

Ken Macintosh: Mr Fraser will look forward with anticipation to the publication of our manifesto, although I can give him a little taster now with a promise of 1,000 teachers to deliver on literacy and numeracy. From Opposition benches, we have already delivered more progressive policies on literacy than the Government has done in four years.

Promises were made to students on levels of debt that were promptly abandoned. Promises were made to parents on class sizes, new buildings, PE, school meals and more, on which there was little or no delivery. Promises were also made to teachers on jobs, for which every SNP member should hang their head in shame.

When I read the SNP amendment last night, I did not know whether to laugh, to weep or to throw something across the room. If one was to believe the words in the cabinet secretary's name, what a list of glorious achievements it would make. In fact, I thought that it would be unsurpassed as a list of fanciful SNP achievements until my colleague Karen Whitefield alerted us to Mr Neil's calendar of celebratory moments and his plans to mark the anniversary of the SNP's consultation on moves to limit class sizes to 25. Oh, how we all await our invitation to that event.

While SNP members pat themselves on the back, everywhere we go in Scotland today we find teachers looking for jobs, schools struggling for resources, classroom assistants laid off and pupil support diminished—all the marvellous work that we did over 10 years coming undone. Instead of moving to the main stream, support for the arts and sport increasingly and exasperatingly has been relegated to the periphery. Buildings in need of replacement have been delayed or postponed indefinitely.

In the face of that situation, the SNP has the gall to boast about reducing teacher employment. The amendment actually calls on us, the Parliament, to recognise

"the fact that the teacher claimant count in Scotland is lower than in any other part of the United Kingdom and is now declining year on year".

A Government that has got rid of 3,000 teachers boasts about reducing unemployment. It takes your breath away.

I was not sure whether the claims in the SNP amendment were deliberately designed to obscure the truth or were part of a larger picture of blinkered self-justification—a bit like the character Billy Liar, who makes up so many fanciful stories that he ends up believing them himself. Let me mention another line in the SNP amendment, which refers to

"increased access to General Teaching Council for Scotland-registered teachers in nurseries".

There may indeed be a marginal increase in access to a nursery teacher, but the amendment does not say that there are now fewer nursery teachers under the SNP Government. Maybe, just maybe, a small number of pupils might be seeing a teacher when they did not before, but all of our nursery pupils are getting less of their teacher's time. What an achievement.

The minister's actions in intervening in Argyll and Bute have been raised by members throughout the chamber: Jackie Baillie, Mike Rumbles and Jamie McGrigor. At the very least, his behaviour can be described only as selfish—interested in his own political future rather than his responsibilities to schools threatened with closure across the whole of Scotland. Maybe there was a hint of fantasy in our motion too. After all, to expect an apology from Mr Russell was always a little far fetched. However, it is clear from his remarks yesterday, from his contribution today and from the motion before us this morning that this is a minister who thinks that he can say anything and get away with it.

Scottish education is in the hands of a Government that is simply deluding itself and pretending that everything is all right when everyone around it is worried, anxious and struggling. Even without looking back at the failure to deliver on promises, we can look at the issues facing us today. In Renfrewshire, we have an SNP council poised to replace 60 teachers with non-teaching staff and to give them responsibility for delivering up to 10 per cent of the teaching week. I cannot comprehend why the cabinet secretary is not intervening to prevent what is a national disgrace.

The SNP boasts that it has finally resolved the probationer jobs crisis—but how? Not by maintaining teaching posts, as it promised, but by decimating teacher training and reducing the intake. That is its answer to the teaching crisis. Sacking teachers was not enough; the SNP needed to sack the teachers' trainers too. Of course, the so-called "solution" does not even

begin to address the lack of full-time or permanent contracts for our newly qualified teachers.

Perhaps most worrying of all, the local government settlement and the Scottish Government's overall budget calculations seem to be predicated on a negotiation with COSLA in which teachers' pay and conditions have already been sacrificed. There has been no discussion with teachers and no involvement with the unions, but the McCrone agreement has been abandoned to pay for the SNP's shabby little deal.

Both Des McNulty and Margaret Smith highlighted earlier that education has suffered disproportionately. Education is clearly not a priority for the SNP Government, and teachers will now have to pay for its decisions.

Scottish Executive Question Time

General Questions

11:40

School Closures (Highlands and Islands)

1. Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands)

(Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what representations it has received regarding school closures in the Highlands and Islands. (S3O-12543)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning (Michael Russell): The decision to close any school lies with the relevant council. The Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010 ensures that when councils propose the closure of a school, a robust, open, transparent and fair consultation process is followed. The legislation also enables ministers to call in decisions, and ultimately block them, should a council not adhere properly to the process.

Since the act came into force last year, councils in the Highlands and Islands region have closed a number of schools and therefore Scottish ministers have received representations from many interested parties, requesting that certain of those decisions be called in.

Rhoda Grant: The minister is on record as stating that eight or nine of the schools earmarked for closure in Argyll and Bute should be closed. Will he now name them?

Michael Russell: I dealt comprehensively with the issues that Rhoda Grant raises yesterday, and indeed some of the issues were raised in the debate this morning. The reality of the situation is that Rhoda Grant has been stirring the issue for the past seven days. I have known her for a long time and my best advice to her is this: "When in a hole, stop digging."

George Foulkes (Lothians) (Lab): You're a charlatan.

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson): Order. Lord Foulkes, I will not have that sort of personal intervention across the chamber from a sedentary position.

George Foulkes: Presiding Officer, he is a charlatan. *[Interruption.]*

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

The Presiding Officer: I warn Lord Foulkes that if he continues with that he will force me into

taking an action that I am very reluctant to take, which might include exclusion from the chamber.

I call Alasdair Allan.

Alasdair Allan (Western Isles) (SNP): What representations has the cabinet secretary received about schools in the Western Isles, and does he agree that the decision he took yesterday to save four island schools was both necessary and welcome?

Michael Russell: In all such cases, apart from those where I have resiled an involvement and insulated myself from the process—a matter that I described yesterday—I consider very carefully the documentation that comes to me and the legislation. In all those circumstances, I then come to a conclusion. The conclusion that I reached about Carloway, Shelibost, Shawbost and Lionel was that the legislation required me to make the decision that I did. I am glad to have done so.

Planning (Hunterston Power Station)

2. Ross Finnie (West of Scotland) (LD): To ask the Scottish Executive, with specific reference to any application for planning permission for a clean-coal-fired power station at Hunterston, whether the presumption of need conferred by “National Planning Framework for Scotland 2” will remain in place until at least the conclusion of the statutory five-yearly review. (S3O-12570)

The Minister for Enterprise, Energy and Tourism (Jim Mather): As indicated in the written answer on 16 December to the member’s previous question on the subject, there are no plans for an early revision of any aspect of the national planning framework.

Ross Finnie: I want to press the minister on that point. Page 6 of the recent draft electricity generation policy statement is explicit in saying:

“NPF2 does not set policy in stone”.

That could not be clearer. However, a coal-fired power station at Hunterston is specified in NPF 2, which, under section 3A(2) of the Town and Country Planning (Scotland) Act 1997, as inserted by section 1 of the Planning etc (Scotland) Act 2006, gives it the status of being the land use that the Scottish ministers believe could and should be developed. How does the minister square those two totally conflicting positions?

Jim Mather: I start by saying that I cannot comment on a live application. Furthermore, the question time format is a difficult environment in which to answer a question as detailed as this one, so I offer the member a briefing with other members to open up the issue and look at it in further detail, especially in light of Chris Huhne’s statement, in which with reference to electricity market reform he said:

“An emissions performance standard will reinforce the existing requirement that no new coal is built without carbon capture and storage.”—[*Official Report, House of Commons*, 16 December 2010; Vol 520, c 1065.]

The issue is complex. I understand Ross Finnie’s concerns and acknowledge his hard work on and knowledge of the subject. I want to weave that in to obtain the best result for Scottish communities and the Scottish electricity consumer, so I offer the meeting that I described.

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): Will the minister confirm that, as the draft electricity policy statement that was launched on 17 November said, thermal requirements will fall from an estimated 50 per cent to 20 per cent of Scotland’s requirements by 2020 and that fewer new power stations—even those with partial carbon capture and storage—will be required than was previously thought?

Jim Mather: Yes—I believe so. In the light of our work and United Kingdom electricity market reform, the main elements of our future energy mix look to be more renewables, decarbonisation of fossil-fuel plants to ensure that we have full carbon capture and storage and the development of an increasingly smart grid. I offer Mr Gibson the chance to join us in ensuring that we produce the optimal results for Scottish communities and consumers.

Electronic Overhead Gantry Signs

3. Elizabeth Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): To ask the Scottish Executive what advice it has given to Transport Scotland regarding the use of electronic overhead gantry signs. (S3O-12593)

The Minister for Transport and Infrastructure (Keith Brown): Transport Scotland is part of the Scottish Government. Through its traffic Scotland service, variable message signs are used to warn drivers of emergencies, incidents and road closures. When the signs are not required for those purposes, they are used to promote road safety, network operation and related campaigns.

Elizabeth Smith: I suspect that I am not the only member who has received representations from constituents about the rather bland and at times irrelevant messages that appeared on some motorway gantry signs in the recent bad weather, which did not relate to the up-to-date road conditions. I appreciate that the wording of the messages is a matter for Transport Scotland, but does the minister agree that it is his responsibility to consider new ways of ensuring fully effective communication between Transport Scotland, our police, the Met Office and groups such as BEAR Scotland to provide motorists with accurate real-time information?

Keith Brown: Following the motorway closures last month, Transport Scotland and the police identified the need for co-ordinated and consistent high-level warning messages to help to guide the travelling public's decisions during the bad winter weather. Transport Scotland worked with the Association of Chief Police Officers in Scotland to produce a nationally agreed set of warning messages that local police forces can use when they issue travel warnings for roads.

The onus in deciding to issue such travel warnings remains fully on police forces. Transport Scotland provides operational support to the police by disseminating messages via the traffic Scotland system of variable message signs, media broadcasts and website updates.

I understand Elizabeth Smith's point about whether the signs could be more effective. We review that continually with Transport Scotland. She is a stakeholder, like everyone else, and we will take on board her point.

Nigel Don (North East Scotland) (SNP): I will ask the minister about an issue that relates to the snow gates on the A93 heading north to Glenshee. Sometimes the police shut those gates—that is their responsibility—as a precaution overnight, but everybody knows that they will open in the morning. The overhead gantries on the main roads will say that the snow gates are closed, but everybody knows that the gates will be open by the time that people reach them. Will the minister take that issue to Transport Scotland? I appreciate that real-time information is wanted, but sometimes such information needs to be ahead of time.

Keith Brown: I am more than happy to take on board Nigel Don's point, with the proviso that closing the gates is the police's responsibility, which I do not want to gainsay. The police have acted correctly at all times.

Nigel Don's point about providing the maximum possible information to drivers ahead of time is extremely important. Through satellite navigation and other methods, we can do more to give drivers real-time information. We are considering how to do that.

Teaching Posts

4. Marlyn Glen (North East Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what action it is taking to guarantee that there are posts available for all newly qualified teachers on completion of their probationary year. (S3O-12541)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning (Michael Russell): As part of the budget deal with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, local authorities have agreed to provide sufficient vacancies for all probationers

who successfully complete the induction scheme in June 2011 to apply for. Of course, no individual can be guaranteed a post, and the posts will be available to all teachers who seek employment through fair and open competition. The deal also provides for further vacancies to reduce longer-term teacher unemployment. We have provided local authorities with an additional £15 million in the settlement to help to meet those teacher employment objectives.

Marlyn Glen: I question how an assertion amounts to a guarantee and I welcome the cabinet secretary's admission on that. What are the prospects for new teachers' longer-term future? The Educational Institute of Scotland already warns of the decimation of teacher numbers across Scotland. In Dundee, one in 10 teachers has gone. How does the cabinet secretary propose to encourage new teachers to become the experienced teachers of the future, who are necessary for good education, when they can see the deprofessionalisation and casualisation of teaching as a direct consequence of his Government's policies?

Michael Russell: There is no deprofessionalisation or casualisation. I hope that Marlyn Glen was present during this morning's debate. If so, she will have heard from me a comprehensive account of how the issue has been difficult for individuals and policy makers, how we have taken a number of steps to move it forward and how evidence is emerging that we have passed the worst.

As I said last night to two young teachers who were present at a highly successful engage for education meeting in Dundee, opportunity is ahead. Dundee City Council's director of education, Jim Collins, was also present at that meeting. He was positive about the contribution that young teachers can make to curriculum for excellence and the health of our schools.

The problem has been difficult. Much work has been done to try to solve it. I hope that Marlyn Glen might recognise that, but that will require her to take a fair and objective view of what has taken place.

The Presiding Officer: Question 5 should be from Nicol Stephen, but unfortunately he is not in the chamber.

Apprenticeships (Financial and Other Assistance)

6. David Stewart (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what financial and other assistance it has in place for people unable to complete their apprenticeships due to a company entering administration. (S3O-12566)

The Minister for Skills and Lifelong Learning (Angela Constance): The Scottish Government has put in place specific measures to support our apprentices through the current downturn, including the adopt an apprentice and safeguard an apprentice schemes. Both schemes have been extended until March 2011.

The adopt an apprentice scheme offers employers a £2,000 incentive to employ a redundant apprentice. Skills Development Scotland advises us that, since the scheme's launch in June 2009, it has supported more than 720 redundant apprentices, which has enabled them to find alternative employment and to continue their training.

SDS advises us that the safeguard an apprentice scheme, which provides a wage subsidy to small and medium-sized enterprises in the construction, manufacturing and engineering sectors, has supported 320 apprentices who would otherwise have lost their jobs.

David Stewart: Does the minister share my view that skills development through modern apprenticeships is a vital tool for industry and commerce? When Rok went into administration last year, 35 young people who were employed in the Highlands and Islands lost their jobs and their apprenticeships. Does the minister support my call for an apprenticeship summit to be held in Inverness next month? Would she or her officials attend that? If not, will she agree to meet me in Parliament to discuss the problem in more detail?

Angela Constance: I certainly recognise and understand that the Highlands and Islands has been disproportionately affected by what happened to Rok. I appreciate Mr Stewart's concern about that. In the first instance, I would be more than happy to meet him to discuss the matter face to face. In the meantime, I reassure him that all apprentices who might be affected by the Rok situation are receiving additional information and support to advise them best of the available options.

The Presiding Officer: Question 7 was not lodged.

Teacher Numbers

8. Pauline McNeill (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive how many fewer teachers it expects to be employed in schools during the lifetime of the current Administration. (S3O-12556)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning (Michael Russell): As I said in this morning's debate, I very much regret the reduction in the number of teachers who are employed in our schools since 2007. However, economic circumstances have changed since then

in a way that could not have been predicted. We also need to recall that the 2007 level was artificially high and unsustainable at the best of times, let alone in the present financial circumstances.

However, I stress that evidence now shows that we have turned the corner on teacher unemployment. That provides a solid foundation for achievement of the teacher employment objectives in our budget agreement with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities.

Pauline McNeill: Under the SNP Administration, teacher numbers have fallen by 3,000. I am concerned about the impact on music teachers and music tuition. Does the cabinet secretary recognise that some local authorities have made attempts to dilute the quality of music teaching in schools? Does he support the EIS charter for instrumental music and what it has said, which is that music should not be an "easy target" for cuts because of the huge benefits that music brings to children? In view of the threat to music teachers and tuition in schools, will he consider issuing guidance to local authorities on the Government's expectations in relation to protecting music in our schools?

Michael Russell: I have a great deal of sympathy with the issue, as the member will know. It is a pity that she was not in the debate this morning. She might have made that contribution and therefore helpfully contradicted those of her colleagues who were objecting to any interference by me in any school, authority or part of Scotland. That said, I am sympathetic to the issue of music and cultural instruction. I agree that it is no easy option to cut such things; it should not be an easy option to cut such things.

I recognise the great difficulties that Scottish local authorities have and the pressures on them—pressures that were forced, of course, by the cuts that the Con-Dem coalition has made too fast and too far and presaged by cuts that Alistair Darling told us would be considerably worse than Thatcher's cuts. There are difficulties, but I have always stood four-square in defence of the arts and culture and teaching music and culture. I remain in that position.

Sandra White (Glasgow) (SNP): The cabinet secretary will be aware that Glasgow City Council is responsible for more than a quarter of the fall in teacher numbers while also being the worst-performing council in terms of attainment levels. Does he agree that, instead of playing politics with our children's education, Glasgow City Council, in particular Labour Party members on the council, should work constructively with the Scottish Government to ensure that Scotland's education system remains world class?

Michael Russell: I know that Sandra White knows that anybody would find me a constructive partner were they to wish to do so. I am always happy to work with local authorities on key problems or issues that they have. Many authorities have co-operated on class sizes and delivery and I am sorry that Glasgow City Council has refused to do so. The member is absolutely correct in what she says on teacher numbers. Glasgow City Council has been a significant contributor to the fall in teacher numbers. I recognise the pressure on local authorities, but it appears that the council that the Labour Party is not prepared to criticise is Glasgow City Council. Every other council can be criticised—provided, of course, that it is of a different political hue.

M8 (Baillieston to Newhouse Upgrade)

9. Ms Wendy Alexander (Paisley North) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what the planned completion date was for the Baillieston to Newhouse M8 upgrade in May 2007 and what the current estimated completion date is. (S3O-12528)

The Minister for Transport and Infrastructure (Keith Brown): The motorway and trunk road programme, which we published in June 2007, showed the estimated completion date for the M8 Baillieston to Newhouse scheme as 2012-13. Subject to parliamentary approval, the earliest completion date for the scheme will now be not before 2016-17. The M8 is a complex scheme and it is important that it has been developed in detail and consulted on fully to ensure a proper and robust solution. We are committed to commencing procurement of this key scheme in 2011-12.

Ms Alexander: Can the minister offer the chamber and country any explanation for the more than four-year delay that has occurred on his watch in completing the last 10 miles of motorway link between Glasgow and Edinburgh?

Keith Brown: I am happy to point out that the explanation for the delays is remarkably similar to that for the delays on the M74. The member will be aware that major road schemes can involve public local inquiries and legal challenges. In this case, there was also delay because HM Treasury would not confirm the arrangements for the international financial reporting standards schemes. Since 2007, this Government, under my predecessor, has undertaken 17 road projects and five more are currently under construction. Of course, the M80 and M74 will also be completed on time and, in one case, ahead of budget and time.

Michael McMahon (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab): I ask the minister to reflect on the fact that the public inquiry that he mentioned related to the Raith interchange. The M8 project was an entirely separate project when this

Government inherited it. The public inquiry into the Raith interchange is no reason for delay on the M8 project.

Keith Brown: I have already explained the circumstances behind the delays. It is funny how, when a project comes under Labour, the idea of a public local inquiry causing delay is acceptable, but it is not acceptable in this case. As I said, the simple fact is this: under my predecessor, 17 road projects—some on them ones that the Labour Party had committed to but made no progress on—were progressed. As I said, the M74 project will be completed ahead of time.

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-2818)

The First Minister (Alex Salmond): Later today, I will make an announcement with one of the world's leading online companies, Amazon, which intends to create 950 new full-time jobs in Scotland at two locations—in Dunfermline and Gourock. I know that all members will want to welcome such a positive boost for the Scottish economy in this new year.

Iain Gray: We always welcome new jobs in Scotland.

In October, I announced Labour's policy on a single Scottish police force and challenged the First Minister to join us. However, he set up sub-groups of the police board and the ministerial advisory committee. They have reported, so he has set up a consultation, which will report to a commission. Is the First Minister incapable of taking a decision? Does he agree or does he not agree that Scotland should have a single police force?

The First Minister: As Kenny MacAskill said yesterday, change is inevitable. The status quo is not an option. Kenny MacAskill has set out the Government's position on the police and the fire service and we have been closely examining the arguments. If we are going to make the greatest change in policing in Scotland for more than a generation, examination of the arguments and an attempt to build consensus seem to me to be particularly important.

As has been said, the status quo is not an option. Kenny MacAskill clearly laid out the advantages and disadvantages of other approaches. We will work to achieve a solution that is in the best interests of Scotland and front-line policing, and which maintains democratic accountability and generates the consensus across society with which such a major change should be introduced.

Iain Gray: Presiding Officer, "This is daft stuff." [Interruption.]

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson): Order.

Iain Gray: Presiding Officer,

"When you have to make the decisions, when you are First Minister, you can't afford to be on two or three sides of

the same issue at the same time, you have to make your decision and stick with it, live with it."

Those are not my words; that is what Alex Salmond told the newspapers at the weekend. He is consulting on three options for the police, but the Cabinet Secretary for Justice said on television last night that the Government is now down to two options for the police, although perhaps one option is stronger than the other. Is it three options, two options or one option? This is "daft stuff"; in fact, it is pathetic. When will the First Minister act as he says a First Minister should act and make his

"decision and stick with it, live with it"?

The First Minister: I am delighted that Iain Gray has given me the opportunity to remind a wider audience of the reason for my talking about being

"on two or three sides of the same issue".

I was referring to the council tax, of course, and to Iain Gray's attack on the council tax freeze. He said that the bills would have to rise under the Labour Party. Just a few days later, he said that he did not have anything against the council tax freeze. A few days after that, he said that council tax bills would have to go up, but perhaps be limited in how much they increased. Iain Gray is in a very poor position to talk about being on two or three sides of a single issue. He cannot make his mind up on anything.

It is vital that we gain consensus across Scottish society on police reform but, as Kenny MacAskill noted yesterday, Labour has not even achieved consensus within the Labour Party. Prominent Labour councillors have attacked the idea of a single police force. It would be of benefit, if only as an educational experience, if the Labour Party took part in the consultation so that we can move together to get the best result for Scotland and Scottish policing.

Iain Gray: I know what Councillor Eric Milligan thinks on the issue and what Tricia Marwick MSP thinks on it, too. She, too, is against a single police force. However, I simply do not know what the First Minister thinks.

Last July, the First Minister's spokesperson said:

"We have no plans to move away from eight police forces".

In October, the First Minister himself told *The Daily Telegraph* that he was opposed to the creation of a single Scotland-wide operation. The same month, his spokesperson said that there would be more than one force but fewer than eight. Last night, his justice secretary said that the case for one force was the strongest. Is it not the case that the First Minister does not even have a consensus with himself on the issue?

The First Minister: As the arguments have been examined, it has become clear that the option of a single police force offers significant savings, which are essential given the mess that the Labour Party made of the economy and the consequent pressure on public finance. Unlike the Labour Party, we stood on a manifesto commitment to have 1,000 extra police on the streets of Scotland, and we have delivered that commitment. Under the public spending pressures from the coalition Government, we know that change is necessary to maintain front-line policing. As the issue is examined, the single police force offers a substantial opportunity for efficiencies that will help on the front line.

There are questions of democratic accountability, however. They are serious questions, and no doubt they are the questions that are in the mind of Councillor Eric Milligan as he opposes Iain Gray's plans. That is why the argument and the examination have to be worked through. If the greatest change in policing in a generation is being proposed, it really is sensible to examine the issues carefully, to come to the conclusions together and to carry a consensus in Scottish society, so that Scotland's police force is the people's police force.

Iain Gray: I still do not know what the First Minister thinks. Yes, it is a serious issue—that is why it demands leadership. We can all see how painful it is for the First Minister to sit on this fence. Dither, delay and dodging decisions: that is the First Minister's modus operandi, and he is a serial offender. On public sector reform, a commission is to report—after the election. On higher education, there is to be a Scottish solution—after the election. On climate change targets, there is to be no action until after the election. On police and fire services, there is to be a consultation—which is to conclude after the election. Has the First Minister just given up on governing at all?

The First Minister: The council tax freeze is being delivered in Scotland now. The ending of prescription charges is being delivered in Scotland now. A thousand extra police on the streets is being delivered in Scotland now. We have an Administration that has maintained and kept 90 per cent of its manifesto commitments, which is far and away above anything that the Labour Party did. That is 84 out of 94 commitments.

This Administration is saying to people that, in return for the wage restraint that is necessary to protect jobs in the public sector, we will protect household budgets. This Administration does not have a leader who appears on the front of a placard outside the Parliament saying "No Wage Freeze" just days after appearing on the radio saying that a wage freeze was essential. This Administration is delivering for the people of

Scotland. It is an Administration that looks for consensus, because consensus is important. It is an Administration that will be re-elected in three months' time.

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-2819)

The First Minister (Alex Salmond): I have no plans to meet the secretary of state in the near future.

Annabel Goldie: Today, we have more than 1,000 more police officers than we had four years ago. Just before the First Minister indulges in selective amnesia, however, I remind him that that was made possible only because of the Scottish Conservatives. If it had been left to Labour, there would not have been any more police officers at all. If it had been left to the SNP, there would have been 500 fewer.

Maintaining the extra 1,000 officers is a political priority for me and for the Scottish Conservatives, not just for this year but for the next four years. That is my commitment and the Scottish Conservatives' commitment. Will the First Minister match it?

The First Minister: Yes, I will.

Annabel Goldie: I am delighted by that response. I welcome the First Minister's apparent clarity and I congratulate him on yet again following a Conservative lead. However, I must take his assurance with a pinch of salt: after all, he tried to break the selfsame commitment four years ago. That was naughty and I had to tweak him back.

At least the First Minister made a commitment, which was more than can be said for Labour, which made no commitment then and has none now. Is it not a simple fact that when it comes to keeping Scotland safe and protecting our public, Labour is silent, the SNP is soft and the only people who can be trusted are the Scottish Conservatives?

The First Minister: When Annabel Goldie was upbraiding me just then I was thinking that matron definitely knows best what I must and must not do.

I accept that some key commitments that we have been able to achieve have been achieved because we appealed for support across the Parliament. I am perfectly happy to acknowledge the Conservative party's support, which was essential in delivering the 1,000 extra police officers, just as, for example, the Liberal Democrats' support was essential when we removed back-end tuition fees in Scotland. That is the inevitability of minority government.

Let us look at justice and policing policy in the round. Not only do we have the lowest crime rate in Scotland for 30 years but, for the first time, people's fear of crime in communities is falling. The reason why is precisely that we have those extra officers on the streets. That is the essence of what we should be trying to do and what we have achieved together—at least to some extent—during the past few years.

However, I gently remind Annabel Goldie that she should cast a look at what her colleagues south of the border are doing. It seems to me that on a number of aspects of the approach to crime and punishment Kenneth Clarke is following not Annabel Goldie's prescription and policies but the SNP Government in Scotland's prescription and policies. I think that Kenneth Clarke is wise to say that short sentences have little value compared with alternative forms of punishment. He is wise to follow that line. Of course, that policy was put through the Parliament with the support of not the Conservative party but the Liberal Democrats.

Over the piece, I think that we can say that together we have achieved substantial things in the justice policy of Scotland. What really matters is that having those police on the streets is leading to a 30-year low in recorded crime in Scotland.

Cabinet (Meetings)

3. Tavish Scott (Shetland) (LD): To ask the First Minister what issues will be discussed at the next meeting of the Cabinet. (S3F-2820)

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

Tavish Scott: The Scottish Government has withdrawn all figures to support its assertion in favour of a national police force. Will the First Minister therefore guarantee to publish robust and validated new figures that show the full cost of setting up a single police force, including costs of a new headquarters, enhanced redundancies and information technology?

The First Minister: That is what we are bringing forward as part of the consultation process that Kenny MacAskill outlined yesterday.

Tavish Scott must face a certain fact: the opportunities for cost savings in the back office in a single police force are very substantial. If he is going to argue against having a single police force, as I assume he is going to do, he must base his arguments on whether the advocates of a single force can ensure the democratic line of accountability and local contribution to policing in Scotland. That is where the answers must be found on the proposal for a single police force, and not—I say with respect—in trying to pretend that a single police force would not offer substantial

back-office savings, which could be deployed on the front line.

Tavish Scott: I agree with the First Minister that it is an important debate, but he surely needs to accept that Labour's police reorganisation in England was cancelled because it was going to cost £500 million. Has he not read the papers on his own Scottish policing board? The Government's own Improvement Service said that

"supporting evidence is caveated almost to the point of parody"

and that

"the analysis ... is an abuse of evidence".

David Strang, the chief constable of Lothian and Borders Police, said that the figures in the draft proposal were

"irresponsibly misleading and not supported by the evidence".

As Mr Salmond knows, the chief constable in his area, Colin McKerracher, said there was not a "shred of evidence" to support a single police force.

Is it normal for the First Minister's Government to make an assertion first and to look for the evidence afterwards? What evidence can he produce to show that his Government has the slightest clue about how much the centralisation will cost?

The First Minister: Clearly, there is a substantial body of opinion in the police force and elsewhere in favour of a single force. Senior police officers such as the chief constable of Strathclyde Police and the deputy chief constable of Lothian and Borders Police would not argue the case unless they believed that a substantial opportunity was to be found in creating a single police force.

On the initial part of Tavish Scott's second question, I assure him that, in making the greatest change in the police service of Scotland for more than a generation, we shall not follow any prescription from what the Labour Party tried to do and abandoned south of the border. If he is saying that the confusion and disarray that happened when the Labour Party was in charge of police reform in England is another argument for ensuring that it is never in a position to reintroduce confusion and disarray in Scotland, then, in this new year, I agree with him.

Duncan McNeil (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab): Earlier this week, I was contacted by Blairs Ltd of Greenock—a manufacturing company with a great reputation that has operated successfully in my constituency for more than a century—with the bad news that, despite the sacrifices of the workforce and the commitment of management, the economic downturn has forced it to call in the

receivers and make 100 employees redundant. There remains a very small window—possibly as little as 48 hours—in which the company can be preserved as a going concern. Alternatively, it faces being broken up, which would be an act of economic vandalism.

Will the First Minister add his support for the management and workforce, who are fighting to salvage something from that grave situation? What will he do to impress upon the insolvency practitioners and the banks—in this case, the Bank of Scotland—that they need to look beyond the narrow and short-term financial considerations and face up to their wider responsibility to jobs and the local economy in these difficult times?

The First Minister: Of course, I will arrange for the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth to contact the constituency member immediately and establish whether a helpful intervention would be possible, as we do—as I am sure Duncan McNeil is aware—in such cases throughout the country. If we can help, we certainly shall intervene to do so.

I know that Duncan McNeil would be the first person to welcome the jobs boost from Amazon that affects his constituency as well as Fife. I also know that he will reflect that one of the most positive signs from the current economic statistics for Scotland is that manufacturing is doing extremely well over the piece. However, that does not mean that individual companies are not still encountering difficulties. Of course, access to finance and the attitude of the financial organisations often contribute to the causes of those difficulties.

Alison McInnes (North East Scotland) (LD): The First Minister will be aware of the significant job losses that have been announced at the Les Taylor Group of companies, which is based at Mintlaw and Ellon in my region. Last Friday, 164 people lost their jobs, and another 19 were made redundant on Monday this week. That is a significant loss of jobs within the rural economy of Aberdeenshire. What actions will the First Minister and his ministers take to support those who have lost their jobs and minimise the impact on the local economy? Will he ensure that a partnership action for continuing employment team is mobilised to assist?

The First Minister: Yes—a PACE team is being deployed to assist. I am well aware of the company, its background and its history. The company is in my former Westminster constituency. As Alison McInnes knows, Les Taylor himself died tragically last year. Losing somebody of his ability, skill and leadership was a serious blow to the company.

I will ensure that the PACE team is mobilised, as I know is happening. I am perfectly happy to arrange for the economic ministers to meet Alison McInnes to talk about the issue.

VAT and Fuel Duty Increases

4. Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): To ask the First Minister what the impact will be on Scottish public services of the recent rises in VAT and fuel duty. (S3F-2821)

The First Minister (Alex Salmond): The recent increases in VAT and fuel duty introduced by the United Kingdom Government will generate additional pressures for Scottish businesses, families and public services at a time when Scotland is already facing unprecedented cuts in public spending and economic recovery remains fragile.

As Mr Gibson is aware, the Scottish Government has written to the UK Government opposing the increases and making the case for a fuel duty stabiliser—an idea that was supported by the Prime Minister and the Chancellor of the Exchequer before the election, although they now seem to be extraordinarily reluctant to introduce it when the time is right for such an initiative.

Kenneth Gibson: Does the First Minister agree that it is a shocking indictment of successive UK Governments that they have imposed the highest fuel duty in Europe on Scottish motorists in order to maximise revenue? Most of Europe's oil comes from Scotland, but shamefully we have to pay more for it at the pumps than any other nation. The burden of additional UK VAT and fuel duty will make Scottish goods and services less competitive and it will cost jobs by draining £2.4 billion from Scotland into the Treasury's coffers this year. Will the First Minister therefore engage with the UK Government to seek the restoration of the funds that have been taken by the Treasury from the Scottish block to avoid further cuts in public services, and to seek the establishment of a fuel duty regulator?

The First Minister: Yes I do, and yes I will. It is probably worth explaining the point that the fuel duty regulator does not concern the £10 billion of expected revenue from Scotland's oil and gas reserves flowing into the Treasury in the coming year. A fuel duty regulator makes the argument that, when there is an oil price increase and an unexpected surge in revenues of £1 billion over and above the £10 billion, some of it should be applied to fuel duty and to regulating and giving stability to the price at these times. We have long argued for that, and the Prime Minister supported it before the election. I would not want to see the Prime Minister making a major commitment and then breaking it by going the same way as the Deputy Prime Minister did on tuition fees.

Pandemic Flu Budget

5. Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): To ask the First Minister whether the Scottish Government will revisit plans to remove £10 million from the Scottish pandemic flu budget in light of concerns expressed regarding the potential rate of influenza A (H1N1). (S3F-2829)

The First Minister (Alex Salmond): Jackie Baillie has not done herself any favours in the way she has raised this issue during the past two weeks. As she is well aware, the £10 million was for a flu pandemic. We have a serious flu issue in Scotland at the moment—as, indeed, they have elsewhere in the United Kingdom—but we do not have a pandemic. If the circumstances change in the next year, we will handle them as the health secretary handled things when we did have a pandemic in Scotland.

As far as possible, such issues should be handled by a united Parliament and chamber. Even the sternest critics of this Administration would probably concede that Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing and our outstanding health service handled last year's flu pandemic with great efficiency and skill. I gently remind Jackie Baillie that our preparedness for this year's seasonal flu outbreak, in the supply and availability of vaccine, for example, seems to be somewhat more robust than it is elsewhere.

Jackie Baillie: I associate myself with the First Minister's comments about the NHS because it has pulled out all the stops to deal with flu. I am sure that the First Minister will also agree that we need to avoid any complacency in dealing with H1N1 flu strains in future years. He will, of course, be aware that flu viruses can mutate, that vaccines might need to be varied, and that vaccine stocks might need to be increased to deal with the situation.

Will any contingency budget be available if the £10 million is removed? Is the First Minister aware of the increasing concern that was highlighted by England's chief medical officer about mortality rates among people with co-infection, particularly group A streptococcal infection and meningococcal disease? What contingency plans does the Scottish Government have in place to deal with that?

The First Minister: We have a full preparatory contingency to deal with that along with the preparatory budget, which remains in place. As Jackie Baillie is well aware, we are not talking about this year's budget for seasonal flu preparedness, but about a contingency budget for the purchase of vaccine in the event of a pandemic.

There are a number of reasons why we do not invoke such a budget if we are not in a pandemic,

not the least of which—as Jackie Baillie is also aware—is the fact that flu vaccine has a shelf life after which it cannot be used. Although maximum preparedness requires vaccine availability in order for us to be able to respond to any situation, nobody would argue for the purchasing of a pandemic vaccine whose shelf life might run out before we faced a pandemic. That would be a major misuse of public money, which could instead be reinforcing the health service's superb handling of the current flu situation in Scotland.

I recognise and welcome the fact that we have unity in our praise for our health service, our health service workers, NHS 24 and the doctors, nurses and chemists of Scotland for the way in which they are handling the current flu situation in Scotland.

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): The First Minister will be aware of the calls from some parents for vaccination of all young children against flu—a call that does not, however, have scientific or medical support. Where does the Scottish Government stand on the issue?

The First Minister: We follow the expert advice of the relevant committee, and both health departments north and south of the border follow the same advice. Such judgments are always difficult to make, but in the circumstances, to follow the best medical advice of the committee that has been established to give that advice seems to be the sensible and proper thing to do.

Legal Aid (Court Delays)

6. Robert Brown (Glasgow) (LD): To ask the First Minister what action the Scottish Government is taking to deal with court delays caused by legal aid problems. (S3F-2822)

The First Minister (Alex Salmond): The Scottish Legal Aid Board introduced changes on 16 August 2010 that were intended to simplify and modernise the operation of the Scottish legal aid system. Those changes are being closely monitored to ensure that the profession and the wider justice community are fully aware of them and to speed up decisions on legal aid applications.

Robert Brown: My concern was raised by reports of the adjournment of criminal cases in sheriff courts across the country. In Wick recently, five out of 18 cases that were called were put off for that reason, which was the subject of judicial comment from the bench. In Glasgow, an adjournment was allegedly caused by the new legal aid procedures, to which the First Minister has referred, requiring more financial documentation before the court. Lawyers are claiming that the changes were introduced without consultation. I accept entirely that people who get

criminal legal aid must support their applications properly; however, does the First Minister accept that the net effect on the public purse is going entirely the wrong way if trials are put off at substantial public cost, to say nothing of the frustration and inconvenience that are caused to witnesses? Will he ensure, as a matter of urgency, that the Scottish Legal Aid Board sorts out the difficulties that are causing these costly delays?

The First Minister: Let us look at the cases that Robert Brown raises. Of the cases at Wick sheriff court on 5 January, none related directly to the changes that were introduced last August. Legal aid had been granted in one of the cases, but was refused in two cases because the applicants earned more than the means-tested threshold. Two cases were continued because the applicants earned more than the means-tested threshold and two were continued because a bank statement and other verification of income had not been provided.

The solicitors and applicants have the prime responsibility to ensure that the information is provided properly; otherwise, a decision whether to grant legal aid cannot be made. The Scottish Legal Aid Board has been working with the profession to ensure that there is full understanding of last year's changes and to avoid mistakes being made that could result in court delays.

James Kelly (Glasgow Rutherglen) (Lab): When Parliament passed emergency legislation in October, following the Cadder judgment, we were told that it would require 500 additional police officers and would result in an increase in the legal aid budget. What action is the Scottish Court Service taking to ensure that the impact of the new arrangements on legal aid procedures and the legal aid budget is minimised?

The First Minister: All the new arrangements regarding legal aid budgets and procedures are monitored closely. I caution the member that, just as in politics we are always told not to believe everything that we read in the newspapers, Labour members should not necessarily believe the propaganda points that they made during a debate. I assure the member that these matters are all properly considered in terms of both the change in legislation and its consequences for legal aid.

12:29

Meeting suspended until 14:15.

14:15

On resuming—

Scottish Executive Question Time

Health and Wellbeing

Rape Crisis and Women's Aid (Budget Provision)

1. Christina McKelvie (Central Scotland) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what provision it has made for local Rape Crisis and Women's Aid services in its 2010-11 draft budget. (S3O-12617)

The Minister for Housing and Communities (Alex Neil): In 2010-11, we made available £3.5 million pounds for the violence against women fund, which provides grants for a number of local Women's Aid groups, and provided £700,000 for the rape crisis fund, which supports local Rape Crisis centres, and £4.16 million for the children's services-Women's Aid fund, which supports the network of children's workers across Scotland. I was delighted to announce in the Parliament on Thursday 23 December that we will continue to fund all three of those important local services at the same level for 2011-12.

Christina McKelvie: I thank the minister for that answer, which I know will be warmly welcomed by Rape Crisis and Women's Aid staff and volunteers at national and local level across Scotland. The fact that they provide a vital service and show dedication and commitment to women of all kinds has led to Lanarkshire Rape Crisis Centre in my area being recognised as South Lanarkshire's voluntary organisation of the year in 2010.

Does the minister agree that the wider preventive and awareness-raising work that Women's Aid and Rape Crisis Scotland do, in addition to the services that they provide to individual women, is crucial? Will the Government encourage the police, the national health service and local authorities to take advantage of the training and information that Women's Aid and Rape Crisis Scotland provide so that women across Scotland receive the highest possible quality of service from all the public agencies with which they come into contact?

Alex Neil: I congratulate Lanarkshire Rape Crisis Centre on its excellent work and agree with all the sentiments that Christina McKelvie expressed.

A very good example of interagency work is the work that Strathclyde Police carries out with all those agencies in the run-up to, during and

immediately after old firm games to reduce violence against women, which has resulted in an average decline of 30 per cent in violence against women in the periods around those games. That is an exemplar of interagency working that includes the police.

Prescription Service (Costs)

2. Derek Brownlee (South of Scotland) (Con):

To ask the Scottish Government what it expects the cost will be in 2010-11 and in 2011-12 to administer the prescription service and what the cost will be to dispense the items prescribed in each of those years. (S3O-12590)

The Minister for Public Health and Sport (Shona Robison): The gross cost of dispensing prescriptions in the community to patients across Scotland between April 2009 and March 2010—the most recent full year for which figures are available—was £1.139 billion. That total includes net drug costs and related remuneration for dispensers. The outturn drug costs for 2010-11 and 2011-12 will depend on various factors, including individual decisions by prescribers. Those are not forecast centrally and as responsibility for meeting prescribing costs is devolved to national health service boards, each board sets its own prescribing budget.

Derek Brownlee: I thank the minister for that helpful and detailed response.

If we leave to one side the cost of the drugs themselves, to what extent does the Scottish Government believe that there is scope to reduce the administration costs of the mechanism for prescribing and dispensing those drugs?

Shona Robison: As I am sure the member is aware, continuing administrative savings of up to £500,000 are associated with the abolition of prescription charges, but the vast majority of the practitioner services division's activity will remain necessary. Around £1.3 million will be saved in respect of fees that are paid to dispensers for sales of prescription prepayment certificates, and there will be a variety of other savings. For example, there will be a saving in the time that pharmacists and assistants in pharmacies spend on checking patients' exemption status, although such savings might be a bit more difficult to calculate.

Milk Banks

3. Brian Adam (Aberdeen North) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government whether it plans to increase the number of milk banks. (S3O-12599)

The Minister for Public Health and Sport (Shona Robison): The Scottish Government currently has no plans to increase the number of donor milk banks in Scotland, but we are aware of

the valuable service that donor milk banks can provide, particularly the donor milk bank in the NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde area, which is collaborating in United Kingdom-wide research into the specific benefit of donor breast milk as opposed to formula milk for premature infants. Maternal and infant nutrition policy for neonates will be informed by the outcomes of that research.

Brian Adam: I have been contacted by a constituent who wanted to donate some breast milk but was told that that was not feasible because she lived too far away from the nearest facility, which was in Glasgow. What are the constraints that prohibit breast milk from being taken from Aberdeen to Glasgow for donation? Are there any plans to overcome those problems?

Shona Robison: The member may want to write to me with more detail of his constituent's concerns. One issue is that the Glasgow facility must have a number of mechanisms for screening milk and ensuring that it is safe. A number of processes are involved, and it may not be feasible and, in the current climate, cost effective to set up a number of milk banks elsewhere. However, I am prepared to explore further whether there are issues vis-à-vis the transportation of breast milk from elsewhere that can be overcome. We can look at those in the context of the research that is under way and to which I referred in my initial answer.

Elaine Smith (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab): I am pleased that the minister thinks that the Government could do more to help and encourage women to donate their milk. What can she do to advise women that birth plans can include a request for donated milk, rather than artificial formula, in case of problems? What plans does she have to promote the importance of breastfeeding more generally?

Shona Robison: As I said in my response to Brian Adam's question, I am happy to look at ways in which we may be able to do more on breast milk donation.

I know that Elaine Smith takes a close interest in the promotion of breastfeeding, so I am sure that she is aware of all the initiatives and campaigns that have been undertaken and of the fact that a great deal of work is done in our maternity services to ensure that mums are well aware of the benefits of breast milk for their babies. We will continue to do that work rigorously.

I am sure that the new infant nutrition strategy that will be launched later this month will be of interest to Elaine Smith, and I will ensure that she gets a copy.

NHS Lanarkshire (Meetings)

4. Karen Gillon (Clydesdale) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive when it last met representatives of NHS Lanarkshire and what issues were discussed. (S3O-12540)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing (Nicola Sturgeon): I meet all health board chairs regularly. The most recent meeting with representatives of NHS Lanarkshire was on 22 November. A range of issues were discussed.

Karen Gillon: When the cabinet secretary next meets representatives of NHS Lanarkshire, will she raise with them the continued problem of bed blocking in local cottage hospitals in Lanarkshire, the difficulty that people have in accessing appropriate care packages from those hospitals and the resultant problems that people have in accessing cottage hospitals from district general hospitals or community and home-based settings? Will she discuss with NHS Lanarkshire how the whole package is operating?

Nicola Sturgeon: Karen Gillon raises an important issue that we discuss regularly with all health boards and their local authority partners. If she provides me with greater detail of her concerns, I will discuss them with NHS Lanarkshire at the earliest opportunity.

As Karen Gillon knows—the point is reflected in her question—reducing and getting rid of delayed discharge is very important both for the individuals concerned and to ensure that the right provision of beds is available in the national health service. We have made great progress in reducing delayed discharge but, as we have seen in recent times, the challenge remains on-going and we are determined to address it. In addition to the other steps that we are encouraging health boards and local authorities to take, we have set aside the change fund for next year, which will help local partnerships to accelerate progress towards better community care solutions and, in the process, reduce delayed discharge even further.

Margaret Mitchell (Central Scotland) (Con): Has the cabinet secretary had any recent discussion with NHS Lanarkshire about the resources that are dedicated to lymphoedema services and the continued provision of protected hours—which, I understand, were increased last year—for nursing of lymphoedema patients in the health board area, to keep waiting times at an acceptable level?

Nicola Sturgeon: I have had no recent discussions with NHS Lanarkshire specifically on the subject of lymphoedema, although my officials are in close contact with all health boards on a range of issues. I am more than happy to write to Margaret Mitchell with the updated position.

Lymphoedema and the problems that its sufferers experience have been raised in the chamber many times before. There are serious issues associated with lymphoedema, and we are working hard to deal with them. I am happy to provide Margaret Mitchell with Lanarkshire-specific information.

Hugh O'Donnell (Central Scotland) (LD): In the course of the discussions with Lanarkshire Health Board, was any progress made on access to X-ray facilities for patients in the Cumbernauld area? I am given to understand that there have been some challenges regarding the hardware and the equipment involved.

Nicola Sturgeon: Hugh O'Donnell has raised the issue of community radiology services in Lanarkshire before. He will be aware that, because of its age, the equipment in Cumbernauld and in Kilsyth can no longer be covered by maintenance contracts after the end of December last year. The safety of patients is absolutely paramount, and it would be in breach of national standards if any board was to continue to use equipment in those circumstances. As a result, patients from Cumbernauld and Kilsyth are being referred to the radiology department at Monklands. That will continue until a full review of radiology services has been completed.

No final decisions on the overall review have yet been taken but, as always, I expect the health board to progress any proposal for permanent change with the full involvement of patients, the public and other stakeholders. If such a proposal was deemed to constitute major service change, formal consultation and, ultimately, ministerial approval, would be required.

Cathie Craigie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab): I have written to the cabinet secretary before about the X-ray service in Cumbernauld and Kilsyth, and I ask her to hold urgent discussions with NHS Lanarkshire on the matter. The board and the officials concerned should have known that the equipment was reaching the end of its life. Why have they not planned to improve the X-ray facilities in Cumbernauld's Central health centre? I had understood that they were doing so. Why have we reached this disgraceful situation, where people from Cumbernauld and Kilsyth now have to travel to Monklands hospital for run-of-the-mill X-ray facilities? Such facilities provide a service to the local community and take pressure off acute hospitals.

Nicola Sturgeon: I understand Cathie Craigie's concerns. As I would always do in such circumstances, and as I am sure she has done herself, it is a matter of communicating those concerns to NHS Lanarkshire. I have explained the background to the situation and, as a local member, I am sure that she was already aware of

it. Patient safety must take precedence and priority at all times.

A wider review of radiology services is continuing, and it is important for that review to be allowed to continue. As I said to Hugh O'Donnell, depending on the proposals that come forward, there are certain things that the review will have to go through. I am sure that Cathie Craigie will agree about patient safety being absolutely principal in all deliberations about those services.

For the benefit of other constituency members who might have an interest in the matter, I should stress that the services in Stonehouse, in Karen Gillon's constituency, and in Coatbridge are unaffected, and normal service is continuing there pending the wider review.

Helicopter Ambulance Service (Severe Weather)

5. Liam McArthur (Orkney) (LD): To ask the Scottish Executive what impact the severe weather conditions in November and December 2010 have had on the operational availability of the Scottish Ambulance Service's helicopter air ambulances. (S3O-12572)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing (Nicola Sturgeon): The extreme weather conditions in November and December 2010 inevitably caused disruption to the operational availability of the air ambulance service fleet, not least because of the impact of airport closures at certain times. As always, however, Ministry of Defence helicopters were able to support patient transfer whenever that was required.

The Scottish Ambulance Service has assured me that, during the periods of disruption, the air wing manager on duty, in association with the emergency medical dispatch centre's paramedic supervisor, monitored the clinical condition of all patients awaiting transfer and, as necessary, discussed cases with referring clinicians.

I take this opportunity again to thank all health care teams across Scotland, including Ambulance Service crews, who worked so tirelessly throughout the challenging conditions to ensure that the best possible care continued to be provided for patients across the country.

Liam McArthur: I thank the cabinet secretary for that response, and I associate myself with the thanks that she has offered to the staff involved.

Aviation experts have long warned that the helicopters could not fly safely in icing conditions that would not have grounded the Islander aircraft that were formerly used in Orkney. Can the cabinet secretary advise how often icing

conditions prevented helicopters from undertaking missions in 2010?

Further, does the cabinet secretary agree that when the roads are closed by snow, demand for the two air ambulance helicopters increases, which worsens the problem of overstretch?

Can the cabinet secretary advise on progress on plans for the Scottish Ambulance Service to share a Kirkwall-based aircraft with the local council and NHS Orkney, so that a locally based air ambulance that is able to react quickly and use short weather windows to get to the north isles and back is once again available to my constituents?

Nicola Sturgeon: On icing conditions, I am more than happy to provide Liam McArthur with the information in writing—I do not have it before me. It is worth pointing out that the Scottish Ambulance Service has advised that it has received no complaints about the air wing's operation during the recent period of adverse weather. Delays to non-emergency transfers and admissions were experienced throughout the period, and I have explained the procedures that were put in place to deal with the situation.

Liam McArthur has asked a question in Parliament previously about the potential use of an Orkney interisland aircraft. He will be aware that a feasibility study has been produced and shared between the Ambulance Service, NHS Orkney and Orkney Islands Council. The report was discussed during the most recent conference call with the partners, which took place in December, and consideration of the proposal remains on-going. I am happy, as I am sure that the local partners are, to keep Liam McArthur fully updated on developments.

Royal Hospital for Sick Children

6. Mike Pringle (Edinburgh South) (LD): To ask the Scottish Executive whether it will provide an update on the Royal hospital for sick children's move to its new site at the Royal infirmary of Edinburgh. (S3O-12576)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing (Nicola Sturgeon): Positive engagement is taking place between officials of NHS Lothian, the Scottish Futures Trust and the Scottish Government health department to develop a procurement strategy, which will seek to deliver the new children's hospital as quickly as possible, building on the work that has been undertaken to date.

Mike Pringle: The cabinet secretary might be aware that the sick kids hospital is currently located next to the popular Sciennes primary school in my constituency, which is struggling for space. Parent groups at the school have an

ambitious proposal to use space that is freed up by the hospital's move to expand the school. Will she agree to meet the parents to discuss the proposals?

Nicola Sturgeon: I am grateful to Mike Pringle for raising the issue. I am not familiar with the detail of the school's proposal. It might be more productive for the parents directly to meet NHS Lothian, which is responsible for taking forward the plans to replace the sick kids hospital. I am more than happy to ensure that NHS Lothian is aware of the request and to encourage the board to take forward a meeting as soon as it can.

Malcolm Chisholm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab): I thank the cabinet secretary for the detailed answer that she gave me when I asked her about the sick children's hospital during a previous question time. She talked about revenue support for the annual charges that will be required for the new privately built hospital, but she did not say whether there would be 100 per cent revenue support or something short of that. Does she accept that if support is short of 100 per cent there will be further pressure on the revenue budgets of NHS Lothian, which are already under strain because, as she knows, the board is not yet receiving the full share that it is due under the funding formula?

Nicola Sturgeon: Malcolm Chisholm takes a keen and welcome interest in such matters as a constituency member. He will understand that although I sympathise with the position that NHS Lothian is in—it is not the only board to be in such a position in relation to the NHS Scotland resource allocation committee formula—I am obliged to point out that that was also the position when he was Minister for Health and Community Care. The situation is not new and we are progressively working towards resolving it, as indeed Malcolm Chisholm was doing when he was the minister.

While the details of the new procurement strategy are being worked through there are questions about which we cannot yet be definitive. I hope that Malcolm Chisholm will take what I say in the spirit in which it is intended: we are determined to work with NHS Lothian to ensure that the new sick kids hospital can be delivered as quickly as possible, which will mean providing as much support as we can do to enable that to happen. There is a productive relationship, in which the pressures under which NHS Lothian and all health boards work are very much recognised. We all want the new hospital to be delivered as quickly as possible.

Margaret Smith (Edinburgh West) (LD): Can the cabinet secretary assure members that the Scottish Futures Trust will not discard the significant work that contractors and others have done, which was paid for by the national health

service, as it tries to secure the new funding source? Can she assure us that the SFT will not go back to the drawing board on the project as a whole, which would potentially lead to worrying delays and extra costs?

Nicola Sturgeon: As I am sure Margaret Smith recognises and appreciates, it is not in anybody's interests to discard unnecessarily work that has already been done, so I assure her that, where possible, we will build on such work specifically to ensure that the sick kids project proceeds as quickly as possible and with the absolute minimum of delay.

I remind members that the context for the situation is a substantial cut in our capital budget from the Westminster Government. We have had to change the method of building the sick kids hospital, but we have not changed at all the commitment and determination to deliver it.

Margaret Smith makes a good point about ensuring that we build on work that has already been done and I assure her that that will be the case.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Alasdair Morgan): Question 7 was not lodged.

Affordable Housing (Argyll and Bute)

8. Jamie McGrigor (Highlands and Islands) (Con): To ask the Scottish Executive what plans it has to boost affordable housing provision in Argyll and Bute. (S3O-12588)

The Minister for Housing and Communities (Alex Neil): The Scottish Government works closely with Argyll and Bute Council to deliver affordable housing in line with the priorities that are identified in the council's local housing strategy and strategic housing investment plan. In 2010-11, our planned expenditure of £20.19 million will allow 87 new homes to be approved.

Jamie McGrigor: Is the minister aware that housing associations in Argyll and Bute that are keen to build new homes to assist the housing needs of the 3,500 families and single people who are still on the waiting list there are alarmed at the proposed 19 per cent cut in the Scottish Government housing investment budget next year? What will he do to allay those concerns? Given the likely pressure on public sector budgets for the foreseeable future, will he pledge to engage with the private sector infrastructure investment funds that want to start lending to our housing associations?

Alex Neil: The best way of dealing with that would be for George Osborne to reverse his decision to cut our capital budget by 25 per cent next year. It is a bit ironic that supporters of the Con-Dem Government in London complain about

cuts that we have to impose as a result of the massive cuts that it is imposing on the Scottish Government's budget. I suggest to the member that the best way forward would be to try to get his Prime Minister and chancellor to change course and reverse the daft policies that they are implementing.

Mary Mulligan (Linlithgow) (Lab): I note that Argyll and Bute Council was not one of the local authorities in the first phase of the national housing trust initiative. Is that because it believes that the national housing trust model does not provide affordable housing, because the rent is set at a mid-market level?

Alex Neil: We have a total of 11 local authorities, 20 developers and 50 sites engaged in the first round of the national housing trust. Argyll and Bute Council was one of the councils that decided that it was not a high priority. The reason that it gave was the profile of the people who are waiting for new housing in Argyll and Bute. The council reckoned that they would be more appropriately served by the existing housing development programme in the area rather than the national housing trust programme, the first round of which depended on relevant mothballed sites from the private sector being available. Such sites were not available in Argyll and Bute either.

For those practical reasons, Argyll and Bute Council has decided so far not to participate in the NHT initiative.

Distinction Award Scheme (National Health Service Pensions)

9. Ian McKee (Lothians) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what the added cost to NHS pensions was of the distinction award scheme for hospital consultants in the most recent year for which information is available. (S3O-12616)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing (Nicola Sturgeon): The total budget for the distinction award scheme for 2009-10 was £28 million. That budget covered the cost of the actual awards and included a contribution to employers' costs, such as national insurance and superannuation. Therefore, any additional pension cost is largely included in that £28 million budget.

However, the fact that distinction awards are currently consolidated and pensionable is one of the aspects of the scheme that I consider needs to be revised. The Scottish Government's evidence to the Doctors and Dentists Review Body asks it specifically to consider that.

Ian McKee: I share the cabinet secretary's disquiet that what may be a temporary contribution to health care over and above what is normally expected from a consultant may be rewarded not

only with a distinction award for the rest of that consultant's working life, but with an inflation-proof pension addition of up to £38,000 until death. I accept that she has drawn the situation to the attention of the Doctors and Dentists Review Body inquiry. Does she reserve the right to take action to remedy it even if the resulting report fails to tackle the issue?

Nicola Sturgeon: I hope that the DDRB will come up with a good set of proposals, and I look forward to that happening.

The member has been at the forefront of the campaign on this issue and I congratulate him on that. However, if the Scottish Government's budget for next year is passed, I believe that I will be the first health secretary in the lifetime of devolution to reduce the budget for distinction awards. That is a step in the right direction.

When we are having this debate, it is important to stress the fact that I and everyone else in the chamber values highly the work that consultants do. However, I do not believe that a rewards scheme that rewards only about 3 per cent of the NHS workforce when we have a multidisciplinary workforce is sustainable for the future. That is why I argued for the review. The previous Labour UK Government resisted the idea of that review and, although I do not agree with the current UK Government on everything, it is a welcome step in the right direction that it agreed to the review, which is now under way.

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): It was reported in the *Sunday Herald* at the weekend that, in addition to distinction awards, some consultants are rewarded with additional salary points. What action is the cabinet secretary taking to address that system of additional reward?

Nicola Sturgeon: Murdo Fraser refers to an article in the *Sunday Herald* about what are called discretionary points. I should say that, in addition to the distinction awards, discretionary points are the subject of the DDRB review, so in the longer term, I look forward to the DDRB's recommendations.

Looking forward again to next year's budget, I have made a proposal, which is currently out to consultation; that consultation will end in mid-February. The proposal is that, as we are doing with distinction awards, for next year and pending the DDRB recommendations for the longer term, we should freeze the discretionary points system. Once the consultation concludes and I have made a final decision on that, I will share it with Parliament.

NHS Highland (Meetings)

10. Peter Peacock (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive when it last met representatives of NHS Highland and what issues were discussed. (S3O-12562)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing (Nicola Sturgeon): I meet all health board chairs regularly. The most recent meeting with NHS Highland representatives was on 22 November 2010.

Peter Peacock: The cabinet secretary will appreciate the concern of a number of communities in the Highlands about the prospect of not now benefiting from capital spending as a result of NHS Highland no longer being able to access £20 million of capital funding that was reserved for that purpose. Will she invite her officials to establish with NHS Highland a mechanism by which it can get early access to any future financial flexibility to restore that capital spending as quickly as possible?

Nicola Sturgeon: As I am sure that Peter Peacock will acknowledge, the context of the question that he has just asked is the same as the subject that we were talking about a few moments ago: the huge cut in our capital budget for next year and the comprehensive spending review. Incidentally, that cut in our capital budget was planned in full by the previous Labour Government and is being implemented by the current UK coalition Government. That meant that we had to take a hard look at how we allocate capital to health boards. The new arrangements will take effect from April 2011.

One of the changes allows a health board to make a bid for project-specific public funding when new public capital becomes available. To ensure fairness in that system, funds that were previously banked by health boards will be included within project-specific funding. In following that path, the Government can ensure that we still give priority to publicly funded schemes and that the investment that has been made in our health service in recent years continues as far as possible.

I and my officials will continue to discuss those issues carefully and closely with health boards to ensure that we are able to implement as ambitious a capital programme in the NHS as possible.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): An issue that should be discussed with NHS Highland is access to orthodontic services. At present, patients who live in the far north are obliged to make many long return journeys to Inverness for consultation and treatment. Recent winter weather has disrupted those journeys and led to appointments being missed. It would be far better if orthodontic

consultation and treatment could be delivered locally in the far north, either by means of the presence of resident orthodontists or by orthodontists who are willing to travel out of Inverness to outlying areas to do their work. Will the minister discuss the potential of that proposal with NHS Highland?

Nicola Sturgeon: The member raises an important issue and I will answer generally before I address his specific point about orthodontic treatment. One of the health themes of our time in government has been to provide health care as locally as possible whenever it can be provided locally. Across areas such as chemotherapy and dialysis, for example, as well as a lot of investigative and diagnostic procedures, patients who often would have been required to travel long distances to the central belt for those procedures can now access them locally. That is the general trend and direction of travel that we have set in the health service, and it is welcome.

The issue of orthodontic treatment in the Highlands is, as I am sure Jamie Stone knows, a long-standing one. He is absolutely right to say that patients should be able to access treatment locally and should not have to travel long distances unnecessarily. We—the Minister for Public Health and Sport, in particular—are working closely with NHS Highland to ensure that that is the case, and we are happy to keep Jamie Stone up to date on progress on the issue.

NHS Board Chairmen (Meetings)

11. Mary Scanlon (Highlands and Islands) (Con): To ask the Scottish Executive when it last met the chairmen of national health service boards. (S3O-12598)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing (Nicola Sturgeon): On 22 November.

Mary Scanlon: I ask that the NHS 24 evaluation of cognitive behavioural therapy by telephone be discussed at a future meeting, given the recent positive and thorough evaluation of the pilot that cost only £176 for full completion of treatment. That highlights the benefits of addressing depression, particularly for people in remote and rural areas and patients who would not otherwise engage with or complete courses of therapy by conventional methods. Given the long waiting lists for access to psychology and psychiatry, what action will the Government take to ensure that more general practitioners can refer and that individuals can self-refer to the service?

Nicola Sturgeon: I am happy to discuss the issue with health board chairs. I am sure that they, too, would welcome the opportunity to look at the work that is being done in the area. Mary Scanlon

is absolutely right to point out the very good work that NHS 24 has done in that regard. She will be aware of the new health improvement, efficiency, access and treatment target for access to psychological therapies. I have been candid about that area with Mary Scanlon and others. We have a lot of work still to do, but good progress is being made and it is important that we properly evaluate that progress.

Since NHS 24 has been mentioned, I will indulge myself by placing on record my thanks to NHS 24 staff for the incredible work that they have done so far in this winter season, helping people through the difficult weather, and currently with the flu situation.

Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): When did the cabinet secretary last speak to the chair of NHS Fife? Today's *Courier* reports a senior member of NHS Fife health board stating that NHS Fife is in crisis over the bed-blocking situation, with staff being run ragged, operations being cancelled at short notice and patients waiting weeks to be discharged. One of my constituents, William Cook, has been waiting for more than 13 weeks to be discharged. Since I last wrote to the cabinet secretary, we are no nearer to a solution to the growing problem. I appreciate that the change fund will be available, but that will not be until April. What action can the Scottish Government take to alleviate the immediate situation in Fife?

Nicola Sturgeon: Claire Baker is right to raise that important issue. I take the view—which is shared across the chamber—that delayed discharges are not acceptable. NHS Fife and Fife Council have been working hard to deal with the issue. They have recently invested additional resources to tackle the issue, but more needs to be done. I put on record the fact that they, jointly, in partnership, need to do more. The Minister for Public Health and Sport will meet both the council and the NHS board next week and will make it absolutely clear to them that we expect them to work in partnership and do what requires to be done to ensure that people are not being unnecessarily delayed in hospital.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Question 12 was not lodged.

Patient Transport Service (Hospital Appointments)

13. Charlie Gordon (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive how many hospital appointments have been cancelled due to operational problems other than severe weather conditions affecting the patient transport service in each year since 2007. (S3O-12542)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing (Nicola Sturgeon): Information about the reasons for cancelled hospital appointments is not held centrally. However, the Government and I fully understand the importance to patients of every hospital appointment and we continue to work with health boards, the Scottish Ambulance Service, local authorities and other partners to ensure that patients can get to their appointments. I hope that that is helpful to the member. I am more than happy to look into any further details that he is about to give me in his supplementary question.

Charlie Gordon: A constituent of mine, a cancer out-patient who is nearly past the optimum time window for his effective treatment, has twice had his vehicle turn up on the wrong day and it has twice turned up with inadequate staff and equipment to cope with the fact that he resides in a tenement flat. No fault is attributed to front-line ambulance staff, but it appears that there is some bureaucratic inefficiency in the administration of the patient transport service. It has even been suggested that patients residing above ground-floor level need to book three or four weeks in advance, which is not usually possible. Will the minister gather statistics on such incidents, so as to facilitate improvement in the patient transport service?

Nicola Sturgeon: Obviously, I am not aware of the personal details of the constituency case that Charlie Gordon cites, and it would not be appropriate for me to comment too deeply on it. However, if he provides me with the details, I will be more than happy to have the Ambulance Service investigate it because the situation that he describes seems to be unacceptable. Like him, I represent a constituency with a high number of tenemental properties, and the people who live in them have as much right to access patient transport as anybody else.

The Ambulance Service has been working hard to improve the patient transport service and has been making progress in that regard. Often, when we talk about the Ambulance Service in this chamber, we talk about the emergency service. However, most people who use the Ambulance Service use its patient transport service.

Some progress is being made. There has been a reduction in the number of cancelled journeys. In 2007-08, the figure was 0.9 per cent and in 2008-09 the figure was 1.5 per cent. So far in 2010-11, however, that has reduced to 0.5 per cent. That is welcome progress, but I am conscious that there are real people behind those statistics and that anyone whose journey is cancelled will suffer distress as a result. I am keen that we continue to work to improve the service, and I repeat my offer

to Charlie Gordon to have the Ambulance Service look into the case that he cites.

Autism (Adult Diagnosis)

14. Hugh O'Donnell (Central Scotland) (LD): To ask the Scottish Executive how many adults are awaiting a diagnostic appointment relating to autism. (S3O-12575)

The Minister for Public Health and Sport (Shona Robison): That information is not held centrally.

As the member knows, the Scottish Government has recently issued a draft national strategy to address the needs of those on the autistic spectrum and their families. There are recommendations in the strategy for increasing access to and delivery of diagnosis in adults. The consultation has just concluded and it is anticipated that implementation will begin shortly.

Hugh O'Donnell: Who will be responsible for the gathering of the data that result from the consultation, and what use will the health department make of that information?

Shona Robison: A small research team, commissioned through the autistic spectrum disorder reference group, is putting together a two-tier proposal to tackle the issue of data and the lack of data. The first tier of the research will consider the issue of providing a national figure for those awaiting diagnosis. The information will also be available by national health service board areas. The second tier of the research will consider developing a system that will capture the data, so that the information on numbers will always be available. Officials are meeting the research team to discuss the proposals in more detail and I am happy to furnish the member with more information about that.

Terminal Illness

15. Margaret Smith (Edinburgh West) (LD): To ask the Scottish Executive what it is doing to allow terminally ill patients to choose to die at home rather than in a hospital or hospice. (S3O-12580)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing (Nicola Sturgeon): Since the launch of the Scottish Government's "Living and Dying Well: A national action plan for palliative and end of life care in Scotland" document in October 2008, considerable progress has been made in improving many aspects of palliative and end of life care across Scotland. One area of development has been advance care planning, which promotes discussion and decision making with respect to future health, personal and practical aspects of care. That enables the

preparation of a plan that is shared with everyone who is involved in the provision of subsequent care and support. That plan includes a patient's preferred place of care at the end of their life.

Margaret Smith: The cabinet secretary will be aware that recent research by YouGov noted that the majority of terminally ill Scots would like to die at home, but that only 25 per cent are able to do so. That is an understandable aspiration. We applaud the work in that regard of Marie Curie Cancer Care. It is asking for certain actions that I think are reasonably affordable, even at the present time: improved training of district nurses and other generalists in palliative care; the introduction of monitoring of care of the dying as a key element of performance management for NHS boards; better co-ordination of care in relation to the assessment of need in delivery of specialist equipment; and improved discharge procedures from acute settings.

What is the Scottish Government doing on those issues so that we can deliver a better approach to the care of the dying and their families, bearing in mind that I am happy to acknowledge the work that the Government has already—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I think that we have got the gist of it.

Nicola Sturgeon: Margaret Smith is right to raise this issue. Many people state that their preferred place of death is their own home. Where that is the case, they should be allowed, where possible, to do that.

I encourage Margaret Smith to read the "Living and Dying Well: Building on Progress" document when it is published. That is our evaluation of how we have implemented the living and dying well policy, which is currently being finalised—I have talked to the Health and Sport Committee about it. It will reiterate the importance of advance care planning and will provide practical resources to support the process. In that context, we work closely with stakeholders such as Marie Curie to ensure that we are doing what needs to be done.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Question 16 was not lodged.

Learning Disability (Care Improvements)

17. Dr Richard Simpson (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what steps it has taken to improve the care of people with a learning disability. (S3O-12564)

The Minister for Public Health and Sport (Shona Robison): A 10-year programme, "The same as you?", which was designed to improve services and support for people with a learning disability, has just concluded. It is currently being evaluated to analyse what has worked well and to

identify the gaps in services that still exist. The final evaluation report will be submitted to me in the summer.

Dr Simpson: The minister will be aware of the report by the Learning Disability Alliance Scotland entitled, “Stuck! People With Learning Disabilities Resident In Care Homes For Older People In Scotland”. The report shows that there are 2,000 people with a learning disability in specialist learning disability homes, but 1,000 such people in homes for the elderly. Three hundred or more of those people are under 65, and they are much more fit and active than the elderly with whom they have to reside, and for whom the average age of admission is now 90.

What steps is the Government taking to ensure that Social Care and Social Work Improvement Scotland, or the Scottish Commission for the Regulation of Care as the current organisation, inspects the situation and ensures that those individuals are being housed appropriately? The Learning Disability Alliance Scotland certainly thinks that they are not.

Shona Robison: I recognise the issue that Richard Simpson raises, and the report raises a number of concerns. The medical, nutritional and physical needs may be being met in the care home, but the question is whether quality of life issues are being adequately addressed when someone who is relatively young is placed in a care home for older people.

The solution to that is empowerment, choice and more control. One way forward is through the self-directed support mechanism, to enable people to consider whether they wish to receive support as an individual in their own home. We need more imaginative thinking around collective living to make that easier for people, and new models of care rather than the more limited models that we have at present. I am certainly keen to discuss that on a cross-party basis if the member so wishes.

Electricity Market Reform

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Alasdair Morgan): The next item of business is a debate on motion S3M-7693, in the name of Jim Mather, on electricity market reform.

14:57

The Minister for Enterprise, Energy and Tourism (Jim Mather): I welcome the opportunity to debate the critical importance that electricity markets and regulatory frameworks play in delivering Scotland’s energy potential. As our very own Professor Peter Cameron, professor of international energy law and policy at the University of Dundee, wrote,

“Energy is at the heart of modern life”

and

“In modern times the main driver of economic growth has been, and continues to be, energy”.

Fortunately, Scotland has a high-quality and high-potential electricity industry, which provides security of electricity supplies, has developed and maintained renewed capacity and has rapidly grown renewable energy sources and new technology.

That is why the Government works closely with the sector, the Great Britain energy system regulator Ofgem—the Office of Gas and Electricity Markets—and the United Kingdom and European Union Governments to develop our electricity sector in Scotland.

In Scotland we have, with our allies and stakeholders, made significant progress. Our energy advisory board has enabled the Government and industry to work to deliver our shared ambitions. We are working with UK Government colleagues on areas of shared interest, connecting renewables projects throughout Scotland and addressing energy demands through energy efficiency planning. We are now preparing to implement the UK green deal to improve energy use and reduce waste.

We are making progress at EU level, with the renewable energy potential of Scotland now recognised as a resource of European significance, as highlighted by the North Sea grid co-ordinator, Georg Adamowitsch, in his third annual report, which is published today.

We are making progress with Ofgem to move forward on fairer locational charging and developing an offshore regulatory framework. We are also making progress in leading research and development in our universities and companies, in delivering innovative network and grid solutions

and in developing carbon capture and storage to address Scottish, UK and EU challenges.

Past, present and future, we have the credentials. We have a history in hydroelectric development, we have the successful growth of the onshore wind sector in Scotland, and we are developing our offshore sector. We lead the way in wind, wave and tidal and in carbon capture and storage, and the opportunity is there to do much more. However, we all know that the design of our electricity market and the regulatory frameworks that underpin it are key to making that happen. We therefore welcome the UK Government's intention to radically reassess the UK electricity industry in the next phase of electricity market reform.

There are significant challenges in moving to a low-carbon electricity generating mix, and substantial new investment is needed. The electricity market reform consultation properly sets out to assess market and support mechanisms for low-carbon electricity. The implications of the consultation are far reaching, and there are positives in the proposals as well as areas of concern. To quote Peter Cameron again,

"natural resources are unevenly distributed among states",

but we know that Scotland is fortunate to be one of those countries with an abundance of energy resources. We have some of the best renewable energy resources in Europe, with as much as a quarter of Europe's offshore wind and tidal energy resource and an estimated 10 per cent of its capacity for wave power.

In addition, a major UK offshore valuation study that was published in May last year estimated Scotland's practical offshore renewables resource at some 206GW, which represents almost 40 per cent of the UK total. We also have the European Union's largest potential offshore CO₂ storage hub. Meanwhile, we have some 7GW of renewables capacity installed, under construction or consented around Scotland and the Scottish ministers have determined a total of 43 applications since May 2007. As a result, we are on track to hit our target of 31 per cent of the electricity that is consumed in Scotland to be provided by renewable energy by 2011 and we are confident of delivering 80 per cent by 2020.

Our draft electricity generation policy statement, which was published in November, sets the evidence base to meet that 80 per cent renewables target. That is backed up by a minimum of 2.5GW from new or upgraded thermal plant, which will progressively be fitted with carbon capture and storage by 2030, coupled with increasing energy efficiency and reducing overall energy demand. The statement also shows clearly that there is no need for new nuclear power stations in Scotland to meet our future electricity

demand. However, the Scottish Government wants long-term price certainty and a regulatory framework in the UK market that facilitates rather than acts as a barrier to renewable energy in the areas of highest resource.

The success of the renewables obligation in Scotland shows how flexible, established and well-understood support mechanisms can bring forward investment at the scale and speed that are needed to meet renewable energy policy aims and ambitions. We have also used Scottish powers to good effect, introducing higher support levels for wave and tidal, supporting carbon capture and storage—Parliament has consistently supported Longannet as the UK's leading CCS demonstration site—and creating a regulatory framework for CO₂ storage in the North Sea. That innovative approach is attracting wider international interest and recognition through the Global CCS Institute. We have used our powers to develop Scottish discretion for Scottish opportunities.

In that context, I turn to the detail of the electricity market reform. We know that there are significant challenges in moving to a low-carbon electricity generation environment and that substantial new investment is needed. The key is how that will be achieved through support mechanisms and incentives. I will touch briefly on the main proposals from the Department of Energy and Climate Change.

The first proposal is carbon price support through a higher tax on the use of fossil fuels for energy generation. That could strengthen low-carbon price signals for renewable energy generators, but we want to be sure that the resultant market signals for renewables will be strong enough. It is important that any such tax does not undermine investment planning for existing fossil fuel generating plant or slow down plans for CCS development and deployment. Also, Scotland must receive its fair share. The UK Treasury's track record of giving money that is due to Scotland back to Scotland with no strings attached is deeply disappointing. As we know, the UK proposal on the fossil fuel levy was to give money that is rightfully due to Scotland back to Scotland, but that was offered only with painful consequential reductions to our budgets for health and justice. That is not acceptable. We have long argued for the fossil fuel levy funds to be made immediately and fully available to Scotland to give us the opportunity to accelerate renewables development. We share the Economy, Energy and Tourism Committee's disappointment that the levy issue has not been resolved and agree that the Governments need to keep working towards doing so.

DECC has also suggested that the existing renewables obligation mechanism be replaced by feed-in tariffs for forms of low-carbon generation. In Scotland, we have used our devolved powers very successfully to create a strong and effective framework of support for renewable energy technologies. Our renewables obligation stands apart from the one in the rest of the UK; we can shape it—and have done so—to reflect specific Scottish priorities such as our enormous wave and tidal energy potential. We plan to do likewise for CCS and indeed welcome the UK Government's proposals to make long-term price support available for CCS. That said, we need to consider carefully how any move towards a feed-in tariff and away from existing renewables obligations will affect investment, particularly in new and emerging renewables technologies. In that context, we must ensure that any change is at least as effective as the current framework and is capable of delivering new industry capacity as well as new jobs.

DECC has suggested capacity payments for peaking plant—in other words, plant that can be brought on to the grid quickly to offset any intermittency in renewable generation to ensure security of supply while we make the transition to a low-carbon generating mix. However, it is important to resist any capacity payments proposals that replicate the kind of unfair locational approach that exists with transmission charging.

DECC also suggests the introduction of an emissions performance standard to ensure that there is no new investment in unabated coal plant. The Scottish Parliament and the Scottish Government must be closely involved in the design of any such standard to ensure that it delivers our CCS policy objectives, backed by clear long-term price support.

Electricity market reform has implications for devolved powers to set renewables obligation support levels, financial support for CCS, energy planning and consents and emissions performance standards. Although I fully believe that Scotland should have full powers over energy in Scotland, I also think that the Scottish ministers and the Scottish Parliament must be fully involved in agreeing and delivering any new mechanisms. After all, renewable energy from Scotland will play the crucial role in helping the UK to meet its renewable energy target and deliver our joint low-carbon future.

The fact that, only today, we have heard from Europe that our renewables resource is of European significance should add to our focus on the matter and I welcome the opportunity that I had yesterday to discuss electricity market reform with the UK Secretary of State for Energy and

Climate Change in Edinburgh. I also welcome the fact that the committee was able to do the same in considerable depth, which will add considerable value, and that Mr Huhne made himself available for a lengthy conversation with the First Minister. Finally, I genuinely welcome our agreement with him to hold a follow-up plenary session on electricity market reform next month under Chatham house rules, much as we did with Ofgem, the National Grid, the generators, Scottish Renewables, academia and others on grid issues.

Most important, I welcome today's opportunity to debate these reforms with the Parliament, to put on record their significance for Scotland and to have a chance to hear members' thoughts and ideas.

I move,

That the Parliament notes the UK Government's electricity market reform proposals and their importance to the delivery of the Parliament's climate change and low-carbon energy objectives for Scotland; agrees that the related UK review of Ofgem and the transmission charging regime is an opportunity to deliver a more equitable system that is fit to help deliver Scotland's massive low-carbon energy potential that will bring economic and other benefits to communities across Scotland; further notes the Parliament's existing powers with regard to renewables and carbon capture and storage (CCS), which it believes should, at a minimum, be left intact; believes that the Parliament should continue to use these powers in support of the development of Scotland's low-carbon energy potential; urges the UK Government to work closely with the Scottish Government to ensure that reforms further incentivise clean energy and incentivise energy demand reduction, as set out in the *Draft Electricity Generation Policy Statement 2010*; calls on the UK Government and Scottish Government to work together to help fulfil Scotland's low-carbon potential, and further urges the UK Government to ensure full and immediate consultation with the Parliament on these proposals.

15:08

Lewis Macdonald (Aberdeen Central) (Lab):

Yesterday morning, in answering the Economy, Energy and Tourism Committee's questions, the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change was keen to stress that the UK Government sees its electricity market reform proposals as a basis for consultation rather than firm and settled plans that are already set in stone. That reflects the commitment to the plenary session in Scotland to which Jim Mather has referred. We on this side of the chamber welcome those assurances and the indication that Chris Huhne gave last month on publishing the proposals that UK ministers want to proceed on the basis of consensus rather than diktat. However, if that consensus is to be achieved, the detail of the reform has to be right, and I agree with Jim Mather that the net effect must be as good as or better than the current approach for producers as well as consumers.

Mr Huhne conceded yesterday that the representatives of the renewables sector had not been pressing him for a feed-in tariff in place of the renewables obligation, although he claimed to have taken soundings that he said showed considerable support in the sector at large. In making inquiries this week, I have been unable to find much evidence of that undercurrent of support in the sector in Scotland. That is because the existing system of renewables obligation certificates works, and renewables developers tend to the view that if it ain't broke, don't fix it. ROCs give developers a pretty high degree of certainty about the return that they will make by generating from renewable sources over a significant period. Critics of ROCs might argue that the system errs on the side of generosity, as the National Audit Office suggested when it looked into the issue in 2005, but I have yet to hear anyone in the sector argue that ROCs are to blame for any failure to provide incentives to development.

A significant amount of financial support comes from the existing system. In financial year 2008-09, Ofgem issued 6.7 million ROCs for Scottish renewable generation, at £35.76 per megawatt hour, amounting to a financial benefit to the sector of well over £200 million. That is a significant sum in subsidy, not from taxpayers but from consumers of electricity that is generated from non-renewable sources. Financial support on that scale is certainly large enough to influence investment decisions and, by the same token, changes to that system have significant implications for existing production and future investment decisions.

UK ministers propose a range of new measures. For me, the key one is to replace ROCs with a feed-in tariff. It is also proposed to replace the levy that was planned by the previous UK Government to support carbon capture and storage with a feed-in tariff, and to provide price support for new nuclear power with a feed-in tariff. The UK Government's current preferred position envisages a single feed-in tariff for all three sectors, which it describes as

"introducing, permanently, a level playing field for low carbon technologies in the UK's electricity market."

That removes the option of retaining ROCs while introducing new mechanisms for the other sectors, in spite of the success of ROCs and the absence of demand for their replacement within the sector.

There could conceivably be an alternative approach of providing three separate streams of support for the three different low-carbon sectors. It would be transparent and it would ensure either that ROCs could be retained or that a feed-in tariff could be designed with the needs of renewables in mind, tailored to maintain as high a level as possible of continuity with ROCs. Equally,

according to that logic, the UK Government's ambitions to offer financial support for carbon capture and for new nuclear electricity could be met in ways tailored to the specific needs of those sectors.

That was another area on which I took the opportunity yesterday to ask Chris Huhne about his Government's intentions, specifically on the issue of different levels of support for different technologies. He confirmed that he has not ruled out a feed-in tariff system with a premium rate for early-stage technologies, providing additional subsidy for a period, which would be reduced to the general rate as the technology matured. Given that new nuclear, carbon capture and the range of renewables technologies are at different stages of development, that premium approach can offer some advantages over one size fits all.

As the minister said, ROCs have evolved in the context of devolution, allowing different parts of the UK to adapt the system to address particular strengths and weaknesses in their respective renewables sectors. That has allowed Scotland, on a cross-party basis, to provide higher ROCs to stimulate new technologies in the marine environment, allowing the Scottish ministers and the renewables sector to play to Scotland's strengths. It has wide support and provides a flexibility that we would not want to lose without some effective alternative mechanism being put in place that achieved the same objective.

Liam McArthur (Orkney) (LD): I may have slightly misunderstood Lewis Macdonald. Is he most concerned about the idea of moving away from ROCs at all, or would he wish to see that happen following a subsequent ROC review, perhaps in 2020 or thereafter?

Lewis Macdonald: No. I am not saying that we should move away from ROCs. I am saying that ROCs have brought significant benefits and advantages and that those benefits and advantages must be retained in whatever system takes their place. It is critical that that is got right. There is no problem in principle with moving away from either ROCs or the previously planned carbon capture levy to a feed-in tariff and there is no problem in principle with the Government recognising that new nuclear can contribute to a low-carbon economy or channelling financial support from polluting plant to low-carbon generation.

The challenge for UK ministers is to make the right choices, so that the new system increases rather than undermines the successes of the renewables sector in Scotland over the past few years. That is why our amendment emphasises the importance of those choices protecting existing investments and providing adequate time for transition from ROCs to a new system. We

welcome the fact that UK ministers are consulting on the option of a premium feed-in tariff, which could protect some of the most valuable features of ROCs and could be adapted to maintain devolution of decision making in providing different levels of support to different technologies in different parts of the UK.

We welcome the emphasis that has been placed by UK ministers so far on achieving broad political support and listening to stakeholders, because the wrong kind of feed-in tariff could have significant unintended consequences. ROC payments depend on output: the more you generate, the more financial support you receive. With the wrong kind of feed-in tariff, the guaranteed long-term price, which Chris Huhne described yesterday as a benefit to producers, could turn into a nightmare for consumers, because it could send wholesale prices through the roof if it overregulates the market or sets the price at the wrong level. The experience of Germany and, recently, of Spain, emphasises the importance of getting that right.

The key issue is not whether to change but how to change in the right way. I hope that that is the case that the Scottish ministers will put to their UK counterparts; it is certainly the case that we will discuss with our colleagues at Westminster.

The same is true of a carbon floor price, which is currently envisaged as a tax to be managed by the Treasury rather than as an energy initiative to be led by DECC. We need to know early how Treasury proposals will interact with the proposals in other areas coming from DECC and how long-term certainty for investors can be maintained under those proposals.

We also need to know how the consultation will operate in relation to the review of transmission charges, which is currently being undertaken by Ofgem under project transmit. Ofgem will complete its review of the evidence on charges at much the same time as ministers begin to consider the responses to the EMR consultation, so we need to be sure that the different processes will be joined up and will provide a coherent result for both producers and consumers. We also need to know what thought has been given to the potential impact on wholesale electricity prices and we need to have assurances that the interests of consumers, as well as those of producers, will be taken into account before final conclusions on a new system are reached.

It is crucial that all these changes are subject to proper consultation. We agree with Jim Mather that Parliament is an important stakeholder and that Scotland's distinct interests should be taken into account. If UK ministers make the right decisions, they will have our support, but to get the decisions right they need to continue to listen.

I move amendment S3M-7693.3, to leave out from "agrees" to end and insert:

"recognises the potential impact of these reforms on both existing and emerging low-carbon energy technologies; believes that it is essential that the best options are adopted for developing Scotland's low-carbon energy potential and providing best value for consumers, and urges the UK Government to ensure full and immediate consultation with the Parliament and with producer and consumer interests in Scotland on the electricity market reform proposals."

15:18

Gavin Brown (Lothians) (Con): This is a critical debate and the tone so far has been exactly as it ought to be for such a weighty and long-term matter.

We need secure, affordable and low-carbon energy and it is clear that the current system as a whole will not deliver what we need it to deliver across the United Kingdom. There is increasing demand, which is likely to accelerate, especially if the market for electric vehicles grows at the rate at which we hope it will as we decarbonise transport and heating. The consultation document suggests that electricity demand across the UK could double by 2050. At the same time, we are seeing a shrinking supply—thermal plant is reaching the end of its natural life and the directive on combustion plants is playing its part—and we have very ambitious carbon reduction targets.

Ofgem estimates that, at a UK level, more than £100 billion of investment is required by 2020. That is about double the rate of investment over the past decade or so. It is clear that that investment will not happen by itself without further intervention. We need new entrants into the marketplace and new sources of finance.

The initial speakers from the Scottish National Party and Labour outlined the four main planks of the electricity reform consultation: carbon price support, feed-in tariffs, capacity payments and the emissions performance standard. Much of the debate so far has focused rightly on feed-in tariffs as the potential replacement for ROCs and I intend to focus most of my remarks on that subject too. However, before I do that, I will reiterate a couple of points about the consultation.

Like Lewis Macdonald, I was at the Economy, Energy and Tourism Committee yesterday when Chris Huhne gave evidence to us. He made it clear that the UK Government does not have a firm set of policies at this stage and intends to consult. The consultation document backs up what Mr Huhne said to us. At page 7, it makes it clear that the UK Government has not yet undertaken full consultation in Scotland but that it is determined to do so. There is a specific reference to Scotland. Indeed, at page 128, a section is

devoted purely to the devolved Administrations. In what the UK Government has said publicly and within the terms of the document is a clear determination to engage on the reforms with the Scottish Government and the Scottish Parliament.

Lewis Macdonald: Although what the member said is correct and I welcome it, does he agree that certain proposed outcomes can support and protect Scotland's influence on stimulating the renewables sector whereas others would fail to do that?

Gavin Brown: A range of policies is proposed. There are three separate suggestions in relation to feed-in tariffs: a fixed rate, a premium rate or a contract for difference, which is the UK Government's preferred idea at this stage—that is “preferred” without a capital P; the Government simply thinks that that policy is better. However, it has made it clear that the premium tariff might be better.

Both Mr Mather and Mr Macdonald raised the substantive point about ROCs that we have had some flexibility in Scotland so we have been able to give more support to wave and tidal power, which makes sense. The potential in the Pentland Firth is probably greater than that anywhere else in the world. The map that I saw at the European Marine Energy Centre suggested that it was either the second or third best stretch of water for wave and tidal power generation on the planet.

Yesterday, Mr Huhne was candid in saying that concerns had been raised with him by the main trade body for renewables. He did not say whether that was Scottish Renewables or RenewableUK, but he was forthcoming and candid about the concerns. Mr Macdonald mentioned that Mr Huhne stated clearly that there could be a premium price or, if I heard him correctly, a range of premium prices to reflect the stage at which the technology was at the time. He stressed the view that one of the benefits of a contract-for-difference feed-in tariff was that there would be greater price certainty for all low-carbon sources of energy. Speaking as an economist, Mr Huhne said that such a tariff had the potential to lead to greater certainty for investors in the short and medium terms.

Shortly before attending this debate, I received the Scottish Power memorandum that was submitted to the House of Commons Energy and Climate Change Committee inquiry. I do not want to rebut completely Mr Macdonald's point, but I will put another emphasis on it—although Scottish Power is not jumping up and down with its arms in the air demanding a feed-in tariff, it states that that could be a beneficial approach to investment in low-carbon technologies. It adds the caveat that there are major complexities and uncertainties still to resolve before it can be confident that such a

tariff would be workable. However, at this stage, Scottish Power is not saying that it is a particularly bad idea; it feels that it could have benefits even though there are complexities.

Given the terms of the consultation and what I heard the secretary of state say yesterday, it seems that there are enormous potential benefits in many of the reforms suggested. There are specific issues to work through, particularly in relation to ROCs, but the parallel systems that are proposed to run between 2013 and 2017 provide some comfort. Those systems potentially give the option to new entrants between 2013 and 2017 either to go for a feed-in tariff or to stick with ROCs, which would remain open until 2017.

There is also a commitment to accelerate the review of the current banding so that investors can be given greater confidence. The document contains an entire annex devoted to investor confidence. The Government is clearly aware of the issue and determined to ensure that any changes are gradual and make it far better rather than worse to invest.

I move amendment S3M-7693.1, to leave out from “at a minimum” to end and insert:

“not be changed in any way that has a negative impact on Scotland; believes that the Parliament should continue to use these powers in support of the development of Scotland's low-carbon energy potential; supports the continuation of nuclear power as a vital part of Scotland's diverse energy mix, and calls on the UK Government and Scottish Government to work together to help fulfil Scotland's low-carbon potential.”

15:25

Liam McArthur (Orkney) (LD): I welcome the opportunity to open the debate for the Scottish Liberal Democrats on issues of far-reaching and fundamental importance to the country. I echo Gavin Brown's comments on the tone of the debate so far. I can confirm that we will support the Government's motion at decision time, although judging by its length, and that of Mike Russell's amendment to the education motion this morning, it is clear that ministers believe that size matters.

By contrast, my amendment is small but perfectly formed. It invites the Parliament to show again its support for Longannet to become the UK's first CCS demonstration facility, with the award of up to £1 billion set aside by UK ministers. We have the industry and academic expertise to be world leaders in CCS. In a week when the UK and China signed a low-carbon co-operation agreement, the potential benefits globally are all too evident and must now be taken through demonstration and full-scale deployment.

Stewart Stevenson (Banff and Buchan) (SNP): The Redpoint Energy report on electricity market reform shows that in 2030 the baseline will be substantially more for gas-generated power rather than for coal. Does the member believe, like me, that it is important that investment in carbon capture for gas-powered stations is brought forward in early course as well?

Liam McArthur: I welcome Stewart Stevenson's comments, which anticipated my very next comment.

As with previous debates on energy-related issues, I suspect that we will find that there are broad areas of agreement across the chamber but also key and perhaps fiercely defended points of difference. Let me start with the former.

I believe that the objective of delivering secure, affordable and low-carbon energy is uncontested. Likewise, there is a recognition that to achieve that, we will need significant new investment in our energy infrastructure to manage the transition as smoothly, speedily and successfully as possible. That is why the consultation on electricity market reform is so important, although today's debate may have come a little early in the process. From my discussions with the sector in Scotland, it is clear that views on how to respond are still being formed, making it difficult for companies to brief MSPs, although thoughts are clearly already emerging.

What has been firmly established is that there is a specific Scottish dimension to the debate. That has been recognised by my colleague Chris Huhne, who has taken early steps to engage with the Scottish Government and other Scottish stakeholders to ensure that final proposals properly reflect Scottish needs and circumstances. That is a characteristically constructive approach, as the minister and others have acknowledged. It is the right approach and increases the likelihood that this once-in-a-generation opportunity for reform will be grasped in a way that benefits both energy consumers and the environment.

The prize is colossal: the potential to secure £110 billion of investment in low-carbon electricity generation, including grid; reducing emissions while keeping bills as low as possible and more stable over the long term; investor confidence through more certain returns in low-carbon generation; special payments for back-up power and new demand reduction technologies; and a firm price for carbon and an emission performance standard to drive down carbon from the system. That is an ambitious but achievable agenda that commands widespread support; the complex task is to get the detail of its implementation right.

In the brief time remaining I will, like others, touch on a few of the specifically Scottish aspects

of the debate. I agree with those such as Scottish and Southern Energy who argue that carbon price support is essential if we are to rebalance the market and incentivise the move to low-carbon generation. I agree also with those who are making the case for a tough EPS, and I could see an argument for devolved control over its scope and level.

The second element of the package is feed-in tariffs—which formed much of Lewis Macdonald's and Gavin Brown's remarks—where it is accepted that long-term contracts are essential to provide certainty to investors in low-carbon generation. A contract for difference is proposed to control costs for consumers, provide stable returns and maintain market incentives, but I welcome the fact that the UK Government has acknowledged the difficulties here and is seeking views on a premium feed-in tariff alternative.

The issue is particularly difficult to get right and the potential pitfalls are deep and numerous. That is why it is right and essential to make any reform gradually and with proper transition arrangements. I appreciate very much Lewis Macdonald's and Jim Mather's points about that.

Gavin Brown quoted some of Scottish Power's early thinking, but I was interested that SSE welcomed the clarity on ROCs and the commitment to existing contracts through grandfathering and in the medium term. That said, I acknowledge the need to continue to allow Scottish discretion, to capitalise on Scottish strengths.

It will surprise no one to hear me stress again the longer-term importance of wave and tidal stream power to our energy mix. Achieving that through the reform process, not least through enhanced incentives, must be a priority. We also expect tougher requirements to be put in place for nuclear operators to put aside significant contingencies to cover the costs of eventual decommissioning. I welcome the proposals for capacity payments, which are aimed at encouraging the construction of flexible reserve plants and demand reduction measures, to help to address security of supply.

Of course, all those policies interact with each other and will take time to be digested and analysed in the months that are ahead. The outcome of Ofgem's review of charging and of the review of Ofgem's role as well as questions on grid access, planning—including community benefit—and financing and construction risk are all key factors in determining our success in moving to a low-carbon economy. Let us not forget that electricity is only one part of the decarbonisation challenge—heat and transport also require major attention.

For the moment, I welcome the publication of the EMR document and the process that it has set in train. Greater clarity is needed about how many policies will interact and I am sure that that will be the focus of attention for the industry and other stakeholders in Scotland in the weeks and months ahead. Despite the impending election, I hope that the Scottish ministers will continue to engage in the process constructively and with an eye to the long term.

I have pleasure in moving amendment S3M-7693.2, to insert at end:

“and supports Longannet to become the UK’s first demonstration facility for CCS with up to £1 billion of UK Government funding.”

15:31

Rob Gibson (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): I am pleased to participate in the debate. The Scottish approach is summed up in the suite of papers entitled “Scotland—A Low Carbon Society”. It involves the opportunity for us to take an integrated approach to the production, supply and sale of electricity and to other carbon reduction measures. Previous speakers have mentioned the need for stability for developers and producers. We must see some opportunity in the system to assure consumers that the prices that they pay do not vary throughout the country for any unnecessary reason. The regulators must ensure that the environment benefits from the decisions that they take.

The Scottish Government’s suite of papers—the draft electricity generation policy statement and so on—shows that the low-carbon society that we envisage is based on our ability to produce some of the cleanest power in the world, without any of the hangover of nuclear waste or of issues that relate to that, which have yet to be solved.

Feed-in tariffs have been mentioned in the debate about how to encourage renewable electricity generation. I am sure that many members will mention such tariffs. The consultation paper suggests that such financial support will also be made available to nuclear power developments. If a two-way process is to take place between the UK Government and the Scottish Government, and if Scotland’s Parliament is determined to take a particular approach, I am concerned that quite a strong firewall will have to exist between the methods of support for renewables and those for nuclear, if support is needed for that in England. I will not argue about that today, but that is important.

The National Grid owns and operates the high-voltage electricity transmission network in England and Wales and operates the system throughout Great Britain. Whether that private company

provides the appropriate model for running our transmission of electricity has not been discussed. Given the moneys that will be required to upgrade the grid, I wonder whether we can rely on the profits that the National Grid makes in the north-east of the United States or whether we should find a more substantial way of supporting the grid. I would like there to be some reflection on that issue because we have been presented with a Thatcherite model. Although such a model has been rejected when it comes to locational charging, we have not yet addressed why the grid should be run by that kind of private company. I would like the minister to talk about that when he responds to the debate.

Market and regulatory reform will be required for electricity developments that, in some cases, will take 10 to 15 years to achieve. The development of wave and tidal energy has been mentioned, and Gavin Brown mentioned the opportunities in the Pentland Firth. There are also opportunities in many other, smaller areas, such as the one between Islay and Jura. We must have some certainty that, beyond 2017, there will be a stable regime that allows such developments to happen, because the 2017 timescale could well be too short for some of the commercial-scale developments. We must start the process early, so we must have a system that allows for that.

Among the matters that might be more pertinent to Ofgem, but which feed into the electricity market debate, is the fact that only five of the 27 EU member states apply network charges on the locational basis that we do, and that Britain has the widest range of intra-country charges and the highest locational charges in Europe. If the electricity market is to benefit producers and consumers, we will have to measure its success against developments in Europe. Jim Mather mentioned Georg Adamowitsch’s report and the need for a vast European infrastructure. If the electricity market reform does not slot into that, we will miss a trick, given our ability to export into that much wider market. I hope that it will be possible for our ministers to hold serious discussions with their counterparts in London about that.

I have two more brief points to make. First, good will and collaboration are required. They were not evident when the port development fund was restricted to English ports in the autumn and the Scottish Government was required to provide for Scottish ports. If we want there to be good will and collaboration, that will have to work both ways. Secondly, the fossil fuel levy, the funds from which the majority of members of the Scottish Parliament believe are required now, should be released in a form that can be used. We must keep up the campaign for that.

Finally, the ROCs supported the production of hydroelectricity, but some tweaking is required so that we can increase the amount of hydro that is available in the power stations in which they have been used. If possible, I would like the minister to address that issue when he closes the debate.

15:38

David Stewart (Highlands and Islands) (Lab):

I welcome the opportunity to speak on electricity market reform. There can be few more important debates than that on the future of energy in this nation, particularly now that the UK, as we all know, is a net importer of oil and gas. The debate draws out strong emotions—although we have not heard too many of those in what, to date, has been a well-tempered debate—about one technology or process versus another. It is also quite complicated, involving the technospeak of product life cycle, proven technology, carbon capture and storage, security of supply and—my own favourite, as I have mentioned before—avoiding Russian-end supply chain, which I am sure that Mr Mather will explain when he sums up.

However, sometimes we miss out consideration of the energy needs of the ordinary Scottish citizen in Leith, Lerwick or Lossiemouth. It might be true that the lights will not go out all over Edinburgh, but if we get the energy balance wrong in the next decade, we will be paying over a barrel—or, indeed, over a therm of gas—to countries with the political stability of Burma and the civil liberties record of Zimbabwe.

Perhaps one of the most fluent and well-argued documents on the subject, which goes back to last year and earlier, is the Royal Society of Edinburgh's report on its inquiry into energy. Members will be aware that it concluded that the challenge is to meet the growing aspirations of the developing world, not least China and India, while mitigating the impact of global climate change. The UK is now more reliant on imported energy, at a time when the international market is much more competitive. To widen the debate from earlier discussions, I believe strongly that the developed world has a strong responsibility to carry the torch and to show leadership in reducing greenhouse gas emissions. For that reason, I welcome the reform consultation.

I believe strongly that, as the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change said last month, now is the time to act. We need to increase investment in greener technology and energy supply, to reduce our dependence on carbon-based energy and imports. We cannot sit on the sidelines if we are to become the green powerhouse of Europe. I welcome the Scottish Government's view that we should work with the

UK to ensure effective and efficient development of Scotland's low-carbon energy potential.

As we have heard from all members so far this afternoon, the reform proposals identify four key areas that need to be addressed to ensure both security and decarbonisation of energy supply, while maintaining low energy costs. Those areas were well identified by Lewis Macdonald, Gavin Brown and Liam McArthur. As has been identified, there is a clear structural problem in the industry. We know that there will be a reduction in the number of coal and nuclear sites, due to closures, that we face issues relating to security of supply and that we must look at demand issues and consumer prices. Rightly, Gavin Brown said that demand for electricity is likely to double by 2050. There are real worries that, without new capacity in the longer term, we may have interruptions of electricity supply at peak periods in the future.

However, in my view, the UK electricity market as a whole is much stronger than many others in Europe and abroad. All of us remember the stories more than a decade ago from California, which had major energy disruptions. The key is to have a strong balance of energy sources, combined with a rigorous and comprehensive grid of the sort that we have here in the UK.

I share Chris Huhne's perspective that we should analyse our future energy needs using three yardsticks—we need to look at affordability, security of supply and carbon reduction. I will give the chamber two examples of security of supply problems in the gas industry; they will be well known to members, but I would like to flag them up nonetheless. Just last month, the Russian-controlled gas company Gazprom cut 80 per cent of Belarus's gas supply over a disputed debt. This month—only a few days ago—Russia cut gas supplies through the interconnectors, which badly hit Bulgaria, Greece, Macedonia, Romania, Croatia and Turkey. I argue that there are particular strategic threats that need to be part of the wider energy and industry master plan.

As we have heard, we need to incentivise producers to create a greater capacity to decarbonise or to produce low-carbon electricity. However, as we have seen in other industries such as telecommunications, transport and banking, the needs of the producer are often in conflict with the needs of the consumer. Recently *The Sunday Times* reported on the scandalous costs of domestic heating oil to consumers, with huge mark-ups by distributors. That is a particular problem in the Highlands and Islands, given our weather patterns.

A report this week by Save the Children concluded that families on low incomes are paying £1,300 more a year for basic goods and services such as heating—up by a fifth from its survey in

2007. The charity said that about one fifth of the poverty premium comes from fuel bills alone. Why is that the case? The reason is that gas and electricity companies routinely charge more for prepayment meters than for direct debits. As all members know, low-income families are forced to use prepayment meters to manage their budget. With expected rises in gas and electricity prices over the next year, the number of households in fuel poverty, which are defined as those that spend more than 10 per cent of their income on heating, will go through the roof.

Power giant E.ON will increase electricity charges by 9 per cent next month. Yesterday, *The Scotsman* reported that critics such as Energyshop.com believe that

“energy suppliers are not taking chances with their profits, and offloading the bulk of their increased costs on to the consumer.”

I welcome Ofgem’s investigation into power companies’ charges for domestic customers, which is due to report in March.

Although 2011 is only in its infancy, already consumers have been under siege from Christmas price hikes and the new VAT increases. We know from studies by Consumer Focus that 750,000 people are living in fuel poverty. Heating a home is a necessity, not a luxury. That is why I strongly support the adoption of the new European legislation, allowing Ofgem to force the big six energy suppliers to disclose the price that they pay for energy.

I welcome the consultation and I believe that our energy strategy links into our industrial strategy. Where are the Scottish manufacturers of wind turbines—with the exception of Skykon in Campbeltown?

The debate should be about not just new capacity, but reducing energy demand. We need to be able to develop co-ordinated offshore grids and better interconnection with Europe, as a springboard for the development of renewables. We all know that the task is great, but Scotland has the opportunity and skills to achieve it, not in a self-serving way but as a partner in the UK. With appropriate development and the right technology on a sustainable scale, and using the skills of our Scottish workforce, we can take a lead in Europe and beyond as we contribute to meeting our global climate change responsibility.

15:45

Stuart McMillan (West of Scotland) (SNP):

Thank you, Presiding Officer, and happy new year to you and to everyone in the chamber.

Much has already been said this afternoon, and in the media over the past couple of weeks, about

the UK Government’s proposals for electricity market reform. I welcome the tone of the debate so far. In a few moments, I will focus on the fossil fuel levy, which the minister and my colleague Rob Gibson have touched on already.

First, it is important to state that the related Ofgem review of the transmission charging regime, which is already under way, presents a wonderful opportunity to fully open up and harness the renewables potential that Scotland possesses. I am sure that all members, irrespective of party affiliation, want Scotland to enhance its credentials as a leading light—no pun intended—in renewables technology. I just hope that we do not miss the boat, certainly in the sense of financial benefit, as we have done since the 1970s, when oil and gas were found in the North Sea. I hope that we can work together in the Parliament to ensure that history does not repeat itself.

The issue of the fossil fuel levy lies within the wider energy debate. It has been spoken about today and many other times in the chamber and in the Parliament’s committees. Yesterday the Economy, Energy and Tourism Committee had the UK Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change, Chris Huhne MP, answering questions on UK energy policy. For my part, I thought that it was an extremely useful and worthwhile session, and it was a shame that it lasted for only an hour or so—a point that I made to the convener at the end of the meeting, as I thought that we could have discussed energy policy with the secretary of state for three hours or even longer. As members would expect, Mr Huhne promoted the UK Government’s energy policy proposals extremely well, but he was open to other suggestions, which I thought was very useful.

One issue that I am sure the secretary of state did not expect to be brought up in our discussion on energy policy is the thorny issue of bankers’ bonuses, but I raised it with him yesterday. I appreciated Mr Huhne’s honesty in his response, but I am left wondering about the green investment bank and the fossil fuel levy, which will be used to capitalise it. As I said yesterday, there is widespread political support for a green investment bank and it would be ideal for it to be established here in Scotland, as there is the financial expertise here—as well as Scotland’s position in renewables. If the institution is to be established as a normal bank, as is the wish of Mr Huhne, issues of bail-outs and bankers’ bonuses must be addressed at the very outset. If they are ignored, public support for such an institution will not be guaranteed. I would go as far as to say that in these times of austerity the public will never support the creation of any institution that might pay out obscene bonuses to even more bankers.

The direct link to this debate lies in the capitalisation of such an institution, with £250 million from the fossil fuel levy. Currently, Scotland's fossil fuel levy stands at more than £190 million, which, as we all know, can be taken at the expense of the Scottish block grant. However, the proposal from the UK Government is to forgo that money so as to be guaranteed £250 million from the GIB for 2013-14. If the fossil fuel levy were to be invested now, that could open up even more possibilities in my region. One prime example is that of Inverclyde, which narrowly missed out against more developed locations on resources from the national renewables infrastructure fund. I was disappointed that it missed out—but it was against other areas that were more developed.

Who can say that if some of the fossil fuel levy were to come to Scotland now and find its way to Inverclyde, the area could not be helped to become the renewables hub that it has the potential to be? We have the core facilities and, with a bit of investment in the waterfront, Inverclyde could be on the cusp of a renewables boom.

After yesterday, how can any politician sell to the people of Inverclyde and Scotland the idea that we should wait for a few years for the green investment bank to be established with capitalisation of £1 billion and guaranteed investment for Scotland of £250 million, when the bankers might well be paid obscene bonuses and the bank might have to go back to the taxpayer for a bail-out if it fails?

I stress that I support the concept of a green investment bank, but we should not build it up to be a panacea. It might not be the answer to all our prayers. It goes without saying that the UK Government needs to work closely with the Scottish Government on electricity market reform and many other issues. The last thing that Scotland or any current investor in Scotland wants is the unintended consequence of lost investment and employment opportunities.

Scotland can grasp the renewables opportunity and we are on our way. Electricity market reform by the UK Government, however well intentioned it is, must not hamper our growth and opportunities. The debate has been interesting and consensual—up to now; some members might disagree with what I just said. I hope that the Parliament will speak with a strong voice today. Collaboration between both Governments and Parliaments is essential for Scotland.

15:51

Marilyn Livingstone (Kirkcaldy) (Lab): I am pleased to take part in the debate. I will talk about

the importance to Scotland and to my constituency of Scotland's low-carbon potential and the renewable energy sector and I will set out why the issue must be addressed in proposals for electricity market reform.

Given increasing energy demand and our ageing electricity generation park, it is clear that the UK will have to invest heavily during the next decade if it is to maintain a reliable power supply and meet the Government's climate change targets. According to the Department of Energy and Climate Change, a quarter of the UK's generation capacity will need to be replaced by 2020. If we are to meet the Government's targets, almost a third of the UK's electricity must come from renewable energy sources by 2020, and the energy sector will need to be largely decarbonised by 2030 to meet climate change goals—no mean feat. Therefore, there is a need to address the needs of the energy sector and provide a fit-for-purpose framework, which also helps Scotland to meet its climate change targets and become the green powerhouse of Europe.

Scotland plays a leading role in low-carbon generation. Half of all UK renewable generating capacity is located here and the most recent renewables obligation report shows that 35 per cent of renewable electricity comes from Scottish generators. Electricity market reform is crucial to the release of Scotland's renewable energy potential.

More than any other part of the UK, Scotland has the potential to deliver all its electricity needs from renewables and to make a substantial contribution to total UK and EU renewables capacity.

Scotland's low-carbon market was worth around £8.5 billion in 2007-08 and that is forecast to rise to £12 billion by 2015-16. Therefore, Scotland has considerable low-carbon economic opportunities across various sectors, which must be supported in any package of reform, particularly in the context of tariffs and incentives. Many members rehearsed the arguments on the issue and I will not do so again—members will be glad to hear that.

In my constituency, the renewables sector is an increasingly important source of investment and employment. For example, Burntisland Fabrications—BiFab—which is located in Fife and in the Highlands and Islands and focuses on offshore energy, has recognised that the energy sector is changing and is now involved in the market for renewables such as wind, wave and tidal power. The company has applied its 20 years of experience to the new sources of power during the past decade. It employs 900 workers and is currently working on a £60 million contract for 31 substructures for the Ormonde offshore wind farm

in the North Sea. It is investing more than £14 million so that it can be well placed to take advantage of future developments.

BiFab is now one of the leading suppliers of support structures for offshore wind turbines in Europe and a world leader in developing offshore structures in deep water, which has given it an international research base and boosted Fife's economy.

In November last year, BiFab secured a £12 million contract from RWE Npower Renewables to design and manufacture two substation foundation structures for its wind farm. The project will safeguard around 390 jobs at BiFab's facilities.

The experience and expertise of the workforce in Fife has made the kingdom the centre for offshore power. It must be matched with investment in renewable energy in any proposals for reform of the energy market to deliver cleaner, greener electricity.

Yesterday, I raised with the minister the need for access to long-term funding for companies such as BiFab, as well as access to the appropriate skills and workforce. Organisations such as OPITO, which develops skills and training for the oil and gas sector, are exemplars of best practice. I hope that the renewables sector will start to emulate some of that success.

We have a once-in-a-generation opportunity. If we fail to reform the energy market or secure appropriate finance and skills to incorporate the needs of the renewables sector, we will jeopardise the progress that BiFab and other renewable energy companies throughout Scotland have made and the jobs that they sustain.

However, the consumer must not bear all the burden of the need to reform our energy market. To deliver best value and ensure social inclusion, support for those on the lowest incomes must be in place to ensure that electricity remains affordable and can be sustained in the long term. David Stewart outlined how increased costs are being offloaded on to the consumer, which has the greatest impact on those who are in fuel poverty. We must protect the consumer.

The reform proposals must be implemented in a way that enhances the sector's current plans for further increases in renewable electricity regeneration as well as protects investments that have already been made so that we can sustain our position in areas in which we are world leaders. Any package for reform must provide a degree of certainty for investors in renewable energy to make that option more attractive than conventional, polluting alternatives and to counter concerns over the long-term robustness of low-carbon markets. A sound business case will be

made for investing in the renewables sector only by reducing uncertainty and risk.

Given Scotland's low-carbon energy potential and the importance of renewables to the economies of regions such as Fife, the UK Government must fully consult the Scottish Parliament on discussions about electricity market reform. I support the amendment in the name of Lewis Macdonald, which

"urges the UK Government to ensure full and immediate consultation with the Parliament and"

the sector

"in Scotland on the electricity market reform proposals."

15:58

Iain Smith (North East Fife) (LD): I, too, welcome the constructive tone there has been throughout the debate. It is an important debate and there is consensus across the parties on the importance of decarbonising our electricity supply and on the role that Scotland can play in doing that in the UK and, indeed, Europe.

Before I highlight a number of issues from my experience as convener of the Economy, Energy and Tourism Committee, I point out that on the key issues that we would have discussed if we had been having this debate 12 months ago—before the general election—there has been a significant change through the way that the new Government in the United Kingdom operates.

For example, Ofgem's project transmit, about which I will talk more later, is examining transmission charging, which the Parliament has called for for many years. Within a few months of the new coalition Government's coming to power, Ofgem began to review the transmission regime. That is a significant change. We called for that review from the previous Government, which did not deliver it.

We have also seen a commitment to investment of £1 billion in carbon capture and storage, for which Longannet is now the only candidate. That will bring significant benefits to Scotland.

Another great change is that we have also had movement at last on the fossil fuel levy. Some members in other parties do not think that there has been movement, but a deal is now on the table for debate and discussion if the Scottish Government will get down to London, discuss it and try to find constructive and positive ways to bring that money into play.

For those who talk about the green investment bank not being available until 2013, Chris Huhne again emphasised yesterday that it could be up and running much earlier, because there is not just the £1 billion that the Government will put into it

from the 2013-14 financial year; there is also money from the sale of assets that might be available much sooner. The bank could be up and running and able to invest in Scotland's renewables infrastructure from next year. We should be positive about these things and engage with the UK Government to see how we can take advantage of them, rather than try to find obstacles to doing so. We have seen some very important changes.

Another point that is worth emphasising from yesterday is that Chris Huhne gave a positive message when he said that there is a strong case for Scotland to be the home of the green investment bank. Again, that has support throughout the chamber. We should welcome Chris Huhne's support and make a strong case that the green investment bank should be based here.

The energy market reform document tries to do a number of things, but the key issue is around trying to take a coherent approach to a number of actions that have to be taken to ensure that we meet our climate change objectives. The carbon price support will help to ensure that fossil fuel generation is less cost effective, and will make lower carbon power more attractive. The feed-in tariff proposals are about ensuring that there will be a long-term increase in investment in those areas. Capacity payments seek to ensure that if the wind does not blow, electricity will still be available. Emissions performance standards will ensure that those who use fossil fuel will be required to produce lower emissions.

Those are all important changes, and if what is being proposed in the consultation is implemented, it will result in more investment in those areas, the acceleration of the decarbonisation of our electricity supply and, by 2030, lower bills for domestic and industrial consumers of electricity. If those three aims can be achieved through the proposed reforms, that will be significant. I hope that members agree that we should be looking to achieve those aims.

I will use the time that I have remaining to talk a bit more about the Ofgem transmission charging review. The Economy, Energy and Tourism Committee has been pressing on that issue for a considerable time. It was part of our 2009 energy inquiry, which was endorsed by the Parliament. It is important to ensure that the transmission charging regime is fit for purpose, and that it encourages rather than discourages investment in renewables. We all know about the lunacy of the current locational charging scheme, which was based on the idea that power stations should be great big things that are built close to the bulk of the demand. That has changed. The wind, waves and tides are where they are. We have to build

power stations where the fuel is and not where the population is, and we need to be sure that the transmission charging regime does not discourage that.

By the way, I think that there are some illogicalities in the locational transmission charging scheme. I cannot quite work out why there is a subsidy for connecting to the grid for someone who happens to be based in Cornwall, which is not one of the most populous areas of the United Kingdom, while someone who is based in the central belt of Scotland has to pay a premium to feed into the national grid, even though the central belt is somewhat more populous than Cornwall. That does not make any sense. It is not a logical system and it is based on an outdated idea of the energy market. I am delighted that it is being looked at.

The regime needs to encourage people to invest and to give security of price, because people will not invest if they do not have that security. As a result of the existing regime, we have seen the cancellation of an important grid network to the Western Isles. It is not going ahead at present because the transmission regime means that it is not economically viable. That regime must be changed so that it does not prevent investment where it is needed, and so that we can take full advantage of Scotland's renewables potential. That is agreed across the board—no one in the chamber will disagree that that needs to be done. The opportunities that we have been given by the transmission charges review have to be welcomed.

I am pleased to say that Ofgem has agreed to come and give oral evidence to the Economy, Energy and Tourism Committee. We will take that evidence in February and we will put the transmission charging regime case to Ofgem very strongly.

I hope that the plenary session to which the minister referred in his opening remarks will be seen as something that the Parliament can be involved in. I am sure that the Economy, Energy and Tourism Committee would particularly welcome the opportunity to send representatives to that meeting.

16:04

Bob Doris (Glasgow) (SNP): I will focus on the relationship between electricity market reform and microrenewables and how it may affect funding for Scotland and jobs in my constituency. I make an appeal to members at the start: I would not normally speak on subjects such as this so, as I tiptoe my way through the issues, I hope that they will be gentle with me.

I have a direct constituency interest in the subject. When we talk about the opportunities in harnessing Scotland's green energy capacity, we tend to think about electricity generation in rural and offshore settings. However, fabrication, supply and maintenance of equipment are also required, and there are a number of spin-off benefits that will establish our urban areas as key players in the Scottish renewables revolution.

Just before Christmas, I met the chief executive officer of Gaia-Wind Ltd at Port Dundas, in Maryhill, Glasgow, which has just announced an initial investment of £5 million in an assembly plant for small wind turbines, which will create at least 50 high-value jobs. Scottish Enterprise and the Scottish Government have been praised for their approach in bringing in that investment ahead of other European locations that were going for that business. I also met last week the head of Ofgem in Scotland. Both meetings were incredibly interesting and have given me a real sense of how mistakes in energy policy at this time could have serious consequences for the growth of the sector as well as for the future sustainable growth of the Scottish economy.

Members will recall that there was a closure announcement not that long ago in Port Dundas, with more than 200 jobs going from Diageo. That gives an idea of why I am keen to get jobs to that part of my constituency. That is my direct constituency interest, and I would like to see Gaia-Wind and others like it investing not just in Glasgow but right across Scotland. I believe that energy policy—particularly reform of the feed-in tariffs—may impact on that.

Gaia-Wind produces small wind turbines that are eligible for the feed-in tariff at the level of 26.7p per kilowatt hour. There was broad political support when that was introduced in April to promote the development of microrenewables, and it has made it more economically viable for small producers, such as farmers and community initiatives, to invest their capital up front in the technology. However, I understand that there are concerns that the scheme is being highly subscribed to by larger commercial interests, particularly in solar panel electricity generation in the south of England. That is not in keeping with the policy intention to boost microrenewables production throughout the UK. David Cameron has also mentioned that in the press recently. With fixed budgets for that FIT scheme being drained, that could have access implications not just for Scotland but for other parts of the UK. I cannot comment on the matter in detail, but I have written to the Department of Energy and Climate Change for more information, saying that I believe that the administration of that scheme is a potential concern and needs to be scrutinised fully by that UK department.

Liam McArthur: I am still struggling with the image of Bob Doris as a shy, retiring wallflower in the debate. He may find some reassurance in the fact that Chris Huhne has made it clear that he recognises that aspects of the way in which the FIT scheme works will need to be kept under review without, at the same time, knocking investor confidence in the various technologies.

Bob Doris: I welcome that. I was about to say to the minister that I hope that the Scottish Government will work in partnership with the UK Government to achieve that outcome and to address the possibility of uneven access to the FIT scheme for microrenewables across the UK. Although I am delighted to see renewables investment in all the nations and regions of the UK, as I have just said, I want to ensure that Scottish tax pounds go to foster that market, particularly in Scotland, and that we get our appropriate share. Also, if there is any dubiety about the affordability and long-term management of the FIT scheme because of administration issues or other factors, investor confidence could drain from the scheme, which is not what we want. The sector needs certainty in relation to that.

FITs for microrenewables are to be reviewed again in 2012, but the current review may impact on that. We have already heard about ROCs and a FIT subsidy for wider, larger-scale electricity investment, and there are direct links there. The FITs must be reviewed, and we hope that that review will move the situation forward. The current level of uncertainty is not helpful, which is why I have written to Chris Huhne on the matter. It seems to be sensible to look at feed-in tariffs across the sector.

Another aspect of the feed-in tariff subsidy is how European law, as interpreted by the UK Government, affects feed-in tariffs in the nations and regions of the UK. For example, if a farmer or small community-based housing association wanted to build some small wind turbines to lower their carbon footprint and cut electricity bills, they could do that but would perhaps need to find grants for it. Highlands and Islands Enterprise may be in a position to provide a partial grant to help, and the Scottish Government's climate fund could perhaps provide a partial grant.

Under the UK's application of European law, however, it would not then be possible to apply for a feed-in tariff. Scotland would be using its block grant to lower carbon footprints in communities, but feed-in tariffs would be squeezed out. I am not suggesting that I want individual owners of turbines to get a double subsidy, but I want to consider how feed-in tariffs are accessed across the UK and whether Scottish block grant investment could divert some of the feed-in tariff subsidy from Scotland.

Those are a couple of issues that are of interest to me—to be fair, they have only recently become of interest to me because there are 50 new jobs coming to my constituency—and, as I feel my way ahead in the dark and try to get a grasp of the subject, they are the issues that I would like to be developed and which I believe the minister should consider.

16:10

Stewart Stevenson (Banff and Buchan) (SNP): I was delighted to respond to Liam McArthur's motion on renewable energy on 28 October. In my speech on that day, I focused on the fossil fuel levy, which has been part of the discussion today. It is slightly disappointing that, with 50 minutes to go in the debate, I am the last speaker in the open part. I am, however, happy to use as many of those minutes as the Presiding Officer allows me.

Today, I read a statement by Georg Adamowitsch. He said:

"The North Sea has different conditions and potentials for the generation of renewable energy. Scotland is a fine example of how different offshore technologies (wind parks, wave and tidal technology, onshore potentials, various wind potentials) can be combined to form a coherent approach."

Of course, if we want more and more of the energy that is used in the UK and Scotland to come from renewable sources, that means implicitly that the shift will be towards electricity. Therefore, it is right and proper that we focus on transmission of that electricity from where it is generated to where it is required.

There are, of course, a number of low-level issues that will be discussed on another occasion, such as the fact that if we are to have electric cars, we must also have local delivery of electricity for them to use. Today's debate is much more about transmission over the high-voltage network, which involves minimising transmission losses so that we can deliver from one end of this island to another.

Liam McArthur: I hope that my intervention will help Stewart Stevenson to get through the 20 minutes that are available to him. Transmission is an important issue, but will he touch on the importance of storage? Everyone who has spoken in this debate has been guilty of glossing over that issue, which involves issues around transport and other factors.

Stewart Stevenson: I am not sure that the Presiding Officer responded to my suggestion that I should speak for 20 minutes—

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Trish Godman): We could suspend.

Stewart Stevenson: Hopefully, not by a tender part of my anatomy.

In response to Liam McArthur's point, it is quite interesting to note that one of the storage mechanisms that is mentioned in the Redpoint Energy report is pump storage. Electricity is going to be a key part of producing hydrogen, which might turn out to be one of the main fuels of choice for transport in the future and, of course, there is a range of challenges in relation to how one stores hydrogen because, being the smallest atom that exists, it sneaks through almost any metal and dissipates rapidly.

I will turn to issues that are a little more parochial. In Aberdeenshire, we have some of the highest transmission charges in Scotland, at some £20 per kilowatt, which is in contrast to the subsidy of over £6.50 per kilowatt that is available in the south of England. That does not seem to be fair, and it does not seem to serve the interests of any part of these islands. As Georg Adamowitsch's contribution to the debate illustrated, Scotland has a huge potential to be the renewables powerhouse of Europe, which will benefit Europe and the UK and will, fundamentally, create economic opportunity for Scotland. We have won the energy lottery again, so it is important that we have in place the right policies and practices that will allow us to capitalise on that.

We and the UK Government share a 2050 target of an 80 per cent reduction in carbon emissions, and the effective generation and delivery of electricity is vital to that.

A huge proportion of the UK's gas supply comes ashore in my constituency adjacent to Peterhead, and there is a gas power station in Peterhead itself. It has been very disappointing that because the charges are so great, there is a real risk that one of the generation units could be closed. The unit has to pay £29 million a year for access, whereas an identical power station in the London area would be paid £3 million to generate the power that is required.

There is a broad consensus among energy producers, business groups and trade unions that locational transmission charging is no longer appropriate, and we very much welcome that. Broadly, I have heard no dissenting voices on that, and the issue has now been picked up in the UK Government's consultation. It is a shame in some ways that we did not get to that sooner.

As there are some 26,000 potential Scottish jobs in renewable energy, it is important that we make progress and move away from a model that is quite distinctly different from that which is used elsewhere in Europe. The Scottish Government has continuously pressed for a change in that regard. As Scotland generates some 12 per cent of the UK's electricity but is forced to pay some 40 per cent of the transmission costs, significant

change is in the interests of everyone in these islands.

There has been one disappointment that I have found in my research for which I have not really found an answer. I had thought that there were significant transmission losses when electricity was pumped over long distances, but there is a clear assumption, even in the UK Government's consultation document, that what you put in is what you get out at the other end. I am obviously wrong on that, and I have been corrected by reading the UK Government's document.

It has been entirely appropriate to take a consensual approach on this subject. It is fundamentally clear that any policies in this area will outlast the term in office of any Government in any part of these islands; it is probable that a series of Governments will continue to engage in the policies that are set as a result of the current consultation. It is important that we all contribute, and that we express clearly and unambiguously today the needs of Scotland and the opportunities that we have to provide for the energy needs of our neighbours elsewhere in these islands, and further afield through interconnectors to other countries in Europe.

I will address—perhaps in a slightly contentious way—the point that Stuart McMillan raised about the performance of individual managers in banks, whether those are green banks or otherwise. I came into politics to purge myself of the taint of having worked for a bank for 30 years. We should perhaps start to call bonuses “performance-related pay” and they should perhaps be taken away from a person's pay if that person does not deliver. If we consider the issue in that sense, performance-related pay is not a bad idea, provided that it delivers for the public good and for customers, and is focused on the outcomes that an individual has delivered. In any case, it should be paid only from profits, should there be any.

I will draw my remarks to a conclusion, Presiding Officer, to—as I can see—the great relief of many of my colleagues in the chamber. I welcome the support that I heard in Liam McArthur's reading of his amendment, which confirmed what I took from it. His party can deliver a positive contribution in Government at Westminster via the UK Government's consultation, to give us equitable access and go a little way towards offsetting some other areas of disappointment.

I particularly welcomed Chris Huhne's recognition yesterday that the SNP Government is led by one of Europe's leading energy economists. It should be no surprise that our First Minister has long been engaged in criticising the access regime and the effects that it has on Scotland and on energy supply in the UK as a whole. The existing

process of charging must change. I am happy to support the minister's motion—and to allow others to try to fill the time.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I now move to the wind-up speeches, and I call Jim Hume.

16:20

Jim Hume (South of Scotland) (LD): I am grateful for the opportunity to sum up for the Liberal Democrats in this afternoon's debate. It has been a very constructive debate, and that must be welcomed.

It is just a few months since we debated Scotland's move towards a low-carbon economy. At that time, I said that climate change must be tackled head on to avoid our leading industries being severely impacted by prolonged periods of extreme weather. Never has that been truer, when we consider the hit that our businesses took in December and the carnage that our commuters faced in the transport network.

The path to achieving a low-carbon economy need not be a painful one. It should be seen to present opportunities that are ripe for exploitation. Although electricity market reform is a vital component in our efforts to tackle climate change, it also serves as one such vehicle of opportunity. Indeed, I know that the Scottish Government shares that view and agrees with the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change that the reform offers a once-in-a-generation opportunity to restructure the vital electricity market.

The consultation document that the Department of Energy and Climate Change published recently is important both because of the scope of its ambitions and because, frankly, time is of the essence. That has been clear today. We are in a period where numerous coal and nuclear power stations are nearing the end of their lives and will leave gaps in energy generation that need to be plugged. One such power station—Cockenzie, in the South of Scotland region, just east of here—is scheduled to close by the end of 2015. It is important that power companies are mindful of local sensitivities when they plan their next generation of power stations, as well as considering the potential impact on communities such as Cockenzie when existing stations close.

In the past, some members on the Government benches have got a bit hot under the collar over nuclear power and its inclusion as one of the means of low-carbon generation. However, for all Governments, there will be circumstances that dictate that things cannot always be done as planned. Those are not my words, but those of the Deputy First Minister—on Twitter, of all places. I welcome her admission that Governments cannot always fully legislate according to their manifestos,

as they would wish. However, for the avoidance of doubt, I state what the Scottish Liberal Democrats have been saying for some time—we are still opposed to new nuclear capacity in Scotland and we firmly believe in maximising the benefits of Scotland's enviable renewables potential, which the Minister for Enterprise, Energy and Tourism mentioned when he commented on the EU remarks.

The publication of the consultation and the reforms that are contained within it only serve to further strengthen the Lib Dem and Conservative coalition Government's green credentials after just eight months in power, as Iain Smith remarked. The Government committed £1 billion to carbon capture and storage pilot plants in the comprehensive spending review. I welcome the energy secretary's visit to Longannet in Fife yesterday, as did Liam McArthur in his opening speech. Members should also be aware that our party is lobbying strongly for the green investment bank to be situated in Scotland, and I welcome the energy secretary's positive comments in that regard yesterday, when he appeared before the Economy, Energy and Tourism Committee, which is chaired by Iain Smith. Due to our renewables potential and Edinburgh's position as a financial powerhouse, Scotland is the obvious fit.

David Stewart noted that E.ON has announced a 9 per cent increase in electricity prices, which makes it the fifth of the big six to announce substantial price increases this winter. Perhaps the most attractive aspect of the reforms in the consultation is the certainty that they would create in the market. For example, carbon price support and feed-in tariffs will provide certainty over the cost of running polluting plant and the revenues for low-carbon generation, and certainty breeds investment. Given the number of new generation power stations that will be required to keep the lights on, the measures will remove the existing bias in favour of fossil fuels and incentivise investment in low-carbon generation. By implementing such reforms, we will be able to achieve the key aim of securing our energy supplies and insulating ourselves from the volatile fossil fuel prices that are so often blamed for increases in electricity and gas prices. It is vital that any reforms protect customers while encouraging investment in low-carbon technologies. The consultation strikes the right balance.

Significant investment will be required from the power sector. It is important that the sector plays ball to drive through the reforms to the market for the benefit of consumers who are penalised annually for trying to heat their homes. That happens not only in the Highlands and Islands, as David Stewart said, but across the whole of

Scotland, including of course my area, the South of Scotland.

As we begin to make significant inroads into decarbonisation, the demand for electricity will rise dramatically, given that it will be required to meet more of our heating and transport needs. The reforms are crucial. I hope that the Scottish Government will work closely with the Liberal Democrat Government to shape the final proposals—*[Interruption.]*—I should have said not Liberal Democrat Government but coalition Government.

I am glad that the minister has welcomed the UK Government's work, which is, of course, led by the Lib Dem Chris Huhne. I am glad to hear that there is to be a follow-up session next month. We all look forward to some positive remarks coming out of that.

16:26

Alex Johnstone (North East Scotland) (Con):

I confess that I am not as young as I used to be. I can just about remember the time before there was an oil industry in the North Sea. It was a wonderful discovery when we found that we had all that oil and gas out there, off the shore of the north and east of the country. As Stewart Stevenson said earlier, who would have thought that this little country of ours could win the jackpot twice in one generation. In the early development of renewables it became very clear that, if wind and waves were the way to go, Scotland had plenty of both.

We have known for a long time about the opportunity of developing our renewables industry. The regime that was in place previously did a great deal to bring that forward. In fact, if anyone took the trouble to look back at some of the things that I have said over the past 12 years, they would discover that even I have been surprised at the developments in the renewables sector in Scotland. I was perhaps one of those who cast doubt on the opportunities or the speed at which development would take place. I now accept that we are achieving the targets that were set. I now realise that the opportunity exists to develop this area still further.

The system that was put in place to underpin that—in particular, the renewables obligation certificates—has proven itself, albeit that it was obvious to many that something had to change. That is why it is a disappointment that it has taken so long, and a change of Government, to come forward with proposals to change or develop the electricity market. Electricity market reform is an overdue subject and one that we must discuss.

As a number of members have said, it is important to ensure that we do not undermine the

confidence of investors. Unlike some in the chamber, I believe that the private sector will produce the necessary investment. I also believe that the sector will bring forward the potential development that we know exists in so many areas of Scotland. Unless we build confidence within the industry, and in those who have enough money to invest in it, we run the risk of undermining that development. It is crucial that what the Government proposes in its consultation document is an overlapping system that will take us forward. It should allow those who have already invested to rely on the old regime while offering the opportunity of a new regime for those who are about to go into a new phase of investment. We are moving from the situation where we are used to seeing wind turbines appear on our hillsides to seeing turbines appear in large numbers off our coast. That will happen in the not-too-distant future and will be a significant change.

In looking at the structures that we have debated today, and as the word “nuclear” is mentioned in my colleague Gavin Brown’s amendment, I must mention nuclear energy and make some comparisons.

I have already said in the Parliament that I think that Scotland has missed the boat on nuclear power. If we were to replace one of our nuclear power stations, we would have had to make that decision before now. The decision not to do so was a bad one that we will live to regret.

When we talk enthusiastically about carbon capture and storage, we are talking about a technology that is not comparable in price to simply burning coal and pumping the carbon dioxide into the atmosphere. We are talking about a technology that will be expensive and difficult to implement. When all the costs are taken into account, it may be significantly more expensive than nuclear energy. That is why, as I have said before, I believe that Scotland will have its nuclear power station but that it will be built south of the border and that we will use the electricity that it sends north through the grid.

It is important that that possibility is retained because, as we consider the key elements in this issue, we cannot ignore the elephant in the room: the transmission charging regime. If we are to cover the north of Scotland in renewable electricity generation devices and supply that electricity to the south of England or, for that matter, mainland Europe, we must have a regime in place that allows the consumer to pay for the cost of the grid development that will be necessary. That means that what we have at the moment is not fit for purpose. The Lib Dem-Conservative coalition Government should be praised for having moved forward so quickly. I welcome that.

So where are we going? What do we have to do here in Scotland? A number of issues mentioned in the debate are worthy of mention again. Rob Gibson raised the subject of hydro. We all seem to forget that we led the world in hydro for a while. We have the opportunity to do so once again. Stewart Stevenson pointed out that we need to find a way to store all this renewable energy. The hydrogen economy may be coming, but it is some way off. However, we have the opportunity to store energy through pump storage, which is why key decisions about developing pump storage in Scotland, perhaps taking some of our existing hydro schemes and converting them to pump storage, is vital to continuity.

Remote renewables need grid improvements, which will be expensive. If we are to do that, we need to ensure that it is the consumer, wherever he or she may be, who contributes to that development. For that to happen, we must be part of a bigger marketplace than simply Scotland. To be part of a UK-wide marketplace would give us a tremendous opportunity to draw money in for investment and to hedge our bets, in case anything that we do turns out to be either inadequate in terms of supply or overly expensive in terms of cost. By spreading that load throughout the United Kingdom and—let us face it—beyond, we have a tremendous advantage that we should not turn our backs on. I cannot accept Rob Gibson’s idea that there should be some sort of firewall between Scotland and England in terms of the electricity market.

Rob Gibson: I meant a firewall between the financial support for nuclear energy, which is supported by the UK Government, and the support that we need for renewables—we must not have that diverted.

Alex Johnstone: Indeed. As I said earlier, I genuinely believe that Scotland needs access to effectively and cheaply-generated nuclear electric. We should have replaced one of our nuclear power stations. We would be in a stronger position today if we had made that decision. We are lucky that that decision is being made in other places.

This has been a constructive debate. We are a great deal further forward in evolving the structures of the electricity market than we were a year ago. Thank goodness for a change of Government. That is the biggest step forward of all.

16:34

Lewis Macdonald: I agree with Alex Johnstone that sometimes a change of Government is a very good thing. I look forward to the next opportunity for precisely that.

As Gavin Brown said, Scottish Power today submitted its response to the consultation on electricity market reform. Similar views have been expressed—so far informally—by Scottish and Southern Energy and others with an active interest in the outcome of this process. I quote a little further from the Scottish Power submission. It says that the contract-for-difference type of feed-in tariff, which was promoted by Chris Huhne yesterday, carries with it “major complexities and uncertainties” that need to be resolved. That is why it calls for the “Premium FIT” approach to be explored. Scottish Power has also highlighted the importance of a Europe-wide approach to carbon pricing and the risk that too high a price in Britain alone could affect competitiveness and be costly to consumers. It has expressed a similar concern in relation to an emissions performance standard if the UK Government was to get its level wrong. It says that

“In all these areas ... getting the detailed design right will be critical,”

and that,

“first and foremost, we need to do everything we can to avoid a hiatus in renewables deployment.”

I endorse all those comments and, above all, I echo its summary, which states:

“We are committed to working with the Government to ensure that the final package delivers the progress that we need on renewables, nuclear and carbon capture and storage whilst keeping the interests of consumers firmly in mind.”

Although we might not agree with the utility companies on what every detail of the final package should look like, we share their view that it is the detail that matters at this stage. The introduction of a capacity mechanism, for example, could be done in any of a number of ways. Modern combined-cycle gas generation may have a role to play, but we do not want another dash for gas at the expense of reducing carbon emissions. Nor do we want the capacity mechanism to produce public funding support for new fossil-fuel plant without carbon capture technology already in place.

Setting a carbon price or emissions standards can help if the right choices are made but, if they are not, the impact could be counterproductive. That is also true of the central proposal for the replacement of the renewables obligation with feed-in tariffs. I was pleased to hear from all the parties and, I think, from all the members who have spoken in the debate, a recognition of the central importance of getting right the regime that replaces renewables obligation certificates.

In recent weeks, Spain has responded to wider economic pressures by altering the feed-in tariffs that it has for solar power, leading to disputes

between Government and generators, which may end up being resolved in the courts. That is not where we want the reform of electricity market intervention in this country to take us, so it is critical that the right system is adopted from the start.

Liam McArthur confirmed what Chris Huhne said yesterday, which is that contracts for difference are currently the UK Government's preferred option, although they are not the only option on the table. The contract-for-difference system would remove the obligation on suppliers to contract for renewable electricity. It might also lead to inflated prices, so instead of reduced costs by 2030, which is an aspiration that we all share, we might end up with the opposite.

Likewise, the current preferred proposals aim to control price through auction structures, which may not be able to deliver lower prices and new technologies at the same time. An ineffective auction system would do more harm than good, which is why the renewables sector is keen to have other options properly considered: options that can maintain a requirement or an incentive to source low-carbon generation; options that identify an appropriate level of support in consultation with stakeholders, which is perhaps preferable to doing so by auction; and options that secure the smoothest transition from the existing renewables obligation. That is why I suspect that the support of large utilities for investigating premium feed-in tariffs may well be reflected by growing support for that approach from the renewables sector as a whole and why I hope this question will be central to discussions on these matters in the weeks and months ahead.

Like others, I welcome the areas of agreement that there have been in the debate, but it is nonetheless important at this stage to recognise that there are some differences in the emphases of the motion and amendments that we will vote on shortly. I will say a word or two about those. I start, of course, by commending Labour's amendment, for two reasons in particular. First, our approach highlights the importance of making the right choices, which I mentioned a moment ago. We will not oppose change just because the current system has served us well—we think that the renewables obligation certificates have done so—but we will only support change if it promises to serve us as well or better. That is crucial. Secondly, our amendment highlights the importance of obtaining best value for consumers and of consulting consumer interests as well as producer interests on any changes that are to be made. On that basis, I hope that the chamber will support the amendment in my name.

Liam McArthur: I am grateful to the member for taking an intervention. I have no difficulty with

either of the two reasons that the member posits for supporting his amendment. My difficulty is with what it takes out of the Government's original motion. I was also slightly confused by the call for a

"full and immediate consultation with the Parliament and with producer and consumer interests",

which DECC have made clear and Chris Huhne emphasised yesterday is already in process. The EMR consultation document that was published before Christmas in effect fired the starting gun on that process.

Lewis Macdonald: I accept that point on the basis of what was said yesterday. I also accept the point about consultation, which we all agree is important. Nonetheless, when wording the Parliament's final view on the matter, it is important that consultation is seen to have a central place in our priorities.

That said, we have no great difficulties with any of the other propositions on the table. I remind Iain Smith that the billion pound competition for carbon capture and storage was put in place by the previous UK Government, rather than the incoming one. I also remind him that Longannet was in pole position long before Chris Huhne discovered the merits of nuclear electricity.

We will be happy to support Liam McArthur's amendment because we all want to see carbon capture and storage demonstrated at Longannet and hope that it will be demonstrated to be both affordable and effective. Should our amendment not succeed, we have a marginal preference for Jim Mather's motion over Gavin Brown's amendment, simply because we do not want to lose all reference to consultation. We will vote accordingly.

I agree with Iain Smith about the importance of consultation with the Parliament and I look forward to the minister's confirming in his response that the plenary session that he discussed with the secretary of state and the UK Government will involve the Parliament and give an opportunity for the kind of debate that we have had this afternoon to be reflected in the discussion between Scotland and the wider United Kingdom on how the reform should be undertaken.

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson): I call Jim Mather to wind up on behalf of the Government. Minister, you have free range up until 5 o'clock.

16:42

Jim Mather: I will take a languid approach.

I am grateful to members for their contributions to today's debate and for its tone, which has been mentioned several times. Stewart Stevenson

recognised that electricity market reform will be a legacy issue for every Government that will ever be formed in Scotland. The tone of the debate was reflected in the conversation that we had with Chris Huhne yesterday. By way of consolidation, I make it absolutely clear that the electricity market reform consultation session will be open to everyone, and to the Economy, Energy and Tourism Committee in particular. I have drawn a lot from this debate, and I know that we will draw more in that session.

Whether from the session that we had on taking a connect and manage approach or the session that we had on grid and transmission charging with Ofgem, the National Grid, energy companies, Scottish Renewables, academia and our officials last year, we are discovering that such sessions work really well. The right solution can emerge when we have such open-ended plenary sessions. That is especially true when we start from a good place of wide consensus. We need to get the right energy generating mix supported by the right market structures, with the right support mechanisms, the right framework for electricity regulation and the right deal for consumers.

Today, we have had the likes of Scottish Power telling us to get it right, to avoid throwing the baby out with the bath water, and to maintain our competitiveness. Competitiveness is an important concern, which was reflected in our conversation with Chris Huhne yesterday and the points that many members have raised today about the necessity of maintaining both confidence and competitiveness. We made a point yesterday about involving the Faculty of Actuaries, which has largely positioned itself as the faculty of enterprise risk managers so that it can get its head round the issue of electricity market reform. Not only was Chris Huhne receptive to that, he gave us the comfort that UK Government actuaries are already involved in that process.

When we come together, in particular when we get other voices in the room, the chances of our identifying more potential unintended consequences and then being able to avoid them are greatly enhanced.

The fantastic thing is ensuring that Scotland delivers its remarkable energy potential in full. Believe me, there is huge international demand for it, which has been shown clearly in the messages that we got from Cancún and the Delhi international renewables conference. At that conference, the Pulitzer prize-winning journalist Thomas Friedman galvanised the audience by telling them that down the line more and more people will look for an American lifestyle, which will require much more power, and that we have to focus on producing more and more clean, green electrons. That links to the point that David

Stewart made about Scotland having the obligation to optimise its potential.

Thomas Friedman also pointed out the sheer arithmetic of population: in 1947, when I was born, there were 2.5 billion people on the planet, there are about 6.5 billion now, and by 2050 there will be 9 billion. The demand exists, which means that Scotland will have to produce energy and technologies that it can export, quality intellectual property, information to advise and guide people, and skilled people to go out from Scotland, as happened in the past when we sold steering gear and engines from companies such as Kincaid's and Hastie's. The issue is important globally, and we must ensure that energy from Scotland plays an important role in meeting Scottish, UK, EU and worldwide renewable energy targets.

What we want from electricity market reform is a basis to ensure that Scotland plays its full part in meeting the challenges of climate change and ensuring the security of future electricity supply. As we all know, energy opportunities for Scotland are vast. The opportunities for onshore and offshore wind, wave and tidal power and for CCS for coal and gas are huge, and we must ensure that we deliver them all in full.

It is worth pausing at that point. The dynamics of the engagement in the ad hoc discussion of carbon capture and storage, the connect and manage approach, and the grid have been enhanced by the way that we have handled the situation with the energy advisory board, the oil and gas advisory board, the advisory group on thermal generation and carbon capture and storage, the forum for renewable energy development in Scotland—the renewables side of it—and now the economic impact and grid advisory board. We are getting people to talk and begin to build trust and confidence in each other, which is enormously important, because in developing the low-carbon potential there are huge implications for low-carbon jobs. We have a low-carbon sector that supports more than 70,000 jobs—that is a 2008 number—and with concerted action we know that we can get the number up to about 130,000 by 2020. With the move to reform, the renewable energy sector could support an additional 26,000 jobs and get a further boost from the low-carbon technologies that will come through.

It is really important not to forget that renewable energy from Scotland will play a key role in helping the UK to meet its renewable energy target of 15 per cent from renewables by 2020. To his credit, Chris Huhne accepted that yesterday. He also accepted much of what we have been doing here, and he was interested to understand how we might have a technology transfer. We are more than willing to ensure that that happens.

The key thing is that future developments are all contingent on a stable, supportive policy and regulatory environment and the right balance between effectively functioning markets and targeted support mechanisms. It is essential that the energy regulation board protects the interests of the consumer and ensures that electricity is affordable, and it is essential that energy regulation is open, fair and transparent. That is the key point that I have always thought that actuaries bring to the table. Actuaries ask how we can maintain the balance and have an energy sector that grows in line with the economy, that will never try to outperform the economy, and that will give us a landscape in which the maximum number of entities and households in work can pay their energy bills. That message was put across yesterday in spades.

It is essential that our regulatory framework strikes the right balance between regulated stability to drive industry and investor confidence and helping to deliver the Government's long-term aims on renewable energy and climate change targets and on security of supply.

Lewis Macdonald: Does the minister agree that, although the extension of price support to the whole range of low-carbon technologies has much merit, it is important that whatever mechanism the UK Government adopts to do that does not destabilise the existing renewables sector, its expectations and its reliance on the current system? The design of the mechanism will be critical to confidence in the future.

Jim Mather: That is fundamental. The approach must be incremental and better and must build on what we have. We must debug it for unintended consequences. I am a great fan of a guy called Dennis Sherwood, whose big theory is that there is no such thing as unintended consequences—just bad thinking. We need the best-quality thinking. We will get the best thinking if we have the collaborative effort from the industry; the Parliament and its committees; the Government in Scotland, Westminster and Brussels; our energy regulator; our utility system operator, National Grid; the wide energy sector; developers; and academia.

By the way, academia played a blinder at Victoria Quay in showcasing to the Chinese—to huge effect—what we have to offer and the comprehensive nature of what we have discussed today. What was said about key matters such as carbon capture and storage, a smart grid, offshore wind power and Pelamis really registered. The Pelamis staff must be thoroughly congratulated on laying on an excellent corporate visit. They showed the technology developing, doubling in output and being utterly solid. That is based on North Sea expertise and proven componentry. It

can be deployed and could work for China and for Chinese interests worldwide.

Nigel Don (North East Scotland) (SNP): I propose to change the subject slightly on the minister's thinking point. I have not heard—forgive me; I have not been here for every word of the debate—about the use of electricity. The comment was made that pump storage is the only way to store electricity. We know that we cannot store whizzy electrons—they must just be used. The balance is important.

However, we will surely have far more batteries, because we will have far more electric cars, one way or another. At some point, the charging regime for the consumer will therefore need to be time as well as kilowatt dependent. Charging batteries overnight is useful, whereas charging them during the day is not. I have not heard about that, but surely that needs to be part of our forward thinking, as we do not have electric cars yet.

Jim Mather: Nigel Don makes an excellent point, which we debated when we met the Québécois out in Cancún. In Québec, 98 per cent of the energy comes from hydro. People there are considering electric vehicles and pump storage as mechanisms for storing energy. We can learn from those good dynamics. In talking to the Québécois, I was struck that we have shorter journeys in Scotland, because it is a smaller country, so the electric car might be a better fit for Scotland.

Liam McArthur: When the minister spoke to the Québécois, did he discuss the Scottish Government's record on its car pool and its shift to hybrid and more fuel-efficient cars?

Jim Mather: Yes, that was discussed. I received to my great delight today a handwritten note from Jean Charest, Québec's Premier, to thank us for our time, so we have registered in yet another element of the planet.

The key point is that the Parliament has come together on the issue. The Economy, Energy and Tourism Committee has played a particularly strong role and helped in successfully forcing the long-overdue review of transmission charging by Ofgem. Committee members have played a role again today. Excellent points have been made, which reflect excellent points that were made in the conversation with Chris Huhne at yesterday's committee meeting, when Lewis Macdonald obtained from Chris Huhne the welcome concession that he would not rule out a premium-rate feed-in tariff for new technologies, and when the wide array of potential unintended consequences was noted.

Before Nigel Don mentioned electric vehicles, the issue was registered by Gavin Brown. It is of considerable significance.

I was taken by Liam McArthur's comments on the virtuous circle of investor confidence, investment and consumer interests feeding back into competitiveness. That is the stuff of this debate. He used an interesting phrase when he described the flexibility that we need from electricity market reform. He said that we had to have

"Scottish discretion, to capitalise on Scottish strengths."

That captures what we want to achieve.

Rob Gibson made some interesting points about the fact that our low-carbon society has the potential to be based on the cleanest power in the world. He identified the requirement for a firewall, and he questioned whether the National Grid was an appropriate model. We meet the National Grid regularly, and we will continue to ensure that it performs to the level that we require and that it is aligned with the common good.

The other point that I want to make in response to Rob Gibson is that in Georg Adamowitsch, we have someone who not only sees the potential that exists in Scotland but aspires to have a common EU electricity market. That takes us to an interesting place.

The considerations of Stuart McMillan and others on the green investment bank pointed to the fact that we have a fantastic opportunity to justify its location in Edinburgh. I was delighted to note Mr Huhne's confirmatory nod on the subject at yesterday's meeting of the Economy, Energy and Tourism Committee. We have the potential to have a green bank here in Scotland that will widen public support and allow the management that runs it to rediscover intrinsic motivation—*[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Order. There is too much background noise in the chamber.

Jim Mather: —and a desire for the common good to be a key driver.

Among the points that Iain Smith made in his role as convener of the Economy, Energy and Tourism Committee was one on the fossil fuel levy. I assure him that I, Mr Swinney and the First Minister, along with officials, will continue to engage on the issue.

We entirely agree with Iain Smith on transmission charges, and we are delighted that the case for change has been driven through. We raised the issue of the Western Isles interconnector with Mr Huhne yesterday, and we will raise it again. We found him understanding and, we hope, sympathetic. As I mentioned earlier, we are happy to ensure that the committee plays a full part in the wider process.

Bob Doris mentioned the incompatibility of feed-in tariffs and grants with EU law. We are working to develop a community loan fund that will provide loans rather than grants and therefore be compatible with EU law. We are looking to take some of the risks away from communities through the initial planning phases.

At a late stage in the debate, I was very taken by Alex Johnstone's life story. He told us that he was just old enough to recognise the north-east before oil. He was surprised at the scale and scope of renewables and seemed to have come to an understanding that the development of nuclear power would result in Scotland having to write a big cheque and would damage our balance of payments. We could not spend that money on renewables or on the grid here. His desire for us to talk to the UK on such matters is being met—we are doing so—but we do want an EU-wide electricity market to be developed.

We are continuing to work to remove the unacceptable barriers that exist. We are continuing to ensure that we have a mechanism for identifying unintended consequences and managing them away in conversation. The electricity market reform document sets out significant proposals. We are working to understand better how they will impact on Scotland. We have a track record of being at the forefront of developments by holding debates that bring forward good solutions in the long term. We are keen to ensure that electricity market reform has a really positive effect on investor confidence, that the renewables sector in Scotland that has blossomed and bloomed in the past four years continues to blossom and bloom, and that everything that we can do here is done to the fullest.

Presiding Officer's Ruling

17:00

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson): Before we come to decision time, I would like to make the following brief statement. Further to my ruling this morning on Lord Foulkes's interventions during general questions, I inform the chamber that I have written to the member stating that I consider such behaviour to be disrespectful and discourteous, and that any future repetition will result in expulsion from the chamber. I take this opportunity to remind all members that, although I fully appreciate that in the run-up to an election exchanges may become heated, I will not tolerate members behaving in a disrespectful and discourteous manner in the chamber.

George Foulkes (Lothians) (Lab): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I have sent you a reply explaining the meaning of the word that I used, which was "charlatan". I consider the word to be neither disrespectful nor discourteous.

The Presiding Officer: That is not a point of order.

George Foulkes: I am explaining that I have written to you explaining the meaning of the word that I used. All of us will watch carefully to ensure that members from other parties are dealt with in a similar way.

The Presiding Officer: I have no need to explain my decision, but I will do so. As has happened previously in the chamber, I find discourteous not the word that was used but the manner in which it was used. That is the way in which I have ruled.

Decision Time

17:01

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson):

There are eight questions to be put as a result of today's business. I remind members that, in relation to the debate on education, if the amendment in the name of Michael Russell is agreed to, the amendment in the name of Elizabeth Smith will fall, and that, in relation to the debate on electricity market reform, if the amendment in the name of Lewis Macdonald is agreed to, the amendment in the name of Gavin Brown will fall.

The first question is, that amendment S3M-7692.3, in the name of Michael Russell, which seeks to amend motion S3M-7692, in the name of Des McNulty, on education, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Adam, Brian (Aberdeen North) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Western Isles) (SNP)
 Brown, Keith (Ochil) (SNP)
 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)
 MacDonald, Margo (Lothians) (Ind)
 Marwick, Tricia (Central Fife) (SNP)
 Mather, Jim (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 Maxwell, Stewart (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 McKee, Ian (Lothians) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 McLaughlin, Anne (Glasgow) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Morgan, Alasdair (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Neil, Alex (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Paterson, Gil (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee East) (SNP)
 Russell, Michael (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Salmond, Alex (Gordon) (SNP)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Lothians) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banff and Buchan) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Govan) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (North Tayside) (SNP)
 Thompson, Dave (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)

Watt, Maureen (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 Welsh, Andrew (Angus) (SNP)
 White, Sandra (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Wilson, Bill (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Wilson, John (Central Scotland) (SNP)

Against

Aitken, Bill (Glasgow) (Con)
 Alexander, Ms Wendy (Paisley North) (Lab)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Edinburgh Central) (Lab)
 Brankin, Rhona (Midlothian) (Lab)
 Brocklebank, Ted (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Brown, Gavin (Lothians) (Con)
 Brown, Robert (Glasgow) (LD)
 Brownlee, Derek (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Butler, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab)
 Carlaw, Jackson (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Chisholm, Malcolm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab)
 Craigie, Cathie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab)
 Curran, Margaret (Glasgow Baillieston) (Lab)
 Eadie, Helen (Dunfermline East) (Lab)
 Ferguson, Patricia (Glasgow Maryhill) (Lab)
 Finnie, Ross (West of Scotland) (LD)
 Foulkes, George (Lothians) (Lab)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gillon, Karen (Clydesdale) (Lab)
 Glen, Marlyn (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Godman, Trish (West Renfrewshire) (Lab)
 Goldie, Annabel (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Gordon, Charlie (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Gray, Iain (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Harper, Robin (Lothians) (Green)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Henry, Hugh (Paisley South) (Lab)
 Hume, Jim (South of Scotland) (LD)
 Jamieson, Cathy (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (Lab)
 Johnstone, Alex (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kelly, James (Glasgow Rutherglen) (Lab)
 Kerr, Andy (East Kilbride) (Lab)
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab)
 Lamont, John (Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Livingstone, Marilyn (Kirkcaldy) (Lab)
 Macdonald, Lewis (Aberdeen Central) (Lab)
 Macintosh, Ken (Eastwood) (Lab)
 Martin, Paul (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney) (LD)
 McAveety, Mr Frank (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab)
 McCabe, Tom (Hamilton South) (Lab)
 McConnell, Jack (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)
 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)
 McNulty, Des (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab)
 Milne, Nanette (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Mulligan, Mary (Linlithgow) (Lab)
 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)
 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)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 47, Against 78, Abstentions 0.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S3M-7692.1, in the name of Elizabeth Smith, which seeks to amend motion S3M-7692, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Aitken, Bill (Glasgow) (Con)
 Brankin, Rhona (Midlothian) (Lab)
 Brocklebank, Ted (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Brown, Gavin (Lothians) (Con)
 Brownlee, Derek (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Goldie, Annabel (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Johnstone, Alex (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Lamont, John (Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 McAveety, Mr Frank (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab)
 McGrigor, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 McLetchie, David (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Con)
 Milne, Nanette (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Scanlon, Mary (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)
 Smith, Elizabeth (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)

Against

Adam, Brian (Aberdeen North) (SNP)
 Alexander, Ms Wendy (Paisley North) (Lab)
 Allan, Alasdair (Western Isles) (SNP)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Edinburgh Central) (Lab)
 Brown, Keith (Ochil) (SNP)
 Brown, Robert (Glasgow) (LD)
 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)
 Finnie, Ross (West of Scotland) (LD)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee West) (SNP)
 Foulkes, George (Lothians) (Lab)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gibson, Rob (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 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)
 Hume, Jim (South of Scotland) (LD)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Lothians) (SNP)
 Ingram, Adam (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Jamieson, Cathy (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (Lab)
 Kelly, James (Glasgow Rutherglen) (Lab)
 Kerr, Andy (East Kilbride) (Lab)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab)
 Livingstone, Marilyn (Kirkcaldy) (Lab)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacAskill, Kenny (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Macdonald, Lewis (Aberdeen Central) (Lab)
 MacDonald, Margo (Lothians) (Ind)
 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)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney) (LD)
 McCabe, Tom (Hamilton South) (Lab)
 McConnell, Jack (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)
 McInnes, Alison (North East Scotland) (LD)
 McKee, Ian (Lothians) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 McLaughlin, Anne (Glasgow) (SNP)
 McMahan, Michael (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab)
 McMillan, Stuart (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 McNeil, Duncan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab)
 McNulty, Des (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab)
 Morgan, Alasdair (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Mulligan, Mary (Linlithgow) (Lab)
 Munro, John Farquhar (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD)
 Murray, Elaine (Dumfries) (Lab)
 Neil, Alex (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 O'Donnell, Hugh (Central Scotland) (LD)
 Oldfather, Irene (Cunninghame South) (Lab)
 Park, John (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Paterson, Gil (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Peacock, Peter (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Pringle, Mike (Edinburgh South) (LD)
 Purvis, Jeremy (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee East) (SNP)
 Rumbles, Mike (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD)
 Russell, Michael (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Salmond, Alex (Gordon) (SNP)
 Scott, Tavish (Shetland) (LD)
 Simpson, Dr Richard (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Smith, Elaine (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab)
 Smith, Iain (North East Fife) (LD)
 Smith, Margaret (Edinburgh West) (LD)

Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Lothians) (SNP)
 Stephen, Nicol (Aberdeen South) (LD)
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banff and Buchan) (SNP)
 Stewart, David (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Stone, Jamie (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Govan) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (North Tayside) (SNP)
 Thompson, Dave (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Tolson, Jim (Dunfermline West) (LD)
 Watt, Maureen (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 Welsh, Andrew (Angus) (SNP)
 White, Sandra (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Whitefield, Karen (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab)
 Whitton, David (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Lab)
 Wilson, Bill (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Wilson, John (Central Scotland) (SNP)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 18, Against 107, Abstentions 0.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S3M-7692.2, in the name of Margaret Smith, which seeks to amend motion S3M-7692, 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)
 Boyack, Sarah (Edinburgh Central) (Lab)
 Brankin, Rhona (Midlothian) (Lab)
 Brocklebank, Ted (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Brown, Gavin (Lothians) (Con)
 Brown, Robert (Glasgow) (LD)
 Brownlee, Derek (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Butler, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab)
 Carlaw, Jackson (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Chisholm, Malcolm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab)
 Craigie, Cathie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab)
 Curran, Margaret (Glasgow Baillieston) (Lab)
 Eadie, Helen (Dunfermline East) (Lab)
 Ferguson, Patricia (Glasgow Maryhill) (Lab)
 Finnie, Ross (West of Scotland) (LD)
 Foulkes, George (Lothians) (Lab)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gillon, Karen (Clydesdale) (Lab)
 Glen, Marilyn (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)
 Jamieson, Cathy (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (Lab)
 Johnstone, Alex (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kelly, James (Glasgow Rutherglen) (Lab)
 Kerr, Andy (East Kilbride) (Lab)
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab)
 Lamont, John (Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Livingstone, Marilyn (Kirkcaldy) (Lab)
 Macdonald, Lewis (Aberdeen Central) (Lab)
 MacDonald, Margo (Lothians) (Ind)
 Macintosh, Ken (Eastwood) (Lab)

Martin, Paul (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney) (LD)
 McAveety, Mr Frank (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab)
 McCabe, Tom (Hamilton South) (Lab)
 McConnell, Jack (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)
 McGrigor, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 McInnes, Alison (North East Scotland) (LD)
 McLetchie, David (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Con)
 McMahon, Michael (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab)
 McNeil, Duncan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab)
 McNulty, Des (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab)
 Milne, Nanette (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Mulligan, Mary (Linlithgow) (Lab)
 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)
 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)
 Marwick, Tricia (Central Fife) (SNP)
 Mather, Jim (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 Maxwell, Stewart (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 McKee, Ian (Lothians) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 McLaughlin, Anne (Glasgow) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (West of Scotland) (SNP)

Morgan, Alasdair (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Neil, Alex (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Paterson, Gil (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee East) (SNP)
 Russell, Michael (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Salmond, Alex (Gordon) (SNP)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Lothians) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banff and Buchan) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Govan) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (North Tayside) (SNP)
 Thompson, Dave (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Watt, Maureen (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 Welsh, Andrew (Angus) (SNP)
 White, Sandra (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Wilson, Bill (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Wilson, John (Central Scotland) (SNP)

Abstentions

Harper, Robin (Lothians) (Green)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 77, Against 46, Abstentions 2.

Amendment agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S3M-7692, in the name of Des McNulty, on education, as amended, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Alexander, Ms Wendy (Paisley North) (Lab)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Edinburgh Central) (Lab)
 Brankin, Rhona (Midlothian) (Lab)
 Brown, Robert (Glasgow) (LD)
 Butler, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab)
 Chisholm, Malcolm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab)
 Craigie, Cathie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab)
 Curran, Margaret (Glasgow Baillieston) (Lab)
 Eadie, Helen (Dunfermline East) (Lab)
 Ferguson, Patricia (Glasgow Maryhill) (Lab)
 Finnie, Ross (West of Scotland) (LD)
 Foulkes, George (Lothians) (Lab)
 Gillon, Karen (Clydesdale) (Lab)
 Glen, Marilyn (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Godman, Trish (West Renfrewshire) (Lab)
 Gordon, Charlie (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Gray, Iain (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Henry, Hugh (Paisley South) (Lab)
 Hume, Jim (South of Scotland) (LD)
 Jamieson, Cathy (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (Lab)
 Kelly, James (Glasgow Rutherglen) (Lab)
 Kerr, Andy (East Kilbride) (Lab)
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab)
 Livingstone, Marilyn (Kirkcaldy) (Lab)
 Macdonald, Lewis (Aberdeen Central) (Lab)
 Macintosh, Ken (Eastwood) (Lab)
 Martin, Paul (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney) (LD)
 McAveety, Mr Frank (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab)
 McCabe, Tom (Hamilton South) (Lab)
 McConnell, Jack (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)
 McInnes, Alison (North East Scotland) (LD)
 McMahon, Michael (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab)

McNeil, Duncan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab)
 McNulty, Des (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab)
 Mulligan, Mary (Linlithgow) (Lab)
 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)
 Pringle, Mike (Edinburgh South) (LD)
 Purvis, Jeremy (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD)
 Rumbles, Mike (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD)
 Scott, Tavish (Shetland) (LD)
 Simpson, Dr Richard (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Smith, Elaine (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab)
 Smith, Iain (North East Fife) (LD)
 Smith, Margaret (Edinburgh West) (LD)
 Stephen, Nicol (Aberdeen South) (LD)
 Stewart, David (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Stone, Jamie (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)
 Tolson, Jim (Dunfermline West) (LD)
 Whitefield, Karen (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab)
 Whitton, David (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Lab)

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)
 Harper, Robin (Lothians) (Green)
 Harvie, Christopher (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Lothians) (SNP)
 Ingram, Adam (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacAskill, Kenny (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Marwick, Tricia (Central Fife) (SNP)
 Mather, Jim (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 Maxwell, Stewart (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 McKee, Ian (Lothians) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 McLaughlin, Anne (Glasgow) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Morgan, Alasdair (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Neil, Alex (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Paterson, Gil (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee East) (SNP)
 Russell, Michael (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Salmond, Alex (Gordon) (SNP)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Lothians) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banff and Buchan) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Govan) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (North Tayside) (SNP)
 Thompson, Dave (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Watt, Maureen (North East Scotland) (SNP)

Welsh, Andrew (Angus) (SNP)
 White, Sandra (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Wilson, Bill (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Wilson, John (Central Scotland) (SNP)

Abstentions

Aitken, Bill (Glasgow) (Con)
 Brocklebank, Ted (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Brown, Gavin (Lothians) (Con)
 Brownlee, Derek (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Goldie, Annabel (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Johnstone, Alex (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Lamont, John (Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 MacDonald, Margo (Lothians) (Ind)
 McGrigor, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 McLetchie, David (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Con)
 Milne, Nanette (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Scanlon, Mary (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)
 Smith, Elizabeth (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 60, Against 48, Abstentions 17.

Motion, as amended, agreed to,

That the Parliament condemns the reduction in the number of teachers under the SNP by almost 3,000 since 2007 and the sharp rise in the proportion of recently qualified teachers who cannot obtain permanent or even temporary employment; notes that the percentage of newly qualified staff who have obtained full-time permanent posts has fallen to just 16.1%, a record low; expresses concern that pupil/teacher ratios are rising across Scotland and many colleges have insufficient bursary funds to meet demand, and calls on the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning to apologise for getting involved in local authority decisions outwith his regional constituency instead of tackling the impact that fewer teachers, more unemployed recently qualified teachers, higher pupil/teacher ratios and a shortfall in bursary funding will have on education in Scotland; notes the inconsistent comments of the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning in relation to his role in local school closures, and calls on the Scottish Government to clarify the rules governing the involvement of the cabinet secretary in decisions to close local schools.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S3M-7693.3, in the name of Lewis Macdonald, which seeks to amend motion S3M-7693, in the name of Jim Mather, on electricity market reform, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Alexander, Ms Wendy (Paisley North) (Lab)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Edinburgh Central) (Lab)
 Brankin, Rhona (Midlothian) (Lab)
 Butler, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab)
 Chisholm, Malcolm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab)
 Craigie, Cathie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab)
 Curran, Margaret (Glasgow Baillieston) (Lab)
 Eadie, Helen (Dunfermline East) (Lab)

Ferguson, Patricia (Glasgow Maryhill) (Lab)
 Foulkes, George (Lothians) (Lab)
 Gillon, Karen (Clydesdale) (Lab)
 Glen, Marlyn (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Godman, Trish (West Renfrewshire) (Lab)
 Gordon, Charlie (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Gray, Iain (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Henry, Hugh (Paisley South) (Lab)
 Jamieson, Cathy (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (Lab)
 Kelly, James (Glasgow Rutherglen) (Lab)
 Kerr, Andy (East Kilbride) (Lab)
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab)
 Livingstone, Marilyn (Kirkcaldy) (Lab)
 Macdonald, Lewis (Aberdeen Central) (Lab)
 Macintosh, Ken (Eastwood) (Lab)
 Martin, Paul (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab)
 McAveety, Mr Frank (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab)
 McCabe, Tom (Hamilton South) (Lab)
 McConnell, Jack (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)
 McMahon, Michael (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab)
 McNeil, Duncan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab)
 McNulty, Des (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab)
 Mulligan, Mary (Linlithgow) (Lab)
 Murray, Elaine (Dumfries) (Lab)
 Oldfather, Irene (Cunninghame South) (Lab)
 Park, John (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Peacock, Peter (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Simpson, Dr Richard (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Smith, Elaine (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab)
 Stewart, David (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Whitefield, Karen (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab)
 Whitton, David (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Lab)

Against

Adam, Brian (Aberdeen North) (SNP)
 Aitken, Bill (Glasgow) (Con)
 Allan, Alasdair (Western Isles) (SNP)
 Brocklebank, Ted (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Brown, Gavin (Lothians) (Con)
 Brown, Keith (Ochil) (SNP)
 Brown, Robert (Glasgow) (LD)
 Brownlee, Derek (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Livingston) (SNP)
 Crawford, Bruce (Stirling) (SNP)
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perth) (SNP)
 Don, Nigel (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP)
 Fabiani, Linda (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Finnie, Ross (West of Scotland) (LD)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee West) (SNP)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gibson, Rob (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Goldie, Annabel (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Grahame, Christine (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Harper, Robin (Lothians) (Green)
 Harvie, Christopher (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Hume, Jim (South of Scotland) (LD)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Lothians) (SNP)
 Ingram, Adam (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Johnstone, Alex (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Lamont, John (Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)

MacAskill, Kenny (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Marwick, Tricia (Central Fife) (SNP)
 Mather, Jim (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 Maxwell, Stewart (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney) (LD)
 McGrigor, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 McInnes, Alison (North East Scotland) (LD)
 McKee, Ian (Lothians) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 McLaughlin, Anne (Glasgow) (SNP)
 McLetchie, David (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Con)
 McMillan, Stuart (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Milne, Nanette (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Morgan, Alasdair (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Munro, John Farquhar (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD)
 Neil, Alex (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 O'Donnell, Hugh (Central Scotland) (LD)
 Paterson, Gil (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Pringle, Mike (Edinburgh South) (LD)
 Purvis, Jeremy (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee East) (SNP)
 Rumbles, Mike (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD)
 Russell, Michael (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Salmond, Alex (Gordon) (SNP)
 Scanlon, Mary (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)
 Scott, Tavish (Shetland) (LD)
 Smith, Elizabeth (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Smith, Iain (North East Fife) (LD)
 Smith, Margaret (Edinburgh West) (LD)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Lothians) (SNP)
 Stephen, Nicol (Aberdeen South) (LD)
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banff and Buchan) (SNP)
 Stone, Jamie (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Govan) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (North Tayside) (SNP)
 Thompson, Dave (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Tolson, Jim (Dunfermline West) (LD)
 Watt, Maureen (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 Welsh, Andrew (Angus) (SNP)
 White, Sandra (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Wilson, Bill (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Wilson, John (Central Scotland) (SNP)

Abstentions

MacDonald, Margo (Lothians) (Ind)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 44, Against 80, Abstentions 1.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S3M-7693.1, in the name of Gavin Brown, which seeks to amend motion S3M-7693, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Aitken, Bill (Glasgow) (Con)
 Brocklebank, Ted (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Brown, Gavin (Lothians) (Con)
 Brownlee, Derek (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Goldie, Annabel (West of Scotland) (Con)

Johnstone, Alex (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Lamont, John (Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 McGrigor, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 McLetchie, David (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Con)
 Milne, Nanette (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Scanlon, Mary (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)
 Smith, Elizabeth (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)

Against

Adam, Brian (Aberdeen North) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Western Isles) (SNP)
 Brown, Keith (Ochil) (SNP)
 Brown, Robert (Glasgow) (LD)
 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)
 Finnie, Ross (West of Scotland) (LD)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee West) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gibson, Rob (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Harper, Robin (Lothians) (Green)
 Harvie, Christopher (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Hume, Jim (South of Scotland) (LD)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Lothians) (SNP)
 Ingram, Adam (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacAskill, Kenny (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Marwick, Tricia (Central Fife) (SNP)
 Mather, Jim (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 Maxwell, Stewart (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney) (LD)
 McInnes, Alison (North East Scotland) (LD)
 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)
 Munro, John Farquhar (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD)
 Neil, Alex (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 O'Donnell, Hugh (Central Scotland) (LD)
 Paterson, Gil (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Pringle, Mike (Edinburgh South) (LD)
 Purvis, Jeremy (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee East) (SNP)
 Rumbles, Mike (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD)
 Russell, Michael (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Salmond, Alex (Gordon) (SNP)
 Scott, Tavish (Shetland) (LD)
 Smith, Iain (North East Fife) (LD)
 Smith, Margaret (Edinburgh West) (LD)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Lothians) (SNP)
 Stephen, Nicol (Aberdeen South) (LD)
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banff and Buchan) (SNP)
 Stone, Jamie (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Govan) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (North Tayside) (SNP)
 Thompson, Dave (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Tolson, Jim (Dunfermline West) (LD)

Watt, Maureen (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 Welsh, Andrew (Angus) (SNP)
 White, Sandra (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Wilson, Bill (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Wilson, John (Central Scotland) (SNP)

Abstentions

Alexander, Ms Wendy (Paisley North) (Lab)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Edinburgh Central) (Lab)
 Brankin, Rhona (Midlothian) (Lab)
 Butler, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab)
 Chisholm, Malcolm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab)
 Craigie, Cathie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab)
 Curran, Margaret (Glasgow Baillieston) (Lab)
 Eadie, Helen (Dunfermline East) (Lab)
 Ferguson, Patricia (Glasgow Maryhill) (Lab)
 Foulkes, George (Lothians) (Lab)
 Gillon, Karen (Clydesdale) (Lab)
 Glen, Marilyn (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Godman, Trish (West Renfrewshire) (Lab)
 Gordon, Charlie (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Gray, Iain (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Henry, Hugh (Paisley South) (Lab)
 Jamieson, Cathy (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (Lab)
 Kelly, James (Glasgow Rutherglen) (Lab)
 Kerr, Andy (East Kilbride) (Lab)
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab)
 Livingstone, Marilyn (Kirkcaldy) (Lab)
 Macdonald, Lewis (Aberdeen Central) (Lab)
 MacDonald, Margo (Lothians) (Ind)
 Macintosh, Ken (Eastwood) (Lab)
 Martin, Paul (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab)
 McAveety, Mr Frank (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab)
 McCabe, Tom (Hamilton South) (Lab)
 McConnell, Jack (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)
 McMahon, Michael (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab)
 McNeil, Duncan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab)
 McNulty, Des (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab)
 Mulligan, Mary (Linlithgow) (Lab)
 Murray, Elaine (Dumfries) (Lab)
 Oldfather, Irene (Cunninghame South) (Lab)
 Park, John (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Peacock, Peter (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Simpson, Dr Richard (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Smith, Elaine (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab)
 Stewart, David (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Whitefield, Karen (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab)
 Whitton, David (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Lab)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 16, Against 64, Abstentions 45.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S3M-7693.2, in the name of Liam McArthur, which seeks to amend motion S3M-7693, be agreed to.

Amendment agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S3M-7693, in the name of Jim Mather, on electricity market reform, 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)
 Boyack, Sarah (Edinburgh Central) (Lab)
 Brankin, Rhona (Midlothian) (Lab)
 Brown, Keith (Ochil) (SNP)
 Brown, Robert (Glasgow) (LD)
 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)
 Finnie, Ross (West of Scotland) (LD)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee West) (SNP)
 Foulkes, George (Lothians) (Lab)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gibson, Rob (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 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)
 Hume, Jim (South of Scotland) (LD)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Lothians) (SNP)
 Ingram, Adam (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Jamieson, Cathy (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (Lab)
 Kelly, James (Glasgow Rutherglen) (Lab)
 Kerr, Andy (East Kilbride) (Lab)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab)
 Livingstone, Marilyn (Kirkcaldy) (Lab)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacAskill, Kenny (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 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)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney) (LD)
 McAveety, Mr Frank (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab)
 McCabe, Tom (Hamilton South) (Lab)
 McConnell, Jack (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)
 McInnes, Alison (North East Scotland) (LD)
 McKee, Ian (Lothians) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 McLaughlin, Anne (Glasgow) (SNP)
 McMahon, Michael (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab)
 McMillan, Stuart (West of Scotland) (SNP)

McNeil, Duncan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab)
 McNulty, Des (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab)
 Morgan, Alasdair (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Mulligan, Mary (Linlithgow) (Lab)
 Munro, John Farquhar (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD)
 Murray, Elaine (Dumfries) (Lab)
 Neil, Alex (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 O'Donnell, Hugh (Central Scotland) (LD)
 Oldfather, Irene (Cunninghame South) (Lab)
 Park, John (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Paterson, Gil (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Peacock, Peter (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Pringle, Mike (Edinburgh South) (LD)
 Purvis, Jeremy (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee East) (SNP)
 Rumbles, Mike (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD)
 Russell, Michael (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Salmond, Alex (Gordon) (SNP)
 Scott, Tavish (Shetland) (LD)
 Simpson, Dr Richard (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Smith, Elaine (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab)
 Smith, Iain (North East Fife) (LD)
 Smith, Margaret (Edinburgh West) (LD)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Lothians) (SNP)
 Stephen, Nicol (Aberdeen South) (LD)
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banff and Buchan) (SNP)
 Stewart, David (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Stone, Jamie (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Govan) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (North Tayside) (SNP)
 Thompson, Dave (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Tolson, Jim (Dunfermline West) (LD)
 Watt, Maureen (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 Welsh, Andrew (Angus) (SNP)
 White, Sandra (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Whitefield, Karen (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab)
 Whitton, David (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Lab)
 Wilson, Bill (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Wilson, John (Central Scotland) (SNP)

Against

Aitken, Bill (Glasgow) (Con)
 Brocklebank, Ted (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Brown, Gavin (Lothians) (Con)
 Brownlee, Derek (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Goldie, Annabel (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Johnstone, Alex (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Lamont, John (Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 McGrigor, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 McLetchie, David (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Con)
 Milne, Nanette (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Scanlon, Mary (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)
 Smith, Elizabeth (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)

Abstentions

MacDonald, Margo (Lothians) (Ind)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 108, Against 16, Abstentions 1.

Motion, as amended, agreed to,

That the Parliament notes the UK Government's electricity market reform proposals and their importance to the delivery of the Parliament's climate change and low-carbon energy objectives for Scotland; agrees that the

related UK review of Ofgem and the transmission charging regime is an opportunity to deliver a more equitable system that is fit to help deliver Scotland's massive low-carbon energy potential that will bring economic and other benefits to communities across Scotland; further notes the Parliament's existing powers with regard to renewables and carbon capture and storage (CCS), which it believes should, at a minimum, be left intact; believes that the Parliament should continue to use these powers in support of the development of Scotland's low-carbon energy potential; urges the UK Government to work closely with the Scottish Government to ensure that reforms further incentivise clean energy and incentivise energy demand reduction, as set out in the Draft Electricity Generation Policy Statement 2010; calls on the UK Government and Scottish Government to work together to help fulfil Scotland's low-carbon potential, and further urges the UK Government to ensure full and immediate consultation with the Parliament on these proposals and supports Longannet to become the UK's first demonstration facility for CCS with up to £1 billion of UK Government funding.

Freight Facilities Grants

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Alasdair Morgan): The final item of business today is a members' business debate on motion S3M-7567, in the name of Cathy Jamieson, on freight facilities grants. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament celebrates the contribution of the Scottish Government's Freight Facilities Grants (FFG) in moving freight to rail and sea, and the contribution that this makes to reducing carbon emissions and congestion; notes that 37 FFG awards totalling £68.9 million have been made to projects in Scotland and understands that this reduces the need for 33,573,500 lorry miles per year; recognises that Transport Scotland is in advanced discussions with a number of bidders to the fund, including a proposal by a social enterprise in South Ayrshire for a railhead at Grangestone by Girvan; believes that a Grangestone railhead could provide great economic and environmental benefits to South Ayrshire; regrets the Scottish Government's proposals to reduce support for the freight industry from £10.3 million in 2010-11 to £2.9 million in 2011-12, including the closure of the FFG scheme for projects which will incur expenditure after 31 March 2011, and expresses great concern that this would put in jeopardy the work that has been done on the Grangestone railhead scheme and similar proposals across Scotland.

17:10

Cathy Jamieson (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (Lab): I thank members, particularly those who have stayed for the debate, for their support for the motion, which has helped it to be selected for debate. I also take the opportunity to welcome the Minister for Transport and Infrastructure to his new post.

The freight facilities grants scheme is an extremely important issue—I would go so far as to say that it is a key issue—in this year's budget. It is a vital issue for my constituency, where it is fair to say that the announcement that the scheme would end came as a shock, because a considerable amount of work has been done on a bid for a new scheme at Grangestone, in Girvan.

The issue is also vital for the economy and environment of Scotland as a whole. That is borne out by the wide range of comments and submissions to the Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change Committee's scrutiny of the budget process, in particular from Highland Spring in Perthshire, in the constituency of the Minister for the Environment and Climate Change. It is also borne out by the wide support for the motion from the rail industry, business, trade unions and environmental groups. I am sure that the speeches in tonight's debate will reinforce for the minister many of the points that have been made.

The amount of money that the freight facilities grants scheme involves is not huge in the context of the budget as a whole. However, such investment can help to regenerate communities, secure jobs, boost the economy and improve our environment. By any standards, the scheme has been a success. It has provided capital grants of up to 75 per cent of costs, to encourage the transfer of freight from roads to more sustainable methods of transport. Almost £70 million has been awarded in Scotland since 1997—I have just checked with Malcolm Chisholm, who is sitting next to me, that he was the minister with responsibility for transport at the time of the scheme's introduction. According to the Scottish Government's figures, the transfer of freight to rail and shipping has taken 33 million lorry miles away from Scotland's road network annually. That is a massive achievement, which we should all celebrate, as the motion says. Without the FFG scheme, our environment would be poorer and our roads would be more congested and dangerous. In addition, we should not forget the benefits of the FFG scheme to business and the economy, in particular in creating and sustaining jobs in rural areas.

Schemes throughout Scotland have been supported and members will no doubt talk about the benefits for their areas. I have seen the benefits in East Ayrshire, where massive amounts of coal are now transported by rail rather than road.

The Grangestone proposal, which is outlined in my motion, would remove some 4,000 lorry journeys from roads in South Ayrshire. It has the potential to reduce the number of heavy goods vehicles that travel on the A77, where, as the minister will have heard from his predecessor, communities such as Maybole, Minishant, Kirkoswald, Girvan, Lendalfoot, Ballantrae and Glenapp have long-standing campaigns for road improvements that would reduce the number of accidents, for speed reduction measures and for by-passes. No doubt the minister will also take account of what his colleague Adam Ingram, who is sitting next to him, says, because Adam Ingram well knows about the pressure from communities on the issue.

I am not for a minute suggesting that the Grangestone scheme could solve all the problems. However, it could reduce the pressure on local roads, cut emissions and improve the local environment. That is a win-win situation, which—rightly—has significant backing throughout the local community. Major businesses that operate in global markets are located at Grangestone, such as William Grant & Sons Distillers and Nestlé. In recent times, both companies have made major investments in their plants to cut carbon emissions.

We can build on that progress. The proposal provides a chance to bring to fruition an innovative and far-reaching project that will be good for business and the environment and which will have the community at its heart. The unique aspect of the project is that it is being taken forward by Ailsa Horizons, which is a social enterprise that has charitable recognition. The company has set up a separate community interest company to operate its proposed railhead, and the plan is that the share of the profits that went to Ailsa Horizons would be channelled into local economic development activity.

The proposal could be the first ever community-owned rail freight facility in the United Kingdom. That is why it has been supported so well and why there is such dismay that this ambitious plan appears to have been wiped out at the stroke of a ministerial pen. It is all the more surprising to me, as the plan seems to tick all the boxes for the Scottish Government's own priorities, given its economic, environmental, social and, indeed, commercial benefits.

To scrap the project now, after the significant time and money that has already been invested, would be seen as a slap in the face for Carrick. It would be a particularly bitter blow, as money was previously allocated to a freight facilities grant for the area to create a railhead at Barrhill to take transportation of timber off local roads. For various reasons, that money was never drawn down, but I argued at the time that future bids should be given a degree of priority to ensure that the area would get a fair share of available funding.

The Grangestone scheme has the support of many people outside the Parliament. Tony Berkeley, chairman of the Rail Freight Group, said:

"Projects such as the Girvan Intermodal Railhead show how small amounts of Government grant can support significant local investment in rail, and deliver economic and environment benefits across Scotland."

WWF said:

"Abolishing this scheme will limit any further road to rail switch and is likely to increase climate pollution as a result."

Keith Norman, the general secretary of the Associated Society of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen, said:

"Scotland's future low carbon economy needs a strong rail freight sector".

The National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers has added its support, highlighting that the loss of freight facilities grants would reverse the progress that has been made in transferring freight from road to rail.

I recognise that the Scottish Government's funding position is constrained. I did not and do not intend to make the debate party political if I

can help it—I am trying to be as constructive as possible—but it is shortsighted to scrap a successful scheme with so much potential. At the very least, the Minister for Transport and Infrastructure could argue for keeping open the possibility of in-year funding for schemes that are already in progress, such as those at Grangestone and Blackford in Perthshire.

I have some experience of the way in which budget options are drawn up and I can only surmise that perhaps the FFG scheme came to be on the hit list as a result of underspends in some years leading to the belief that there was no need for the scheme. I see from today's newswires that the scheme is now described as "suspended", not scrapped. Perhaps that is a bit of movement, because scrapping the FFG would be bad for business, the environment and my local community, which has much to gain from the excellent proposal for Grangestone.

It is not too late to resolve the matter. As we are talking railways, I will not ask the minister to do a U-turn, but I ask that he stop, reverse, change direction and give an assurance that the FFG schemes will not be shunted into the sidings. I hope that, in his response, he will give a commitment to ensuring that the schemes that are in progress will proceed and a continued commitment to freight facilities grants for the future.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We come to the open debate. I ask for speeches of four minutes. The debate is oversubscribed, so I will stop members when they get to the four-minute mark.

17:18

Christopher Harvie (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP): I congratulate Cathy Jamieson on the motion and her eloquent presentation of it. I also declare an interest as the honorary president of the Scottish Association for Public Transport.

The debate is set against the background of great shifts in natural resources. The price of oil was \$10 per barrel in 1999—the year of the Parliament's inauguration—but we are now on the edge of the \$100 barrel, a figure that was not expected before 2030. That has already affected the USA, where the 50 cents gallon has given way to the \$3 gallon, a fact that underlies the declining fortunes of the American middle class and the emergence of the sub-prime generation.

One result of that has been the declining profitability of road transport. In Scotland, we are presently menaced by rises in fuel duty. One hopes that that will be reversed, but it will not be the last such situation. In October last year, the coalition Government tabled the introduction of road freight lorry user charging following success

in Switzerland and Germany with the Brummi-Maut—the lorry toll. That is bound to have a significant impact on road haulage in Britain.

Meanwhile, despite the recession, rail freight increased by 65 per cent between 1997 and 2009. Freight grants have, yet again, made Aberdeen a major centre of freight transfer, with three depots. Large amounts of goods for supermarkets run in dedicated trains from the English midlands to destinations in Aberdeen and Inverness. Given the right regime, rail is expected to rise fivefold during the next 20 years. Much of that could now be put at risk.

Some might ask whether, if growth is coming anyway because of rising fuel costs and so on, we need the freight facilities grant. In Germany, for example, a market has been enforced by restrictions and taxation on road haulage rather than by subsidy. In the case of the capture of supermarket traffic, those restrictions were probably the driving functions, rather than subsidies.

However, an important further challenge is waiting for us, and that is rail's contribution to Scotland's renewables revolution. We will require seamless transit from European factories to Scottish assembly plants. One key site is the Fife energy park at Methil, which is the host to Burntisland Fabrications Ltd's assembly plant for jackets for offshore wind farms. The components for those can come from up to a dozen different countries. In the opinion of Neil Henderson, the BiFab site manager, a railway siding into the Methil yard from the Thornton to Levenmouth branch line, which is mothballed at the moment and would require £46 million to be restored for passengers and freight, would, in his words, be "a godsend". It would add to a number of important local shifts from road to rail, notably that of the Diageo distillery, which produces whisky, Gordon's gin and Smirnoff vodka—as Michael Caine would say, not a lot of people know that—at Cameronbridge. Diageo has been trying for some time to get rail access from Network Rail. Surely it is time for rail access to that major region, which has a lot of social problems and enormous possibilities, but which is also an area in which freight facilities grants could be an implement of revitalisation. I plead with the minister to grant that.

17:22

Michael McMahon (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab): I begin by congratulating Cathy Jamieson on securing the debate and providing members with the opportunity to highlight the short-sightedness of the Scottish Government's decision to cut off the supply of freight facilities grants. It also affords me the chance to join Cathy

Jamieson in raising concerns about the impact that the Government's decision will have on my constituency of Hamilton North and Bellshill.

The Minister for Transport and Infrastructure (Keith Brown): Would the member like to address the impact of the £800 million cut in this year's capital budget? If Cathy Jamieson can describe the reduction of the freight facilities grant as "a slap in the face", does the member agree that the cut in the capital budget is tantamount to grievous bodily harm to the Scottish budget?

Michael McMahon: The minister makes a clever argument, but he can see the importance of his strategy—I will come on to that later—and he is undermining his position rather than making me defend the difficulties that he faces.

Twenty-five years ago, in January 1986, the then Tory Government's economic cutbacks meant that the traditional Lanarkshire steel-making industry began to be closed down. Ravenscraig was under threat, and the 12 Gartcosh to London marchers set off, determined to fight against the plant's already announced closure. We all know that the steel works are no more, but what is not so well known is the fact that Bellshill, which was one of the worst-affected areas in Lanarkshire, managed to recover by exploiting its geography and transport infrastructure links to become a hub for distribution and logistics. Central to that was the development of the Mossend rail freight terminal and Peter D Stirling Ltd's Mossend railhead depot.

In November 2003, the then Labour-led Administration announced the award of a freight facilities grant of £650,000 to English, Welsh and Scottish Railway Ltd for additional freight facilities at Mossend to enable the transfer of an express parcel service from road to rail. Other grants were also awarded, such as one for the then Safeway logistics depot in Bellshill to put trailers on to rail for transportation north to Inverness. Mossend was rightly identified by that Labour-led Administration as a strategically important centre for rail freight in Scotland, and those grants reflected the Scottish Executive's recognition of the site's significance in enabling the transfer to rail.

However, along comes the Scottish National Party Government and its transport myopia: no Edinburgh airport rail link, no Glasgow airport rail link, delays in the M8 and Raith upgrades, and many more transport projects postponed or shelved.

The Government has the stated policy, in its freight action plan, to make

"the movement of freight through the entire supply chain ... efficient and sustainable"

by pursuing activities that promote modal shift to rail and shipping, and we have heard that

“moving more freight to rail contributed to the Government’s targets of making our transport network ‘smarter’ and ‘greener’.”

Mossend is geared up to play its part in that strategy.

As ASLEF has pointed out, there have been almost £70 million of FFGs in Scotland through 40 grants since 1997, which has taken 30 million lorry miles from Scotland’s roads. By freezing FFGs, the Government is not only undermining its own policies, but is putting the brakes on the regeneration of Lanarkshire and the economic fightback against the cuts that started 25 years ago and which led to the fight to defend our steel industry. I ask the minister to ensure that, this evening, he sends out a signal that we will not have to look back to those days for an example of what has to be done to defend the industries that have grown in Lanarkshire out of the mess that was created so long ago. He has an opportunity to do the right thing. It is asking for money in a tight budgetary period, but the failure to deliver that money will undermine the Government’s own strategy. That is the problem for the minister. He can throw figures around as much as he wants tonight, but it is the Government’s problem—the Government created it and he must solve it.

17:26

John Scott (Ayr) (Con): I congratulate Cathy Jamieson on securing the debate, which is relevant to Ayrshire and South Ayrshire, in particular, which we both represent. The freight facilities grants have had a very beneficial effect on the whole of Scotland, from Thurso to Galloway, and their importance in keeping freight off our roads and in developing freight modal shift should be regarded as a success. I support Cathy Jamieson’s comments about the benefits of the scheme.

In Ayr, Associated British Ports, which is known locally as ABP, received one of the biggest awards in the scheme—more than £4 million—to bring in timber, which has had a positive economic impact on the ports of Ayr and Troon as well as on rural communities in Argyll. The grant award kick-started timber shipping on the west coast of Scotland and brought timber from Campbeltown, Ardrishaig, Portavadie and Sandbank mainly to Troon for onward transmission to Wilson’s sawmills in Troon, the Caledonian paper mill in Irene Oldfather’s constituency and the Egger chipboard plant in Cathy Jamieson’s constituency.

That investment has played a vital role in sustaining jobs at those facilities, which must be recognised. However, the withdrawal of the

scheme is now threatening economic development at the Ayrshire ports in my constituency, which is a matter of great concern to me. Indeed, a project has been threatened by the abrupt withdrawal of the freight facilities grant, with meetings with Government transport teams being cancelled recently at very short notice. That is a matter of the utmost concern to me. Commercial confidentiality does not allow me to give more details, in this most public place, of the proposal that has been put in jeopardy, but Government officials and, I am certain, the minister will be aware of the project to which I am alluding, and of the meeting that was scheduled for 15 November to discuss the project that was cancelled by Government officials.

I acknowledge the historical benefit of the scheme but greatly regret its withdrawal, in effect, because the economic benefit that its further application would have brought to my constituency will not now be enjoyed by my constituents. Further, the jeopardising of the proposal at Grangeton, in Cathy Jamieson’s constituency, has an impact on my constituents as well, as many people travel from Ayr, Prestwick and Troon to take up employment in her constituency. Like her, I would like the grants to be reinstated.

I understand that the Government must make savings in its budgets. However, the obvious benefits of the scheme throughout Scotland, in terms of economic development, greenhouse gas reductions and, therefore, the meeting of climate change targets, mean that it is not a scheme to cut. In addition, given the fact that the roads maintenance budget is already a headache for the minister and councils throughout Scotland—particularly South Ayrshire Council—it is vital that other modes of transport be used for freight transfer.

In summary, the multiple benefits that the scheme supports and provides should not be put at risk by the proposed reduction in funding from £10.3 million to £2.9 million in this year’s budget. Such a proposal is truly short-sighted and goes counter to many of the Government’s and the Parliament’s stated aims and agreed targets. Considering the relatively modest sums that are involved, in the context of the overall budget, I ask the minister to discuss the matter further with the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth with a view to restoring the freight facilities grant in full in this year’s budget and thereafter.

17:30

Karen Whitefield (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab): I welcome the opportunity to speak in this evening’s debate and I congratulate my colleague, Cathy Jamieson, on securing a members’ business debate on this important matter.

Like many members speaking tonight, I am surprised and disappointed by the Scottish Government's decision to scrap the freight facilities grant and I struggle to understand the logic of the decision. To its credit, the Scottish Government has placed environmental sustainability to the fore in its policy making—perhaps as a matter of principle, or perhaps as a pragmatic response to the need to work in partnership with the Green party. However, the decision to scrap the freight facilities grant seriously undermines the Government's ambition to reduce carbon emissions.

Keith Brown: Does the member think that the decision of the Labour Government to scrap the scheme five years ago and the fact that it spent less money in five years in England—which has a much bigger transport network than we do—than we have spent in one year in Scotland, mean that the Labour Government should have attracted the same kind of criticism? Did she make any points about the matter at the time?

Karen Whitefield: We are talking about Scotland, and the minister is responsible for the situation in Scotland. Labour Party members criticise their party when they need to. We do not just do as we are told; we take responsibility, which is what we are asking the minister to do tonight.

The grant system was designed and implemented in recognition of the economic advantages of reducing long-distance road congestion, and of the social and environmental advantages of rail freight. Given the threat of climate change, those justifications have only grown stronger with time.

As others have pointed out, the freight facilities grant has helped to take over 33 million lorry miles off our roads since 1997. That has been delivered through 37 awards totalling £69 million. Indeed, the vast majority of the projects facilitating the shift from road to rail in Scotland in recent years have been achieved with the assistance of the freight facilities grant.

Given the significantly better carbon emission figures for rail—it produces 70 per cent less carbon than the equivalent road journey—that represents a substantial and positive impact on the environment.

That was recognised by Transport Scotland when it stated that moving more freight to rail contributed to the Government's targets of making our transport network smarter and greener.

In addition to the environmental impact of removing freight from our roads, there are also significant benefits in relation to congestion and road safety.

I support the call that is being made by Transform Scotland and the Rail Freight Group to retain the scheme with an initial suggested budget of around £5 million. That will ensure that the momentum that has been created and maintained through the FFG since its introduction will not be lost.

There is a real concern that, without the grant, future freight infrastructure projects will fall at the first hurdle due to insufficient funding. Indeed, concerns have been raised that withdrawal of the grant could lead to existing rail traffic reverting to road haulage.

Obviously, members' business debates finish without a decision. However, I hope that the minister is listening closely to the case that is being presented this evening by members across the chamber. This is not about scoring party-political points. I accept the Government's commitment to environmental sustainability. I ask only that the minister take the steps that are needed to turn that commitment into action.

17:34

Alison McInnes (North East Scotland) (LD): I congratulate Cathy Jamieson on securing this debate, which provides us with an opportunity to discuss not only the future of the freight facilities grant but also the wider issue of sustainable freight transport in Scotland. For that, I am grateful.

There are many innovative ways to make the transport sector more sustainable—encouraging the use of private electric vehicles, for example—but, if we are serious about our intentions to create a transport network that is fit for the 21st century and is aligned with our climate change targets, the issue of sustainable freight management cannot be ignored.

Like others, I am dismayed by the Scottish Government's intention to withdraw support for the freight facilities grant. It is a tried and tested scheme that is designed specifically to make the transportation of freight more sustainable and we know that it has worked, bringing a reduction of 33.5 million heavy goods vehicle road miles per annum across Scotland.

In my own region, awards that were granted to Asda, W H Malcolm, ARR Craib Transport and DRS have resulted in the removal of around 12,000 lorry journeys from the A9 and A90 each year. Such grants are estimated to have provided roughly £4 million-worth of environmental benefits over the past five years.

Despite those positive results in the north east and throughout Scotland, there is much work still

to be done, given that more than 1.5 billion HGV miles were travelled on the road network last year.

By withdrawing support for the FFG at this point, ministers are taking a puzzling approach that goes against the grain of the stated aims of transport and climate change policies. The national transport strategy states that the Government will

“Actively promote sustainable distribution strategies, aimed at enabling freight to use rail and sea as alternatives to road and reducing the environmental impact of freight ... on roads”.

Despite the Scottish National Party's claim to be striving for a Scotland that is characterised by the sustainable movement of freight, it seems to be intent on jettisoning an initiative that is aligned with its policy objectives and is proven to work.

The TICC Committee raised concerns about the scheme's closure in its budget submission to the Finance Committee, but the concern is wider than that. Members will all have heard the concerns of Direct Rail Services, the Rail Freight Group, ASLEF and the RMT. Transform Scotland has warned that the loss of the grant may even lead to some of the freight that is sustainably transported at present reverting back to road haulage. That is a worrying prospect indeed, and I hope that the minister will address it later in the debate.

Even if that fear proves to be unfounded, the suspension of the scheme at the very least immediately puts at risk five large-scale modal shift projects throughout Scotland. In my own region, that means that a project by Lafarge to take hundreds of lorry-loads of bagged cement off the road may now not go ahead.

The minister should know that I will find it difficult indeed to explain to my constituents why a Government that is supposedly committed to moving freight from road to rail is, in this case, acting to prevent that from happening.

I have so far focused on the benefits that the FFG provides in terms of sustainability and emissions levels, but we should not overlook the other benefits of taking freight off the road. In road safety terms, for example, HGVs are involved in accidents that represent a cost of £1.3 billion a year throughout the UK. By reducing the number of HGVs, we can reduce the frequency and severity of such accidents.

I am told that the cancellation of the grant will result in an additional cost of £2.4 million per annum in road maintenance. We know that councils are already facing crippling road maintenance bills because of the harsh winter—surely we should be doing all that we can to reduce the number of HGVs that are pounding the roads.

I appreciate that we are facing unprecedented economic times, and that consequently Governments must look again at their actions. Nevertheless, the cancellation of the grant without any indication of how the positive outcomes from the scheme will be achieved in other ways can be described only as short-sighted.

It would be helpful if the minister, in his speech at the end of the debate, could inform us of how his Government intends to fill the gap that the cancellation of the grant will leave and ensure that Scotland is travelling forwards, not backwards, with regard to sustainable freight management.

17:38

Charlie Gordon (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab): I congratulate my colleague Cathy Jamieson on bringing to the chamber a debate that is at once important and very topical.

At the December 7 meeting of the Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change Committee, I pressed the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth, John Swinney, on the proposal in next year's draft budget to close the freight facilities grant to new applications. The cabinet secretary pointed to a trend in recent years of a lack of draw-down of the grants that are available.

To what can that lack of successful applications be attributed? Operators in the freight transport industry have told me that they found some of the scheme rules a bit bureaucratic and that some applications were falling at various hurdles. The cabinet secretary took the view that some applications were falling foul of state aid rules, but we do not have more information on that point at the moment. There might well be merit in both of those contentions.

If there were no applications in the pipeline and given the severe budget pressures, there could be a financial case for the Government to say that, since no one is applying for the grant, it would not be wrong to use the money for something else and to close the scheme to new applications. However, Cathy Jamieson pointed out a scheme in the making that would have the benefit of eliminating 4,000 lorry journeys, Professor Harvie alluded to an example in Fife that has the potential to eliminate 13,000 lorry journeys and Alison McInnes alluded to another potential scheme that could account for 2,360 lorry journeys. Then there is the example of the John G Russell, Ferguson Transport and BSW sawmilling facility at Corpach, which has the potential to eliminate up to 5,000 lorry journeys, and of course the Highland Spring proposal in relation to Blackford, with the potential benefit of the removal of up to 10,000 lorry journeys.

The problem with stopping new applications at this stage is that this year, arguably unlike other years, there seems to be quite a lot in the pipeline. Therefore, we must look again at the proposal and say that this is perhaps not the year to eliminate new applications for freight facilities grants.

As other members have made clear, there are obvious climate change benefits in schemes of this nature; as Alison McInnes importantly made clear, there are obvious road safety benefits; but above all, there are jobs benefits, for both the retention of existing jobs and, crucially, the potential to create new ones. This evening's debate—unlike, perhaps, some members' business debates—should not result in just a bit of local propaganda. It points the way forward for the Parliament, in further consideration of next year's draft budget to look again at the whole idea.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: At this point, I would be prepared to accept a motion without notice to extend the debate by 10 minutes to complete the business. I ask Cathy Jamieson to so move.

Motion moved,

That, under Rule 8.14.3, the debate be extended by up to 30 minutes.—[*Cathy Jamieson.*]

Motion agreed to.

17:42

Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): I add my thanks and congratulations to Cathy Jamieson for bringing the motion to the chamber for debate. I was happy to sign up to it almost as soon as it was lodged, and if the measure of cross-party support that has been built up so far can persuade the Government to change its position, that will be extremely constructive.

The freight action plan, which is available at the back of the chamber, was published before the current Administration came into office, so the current minister clearly cannot be held accountable for every word of its contents. However, it does give an accurate description of where things stood before the decision that we are debating today was made. Four grant schemes are listed, of which the freight facilities grant scheme is the principal one. It is clearly the principal means by which the previous Administration and the current one have attempted to achieve their stated objective to get modal shift in freight.

That is where we have to begin—with a recognition that no other mechanisms are being talked about. Chris Harvie's description of the experience in Germany included some sticks as well as some carrots, with some restriction on road freight. I do not think that I will surprise anybody by

saying that I would be quite comfortable if we were talking about that as well as about some carrots, but the fact is that the Government has not brought in those alternatives.

I suspect that if the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth had come to the Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change Committee a few weeks ago and said, "We don't think the freight facilities grant is working as it should, so here are some options for improving it," the committee would have found that a welcome conversation to have, and we might have had our own ideas about how it could be improved. However, that discussion did not happen. There was no discussion about how to improve the grant.

The cabinet secretary did say that the money had not been spent and that it had been difficult to get the money out the door, and he also complained about the budget reductions that the Government is suffering. I sympathise with that, but those things do not, in themselves, form a rationale for abolishing or closing to new applicants a scheme that is, as I said, the principal mechanism by which Government can achieve its stated objective. Instead, they form a rationale for asking how we can make the scheme better.

The size of the overall budget is not the only issue, albeit that it is, of course, an important one. The size of the cake is one important issue, but how it is sliced up is also important. Year after year, our committee has complained about the share of the transport budget that goes to increasing capacity and locking in high-carbon behaviour as opposed to assisting a transformation to low-carbon behaviour.

As Transform Scotland has argued, scrapping this grant scheme appears wholly inconsistent with the Government's policy objectives on climate change, sustainable economic development, environmental protection and road safety. That is one reason why such a broad range of voices is speaking out against the decision. We have heard business voices speaking out, as well as trade union voices, environmental voices and the voices of transport experts and a range of others. In the face of all of that, it seems astonishing that, instead of trying to make the scheme better, the Government has simply decided to abolish it.

I will close by talking about "Low Carbon Scotland: The Draft Report on Proposals and Policies", which we debated earlier this week and which is the Government's plan for meeting its climate change objectives. The report talks about financial

"incentives to encourage modal shift".

If that is the direction in which we are going, how can we approve a budget that takes us in the

wrong direction? The Government says that those incentives are

“Dependent on cooperation of other bodies.”

I suggest that, first of all, it is dependent on the intention of the Scottish Government and the budget that it brings to the Parliament.

17:46

Hugh Henry (Paisley South) (Lab): I, too, thank Cathy Jamieson for the opportunity to debate this important issue. I also thank her for alerting me to something that I had overlooked completely: the proposal in the budget to remove this funding. When you look into the matter, it is startling to find that that has happened, given the relatively small amount of money it represents in the bigger scheme of things. In a sense, it is a no-brainer: we should support this grant scheme.

As Alison McInnes said, there is an environmental impact to putting freight back on to our roads. After the winter that we have had and the scenes that we have seen up and down the country—including of huge potholes, which councils are struggling to repair—do we seriously want to put more freight, by way of more lorries, on to our roads? I am talking not only about the impact on my own area in Renfrewshire but right across Scotland.

The FFG is a scheme of proven value. It takes lorry journeys off our roads and puts them on to rail. I spoke to Andrew Malcolm and Jim Clark at W H Malcolm, a Renfrewshire-based company, about the scheme and its value. The company has two sites that have benefited, at Elderslie and Grangemouth. They told me in particular about the 20 loads per day that the company is involved in taking up and down to Aberdeen. I think that Asda is a particularly big user of that service. Other members have spoken about Aberdeen. The consequences of putting that freight back on to our roads would be horrendous. W H Malcolm has two projects in the pipeline that would be threatened by the removal of the grant scheme. The projects are not in the west but the east of Scotland. The company has the capacity and ability to take yet more lorry loads off our Scottish roads and the UK network. We are talking about around 50 to 60 loads per day and journeys that range from 50 to 100 miles to Anglo-Scottish routes of up to 350 miles.

It is becoming difficult for many freight companies to operate in the current environment because of the recession and high costs. In these difficult times, and given that those companies are already struggling to survive, do we honestly expect them to find all the money to do something that benefits us all? Freight companies are not asking for anything that is unreasonable. No one is

asking for long-term subsidies for rail. I think that the freight industry recognises that rail should ultimately be able to stand on its own feet and compete. We are talking about a relatively small amount of money to kick-start something that we will all benefit from.

I hope that there has been an oversight. I hope that it is just that when the officials were producing the figures, they did not give proper thought to the issue. Even at this late stage, I hope that, rather than have a confrontation over the budget to resolve the issue, common sense can prevail and the money be restored. If that happened, everyone would win.

17:50

Dr Richard Simpson (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): I, too, congratulate Cathy Jamieson on securing the debate.

I welcome the new Minister for Transport and Infrastructure to his post. I want to tell him a little story. It is about a company that set up in Cowie in his constituency. When it set up, it was keen to use rail, and some of us argued at the time that with a small amount of what is now called mode shift revenue support, that would be possible. A railway siding was built at the works where the manufacturing process was to occur, but it was never used. The company is still going. It built a special road to access the area. Hundreds of lorries thunder up and down it. The story dates back to a time before climate change or the other issues that we have been hearing about today.

If we are serious that £7 million is too much to be our contribution to dealing with the huge global issues that we face, something is badly wrong. I hope that the closure of the FFG scheme is a mistake and that we can address the issue on an all-party basis.

In my area, Malcolm transport at Grangemouth has benefited enormously from taking lorry loads off the roads. As Charlie Gordon said, the Highland Spring proposal would take 10,000 lorries off the roads. Highland Spring has a £30 million expansion programme. It is not just the current lorries but the future ones. If we really are talking about the development of the economy, and if companies are going to be expanding, there will be more road traffic. If we can eliminate some of that road traffic now, it will at least arrest the problem with our roads and prevent increased carbon emissions.

The fact that the issue has united business with unions, some of which are, I think, quite far to the left, is fairly unique. They have come together and said that although the FFG is a small grant, they all feel that it should continue.

I will ask a couple of questions before I finish. I understand that out of the £68.9 million that the FFG scheme has taken out of our budget since 1997, £10.9 million has been contributed by the Department for Transport. I take it that if we abolish the grant we will lose any contribution from the DOT. Will the minister tell us whether that is the case?

Can he confirm that the mode shift revenue support grant will continue? If it does not, there are some borderline schemes in which there may be a return to road from rail.

Major projects like the Thornton rail extension in my constituency—I think that Christopher Harvie said that £46 million would be required—are for the future, when things are restored. I am not referring to such projects. We are talking about a modest grant—a small part of the budget—that can have a continuing significant impact. I therefore ask the minister to join us, to tell his budget colleagues about our support for the grant and ask them whether they could not think again.

17:54

The Minister for Transport and Infrastructure (Keith Brown): Like other members, I congratulate Cathy Jamieson on securing the debate.

I think that it was Aneurin Bevan who said that politics is the language of priorities. Given members' arguments, I see the freight facilities grants scheme as a far higher priority than, for example, spending £500 million on the tram scheme in Edinburgh. It is a question of the priorities that we want to advance. I say that because the FFG scheme has without question played an important part in moving freight from road to rail and water by funding new freight facilities. As many members said, it has led to a reduction of millions of lorry miles in the past 10 years.

I join Cathy Jamieson and others in celebrating its success in delivering environmental benefits across Scotland. Many of the FFG-funded facilities will continue to remove lorries from Scotland's roads for years to come. On Richard Simpson's point, I confirm that the resource element will continue, so traffic that has been taken off the roads will not revert back on to them.

Like other members, we are clear about the FFG scheme's positive environmental impact. That is why its budget has totalled more than £40 million since 2007. During that time we have made FFG awards to seven projects. It would repay the members who are most interested, among whom I certainly include Charlie Gordon, to look at the history of the projects. Many projects that are talked about for many years do not come to

fruition. The business case is sometimes not presented and, in some cases, an award is made that is not subsequently taken up. It is worth having a look at that information, which might go some way towards explaining the response that Charlie Gordon received at the committee from John Swinney on the take-up of grants so far.

The projects that have been successful include the daily Eddie Stobart-Tesco rail service to Inverness, which takes more than 270 lorry journeys off the A9 each week, and the innovative JST floating pier, which enables timber to be transported to sawmills by sea.

The nub of the situation is the UK Government's decision to cut the Scottish Government's budget by £1.3 billion in 2011-12. Whichever party members represent, they must agree that there is no question but that that presents a real financial challenge—a challenge that is without precedent since devolution. On top of that is the reduction of £800 million in the capital budget, which was hit particularly hard.

Members have said, with some justification, that, in the global scheme of those reductions of £800 million and £1.3 billion, the figures that we are talking about for the FFG scheme are small. However, we have to get the smaller figures to add up to achieve the huge cut. As Karen Whitefield said, we are in Scotland and we have to talk about Scotland. However, the money that we get comes from Westminster.

It is interesting to draw a comparison, because the Labour Party in England did not have the same scheme when it was in government. I think that the Labour Government in England spent £8 million on such grants over five years, whereas we have spent £40 million over a slightly shorter period. That shows a level of commitment to freight facilities grants that has not been replicated elsewhere.

Hugh Henry: The minister highlights a mistaken decision by Westminster-based politicians and a very correct decision made by ministers of the same party in Scotland.

Keith Brown: I acknowledge and welcome that intervention, but what has changed is the financial situation. I think that Hugh Henry would go on to say that that is the reason why we should continue to fund new projects, but we must recognise how much the financial situation has changed for Scotland in the interim.

We should remember the last words of the Chief Secretary to the Treasury in the previous Labour Government on leaving office: "There is no money." That is what his note said and that is what the Labour Party said. We are now dealing with the consequences of that and we have to live within our means.

Michael McMahon: Is the minister not missing the point? The freight facilities grants scheme in Scotland was much more flexible and operated in an entirely different way from the scheme in England. He continually talks about the situation in England when he has the power to continue with something that was working better here. That is his responsibility. No amount of talk from him about what happened in England will deflect from his responsibility to get his priorities right.

Keith Brown: Power is one thing, but resources are another. It would be useful if the member would acknowledge, even for one second, the disastrous effects of Labour's handling of the economy and the implications for budget lines across the whole budget in Scotland. It is true that, because there has been no progress so far on borrowing powers, we have to fund large projects, such as the Forth crossing, from current budgets. It is an impossible situation.

Patrick Harvie: Will the minister give way?

Keith Brown: I am sorry, but I have to make some progress.

The new hospital in Glasgow is another project that will take a huge chunk out of a capital budget that has been substantially cut, leading to our having to make very difficult decisions. Of course, significant commitments are already in place, including the £1 million of FFG that we are committed to funding in 2011-12.

There have to be cuts somewhere and, reluctantly—

Cathy Jamieson: Will the minister give way?

Keith Brown: I have to make some progress.

We have concluded that we cannot fund new FFG projects for the time being. We have allocated £2.9 million to support the freight industry in 2011-12, which enables us to continue to support significant modal shift across Scotland.

I understand the disappointment felt by those who have FFG projects in development, such as the promoters of the new railhead that Cathy Jamieson mentioned. As has been said, the FFG scheme is a discretionary grant scheme and applicants can never be certain of grant support during the project development stage. There is no formal application at that stage.

Cathy Jamieson: Will the minister take an intervention?

Keith Brown: Although I have already taken two interventions and do not have much time left, I will take the member's intervention provided that she is very brief.

Cathy Jamieson: Almost six minutes into his speech, I am glad that the minister has mentioned

the Grangestone railhead. His predecessor was supportive of the project, on which a significant amount of money has been spent. What comfort can he give to people that the project might proceed?

Keith Brown: I have been trying to deal with that subject. Cathy Jamieson made the point in her speech that the FFG scheme is suspended, from which I think she took some comfort. The scheme in England has also been suspended for a number of years.

There is potential for change. I understand that the Tory-Lib Dem Government down south will look at the matter again in its budget. If that resulted in an increase in transport expenditure with which the FFG scheme could identify, consequential moneys would come to Scotland. We could benefit from that so we should keep the matter under review. Although we are unable to fund the scheme at the moment because of the draft budget, if additional moneys come in we can quickly go to projects that are ready to go. I ask people who are interested to continue to register their interest.

Patrick Harvie: Will the minister take an intervention?

Keith Brown: No, I do not have time.

Charlie Gordon mentioned that there is another remedy, through the budget process. If he or Cathy Jamieson want to propose an amendment to the budget and say from where we could lose money, that is entirely within their gift, as it is within the gift of any party. Part of the remedy lies with others. If the priority attached to the scheme is as has been described, the Labour Party can make that move. The Conservative and Liberal Democrat parties can also bring pressure to bear on their colleagues south of the border. If we have that funding, we can continue to support FFG projects. Funding for FFG projects of £40 million over five years is substantially more than has been allocated elsewhere and gives an idea of our continuing commitment to such projects.

We also facilitate the sustainable transport of timber through the strategic timber transport fund, which has been allocated £3 million in the forthcoming year. In addition, we continue to fund other activity to help the freight industry to reduce emissions, such as the distribution of freight best practice information.

Remedies are available and the situation is not as bleak as it seemed at the start of the debate. I have confirmed that the scheme has been suspended, as it has been elsewhere, but there are other remedies. If others take different decisions to help us with the resource situation that we are in, the matter can be looked at again.

Meeting closed at 18:02.

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