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Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Official Report

MEETING OF THE PARLIAMENT

Wednesday 7 September 2011

Session 4

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Scottish Parliament

Wednesday 7 September 2011

[The Presiding Officer *opened the meeting at 13:00*]

Time for Reflection

The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick): Good afternoon. I welcome members back after the summer recess. The first item of business is time for reflection. Our time for reflection leader today is Dr Salah Beltagui of the Muslim Council of Scotland.

Dr Salah Beltagui (Muslim Council of Scotland): Thank you, Presiding Officer. Good afternoon and salaam aleikum.

It is my privilege and pleasure to address you at this time of festivity for Muslims. As the blessed month of Ramadan leaves for another year, Muslims celebrate Eid ul Fitr, which is the festival of the breaking of the fast. It is not a celebration of a person, an activity or an event; it is a celebration of our own success in doing the fast of Ramadan.

I would like to take the opportunity, on behalf of the Muslim Council of Scotland, to extend Eid greetings to all Muslims and all people of Scotland. May it be a peaceful and joyous occasion.

Eid is a very special occasion when all Muslims celebrate and give thanks to God for helping them to fulfil their fasting, their prayers and their charity during the month of Ramadan. It is a month when we not only refrain from food from dawn to sunset, as a sign that it is not only by bread that man lives, but use the opportunity to remember God and his message of peace and justice, discipline and obedience, and brotherhood and compassion by reading and listening to the Qur'an and understanding those principles. The Qur'an was revealed in the month of Ramadan, which is why we celebrate Ramadan.

The Eid celebration starts with every person in the household delivering a charity to the needy before Eid starts so that on the day of Eid they are not looking for support and can celebrate like everyone else. The day starts with a morning congregational prayer that is attended by men, women and children. It is recommended to be performed in the open air, weather permitting. The idea is to have the whole community in one place rather than in small places of worship. The rest of the day and the following two days—or the weekend after, as happens in Scotland—are spent on family visits, exchanging presents, entertainment and, in particular, giving time to children, who get excited about the occasion as

they are given new clothes, food, spending money and all the usual entertainments for children.

As we celebrate Eid, let us take the good that we accrued this month for the rest of the year. Let us give our prayer of thanks and gratitude to Allah, continue to remember the needy and keep the spirit of patience, giving and solidarity alive.

We also remember those who are less fortunate than us in any way, whether materially, morally or whatever, in all parts of the world and look in hope for all of them.

We pray for all our fellow citizens in Scotland that today is better than yesterday and that tomorrow is better than today.

Finally, we pray for the success of this Parliament and its members in making the lives of all the people of Scotland even better. [*Applause.*]

Business Motion

The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick): The next item of business is consideration of business motion S4M-00795, in the name of Bruce Crawford, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, setting out a business programme.

13:04

The Cabinet Secretary for Parliamentary Business and Government Strategy (Bruce Crawford): I am pleased to move motion S4M-00795, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, asking the Parliament to agree to the business programme.

I move,

That the Parliament agrees the following programme of business—

Wednesday 7 September 2011

1.00 pm Time for Reflection

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by First Minister's Statement: The Scottish Government's Legislative Programme

followed by Scottish Government Debate: The Scottish Government's Legislative Programme

followed by Business Motion

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Thursday 8 September 2011

9.15 am Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Scottish Government Debate: The Scottish Government's Legislative Programme

11.40 am General Question Time

12.00 pm First Minister's Question Time

2.15 pm Themed Question Time
Infrastructure and Capital Investment;
Culture and External Affairs

2.55 pm Ministerial Statement: Police and Fire Reform

followed by Scottish Government Debate: Scotland Bill – EU Involvement

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Wednesday 14 September 2011

2.00 pm Time for Reflection

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Ministerial Statement: Post-16 Reform

followed by Scottish Government Debate:
Government's Economic Strategy

followed by Business Motion

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Thursday 15 September 2011

9.15 am Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Scottish Labour Party Business

11.40 am General Question Time

12.00 pm First Minister's Question Time

2.15 pm Themed Question Time
Education and Lifelong Learning

2.55 pm Ministerial Statement: Care Homes

followed by Scottish Government Debate: Scotland Bill – Corporation Tax

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Wednesday 21 September 2011

2.30 pm Time for Reflection

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Scottish Government Business

followed by Business Motion

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Thursday 22 September 2011

9.15 am Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Scottish Government Business

11.40 am General Question Time

12.00 pm First Minister's Question Time

2.15 pm Themed Question Time
Finance, Employment and Sustainable Growth

2.55 pm Scottish Government Business

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

The Presiding Officer: Richard Baker has pressed his request-to-speak button. [*Laughter.*] He does not want to speak, so no member has asked to speak against the motion.

The question is, that motion S4M-00795, in the name of Bruce Crawford, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to.

Scottish Government's Legislative Programme

The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick): The next item of business is a statement by Alex Salmond on the Scottish Government's legislative programme. The First Minister's statement will be followed by a debate, so there should be no interventions or interruptions during the statement.

13:05

The First Minister (Alex Salmond): I have great pleasure in introducing the Government's programme for the coming session.

Everywhere today, men and women—many of them young—yearn to be productive. They are ready to work because, very often, a life of unemployment is no life at all. Political leaders owe it to those young people to create the conditions that encourage growth. With growth comes work and with work come security and confidence. With confidence comes prosperity and a deeper sense of wellbeing, not just for individuals and families but for the wider community. That is how we create the good society and the fair society, and it is at the heart of the programme for government that I will outline today.

Recent events in Europe and the United States have highlighted the fragility of the global recovery. Indeed, some even suggest that another could blast of recession threatens the world economy and certainly western economies. I believe that we can continue to grow, but the fact that the double dip is at the door is in part due to the mistakes of those who have choked recovery with their obsession with early deficit reduction rather than growth. The fact is that failure to grow leads to failure in reducing deficits.

Joseph Stiglitz, the Nobel laureate and former World Bank chief economist, said in January that the

"gravest threat"

to recovery

"comes from the wave of austerity sweeping the world ... particularly in Europe".

He will take no pleasure in seeing that his prophecy seems to be coming to pass. However, there is still time to take his advice and tackle the vicious downward spiral of debt and depression.

Market pressure is often cited to vindicate irresponsible cuts, but if the markets hate one thing more than debt, it is a lack of growth. Failure to grow means that we shall never break out of the debt spiral, which is why the Government has argued consistently against the deep cuts in

capital spending that the Westminster Government is imposing.

Professor Stiglitz says that we can stimulate growth and employment in the long term with a large-scale public investment programme now. The Government agrees with him and has tried to do that, despite London's refusal to recognise the views that the people of Scotland clearly expressed in May and to give us the economic tools that we need.

Here in Scotland, we want the kind of economic levers that will allow us to implement fully Professor Stiglitz's advice. We have argued strongly against the coalition's plans to cut our capital investment by nearly 40 per cent in real terms over the spending review period, which is economically illiterate and endangers recovery.

The Parliament has heard the voice of the people and backed our calls for improvements to the Scotland Bill that will transform the job-creating powers that we need in the Parliament. It is now time for the United Kingdom Government to hear and to act accordingly. However, waiting for London to show humility and recognise the democratic mandate of the Scottish people is not enough to deal with the urgent need to boost growth.

Using the powers that we have, we took action through our economic recovery plan that meant that the recession in Scotland was shorter and shallower than that for the UK as a whole. The Scottish unemployment rate is lower than that of the UK, while the employment rate is higher.

We cannot allow decisions that are made elsewhere to threaten that progress. That is why the programme for government will focus on ways in which we can stimulate growth. That objective will also be central to plans that ministers will place before the Parliament in coming weeks.

John Swinney will publish a new Government economic strategy, followed by the spending review, which will allocate the Scottish budget. There is no better articulation of our competence in government than John Swinney's record in managing the public finances.

Our first priority in that new plan is promoting capital investment in the economy. Our previous decision to accelerate capital spending was a considerable success, with growth in construction jobs of 11.6 per cent over the year to the first quarter of 2011, compared with a fall in the UK as a whole. At the end of June, we opened the M74, which is set to generate as many as 20,000 jobs for our economy in the years ahead. That was ahead of schedule and £15 million to £20 million under budget.

We will deliver key infrastructure projects, such as the Glasgow south hospitals project and the Forth replacement crossing, which will on its own support 3,000 jobs. We will take forward a new housing investment programme. That is starting with our £400 million housing investment budget for this year, which is estimated to support more than 15,000 jobs across the country. We will support additional investment through alternative funding streams such as our £2.5 billion non-profit-distributing programme and the use of tax incremental financing.

However, infrastructure is about more than bricks and mortar. We are aware of the disappointment that followed the UK Government's announcement of broadband funding that took far too little account of Scotland's greater geographical area and the very poor connectivity in many of our rural areas. Therefore, to that end, we will launch the next generation digital fund to help business activity, particularly in those rural areas.

The second way to assist the economic recovery is to improve access to finance. We have a blockage at the moment, with many large companies holding significant amounts of capital, but many of our smaller, and most dynamic, companies constrained by an inability to secure affordable finance from our banks. To address that, we have established the Scottish Investment Bank, which is now open and lending to Scottish companies. Yesterday, I announced an investment in AccuNostics, which is a life sciences business that is seeking to grow internationally from its base in Forres and which is creating much-needed well-paid and highly skilled jobs in that community. However, the Scottish Investment Bank cannot take the place of bank lending, as the total resource that is available to it is £200 million, compared with Scotland's share of project Merlin lending for small and medium-sized businesses of £6.5 billion. We therefore continue to press the banks and the UK Government to improve the supply of finance.

We must also release the wall of private sector capital, which is currently being held back by the lack of investment opportunities. One key area where there is significant scope to leverage such investment is offshore renewables. We have a unique opportunity to reindustrialise this country. Scotland has around a quarter of Europe's offshore wind and tidal energy potential and an estimated 10 per cent of the wave power capacity. Therefore, our £70 million national renewables infrastructure fund will leverage private sector investment to support offshore renewables and ensure that Scotland becomes Europe's green energy powerhouse. Thousands of jobs will be the result in communities around Scotland.

Thirdly, we must restore confidence among businesses and consumers. Our policy of no compulsory redundancies for staff for whom we have direct responsibility has helped to provide economic confidence. If people are more secure, they spend money, which boosts demand right across the economy. We will continue to deliver the most competitive business tax policy in the United Kingdom, including the small business bonus scheme, which has removed or reduced the rates burden for tens of thousands of small business properties.

Our social wage serves a similar purpose. Free education, free prescriptions, free concessionary travel and frozen council tax and water bills have helped to maintain demand by offsetting, at least in part, a work wage that is often reducing in real terms for many of our fellow citizens. We still need the United Kingdom to show the same kind of initiative and come forward with a plan B for boosting business growth. However, the Scottish Government will not wait for the UK to show initiative—that would be a hazardous policy and, indeed, a long wait.

A jobs agenda is at the very heart of this programme for government. We are committed to doing everything in our powers to reduce youth unemployment, which has fallen by 2,000 in the past year, but which remains far, far too high. We have responded with a range of initiatives, including providing almost 300,000 training opportunities since 2007, with a record 25,000 modern apprenticeships this year, which we now commit to for every year of this Parliament. That annual level is some 60 per cent higher than when we came to office.

We will of course ensure that access to higher education is based in Scotland on the ability to succeed rather than the ability to pay. We will maintain bursary support to help young people remain engaged in college and training. We will invest in 14,500 pre-employment training opportunities and we shall continue to fund the education maintenance allowance for young people in school and college.

Our key commitment is to those young people who, as I said, yearn to be productive. No young person should go through school only to become an unemployment statistic at the age of 16. We will not allow that in Scotland. We already have 85 per cent of school leavers going on to positive outcomes—that is, employment, education or training. The 125,000 modern apprenticeships over five years will build on that success.

However, the strength of Scottish apprenticeships is their linkage to a real job, so expanding beyond that hugely impressive number is dependent on the labour market. That is why today I can announce the opportunities for all

initiative: a commitment that every single 16 to 19-year-old in Scotland will be offered a learning or training place if they are not already in a job or a modern apprenticeship, or in education. Mr Russell, the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning, will announce further details of opportunities for all in his statement next week.

This Government's key policies focus on delivering growth and are part of an ambitious plan for Scotland. In recent years, we have been able to attract major international companies to Scotland including, in the past 12 months, Amazon, Gamesa, State Street, Doosan Power, Ryanair, EasyJet, Tesco Bank, Virgin Money, Blackrock, INEOS/PetroChina and Mitsubishi Power Systems. We will increase our efforts in the months ahead to attract even more major international companies to Scotland.

We will announce in the autumn our plans for enterprise areas to attract new investments and jobs to Scotland. We will work tirelessly to improve our links with those economies that buy our goods and services, because we recognise the importance of export growth in Scotland. The Scottish Investment Bank will therefore prioritise lending to small and medium-sized businesses with international ambitions as part of that growth strategy. We have set a target to increase the value of international exports from Scotland by 50 per cent over the next six years.

Our food and drink sector and our farming and fisheries are a key part of what Scotland offers to the world. In June 2010, Scottish food exports broke the £1 billion barrier for the first time. However, here, as elsewhere, we cannot simply rest on our laurels. So, a bill on agricultural holdings will encourage landlords to increase the availability of farming tenancies and support new blood to enter farming. In addition, we are developing consultation proposals with a view to legislation to support the development and necessary expansion of farmed fish and wild salmon and freshwater fisheries.

In normal economic times, we would use public service reform to help to drive economic growth. However, in the context of the unprecedented and extended real cuts being made to our budget over the coming years, it becomes an even more important component of this Government's programme. If we are to maintain the levels of public services that we all want, we need to do things smarter and better. We therefore appointed the Christie commission to look at ways to reform public services while also improving them. Christie recommended an emphasis on collaboration; our public services cannot operate in silos. There was also a focus on investing in prevention, which, in the longer term, can save money, too. We will publish a response to Christie in the near future.

In health, we will take action to improve the early detection of cancer. Our bill on minimum pricing for alcohol will tackle the scourge of alcoholism in Scottish society and families. We will ensure that services are organised round the needs of individuals by integrating health and social care. A bill on self-directed support will put those receiving care at the heart of the decision making about that care and we will deliver our commitments to carers and young carers, in particular those around better information, respite and support.

In education, we will introduce far-reaching reforms of our post-16 learning and student support, which we will set out in a pre-legislative paper, and I reaffirm our absolute commitment to keeping university education free for Scottish students so that access to education in our country is based on the ability to learn.

To demonstrate our commitment to our young people, we will introduce a rights of children and young people bill—indeed, we are launching the consultation on that tomorrow. We will introduce an early years change fund and build on our children's rights bill, in the next session, with a children's services bill. We will develop family centres, a national parenting strategy and a modern careers service, always with a focus on those in the greatest need.

We will introduce a European-style system of language teaching and a new programme of Scottish studies so that our children acquire a deeper understanding of their own diverse culture and Scotland's place in the wider world. Our colleagues on the Conservative benches have dismissed Scottish studies as indoctrination. I cannot imagine any other nation where teaching one's own history, arts and literature in an impartial way would be dismissed in such a negative fashion. It is all the more surprising given the Conservatives' new-found interest in their own history. Perhaps history teaches us that success takes more than a change of name—it takes a change of attitude towards Scotland.

In justice, we will make Scotland a safer country by rolling out the no knives, better lives programme, by bringing forward a radical reform of courts and tribunals under the making justice work programme and by progressing the Offensive Behaviour at Football and Threatening Communications (Scotland) Bill to crack down on violent and bigoted behaviour.

Official statistics published yesterday report that crime levels in our country are now at their lowest level since 1976, or 35 years ago. Separate figures also confirm that police numbers remain well above our target to keep 1,000 additional officers in Scotland's communities. Scots are feeling safer: 71 per cent said that local crime

rates improved or stayed the same in 2009-10, compared with 65 per cent in 2006, and 94 per cent of Scots now rate their neighbourhood as a very or fairly good place to live.

However, there is widespread recognition that reform is needed so that we can create services fit for 21st century Scotland, despite the London cuts. Communities do not care about boundaries; they want services to work effectively and efficiently. After detailed consideration of all the evidence available, we are persuaded that a single police service and a single fire and rescue service are the right options. As far as the police service is concerned, it is the only way to maintain the number of officers in every community right across Scotland. The move will sustain and improve the delivery of local services, while giving all parts of Scotland access to national expertise and assets whenever and wherever they are needed. The reform will also enhance national governance, ensuring clear separation from ministers, to ensure the continued operational independence of these vital services.

Today I am announcing our intention to move towards single services. Tomorrow, the Cabinet Secretary for Justice will provide Parliament with further information, including on how we will seek views on the options for how the new services will work in detail.

This programme for government, the Government economic strategy and the spending review set out how we will make full use of the economic levers currently devolved to the Scottish Parliament with the aim of improving Scotland's rate of sustainable economic growth. However, it is also important to reflect on the type of country and economy that we want to be in future. In May, the people of Scotland voted for change. They want this Parliament to have the control, flexibility and freedom to make the decisions that are right for Scotland.

Many of the key job-creating powers, particularly in relation to taxation and central elements of economic policy, lie outside the remit of the Scottish Government. Approximately 90 per cent of Scotland's revenues are collected by Westminster and are not set with any reference to economic circumstances here or the preferences and needs of our businesses or households. With greater responsibility we could address those needs.

The Scotland Bill as it stands fails to make things better. The tax proposals that have been designed are potentially damaging and could result in less funding for Scotland. Even more important, they provide no meaningful economic levers and fail to give Scotland power over its own wealth and resources. We will look to work with the Westminster Government and its Parliament to

strengthen the Scotland Bill into legislation that really takes Scotland forward.

I mentioned earlier that the Conservative Party could benefit from knowing its own history. That applies to Labour and the Liberal Democrats as well. They should, for example, remember the claim of right that they signed before the establishment of this Parliament. Let me remind the chamber of what it said:

"We ... do hereby acknowledge the sovereign right of the Scottish people to determine the form of Government best suited to their needs, and do hereby declare and pledge that in all our actions and deliberations their interests shall be paramount."

In May, the people of Scotland determined that they wanted key additions to the Scotland Bill. It is now the duty of the claim of right parties to respond to the expressed will of the people. I urge them to remember their own past and their own principles and to join us in recognising the sovereign right of our people to determine the form of government that they want here in Scotland.

Today we unveil a programme for government—practical measures to make our citizens safer and healthier and capital investment to aid our recovery. I would welcome constructive ideas from across the chamber on how to make Scotland better. Making Scotland better is the focus of this Government. It is one reason why we won a historic victory in May. It was a recognition of proven competence and commitment; but, yes, it was also about Scotland and our nation's future. The people are ready to move on to the next chapter of Scotland's story.

The first objective on the constitution is, as we set out in our election campaign, to deliver much-needed new job-creating powers for this Parliament. The voters who put their trust in us also understand that the Scottish National Party believes in independence. They understand that, and they do not fear it. We have won their trust and we will not abuse it.

We know that those people are listening, keen to hear the positive story that we have to tell about the future—their future as parents, students, workers, pensioners, carers, entrepreneurs and professionals. They share our excitement about the project at hand to build a better nation. Independence will improve the future for all those people: they will be an independence generation.

Independence is the opposite of dependence, limited ambition, negativity, caution and pessimism. It means rejecting those who tell us that we are too lazy and too poor. Scotland is in a better financial position than the UK as a whole. For example, we have been in current surplus for four out of the last five years recorded. We also know that many of our most successful sons and

daughters—Jim McColl, Tom Hunter, Audrey Baxter and Martin Gilbert—support more economic power for Scotland.

Our population is growing—numerically as well as growing in confidence—and it is that population, made up of millions of individuals and families and thousands of communities and businesses, that lies at the centre of this programme for government, the Government's economic strategy and the spending review.

Our agenda for this Government is global in its spirit. It listens to the voices of economic sanity that are urging world leaders to invest for the future. It takes note of the words of Christine Lagarde, head of the International Monetary Fund, who warns of the danger that austerity poses to recovery. It is a response to Professor Stiglitz and to another leading economist, Nouriel Roubini, a former adviser to President Bill Clinton.

Professor Roubini is widely acknowledged as being the man who best predicted the 2008 crash with his prescient warnings about the property bubble. Earlier this month, he said that the nations of the world must move away from both the Anglo-Saxon model of laissez-faire and voodoo economics and the continental European model of deficit-driven states. He said:

"The right balance today requires creating jobs partly through additional fiscal stimulus aimed at productive infrastructure investment."

Scotland should heed the calls from some of the finest economic minds in the world, but our desire to introduce that growth and balance is threatened by the voodoo economics of the London coalition, whose ministers lecture Scotland about our future. Let them start by using their own powers wisely before they attack Scotland—a Scotland where sensible policies have employment above the UK average and unemployment below it, and where in the last three months Scotland created 24,000 out of the 25,000 aggregate jobs created across these islands. We therefore much prefer to take advice from a Lagarde, a Stiglitz and a Roubini rather than a Moore, an Alexander or a Mundell.

This Government prefers to think big for Scotland because this Government knows where it is going. We have Scotland's interests at the heart of the programme that I have outlined today. The people recognise that ambition and trust us to take Scotland further on its journey. So should this chamber.

Scottish Government's Legislative Programme

The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick): The next item of business is a debate on the Scottish Government's legislative programme. Members should be aware that, in order to participate, they must enter their card into the console on the desk in front of them and press "Enter". I call Iain Gray to open the debate.

13:30

Iain Gray (East Lothian) (Lab): The last speech that I made was a father-of-the-bride speech at my daughter's wedding. They laughed, I cried. I hope that the result today is slightly different.

Today is an important day in the life of the Parliament. This is the last of the fixed points of a new parliamentary session. We had the election of the First Minister, then we had the official opening. Today, we have the first legislative programme for government of the new Administration. It is, then, the last time that I feel the obligation to begin by making clear yet again that we, on the Labour benches, understand not only that the First Minister won but that he won a majority of seats in the Parliament and that, under our electoral system, that is a remarkable achievement. I have tried to make it clear—how can I put it?—that we get it. I believe that my colleagues have conducted themselves with dignity and even as much magnanimity as they can muster. However, I hope that the chamber will forgive me if I make this point today with a little envy in my heart—not envy of position, patronage, pay check or even power itself but, I confess, envy of the opportunity that power affords.

I believe that all of us are here because we want to change our country for the better. I profoundly disagree with the First Minister and with other members in the chamber on how we should do that, but I do not question their intent or the First Minister's. What an opportunity he has! With an absolute majority, he has the chance to achieve so much—the chance to put into practice the policies that he preaches and the power to shape Scotland for the better. He has power over the national health service, local government, our education system, our colleges, our universities and our legal system—all of those and much more besides. He can define how those institutions are and how they work. He can bend them to his will and make them deliver the things that he wants. There is no place now for excuses or for blaming others. The Government has the power to make Scotland and its institutions work as it would wish.

When fears have been expressed in the chamber about the danger of hubris from a Government with a majority, the First Minister has been quick to point out that we have had Governments with a majority before, through coalitions. We have. In those Governments, we took the opportunity of that power to reshape this country. We introduced land reform and ended a thousand years of feudalism. We passed the best incapacity legislation in Europe and the best homelessness legislation in the world. We introduced free personal care. We abolished tuition fees in Scottish universities for Scottish students. We introduced the smoking ban. We even set party advantage aside and modernised the way in which we elect our local councillors. I still have the scars from that and I was not even here to vote for it.

As I look around, I wonder how many new members on the Scottish National Party benches owe their start on a political career to proportional representation—more than a few, I think. That measure was introduced by a majority Government setting party advantage aside and pursuing measures every one of which changed Scotland for the better. Every one of them was unique to Scotland—in the case of the smoking ban, at the time at least. Every one of those things made Scotland better and different.

That is what a party can do with a majority, even if it is through a coalition. What can a single party with a majority do? It can do more than a national library bill. For four years of an SNP minority Administration, the First Minister dutifully introduced his centrepiece measures and legislation, then dutifully withdrew, cancelled or smothered them, and it was always someone else's fault.

Members: Yours!

The Presiding Officer: I ask members to settle down and allow Mr Gray to be heard undisturbed.

Iain Gray: Thank you, Presiding Officer.

In year 1, we had the class-sizes-of-18 promise, but the big, bad councils would not let the Government do that. Forget the fact that the Government sets its budgets and that it has the power to ensure, if it wants to, that class sizes are cut. It ended up being the broken-class-sizes-promise bill, capping classes not at 18 but at 25.

In year 2, we were promised a bill to abolish the council tax. Where did that end up? It ended up with the Government running to the courts to hide the documents that showed just how badly that bill would have punished ordinary Scots—taxpayers' money being spent on legal bills to stop taxpayers finding out how much tax they were going to have to pay. It ended up with the Government going to the Court of Session to take on the Scottish

Information Commissioner. That does not augur well for the amendments that the Government promised to the Freedom of Information (Scotland) Act 2002 this year.

Finally, the Government sneaked out the evidence that it had known all along that we were telling the truth about how much the local income tax would cost Scots on the day on which all eyes were on the First Minister's erstwhile golf and theatre partner, Mr Murdoch, being humbled by a select committee in Westminster.

In year 4 of the previous session, we were promised a water bill, which was going to make Scotland the first hydro economy on the planet. We suspected that, like other promises, it was a flagship that would sink. It did, resurfacing now, a year late, watered down and stripped of the hyperbole.

Unfettered by minority, there is nothing now to stop the First Minister. He can legislate for class sizes of 18 if he still thinks that that is the right thing to do. He can introduce his local income tax now if he still thinks that it is a good idea. He can make us into a hydro economy—God knows, the raw material for it has been falling from the sky day after day. If he does not, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that he never had any intention of reducing class sizes to 18 and that he always knew that his local income tax was unfair, unworkable and a massive tax hike for most families.

What of the year of the great referendum bill? It was coming on Burns night and we would be voting on St Andrew's day. It was to be the centrepiece not just of that year but of the very century in which we live. I know how important that issue is to the First Minister. I read it in the paper:

"Salmond puts independence at top of the agenda".

That is the headline of a report, dated 15 August 2007, on the launch of the independence white paper. The white paper came out in 2007 and 2009 was to be the year of the referendum.

No wonder—*[Interruption.]* I did not actually keep the paper as a souvenir; I found it at the weekend. *[Interruption.]* I tell members what, I reckon that they could go to just about any newspaper from any week in the past four years and find the First Minister launching an independence white paper. No wonder we never got round to the rest of the agenda; we were always stuck on item 1. We had white paper after white paper, we had a national conversation and we had a launch, a consultation, a relaunch and a consultation about a proposal for a white paper about a bill, but we never had the bill itself.

The First Minister said that the reason for that was that he did not have a majority for his

referendum. He does now, but guess what? We are still stuck on item 1. In 2007, the First Minister asked every Scot to pause and reflect on the matter. He has been pausing and reflecting—noisily and expensively—on exactly that for four years, but he still does not know what his question will be, how many questions he will have or what propositions the questions will be about. He still cannot tell us about the Scotland that he wants to see. He cannot tell us what currency it would have, how it would defend itself, which institutions it would share with neighbours, whether it would be a member of NATO, or how or whether it could enter the European Union. He cannot tell us how our benefits and pensions would be secured.

The one thing that the First Minister has told us for sure about the Scotland that he wants is that the Queen would remain our head of state. He told her that right here, only a few weeks ago. Unfortunately, of course, it turned out that he could not be sure of that, because his party's policy is to have a referendum on that matter, as well. There is nothing that he can tell us about the proposition, after all this time.

The First Minister has a mandate now. He has a majority in the Parliament. He has a draft bill—or so he said. He has no credible excuse for not bringing the bill forward, except that he does not think that the people of Scotland are ready to have their say, because they might not give him the answer that he wants.

I know that the First Minister knows his Montrose. Why would he not? Any poem that has the line

"Like Alexander I will reign,
And I will reign alone"

is bound to be to his liking. Of course, the poem also says:

"He either fears his fate too much,
Or his deserts are small,
Who dares not put it to the touch,
To win or lose it all."

Where is that bill?

We will prosecute the case for unity—for all that a strong Scotland in a strengthened United Kingdom can be. We will present the case for a Scotland that is big enough, rich enough, smart enough and talented enough to get the best out of a modern, 21st century United Kingdom. We will present the case for a strong, devolved Parliament in Scotland, as we have done for decades.

When the First Minister talks about our history and other parties' histories, he should remember his own history. The claim of right was a direct result of the Scottish Constitutional Convention, as is the Parliament in which we stand. That was the Scottish Constitutional Convention in which he

refused to participate from day one, just as he opposed the work of the Calman Commission on Scottish Devolution and the preparation and early stages of the Scotland Bill until he felt that there was some party expediency to be gained by coming on board. That is the history of his approach to devolution.

What do we find in the First Minister's legislative programme? In the creation of a Scottish police force and fire service, there is a substantial reform, which I have long made clear we will support. However, we have to get it right. We will not get it right if the argument is made solely in terms of saving money. We have the opportunity to strengthen local democratic accountability of our policing at a more local level than is the case now and, at the same time, to streamline policing of organised crime, terror and fraud at the national level. I hope that, from tomorrow onwards, the Government will grasp this opportunity for positive change and not—as I have heard it do in recent days—trot out the tired old argument about Westminster cuts forcing its hand. Establishing a Scottish police force and a Scottish fire service is the right thing to do for reasons of policing and safety. We should do it right and we should do it for those right reasons. I believe that, if we do that, we will win the arguments with those who have not yet been convinced.

The Government is entitled to return to minimum unit pricing of alcohol, and we are entitled to continue to ask about its legality and effectiveness. However, I accept that it will happen. I am concerned, though, that the planned bill will be narrowly drawn and will not allow us to look again at other issues, such as restrictions on caffeinated alcohol, or to reconsider alcohol treatment and testing orders, which could have the same impact as drug treatment and testing orders have had over many years. We should be trying to extend further test purchasing and increasing support for children who are exposed to the worst excesses of alcohol-fuelled behaviour. If the bill is drawn too narrowly and we cannot do that, that will be a lost opportunity for Scotland.

Speaking of lost opportunities, I must ask why we have not used the measures that we passed in the previous session. A year ago, we passed a ban on alcohol promotions. That has not come into force yet. We also passed the idea of the social responsibility levy, which could be used to push up prices for alcohol and ensure that there is a payback not to the supermarkets but to local government, which could be invested in preventive measures. We agreed that we should implement that proposal. There is no point passing legislation in the Parliament if we simply do not use it. We all agree that the problem is urgent, so why has the Government not urgently used the legislation that we passed?

There is a more profound debate that we must begin, and I hope that the politics of this issue will not stop that debate beginning. Last week's figures showed that, although alcohol consumption in Scotland is falling, it remains 23 per cent higher than it is in England, even though there is no price differential. I do not know why that is, but I am sure that it is something that the action that we take on price—or, indeed on opening hours or the strength of the drinks that are sold—will not completely address. Perhaps it involves issues of inequality or is a symptom of atrophied communities, the stress of modern family life or alienation. I do not know, but I think that it is time that we tried to find out, whatever disagreements we might have about anything else.

The delayed bill to tackle sectarianism is another one that we support. We do so, critically, because it involves another area of great difficulty. That has been demonstrated and reinforced by the recent inexplicable judgment in Edinburgh's Sheriff Court in the case of an assault against a nationally known figure that appeared on live television. The lesson for us is that these offences are on the statute book and the will to deal with them is there, but it is hard to make them work. That is why the First Minister was right to delay the bill and extend the timetable. We must take our time if we are to get it right.

On higher education, we agree with the Government on the principle of free education. However, the funding situation is already spiralling out of control. Of course, fees for students from England, Wales and Northern Ireland had to rise and, of course, the fundamental problem is caused by soaring fees in the rest of the United Kingdom—I do not deny that. However, we now have a crazy situation in which the University of Edinburgh is the most expensive university in Britain. That is not what the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning said he wanted or expected. He said that he expected that fees would be set in the range of £1,800 to £9,000. It is, frankly, hard to escape the conclusion that the universities are laughing at him and going their own way. He needs to get a grip, and quickly. Fees for Scottish students are only one element of how we fund our higher education sector, and there are many other questions that we must resolve urgently.

I am sure that we will support other bills on the list, such as the national library bill—I apologise to the National Library of Scotland for poking fun at it earlier. We will also support the self-directed support bill, which is late, as it was promised well over a year ago, and support for carers. All that is welcome.

This is what I meant about opportunity. A Government with a majority and a five-year term

ahead of it could legislate today to create a national care service that would integrate health and social care, stand alongside the national health service and give a guarantee to our older people and those with disabilities that they will be looked after. That would be bold and dramatic, and change Scotland for the future.

I go back to my original question: what should one do with a majority like the First Minister's? In fairness, he got that partly right. He should focus on making a future for young Scots, jobs and the economy, and opportunity. He should start now and aim as high as he can imagine. I welcome the attention in the First Minister's statement to youth employment and the further measures that are proposed. However, they should be bolder still, and the First Minister should be more prepared in that area to use his majority legislative power if need be. Every public sector procurement of any size should require the creation of apprenticeship opportunities—

The Presiding Officer: You need to wind up now, Mr Gray.

Iain Gray: Why is there no reform of procurement? The support for small businesses should continue, but it should incentivise job creation. What about the living wage—why not implement that and legislate for it? Why not legislate for no compulsory redundancies instead of just talking about it? Let no one say that those things are too difficult. Majority power bestows the opportunity to do the difficult things because they are right, or else it means nothing. Let us give our young people not just a guarantee of a future but a right. That is what power gives the First Minister the opportunity to do—I wish that I had it, but I will support the Government if it sets out to create that future for our young people.

13:53

Annabel Goldie (West Scotland) (Con): The legislative programme is certainly not lacking in quantity, but that does not cut any ice with me: it is quality that matters. Indeed, much of the overdue change that we need to bring to Scottish public life does not depend on an endless list of brand new laws, and more and more statutes. It depends on political will, and—yes—a relaxation of existing rules, laws and restrictions. Sometimes, less is better than more. The changes that are needed are inescapable, as we all strive to protect our most vital services at the very time when we must also mop up the mess in our public finances and reduce the toxic levels of debt and deficit that we inherited.

In that context, I was curious about the First Minister's allusion to a string of economists, most of whom I had never heard of. Their purpose

seemed to be to move away from deficit-driven states, and that is exactly what Alexander, Moore and Mundell are committed to doing.

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Hear, hear.

Annabel Goldie: Thank you. [*Laughter.*] Reform of our public services is unavoidable. That is why it is perplexing to see that the Beveridge report, which is one of the most important contributions to the debate, is now more than a year old and gathering dust on the Scottish Government's shelves. That independent report into our public finances set out some solid ideas, but what was Alex Salmond's response? It was to set up another review, the Christie commission. Such was the success of that little endeavour that we now have a new Cabinet sub-committee considering the Christie report and kicking things around a bit more.

In the First Minister's statement, there were just four paragraphs on public service reform and not one specific proposal. He is all talk and no action. It is a bit like the SNP's plans for an independence referendum—there is no date, no question and, it would seem, no idea of what independence means any more.

The summer offered Alex Salmond an opportunity to reflect, innovate and reform, but instead it was one long whinge—one long rant from him about what everyone else is getting wrong. People are getting fed up with that diet of negativity and gripe. The SNP is relentlessly hostile to anyone who dares to speak out against it, question its version of reality or challenge its proposals.

The Confederation of British Industry Scotland is right to ask when the referendum will be and to point out that the fudge on offer from Alex Salmond is harmful to Scotland. What does it get in reply? Vitriol and bullying. Instead of answers to reasonable questions about precisely when the referendum will be and what the question will be, all that we get is a defiant, blustering and evasive response about some vague day in a few years' time from a party that has already spent vast sums of taxpayers' money drafting a bill.

The SNP looks even more ridiculous when it comes to pinning the party down on what independence would mean for our currency, our armed forces, our defence jobs, the Scottish national deficit, social services and all the other essential aspects of a 21st century country. The SNP is always quick to complain about the powers that it does not have, but it is struck dumb when it comes to providing answers about what it would do and how it would pay for it. Only today, a series of legitimate questions to Mr Swinney from the UK Treasury about the devolved corporation tax was

dismissed as "predictable" and "depressing". If the questions were so predictable, why did the SNP not anticipate them and formulate the answers?

The SNP's true colours are on show. It cannot deal with informed comment and criticism. Its total response is hectoring and bullying bluster, which says everything that we need to know about the party. [*Interruption.*] Mr Lochhead is getting exercised, which is a rarity.

What is more, I know what the next three or four years will bring: Alex Salmond will grind on and on, day after weary day, about the powers that he does not have. I can hear him now saying, "If only I had the powers to do this or that!" I say to him that today's poll in *The Times* could not be clearer: Scotland says that he should get on with his independence referendum and get it out the road.

If the First Minister will not or cannot answer detailed questions on what independence means, will he start concentrating on using the powers that he has? There are measures in the legislative programme that we can support, others that we cannot and some that will need amendment. My colleagues will deal with them in greater detail, but I will highlight a couple.

First, the Government was right to acknowledge the problem of sectarianism and contemplate legislation but wrong to try to rush that legislation through. It was sensible to pause, reflect and consult. Therefore, let us ensure that the Offensive Behaviour at Football and Threatening Communications (Scotland) Bill actually addresses the evil of sectarianism and contributes to its eradication.

Secondly, on the reform of our police forces, the Scottish Conservatives have accepted that there are compelling arguments for having fewer forces in Scotland. However, public accountability is paramount. We favour directly elected commissioners throughout Scotland. The Scottish Government's reform of policing cannot concentrate power in the hands of one minister and one police chief without the public protection of democratic accountability, and I hope that the First Minister will listen to us on that.

I will also put down some markers about the big challenges that face our country and people—challenges that transcend constitutional issues or party politics. Three years ago, I gave a speech that, in light of recent developments, has renewed resonance. I spoke about how a new insidious and corrosive threat was emerging from the shadows. The threat to which I referred was not like drugs abuse or excessive alcohol consumption. It arose not out of something that people do but out of something that they do not do. I am talking about parenting skills or, sadly and in far too many cases, the complete lack of them. Too many

parents do not or cannot extend to their children the parenting skills that are so essential if young people are to have any hope of growing up with guidance, support and boundaries. Why do they not extend those skills? Because, sadly, they were the children of parents who did not possess such skills. Disturbingly, we might now be moving into the third generation of that parental void.

Just look around our society and ask our teachers—the depressing evidence is all too obvious. Indeed, the 2010-11 report from the Scottish Children's Reporter Administration noted that the number of children who were referred on the ground of lack of parental care was more than 13,000. That is a reduction from previous years, but we all realise that that number is deeply disturbing. It is not some abstract bit of statistical data. We are talking about young lives being ruined and 13,000 children living in a desperate situation, and those are just the ones we know about. Those children are our nation's future and the parents of the future. I welcome the First Minister's intention to address the issue, but only time will tell whether legislation is what we need. We certainly need a long-term strategy to deal with this new problem. We cannot just cobble together solutions to deal with individual problems as they arise. We cannot hope that the overall problem will solve itself, because it will not.

I will not stand by silent on the issue. I am prepared to ask tough questions. I accept that there is no simple solution, because the causes might be complex, arising from deep-rooted reasons, but we need to take a fresh look at the issue and find a new way. We cannot keep passing the buck to hard-pressed social workers or teachers, who are already under immense pressure.

Our voluntary and charitable sector has a tremendous amount of expertise and skills, so how do we harness that? I will return to that point in the months ahead.

That point also takes me to my next issue, which is drugs abuse. I am proud of my party's role in forging the national drugs strategy, "The Road to Recovery: A New Approach to Tackling Scotland's Drug Problem". That was one of the Scottish Conservative conditions for agreeing to the 2008 Scottish budget. However, three years on, I am angry. Why? David Liddell, director of the Scottish Drugs Forum, claims:

"if you look at the rate of drug-related deaths compared to the overall population, Scottish people are seven times more likely to die from a drug-related death than their European counterparts."

That is not the road to recovery. In June, we learned from the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime that Scotland tops the world league for cocaine consumption. That is not the road to

recovery. Methadone, a state-prescribed opiate, still contributes to one third of drug-related deaths in Scotland. That is not the road to recovery.

Clearly, more needs to be done to turn a good and well-intentioned strategy into results on the ground, so I put down this marker. I fought long and hard for a new strategy that would be based on recovery leading to abstinence. In the months and years to come, I will redouble my efforts to turn that aspiration into a reality. A glossy strategy is one thing, but success will come only when those who work in the drugs field get on board. It is time to forge a new political will to make that happen, because the benefits will be incalculable.

The legislative programme might deal with some of the immediate issues that are facing Scotland, but other deep-seated challenges lie way beyond the scope of one year of lawmaking. The First Minister has the majority to railroad anything he wants through the Parliament, but I hope that he has the wisdom to realise that a majority does not make a flawed proposal good, and it does not make something that is wrong right.

14:04

Willie Rennie (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD): I am not sure that the Alex Salmond of 40 years ago would have believed that he would lead his party or that he would be a member of a Scottish Parliament. He would probably have scoffed at the idea of becoming the First Minister of Scotland—twice. But perhaps that shy, retiring exterior is just a mask.

This is a big day for the First Minister, so I will begin on a note of consensus. The Liberal Democrats initially opposed the SNP's plans to tackle the blight of alcohol, which holds back communities, but we have now reflected and considered, and we will support them. [*Applause.*] I did not think that I would ever hear that, to be honest. The approach is backed by a wide range of health bodies. Alcohol hits communities with antisocial behaviour, the health effects are severe, and it impacts on children and families. As a Liberal, I want to remove the barriers that hold people back from getting up and getting on in their lives, and the excessive drinking of alcohol is one of those barriers. The smoking ban, which Iain Gray mentioned, was a success. It was a bold measure by the previous majority Government, and I think that we can also tackle in the Parliament the blight of alcohol. My colleagues and I will work with the Government to make the proposals a success.

The Liberal Democrats have been prepared to reconsider our position on a major area of policy. I urge the First Minister to do likewise on the police and the fire service, but fear that he is destined to

continue to ignore all opposition to the proposals that have been made. The Liberal Democrats are instinctive decentralisers; putting power in the hands of the minister at the centre is the exact opposite of decentralising. The Government's plans will have an immediate increased cost in already challenging times, and will risk front-line policing. Big top-down reorganisations never save the money that they promise. Too much power will be put in the hands of only three people, and the opportunities to have complaints and discipline supervised by an independent force will be stripped away. Those are the reasons why 78 per cent of rank-and-file police officers and seven out of eight chief constables are against the proposals. I hope that the Government will have a change of heart.

Disregarding advice is one of the things that the Government has a habit of doing. It set up the Christie commission to advise on public services, which was a way to dodge and delay any decisions until after the election. There simply was not enough in the First Minister's statement to show that he is taking forward the Christie vision. Where were the plans to enshrine localism in public services and put the user in control? Where were the plans to integrate local services rather than have top-down silos? Where is the legislation recommended by Christie to make it a duty on public bodies to take preventative action rather than simply pay up for solutions to problems that could have been avoided? The First Minister has not done the Christie commission justice.

I will need to be convinced that adding more laws will tackle the problem of sectarianism, which has been shown in recent weeks to be above simple law making. Legislating to send a message often makes bad law.

On the rest of the programme, I hope that I can encourage the Scottish Government to consider my party's proposals on real reform to Scottish Water to create a future for Scotland fund and create jobs; its proposals to reform regulation and procurement to help Scottish businesses; its plans to make Scotland a science nation; and its proposals on action to tackle top pay and bonuses.

Those are solid plans for jobs and growth. We are not proud; we would be happy for the First Minister to pinch our ideas. Instead, for all his bluster today, his solution to the world's economic problems stretches to two sides of A4. He did not even mention that he has chosen to strip £250 million from transport capital investment to spend in other departments.

The biggest threat to Scotland's economy is the First Minister's plan to split Scotland from the rest of the UK. If Alex Salmond predicted 40 years ago that he would be First Minister with a majority, I

am sure that he did not envisage that his first legislative programme would fail to include independence. Seventy years on from the creation of the SNP, the First Minister hardly even mentions the sole reason for that party's existence.

Everything that this Government does has a purpose: securing independence. However, no answers have been offered and there is no timetable for answers. Last week, the Secretary of State for Scotland asked the SNP Government six simple questions about independence: what regulation would be applied to our banks and who would enforce it? Which currency would Scotland adopt? He also asked about membership of international organisations; our armed forces; pension liabilities; and, the bottom line, the cost of independence, but he did not get any answers. He was referred to a booklet from two years ago, but it did not have the answers either.

This session of Parliament will be dominated by independence, but that is the one issue that the SNP Government is determined to avoid discussing. While Scotland waits, the SNP refuses to declare, debate or even discuss the cost of independence. The only people who are stopping them trying for a separate state are themselves. That sense of dodge and delay marks so much of this Administration. After 70 years, the SNP finally has a majority. Now we need the answers.

14:11

Annabelle Ewing (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP): I am pleased to speak in an important debate on the Scottish Government's legislative programme. It is clear from the First Minister's comments that the programme is ambitious, as befits an SNP Government that is ambitious for Scotland and wants to make Scotland better.

At this juncture I will comment on the somewhat negative remarks, to put it politely, from the Opposition leaders in their introductory comments at least and, in the case of the Lib Dem leader, in his concluding remarks. I gently suggest that in those negative comments there perhaps lies a clue to why there is an SNP majority Government in this Parliament and why the Opposition parties are where they are. Indeed, the most recent opinion polls indicate that they seem to be struggling even further. I would have thought that that would be instructive to the Opposition parties regarding what the people of Scotland want and expect from them.

I return to the legislative programme, which builds on the minority SNP Government's strong record of delivery in the previous session of this Parliament. For example, in 2007, the minority SNP Government promised to recruit 1,000 extra

police officers. The Opposition parties said, in the main, with their customary limited ambition, that that could not be done. However, not only did the SNP Government keep our promise, but the most recent statistics, published this week, show that there are now 1,105 more police officers than was the case in March 2007.

In turn, as the First Minister said, crime figures published this week show the lowest recorded crime levels in Scotland in 35 years. Importantly, the perceived fear of crime is also at lower levels. Nevertheless, the Scottish Government recognises that we need to build on that progress, so we have seen—

Margaret Mitchell (Central Scotland) (Con): Will the member take an intervention?

Annabelle Ewing: Not at this stage, thanks. I would like to make some progress.

We have seen today the proposal for the establishment of a single service for the police. I imagine that that will be the subject of debate in more detail during the deliberations on the legislative programme, but for me the key issue about the proposal is clear: what people in Scotland care about very deeply is that the focus of our precious resources goes to the front line and not to duplicative bureaucracy. As in the phrase that has been coined, it is about bobbies not boundaries.

Another important measure in the legislative programme from the SNP Government concerns our very strong commitment to housing. Over the last four years, we saw the SNP commitment to more than 3,300 new council houses being funded. That compared very favourably indeed with the pitiful record of the Labour-Liberal Administration in its term of office between 2003 and 2007 when, I believe, just six council houses were built in Scotland.

Hugh Henry (Renfrewshire South) (Lab): Will the member take an intervention?

Annabelle Ewing: I would like to make some progress.

The legislative programme contains a commitment to look at dealing with the problem of long-term empty properties through a supplementary council tax levy. I think that that is an important step, which would help to raise funds for local authorities and would ensure better use of our housing stock.

Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): Will the member give way?

Annabelle Ewing: I am afraid that I will not, because I wish to get through some other important points.

As has been mentioned, the Government will bring back proposals on minimum pricing of alcohol, and it is welcome to hear that there has been some shift in opinion in the chamber since such measures were last brought before it. The people of Scotland were absolutely baffled by the Opposition's tactics in ensuring the failure of those important measures. It is pleasing to see that on that issue at least, if not on many others, the Opposition parties are starting to listen to the people of Scotland and to recognise the broad support that exists for minimum pricing across civic Scotland.

I believe that the Government's programme is ambitious and wide-ranging in its scope. It encompasses measures on aquaculture, the tenant farming sector, social care and the rights of children and young people. In short, in the programme, we see a Government that is determined to build on the progress that we made in our first four years in delivering improvements for the people of Scotland. Our delivery record was, of course, comprehensively endorsed by the people of Scotland on 5 May. They are a people who are increasingly self-confident in their ambitions for themselves, their families and their country.

I look forward to the roll-out of the various legislative proposals and, in the years to come, to the first legislative programme of an independent Parliament, which will have at its root all the economic levers that are necessary to ensure that we achieve job creation, sustainable economic growth and real social justice in our country.

14:17

Richard Baker (North East Scotland) (Lab): The First Minister has said that economic growth is the focus of the legislative programme. We welcome that intention, but what matters now is that it is matched by the actions of the Scottish Government. Given the economic challenges that we face, the Government must use the significant powers that it already has to deal with those problems, which include low growth in our economy. On the rising level of youth unemployment, in particular, we have called for concerted action, so we look forward to hearing more from the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning on the opportunities for all initiative. In addition, we hope for further action in the budget bill and in the spending review.

All the proposed legislation that has been announced today, whether it be on water or public sector reform, should seek to contribute to the goal of creating growth. We would have liked to see more legislative proposals with a direct locus in the economy. In the previous session of Parliament, ministers often talked of "the purpose".

That purpose—which often came in capital letters, so that we would know how important it was—was achieving economic growth. We have heard rather less about “the purpose” recently—certainly since Mr Mather took his leave of the Government, taking his mind maps with him—but the purpose of achieving economic growth must be at the heart of the Government’s work now because we know that our economy is in trouble.

The most recent gross domestic product figures show that the Scottish economy is on the cusp of contracting again. The figures for Scotland were worse than those for the rest of the UK. I am afraid that the First Minister’s boast that the recession has been shorter and shallower in Scotland than it has in the rest of the UK, which we heard again today, now rings somewhat hollow, and we look to the Government for a plan for growth.

We know that the Scottish Government’s cause is not helped by a UK Government that refuses to acknowledge the evident need for a plan B on the economy—there will be no disagreement between Mr Swinney and me on that. We have said that we need not just a plan B from Mr Osborne but a plan for Scotland from Mr Swinney, so the new Government economic strategy that Mr Swinney is to announce will be crucial. We will engage in that strategy, because it is vital that it makes a difference to our economic outlook, as must the budget bill and the spending review.

As several members have said, immediately after the election, the Scottish Government demanded a number of new powers that it argued would boost economic growth. We have said that we will listen to any evidence that the Government produces in making its case for such powers, but we have also said that the problems are with us now and that ministers’ focus now must be on using the powers that they have to do what they can to improve our economy. When we discuss the budget bill, we will continue to argue that we must invest in growth, even in these tough times for public finances.

Margo MacDonald (Lothian) (Ind) *rose—*

Richard Baker: For the sake of debate, I will give way to Margo MacDonald, although I might well regret it.

Margo MacDonald: I thank Richard Baker and I sincerely hope that he does not regret giving way. Just for clarification, will he say whether the Labour Party maintains that the Parliament does not need more economic powers?

Richard Baker: We are open to that debate. For example, we have said that the Government should have new and extensive borrowing powers that go beyond those that were proposed in the Scotland Bill. We will be keen to enter into the debate fully. However, the evidence for the need

for a range of powers—such as those to set corporation tax and excise duty—has been somewhat lacking from the Scottish Government. We have an open mind, but we need the evidence to show how the powers would benefit our economy.

We have powers now to make a huge difference to economic growth. Our biggest power is a £30 billion budget. We will make the case for an expanded future jobs fund, to give more opportunities for those who are without work to get into or go back into employment.

Joe FitzPatrick (Dundee City West) (SNP): Will Richard Baker take an intervention?

Richard Baker: No—I want to make progress.

We will press for a new green deal to provide investment to make 10,000 homes energy efficient and provide hundreds of jobs and training places. That would give our construction sector a much-needed boost and tackle fuel poverty.

With rising energy prices, we will all be anxious that more Scots will end up being fuel poor. That is why it was not the right decision to cut the fuel poverty budget in the previous budget and why we ask ministers to take a different approach in the spending review. Tackling fuel poverty and poverty more widely in our society will benefit our economy, so we will continue to press for a living wage in the public sector and beyond.

I said that we had hoped that the legislative programme would include more legislation that would directly affect the economy and a procurement bill. We have heard from small businesses that the opportunities for local businesses to benefit from contracts that public agencies award are still too few. Legislation on that would listen to business concerns, which is what the Scottish Government should do instead of dismissing them and attacking business leaders’ views, as it did last week. That was highly bizarre from a party that has done much to woo the business community. We need action to help business and make our public sector more efficient. *[Interruption.]* Presiding Officer, I understood that I had six minutes for my speech.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Elaine Smith) *indicated agreement.*

Richard Baker: I have used only five minutes and 40 seconds.

I will talk briefly about public sector reform. As defenders of the public sector, we Labour members understand that we must also be public sector reformers. That is why we embrace and have led the arguments for a single police force and a single fire and rescue service. That must be about plans that will genuinely provide more efficiency, reinvest savings in the front line and

protect local accountability. If the plans involve cuts to front-line services or reducing local accountability, we will of course hold the Government to account. However, we believe that the proposals can protect the front line in these difficult times for our economy.

We have more debates on the economy to come. The legislative programme addresses some but not all of our concerns. The Government seeks new powers, but we still do not believe that it is doing all that it can to boost our economy with the powers that it has.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Baker, you really must stop now.

Richard Baker: That is the priority of the people of Scotland and it should be the Parliament's priority, too.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I remind members that the debate is very tight. Speeches are to be of six minutes, and interventions will have to be taken within that time, so that we can fit everyone into the debate.

14:24

Fiona McLeod (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): I must begin by making two declarations: I am a member of the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals and I am a carer who manages a direct payment.

I welcome many aspects of the legislative programme, but members will not be surprised to hear that I want to concentrate on self-directed support. However, I would first like to say that I am glad that Iain Gray apologised for his flippancy about the National Library of Scotland. It is a proud, world-renowned and modern institute—so modern, in fact, that this morning it began to follow me on Twitter. The reason why we need legislation is that the library's governance was set up in 1925 and it wants to be a 21st century organisation.

I welcome the reintroduction of proposals on minimum pricing. During the election, I discovered that, in my constituency, it is possible to buy 3 litres of cider at 18p per unit. We need minimum pricing because 18p is a recipe for mayhem and alcoholism.

I am delighted about the children's rights bill, which is on an issue that I championed when I was first in Parliament in 1999. That bill seems to me to be the logical conclusion to the appointment of Scotland's Commissioner for Children and Young People.

On self-directed support, I welcome the Government's stated principle that the aim is to promote choice and control for those who are in

receipt of social care and to promote the independence of those people. The First Minister referred to the independence generation. I would say that self-directed support will help to foster an independence generation.

I will focus on five aspects of the self-directed support bill. Given my background, members will not be surprised to know that one of them is on older people. I will also consider assessment, regulation, support and carers. We all know about the demographics and the rise in Scotland's elderly population. My constituency of Strathkelvin and Bearsden is home to the largest rise in Scotland. We spend £1.1 billion per annum on social care, but only 7 per cent of that budget is spent on care at home, although that is what most people want. Sadly, the uptake of direct payments is still lower among the older population, so I hope that the self-directed support bill will ensure greater uptake. The bill, with its promotion of independence and enablement, will be a preventative measure rather than a reactive one, as social care so often is for older folk. I hope that, if it works, that preventative measure will mean fewer admissions to acute care and more people living longer healthy lives at home.

Assessment is fundamental to the success of any self-directed support and of the preventative model. Assessments for social care must encompass not only people's care needs, but their expectations for their quality of life. I am delighted that we are moving much more to considering the success of the outcomes of that assessment, rather than outputs.

The preventative criterion alone will ensure that care is always there when it is needed, rather than only when the situation becomes critical. As a constituency member, I raise the issue that if we are to ensure that the preventative element of self-directed support and care in the community is working, we must ensure that the bar for accessing care in the community is lowered so that care is provided before the situation becomes critical or substantial. That does not happen in many local authorities. If, as happens in East Dunbartonshire Council, we wait until a person is critical or in substantial need of care, we have probably missed the chance to use preventative measures to ensure that the person stays healthy. That point has been supported by WRVS in a recent report.

On regulation, I refer ministers to the current Health and Sport Committee inquiry on the regulation of care. One issue that is beginning to arise from the evidence is that we need to consider not only whether regulation is fit for purpose now, but whether it is fit for the future, when, we hope, more care will be delivered in people's homes.

Many reports indicate that carers and care users find the idea of self-directed support a bit scary to begin with. I was scared when I first looked at direct payments for my mother. However, all reports show that, with support, things become manageable. We must ensure that such support structures are in place.

My final theme, members will not be surprised to hear, is carers. The importance of carers runs through all reports and evidence. I am delighted that, in the national strategy, the Government recognises carers as partners in care; I hope that we will see that move further. The only item that I am disappointed about in the national strategy for care is that there will be

“no drive to remove ... legislative limitation on employing family members as personal assistants”.

Three quarters of a million unpaid carers in Scotland provide services worth £7 billion. As Carers Scotland said in evidence to the Health and Sport Committee, one of the easiest ways to sort out all the problems is to give direct payments to the people who are already doing the caring.

14:31

Nigel Don (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP): I found the opening speeches from the party leaders rather more interesting than perhaps they thought, since I notice that too many of them have left the chamber. However, I thank Fiona McLeod for her speech, given that my wife, Wendy, and I are carers for an elderly relative. Having said that, I will move on to other issues.

I listened to Iain Gray, who had great fun. However, I noticed that it took him 14 minutes of his 22 minutes to get to the legislative programme, and he then overran. That was sad because it seems to me that there is rather more in the programme that he could have spoken about.

I want to address an issue that Iain Gray did not manage to get to, which is the proposed new social care and health service and the idea that that might somehow be all put together through legislation. I understand that that would require the repeal of 11 bits of legislation, which might be an interesting issue for members. However, I would prefer a model whereby integration was achieved locally by whatever appropriate means rather than by a new national body that would suffer from all the failings of national bodies.

I want to reflect on one of the things that Annabel Goldie said, which was that the First Minister had the opportunity to railroad through Parliament anything that he likes. I assure her, and anybody else who thought that she was right, that SNP back benchers—the First Minister knows this—are not here to be railroaded. *[Interruption.]* We have the collective interests of Scotland at

heart every bit as much as anybody else does. As I am sure members will see, there will be no need to have a fight about this, because the First Minister's heart is in precisely the right place. However, I take exception to Annabel Goldie's comments. *[Interruption.]*

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Can we calm down, please, and listen to the member?

Nigel Don: I notice that Willie Rennie has now left us as well, which is a great pity but perhaps wise.

Lewis Macdonald (North East Scotland) (Lab): Will the member take an intervention?

Nigel Don: Forgive me, but I do not have time.

Mr Rennie pointed out that seven out of eight chief constables were opposed to having a single police force. I do not know whether it occurred to him that there might be a reason for that. However, much more substantially, I noticed that he referred to the Secretary of State for Scotland's recent speech in which he apparently asked six questions of the Scottish Government. The record will show what those questions were, and they will of course be answered in due time. However, the secretary of state also suggested in the same speech that the Scottish Government should get on with the job. I wonder whether Mr Rennie and other Liberal Democrat members and, indeed, other members in the chamber have noticed that the legislative programme in front of us does precisely that: it gets on with the job.

Let me turn to three other specific items, starting with the proposed police and fire service reforms. It seems to make a great deal of sense to have a single system across Scotland for the employment of folk in the police force. However, I share every sentiment that I have heard so far about local accountability. I am not entirely sure what Mr MacAskill will announce in the coming days, but it seems to me that it is crucial—I have said this before, and I make no apology for repeating it—that accountability be with local councillors, and possibly others who are elected locally, at a level that makes practical sense on the ground.

Let me say, as a former resident of Dundee, that Dundee city might very well be appropriate in this respect; having also lived in Aberdeen, I think that the same might apply there. However, my constituency is divided between Angus and Aberdeenshire—of course, that is just the way it is—and I am concerned that the northern part might end up in an area where accountability with regard to the police extends across the whole of Aberdeenshire. If we want to follow that model, I should remind folk that Laurencekirk is an awful long way from Fraserburgh and suggest that, in this respect, our geographical areas should be appropriate. Some structures such as those in the

Northern Isles and other areas up there are very wide but I am sure that the local members will talk about that. My point is that we must ensure that accountability is geographically appropriate.

I doubt that many other members will have a vested interest in the proposed agriculture and fisheries legislation but, again, it is of considerable interest to me as a member whose constituency covers not only the North Esk and South Esk and the River Bervie, but the Usan Salmon Fisheries netting operation off the coast. Certain organisations already look after the various businesses and leisure activities, but it is entirely clear to me and to those businesses in my area that the current structures of governance are not working very well and that folk with diametrically opposed commercial interests are supposed to sit on the same body. Not everyone will have an equal voice and it is extremely important that we examine that legislation and get it right.

14:36

Ken Macintosh (Eastwood) (Lab): One of the many benefits of the education brief in this Parliament is that, for the most part, my education colleagues and I are spared the wearisome and increasingly strident but entirely unconvincing mantra of “If only”—as in, “If only we had the powers, everything in Scottish education would be all right,” or, “If only we had independence, our schools would all be wonderful.”

The separatist arguments in other policy areas are similarly unconvincing. Separatism does not deliver one extra nurse, doctor or police officer. However, with education, the arguments spectacularly fail to apply because Scotland already has full control over decision making. Our nurseries, schools, colleges and universities are entirely devolved, which means that the Scottish Government already has responsibility when things go wrong or are not as good as they should be. Indeed, I remind members that it has had such responsibility for the past four years. If parents cannot get access to a nursery or cannot afford childcare; if a local school is being closed or our teachers are threatening to go on strike; if we are reducing the range of courses at our universities or limiting access to those institutions, the buck stops with this Administration. This Parliament and this Government have ultimate authority.

That makes the Scottish Government's education plans—or perhaps I should say lack of them—for the next five years all the more revealing. Education is the key to transforming our country, to giving all young Scots the best start in life, to retraining our workforce, to tackling inequality, to making the most of our talents and abilities and to allowing us all to prosper as a nation. These are the goals to which we should

aspire, but precious little has been outlined today in the legislative programme for education to capture those aspirations.

Do not get me wrong—I want to give the cabinet secretary some words of encouragement. Although we will question and scrutinise the Government's proposed legislation, we will certainly not oppose the little that has been outlined. In fact, I can go further. Although we await further detail on the education proposals in the legislative programme, I assure the First Minister that we welcome the findings of the review of post-16 education and the establishment of the review of higher education governance. If the Government wants to bring forward proposals to invest in and improve our schools and make them the best in the world, it will have our support. After all, that is the mission on which we are engaged.

What we are concerned about are the areas that have not been covered in today's programme and which are not the subject of new legislation. The list goes on and on. On class sizes, for example, the current hotch-potch of policy, legislation and guidance is utterly confusing for education authorities and exasperating for parents. The SNP has obliged local authorities to reach a target of 20 per cent of primary 1 classes with 18 pupils or fewer, with the very real threat of a vastly reduced financial settlement if they fail. The rest of P1 will have to make do with a legally enforceable maximum of 25, while unfortunately that rises to 30 in P2 and P3 and to 33 in upper primary. Pupils are being moved about from year to year, from small classes to large or, increasingly, to deeply unpopular composite classes, with no continuity. Where is the leadership or strategic direction? Do the discredited targets of class sizes of 18 from P1 to P3 still stand? Can the minister tell me whether that is still Government policy?

Similarly, the teaching profession is extremely anxious about pension arrangements, career prospects and salary freezes, not to mention the McCormac review and what might follow. We know that the single most important factor affecting the quality of our children's education is the quality of our teachers, but where do teachers figure in the SNP's priority list? The answer from staffrooms across the country is “Not very highly”.

This year's probationers have been incredibly relieved to have the comfort of a manifesto commitment that supposedly guarantees them the number of available jobs. I can tell members that when the figures are published we will be watching closely to see whether that promise is delivered. We still have not heard what is to become of the past four years' graduates who have stuck in there, awaiting their opportunity. Are they to be

leapfrogged by this year's intake? Is that really fair?

Teachers on supply are being particularly badly treated. As one dismayed teacher said to me recently,

"there's little doubt supply teachers were picked out as a soft target for cuts. It is an affront educationally though. For thousands of young Scots every day, supply teachers ARE Scottish Education. To undervalue those teachers is to undervalue education. After all, is the work of a locum doctor or a retained firefighter of any less value when they diagnose a serious illness or pull someone from a blazing building?"

I emphasise the teacher's parting comments:

"If a country is serious about its future then it surely must place a greater value on education than this".

That is what education is all about—the future of our country, improving the skills of our workforce, and giving people confidence in their own abilities—not this obsession with the constitution or the pretence that separation will make things better. Education makes things better right now, and we have the powers right now. Why is the Government not using them?

As for the SNP's much-vaunted commitment to opposing tuition fees, it is difficult to take the First Minister seriously. The SNP is hardly 100 days into office and it has introduced £9,000 fees for rest-of-UK students. The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning has said that he expects universities to show restraint. Is £36,000 for a degree at Edinburgh restrained? At the very least, the cabinet secretary should have insisted on regulating or approving wider access arrangements at Scotland's higher education institutions.

To conclude, I return to my opening remarks, I am pleased that for the most part the SNP does not try to use education to drive a wedge between Scotland and the UK, but I urge the Government to recognise the opportunity that we are offered right here, right now. No more "If only", no more excuses.

14:42

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I enjoyed listening to Ken Macintosh. As one leadership candidate to, perhaps, another, I would say, "Ken, go for it. You'll find it very liberating." [*Laughter.*] Having debated more or less non-stop for the past 72 hours the future or otherwise of my own party, it is a change to return to more mundane matters, namely the Scottish Government's legislative programme.

I will start with something that is not in the legislative programme but should be, namely the bill for an independence referendum. I would have thought that a party with an overall majority in

Parliament that has for years campaigned for Scottish independence would be desperate to put to the Scottish people a vote on whether they become independent but, no, we are disappointed again. We are not yet to have the bill.

That is important because we heard only last week from the boss of CBI Scotland, Linda Urquhart, that the delay in settling the issue is causing concern to the business community. The Scottish Government and the First Minister should put their money where their mouth is and bring forward a referendum bill for a straight yes or no, so we can have the matter resolved once and for all.

I turn now to something that is in the legislative programme: minimum pricing, which makes a return and which I suspect—due to the parliamentary arithmetic—will be here to stay. We opposed the measure in the previous session of Parliament, and we will continue to oppose it in this one, too. I do not say that from any dogmatic approach to the issue, because I recognise that there is a substantial problem with alcohol consumption in Scotland. That is why we supported the Alcohol etc (Scotland) Bill in the previous session of Parliament—a bill that contained a number of very important measures to tackle excess alcohol consumption that have yet to be implemented—but we remain unconvinced that there is evidence to support minimum unit pricing. It was rejected by all the main Opposition parties at the time, and there are a number of problems with the policy.

Jim Eadie (Edinburgh Southern) (SNP): I thank the deputy leader of the Scottish Conservative and Unionist party—at least I think that that is what we are to call it—for giving way. Can he tell the chamber why he thinks that the chief medical officers in each of the countries of the UK and the whole of the health policy community are wrong on the issue of minimum pricing and he is right?

Murdo Fraser: I have consistently asked those in the health lobby to produce evidence to support their arguments. I am sad to say that I am still waiting, but there is still time. I say to Mr Eadie that I am an open-minded man and I remain to be persuaded. If the evidence can be produced, I will look at it; however, I remain to be convinced. We have still to see a direct linear relationship—a causal link—between alcohol price, consumption and harm. There is no such established relationship, and even the most cursory overview of the key literature proves that.

Let us take, for instance, the Government's monitoring and evaluating Scotland's alcohol strategy—MESAS—report, which was published last week. The Cabinet Secretary for Health, Wellbeing and Cities Strategy was quick to put out

a press release saying that it was further evidence that we needed minimum pricing in Scotland. In fact, it proved nothing of the sort. I think that this point was made by Iain Gray earlier. The report showed that the number of sales of alcohol per adult were nearly a quarter higher in Scotland than in England in 2010, despite the fact that there is no difference in price between Scotland and England. Indeed, because average salaries in England are higher than average salaries in Scotland, the relative cost of alcohol is lower in England and we might expect the rate of consumption to be higher there, but it is not. England does not have a policy of minimum pricing because the coalition Government has wisely ruled that out.

Jamie Hepburn (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP): Will the member give way?

Murdo Fraser: No. I have given way once already.

The fact remains that, regardless of how many actresses, comediennes and health-lobby attack dogs the cabinet secretary wheels out, Scotland's relationship with alcohol is a complex issue. Any policy that seeks to modify behaviour through price changes must be targeted and proportionate while also avoiding being regressive. Minimum unit pricing fails to satisfy any of those criteria.

That brings me to my second objection to minimum unit pricing. What is the point of introducing a policy that can be so readily evaded and undermined by cross-border and internet sales? The UK e-retail market is currently growing at 18 per cent a year despite the economic downturn. The industry is worth £5.5 billion and, during April, there was a 55 per cent increase in online alcohol sales. What convinces the cabinet secretary that her imaginary Maginot line will be able to thwart the will of the Scottish consumer?

Thirdly, unlike tackling the issue through targeted taxation, which we would support, any increases in price coming from minimum unit pricing would simply go to fill the pockets of retailers.

Finally, the Scottish Government has yet to convince us that minimum unit pricing is legally competent. As far as I can see, European Union law is pretty clear on the matter. Not only did the European Court of Justice reject minimum prices for spirit drinks in a 1978 ruling, but the European Commission has taken several member states to the ECJ in relation to minimum pricing, albeit of tobacco. The cabinet secretary may be interested to note the words of the Advocate General—the court's top legal adviser—who issued a strong opinion that minimum pricing is

“not necessary to protect public health”.

More recently, the Swiss Government has rejected minimum pricing on the basis that it would fall foul of its trade obligations with the EU, arguing that reasons of public health fail as a justification due to the proportionality of the measure.

We remain to be convinced. If the cabinet secretary can produce the evidence, we will look at it. The fact that the SNP has a majority to railroad the measure through Parliament does not make it the right move.

14:49

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): I will, as probably expected, focus on justice issues in the coming five years. I will start with the Offensive Behaviour at Football and Threatening Communications (Scotland) Bill, which is currently before the Justice Committee.

Everyone in the chamber opposes bigotry and sectarianism, but there was an interesting debate at the Justice Committee yesterday between Pat Nevin, Graham Spiers, Professor Walker and Dr Waiton that illustrated the conflict and tensions between freedom of expression and the proposed legislation. It is important that members look at the bill, as issues are raised about freedom of expression and the state's intervention. It opens up a large debate.

I speak not as convener but on behalf of the committee. During yesterday's debate, we required the supporters clubs that were giving us evidence in a round-table format to bring forward their own proposals for remedies, either as an alternative to legislation or in addition to legislation. There was consensus that what was out there was not working.

I am pleased that the committee, and members of all parties, persuaded the Government that the issue was not suitable for emergency legislation. I agree with Iain Gray—it is probably all that I agree with him on—that we must take our time. If anything, yesterday's debate in the Justice Committee demonstrated how careful we have to be on the issue.

Margo MacDonald: Was there any mention of the clubs taking much more responsibility for the behaviour of fans, in that clubs could be fined, either in points or in money? That would make fans behave.

Christine Grahame: Yes. The *Official Report* is online now, so the member can read some of the suggestions that were made.

On knife crime, for reasons that we have exhausted previously in Parliament, I take an entirely different view on mandatory prison sentences on conviction for carrying a knife—an

approach that Labour pursued at one point. Such an approach would be crude and ludicrous and would have led to indefensible imprisonments. I talk about legislation not being the answer in the context of reducing bigotry and sectarianism. Legislation is not always the cure; indeed, through unintended consequences, it can lead to greater ills. That is illustrated by the attempt to make carrying a knife a statutory offence. Policy action in the context of knives—the no knives, better lives campaign—is to be commended.

On access to justice in the Government's programme, I am reasonably proud of Scotland's record on its legal aid system. As I understand it, we are not taking the route taken by Westminster, which has removed legal aid from certain important categories such as family matters.

Not all is well within the legal aid system, however, and the legal aid bill will be challenged by the fallout from recession, bankruptcies, redundancies, broken relationships and debts. There will be pressures there. Reform of legal aid is some way down the track and I look forward to seeing the bill.

On the matter of reform, the Government proposal for a single police service and a single fire service raises interesting opportunities—and legitimate concerns. The current democratic accountability through police boards is—how can I say it kindly?—quite insufficient. When members attend police and fire board meetings, they may be completely overawed by the brass and scrambled egg in front of them. Indeed, if they deign to challenge the chief constable—which they usually have to do in his office, which is not good psychologically—such an inquiry might be rebuffed with the answer “It’s operational.”

If we are looking for local accountability and delivery and national administration and procurement, a single force may be—as my old history teacher used to say—a good thing. No doubt the robust interrogation by the Justice Committee will prise open any deficiencies.

While I am on the subject of committees, I commend Nigel Don for what he said about back benchers. I will not get railroaded by anybody in any party in this chamber.

In this fourth session of Parliament, with an overall majority Government, it is important for members of committees to get into the mindset that they are their own masters and that they require to demonstrate robust independence right across the parties in the interests of good government, good law and a good Parliament. It is important that whips of whatever party do not leave their marks on the backs of members who dare to challenge the party line if it conflicts with the evidence that they have heard in committee.

14:54

John Finnie (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): I intend to talk about the police reform proposals, and given that there is an oblique reference in there to police pensions I should declare that I am a police pensioner. The details are in the register of members' interests.

An important obligation that is placed on every Government is the safety of its citizens. We heard that recorded crime is at a 35-year low. Indeed, it is down 19 per cent since 2006-07. There is also a 35-year high in the detection of violent crime. The significant increase in the detection rate, from 67 to 72 per cent, is most welcome. Similarly, the two-year reconviction rate has dropped to its lowest level in 11 years. The results, as we heard, are borne out by the Scottish crime and justice survey.

The Scottish Government requires to and will build on those successes, not least through minimum pricing of alcohol and police reform. Some £1.3 billion has been removed from the budget and the criminal justice sector will be no more able to sustain the status quo than anyone else in the public sector will be. Yesterday's report from Audit Scotland was interesting and lessons will be learned and acted on, the most significant of which is to do with co-ordination across the sector. Greater use can and should be made of technology, which will involve consultation and negotiation with unions and staff associations.

Police reform cannot be detached from wider public sector reform, the intention of which is to protect and improve public services and to enhance local scrutiny. It is not about protectionism—we heard from Nigel Don why there might be protectionism in some quarters. The focus must be on front-line police services and the retention of officer numbers, so that we can maintain the good figures, because 35,000 fewer crimes means 35,000 fewer complainers.

Johann Lamont (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab): Will the member be willing to work with members across the Parliament if it is established that police boards will lose civilian staff and back-office roles will be filled by police officers, who will not be doing the job that they are supposed to do? Does he acknowledge that the unions are concerned about the issue? Will he work with other people to establish what is fact and reality and to ensure that what people are concerned about does not happen?

John Finnie: The most important point to make is that front-line police services are not delivered just by police officers. Support staff play a vital role. The matter clearly falls into the operational realm. We want the retention of front-line services, and that includes support staff.

The public have been reassured by the visible presence of the additional 1,000 officers on the street, but they are blissfully unaware of the eight—if not nine, in many instances—human resources, information technology and payroll departments. An outline business case has been prepared in relation to police reform. The single force will produce savings. It will not do so instantly, because, as with any change of circumstances, there will be one-off transitional investments, the most significant of which will be in IT systems. Initially, there will be significant investment in IT convergence. It might surprise some members to hear, for instance, that there is no direct e-mail system between police officers in Scotland, which is worrying and disappointing. All members know of the tragic events in Soham. The Bichard inquiry that followed was all about the sharing of information across police forces.

A single service would not only maximise savings through the sharing of support services but protect front-line resources. The key word, which has been used a lot, is “local”. That is not a word to which the SNP takes exception—it is what we are all about. Local policing with local authority involvement, local priorities and local partnerships are important. Christine Grahame mentioned that police committees are too deferential. I encourage anyone who has not attended a police committee to do so; they will see that there is evident need for change.

Margo MacDonald: I want to draw on the member's experience. Is there a great difference between the advantages in efficiencies and savings to be gained from having one police force and the advantages to be gained from having two or three?

John Finnie: I understand that in relation to the transitional arrangements the costs would be less for a regional force. However, economies of scale can be made only by having a single force, although there would still be difficulties. If someone sets out by motor car from Edinburgh, they can cross five police force boundaries within a reasonably short period. Travelling criminals, international criminals and terrorists do not acknowledge boundaries, so I do not think that we should do so. That is what is meant by “bobbies not boundaries”. I drove down the A82 the other day and in a short period I crossed three police force areas—I know the area and I would not have been able to tell which one I was in at any given time, but for the road signs.

It is important that we have an efficient police service. There will be an opportunity to enhance specialist services, which will be available to all forces, unlike the situation at the moment. Sharing services will also bring about opportunities for

greater reporting and accountability across all areas in Scotland.

Mary Scanlon (Highlands and Islands) (Con): Given John Finnie's position as the secretary of the northern branch of the Scottish Police Federation in recent years, can he tell us whether the 93 per cent of officers in Northern Constabulary who voted against a single police force were wrong?

John Finnie: Those officers have a valid perspective on things. The reality is that there is a genuine concern about numbers. I am sure that that concern will be greatly allayed by the Cabinet Secretary for Justice's announcements tomorrow.

Local is important. The Scottish National Party did not invest in those additional officers to see them removed. The reality is that numbers will be retained and the service will be improved.

15:00

Hugh Henry (Renfrewshire South) (Lab): I welcome much of what I have heard this afternoon and think that it should be supported. I do not think that anyone could argue against there being better and more opportunities for young people. If we waste this young generation, there will be a heavy price for society to pay.

I welcome the reform of police and fire services. I have long been an advocate of a single fire service for Scotland and I have argued in favour of fewer police forces. I am not intrinsically opposed to a single police force. I have argued that the idea has merits. The one caveat that I would make is that we need to be careful that we do not create one powerful police figure in Scotland who would be a counterweight to the Cabinet Secretary for Justice. There is an argument that having three forces might provide a better balance, but I would not rule out having one police service, and I think that the idea is worth considering. Whatever happens, we should be arguing for a community safety committee in every local authority in Scotland. In those committees, the police, the fire service, the ambulance service and the health service would report to councillors, which could enhance local accountability.

There is much that I agree with when I hear ministers talk about the need to tackle the scourge of alcohol in Scotland. I despair when I think of the way in which we have divided the issue and focused the arguments on the issue of minimum pricing. Murdo Fraser has articulated many of the concerns that I still have about minimum pricing, so I will not go over them again. However, we should not let that issue divert our attention from the need to do something about a problem that is affecting far too many families and communities in Scotland.

I support the Government's intention to tackle the scourge of sectarianism in Scotland, which is something that has long afflicted many individuals in many communities. To our shame, we ducked the issue and hid away from tackling it. However, we should admit that sectarianism is not just about football. There is sectarianism in professional classes and in certain jobs, certain industries and certain professions. We have to face up to that and confront it.

I welcome Christine Grahame's comments about the dangers that are associated with a crude and simplistic drive towards imposing lengthy jail sentences for something that we might not fully understand or be able fully to articulate. It would be wrong to attempt to send someone to jail for five years and yet not tell them what the crime is that they are guilty of or have been accused of. We will not tell them which slogans or songs are enough to drive them into jail, yet we are prepared to prosecute and jail them for that. We need to be concerned about that. We should be much more determined to use the existing substantial powers to penalise those who are behaving wrongly.

Christine Grahame: Does Hugh Henry accept that the clubs and the Scottish Football Association have a huge role to play, and that there is much more that can be done and should have been done?

Hugh Henry: Football clubs absolutely have a contribution to make, but I repeat my point: sectarianism is not just about football, and the solution should not be left to football clubs.

I welcome the Government's intentions on public sector reform, but I am puzzled that the issue has been considered for so long and yet there is no detail on how reform will be implemented. It is not good enough for the Government to say that it is still considering the Christie commission's work: we should know by now what it intends to do.

I welcome the talk of housing as a priority, but I and other members of the Public Audit Committee heard this morning from Audit Scotland that one of the biggest cuts in the next few years will be in the housing budget. The Government cannot say that a few extra council houses here and there will be enough to overcome those cuts, which will damage many communities throughout Scotland. We need consistency on that.

What is more important is what I would have liked to have seen. Why was there no talk about protection for workers? We heard before that the powers are already in place and that we do not need additional laws, yet on sectarianism, existing powers are not being used but we somehow need additional laws. There is an inconsistency and a contradiction there, and I would still argue for more

protection for workers who face violence in the course of their work.

Why is there no regulation of bus services to protect the communities that we represent up and down the country? Why is there no legislation to stop councils taking qualified teachers out of the classroom and replacing them with unqualified staff? Why is there no protection for care services—not just action on self-directed support, but action to protect the carers and the care services that have been badly damaged throughout Scotland?

15:07

Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): I very strongly support the First Minister's attack on the UK Government's cuts agenda, which is an austerity programme that will benefit only the wealthiest in our society and will worsen inequality, poverty, ill health, underachievement and unemployment. The First Minister was quite right to say that investment in the future should be the priority.

However, I urge the First Minister and the Government to follow through on the logic of that argument, and to stop pursuing the reckless idea of cuts to corporation tax if the powers are won. That type of policy would only leave yet another hole in the public finances and make the cuts to public services even worse. Instead of tax giveaways to big businesses, there are many priorities on which we should be able to unite in order to—in the First Minister's words—"make Scotland better".

I turn to a few areas of the legislative programme in which there is common ground, where we can work together and where constructive opposition will involve bringing ideas to improve the Government's plans rather than opposing them. On the proposed water bill, for example, we have heard a wee bit less in the way of ambition from the First Minister today. He used to talk about turning Scottish Water into one of Scotland's biggest renewable energy generators: a massive publicly owned renewables company. We should put some of that ambition back into the bill.

I certainly welcome the return of the minimum pricing proposal, but I agree with Iain Gray about the wide-ranging debate that is needed—not just purely on minimum pricing, but on other measures too. Both sides—Labour and the SNP—lost out in the last debate on alcohol legislation by blocking each other's ideas. We should ensure that we take a more mature approach and get the best legislation that we can.

I also welcome the move to increase council tax on empty homes. It is a positive measure and will

help not only to bring in revenue, but to create disincentives to keeping homes empty. However, we should go further and say that we should do the same with business rates. A huge number of empty and derelict properties pay no business rates at all, and yet are held back from development, often by speculative investors who are making a profit on that investment and artificially increasing prices for real, active local businesses.

I welcome the proposed bill on land registration, which could—if it is done right—provide the groundwork for a land value tax. The Greens have argued for such a tax for many years and the SNP has flirted with it year after year, but never quite committed to it. It could be used to fund the investment in our future about which the First Minister talked.

I also welcome the proposed freedom of information legislation, but I hope that the Government will extend the scope of FOI to include contractors for the public sector and arm's-length companies.

The opportunities for all programme also sounds welcome. I want to see more of the detail and I remind the Government of its support in January for our proposal for a microfinance scheme for young people. That would be far better than bungs to big businesses and would support young people to get their own small ideas off the ground. I urge the inclusion of that measure in the programme.

I welcome, of course, the commitment to continue and build on the climate challenge fund, which we persuaded John Swinney to include in a budget a few years ago. However, it needs more than just a junior version added to it: it needs a way to move forward developed projects and turn them into self-financing social enterprises or renewable energy generators so that they do not lose the experience that they have built up simply because they are grant dependent.

The proposed rights of children and young people bill will be welcome. How we deal with the rights of children and young people who are dependent on devolved and reserved services and Governments remains a problem. We will look to see whether we can improve that bill as well.

There are a few matters on which we will have to oppose the Government's programme. I share the opposition to the idea of a single police force. Hugh Henry's suggestion that a single chief constable could come politically to rival a minister and an elected Government is a serious cause for concern.

We do not support aspects of the Offensive Behaviour at Football and Threatening Communications (Scotland) Bill, not only the timescale of emergency legislation. Aspects of the

proposals will have to be removed if the Greens are to support the bill.

There are also matters on which the Government's programme is silent and, therefore, on which constructive opposition will mean applying pressure for new action. One example is the wider equalities and human rights legislation. I welcome the consultation on equal marriage—its tone, not just its existence—but was disappointed not to see a commitment to a timescale in the legislative programme. There is no reason why we should have to wait until 2013 when we know that the consultation will be over well before Christmas.

On climate change, we need to move forward on transforming our transport system so that it becomes sustainable.

There was nothing about the referendum. Iain Gray again had fun winding up the Government about the lack of detail on it, but as a supporter—someone who wants a referendum question on which I can campaign for a yes vote—I say that now is the time for a participative and democratic process to put the detail into the proposals for the independent country that the SNP wants to create. That would include all the questions such as whether to appoint, elect or simply inherit the head of state, and the timing of the vote. I urge the Government to start putting detail on the issue right now.

15:13

Stuart McMillan (West Scotland) (SNP): I warmly welcome the Scottish Government's legislative programme for the year ahead. The 16 bills—including the sectarianism bill that is already before the Parliament—will certainly ensure that the Parliament works hard to deal with the many issues that face the nation.

Until we have the bills in front of us, it is difficult to speak in depth about what they contain. However, it was anticipated that the alcohol bill would come back to the Parliament. I am happy that it will and I know from speaking to many constituents and representatives of organisations that it will be warmly welcomed. Alcohol misuse is a blight on all Scotland from many different perspectives, including the health of the individual, the health of others who are affected by the misuse, the costs to the health service and the justice system and the economic effects. As a nation, we need to examine the problem and try to improve the situation. Minimum unit pricing is not a silver bullet—the Cabinet Secretary for Health, Wellbeing and Cities Strategy knows that and has never claimed that it is—but if its introduction helps to save people's lives and, as a consequence, saves public money to be

reinvested in the health and justice budgets, it is surely worth while.

Of course, any measure that Parliament introduces must be fully justified and scrutinised.

Johann Lamont: Will the member give way?

Stuart McMillan: I will give way in two seconds. I dare say that many of the arguments that were used for and against minimum unit pricing the last time will be used again.

Johann Lamont: Will the member now support the enactment of the social responsibility levy, which would raise funds that could be directed towards programmes to support families and communities that suffer from the blight of alcohol abuse? Can that be done now?

Stuart McMillan: That was discussed during the debate on the previous bill in the last parliamentary session, so it will come up in due course.

Whichever committee examines the proposed alcohol legislation, I hope that it endeavours to obtain information from young people and groups that deal with alcohol addiction in young people. I have spoken to such people and the evidence that they provide, along with the anecdotal evidence, is frightening. We should make no mistake: the public in Scotland want to ensure that we tackle this most serious of issues. I welcome the Liberal Democrats' change of position and we will see what transpires from the other parties, whether it be Murdo's Tories or the Tories. However, I will say one thing this afternoon: the Scottish public are watching. They expect the issue to be taken seriously and not used as a party-political football.

The NHS Scotland statistics that were published on 31 August were staggering. Some have been touched upon already today. It is unfortunate that Murdo Fraser has left the chamber, because he spoke about alcohol sales in Scotland being 23 per cent higher than they are in England and Wales. He also went on to say that, because of the difference in salaries, it might be cheaper to buy alcohol in England than it is to buy it here. First, not everyone in England earns more money than people in Scotland. Also, there are areas of deprivation and poverty in England as well as in Scotland. I thought that Murdo Fraser's comments were just an ill-informed presumption.

Mary Scanlon: Will the member take an intervention?

Stuart McMillan: I need to make some progress; I am sorry.

My tipping point on the issue came a couple of years ago. A supermarket chain was selling four bottles of a well-known international lager for £1 during the weekend of an international football

tournament. There is also the selling of three cases of beer or cider for £20. In June this year, a supermarket in Inverclyde made a pricing error. Instead of three cases costing £20, they cost £11. Unsurprisingly, the supermarket sold out and the headline on the STV website was

"Beer pricing glitch leads to stampede at ..."

and the store was named. I would have thought that, when they realised that the error had been made, they could have stopped selling the alcohol until the problem was fixed. When and if the minimum unit price is introduced in the future, I hope that the headline writers do not need to write similar headlines regularly.

I want to touch on the proposed legislation to deal with extending the Freedom of Information (Scotland) Act 2002. I look forward to that bill because I am sure that there have been occasions when MSPs from across the chamber have been frustrated when they have been trying to assist constituents, only to be thwarted. I do not know what will be in the bill, but I hope that it will be as wide ranging as possible. I state for the record that many organisations that are not covered by FOI operate an extremely efficient system of helping parliamentarians when they are trying to obtain information, and I commend those organisations for maintaining such a positive working relationship. However, I suggest that extending the legislation should guarantee that the information can be obtained, as opposed to having to rely on the good will of bodies and organisations that receive and spend considerable amounts of public money.

Mary Scanlon: Will the member give way now?

The Deputy Presiding Officer (John Scott): The member is in his final minute.

Stuart McMillan: The legislative programme is exciting and challenging. The First Minister's announcement about the opportunities for all initiative once again proves that things can be done without a plethora of bills going through Parliament. I look forward to the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning's statement providing more information on that initiative.

Against a backdrop of savage cuts from the UK Government because of the financial crash and the shameful mismanagement of public finances by its predecessor, not to mention the civil war between 10 and 11 Downing Street a number of years ago, the Scottish Government is working hard to improve Scotland's health and wealth. With greater powers, we can do more, and with independence, we could do even more. I welcome the legislative programme and look forward to shaping an improved Scotland and helping our citizens.

15:19

Mark McDonald (North East Scotland) (SNP):

It is interesting that, during the election campaign, all the Opposition parties—I except Patrick Harvie—told us not to focus on a referendum on independence, but on the day-to-day governance of Scotland. Now, everybody wants to focus on a referendum on independence while we want to focus on the governance of Scotland and making Scotland better for our people. During the election campaign—with the exception of Patrick Harvie and the Greens—nobody wanted to have a referendum, but now everybody wants to have one; indeed, some folk even want to have two. It is now established that Moore's law is opposed to people's right to choose. If they get the right to choose and say "Yes", they must be asked again to make sure that they said what they wanted to say in the first vote.

The Government is committed to ensuring that Scotland improves and Scotland's people are taken forward. I was therefore very disappointed by the party leaders' contributions. Iain Gray made a diamond speech: it would have been more sparkly if he had cut it. Spending 14 minutes talking about the past four years does not do anything to move our country forward. I know that we have spoken about Scottish studies and a recognition of Scotland's history, but that is not what we had in mind. Iain Gray and the Labour Party should focus on the future of Scotland and how to drive it forward rather than his spending the majority of a speech on the past and all the ways in which the Labour Party has held Scotland back.

It is rather worrying that Annabel Goldie has never heard of Joseph Stiglitz, Christine Lagarde or Nouriel Roubini, and that she prefers to take her economic lessons from David Mundell and Danny Alexander. That is disappointing, but it probably explains a lot. The lesson of the eminent economists that I mentioned are salient: cutting too deep and too fast risks causing fatal damage to the economy. The rush to slash the deficit and pay off the debt risks disadvantaging and disillusioning huge swathes of society across the UK and Scotland. I could pay off the mortgage on my house if I wanted to over five or seven years, but my children would have no shoes. The same aspect exists in a rush to cut and pay off the debt in the UK. There undoubtedly needs to be fiscal responsibility, but I would wager that the UK Government is exercising fiscal irresponsibility in cutting too far too fast too soon.

Margo MacDonald: Will the member give way?

Mark McDonald: I will not at this stage. I want to make a little progress.

I agree with a lot of what Patrick Harvie said, but surely he accepts, whatever his views on

corporation tax—whether he thinks that it should be raised, lowered or kept the same—that they are academic. Indeed, the previous Scotland Bill Committee, which was convened by Wendy Alexander, recommended that whatever one's views on corporation tax, the power to change or control it should rest with the Scottish Parliament and the Scottish Government.

Mary Scanlon: Will the member give way?

Mark McDonald: I will not right now.

We have to consider ways in which we can increase capital spending. The UK Government's short-sighted view on drastically slashing the amount of capital that is available risks stagnation and putting us back into a double dip. Major public and private sector projects depend on the availability of capital to invest in order to create jobs and boost sectors such as the construction industry. Reducing that by 40 per cent holds things back and prevents the creation of meaningful employment for people across society.

The Government is committed to supporting young people into employment. In a tough jobs market, we must create the opportunities for young people to access employment. That is why the investment in record numbers of modern apprenticeships is vital and why what the opportunities for all initiative, which the First Minister has announced today, could deliver is extremely exciting. I eagerly await the cabinet secretary's announcement on that.

James Kelly (Rutherglen) (Lab): The member speaks about the importance of capital investment. What does the Scottish Futures Trust, with its overinflated salary bill of £23 million, bring to the capital investment programme?

Mark McDonald: We had the debate on the Scottish Futures Trust during the election campaign. The people of Scotland demonstrated that they are quite happy with the work that it is doing and are quite unhappy with the scaremongering of people such as James Kelly.

Margo MacDonald rose—

Mark McDonald: I apologise profusely to Margo MacDonald for not taking an intervention from her, which would have been 10 times better than James Kelly's intervention. I will now take an intervention from her.

Margo MacDonald: It's the way he tells them.

Although I agree with what the member says about capital investment being required and so on, this Government—like any other Government—is beholden to the people who set the interest rates and give credit ratings. Does he suggest that the UK Government should have ignored the potential

loss of its triple A status, which would have meant that it would have to pay more for borrowing?

Mark McDonald: There has been nothing to suggest that if the UK Government had taken a different approach to the economic strategy, that would automatically have resulted in a loss of the triple A credit rating. That is far too often held up as a fear figure and as a straw man to prevent us from looking at the economic situation and establishing whether the action that is being taken is what actually needs to be done.

We must see our young people—all our young people—as having potential, perhaps not simply in crude academic terms but in terms of potential to achieve and to contribute to Scotland's future and to Scottish society. We should not write them off as a feral underclass or a lost cause. We have to ensure that as a Government we dig at the roots and pull the desperate, the vulnerable and the disadvantaged out of the slime that all too often sucks them down and prevents them from playing a meaningful role in society.

That is why other aspects of the legislative programme, such as minimum pricing, which will prevent the situation from arising whereby someone can buy 10 times their recommended weekly allowance of alcohol for less than £20, will have a vital impact, because with the Scottish Government we see social justice in action, and with the UK Government we see inaction on social justice.

15:26

James Kelly (Rutherglen) (Lab): I welcome the opportunity to take part in the debate.

When the Government launches its legislative programme, it is of course about setting out its priorities for the coming period. I suppose that, as someone who operates within the justice portfolio, I should therefore welcome the fact that five of the 16 Government bills will come within that portfolio. However, as we have heard in the debate, there are gaps in the programme in respect of priorities. There are bills that are welcome, but other bills that would be welcome have not been brought forward. I will expound upon those later in my speech.

I will start with the Offensive Behaviour at Football and Threatening Communications (Scotland) Bill, which Christine Grahame and others have already mentioned. There has been much debate about and comment on the bill over the summer. The Government was very wise to withdraw the bill and to allow a longer timescale for consideration. There is no doubt that the submissions to the Justice Committee, many of which oppose the bill, show the scale of the task that still lies before the Government and this

Parliament to make the legislation robust and worthy so that it can not only be passed but can be followed and implemented by police and by prosecutors and can have the confidence of the public.

Of course, we all support action against discrimination and sectarianism; we support action being taken when people are either attacked or discriminated against because of their religion, sex or race. We should use the existing laws to enforce that, but when a new law is made there always has to be a question asked about what it is seeking to achieve. The Government still has to answer that question.

Labour supported the principles of the bill at stage 1 and will continue to explore the bill's merits through the committee process. The Government has a long way to go on the bill and it must seek to provide more clarity to ensure that it is a just bill that the Parliament will pass.

On police and fire service reform, the Government is correct to go down the route of a single police service. It is important that that is delivered with local accountability and it is also key that there is effective front-line policing. There is no point in having the police numbers, which the SNP likes to remind us about, if at the same time the number of support staff is being slashed throughout the country. The public need to have the confidence that is provided by seeing police on the beat, so it is important that the reform delivers that.

On the fire service, there has been a bit more consensus in the debate about moving to a single service, but Labour has some concerns about the way in which the proposals have been drafted. Those concerns are underlined by the figures that have come out today, which show that there has been a 5 per cent reduction in firefighter numbers. Yesterday, we had the much-trumpeted increase in police numbers, but today, while everyone was watching the legislative programme, a release was issued that shows a 5 per cent cut in firefighter numbers, which undermines public safety throughout Scotland.

In examining the draft proposals for the fire service, the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and others have highlighted the fact that the budget for firefighter numbers could be reduced by up to £35 million. That must be addressed as the Government works through the reform process. In doing so, it needs to involve the experts in the field—that is not a job for accountants or business analysts; it is a job for those who work in the fire service, if we are to ensure that we get the model absolutely correct.

There is a gaping hole in the Government's legislative programme as far as justice is

concerned. At the start of the election campaign, Alex Salmond told us that if the SNP Government were re-elected, it would introduce a victims bill, but it has failed to do that. A victims bill is essential not just from a rhetorical or a party-political point of view. It is clear from talking to victims of crime that they feel isolated by the system. That point was reinforced in yesterday's Audit Scotland report. They need support, which a victims bill would give them.

The SNP Government proposes to introduce 16 bills. Alex Salmond told us that he would think big for Scotland. I think that it is time that he acted big for the victims of crime in Scotland. It is important that they have a voice in the Parliament; it is just a pity that they have not found such a voice among the ranks of the SNP Government.

15:32

John Lamont (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): I welcome the opportunity to participate in what has been a wide-ranging debate that is of crucial importance to our country and which has given the Scottish Government the opportunity to lay out its priorities for the coming years.

Although the political make-up of the Parliament means that the role of the Opposition parties is somewhat different from their role before the election, it is important that the Government works closely with members of all the political parties in this place and does not attempt simply to bulldoze its agenda through the Parliament. My colleagues and I in the Scottish Conservative and Unionist party will engage fully with the Government on issues on which there is common ground and will challenge it when we feel that it has got things wrong.

There are a number of issues in the justice portfolio and how we make our communities safer that I want to address, the first of which is reform of the police and fire services. How we will do that has been one of the most high-profile issues in recent months. The Scottish Government has made no secret of the fact that such reform is needed. As we have heard today—and as we have all suspected—it favours a single police and fire service. It is clear that to make the savings that are required, significant changes are needed in how the police and fire services in Scotland are organised. The harsh reality is that the status quo of separate services is not an option. That is a position on which there is almost complete cross-party consensus.

We should recognise the progress that has been made in recent years. Today, there are 1,000 more police officers on our streets than there were four years ago. They prevent crime and

provide reassurance in our communities. I am very proud of the role that the Scottish Conservatives played in making that achievement, although it is disappointing that certain other parties felt unable to support the provision of those extra officers.

A key priority for the next five years is to retain those extra officers. We have made it clear that in any restructuring of police forces in Scotland, the priority must be to retain a visible, effective and locally accountable police presence on our streets. Of course none of us wants to be in the position that we are in of having to make cost savings in important public services such as the police, but if savings need to be made, it is preferable that they are made by cutting down on duplication in police headquarters up and down the country rather than by cutting down on front-line policing. We therefore broadly support the Government's move to reduce the number of police forces. However, our support will be conditional on having an adequate means of local accountability for the communities that the police serve.

James Kelly identified the massive hole in the Scottish Government's agenda in relation to victims' rights. In June, the Cabinet Secretary for Justice announced that he intended to introduce a victims' rights bill to enshrine in law a victim's right to damages and compensation and to give victims input into sentencing policy and parole decisions. The SNP's record on being on the victim's side is questionable. After all, it has presided over a policy of deliberately emptying our jails in the past four years, which has left many victims of crime feeling let down and betrayed by the system.

Too often, victims of crime are forgotten. The Scottish Conservatives have always said that we want to give them a strong voice at the heart of the justice system, so we would have worked constructively with the Government if a victims' rights bill had been introduced.

Derek Mackay (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP): Does John Lamont agree that fewer prisoners might be in jail partly because Scotland's crime rate is at a record 35-year low under the SNP?

John Lamont: Fewer prisoners are in prison because of the SNP's policy of introducing a presumption against short-term sentencing. If we speak to anybody who is involved in the justice system—particularly victims of crime—they will say that that policy sends out completely the wrong message to those who might want to commit crime and to victims, who feel that the system is not on their side.

In the short time that remains, I will deal with sectarianism. The Government's bill to tackle sectarianism is another major issue that we will deal with in the coming months. As we heard from

Christine Grahame, the Justice Committee had an informative meeting yesterday at which it took evidence on that bill. I look forward to hearing from other experts and stakeholders in the coming weeks and I am pleased that we now have a proper opportunity to scrutinise the bill, which deals with an important issue.

It is critical that we strike the right balance between tackling the problem in our society and protecting freedom of speech. It is clear that we cannot afford to do nothing, but what we do must be as effective as possible. We must recognise that the problem is perhaps wider than just that in our football grounds. The Government's decision to delay the bill will allow us to produce more robust legislation that tackles more effectively the awful problem that affects part of our society.

We welcome parts of what the Government is doing in the justice system, but it is disappointing that several measures are missing from the legislative programme. One of Scots' biggest frustrations in relation to our justice system is about sentencing. There is considerable room for improvement in restoring public confidence in the criminal justice system. All too often, criminals are seen to get away with serving sentences that do not come close to matching the crime. We should not be seduced by the view that prison exists only to exact retribution and punishment on criminals and should be used as little as possible. Putting dangerous criminals in prison means that they cannot terrorise communities and commit more crime.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You must close now, please.

John Lamont: That means that our streets and communities are safer. We will work with the Government where we can and we will oppose when we disagree with it.

15:38

Jenny Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): I will touch on a few issues that the First Minister addressed and on one notable absence from the Government's legislative agenda—climate change. Central to tackling climate change in Scotland, which we all know is a pressing need—especially after the Climate Change (Scotland) Act 2009—is adopting new, innovative and robust policies to underpin the Government's plans to meet the climate change targets.

We know that the targets can be met—the UK Committee on Climate Change has said that climate change targets are economically viable and can be met with just 1 per cent of GDP. However, as energy efficiency and fuel poverty budgets were cut by a third last year, the UK committee has indicated from provisional data that

Scotland will have missed its first annual emissions reduction target for 2010. The 2009 act cannot remain a fanciful wish list—it needs actions to make it a reality.

The opportunities to tackle climate change lie primarily in the areas of housing and transport, but too many Government proposals on those issues are exactly that—just proposals. A commitment to real policies on issues such as home efficiency and road traffic demand is crucial if we are to reverse the negative social consequences that are intrinsically linked to climate change around the globe.

I turn to the early years, and particularly childcare in Scotland. I welcome the proposed children's services bill and look forward to the detail of the rights of children and young people bill. Families throughout Scotland are struggling to make ends meet. They are juggling rising living costs with falling earnings or wage freezes, and many are forced to make choices that seem like no choice at all, often between heating and eating. I do not make that point lightly. This morning, I signed the Save the Children petition that calls on the UK and Scottish Governments to act now to give more support on childcare costs for hard-pressed families in Scotland. The finding of Save the Children's recent survey laid bare the difficulties that our poorest families face.

To make work pay and to address child poverty, childcare must be more affordable. Childcare costs in this country are among the highest in the UK. Parents are leaving work and turning down jobs because they cannot afford childcare. A third of low-income families are in debt because of those costs. That makes stark reading, so the Scottish Government must make tackling the issue a priority. Only last year, in Dundee's Hilltown, three out-of-school care clubs were closed because of the Government's policy of slashing ring fencing. There was no money left in the council budget to keep those out-of-school care clubs open. We had young mothers on the phone saying that they had to give up their jobs because they could not afford private provision. We must take the issue seriously if we are to get people back into jobs. I hope that childcare measures will be included in the Government's early years legislation.

Derek Mackay: Will the member give way?

Jenny Marra: Sorry, but not at the moment.

The SNP manifesto made a number of commitments on the early years. I am glad that the First Minister mentioned some of them, but the commitments that were not mentioned include one on the establishment of a task force to ensure that early years spending is prioritised throughout the public sector. I hope that that was merely an

oversight rather than an omission, and I look forward to the measure being debated in the chamber in the coming months.

Following through on commitments and even on legislation is important for any Government. The deficit between what this Government promises and what it delivers is increasing and it looks as though it will continue to grow. Take the Government's policy of no compulsory redundancies. Only this morning, Alex Neil on "Good Morning Scotland" repeated the Government's commitment to the policy. He said:

"the security of employment is absolutely essential in a civilised society and one where you do not want to destabilise families or individuals by the continual threat of unemployment. So no compulsory redundancies is absolutely at the core of the SNP's economic strategy for Scotland."

Why, then, are we already hearing of compulsory redundancies by the back door in the national health service? Good workers are having to go through reorganisation, followed by redeployment, followed by re-employment into a fixed-term post that is not renewed. That is not to mention the thousands of workers in the public sector who are being squeezed into voluntary redundancies. They include teachers, lecturers, council workers and police staff—the list goes on. I am sure that SNP members will be aware that, only two weeks ago, an SNP member in Dundee tore up his party card because his party had failed to meet its promise that he would not be made redundant from a college lecturer post.

The Government has a delivery deficit. Manifestos and legislation are not fanciful wish lists—they need action. We need action to meet our ambitious climate change targets and to bring into force measures to tackle alcohol abuse for which the Parliament has already legislated. We need action that justifies the Government's warm words on early years and child poverty. I hope that the legislative programme is a guarantee of delivery from the Government and not a list of aspirations and false assurances.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (John Scott): Thank you very much. I now call on John Mason, to be followed by Lewis Macdonald. Members have a very tight six minutes, because going over that is eating into other members' time.

15:45

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP): Clearly, one of the most difficult pieces of legislation that we will have is the next finance bill, with the question of the next budget for this Parliament. We face cuts from Westminster of £1.7 billion. It is easy for Jenny Marra to list some of the repercussions of that, but she did not point out that it was her party that got the economy into

such a mess. Proportionately, we have even more of a cut in the capital budget, which will be a huge challenge.

James Kelly: When the Royal Bank of Scotland and HBOS were on the verge of collapse, was the member opposed to the Government coming in with a rescue package of £37 billion to save those banks and Scottish jobs?

John Mason: I think that, at least, John Swinney's regulation of the banks would have been considerably better than Gordon Brown's. It is interesting to note that a small European country called Switzerland has such a strong economy at the moment that it is having to try to keep its currency down, as compared with the UK, which has such a weak economy that the pound has collapsed.

Johann Lamont: Will the member take an intervention?

John Mason: Excuse me a minute, but I think I need to say something. I have only read three lines.

One thing that we can be sure of is that there are few lessons to be learned from Westminster. As we have gathered over recent days, the previous Prime Minister and Chancellor of the Exchequer were squabbling over the budget until the last minute. It is clear that our budget process will be handled a lot more professionally.

Iain Gray used a phrase—I think that I heard correctly—that was something about the strong, modern United Kingdom. I think that there were some other adjectives in there as well. I am 54 years old: when are we going to see this strong, modern United Kingdom? If members want to go down to Westminster, where I unfortunately was for two years, they will see what is neither strong nor modern.

It is clear that on the Finance Committee there is widespread agreement that we should emphasise preventative spending in the coming years. However, there are challenges with that. How do we find the preventative spending when there are acute needs at the same time? Witnesses have told the committee that there can be a quick return from preventative spending, but I fear that there is not always a quick return when we invest in that way.

Another challenge is which preventative spending to spend. I spent much of August in my constituency visiting organisations there such as Includem, which does valuable work with difficult teenagers; Quarriers, which supports families and befriends children; and Geeza Break, which provides respite care. All of them argued that if we spent £1 with them, they would save us £4, £7 or £8 in the longer term. Considering the claims for

preventative spending and deciding which ones are more solid and would have most impact is a huge challenge for the Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Employment and Sustainable Growth and all the Parliament's committees.

As I mentioned, the capital budget is one of the things that Westminster is cutting most severely for our Parliament. Another group of organisations that I met over the summer was housing associations—I used to work for one or two of them. They put a strong case for investment in housing. We know that better housing means better health and education and that it also creates jobs along the way. I congratulate the previous SNP Government on restricting the right to buy, which has been a huge step in the right direction, as well as on bringing forward capital spending. However, clearly expectations have been raised that that could and would continue. We all, I think, want the maximum number of houses to be available, but some housing associations fear that the strong associations with big resources of their own will be the only ones able to do development. That is another challenge for us.

Finance, the spending review and the coming budget are all very much linked to the powers that this Parliament has. I will mention just three of those that we need to look at. First, powers over corporation tax are not just about the headline rate. Much as I respect Annabel Goldie and Patrick Harvie, I believe that they both made a slightly simplistic argument against varying the headline rate of corporation tax, but that is only one part of the powers that we would have. We would also be able to target key industries with better capital allowances.

Secondly, we all agree, I am sure, that borrowing must be wise and affordable and that we must not copy Westminster's reckless policies. However, prudential borrowing has largely worked for councils such as Glasgow and surely provides a better model than a fixed ceiling.

Thirdly—and very importantly—we should have control over and involvement in welfare and benefits. How can we set a proper joined-up budget if we do not also have control over benefits? What is the point in helping to create the jobs here by investing if savings on the benefits bill all end up in London? Even if the jobs are there, how can we encourage people into them when the minimum wage is so low? Richard Baker talked about a living wage, but we need to go further than that and introduce a higher minimum wage that all employers must adhere to.

The Scotland Bill can be amended if there is political will at Westminster, which I fear is being very timid. Members down there need to do some listening and stop treating Scotland with contempt.

15:50

Lewis Macdonald (North East Scotland)

(Lab): I was glad to hear the First Minister say that he recognised the importance of housing to Scotland's economic recovery. I am sure that he also recognises the scale of the challenge, which was confirmed by last week's housing figures. Last year, the private sector built fewer homes than it has for many years; in fact, it was one of the lowest levels across all sectors since 1945. Moreover, John Mason confirmed just a moment ago the pressure put on many housing associations by the Government's reductions in the housing action grant per house.

I welcomed the SNP's manifesto commitment

"to build over 6,000 new socially-rented houses each year"

and listened very carefully to hear whether the First Minister would endorse that very precise and specific commitment. Alas, I listened in vain. However, I was not entirely surprised. When we debated housing in June, I pressed ministers on whether they actually intended to build 6,000 homes for social rent each year or whether what they really meant was a target of 6,000 homes of all types in the public housing and housing association sectors. That distinction matters. A social rent might amount to 60 per cent of a rent on the open commercial market, while a mid-market affordable rent is more likely to amount to 80 per cent. That difference will decide whether a rented home really is affordable to a low-pay household. Mid-market rents, shared equity, shared ownership and the national housing trust all have a role to play and all affordable homes are welcome, but those mechanisms will not deliver social housing for low-income families.

I am sorry that Keith Brown left the chamber only a few moments ago because after the debate in June he wrote to me over the summer to say that the SNP's manifesto commitment had been "clarified". It seems that what it really meant was affordable housing in general, not homes for social rent. The phrase "affordable housing" was also used in today's statement on the programme for government. However, it is not what the SNP told people in May and I think that now is the best time for ministers to think again about delivering on their commitment.

Yesterday, in Aberdeen, I and members from other parties attended the opening day of Offshore Europe 2011, which is one of the most important events in the calendar for Scotland's economy. Every other year, 50,000 people from across the world come to do business in Europe's oil capital and tap into the fantastic expertise and experience that have been built up in the North Sea over the past two generations. Indeed, Mr Ewing was present at the business breakfast yesterday morning in Aberdeen and both he and I heard not

only about what oil and gas are already doing to grow the economy, pay for public services and create jobs in Scotland and across Britain but about the sheer scale of private sector investment in the North Sea.

However, visitors to Offshore Europe also heard about the continuing delay in delivering the public sector investment in infrastructure that Aberdeen and Scotland desperately need. Those visitors will read in today's evening press about the prospect of disputes over the Aberdeen western peripheral route dragging on to the end of next year and beyond.

Alex Salmond spoke about a commitment to modernising Scotland's infrastructure. When his party took office four years ago, it inherited a timetable for the AWPR of completion by the end of 2011. Having looked at that timetable, his then transport minister told us:

"we are looking at the project being completed around the end of 2012."—[*Official Report*, 27 June 2007; c 1131.]

Well, not any more, and industry leaders from around the world who have travelled to Scotland will read with disbelief—

Mark McDonald: Does the member not accept that part of the reason behind the delay is, first, the fudging of the original route by the then transport minister Tavish Scott and, secondly, the fact that the Scottish Government cannot control the protests that have been made against the development?

Lewis Macdonald: It is certainly the case that the delays that have affected the project are not down to ministers alone, but it is their responsibility to find ways to deliver on their promises. People coming to Scotland will be astonished that a project that was agreed by a previous Scottish Government as long ago as 2003 may not now be completed until 2019.

If ministers want to address the obstacles to delivering on their promises, they might look again urgently at, for example, their decision to delay improvements to the A90 at Balmedie and the Haudagain by tying them to the completion of the AWPR. I hope that they will reconsider that approach. Addressing the obstacles also means doing everything that they are allowed to do to encourage early decisions on matters affecting the progress of projects such as applications for legal aid.

We recognise that the Scottish Government faces a capital squeeze, and in order to manage that it needs to look to the Scottish Futures Trust as its preferred model—a public-private partnership model with capped profit distribution, which it intends to use to deliver the AWPR and many other projects. The issue for this Parliament

will be whether ministers get the right balance of non-profit distribution, public-private partnership schemes, borrowing money from elsewhere—if they obtain the power to do that, which we hope they do—and direct capital expenditure. The test of getting the balance right will be their ability to deliver on all the projects that they have undertaken to deliver, which means not watering down commitments or rescheduling endlessly to delay things.

Finally, the Government said today that it will set out its infrastructure priorities. I hope that, when we see that plan, we will see timetables and budgets as well as the order of priorities for the projects.

15:57

Margo MacDonald (Lothian) (Ind): I urge members to read John Mason's speech. He exemplified the difference between pick-and-mix devolution policies on taxation and full powers. He took the example of corporation tax. If that is all that we can use to try to help business, we cannot move the pieces around the chess board and, for example, do anything about regional grants. I urge members to look at his speech because it contained the essence of what I think the Government should be doing: comparing and contrasting what is possible with the full range of powers and what they will do with the limited powers that they have.

The constitutional question will run throughout this session of Parliament: it is absolutely unavoidable. We now know and have witnessed on television the changes that have taken place in English society and communities over the last generation and generation and a half. We are a bit different. The difference is one of degree—I do not say that it is an absolute difference—but the degree is enough to call for a different management and a perhaps more sensitive range of policies than is possible if we use the one leverage from Westminster.

I should make a point while I am talking about Westminster. The Government was urged to come clean and say how it would make Scotland better. I think that Westminster should be asked to come clean and say how it means to make Scotland better. It is not a Scottish Government that produced the health statistics that we saw last week and which showed that Scots live shorter lives. It was not this Government or the previous Governments in the lifetime of the Scottish Parliament that provided the baseline for the health statistics that we should all be ashamed of.

As well as calling ourselves to account, saying what we might do and admitting that there are limitations, we should not hesitate in calling

Westminster to account and asking it how it will come up with a better idea. One or two speakers on the Labour benches said that we could expect more from Westminster. Is that from this coalition Government or the next one to come? I do not think that we should be too shy in saying that sort of thing, either.

There was a tendency in the debate about the police to skip over the alternatives. I look forward to the statement from the Cabinet Secretary for Justice tomorrow, because I think that the alternatives are not simply one police force or eight; there is any number of variations in between. There are various ways in which operational tasks can be shared among the forces. I am utterly opposed to having only one police force, but that is because of the implications for civil liberties more than anything. Of course, we need to save money in all the services, but can we afford to compromise on civil liberties? We should remember that the forces are the only coercive power in our public services and they can make people do something.

Jamie Hepburn: I too am a great supporter of civil liberties. The member has not explained why any change to the structure of the police would alter our civil liberties.

Margo MacDonald: It is because we have to legislate for contingencies; we do not legislate for only the conditions that exist at this time. What happens if we get an absolutely rotten police chief and we have only the one? What happens if that police chief is corrupt or has to report to a less-than-efficient or less-than-honest minister? That has happened in other communities. That is why we lay down basic standards regarding the civil liberties that the citizen has a right to expect in a democracy as old as our own.

John Finnie: Will the member give way?

Margo MacDonald: No, I am sorry—I know that the member took an intervention from me.

For those reasons, I cannot be persuaded of the argument that one police force is better than two or three. I want to hear the arguments tomorrow and urge members to pay great attention to them because the issue is fundamental to the temper of the society that we live in.

One thing that was skited over a bit at the beginning of the debate is the Government's intention that Scottish studies should be taught and absorbed by Scottish pupils. That is a very good idea. We have a skewed identity, in many respects, and measure ourselves against our much bigger, very different southern neighbour in a way that another country that I know well and love—Portugal—fails to measure itself against Spain. It is the same situation: two countries side by side, one very big and one very small, both with

proud and different histories. A man from Mars who visited the Iberian peninsula would not really know the difference between the two; however, if he lived there, he would come to appreciate the nuances that make for a much richer society. That is the sort of thing that we can learn through Scottish studies. Many of our pupils leave school knowing much more about obscure places in Europe than they know about this obscure place on the periphery of Europe from which many inventions and proud additions to the world's culture have come. We should not be ashamed to say that.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Elaine Smith): I ask you to close now, please.

Margo MacDonald: There is nothing wrong with appreciating ourselves and knowing what we have done in the past. Only when we do that can we say what we might do in the future.

16:03

Clare Adamson (Central Scotland) (SNP): In management circles, the mantra is often thrown out that good management is doing a thing well but good leadership is doing the right thing. The election result in May endorsed the good management that the SNP Government has shown, and the legislative programme that has been announced by the Government today certainly shows good leadership. It shows ambition, direction and an understanding of what the people of Scotland want in order to progress our country.

Doing the right thing means not just having a big, bold, dramatic legislative programme, but getting it right for all aspects of Scottish life. Mr Gray made a flippant comment about the National Library of Scotland. I hope that members will indulge me while I talk a bit about why the National Library of Scotland is so important to the people of Scotland. We are a creative nation, we are rich in our heritage and we are contributing to the world. The National Library of Scotland underpins all that we do as a creative nation.

Margo MacDonald spoke about how important it is that our children understand Scottish history and culture. What better resource could they have than the National Library of Scotland? It reaches out to the Scottish diaspora by supporting genealogy projects and investigations. It stores our plays and literature and holds events that resonate throughout Scotland. It has projects such as the most important plays in Scottish history over the past 20 years, in which students and pupils can go and read plays such as the "The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil", "Black Watch" and "The Steamie"—one resource all in one place.

It links with our festivals in Scotland, including the Edinburgh international book festival. As part of that festival, it holds the Donald Dewar memorial lecture and provides a real flavour of those lectures—given by the likes of Robin Cook; a previous Presiding Officer of the Parliament, George Reid; and Alex Salmond—by recording and storing them and offering them as a resource.

As has been said, the governance of the National Library of Scotland was established in the 1920s and is no longer fit for purpose. It has a board of representatives that is far too large and unwieldy. It includes the First Minister, so I hope that he will not be too upset if he loses a job at the end of all this. The consultation was overwhelmingly in favour of a review of the governance of the organisation. I am sure that we will be able to deliver legislation that will allow the library to achieve its full potential and meet its targets in future.

The idea of good governance is throughout the legislative programme, from the recognition that the National Library needs reform to the approach to our police and fire services. The Government's programme is ambitious and will deliver a fairer society. The broadband digital fund will allow our businesses to be more efficient and to reach competitiveness. If we consider individual access to broadband throughout Scotland, we can recognise that some of our poorer areas are still not included in the digital age. We can tackle that.

The Government has managed its resources by putting together the Scottish Investment Bank, which is already delivering for small companies that are desperate for funds to move forward. It is also showing its leadership in tackling the problems that have led to the moneys from the banks not being released into the economy.

In what area could Government leadership and doing the right thing be more important than in tackling Scotland's relationship with alcohol? I am happy to debate with members on the opposition benches how, if we had control of our taxation, the products and trade and so on, we could tackle the alcohol problem differently. But we are where we are, and to do nothing is not doing the right thing; it is letting down the people of Scotland.

Jenny Marra mentioned that the end of ring fencing had led to nursery closures. I remind her that it was Labour-controlled COSLA that lobbied for the end of ring fencing for so long. She should recognise that one of the biggest problems for single parent families and poor people in Scotland was the abolition of the 10p tax rate by her Government.

Annabel Goldie mentioned that we seem to be confused about independence. I guarantee that if she speaks to any one of us on these benches,

she will find that we know what independence means. Perhaps she should consult Murdo Fraser, because he seems to have a pretty good idea of what independence means at the moment.

16:09

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab):

There is much to welcome in the legislative programme, but there are also huge gaps, which show a lack of ambition for Scotland.

For instance, I welcome the proposal to use public procurement to increase apprenticeships and the aspiration to make more public procurement contracts available to small and medium-sized enterprises. However, there is no public procurement bill in the legislative programme. A bill could have promoted environmental, social and financial sustainability. For example, the Government has climate change and carbon reduction targets, none of which is included in public procurement. Contracts do not take account of a supplier or contractor's distance from the organisation with which it is contracting, although being a distance away adds food miles and material miles. I have experienced large suppliers being given contracts on the basis that the local supply chain is too small and fragile, without account being taken of the environmental impact of transporting goods over long distances and without account being taken of price. Local contractors are often able to supply at a much lower price.

Contracts do not take account of social sustainability, either. Contractors should be legally obliged to pay the living wage not just to staff who are involved in the contract but to all their staff. Indeed, a contractor should be paying its staff a living wage before it is allowed to bid at all.

We need to ensure that small and medium-sized enterprises have a chance in bidding for public contracts. The Western Isles schools contract was far too big to allow the islands' builders even to tender for it; they did not have the economies of scale that would enable them to complete the contract in the given time. The Government needs to look at how it spends its capital moneys, to allow smaller contracts to be put out to tender, with longer lead times. The hubs that the Scottish Government is promoting push out all other contractors. Large contractors and very small contractors will not get a look-in in the current economy.

We need to legislate to ensure that contractors have proportionate disabled employment. Disabled people tend not to get employed and have great difficulty in securing employment. We could say to contractors that to be able to contract publicly they must have a percentage of registered

disabled workers on their books. Local employment and service procurement would have to be in the contracts, too.

We must look at best value, by which I mean best value to the public purse and not just to the organisation that is procuring. We need to get out of the silo mentality and consider the knock-on costs to other agencies. What impact does bringing in workers from another area have on a local economy, when enterprise companies are trying to create jobs locally? The cost of unemployment is huge and needs to be considered. A procurement bill could have had an impact on such issues, which are crucial to recovery.

I welcome the acknowledgement in “Renewing Scotland: The Government’s Programme for Scotland 2011-2012” that broadband is hugely important to the Scottish economy and I look forward to seeing the detail of the next-generation digital fund. However, no legislation is proposed. Legislation could have made an impact. Planning regulations could have been changed, to insist that fibre cable is included in every new development. Legislation could have provided for the setting up of a public record of where spare capacity and fibre are available. I talked to Scottish and Southern Energy in the summer and it is clear that fibre is available on its pylons. The Beaulieu to Denny line will have excess fibre available, which other organisations could use. SSE suggested to me that fibre might also be available from Network Rail, Scottish Water and other organisations. However, the information is not made public and is not available to anyone who wants to plan for rolling out broadband.

We must consider how we use the public infrastructure. Highland Council’s pathfinder network is not available for remote and rural communities to use to access broadband. The Government’s aspiration is that next-generation broadband will be available by 2020. The Royal Society of Edinburgh said that broadband should be available for all communities by 2015. There are community solutions available. There are last-mile developments. I wrote to the minister and asked him to come and look at some of those developments, but he refused to come—he said, “Speak to my officials.” The issue is of absolute importance if we are going to get people connected. The areas that can benefit most from broadband connectivity are the remote and rural areas. If the minister cannot be bothered to come and see them, we will never find a solution to the problem. Industry has said that, unless the Government gets involved, island communities will be left behind.

The Government criticises Broadband Delivery UK. So do I. Its funding is inadequate. However, it

tells me that the Government has not engaged with it. I encourage the Government to engage with BDUK as a matter of urgency.

I have many more points to make, but I am aware of the time, so I will close on the very important point that broadband is essential to our recovery and our infrastructure.

16:16

Jamie Hepburn (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP): The programme that the First Minister has set out before us does not stand alone but has been firmly placed in a wider context, which has at least two strands. The first is that it builds on the achievements of the past four years of the SNP minority Administration. That was underscored by the result that we got at the election, when, as the First Minister said, our competence and commitment were recognised. Those achievements were reflected in many areas, such as the reintroduction of free education for our students.

On that point, I have to say that Iain Gray was wrong to say that his party abolished tuition fees. Labour abolished tuition fees no more than Murdo Fraser will abolish the Tories. Labour merely rebranded tuition fees, just as Murdo Fraser wants to rebrand the Tories. However, that is the political equivalent of Opal Fruits transforming into Starburst—different packaging but, in the cases that I am talking about, the same nasty flavour.

Other achievements in the previous session include the phasing out of prescription charges, the renaissance in council house building, the additional police officers on the streets and the saving of two threatened accident and emergency departments. That investment in infrastructure and the wellbeing of Scotland’s people has contributed to a better country.

The second strand of the context that we must recognise is that we still live in fragile times. The First Minister made clear reference to the Scottish Government’s concerns about the economic approach that is being pursued by the UK Government and others. That is a matter that we have debated previously—indeed, the Deputy Presiding Officer has raised the issue on a number of occasions in members’ business debates that she has secured. We all know that that approach to deficit reduction threatens our economic recovery. It is vital that the Scottish Government does all that it can with the limited powers that it has to support economic recovery.

Mary Scanlon: Is the member saying that he supports the continuation of the £180 billion structural deficit at the UK level and the payment of £120 million in interest every day?

Jamie Hepburn: No, I do not think that those words came out of my mouth. I quite clearly do not agree with that approach. We have to recognise that there is a different approach that involves making capital investment to promote the wellbeing of our people and sustain economic recovery while simultaneously dealing with the deficit. Both things can be done.

One key way in which the Scottish Government can rise to the challenge that is before us is by investing in our national infrastructure. Given that I am the convener of the Infrastructure and Capital Investment Committee, it might come as no surprise that I want to focus on that area, which is one that has been significantly affected by the UK Government's cuts agenda.

There have been significant cuts to the amounts that are available for capital investment, but we must remain committed to it, as it is important for short-term growth, because of the construction jobs that are involved, and for the creation of a modern infrastructure, which will mean that we do not need to invest money in creating that infrastructure in future, because we will already have it. It is also important with regard to opening up long-term economic opportunities. I was glad, therefore, to hear the First Minister refer to, for example, the Southern general hospital and the new Forth crossing, which represent significant investments that will bring about economic and social benefits.

Patrick Harvie: Will the member give way?

Jamie Hepburn: I thought that Mr Harvie might want in at this point.

Patrick Harvie: I will not bang on about the road building programme, as I think that everyone knows my views, but am I not right to be disappointed that there is no emphasis on investment in publicly owned renewables? That is a huge opportunity for generating not only energy but revenues that no Government in London or Edinburgh can take away at the stroke of a pen. Should we not be investing in that for Scotland, not only for this generation but for the long term?

Jamie Hepburn: I would love to see investment in publicly owned renewables, but we must reflect on the reality and the limitations of devolved government. The First Minister's statement refers to supporting investment in renewables infrastructure. Many members are focusing on the statement itself—rightly, because it kicked off today's debate—but there is a wider document that includes many other things to which I had hoped to refer, although I doubt that I will have time. There is a clear commitment to investing in renewable energy generation.

I am sure that Patrick Harvie will share my interest in the details that are emerging on the

Edinburgh to Glasgow improvements programme, on which Network Rail is currently consulting. It will, I hope, directly benefit my constituency, and the significant capital investment will create jobs, improve transport links and help our environment.

I had hoped to go into the rest of the programme in a little detail but, as ever, time runs away from me, so I will conclude. We heard a little from Iain Gray and Ken Macintosh earlier about how the Administration should utilise the powers that it has available for the benefit of Scotland. It is clear from what we have heard today—from SNP members and from the First Minister—about what the document before us contains that the Scottish Government is doing that, but we must be clear about the limitations.

Murdo Fraser and Willie Rennie should rest assured that there will be an independence referendum in this session of Parliament. It is coming down the line, and it will be won. We will then have joined-up government and the real power to make a better country.

16:22

Jean Urquhart (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): I support the First Minister in everything that he said today. It seems that the Government's line in the document that it has published is all about the people of Scotland, and everything that affects them, including housing.

We have heard some fine rhetoric from Opposition members about house building. The restriction on house building is partly to do with the housing debt, which is the result of a bribe that did not work by a Labour Government that asked councils in Scotland to give away responsibility for housing its own people.

We may have to thank Margaret Thatcher, at least for putting a section in her bill that meant that housing could never be transferred without the approval of the residents. In a number of areas in Scotland, residents did not approve the transfer. One of the reasons why we cannot release more money for house building in Scotland, which we desperately need, is that millions of pounds of debt still exists throughout the country, to which no Opposition members have referred.

Rhoda Grant: Does Jean Urquhart agree that if Highland Council tenants had agreed to transfer their housing, their debt would have been wiped out and the council would now be in a position to invest more in council housing?

Jean Urquhart: No, I certainly do not agree with that. I vigorously opposed any idea of the tenants transferring, as they hugely supported keeping a local authority as their landlord. They were perfectly happy and content and, furthermore, we

could have done with the £1.6 million that it cost to provide glossy brochures to try to persuade them to move to a private landlord or the equivalent. I do not accept Rhoda Grant's point for a minute.

Johann Lamont: Does Jean Urquhart consider housing associations and housing co-operatives to be private sector housing providers?

Jean Urquhart: No, I do not say that at all. However, there is and always has been a need for houses to be built by local government. *[Interruption.]* Members should hear me out. We were about to transfer housing stock—hundreds and hundreds of houses—for £16 million. Why would we devalue property at that rate? There was deep suspicion in the council and among tenants. That is now being overturned.

Part of the problem was that housing stock was transferred in areas where that was not relevant. In a number of areas in Scotland, we are still stuck with the debt. Why was it not waived in any case? What was the problem? If the money was available to clear the housing debt when the stock was transferred, it was clearly available if it was not transferred. I will not go on about that, because I would like to raise a number of other issues.

All the issues that the First Minister's statement addressed relate to care for people in Scotland, be that a roof over their head or clean water to drink. I suspect that, if it were not for the creation of the Scottish Parliament, water would not still be thought of as a public resource and Scottish Water would not still be a public company.

Throughout Scotland, one of the inhibitors to the education of our children and the building of schools is the need for local authorities to pay off the enormous debt with which public-private partnerships left them. The Labour Party is quite happy to forget that programme. It claims to have built many hospitals and schools, but it did not. The banks built them and the Labour Party took the credit for it. We are paying for that now. In addition to criticising, the other parties need to be realistic about what Scotland can be ambitious about and what it can achieve.

I was aghast when Iain Gray said that he was envious of our First Minister's ability—I think that I am using his words—to make Scottish institutions bend to his will. How far that is from the kind of governance that this Government would like to see. It is not about making anybody bend to anybody's will but about finding a way forward in agreement about what is best for every part of Scotland.

On the discussion about whether we should be independent, independence is about running the country well and running the country well is about independence. If we run the country well, clearly

state our objectives for that and take people with us, that is independence. The fact that we work on the constitution is by the way.

We can govern ourselves sufficiently, caring for all the issues that are raised in our programme for the way forward and caring for our own ambition. People might not accept that we can do that, but we can and we have the people to do it. For the first time, we have been given a clear passage to declare that. We do not need any if-only issues about the mere detail. The ambition is to do the best that we can for every man, woman and child in this country.

16:29

Michael McMahon (Uddingston and Bellshill) (Lab): I appreciate that important discussions are under way between the Scottish Government and COSLA and that it would be dangerous to predict, or speculate about, what may emerge from those discussions. I refer to discussions between the Scottish Government and the actual COSLA, not the Labour-controlled COSLA that seems to exist only in Clare Adamson's mind.

Those discussions concern serious matters that the two parties must conclude. I might not approve of what ultimately transpires from them, but there can be no doubt that local government will have a huge role to play in implementing much of the First Minister's statement under difficult financial circumstances. It has a huge role to play in helping Scotland's economy to grow out of the economic morass, so I expected to hear much more about local government issues than I have done this afternoon.

Public services reform, particularly the shared services agenda, is an area in which I expected the First Minister to come up with more than 16 lines in his statement. With huge pressures being brought to bear on local authorities by internal necessity and Government direction to deliver efficiencies that it requires, the Government should not be standing on the sidelines while local authority after local authority walks away from the implementation of the few blueprints for the sharing of existing services. The issue should not divide local government from central Government, nor one political party from another, but a problem is emerging with the development and delivery of shared services, and the Government cannot allow it to worsen. Any outcome from the Christie commission report would be welcome as soon as possible and I welcome the First Minister's commitment to delivering it in the near future, but I suggest that that be done in 2011 rather than later, as we must get on with that agenda.

What was missing from the First Minister's statement, but which could have been included,

was new legislation or reviews of existing laws on matters for which responsibility lies with our councils. Increasing numbers of individual constituents, communities and businesses will be concerned at the lack of any recognition in the statement of a need to address the increasing problem of planning regulations and guidelines on waste management facilities, especially incinerators. Just where does the SNP stand on that issue?

From answers to previous questions, I know that the Minister for Local Government and Planning has no plans to review the situation, so it comes as no surprise that the First Minister's statement left the area untouched. However, it is becoming increasingly unacceptable that waste disposal companies that are acting in accordance with Government targets on waste management and energy from waste are met with a confusing picture because of the planning regime in that area. Planning authorities will always exhibit inconsistencies from local authority to local authority as attitudes to certain developments will always differ. It is therefore not surprising that some will always reject proposals for waste disposal plants while others are inundated with them. If the Government is genuine about its waste management targets and the solutions that it supports for meeting them, it must get serious about the planning regulations that govern the sector. If it does not, local communities will continue to war with business in conflicts that will hamper the economic viability of some businesses and the achievement of waste reduction and recycling targets.

Another area in which greater clarity is needed is the planning of housing developments. Although it is bad enough that the Government has watered down its commitment to build 6,000 social rented homes, as Lewis Macdonald rightly pointed out, it is also not good enough that it is showing scant regard for the problems that are being encountered in local communities over where houses will be located. We need the right type of home in the right place but, too often, planning authorities and developers and local communities are at odds with one another because the desire for good quality and sufficient numbers of affordable private developments, shared equity homes and social rented accommodation is hindered either by nimbyism, poor planning, irresponsible development or a combination of all three.

I accept that the situation could have been avoided by the better designation of land in local plans, but the fact is that we are in another unacceptable situation that highlights the need for a review of the implementation of planning legislation. I am disappointed that the Scottish

Government programme has not indicated that that will happen.

I will finish off on a matter that is slightly less important but still reasonably significant and worthy of comment. Where is the high hedges legislation that the former Minister for Community Safety promised last session? I know and regret that the issue could and should have been dealt with by the Governments that I supported prior to 2007. However, in September 2010, Fergus Ewing specifically briefed MSPs that Scottish Government officials had started preparatory work to enable a draft bill to be introduced shortly after the election, should any incoming Government decide to do that. Evidently, the Government does not think that there is any need for a bill and the issue is not going to be addressed yet. Indeed, the new minister has informed my colleague John Pentland in a written answer that we will not get the bill shortly after the election, as was promised, but will get it during the current parliamentary session. That could mean 2016. I assure members that the people in my constituency whose lives are being blighted by their neighbours' high trees and hedges will be bitterly disappointed by the minister's backsliding.

There will be measures in the Government's legislation programme that I will be able to support, but there are more missed opportunities than there should have been.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Due to time constraints, we have already lost a member from the debate. If everyone else keeps within their six minutes, we should manage to get everyone else in.

16:35

John Wilson (Central Scotland) (SNP): I welcome this debate, which has been initiated by the Scottish Government, and I am glad that it has highlighted how it intends to move Scotland forward through its programme for government.

In its current thinking and the programme for government, the Scottish Government has correctly spelled out the need to reindustrialise parts of Scotland, harness renewables and offer new funding initiatives. An example of such funding is the establishment of the £70 million national renewable infrastructure fund, which will aid the delivery of 28,000 jobs. There is more that the Scottish Government can do in examining the future, but Scotland needs the tools to do the job of investing in our human capital as well as the physical investment.

Promoting growth that is sustainable in the long term rails against the increasing short-termism that some key financial institutions have exhibited. That said, I am encouraged that people in the City

of London are now actively talking about kilt-edged, rather than gilt-edged, securities that can be launched as a way for people to invest in Scotland's infrastructure needs. That was reported in the *Investors Chronicle* on 14 June 2011. The need to attract investment is paramount, and the SNP's manifesto flagged up key commitments, especially the need to take forward a Scottish growth strategy. The debate on that—especially on targeting capital investment—represents a welcome one on Scotland's direction, although it must be put in the context of a highly political agenda that the UK Government is advancing, with a focus on a plan A of cuts being all-important.

Many economic commentators, including ex-members of the Bank of England's monetary policy committee—most notably, Professor Blanchflower—have criticised the UK Government's approach. The UK Government's plan lacks the necessary flexibility, despite the assertion by the Chancellor of the Exchequer, George Osborne, that an element of flexibility is built into the UK Government's financial planning assumptions. It is notable that the UK growth figures are being constantly revised downwards almost daily—or so it appears.

The UK political parties have consistently failed to recognise that the Scottish Government's budget has been cut by the UK Government. Moreover, £800 million of those cuts directly affect the capital budget elements in the Scottish Government's financial settlement. In that context, I welcome the UK Government's recognition that, under the current legislative framework, the Scottish Government is severely limited in its borrowing powers, to put it mildly. The proposals to extend the current borrowing powers in the Scotland Bill, which recently progressed in the UK Parliament, and to introduce new capital borrowing powers from 2013 are a step in the right direction, but that step should have been taken earlier.

A key Scottish Government undertaking is to deal with the practicalities of renewing Scotland's infrastructure. On 26 May 2011, the First Minister stated in the chamber that investment is critically important in the process of renewal and regeneration. He referred to investment that

"will prepare our nation to meet the challenges of the future."—[*Official Report*, 26 May 2011; c 70.]

The Scottish Government does not operate in a vacuum with its legislative programme and key policy objectives. There is a need to recognise that household budgets are under severe strain with inflationary pressures. Gas prices have increased by more than 80 per cent over the past five years, and electricity prices have increased by almost 55 per cent over the same period. Fuel poverty is an important issue—even more so when we consider

the aim to eradicate it by 2016. When that target was set, nobody expected that rising prices and falling earnings would draw more people into fuel poverty. I welcome the First Minister's commitment to the social wage, as outlined in his speech.

The growth of Scotland's companies has been severely tested in the recent economic climate, with certain sectors being increasingly exposed to the economic downturn. That has, in turn, led many small and medium-sized enterprises to use short term or variable debt, such as business overdrafts. I therefore welcome the £55 million that has been allocated through the Scottish loan fund, because that is real money that will have a direct impact, on the ground.

I appreciate the need for today's debate and hope that many of the issues that have arisen will be taken forward in the coming months and years, that we can develop a programme and strategy that benefits all sections of Scottish society and that the Opposition parties, both in the chamber and outside, are prepared to engage constructively with the Scottish Government and its programme to drive forward real benefits for all of Scotland.

16:40

Mary Scanlon (Highlands and Islands) (Con):

On behalf of Scottish Conservatives, unionists, progressives and Tories, I particularly welcome the Government's bill on self-directed support. It used to be called direct payments and was supported by all parties in the first session of the Parliament, with the formation and dissolution of Direct Payments Scotland.

I welcome carers being in the driving seat. That will give them freedom and choice over the provision of care and respite and will help to ensure that they get care time in line with the assessment of need. The bill will break the stranglehold of local authority monopoly provision of care and I hope that it will drive up standards.

My concern is about the quality of care and how carers can decide on what is and is not a good service. That concern is based on the fact that the registration of support workers for care-at-home services does not even start until 2017, with full achievement of registration by 2020.

The Scottish Social Services Council was set up by Parliament and became operational in 2001. It will be 19 years from the set-up of the organisation before all support workers for care at home are fully trained, skilled, experienced and capable of registration. That is in no part the fault of carers who carry out their duties daily, often without the full support and training that they need from their employers for this important job. I ask the Government whether it will review the registration

process, which is inextricably linked to training, with a view to reducing the registration period, and I ask it to incentivise employers to train fully and support their staff to undertake the tasks and duties that they are asked to carry out. We would not accept a teacher being unqualified and not registered with the General Teaching Council for 19 years, nor would we have a doctor practising medicine without registration with the General Medical Council, so why should we allow untrained, unqualified and inexperienced carers to look after our older people in Scotland? For care homes, support workers have to register by 2015—that is still four years off.

I think that all MSPs would agree that most of the bad practice in recent years has highlighted the lack of training and support given to staff, and the self-directed support bill will be successful only if carers can choose from a pool of staff who they know are trained and equipped for the job now, not in eight years' time.

If elderly people were better cared for in their own homes, there would be fewer emergency admissions to hospital and much less need for long stays in care homes.

My second point is on the mental health bill that was promised in the SNP manifesto. Where is it?

My third point is on the minimum unit pricing for alcohol bill. The proposals in the Alcohol etc (Scotland) Bill led to many questions and excellent scrutiny by the Health and Sport Committee in the previous session of Parliament. I assume that further research will be brought forward to accompany the new bill on minimum unit pricing. I also assume that the Scottish Government will now have the answers to questions on internet sales, which is the fastest-growing market for alcohol, and on how to address cross-border sales. I trust that the Government has also done further work on the income elasticity and cross-elasticity of demand and has conducted an examination of binge drinking. That information was not available with the previous bill—I assume that it will be available now.

Mark McDonald: Would the member not accept that the possibility of legislation being circumvented should not be an excuse not to legislate in the first place to tackle social ills?

Mary Scanlon: The Parliament's having the opportunity to pass legislation depends on every parliamentarian being fully informed. Many questions were asked during consideration of the Alcohol etc (Scotland) Bill and it is the responsibility of any Government, whether minority or majority, to bring forward that information.

Then there is the legal case. Given the importance of the minimum unit pricing bill in relation to European Commission treaty rules on

the free movement of goods, it is my understanding that a full range of alternative measures, including taxation, that might have the same public health impact, but which might be less restrictive to intra-Community trade, must be pursued before a measure such as minimum unit pricing can be deemed legal to address public health. I trust that the Government will give the Parliament the full list of public health measures that it has pursued since 2007 before resorting to minimum unit pricing, which will be needed if the bill is to be considered compliant with EU law. Please can we have that information now?

The most high-profile piece of proposed legislation in this parliamentary session will probably be the referendum bill. After 77 years of campaigning for an independent Scotland, we now have a pick'n'mix option that involves neither independence nor leaving the current arrangement alone.

As regards shared defence bases, why would any UK Government share bases with an SNP-controlled independent Scotland when that party is anti-nuclear, anti-NATO and has opposed every war and defence strategy for 30 years? "Unpardonable folly" was the phrase that Alex Salmond used to describe our humanitarian intervention in Kosovo to stop Milosevic's brutal ethnic cleansing.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I am afraid that the member will have to stop.

16:47

Malcolm Chisholm (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (Lab): Today, as has been the case over the past 12 years, there is broad consensus between Labour and the SNP on a great deal of the legislation that is proposed. Personally, I do not object in principle to any of the bills that have been announced.

In addition, there is a broadly shared economic stance. I do not have a problem with Joseph Stiglitz, whom the First Minister eulogised, but I do not have a problem with Ed Balls either, and both present very similar economic analyses. Of course we need to stimulate growth; of course the scale and the speed of the cuts are counterproductive from the point of view of growth as well as of deficit reduction; and of course we must do everything that we can to promote infrastructure investment.

I welcome the debate about extra powers—I would like the Parliament to have quite a few more, even beyond those that are contained in the Scotland Bill—but it was a bit odd to hear quite so much about that in a statement on the legislative programme. Whatever we think about extra powers, talking about them must never be a

substitute for making full use of the powers that we have. In that regard, I agree entirely with what Richard Baker said about the green new deal, the living wage and procurement.

I particularly welcome the consultation on the draft early years bill, the task force that is referred to in the document that the Government brought out today to ensure that spending on the early years is prioritised across the public sector—as long as that is ensured—and the document's emphasis on family centres and a parenting strategy.

Last week, I visited the violence reduction unit in Glasgow and talked to two of the most inspiring people in Scotland—Karyn McCluskey and John Carnochan. Recently, journalists have rightly praised their work in successfully combating gang violence, but the supreme importance that they attach to investment in the first three years of life in particular as a way of preventing crime and many other future ills has been ignored. Indeed, John Carnochan, who is a senior police officer, has famously said that he would rather have 1,000 extra health visitors than 1,000 extra police officers.

In emphasising the early years, it is important to focus not just on families but on the wider social context. In that regard, I agree entirely with what Jenny Marra said about child poverty and childcare. I am sure that we were all alarmed by the Daycare Trust's report that came out this morning, which highlighted the increasing cost of childcare and how that is increasing poverty in Scotland. It is very important that in emphasising the early years, we take action on child poverty and childcare.

The violence reduction unit was also highly instructive on alcohol. It emphasised the incredibly strong association between alcohol and violence, which—combined with the recent steep increase in health problems that are associated with alcohol—means that a range of measures is required to combat alcohol abuse. I agree entirely with Iain Gray's request for the bill on alcohol not to be narrowly drawn, because no one single measure can deal with this increasingly serious problem. However, as is well known, I believe that one of the measures should be minimum pricing.

From what was said today, it is unclear whether primary or secondary legislation is required for higher and further education changes. It is really important that, at the end of the review of further education, democratic accountability of further education colleges is increased.

I ask the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning, who is in his seat, to reconsider his proposals for tuition-fee payment by English students. Of course I accept the need for such

fees to be paid, but I am sure that I was not the only MSP—I feel it particularly as an Edinburgh MSP—to be shocked by the announcement this week that the University of Edinburgh would charge English students £36,000 for an honours degree. It is unacceptable that more should be paid in Scotland than in England, so I ask the cabinet secretary to look at that again and perhaps to consider the more radical proposal that all tuition fees from English students would be paid to the Scottish Further and Higher Education Funding Council and distributed equitably as part of the grant distribution to universities.

One disappointment in the legislative programme concerns housing. That relates crucially to what I said about capital investment—I have previously expressed disappointment that housing is not being prioritised for capital investment. I am disappointed that the legislative programme contains little about housing. I support the bill on council tax on empty homes and on housing support grant, because it is good to incentivise the bringing into use of empty homes. However, it is disappointing that the only other measure is scrapping housing support grant; that should be looked at again.

I welcome whole-heartedly many of the other bills that have been announced, such as the self-directed support bill, the rights of children and young people bill and the Scottish Criminal Cases Review Commission bill, which—strangely—no one, including the First Minister, has mentioned after four hours of debate. I look forward to constructive discussions on all those bills in the next few months.

16:53

The Minister for Energy, Enterprise and Tourism (Fergus Ewing): It is always a pleasure to follow Malcolm Chisholm, who made a typically thoughtful speech. He mentioned his visit to the violence reduction unit in Glasgow. I agree that Karyn McCluskey and John Carnochan are two of the most inspiring individuals in Scotland.

It is relevant to point out that, while our main aim in taking forward our programme is economic growth, the human misery that drug addiction and alcohol abuse cause not only is a human tragedy but contributes massively to economic difficulties, at a cost of an estimated £5 billion a year. That is not the main reason why our minimum alcohol pricing bill is important, but it is a contributory reason. It was pleasing to hear that the Liberals will now support that bill, which is a positive move. We look forward to building on that consensus with the various strands of opinion that are emerging in the Conservative Party—whether people are abolitionists or non-abolitionists, I hope

that they can unite behind some of the promising SNP measures in our legislative programme.

The First Minister made it clear that among our most important priorities are creating and protecting jobs; growing the economy; securing capital expenditure in so far as we can, given the predation from London; and helping young people into jobs through building on our excellent record, with 25,000 apprenticeships created last year. However, I want to talk about work that is being done not by the Scottish Government—although it is supported by it—but by Scottish companies and people whom I have had the pleasure of meeting in the past few months.

One of those people is Ian Couper of Energy North, who has brought together 60 or 70 companies in the north of Scotland to build on the opportunities in the oil fabrication and renewables sectors in places such as Nigg. We hope that, through Global Energy, the excellent work at Nigg, which has been supported by members from across the Parliament, will continue. Another example is the work carried out by Scott Taylor, the chief executive of the Glasgow City Marketing Bureau. Tourism makes a huge contribution to the economy. The new Scottish Hydro arena, to which Scottish Enterprise contributed, will enable Glasgow massively to increase visitor numbers to that great city, as people come to listen to bands such as Take That—not one that I am familiar with—and many others. *[Interruption.]* I am told that another is Robbie Williams, who is another individual with whom I am unfamiliar. That will make a massive contribution that will be worth about £150 million a year, or something of that ilk.

I also visited the Moray economic partnership and met Jim Royan and George McIntyre and others who are working to help the people who are losing their jobs at RAF Kinloss. Through individual effort and with appropriate assistance from Highlands and Islands Enterprise and the Moray economic partnership, those people are trying to get back on their feet and, in many cases, find a way of staying in the Highlands. Among them are people from England whom we would like to stay and continue to make a huge positive contribution to our economy. Another example is the company Ceridian.

David McLetchie (Lothian) (Con): In the minister's round-up of job-creation measures, will he address the needs of Scotland's gardeners to cut the hedges and Michael McMahon's point about the minister's failure to deliver legislation that he promised last September to many members of the Parliament, including me? The failure to deal with that issue will disappoint many in Scotland. If the Government will not take action, will it provide time and support for a member's bill on the issue?

Fergus Ewing: I am slightly surprised that the other parties' priorities seem to have shifted slightly. While we are determined to promote Scotland's economy, jobs in Scotland and opportunities for young people, there seems to be a new Conservative-Labour alliance on high hedges. "High hedges!" is the cry—that is what we need to sort out in Scotland. Of course we will see brought forward measures to deal with a high hedges bill. I have every confidence that that will happen. I know that Roseanna Cunningham has the issue at the forefront of her agenda and that appropriate measures will be taken forward. I am happy to assure David McLetchie and Michael McMahon on that important topic.

I turn to matters that, arguably, are at least of equal importance, such as the oil and gas sector. Lewis Macdonald mentioned that he was in the audience when I spoke at a business breakfast in Aberdeen yesterday morning. As we all know, the oil and gas sector makes a massive contribution to the Scottish economy, including the 196,000 jobs and £13,000 million to the London Treasury. When we consider the oil and gas that is yet to be extracted from the North Sea and off Shetland, and given that that will happen in higher proportions under enhanced oil extraction—a policy that both Governments support—we find that the value of the remaining reserves in Scotland's waters is estimated at up to £1.2 trillion. Members who have doubts about whether we are some sort of economic basket case might want to reflect on the fact that the oil and gas sector is doing well.

One fact that is of particular importance is that the oil and gas sector in Scotland, working in complement with the renewable energy sector, has about five decades to come of continued activity in the North Sea. I hope that all parties will endorse our view that, for young people who want to pursue a career, that sector offers an extremely important opportunity to have a lively and rewarding career. I therefore have pleasure in commending the programme for government.

The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick): Members will wish to note that we will continue the debate on the programme for government at 9.15 tomorrow morning.

Parliamentary Bureau Motions

The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick): The next item of business is consideration of two Parliamentary Bureau motions. I ask Bruce Crawford to move the motions.

17:00

The Cabinet Secretary for Parliamentary Business and Government Strategy (Bruce Crawford): Presiding Officer, on motion S4M-00762, it might be helpful if I give a quick explanation of its intent. The Parliamentary Bureau considered a request from the convener of the Scotland Bill Committee to suspend standing orders, which would permit the committee to sit on the morning of Thursday 8 September alongside plenary business. We all know that that is not the usual situation as far as Parliament is concerned. However, there are unusual and particular circumstances here, so the bureau agreed to the request and I move a motion on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau in that regard.

Motions moved,

That the Parliament agrees that Rule 12.3.3A of Standing Orders be suspended for the purpose of allowing the Scotland Bill Committee to meet from 10.00 am until 11.50 am on Thursday 8 September 2011 to take evidence from UK Ministers.

That the Parliament agrees that Rule 6A.3.3 of Standing Orders be suspended from 15 September to 31 October 2011 to allow the Conveners Group to meet.—[Bruce Crawford.]

The Presiding Officer: Questions on the motions will be put at decision time.

Decision Time

17:01

The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick): There are two questions to be put as a result of today's business. The first question is, that motion S4M-00762, in the name of Bruce Crawford, on the suspension of standing orders in regard to the Scotland Bill Committee, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that Rule 12.3.3A of Standing Orders be suspended for the purpose of allowing the Scotland Bill Committee to meet from 10.00 am until 11.50 am on Thursday 8 September 2011 to take evidence from UK Ministers.

The Presiding Officer: The second question is, that motion S4M-00763, in the name of Bruce Crawford, on the suspension of standing orders in regard to the Conveners Group, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that Rule 6A.3.3 of Standing Orders be suspended from 15 September to 31 October 2011 to allow the Conveners Group to meet.

Young Drivers

The Deputy Presiding Officer (John Scott):

The final item of business is a members' business debate on motion S4M-00620, in the name of David Stewart, on young drivers. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament notes with concern that research published by Dr Sarah Jones of Cardiff University suggests that there is epidemiological evidence available indicating that young drivers are more likely to crash at night or with similar-aged passengers in the vehicle; understands that between 2000 and 2007 there was no change in the number of collisions in Scotland involving young drivers while collisions involving older drivers fell by 19%; supports the view that, if a graduated licence scheme was introduced in Scotland, up to 22 lives per year could be saved and in excess of £80 million saved to the Scottish economy, and further notes and recognises the work of the Sensible Driving – Always Arriving campaign being undertaken in the Highlands.

17:03

David Stewart (Highlands and Islands) (Lab):

I place on record my thanks to members across the political divide who have supported my motion and to colleagues who have stayed behind this evening, who have shown their interest in and concern about the road safety of young drivers across Scotland.

It is a truism that is not depleted by repetition that there is no greater tragedy, sorrow or loss for a parent than the death of a young son or daughter, as I know from my own personal experience. However, let me tell you why I am here tonight debating young driver safety.

In early spring last year, I was approached by the Matheson family from Inverness and asked to do what I could to stop the carnage on Highland roads. Their son Callum and his friend died in March 2010 in a fatal road collision in the city of Inverness. The car involved was a high-powered, 2-litre Skoda Fabia and the driver was only a provisional licence holder.

I had a discussion with my local team and we decided to launch a major campaign to raise awareness among young people of their responsibilities for their passengers, not in a top-down, patronising way but by involving them in the campaign. I will give three or four examples. Last week, I went to Anderson high school in Shetland and spoke to the whole sixth year about the campaign. They were really enthusiastic and wanted to take part.

We managed to get a car from a local firm—Macrae & Dick—which changed the livery of the car to reflect the campaign, which was great; we managed to get hundreds of leaflets sponsored by

a local nightclub; we managed to get a local bus company to put 150 posters in all the local buses; and we also hope to involve the Scottish Youth Parliament. Finally, through the support of the business community, a DVD is being sponsored; part of tonight's debate will feature on it, and I promise that each member who wishes one will get a copy.

Our first step was to consider best practice across the world. We discovered that one in five newly qualified drivers crashes within six months of obtaining a full driving licence; that most newly qualified drivers are under 25; and that in the United Kingdom four people a day are killed or seriously injured in road collisions involving young drivers.

There is a rural component. As we all know, rural roads across Scotland are more likely—in terms of road collisions per passenger mile—to be the scene of a fatal injury than urban motorways or dual carriageways. If we ever needed an argument for the dualling of the A9, that is it. However, road design and engineering are only one part of the equation—we also need to consider driver safety, training and education.

Elsewhere in the UK, Wales has an excellent and innovative initiative called *deadly mates*, which warns young drivers that their passengers are their responsibility. Dr Sarah Jones of Cardiff University has, for 10 years, carried out research into road collisions involving young drivers in Wales and Scotland. As part of that research, she has considered a graduated driver licensing scheme. She has revealed that, if such a scheme were introduced in Scotland, 1,500 fewer injuries would occur each year, 22 lives could be saved, and £80 million could be reinvested in the Scottish economy. In short, the graduated driver licensing scheme is a system that allows new drivers to gain further skills in driving under conditions in which the risks are reduced. To use a very simple analogy, it is like a nursery slope for drivers—an apprenticeship designed to increase skills and reduce the risks for new drivers. It works by adding an intermediate stage between the learner stage and the full licence stage. There are restrictions on the number and age of passengers allowed to be carried, and the driver is not permitted to consume any alcohol.

There is no consensus across the world on whether such a scheme should apply to all new drivers or just to young new drivers. New Zealand has one view; Australia has another view. However, the evidence from Dr Jones shows clearly that young drivers are more likely to be involved in a collision at night if they have passengers of the same age. As we all know, the drivers most at risk are male drivers under the age of 25.

Across the world, the graduated driver licensing scheme has been demonstrated to be effective in reducing collisions and casualties. However, we have a problem here in Scotland. Current practice is not having an impact on young driver crash rates. Between 2000 and 2007, there was no change in the number of collisions for young drivers. However, among older drivers, the numbers dropped dramatically—by around 15 per cent. Enforcement is essential to reducing collision and casualty rates. In other countries, sanctions take the form of penalty points, fines, and, in some cases, the seizing of vehicles.

Keith Brown, the minister, will outline the Scottish Government's view on my proposals. However, his predecessor—Stewart Stevenson—in reply to a parliamentary question on 26 October 2010, said:

“The legislation for graduated licensing is reserved but in our reply to the Driving Standards Agency ... we highlighted that there is strong support for regulated driving for new drivers amongst the road safety community”.

He continued:

“Transport Scotland is in the final stages of awarding a contract to facilitate a national debate on young driver issues.”—[*Official Report, Written Answers*, 26 October 2010; S3W-36632.]

Perhaps the minister will confirm the timescales.

I believe that a graduated driver licensing scheme is an innovative idea whose time has come. Tom Paine, the American revolutionary author, once said:

“We have it in our power to begin the world over again.”

For families who have lost loved ones, unfortunately we cannot turn the clock back. We can, however, adopt a new, safer, proven driving regime, aimed at slashing the carnage on our roads and preventing the deaths and injuries of our young drivers.

17:09

Mark McDonald (North East Scotland) (SNP):

I congratulate David Stewart on securing the debate. Every member across the chamber would echo the sentiment that the loss of young lives on our roads is a tragedy and something that we must do everything in our power to prevent. He spoke of the carnage on Highland roads. I come here as a North East Scotland member to say that the issue has been the cause of great concern in the Grampian area for a long time as well. Both the police and the fire service have done a great deal of work to try to educate young drivers—of which, more later.

I am generally supportive of the graduated licence scheme. There is a need to be cautious in viewing one particular solution as a panacea, but I

do not think that David Stewart is doing that. The Government undertook a survey of young drivers through the form of a national young drivers debate in October 2010, which looked at, among other things, the graduated driving licence scheme. Interestingly enough, the young people themselves were not very keen on it, and we can probably understand why—the potential restrictions to their driving.

Over the summer, I attended an agricultural show and got talking to a driving instructor. He told me that he had discovered that fewer young people are putting themselves forward for pass plus than previously because they have found that insurance companies are no longer offering discounts to people who have pass plus because they do not see any differential in the accident rate between people who go through pass plus and people who do not. I do not know whether the statistics bear that out, but that is certainly what the insurance companies are saying. We have to ensure that we have the empirical evidence, and the study that David Stewart alluded to will certainly help to back up any argument.

The issue around the insurance companies and their attitude to pass plus demonstrates that the question is one of not just driver skill but driver behaviour and attitudes. In that regard, I note that David Stewart's motion makes mention of the sensible driving, always arriving scheme, which I assume is similar to the safe drive, stay alive campaign that exists in Grampian and, I think, other areas. The campaign gives schoolchildren a fairly graphic presentation about what happens when a young person loses control of their car due to poor driver behaviour. That brings home to the young people exactly what the consequences of their actions can be. Victims of car accidents and parents who have lost their children speak to the young people and tell them about the consequences. The young people are often visibly moved during the presentations.

Presentations such as those have an important role to play alongside any measures that might be introduced. If we are going to tackle the issue, it is fine to do all we can to improve driving ability and perhaps remove night-time driving, but a reckless driver will be reckless during the daytime as well as at night, so we must ensure that the behavioural aspects are dealt with, too.

I noted with interest that young males are most likely to die on our roads as a driver but, crucially, young females are most likely to die as the passenger of a young male. David Stewart spoke about the restrictions on passengers, and that issue needs to be looked at. We may need not a restriction on passengers but a requirement for a responsible older person to be in the car for a period after a driver has passed their test, in the

same way as someone who is learning to drive can go out in a vehicle only if they have somebody of a responsible nature over a certain age in the car with them.

I welcome the debate. There is a lot of discussion to be had, but at least we are having that discussion.

17:14

Jackson Carlaw (West Scotland) (Con): I congratulate David Stewart on securing the debate. I am sympathetic to the proposal as he has put it. He is a sincere and passionate member of Parliament—I have had the pleasure of working with him on committees, and that has been evident to me.

As members, we will all have our own experience of fairly ghastly accidents, particularly ones that have involved the loss of young lives. As some members will know, my background is in the retail motor industry. A large part of the business that we operated was accident repair, and many of the vehicles that ended up with us were damaged or ones in which people had lost their lives.

At one point, the business was located next to a police holding compound where vehicles that had been involved in accidents ended up when a prosecution might follow. It was astonishing, at times, to think how many people had survived those accidents and tragic to stand looking at a vehicle in which I knew that several people—invariably, when multiple deaths were involved, it was several young people—had lost their lives.

It is interesting to think how many more people might die on our roads each year had not considerable progress been made both by the industry and by the Government on road improvement. Cars are much safer vehicles than they once were and are now designed with anti-roll bars, airbag technology and impact absorption that seeks to mitigate the potential damage and prevent loss of life. Those things have helped to reduce the loss of life in road accidents.

I travel home to Troon down the M77, which, as the A77, had one of the worst loss-of-life records of any road in Scotland. That was because there were two lanes in each direction with space for nothing more than a sheet of paper between the four sets of cars that were zooming in either direction. Many of the accidents on that road were caused by inexperienced young drivers who were not necessarily travelling above the speed limit but who simply lost control of the cars while driving on such a road. The dualling—the motorway status—of the M77 and the reduction in speed that has been achieved on the section that is not divided through the use of the vulture-type traffic control cameras have had a profound impact in reducing

the number of accidents that take place on that road. However, many of the accidents that still take place happen on rural roads or roads on which it is not practical to install vulture-type cameras and which it is not practical to dual or convert to a higher status. It is on those roads that inexperienced young drivers are still losing their lives and are potentially at risk.

I have read Dr Sarah Jones's report, which adds a significant weight of evidence to the argument. I am instinctively nervous, however, about rushing to further regulate although I see that that course may prove to be best. I am slightly anxious because a lot of the support for such a move is fuelled by the concern that some inexperienced young drivers drink. There are also young people who do not drink, who become fairly experienced drivers at an early age. I sometimes wonder whether the imposition of regulation on everybody is the way forward. As with all such things, I would like to see what else can be done first. We are continuing to improve the training processes, there is a new post-test vocational qualification, we are modernising the driver training industry and the insurance companies are considering technologies that would allow vehicles to be adapted to enable young drivers to produce evidence for the insurance companies that would perhaps allow their premiums to be reduced, thereby providing an incentive to drive with even greater care.

However, if none of those proves to be effective—and even if they do prove to be effective—there is an argument that the Government should look further at the issue. If, in doing so, it concludes that there is merit in producing legislation, we would be happy to support it.

17:18

John Finnie (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): I, too, commend David Stewart for lodging the motion and for all his work in the field. His compassionate and detailed involvement in the issue is widely acknowledged.

As members might expect, I got a load of statistics provided to me by one of my employees, but I have decided to abandon those and be unashamedly anecdotal in my speech. As a police officer, I attended many road accidents in advance of an excellent campaign that I am sure David Stewart is familiar with—indeed, his colleague Councillor Deirdre Mackay spoke about it in the media last week. Driving ambition is a scheme—no doubt replicated elsewhere—through which every effort is made to encourage responsible driver behaviour. Significantly, it also encourages responsible passenger behaviour. We need to empower people not to get in vehicles if they are not comfortable—that is important, too.

I will spare members the war stories about the grisly sights from the scene of accidents—I am sure that members can imagine them. As Jackson Carlaw said, advances in vehicle design have greatly improved the situation. In the past, officers had to attend harrowing scenes involving crushed vehicles. I once dealt with five deaths in a submerged vehicle—thankfully, such incidents are extremely unusual—and the complications surrounding that.

Of course, that was just part of the process. The follow-up to accidents often involved trying to deliver a death message. I have had various responses to that, from having a door slammed in my face to a situation in which I had to establish which of the male relatives in the household was the fatality in the car. Those are all harrowing situations. The statistics are frightening, but the statistics are people—they are neighbours and loved ones. It is important to say that.

I am not impressed with the cost figures, although they are important. A cost can be put to some things but what cost do we put on a life? I had a brief discussion with David Stewart about that yesterday. Like me, he attended two funerals last year, those of Callum Matheson and one other young man. Schoolchildren should not be attending funerals in such numbers. If anything can be done to avoid the tragedy that unfolded in both of those cases, that is the route that we have to take. We should rule nothing out.

To be unashamedly parochial again, suicide is a problem in the Highlands. An awful lot of young people—far too many young men—take their own life. I would not want a situation in which we did nothing about that either.

There is an opportunity here to ensure responsible driver behaviour. I do not think that we will ever put an end to such tragedies. Training does go on, and David Stewart's initiative in Shetland is an excellent example of how it is possible to capture a lot of interest and get a lot of community support. There is not a village or town in the Highlands that has not been touched by such tragedies, which, I am sure, are replicated elsewhere in Scotland. Anything that can be done to improve the situation must be done. I am happy to lend David Stewart my support.

17:22

The Minister for Housing and Transport (Keith Brown): I congratulate David Stewart on securing the debate. I acknowledge the work that David has done in the past on the issue. There has been an interesting range of contributions. We had someone who has campaigned for a long time on the issue. We had someone from the motor industry. We had someone who had served in the

police. In Mark McDonald, we have as near as we get to a young person, at least in the current crowd—no offence to anyone else, including myself. It was a good range, even though it was a fairly small number of speeches.

David Stewart alluded to and is well aware of the fact that significant challenges face us in respect of the safety of young drivers on Scotland's roads. The latest confirmed figures for road casualties in Scotland, from 2009, show that road casualties are at their lowest level in 60 years. We should acknowledge the progress that has been made.

That said, the Government believes that more can be done, particularly for young drivers. While, as with other age groups, rates are falling, they are not falling as fast for young drivers as they are for other groups. I would particularly like to take action with regard to fatalities and serious injuries.

Jackson Carlaw touched on the fact that in all cases we are talking about adults. No one can get a provisional licence till they are 17 years old. There is the issue of responsibility—if someone is an adult, they must accept adult responsibilities. One can make a mistake with some adult responsibilities, such as the ability to marry, and many of us do. One can make a mistake with drinking. When we first get the chance to drink legally, we can make a mistake by overconsuming. However, the consequences of a mistake when we drive can be far more serious. We are talking about young people but they are also adults.

The statistics show that around one in four drivers or riders killed or seriously injured on the roads in 2009 was in the 17 to 25-year-old age group. That figure changes to 29 per cent for car drivers only. However, young driver accidents are not increasing. If we compare 2009 with the average for 1994 to 1998 for all casualties—that is, all severities and all road user types—we see that casualties among 16 to 24-year-olds fell by 30 per cent, compared with a 33 per cent fall for all age groups. If we consider the category “killed and seriously injured” for car drivers only, we find that in the 16-to-24 age group there was a 48 per cent reduction over the same period, compared with a 47 per cent reduction for all ages.

“Go Safe on Scotland's Roads—it's Everyone's Responsibility: Scotland's Road Safety Framework to 2020”, which was published on 15 June 2009, was debated by the Parliament in September 2009. The framework sets out our commitments for greater road safety for all road users and includes our intentions on education, publicity and young drivers. In the framework, we set ourselves challenging targets to reduce fatalities by 40 per cent and serious injuries by 55 per cent, based on the 2004 to 2008 average. Young drivers are

identified as one of the eight national priorities in the framework.

Road Safety Scotland has focused much of its recent publicity on young drivers, as well as talking about rural roads, which also cause concern, as members said. The organisation's recent publicity measures feature young drivers and include a national cinema and television campaign on country roads and distraction. As Mark McDonald said, and as I know from experience, some of the work that is done in schools has a visible impact on young people, especially when people take part who have been involved in serious accidents with dramatic consequences.

There is evidence that the behaviours and factors that contribute most to fatal and serious accidents that involve young drivers and their passengers are speeding, driving while impaired through drink or drugs, distraction, not wearing a seatbelt and—this is crucial—lack of experience. All those factors are addressed comprehensively in Scotland's road safety framework.

David Stewart made a good point about passengers. Parents—especially parents of daughters, given the figures—are very concerned to say to their children that once they are in a car that someone else is driving, they have no control, so they really must ensure that the person who is driving is aware that they must not take risks. Taking risks with oneself is one thing; taking risks with other people is quite another.

In late 2010 we commissioned a nationwide debate with young people and key partner road safety bodies, which gave young people a chance to voice their needs and concerns and put forward their ideas and suggestions on the issues that affect them—I think that David Stewart referred to the debate and I am happy to let him have the findings from it. As I think that Mark McDonald said, the response from young people on graduated driver licensing was different from the response of older people. As we perhaps would have expected, there was much less support for the idea among young people and support grew as people got older. The report on the discussions, "National Debate on Young Drivers' Safety", was published on Transport Scotland's website in March.

My officials and I are aware of the research that Sarah Jones, from Cardiff University, conducted. She was invited to present her findings to the road safety strategic partnership board meeting in March. Her research found that between 2000 and 2007 the number of crashes that involved 17 to 19-year-old drivers appeared to be steady, at around 1,400 per annum. However crashes remaining steady does not equate to injuries remaining steady, and we categorise a young driver as being between 17 and 24 years old.

I urge members to support the spirit of David Stewart's motion and to note that graduated driver licensing is a reserved matter, as he said. We wrote to the UK Government to encourage it to move in that direction, and when it replied, "No," we wrote back to express our disappointment and ask it to keep the option open.

The report of the national debate on young drivers' safety contained 17 recommendations to improve road safety outcomes for young drivers—I mention that to make the point that although we have had a refusal from Westminster we have not left matters at that but realise that there is much that we can and will continue to do. We have gathered evidence to help us to consider whether and how graduated licensing could be implemented in Scotland, if we have such an opportunity.

As I said, to deliver the framework commitments we brought together key stakeholders to form the road safety operational partnership group and the road safety strategic partnership board. The group met on 30 June and agreed to consider all 17 recommendations in the report, one of which is to get further evidence on graduated driver licensing. We have not let the issue slip. We have made representations and we are taking other actions. We will keep on at the issue.

Meeting closed at 17:29.

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