



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Official Report

MEETING OF THE PARLIAMENT

Thursday 19 January 2012

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

Local Government Elections 2012

The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick): Good morning. The first item of business is a debate on motion S4M-01741, in the name of Derek Mackay, on the local government elections in 2012. I indicate at the outset that we will be extremely generous with members' time.

09:15

The Minister for Local Government and Planning (Derek Mackay): It is a privilege to lead my first debate as Minister for Local Government and Planning on the subject of local government elections. This is my first opportunity to welcome the Opposition spokespeople Sarah Boyack and Margaret Mitchell to their respective roles.

The 2012 local government elections will be an opportunity to renew local democracy and refresh local government's mandate. I am sure that we all share the aim of delivering a fair and transparent election in which the lessons of the 2007 difficulties have been learned. I pay tribute to my predecessors Bruce Crawford, Jim Mather and Aileen Campbell, who began the improvements that I would like to see through.

In approaching the local government elections, we have pursued the recommendations of the Gould report, and I continue to seek consensus on matters relating to those elections. The overall conclusion of the Gould report was damning, stating that Scotland's voters had been treated "as an afterthought" in the planning and organisation of the elections in 2007.

A range of actions have therefore been taken to address the concerns that were raised about the previous election, which suffered from the effects of a combination of factors. Throughout the preparations for the 2012 local government elections, we have kept at the forefront of our minds the interests of the voter and the specific recommendations of Ron Gould, which were widely welcomed and supported by the Parliament in the previous session.

The Gould report found that the fragmentation of roles and responsibilities was a critical barrier to the smooth administration of elections. The Parliament passed the Scottish Local Government (Elections) Act 2009, which decoupled Scottish local elections from elections to the Scottish Parliament and provided for two five-year terms for

local government, with elections to be held in 2012 and 2017. After that, local government terms will revert to four years, with local elections being held at the mid-term point of the Scottish parliamentary session. The aim of decoupling the two sets of elections was to make things easier for the voter; to put the voter first; to avoid the voter having to consider two different voting systems; to reduce voter confusion; and, just as important, to give each election its due prominence.

While talking of confusion, I should say that I have been struck by the number of pieces of legislation that govern elections and how they should be run. Addressing that will not be a short-term piece of work, but I would like to see moves towards the consolidation of electoral legislation. That work would, of course, be much easier and more effective if the Scottish Parliament had full legislative responsibility for all elections, but that is for the future. For now, local government deserves a stand-alone election, in which local matters can be discussed and local candidates can have their opportunity to campaign without being crowded out by parliamentary elections.

Gould recommended the creation of a chief returning officer to co-ordinate the administration of local government elections. The Government consulted on that and, following consideration of the comments that it received, introduced a bill. The resulting Local Electoral Administration (Scotland) Act 2011 created the electoral management board for Scotland. The board will assist local authorities and others to carry out their functions and promote best practice in the administration of elections. The convener, who must be a returning officer, is appointed by Scottish ministers and will have the power to give directions to returning officers and electoral registration officers. Those directions will relate primarily to administrative issues. The convener must consult board members and the Electoral Commission before giving a direction.

Through the same legislation, we extended the Electoral Commission's statutory functions in Scotland to include the local government elections. That extension reflects the need to remove fragmentation of responsibilities; in addition, it will provide consistent oversight of elections. The commission has already carried out some activity on an ad hoc basis, such as the provision of public awareness campaigns, and the bill formalises that work.

Another key Gould recommendation was to ensure that the relevant legislation is in place six months before an election to give administrators confidence in developing their plans for it. I am pleased to remind the Parliament that, in accordance with that recommendation, we agreed

the legislation that will govern the 2012 elections at the beginning of November last year.

On 3 September 2010, we published “The Administration of Future Elections in Scotland: A consultation exercise to examine the recommendations of the Gould Report to improve administration of future elections in Scotland”. It covered a range of issues, from the election timetable and the design of the ballot paper to longer-term considerations such as the voting age. We were encouraged by the quality and support of the responses that we received, which helped to shape the Scottish Local Government Elections Order 2011, including the proposed ballot paper.

As recommended by Gould and others, we have tested the ballot paper design with a cross-section of voters, using the principles in the Electoral Commission’s guidance “Making your mark”. The draft ballot paper was included for public consideration in the Scottish Government’s consultation on the administration of future elections in Scotland. The aim of the testing, which was carried out by external researchers, was to assess the clarity and usability of the draft ballot paper and to make improvements at each stage.

The research identified that participants liked the overall design, describing it as being clean, simple and straightforward, but highlighted a continuing issue in that participants did not have sufficient knowledge of the single transferable vote system. The report therefore recommended an information campaign that focuses on STV in the run-up to the 2012 elections. The Scottish Government accepts that recommendation and will work with the Electoral Commission and the electoral management board for Scotland to take it forward. The revised ballot paper was used in the successful bulk testing of the e-counting system that took place during the summer last year.

When voters go to the polls, it is important that the arrangements for casting their vote—and indeed the process that takes place behind the scenes before election day—are as simple as possible and are consistent with other elections. In considering the regulations for this year’s local elections, we therefore examined the contents of the regulations for voting in the 2010 Westminster elections. That allowed us to pick up a number of minor changes that have been made since 2007. By incorporating those changes into our regulations—for example, changes to the electoral timetable—we have been able to ensure a degree of consistency for the voter and the electoral administrator.

We gave the electoral management board for Scotland and the Electoral Commission copies of the draft order so that they could provide detailed comments. The vast majority of the comments that we received have been incorporated into the

order, and I thank the board and the commission for their contributions.

However interesting we make the local government elections, we are unlikely to see USA or post-apartheid South Africa-style queues in May. However, I make the Parliament aware of a new provision that addresses an issue that was experienced in England in 2010. A person who has presented at a polling station in time and is held in a queue to cast their vote may still put their ballot paper in the box after 10 pm. The inclusion of that provision seeks to address any confusion that has arisen on the technical issue of close of poll. The Scottish Government is the first Administration to include such a provision in election rules and the move has been welcomed by the Electoral Commission.

We have received a number of informal representations about that change of policy from electoral administrators who feel that it might be difficult to manage. While not discounting those views, we agree with the Electoral Commission, which describes the change as a

“positive step to ensuring that every vote counts in the local government elections”.

To give further reassurance, the Electoral Commission is working with the electoral management board for Scotland to produce effective guidance on how to manage the provision.

We have recently introduced legislation to reduce the cost of obtaining copies of the marked register. That will bring costs into line with those for other elections in Scotland.

I also take this opportunity to inform the Parliament that we will introduce legislation next week to increase the spending limits at local government elections by 17.5 per cent. That is a rate-of-inflation increase since the previous review in 2005, and it responds to a unanimous request from the political parties panel that the limits be increased. As it happens, representatives had differing views on the uplift. On this occasion, I have sided with the Labour Party representative’s view on the increase. Any future increase will be a matter for further consideration and consultation.

The use of single transferable voting for local government elections means that e-counting is almost inevitable.

James Kelly (Rutherglen) (Lab): The minister acknowledged earlier that awareness of the single transferable vote system is low and said that the electoral management board would work with relevant bodies, including the Electoral Commission, to raise voter awareness. Will he give more detail about the factors that have been

considered for a voter education campaign and about the timescale?

Derek Mackay: I will expand on the awareness campaign later in my speech, but it will be broken down into phases and will involve a partnership between the Electoral Commission and councils across Scotland.

The testing regime for the new e-counting system is important. Improvements have been made to the system since the previous count. As we all know, a manual count would take many days to conduct.

The new regime has been thoroughly considered. The system has been subjected to more rigorous testing, which should protect against the failures of the past. The testing started in January 2011 and culminated in the delivery of a bulk stress test of the system over two weeks, when more than 500,000 ballot papers were successfully scanned and counted. Councillors, the Electoral Commission, academics, the Open Rights Group, the former Local Government and Communities Committee and representatives from the press and the media have all attended tests of the system.

The system provides greater transparency. Every part of the process is fully visible to candidates and agents. Large display monitors are used to inform observers of count progress, and adjudication staff and returning officers use dual-facing monitors in executing all decisions. All 32 local authorities have committed to using the new system and we are now preparing to deliver training to the staff who will operate the system during the count.

The use of electronic counting has resulted in the capturing of a considerable amount of new data. In the 2012 election, we will publish more information than before, including detailed information on the number of preferences that were given to candidates at polling stations.

Candidates' confidence in the system is important. We seek to build greater transparency, while of course ensuring the secrecy of the ballot. The availability of more detailed information is paramount in providing reassurance that the system has produced a correct and accurate result and in instilling transparency in the process and confidence in the election's overall outcome. We are therefore considering the practical and legal issues that are involved in publishing full preference tracking at ward level, with a view to introducing legislation that allows the retrospective release of that data from May's elections. That matter is being raised with the political parties panel.

Turnout might be an issue—the decoupling of elections might contribute to that. A strong and

vibrant democracy relies on people from all walks of life using their vote. Councils will run their own campaigns and the Electoral Commission will run a public awareness campaign.

For the first time, the commission will have a statutory responsibility to promote public awareness at local government elections. It will run its campaign in two phases—voter registration, which will be given a clear focus, and voter information. The registration campaign will be followed by voter information, in the media and in local information booklets, that is aimed at ensuring that electors have the necessary information to cast their votes under STV. As politicians and parties, we too have a duty to reinvigorate the electorate with positive campaigning and policies that capture the imagination of the public to participate in the democracy that we cherish.

Once the votes have been cast, they will need to be counted. I know that the timing of the count has provoked a certain amount of discussion over the years. The electoral management board has issued a consultation document to seek views on when the votes in this May's elections should be counted. I understand that the board's convener is considering issuing a direction to local returning officers to ensure consistency in arrangements across Scotland. Regardless of the consultation's outcome, the political parties panel considers that a consistent approach is important.

Over the past five years, the Parliament has embraced the Gould recommendations with a high degree of consensus. We may legitimately disagree on political matters, but we have worked together to implement the largely administrative recommendations that fall within the Parliament's powers. However, there is one key recommendation on which no action has been taken: the full devolution of the Scottish Parliament and local government elections. It is absurd that the Parliament is not responsible for the election of its members and that we are unable to give 16 and 17-year-olds their democratic right to vote, even when that is the will of the Parliament.

Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): Is the minister as surprised as I was that, when the Secretary of State for Scotland spoke just a couple of weeks ago in the House of Commons, he seemed to be blissfully unaware of the fact that we cannot legislate to give 16 and 17-year-olds the vote in local elections? Given that the secretary of state seems so relaxed about the idea that we might already have that power, will the minister ask for a section 30 order as soon as possible to ensure that we can do that with some haste?

Derek Mackay: I was as surprised as Patrick Harvie was that the secretary of state did not know the legal competence that he has in that regard,

which the Scottish Parliament does not have. We have made approaches on the issue, but the United Kingdom Government has remained silent. We will make further approaches.

I hope that the Parliament can unite today behind a concerted effort to deliver a sound election for local government and that it will continue with a consensus-based approach, acknowledge the extensive and timely preparations that have been undertaken, and call on the last outstanding recommendation to be delivered by Westminster: the transfer to the Scottish Parliament of the legislative powers for local government elections.

I move,

That the Parliament notes the importance of local democracy and in particular this year's local elections; welcomes the response of the Scottish Government, local authorities and others to the Gould report and the improvements that have been made in electoral administration as a result; further notes that preparations for the local government elections in Scotland in May 2012 have been taken forward in a collaborative manner with electoral professionals and local authorities including work to procure, develop and test a system of electronic counting to be used in the elections; calls on all of those with an interest in these elections to work to further increase and improve voter engagement and participation, and supports the recommendation of the Scotland Bill Committee that the UK Government should amend the Scotland Bill to devolve responsibility and powers for all elections that take place in Scotland, except those to the UK and EU Parliaments.

The Presiding Officer: I call Sarah Boyack to speak to and move amendment S4M-01741.2. She has a generous 10 minutes.

09:31

Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab): I have prepared to speak for eight minutes, but my speech will take 10 minutes easily.

I thank the minister for his warm welcome. I was absolutely delighted when I first saw the debate's title, because I thought that it would be a great chance to highlight the importance of local government elections and encourage people to vote in them. I also thought that it would be a great opportunity to highlight the fact that the Scottish National Party has taken a 2.9 per cent cut in its budget from the United Kingdom Government, but has passed on a 6.1 per cent cut to local government. However, when I read the motion, I realised that we would be not just debating local government, but taking part in the endless conversation that is the SNP's mission for independence.

The local government elections will be held in their own right. It is a long time since local government elections were held separately. Turnout for local elections is always lower, and recent election turnouts have been incredibly low.

Therefore, I very much welcome the minister's comments on promoting more engagement and involvement. I will return to that issue.

Our amendment focuses on participation and voter registration in the local government elections. We wanted to put those issues explicitly on the agenda, as we think that they are crucial issues that we should note. Nothing like the full number of people who are eligible to vote do so in any elections, and I think that we all know that, having decoupled the elections for good reason, as the minister outlined, ensuring that people turn out on the day and that the elections are supported by local people are serious issues.

We supported the implementation of the Gould report's recommendations when it was published after the 2007 elections. Like the minister, I think that what Gould said about how the voter was treated was striking. He said:

"the voter was treated as an afterthought by virtually all the other stakeholders."

That is a damning comment. In all our discussions about the elections, we must put the electorate first.

Gould argued that parties should be involved in discussions about elections, but that we should not own the process or put party advantage above the interests of fair elections. Those are good principles that should apply to whatever election or referendum is being discussed. That is why we argued in the chamber last week for there to be discussions on the referendum not just between the First Minister and the Prime Minister; the wider civic movement in Scotland and the parties that are represented in the Parliament should also be represented and consulted. Therefore, I very much welcome the minister's comments. He has listened to the comments from a range of parties on the amount of money that parties are allowed to spend on the election.

The only thing that concerned me about the timing of the count was that the consultation on that took place over the Christmas holidays, which will not have maximised people's contributions to the discussion. I know that that is a technical issue, but in the spirit of Gould we should have proper and wide-ranging discussions and consultations.

I agree with the minister that the Gould report was good; it contained clear analysis and sensible recommendations for the conduct of the elections. Reading it four years on, I find it an excellent reminder of what we need to focus on in the run-up to the elections in May.

When the report was published, we argued that, as politicians, we should not pick and choose which recommendations suited us or just sign up

to the ones that favoured our party and leave the others on the sidelines. One of the key recommendations was that all the arrangements should be in place in good time—ideally six months—before the elections.

As we are now less than four months away from the local government elections, the minister's report today on what the Scottish Government has done to ensure that those elections are fair and transparent and that they are run properly is welcome. Has the minister conducted his own review of that process to satisfy himself that everything that needs to be done has been done before the elections take place?

I will focus on postal voting, which the minister did not mention. The Gould report dealt with access to postal vote registration, the opportunity to cast a postal vote and even the way in which we fold our postal votes so that the electronic counting machines can deal with them. Those might seem small issues, but as we are encouraging people to vote by post, they must be taken on board. Perhaps the minister can comment on that in his closing remarks.

Our amendment deletes the last section of the motion—or suggests that we delete it; given our numbers in the chamber, we cannot guarantee to delete anything. We do not dispute the need for consistency and a more coherent approach, and we are signed up to the Gould recommendations. However, the Scotland Bill Committee did not consider the evidence in relation to local government, yet it still made recommendations on that in its final report. It is too late to make major changes for this year's elections; that should have been discussed before the minister's predecessor laid the order before the Parliament in October last year.

Across the country, parties are selecting or have already selected their candidates for May's elections, and we should focus on what happens in less than four months' time. The turnouts for recent by-elections have been incredibly small, and this election will be the first stand-alone local government election for decades. No one group or organisation is responsible for promoting participation—the minister is right to say that we all have responsibility for that. However, I would be interested to hear how much will be invested in the discussions on promoting voter participation, particularly with regard to the key issue of voter registration.

In the run-up to the 2007 elections, there was publicity from the Electoral Commission on how the STV system worked. What similar publicity will we have this time? There is a new generation of voters who were not around to benefit from that publicity last time.

In 2007, the Electoral Commission published its report on other aspects of the election, and I will focus on the issue of electoral registration. It is now possible to register to vote much closer to polling time, but research for the Electoral Commission has shown that the percentage of people missing from the registers has grown since the last time that matter was examined more than 10 years ago. The research suggests that around 13 to 15 per cent of eligible people in Great Britain were not registered following the annual household canvass activity in autumn 2010, in comparison with 8 to 9 per cent after the 2000 canvass.

Do we have the comparable figures for Scotland? I am interested in the issue of participation, because a social justice factor is involved. In my region, the areas with higher levels of deprivation—

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP): I agree with Sarah Boyack that registration is a problem. Having been a member of Glasgow City Council, I must give the council its due as it has done a lot of work on registration, but it has struggled to get the figures up. Does Sarah Boyack know of any specific ways in which registration could be improved?

Sarah Boyack: Yes—part of the issue is that we must go round and talk to people rather than just waiting until the elections. The way that it is done at present is that a letter pops into people's houses.

The statistics show that the areas with higher levels of deprivation or transient populations have much lower registration levels than more affluent, stable communities. There is an issue around targeting communities in which there is low turnout and low registration. There is a real democratic deficit in that regard, and we must all consider it. There is good practice in some local authorities, but that must be applied across the country.

We have all been in the polling station when somebody has turned up who cannot vote because they are not on the most recent register. I am keen to hear what the minister will do to encourage registration.

In our debate last week, we talked about lowering the voting age. However, we know that the turnout for elections among younger people is lower than the turnout among people in older age groups. I therefore ask the minister what in particular will be done to focus on younger people and to make local government elections relevant to them. Access to affordable housing, jobs and training, and local sports facilities are all issues that are dealt with by local government, and there is a huge opportunity to engage young people.

There is a great line in the film about Aung San Suu Kyi that has just come out, called "The Lady":

"You may not be interested in politics, but politics is interested in you."

We must get that message across to young people.

Many people are also concerned about the move to individual registration. There could be a duty to promote registration, so that all local authorities would see that as a key issue.

As has been said, everything needs to be in place six months before the elections. A key issue for all elections or referenda is that we need to know the rules in advance. In his speech to Parliament in October 2007, the First Minister stated that the Scottish Government accepted all the Gould recommendations, one of which was about what parties call themselves and the issue of sloganising. In his summing-up speech, will Derek Mackay, who is the SNP's campaign manager, be able to tell us what name the SNP will be flying its flag under this time? The spirit of that recommendation was not applied in the Scottish Parliament elections last year.

What will be the outcome of today's debate? The elections are vital and there is real irony in the fact that the party that is demanding more powers for the Scottish Parliament is soaking up powers from local government to here, whether through the new Forth Estuary Transport Authority board, the new education quango or whatever. Local authorities are worried that their financial straitjacket means that they will be responsible for delivering on the ground what the SNP decides here. That is an issue that we need to debate. Local government should remain local; it should be accountable for local service provision. Local councils exist solely to provide local services to meet local needs and suit local circumstances, accepting the fact that collective provision will always be more effective than individuals trying to look after themselves, particularly in a recession.

Those of us who are party animals take knowing how to vote for granted, but we must ensure that there are proper systems in place to encourage ordinary voters. I am keen to hear more from the minister about the resources that are being allocated to ensuring that that happens. We also take for granted the conduct of the elections. I welcome the fact that we have been able to focus on that today. It is highly appropriate that we acknowledge the work of the thousands of staff throughout the country who do the hard work on the day of the elections and, afterwards, during the count to ensure that our democracy is a real democracy.

I ask the minister to give us a bit more detail about awareness raising and the distribution of

promotional literature to ensure that the voters—the people who really matter—know when the elections will take place; how to register; how to vote in a polling station; how to get to the polling station if they have a physical disability; and how the postal vote system works. As the minister said, we must ensure that the elections are democratic and that as many people as possible who are registered and eligible to vote actually turn out and vote.

I move amendment S4M-01741.2, to leave out from "and participation" to end and insert:

" , registration and participation, and notes the valuable role of the Electoral Commission in helping to ensure fair, open and transparent elections and good practice in this regard."

09:43

Margaret Mitchell (Central Scotland) (Con): I welcome the motion's emphasis on local democracy in general and on this year's local government elections in particular.

There is no doubt that local democracy was badly undermined in the 2007 election fiasco, which led Ron Gould to conclude, in the independent report that the Electoral Commission asked him to undertake, as the minister and Sarah Boyack have highlighted, that almost without exception the voter was treated as an afterthought by virtually all other stakeholders.

The Gould report details the various factors that contributed to the confusion and chaos at that election-night count. Those included the fact that the elections for the Scottish Parliament and local government were held on the same day and the fact that three different types of electoral system—first past the post, the additional member system and the single transferable vote—were in operation, the latter being used in Scotland for the first time. Electronic counting was also used for the first time, resulting in the rejection of ballot papers, which were automatically discounted without any manual authorisation. It is perhaps not surprising that, with all those factors to contend with, the process became all-important and the voter was forgotten.

The key Gould review recommendations were legislated for in the Scottish Local Government (Elections) Act 2009. As a consequence, local government and Scottish Parliament elections have been decoupled, as the Scottish Conservatives advocated from the outset. As the motion states, work has been carried out

"to procure, develop and test a system of electronic counting"

for this year's local government elections. Given the complexity of the STV system, electronic counting remains a sensible method of

determining the result. As the minister confirmed, the early indications suggest that the trial has been successful. Furthermore, all rejected ballot papers will have to be checked by the chief returning officer or their duly nominated representative.

The design of the ballot paper has also been addressed. In "The Administration of Future Elections in Scotland: A consultation exercise to examine the recommendations of the Gould Report to improve administration of future elections in Scotland", which was published in September 2010, the Scottish Government states:

"The overriding principle will be to put the interests of the voter first and to ensure that the ballot paper design adopted for the elections minimises the possibility for confusion."

However, that commitment did not prevent the reappearance of the phrase "Alex Salmond for First Minister" on the Scottish Parliament election ballot papers.

Despite the upbeat terms of the motion, and as James Kelly and Sarah Boyack have pointed out, concerns remain that insufficient work has been done to date to ensure that voters are properly informed and educated about how the STV system works. In fact, most people still associate STV with a television station rather than a voting system. It is clear that there is a lack of understanding that could in turn adversely affect turnout and participation.

John Mason: Will the member give way on that point?

The Presiding Officer: Mr Mason, if you are going to make an intervention, will you stand up before you do it?

John Mason: My apologies—I learned bad lessons in another place.

Does Margaret Mitchell accept that the lack of understanding of STV has been overstated? There were fewer spoiled papers in the STV vote than in the parliamentary vote, certainly in Glasgow. Many people already use STV in elections for things such as pension funds and unions.

Margaret Mitchell: That certainly is not my experience. From talking to the electorate, I find that there is still huge confusion about the STV system and multimember wards.

Although the Conservatives are generally supportive of the motion, we do not agree that the Scotland Bill should be altered so that responsibility and powers for all elections that take place in Scotland—except those for the United Kingdom and European Union Parliaments—are devolved. Implicit in such a move would be the responsibility for the franchise. As the minister confirmed again this morning, the SNP continues

to argue for extending the franchise to allow 16 and 17-year-olds to vote in elections and the forthcoming referendum. The SNP states that, to deny that age group the right to vote shows a lack of consistency with other legal rights. However, the real inconsistency is highlighted in the SNP's preferred policy that young people must be 21 years of age or over to purchase alcohol from off-licences and supermarkets.

It is argued that, if young people have the right to marry at 16, they ought to have the right to vote. However, it is worth pointing out that, although they have the right to marry at 16, few choose that course of action. Significantly, according to 2010 statistics, although there are 126,000 people aged 16 and 17 in Scotland, a minuscule 79 chose to exercise the right to marry, and they were not just in the 16 to 17 age group, but in the wider 16 to 19 category.

Kevin Stewart (Aberdeen Central) (SNP): Ms Boyack said that we should do everything possible to get folk out to vote. Over the years, I have found that many young people in fifth and sixth year at school are immensely interested in politics, but when they leave school they are suddenly disinterested because we have not grabbed their interest at that earlier point. Does the member agree that giving young people the vote at 16 and 17 would keep them interested in politics?

Margaret Mitchell: I am coming to my main point, which is that while some people would feel competent to vote and would be interested enough to take that option, many others would be totally ambivalent about it. As the Electoral Commission's 12-month consultation, "How old is old enough?" reveals, young people were divided on whether they were ready to be given the vote at 16.

Dennis Robertson (Aberdeenshire West) (SNP): Will the member take an intervention on that point?

Margaret Mitchell: If Mr Robertson does not mind, I would like to make some progress.

As for helping to increase participation and turnout, according to the same Electoral Commission consultation, evidence suggests that lowering the voting age would decrease the overall percentage turnout in the short term because of the additional number of eligible but disengaged voters. Longer term effects are also disputed. The Electoral Commission has a vital role to play in ensuring fair, open, and transparent elections. For that reason, the Conservatives will support Sarah Boyack's amendment.

The Conservative amendment notes that

"responsibility for the general administration and conduct of elections to local government is already devolved"

and supports that being extended to elections to the Scottish Parliament. The important point is that that would safeguard the consideration of UK constitutional issues on a consistent UK basis.

The mistakes made previously have been reviewed and it is to be hoped that the glitches have been resolved. It is crucial, however, for voters to have an understanding of the electoral system that is in operation, and of the powers and service provision for which local government is responsible and which affect the daily lives of people all over Scotland. Politicians and candidates must bear some responsibility for educating people and promoting policies that resonate with the electorate, thus motivating them to participate and turn out to vote.

Opposing school closures is a case in point. For example, the proposed closure of Earnock high school in Hamilton a number of years ago saw a vastly increased turnout at the polling stations with people queueing to vote. It resulted in the defeat of sitting local members who had voted for the proposition. That is an example of local democracy in action. The decisions that local authorities take about spending and cuts will also encourage those who are rightly opposed to, for example, the proposed closure of refuges for victims of domestic abuse in North Lanarkshire, or the same council's decision to cut funding to the Bellshill citizens advice bureau for debt advice, to exercise their democratic right to register their protest at the ballot box.

There will be no shortage of live and contentious issues for local government candidates and other politicians to put to the electorate in an effort to gain votes and increase turnout. In those circumstances, with all the funding decisions that are affecting the provision of services to the public, allowing 16 and 17-year-olds to vote is not a priority.

I move amendment S4M-01741.1, to leave out from "supports" to end and insert

"notes that responsibility for the general administration and conduct of elections to local government is already devolved and that these powers are being further devolved for elections to the Scottish Parliament under the Scotland Bill while ensuring that issues of UK constitutional importance continue to be dealt with at UK level."

The Presiding Officer: I now call George Adam to be followed by Mark Griffin. You have a generous seven minutes, Mr Adam, if you take interventions.

09:53

George Adam (Paisley) (SNP): Thank you, Presiding Officer. As the room is full of standing councillors from Scottish local government, you might regret giving them the freedom to discuss it

in detail. However, I have every reason to believe that you will control the situation.

I congratulate Derek Mackay on his new role as the Minister for Local Government and Planning. As everyone knows, I have worked with him for many years. His record, particularly in local government, has been strong so it is great to see him in his new position.

We are talking about the Gould report and many of the things that happened in the past. We only have to look at the 2007 elections to realise that it is very good that the elections have been decoupled. When I hear Sarah Boyack talk about the confusion and the discussions that took place at the time, I remember that it was a Labour-Lib Dem Administration that created the situation for the 2007 election. It was rushed at the last minute because so many election papers had to be in the right places, which did not help.

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): Does George Adam agree that having "Alex Salmond for First Minister" on the ballot paper was designed to cause the electorate confusion?

George Adam: The confusion was not helped by the fact that there were so many different ballot papers, the arrangements were rushed through and there was very little public education about STV. That was the problem.

The comment is funny coming from the Labour Party, which calls itself the Scottish Labour Party, although we all know that there is no such thing.

The idea of having a stand-alone election is good for local democracy, because it is important that people in areas such as mine have the chance to discuss the local issues that affect them and their areas. It is important that we have the time for that debate, that it is not lost in the national picture and that people have a chance to discuss the issues in full.

Although, as the minister says, we do not have the South African ideal of people queueing up at 10 o'clock to try to cast their votes, I welcome the fact that people coming in at night due to shift patterns, work and family commitments will be able to vote, and that it will make a difference.

It is important that we inspire people to vote. Let us not say that local council election turnouts have always been low and will continue to be low. We must go out, stand on our records and inspire people to vote.

I find some things a wee bit strange, such as electronic voting. Party animals, as Sarah Boyack called them—that is a new one; I was going to say "more experienced members of political parties"—found it strange watching the computer screens for the electronic voting. We were used to the old analogue way of doing things. One of the

independent candidates in Renfrewshire said that waiting for the results to come in and watching the graph go further was like sitting in a bookmaker's. That was difficult, but things change and we have to move on—as long as the process is open and transparent. That is extremely important.

We must ensure that 16 and 17-year-olds get involved in and enthused by local and national Government. As my colleague Kevin Stewart mentioned in his intervention on Margaret Mitchell, we must ensure that we get young people at that early stage and keep them involved from that time.

When Ms Mitchell mentions not allowing people to buy alcohol until they are 21, she mixes two entirely different ideas. People constantly turn up at the surgeries that I hold as a sitting councillor with complaints about the problems that their communities are having with individuals and alcohol in particular.

Margaret Mitchell: Does George Adam accept that there is a certain hypocrisy and inconsistency in suggesting that 16 and 17-year-olds are responsible enough to vote but that people are not responsible enough to buy alcohol until the age of 21?

George Adam: There has always been a level of hypocrisy in 16 and 17-year-olds being able to join the Army and fight for their country but not being able to vote on the Government that sends them to war in the first place. That is a continual issue.

A level of maturity is needed when dealing with alcohol. It is not hypocrisy. We are talking about looking after our communities and ensuring that we move our young people away from their dependency on alcohol. People need a level of maturity when dealing with alcohol, whether they are 21 or 41.

The most important thing that will help with election campaigns is to have a positive campaign that will encourage and enthuse people. I mentioned standing on our records. I am happy to do that, because the Scottish Government, working in partnership, has given a fair settlement to local government over the past five years.

James Kelly: The budget that the Parliament will consider next week will contain £700 million of cuts to local government over the next three years. Does George Adam consider that a fair settlement?

George Adam: James Kelly is aware that circumstances have changed and that we live in extremely difficult times. We have a recession, which was created by Labour and has been continued by the Tories. Over the next couple of years, we will have a debate on the future of Scotland. The main reason for Scotland to be

independent is so that we can make our own decisions and ensure that we take our place in the world.

In Renfrewshire, we worked hard for a fair settlement and we have managed to deliver quite a lot. We have done simple things, such as developing Paisley town hall and spending £1.5 million on closed-circuit television in all town centres. We have ensured that Renfrewshire is the gateway to the Commonwealth games in 2014 and have contributed £100,000 to activities connected to the games.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (John Scott): You must close, please.

George Adam: I have taken three interventions, Presiding Officer. I was told that I had some latitude.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You have 20 seconds.

George Adam: Youth unemployment is mentioned constantly. The council's administration proposed

"to create a fund of £2.5 million to support a package of measures aimed specifically at youth unemployment in Renfrewshire."

The fund will lead to the creation of 250 new jobs with employment subsidy and will secure training for 1,300 young people.

Politics is about responsibility for making decisions that make our communities more socially just, secure places to live. We must ensure that as many Scots as possible engage in politics and we must enthuse them to do so. We must also ensure that the public have confidence in the election process, from the voting booth to the counting hall. The plans outlined by the minister will help to achieve that.

10:01

Mark Griffin (Central Scotland) (Lab): I welcome the opportunity to speak in a debate on local government elections. I declare that I am a member of North Lanarkshire Council, although that will no longer be the case after the elections that we are debating.

I am glad that the Government has acknowledged the importance of the local government elections by scheduling the debate and explicitly stating that importance in the motion. To sustain that acknowledgement of importance, we must talk only about the local government elections and not allow the debate to veer off into other areas; that diminishes the profile of both the local government elections and the debate. By focusing solely on the elections, we should be able to achieve the aim of the motion and our

amendment and increase voter engagement, registration and participation.

There have been welcome changes to the administration of the local government elections. There is a new provision to allow a member of the public to cast their vote after 10 pm as long as they are in the queue to vote before the 10 o'clock deadline. That will avoid the confusion that there was at some polling stations in England in the 2010 UK election, when a number of people were unable to vote despite arriving on time, and the criticism that followed.

Like the minister, I am not sure that we will reach a high enough turnout to cause queues at polling stations at 10 pm. You never know, though. Perhaps the voters of Kilsyth will be energised by the fact that Mark Griffin will not appear on the ballot paper; perhaps voters in Renfrew North will be similarly enthused by the fact that there is no Derek Mackay on the ballot paper. Perhaps they will all be so happy at the prospect of getting a different councillor that they will turn out in huge numbers. That is a bonus—they will be able to vote after the 10 o'clock deadline as long as they get to the polling station in time.

There is also a return to electronic counting, of which I am a massive fan, despite the problems in 2007. I think that those problems were more a result of voters being faced with three different voting systems at once than of the machinery. Tests in Perth of hundreds of thousands of ballot papers have been successful. A test of the procedures in a by-election also went smoothly.

The reason that I am a fan of electronic counting is that the results of the election can be released down to ballot-box level, as long as it is not lower than the 200-ballot limit, for voter identification reasons. That means that political anoraks such as me—I would not call myself a party animal—can analyse local voting trends in tremendous detail, just as I could after the 2007 election. I am pleased that Aileen Campbell was able to reassure me about that at the Local Government and Regeneration Committee last October. Derek Mackay has given the Parliament a similar assurance that the Government will seek to release that data.

There have been successful tests of draft ballot papers with sample groups. As the minister said, participants have described the design as clean, simple and straightforward. However, as stated, the main cause of errors was the lack of understanding of the single transferable vote. I am pleased that the Government has accepted the recommendation to work closely with the Electoral Commission to run an information campaign to improve awareness of STV and encourage voter engagement and participation.

We already know that local government and Scottish Parliament elections have been decoupled by moving to two five-year terms for local government. That was intended to put local government elections at the mid-point of a Scottish parliamentary term, but the situation has now been complicated by five-year, fixed-term Parliaments in Westminster and a five-year session here too. If it is to be assumed that five-year terms will continue in the Scottish Parliament in order to prevent clashes with Westminster elections, we will also have to debate five-year terms for local government in order to continue the principle of free-standing local government elections.

Although I agree with the principle of decoupling to give local government the focus and priority that it deserves, collectively we will have to deal with the issue of a potentially reduced turnout and the implications of that. Jointly we will have to do all that we can as politicians to encourage as many people as possible to participate in the elections, although I imagine that in practice that will result in us all going our separate ways to encourage our own supporters to turn out and vote. Taking that aside, the Government should start a voter registration drive to encourage people to get on to the electoral register and a campaign to encourage people to switch to a postal vote, as figures show that turnout is much higher in that section of the electorate.

I am also pleased that the Government has accepted another recommendation from the Gould report, in that the period between close of nominations and polling day will be increased from 16 to 23 days. That is a welcome change that will allow more time for the printing, distribution and return of postal votes, reducing the pressure on election administrators at a very busy time and potentially eliminating the scenario in which a postal ballot is received by a voter, but too late for it to be returned in time to be counted. That is a big issue for anybody who falls ill or becomes housebound on an emergency basis, applies for a postal vote at a late stage and is unable to cast it. I am glad to see that that potential scenario has been overcome.

I look forward to the measures that I have mentioned being implemented and, I hope, the smooth running of local government elections in May. I also look forward to playing a big part in the elections locally, although perhaps not as big a part as I anticipated this time last year. I support the amendment in Sarah Boyack's name.

10:07

James Dornan (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP): I start by congratulating Derek Mackay on his ministerial maiden speech to the Parliament. It was a job well done.

I will speak briefly about the motion, but the great thing about it is that it gives us an opportunity to talk about the elections in May, which will be the thrust of the main part of my speech.

I welcome the hard work and joint effort from the Scottish Government, local authorities and others to ensure the implementation of the changes that flowed from the Gould report. Mr Gould should be congratulated on his full and frank report, which highlighted many of the shortfalls of the 2007 Holyrood election. We have heard from previous speakers examples of the problems and some of the work that the Government is doing to combat them. Unfortunately, there are a couple of areas in which we do not have the powers to do that—two of them being votes for young people aged 16 and 17 and the devolution of the powers to control local authority elections.

The proof that the Scottish Government took recommendations seriously is in the smooth running of the 2011 Holyrood elections, and I am confident that the decoupling of the local authority elections from other elections will ensure another successful, well-run day in May.

There are aspects of the Gould report's conclusions that should leave some of the political parties in this chamber embarrassed—well, on this occasion, just one party as the other party has not even bothered to turn up. To be told that

“the Scotland Office and the Scottish Executive frequently focused on partisan political interests, overlooking ... the voter”

surprises few of us on this side of the chamber but must have come as a huge shock to voters across the country who previously put their faith in those political parties to make decisions on their behalf and not solely for political gain.

We have moved on, and I look forward to the transparent, fair and smooth running of all elections, and referendums, in Scotland in the future. Of course, one way to ensure that is, as the motion says, to devolve the power for the running of all Scottish elections to Scotland.

I am sure that I am not alone on this side of the chamber in saying how much I look forward to the forthcoming local elections.

Neil Findlay (Lothian) (Lab): The member mentioned fairness. One of the arguments promoted by those who supported STV was that it would be fairer. In my local authority, Labour is the largest group with 14 members, but it does not control the council. With 14 members, Labour has only two seats on the executive committee, yet the Scottish National Party with 13 members takes eight seats. Would the member support changes to legislation to bring us in line with England,

where there is fair representation on council bodies?

James Dornan: I point out to Mr Findlay that I was leader of the opposition in Glasgow City Council. I know all about unfairness in local authorities.

Neil Findlay: Answer the question.

James Dornan: As opinion polls continue to show growing support for the party, which has a great record in local by-elections and a track record of success in administration, and given the record of hard work and commitment of SNP councillors across the country, I am confident that the people of Scotland will elect our candidates as their local authority representatives in great number.

We have talked about the process of local elections and how we can try to make it easier for people to vote in May; now we must enthuse people about coming out to vote. The main reason to come out and vote in Glasgow in May is that the elections give people a chance to throw the dead hand of Labour control off our beautiful city. For far too long the citizens of Glasgow have had to live under the complacency, arrogance and incompetence of an Administration that would rather fight with the Government for political reasons than work with it to make life better for the people that it is meant to represent—present company excepted, of course.

While the SNP Government completes the M8, builds a brand new hospital and funds numerous new schools, the local administration group penalises the poorest and most vulnerable in society by closing down day centres for the disabled and schools for pupils who have additional support needs and, worst, by using the admirable self-directed support system to cut funding from the people who need it most, leaving many people without any way to live life as fully as they have been used to doing. It is thought that Glasgow City Council will face a legal challenge on how it is trying to implement the policy. I would not bet on the council's being able to defend its approach.

Neil Findlay: On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I am wondering to which part of the motion the member is referring as he gives a party-political broadcast.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I was wondering that myself. Perhaps you will stick to the terms of the motion, Mr Dornan.

James Dornan: I did not realise that there are set words that we have to use in our speeches—*[Interruption.]* I am trying to explain why we should get people out to vote, not just how people should vote. The two issues are closely connected.

Glasgow Labour is ripping itself apart, after the most inept selection process that I have ever witnessed, with more than 20 councillors deselected for not being up to standard, one of whom was city treasurer just a few months before and another of whom was convener of the licensing board. When was it realised that those people were not up to the job? If that is the case, why were so many of them in extremely important positions in the first place?

We are putting forward a record number of high-quality, committed council candidates to fight for Glasgow—double the number that we put up in 2007.

While Labour supports the continual privatisation of the national health service, the SNP continues to protect the NHS in Scotland from the worst ravages of the Westminster cuts.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Dornan—

James Dornan: And while Labour has a number of councillors who thought that their only responsibility was—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Dornan! Please stick to the terms of the motion. If you are unable to do so, do not continue. There needs to be an element of relevance here, and I am afraid that you are not being entirely relevant.

James Dornan: I think that that is highly unfair, Presiding Officer, but I am happy to go back to talking about how we should encourage 16 and 17-year-olds to vote for the SNP. I have given some of the reasons why they should be able to vote for the SNP when it comes to the local authority elections on 3 May. I did not realise our speeches had to be okayed—particularly by Mr Findlay—before we made them, but if I have touched a nerve I do apologise.

We have an opportunity, thanks to the work of the Government and local authorities, to ensure that more people vote on 3 May. I hope that they will vote for the SNP.

10:13

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP): I think that all members agree on the importance of local government, and I think that the electorate agrees on that, too. Councils have a remit on many of the issues that concern people, such as council tax, housing—in many places—schools, roads, planning, refuse collection, licensing and parks. The list goes on.

I have had the privilege of being in Glasgow City Council chamber, at Westminster and here, and I have no doubt that councillors are generally at least as hard working as other politicians are and are often underpaid.

I am glad that this year's local government elections will take place on their own day, but we must not forget the bad old days.

Neil Findlay: I was interested in the member's reference to councillors being underpaid. Does he therefore disagree with the minister's decision not to do anything on councillors' pay?

John Mason: I was going to touch on that later. For now, I will just say that in the short term we are constrained because the public would not accept a pay increase, but we need to look at that in the longer term, so the member has a point.

My experience of council elections came first in 1998, when I was elected to Glasgow City Council, which had only one other councillor who had been elected for the SNP—our own, dear Kenneth Gibson. In 1999, I was elected again, this time with his mother, and then there were two of us. In 2003, we reached the fabulous achievement of having three SNP councillors in the city. To touch on a point that Neil Findlay made earlier, during the time when I was a Glasgow city councillor, the Labour group attempted to claim that 100 per cent of the executive of Glasgow City Council should be Labour, with no opposition councillors whatever. I protested against that by sitting in the lord provost's chair and got suspended for nine months.

We need to give due thanks to the Liberal Democrats, who forced the introduction of STV. Thanks to that, in 2007 we achieved an SNP group of 22 councillors. Unfortunately, Liberal Democrat members are not here to hear my compliments. The Liberal Democrats forced Labour to accept PR, much against its will, and it is disappointing that their colleagues at Westminster did not manage to force similar concessions from the Tories but settled merely for an AV referendum.

STV is clearly the best system. It means that all councillors have equal footing, compared with the slightly flawed system that we have here at Holyrood with two different ways of being elected. As I said earlier, I think that there is a pretty good understanding of how STV works, especially when it is the only system that is being used on a particular day.

However, some areas of the system could be improved, and we will have suggested some of those in the past. First, a five-member ward would have been more proportionate and would have helped smaller parties. Not many of those are represented here today, either. A second issue is by-elections. At the moment, in a three-member ward where, say, party A has two seats and party B has one seat, and the party B member dies, the likelihood is that the main party, A, will win the third seat as well. We then end up with a ward

where 100 per cent of the seats are held by one party. That was not the intention. We could say, for example, that the replacement councillor should be from the same party as the one whose seat has been lost—or an independent if that was the case—or that the by-election should take account of existing councillors. I accept that a tidy solution is difficult, but we need to consider the matter at some stage in the future. Another aspect of elections that we would like to improve is giving 16 and 17-year-olds a vote, but that is outwith our power.

I look forward to May's elections and hope that the SNP becomes the largest party in Glasgow. However, to achieve that, we need to increase turnout, which is a long-standing problem for us in Scotland at different levels. The fact that we have a separate day for the elections is very worth while. That was opposed long and hard by certain other parties—partly, to be fair, on grounds of turnout. Part of the answer on turnout would be to give councillors the respect that they are due; perhaps we do not always do that. The public have a tendency to look at it as a hierarchy, with MPs at the top, MSPs next and councillors down below that, with members of the European Parliament totally lost somewhere. Having been in the first three of those positions, I do not agree that that hierarchy reflects reality.

We have made some inroads into the issue of respect, especially by ending ring fencing, which gives councillors a lot more autonomy. When the minister and I were both councillors travelling to Convention of Scottish Local Authorities meetings, we asked endlessly for ring fencing to be ended, and doing it is a big achievement for the SNP Government. There is no point in having elections to local government if councillors cannot make their own decisions.

However, more must be done in all parties. We could allow councillors to take more of a lead on media issues, for example. MSPs have tended to barge in on what are largely council matters; indeed, I have been guilty of that myself.

As I have said, we also need at some stage to think about paying councillors better. I consider the gap between the £16,500 paid to a councillor and the £57,000 paid to one of us to be too wide. That kind of pay limits the number of people who can afford to be councillors, especially those who need to take on the role full time.

Derek Mackay: Does the member welcome the fact that, before a ministerial view was taken on a pay freeze for councillors, councillors themselves, through our umbrella organisation, COSLA, had volunteered to introduce such a freeze because of the circumstances in which we all find ourselves?

John Mason: The minister is absolutely right to talk about circumstances, because certainly that is the current situation, but I think that in the longer term we need to think about redressing the balance.

Finally, councils need to be responsible for more of their finances.

Nevertheless, there are positive things to highlight. For example, the relationship between Glasgow and the Government over the Commonwealth games has been very positive, and I trust that that will continue.

10:21

John Pentland (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab): I know of no one who would dissent from the view that

"local democracy and ... this year's local elections"

are important. I certainly would not; however, in agreeing, I must declare an interest as a North Lanarkshire councillor who will stand down in May. There is also no question but that the 2007 election brought local and Scottish democracy into disrepute on a number of counts and that the lessons that have been drawn in the Gould report and elsewhere have, in most respects, been learned. Nor is there any doubt that subsequent "improvements ... in electoral administration" are welcome. Clearly we all welcome the work on providing a robust system of electronic counting for the elections and want a successfully run election with a high turnout.

However, the final section of the Scottish Government motion is not really about local government elections. That is just as well, because if the motion had any real relevance to that issue, I would be drawing the chamber's attention to Gould's criticism of the lateness of consideration of arrangements for 2007 and his recommendation that such matters should have been sorted out long before.

In this debate on local government elections, we should not muddy the waters by discussing the Scottish Parliament elections that will take place in four years' time or the administration of a referendum 1,000 days away. Instead, we should give proper consideration to ensuring that the local government elections are—and are seen to be—fair and above board. I believe that that is best done through the good offices of the Electoral Commission.

We might all agree on the importance of local democracy, but it could be said that some have a funny way of showing it. I do not think that local democracy is well served by current Scottish Government policies. On funding, which has already been mentioned, recent figures from the

Scottish Parliament information centre show that, within a shrinking Scottish Government pot, local government funding is shrinking faster than everything else.

Jamie Hepburn (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP): Will the member take an intervention on that point?

John Pentland: No—I am moving on.

This year, 34.5 per cent of the Scottish Government budget will go to local government; next year, the figure drops to 33.9 per cent; and the year after—2013-14—it will fall again to 33.2 per cent. Over a three-year period when total funding will drop by 2.4 per cent, local government funding will drop by a massive 5.9 per cent. What happens to the rest of the Scottish Government budget when we take out local government funding? With the rest of the budget taking an increasing share, it drops by only 0.6 per cent.

Jamie Hepburn: On a point of order, Presiding Officer. You have already recommended to one member that they stick to relevant issues in this debate. Will you be doing likewise to the member speaking at present?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That is not a point of order. I believe that Mr Pentland is staying within the confines of the terms of the motion.

John Pentland: Thank you, Presiding Officer.

For the next two years, the Scottish Government expects local government to shoulder 10 times the level of cuts that will apply elsewhere. In 2014-15, the cuts are smaller and more even, but already the damage is done, so the cumulative impact of that squeeze on local government is that it will always be £1 billion worse off than if its budget share had been maintained to 2015—and, of course, that figure would be higher still if one compared the position had the budget been maintained in real terms. So much for valuing the importance of local government.

Support for local democracy should also mean working with local authorities to tackle issues such as high unemployment and ensuring that Scottish policy supports local action. Why, then, do areas such as North Lanarkshire not feature in initiatives such as new enterprise zones? That is a double blow for North Lanarkshire, as the BioCity life sciences—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Pentland, I feel that you are now certainly straying off the subject at hand. I would be grateful if you would stick to the terms of the motion.

John Pentland: I will take your words of wisdom, Presiding Officer.

Local democracy is important. So is holding the Scottish Government to account for what it does to

local government. The verdict on local government's performance will, I hope, be delivered through smoothly run elections in May. The verdict on the Scottish Government may be reflected in that result too.

10:26

Dennis Robertson (Aberdeenshire West) (SNP): I congratulate the minister on what I consider to be an excellent first speech, and I welcome Sarah Boyack and Margaret Mitchell to their respective shadow posts. In this generous mood of congratulating people, I would like to take the opportunity to congratulate Aberdeenshire Council—which might come as a surprise to it, given some of the debates that I have had with it recently—on the proactive way in which it has been getting itself ready for the elections in May.

Last year, I had the privilege of working with Aberdeenshire Council's chief executive, Colin Mackenzie, his returning officer and his officials, particularly Alan Bell, who strived to ensure that those who could vote in last May's elections were able to vote.

With the changes to local government elections and the introduction of the electronic counting system—we have all heard of the complexity of those issues and the problems that we had in 2007, and I am absolutely delighted that the recommendations of the Gould report have been taken on board—it is important that people understand the methodology behind the system and what will be happening. I think that the minister said that the system has gone through stress testing. I sincerely hope that he means rigorous testing, not stressful testing, because I hope that the local government elections in May will be stress free. I have every confidence that the electronic system has been tested in full and I hope that we will have no surprises in May—except, perhaps, for a surprising rise in the number of SNP councillors elected.

It is important that those who are allowed to vote are able to do so. It is in the interests of every member in this chamber to ensure that we encourage our colleagues at local government level to find a method of countering apathy—I am reluctant to use that word, but I think that there is sometimes a degree of apathy when it comes to turning out to vote in local government elections. It is important that we ensure that people have the confidence to come out and vote for what they believe in. We must ensure that the information that they are given is robust and understandable.

Margaret Mitchell alluded to one of the problems we face when she talked about the complexities of STV voting—the situation was, of course, made more difficult for people to understand in 2007, as

we had more than one election going on at the same time. It is important to ensure that not only those who vote in polling stations but those who use the postal voting system have the appropriate information and an awareness of the STV system.

Hanzala Malik (Glasgow) (Lab): I agree with what the member is saying and am pleased that he is saying it but, when it comes to increasing awareness among communities, does he agree that the minister should look at ways of encouraging people from the minority communities, in particular, to participate in elections? One way of doing that would be to ensure that they are registered to vote. Many members of those communities are not registered to vote, which means that at every election they miss out on the opportunity to exercise their democratic right.

Dennis Robertson: I agree 100 per cent that we must ensure that people have the necessary information, which must be in a language and format that everyone can understand.

I congratulate Aberdeenshire Council on the work that it has done to ensure that people have full access when they go to their polling station. Every local authority has a statutory requirement to ensure that that is the case, but I know that Aberdeenshire Council looks at all its polling stations and ensures not only that they are accessible, but that they have appropriate lighting and that appropriate information is provided at election time.

We should try to ensure that the information that goes out to the electorate on the STV system is provided in the languages and formats that people require. We need to encourage organisations such as the Royal National Institute of Blind People that provide information to people with sensory impairments to get that information out to the groups of people they represent.

I remember full well what happened at last May's election when, at 6 o'clock in the morning, I went up to the platform, having been elected as the MSP for Aberdeenshire West. I would welcome the count being done on the following day, and not just because I probably went for three days without sleep—albeit that I was probably on an adrenalin high at the time—but because that would be fair to the local authority staff, who endure a great deal on polling day, manning the polling stations and so on. Counting taking place the following day would also be fair to candidates, and I hope that the minister will take that point into account when he sums up.

I look forward to the election in May and to its being fair and transparent. I congratulate the minister on saying that post-election information will be made available so that we can see how and

where people voted, and I look forward to seeing even more SNP-run councils in May.

10:33

Roderick Campbell (North East Fife) (SNP): I welcome the opportunity to speak in the debate and, like other members, I welcome the minister, Sarah Boyack and Margaret Mitchell to their new positions and thank them for their contributions to the debate.

As the Parliament has already recognised, the 2007 election fiasco should never happen again. However, it was not all bad—in many senses, what happened in 2007 was significant. It was the first time that the single transferable vote system had been used in Scotland for local elections—sadly, that is not why the 2007 elections stand out in our memories. At 38,352, the number of spoiled local government ballot papers was rightly perceived as being way too high, even if it was somewhat less than the number of spoiled ballot papers in the parliamentary election on the same day. It is clear that Scotland's reputation for being able to administer elections efficiently and fairly suffered a damaging blow.

The people of Scotland are entitled to a robust and efficient electoral system, and I am glad that members across the chamber agreed that things had to change for the elections in 2011 and 2012, to ensure that people would not, in effect, be disenfranchised by accident ever again.

The independent report that Ron Gould published in 2007 was a welcome guide to how elections ought to be run. The SNP accepted the report and the wide-ranging conclusions of the review, acknowledging the unusually complex system in Scotland whereby electoral responsibilities are divided between Westminster and the Scottish Parliament. As we know, the administration of local government elections is devolved to the Scottish Parliament, but many powers remain at Westminster, such as the franchise and the power to change the voting age at those elections, as the First Minister reminded us last week.

In connection with that issue, I find it surprising that the Liberal Democrats are so hostile to votes for 16 and 17-year-olds in the referendum without acknowledging that, if we had control of the franchise for local authorities, there can be no doubt that the reform could have been introduced for the elections in May.

The complexity of the situation is illustrated in the Gould report. Members who have looked at it recently will know that it includes an interesting table, on pages 12 and 13, that lists the various statutes—created by Westminster and Holyrood respectively—that affect local government

elections. The situation really is a guddle. No wonder Gould described it as antiquated and fractured. I am pleased that the Scottish Government is continuing to press for full control of the franchise for local elections in order to streamline the legislation and maximise efficiency in the process.

Gould expressed concern that two different voting systems were used on one day—first past the post and STV. That led people to put crosses where they should have put numbers and vice versa. We need to continue the public campaign to make voters aware of the need to place 1, 2 and 3 on the paper as opposed to crosses. I am glad that a public awareness campaign immediately before the 2012 elections will focus on that.

Following Gould, the decision was taken to separate elections to the Scottish Parliament from local government elections. That decoupling brings us to where we are today, with the local government elections approaching a whole year after the parliamentary elections. The Gould report argued that holding local government elections in the same year as Scottish Parliament elections might have overshadowed the importance of the former. Few would disagree with that. It is important to ensure that there is an informed debate before any local government election, and I am glad that there will be no confusion between elections this year that might detract from that debate. This year's local government elections are no less important than any that have gone before.

The decoupling presents a significant challenge in relation to turnout. Sarah Boyack reasonably mentioned issues with postal voting. I am happy to stand corrected, but I am not sure that there has been much consideration of the alternative voting methods that could complement postal voting, which are mentioned on page 69 of the Gould report—in particular, advance voting. Those methods might increase turnout and they certainly need to be considered in connection with any franchise for the referendum. I hope that the minister will address that, either in his closing speech or later.

Local authority elections are often regarded as being less exciting than national elections. Although I concede that local elections often lack the television and other media coverage and excitement of parliamentary elections, it is local authorities that provide many of the services upon which vast numbers of the electorate rely. Without those services, daily life would grind to a halt for many people. For that reason, local elections matter just as much as any other elections. I therefore urge my constituents and voters throughout Scotland to get fully involved in the elections and to cast their vote. Let us hope that, whatever the result on the first Thursday in May,

we can be proud that the elections have been fairly and efficiently run.

10:39

Anne McTaggart (Glasgow) (Lab): As most members will know, I am an elected member of Glasgow City Council. I wanted to declare that interest before I contribute to today's debate.

I welcome this debate on the forthcoming local government elections in May. It is a welcome change to have a discussion about a vote of which we know the date, and in which we know what will be put to the electorate.

As we know, reflection, analysis and action on the elections process were needed after the circumstances of the 2007 vote. Many voters were left feeling disenfranchised by the whole situation and I am sure that no one in the Parliament wants that to happen again. The work that was done to produce the Gould report was therefore needed and welcome.

In preparing for the debate, I was struck by the fact that the Gould report said that having too little time to incorporate changes adequately into the electoral process was consistently reported to the research team as having been problematic. That made me think that this debate is also rather late in the day, as we have less than four months until polling day.

Derek Mackay: Will the member take an intervention?

Anne McTaggart: No.

Lest we forget, the underlying principles for us as elected members are representation, democracy and dialogue. We should all strive to increase participatory democracy at all levels, to enhance citizenship and to redress the democratic deficit. The decentralisation of decision-making processes to our communities is imperative. That enables us as politicians to best represent the needs, issues and aspirations of communities, as we are elected to do.

Recent history suggests that we might have a disproportionately low turnout on polling day and that a vast number of people will not use their vote. That issue is particularly important and needs to be addressed, especially as this will be the first stand-alone local government election in almost a decade and will involve a huge number of new voters.

As seasoned canvassers, campaigners, party animals and—what else have we had this morning?

David McLetchie (Lothian) (Con): Anoraks.

Anne McTaggart: Anoraks—that was it.

I am sure that we have heard many of the reasons that people give for not voting, but we must all try to work together to increase awareness and interest, in the hope of increasing turnout in May.

Clare Adamson (Central Scotland) (SNP): Will the member take an intervention?

Anne McTaggart: After all, one of the Gould report's recommendations was that we put voters first and ahead of any party self-interest.

Dennis Robertson: Will the member take an intervention, please?

Anne McTaggart: No—I will not.

We must strive to increase participatory democracy at all levels and enhance citizenship and we must work to redress the democratic deficit, especially locally, where the situation is being noticed more and more with the onset of cuts to public services because of the Scottish Government's council tax freeze.

Kevin Stewart: Will the member take an intervention?

Anne McTaggart: As a member of Glasgow City Council, I know that its budget will have the biggest cut in Scotland between now and 2015. Given funding cuts of £25 million, for example, it is no wonder that local democracy struggles to engage with voters.

Jamie Hepburn: Will the member give way?

Anne McTaggart: That applies especially because such cuts will be felt most by—

Jamie Hepburn: I did not think that the member would give way.

Anne McTaggart: Such cuts will be felt most by people in the most vulnerable circumstances and could result in the withdrawal of vital council services in communities across Glasgow and Scotland.

I want the people of Glasgow to turn out and vote in the forthcoming local elections. First and foremost, I want them to feel that they are voting in an open and fair process.

As a woman from a working-class background with a particular interest in the women's movement, I am often reminded of the struggle of people like me to get the chance to vote. It is because of the class and gender struggle for suffrage that I feel not just pride in having a vote but the responsibility to use it.

Dennis Robertson: Will the member give way on that point, please?

Anne McTaggart: It is of course vital that the people of Scotland have the opportunity to

participate in the forthcoming local government elections through a system that they can trust and engage with. That is why the Electoral Commission's role is extremely important.

The Electoral Commission's independence ensures that the public feel greater confidence in the procedures with which they engage. As we know, responsibility for local government elections is devolved to the Scottish Parliament, so the same legal requirements for the commission to have a direct role in the conduct of elections that are reserved to Westminster do not apply. However, we should not underestimate the value that the commission still offers. It plays an extremely important role in giving advice to local government candidates, their agents, officials and activists, for instance. In fact, the dedicated pages on the commission's website are of real value to those groups, and they should be widely promoted. Perhaps most significantly, the Electoral Commission has a proven record of working to maximise voter registration, participation and awareness. As I said earlier, that is a must if we are to encourage more people to engage in the local elections.

I am glad to support the amendment in the name of Sarah Boyack, as it acknowledges that excellent work. I hope that members across the chamber will also recognise that work and support the amendment.

10:45

Chic Brodie (South Scotland) (SNP): I formally welcome Derek Mackay as the new Minister for Local Government and Planning. His promotion is well deserved.

I am delighted to support the Government's motion and am even more delighted to look forward to the fray of the local elections in May this year. As we all know and as has been said, the 2007 elections were a shambles, but the 2011 parliamentary elections ran smoothly. The system for the 2012 local elections should be better and should allow us to focus on our policies. They will, of course, be helped by the decoupling of the national and local elections and by the in-depth electronic counting system aided and abetted by the professionalism of more fully trained presiding and returning officers. The electronic system report is very readable not just for information technology anoraks and is a strong foundation for voter confidence.

This time, we politicians have no place to hide. The people's focus on policies and their decisions will out. They have a right. They rightly demand security of process, fairness of proportionality, proximate accountability and, above all, clarity of policy. It has been said that there is concern about

the low turnout levels. It is incumbent on all national and local politicians to address that issue. I believe that part of the solution is that all elections that pertain to and affect solely and directly the sovereignty of the voters of Scotland must be devolved to and controlled by the Scottish Parliament.

Electoral conditions should move with the ever-increasing maturity of our nation. That is why, for example, we must pursue legislation to allow 16 and 17-year-olds to vote in the local government elections and, indeed, all Scottish elections.

The now-accepted Gould report revealed many of the issues relating to the 2007 debacle. There were too many such issues, and there is not enough time to rehearse them. Narrow partisan politics, electronic counting, inadequate preparation and descriptive confusion were all highlighted in the report. I welcome the past considerations and actions, as well as the new initiatives that the minister has announced today.

We have—happily—moved on from 2007, but there is still one concerning element, which I mentioned. That element was highlighted in the joint statement made on 27 October 2009 by Mr Crawford, who is now Cabinet Secretary for Parliamentary Business and Government Strategy, and Ann McKeichin, who was then under-secretary of state in the Scotland Office. That statement was collaborative and substantive in its response to the Electoral Commission. Specifically, item 8 of the statement said that the electoral management board's remit

“should extend to all elections in Scotland”.

So it should, of course.

With confidence in the process, let us now progress together to the constructive politics of local administration elections in Scotland. The voting system has demanded the development and encouragement of partnerships in councils, positive debates and meaningful outcomes that will finally destroy the hierarchies and hegemonies of local authorities that besmirched some of Scotland's large local authorities in the past.

Let us go into the fray in May. We on the SNP side of the chamber will point to our major achievements in leading or working in council partnerships, such as the council tax freeze, the small business bonus scheme, the introduction of single outcome agreements, preventative spending and maintaining local government revenue in cash terms. Others will argue their particular case equally strongly.

Throughout the Borders, and indeed throughout Scotland, the SNP will fight to win each council outright, but it will be constructive at all times if partnership is necessary. In South Ayrshire

Council, the SNP worked in partnership with the Tories—we picked up a council that was almost bankrupt and have now turned it into a fully liquid council. Let us debate and do battle.

I return briefly to my earlier point about allowing 16 and 17-year-olds to vote in local elections. We must look forward even beyond the election in May. I have no idea what the average age of candidates in the election will be, but it will certainly not be 16 or 17. We must not only encourage and avail the involvement of the young in voting but collectively—as it is our responsibility—and actively secure their participation.

As I and other members have said, turnout at local elections is already too low. I know that the youth vote issue is particularly dear to the minister's heart. The active involvement of young people at an early age will, I believe, prevent our elections and local elections from withering on the vine. Our nation and its future democracy are too precious to allow that to happen. I beg members to support the motion.

10:52

Jamie Hepburn (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP): I declare at the outset that, unlike many other members who have taken part in the debate, I am not, have never been and am never likely to be a member of any particular local authority, despite George Adam's best efforts from a sedentary position to recruit me.

The debate is important, as no one should underestimate the importance of local government and local democracy. Local government is, in many ways, the level of government that has the most direct impact on the individual.

Before I get to the guts of the debate, I note that I was taken by something that was mentioned by a few members on the Labour side of the chamber. Sarah Boyack talked about local government being in a financial straitjacket, and James Kelly and Anne McTaggart repeated that mantra, as did John Pentland—who will perhaps be bold enough to take an intervention from me or from any other member at some point in the next four years; it will be a gala day when he does. If he had been bold enough to take my intervention, I would have made this point: in 2007-08, local government's share of the Scottish Government budget was 37.1 per cent, whereas in the current financial year, it is 38.4 per cent. It will be higher than the 2007-08 level in each of the coming years of the spending review period.

Rhoda Grant: Is it not the case that the Government has made an art of cutting budgets and then restoring them in part and saying that it has increased budgets? Has that not happened

with the housing budget and again with the local government budget?

Jamie Hepburn: I think that I just heard from Rhoda Grant a tacit admission that the supposed facts that were being espoused by her colleagues were in fact nothing like facts at all. She said quite clearly that budgets had been increased by the SNP, and I am happy to back that position.

It is clear that the SNP in government respects local government and local democracy. I cannot recall anyone ever saying of this Administration that, as was once said of another Administration,

“the executive is resorting to bully boy scare tactics”

in relation to local government. Those were the words of Labour councillor Pat Watters on 7 February 2006; I do not think that I need to remind members who formed the Government in 2006.

Let us get to the guts of the debate, the background to which is the Gould report. The report's overall conclusion was pretty damning by any stretch of the imagination, stating as it did that Scotland's voters had been “treated as an afterthought” in the planning, organisation and execution of the May 2007 elections.

Some of the report's findings are very damning indeed. For example, it states:

“the Scotland Office and the Scottish Executive were frequently focused on partisan political interests ... overlooking voter interests and operational realities within the electoral administration timetable.”

It also states that

“changes were introduced ... with the expectation that such changes would simply fall into place”

and that there was

“no effective planning process ... connecting legislative timetables to operational timetables”.

I could quote a number of such damning findings but I do not need to, as Parliament has welcomed and debated the Gould report. In January 2008, we had a full debate in the chamber after which Parliament passed a motion backing the terms of the Gould report and the devolution of legislative powers over elections to the Scottish Parliament. Mark Griffin, who made one of the better speeches from the Labour benches, was right to welcome the fact that the Scottish Government has acted on the Gould recommendations. We should remember, however, that it is not just the Scottish Government but this legislature as a whole that has done so. That is entirely appropriate, as the changes should not be made in a partisan, party-political way, which is a criticism that was levelled by Gould at the organisation of the May 2007 elections. We must move away from that, and it is

clear that we can do that if we all get behind the Gould report.

Let us look at what has happened in the intervening period. Many of the proposals in the Gould report have been put into practice. We need only look at the organisational changes that were made for the 2011 parliamentary elections, which ran very smoothly, for evidence that things are going in the right direction. The minister set out clearly the extraordinary level of preparation for the May 2012 local government elections, which has involved testing the ballot papers and a rigorous test of the electronic counting system. A lot of organisation has been undertaken, so no one can level the charge at the Government or the Parliament that Scotland's voters are being treated as an afterthought in the run-up to the elections.

One change, which George Adam picked up on, is particularly welcome. We are unlikely to see massive queues at the polling stations at 10 pm, but if someone has joined a queue to vote and the polling station is going to close, they should not be denied their right to vote. If they have taken the trouble to go out and exercise their democratic right to vote, they should not be told that the polling station is closed and they have missed their chance to vote, which is what happened in Sheffield in the 2010 general election. That should not happen again.

Presiding Officer, I was told that we had some leeway. How much leeway do I have?

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Elaine Smith): I can give you about another minute.

Jamie Hepburn: Thank you very much, Presiding Officer.

I turn to the issue of 16 and 17-year-olds voting. Unlike the minister and Patrick Harvie, who is no longer in the chamber, I was not surprised at all that the Secretary of State for Scotland was unaware that we do not have the power to extend the franchise for local government elections. It is perhaps a surprise that I was not surprised but, when one considers that the current occupant of that post is Michael Moore MP, why would I be surprised that he did not know what he was talking about? With the greatest respect, I say that Margaret Mitchell most tellingly and incorrectly raised the issue of 16 and 17-year-olds getting the vote. She suggested that that age group is disengaged, but I have seen no evidence or study that suggests that. My experience, like Kevin Stewart's, is that that age group is fully engaged with the political process. If 16 and 17-year-olds have certain responsibilities placed on their shoulders, they should have certain rights, one of which should be the right to vote not only in local government elections but in every election.

10:59

Helen Eadie (Cowdenbeath) (Lab): I apologise to you, Presiding Officer, and to the chamber for my late arrival this morning. The technology did not work for me. Last night, I sent my speech to the Parliament from home, expecting to be able to print it out this morning. However, it arrived on my BlackBerry, not my desktop, so I had difficulties. That is the explanation for my late arrival. I just hope that the minister's officials throughout Scotland do not have to give him a similar apology after the May election. I hope that there is a back-up plan—I had one, although it took a little time.

I congratulate the minister, Sarah Boyack and Margaret Mitchell on their appointments and wish them well in the work that lies ahead. I welcome what the minister said this morning, at least in the part of his speech that I heard. Good progress has been made. I am pleased to support Sarah Boyack's amendment, which commends the role of the Electoral Commission in supporting

"fair, open and transparent elections and good practice".

I come to the debate having been involved in election campaigns since I left school at the age of 16. A few years after I returned to Scotland from London, I was privileged to serve as a councillor in Fife Regional Council and, following reorganisation, in Fife Council. I held a variety of posts in that time, including deputy leader of Fife Regional Council, chair of the equal opportunities committee and, finally, roads and transportation spokesperson with the reorganised Fife Council. My experience of elections spans more than 40 years, 17 of which were in the London boroughs of Lambeth, Lewisham and Southwark, where I was an election organiser throughout those years.

In all that time, my aspirations have been to maximise public engagement and participation in the process. I have witnessed personally how the views of individual returning officers can govern the elections in their jurisdiction, resulting in a variety of approaches in electoral administrative areas. I and others consider some of those practices to be extremely unfair. Over all those years, it has become obvious that, if we had not had an Electoral Commission, we would now be talking about creating one. If ever we had doubts about the need to regulate all that is involved in electing people to represent us, we need only reflect on the experiences that members of the Parliament have had.

My colleagues have spoken about the practical issues in local government elections and the recommendations of the Gould report, so I shall not repeat any of those points, which they made so well. Instead, I will reflect on the values and freedoms that we take so much for granted in this country. That is not to say that reports such as the Gould report mean that we can rest on our laurels.

Instead, we should celebrate the hard work to date, knowing that much remains to be done.

If ever we had doubts about the value of those freedoms, we need only read about the experiences and work of Amnesty International. Part of its remit is to monitor elections abroad. It is good to be reminded of reports from election observers in various countries. I believe that Linda Fabiani has been an observer—she was with us a few moments ago, but she might have just popped out briefly. Election observers undertake an important task. Before Christmas, hundreds of thousands of Russians attended protests throughout that country to denounce alleged fraud in the 2011 parliamentary elections and the presidential elections. Following the controversial parliamentary elections in early December, three massive protests were held in Moscow—the biggest ever in the Putin era—expressing the anger of the many Russians who say that they were denied a truly fair vote.

Only yesterday, we learned that, as a consequence, a group of Russian writers and television presenters are launching a league of voters in an effort to make future elections in the country fairer. The remit is not to support individual politicians but to campaign for the election process to be fair, open and transparent, with good practice at the heart of what Russians do. That is what Sarah Boyack's amendment calls for here. The league of voters hopes that regulation will be the outcome of its efforts. We want the same good practice, fairness and transparency in our country.

Our challenge is not just to deal with the process but to motivate and encourage people to take an interest in elections at every level. Our country has the lowest turnout in local government elections in the European Union, even though our turnout in national elections is close to the norm for Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development countries. Moreover, in some parts of the country, election turnout has reached new lows since the 1997 general election. The Scottish Government's response has been to introduce new electoral arrangements to make it easier to vote and to change the way in which local government operates so that it is clearer who is responsible for making decisions. However, in local elections, we still fail to engage the participation of a majority.

During the past 20 years, turnout in local elections has averaged 40 per cent. Not only does that put this country at the bottom of the European Union league table for turnout in subnational elections, it means that we are the only country in the EU in which subnational elections regularly engage the active interest of less than half of its citizens. Moreover, in recent years, turnout has fallen even lower, with less than 50 per cent of

voters turning out to vote in local elections in many parts of Scotland. The turnout in the London borough of Southwark, where I lived for a time, dropped to 26 per cent. At one time, Keppochhill had the lowest turnout in Scotland at 31.6 per cent. The message continues to concern us all.

Only yesterday, I had a brief conversation with Eberhard Bort—he is known more affectionately to many of us as Paddy—who, together with Lesley Riddoch, has expressed strong arguments about the process of the centralisation of government having

“gone further in Scotland than in other countries.”

They argue that that is

“damaging democracy and economic development”.

Do we need to reflect on their paper and that of Rob Gibson, whose ambitions are highlighted in their article, which I read last night? We would do well to consider the case that they make.

So here we may have the nub of the crisis in local democracy in our country. Voters are not sure that local elections decide anything, but then they are not sure that they want local councils to have much freedom to decide anything anyway.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Could you come to a conclusion now?

Helen Eadie: Until and unless local government can persuade its citizens that it should have a degree of autonomy from the central state, it is likely to find it difficult to persuade them that local democracy that helps to justify the exercise of any autonomy is worth their attention.

11:06

Kevin Stewart (Aberdeen Central) (SNP): I welcome the new minister and the shadow spokespeople to their new posts.

It came as no surprise to me that the Gould report was as damning as it was. At the May 2007 election, I spent a night and a day in an election count hall in Aberdeen watching the on-going farce. I certainly do not blame any of the election staff for that farce, because folk did their best. Unfortunately, not enough planning was done on what would happen with the electronic vote machines on that night. Some slight difficulties—“slight” is not really the word that I would use—were caused by simple things such as the fact that the machines could not handle postal votes that had been folded. I am glad that much more testing of that has been done so that we can be confident that we do not see the same farce happening come May 2012.

Local government elections are extremely important. I am still a local councillor and refer members to my entry in the register of interests.

Unlike Mrs Eadie, I think that most folk think that local government has a huge part to play in their day-to-day lives. Many folk think that local government is much more important than this place and certainly more important than Westminster. We should therefore do everything possible to encourage—

Helen Eadie: In fact, I was quoting Rob Gibson, who was quoted in the paper that I read last night, along with other documents.

Kevin Stewart: I thank Mrs Eadie for clarifying that. I do not entirely agree that local government is of no consequence in folk's lives; in many folk's lives, it is the paramount authority.

Today, we have heard a number of speeches about encouraging people to register and to vote. I agree with Ms Boyack that there is work being done in some places but not in others to encourage people to register to vote. I also agree that it is more difficult to get folk in areas of deprivation to register. The efforts of electoral registration officers and evaluation boards should target those areas to encourage people to register to vote.

Sarah Boyack: I welcome Mr Stewart's comments. It is helpful to have a cross-party discussion on the issue, given the range of political control across local government. Might one way to help be for us to put a statutory duty on returning officers to ensure that they take electoral registration seriously and are proactive about it?

Kevin Stewart: I am always wary of adding to statutory burdens. However, best practice should be spread across the country. We should examine some of the good stuff that has gone on in certain places and ensure that it goes elsewhere. I am sure that, in his closing speech, the minister will go over that point and consider whether it is possible. Perhaps he will issue some guidance rather than put some new statute in place.

Mr Griffin made some interesting comments. I do not know whether turnout will increase in his council seat when he stands down or whether it will increase in Mr Mackay's former council seat, just as I do not know what will happen in mine.

One of the key things about Mr Mackay and Mr Griffin is that both were elected at a younger age than most. We require more young folk in local government, and I was proud to lead an SNP group in Aberdeen that had four folk under 30. They were elected for the first time at the previous local government elections and one of them, John West, was 18 at the time. Those four councillors were fully engaged with the process, and I think that the fact that we had young candidates encouraged younger folk to go out and vote.

As I said when I intervened on Mrs Mitchell, 16 and 17-year-olds are engaged but there comes a point—and I do not know when it is—when a number of young folk become disengaged. We should give 16 and 17-year-olds the vote in every election—I have believed that all my days and will continue to believe it—so that we continue to keep them engaged in the process and do not have a point of disengagement. I cannot see what the difficulty is with enfranchising 16 and 17-year-olds. We have had some flip-flopping on the issue from the Liberal Democrats, who have not bothered coming to the chamber, and from some Labour members. It is time for the Parliament to have the right to allow 16 and 17-year-olds to vote in local government and Scottish elections.

Dennis Robertson: Does Kevin Stewart agree with the view of the Scottish Youth Parliament and the National Union of Students that 16 and 17-year-olds should definitely have the right to vote?

Kevin Stewart: I completely agree with the Scottish Youth Parliament, the NUS and Mr Robertson. I truly believe that 16 and 17-year-olds should have the franchise and I hope that they will have it in elections in the very near future. I know that the minister will do all that he can to ensure that we get the powers to enable them to have it.

11:13

David McLetchie (Lothian) (Con): I welcome Derek Mackay to his new ministerial role.

As other members have pointed out, the elections to our councils in May this year will be the first to be held on a stand-alone basis since 1995, notwithstanding the fact that independent report after independent report consistently said that council elections and Scottish Parliament elections should not be held on the same day. Those recommendations were studiously ignored by the previous Labour-Lib Dem Scottish Executive, and it finally took the fiasco of the 2007 elections to change minds.

In light of that experience and the recommendations of the Gould report, the Parliament accordingly exercised its devolved power in relation to local government elections and put in place measures that extended the lifespan of our present councils to a five-year term and will likewise give a five-year term to the councils that we will elect this May.

It is worth recalling that there were 38,352 rejected ballot papers in the local government elections of 2007—1.83 per cent of the total and approximately three times the number of rejections in the 2003 council elections, which were conducted on a first-past-the-post basis. The change to the single transferable vote undoubtedly led to a higher number of spoiled ballot papers;

the number would have been higher still had it not been agreed that persons who marked a ballot paper with a single cross would be treated as having cast a valid vote for a number 1 preference. Although that was the correct adjudication decision, the situation demonstrated that many people had failed to grasp the essentials—the 1, 2 and 3—of STV.

In the light of that experience and of the Gould recommendations, testing has been undertaken on the layout of the ballot paper. The Scottish Government's thorough approach in that regard is to be welcomed and commended. However, as a number of members, particularly James Kelly, pointed out, no matter how well designed the ballot paper and how clear the instructions on the day, that is not a substitute for an advance voter education campaign to inform people about how the system works and how they should cast their vote if it is to be valid and counted.

Once again, there will be electronic counting of ballot papers in these elections. That is right, given the complexity of the maths surrounding STV. If we get this right, there is no reason why we cannot have an overnight count for these elections and know the make-up of our councils at the earliest opportunity. Like Mark Griffin, I welcome the minister's decision to make available after the election further information about voting preferences at ward level, which I am sure will be of considerable interest to us all.

Turnout in elections is important. I accept that coupling the council elections to the Scottish Parliament elections in the past improved the local election turnout from an average of around 42 per cent in stand-alone elections to 52 per cent in 2007, although turnouts for Parliament elections are nothing to write home about.

As matters stand, it is likely that turnout will fall to approximately where it was before. We need to do a lot more to encourage people to register and vote, and to ensure that they know how to cast a valid vote. Sarah Boyack made an interesting point when she asked the minister to elaborate on what budgetary provision the Scottish Government has made for awareness raising in that respect or whether that is being left to councils.

Sarah Boyack also raised the issue of sloganising on ballot papers by the SNP. She need not concern herself, because "Derek Mackay for Local Government Minister" does not have quite the same ring to it, even if it sounds pretty good to Mr Mackay.

Apart from the issue of the franchise, the conduct and administration of council elections is wholly devolved, which is why we were able to change the voting system from first past the post to STV and to change the rules on the timing of

elections, terms of councils and other administrative aspects of the conduct of the elections.

Although the issue is not expressly stated in the motion, it is apparent from the debate that many members want to extend the franchise in council elections to 16 and 17-year-olds and think that Parliament should have the power to do that. The issue was fully examined in April 2004 by the Electoral Commission, which recommended that the minimum age for all levels of voting in public elections in the United Kingdom should remain at 18, which is the common age in international comparisons. Indeed, in the 2004 study, the Electoral Commission found that only nine countries had a voting age below 18. It seems that the SNP wants to put Scotland on a par with Cuba and North Korea—two countries also led by people with outsized egos.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr McLetchie, could you begin to reach a conclusion?

David McLetchie: Oh, I was really starting to enjoy this. [*Laughter.*]

The Electoral Commission made the valid point that we should not equate different ages for different purposes and come up with superficial arguments, such as that which says that because someone can marry at 16 they should be able to vote at 16. The commission also recommended that, if we are going to look at a voting age, we might look at the age of majority for general application in a range of contexts before we come to a decision on a particular point.

Notwithstanding our dissenting views on voting ages, I do not think that attention should be deflected from our support for all the work that has been done to ensure that the forthcoming elections are conducted fairly, efficiently and in a manner that puts the voter first. I commend the motion, provided that it is amended as recommended by my friend Margaret Mitchell.

11:21

James Kelly (Rutherglen) (Lab): I welcome the opportunity to close this morning's debate on behalf of the Labour Party. Also on behalf of the Labour Party, I welcome Margaret Mitchell and Derek Mackay to their posts. I acknowledge Derek Mackay's first speech as minister and wish him well.

As John Pentland pointed out—there has been agreement across the chamber on this—elections and local democracy are crucial in Scotland. If we look at the landscape and the issues that local government deals with, from housing and education to roads, we see that people interact with local government on a constant basis as they

journey through their day. We see that as MSPs in some of the issues that are raised with us. That means that it is important that we reinforce the role of local councils and local democracy. That is done by proper, clear and transparent elections with as high a turnout as possible in order to enhance the credibility of the councillors to represent the electorate.

Helen Eadie spoke about her 40 years in politics, and there is no doubt that elections have changed over that time. We now have many more elections, with different electoral systems. That presents greater challenges not only in getting more people to the polls but in ensuring that people interact with the system and understand the different electoral systems by which we choose our representatives. Those are major challenges.

It is clear, as Margaret Mitchell and Anne McTaggart said, that it was correct to review the arrangements in the aftermath of the 2007 elections because of the chaos that ensued and that we must put in place arrangements in which the electorate can have more confidence. From that point of view, I recognise the work that Ron Gould did and congratulate him on the many recommended arrangements that have been taken forward. Central to those arrangements is the design of the ballot paper, and I acknowledge that testing has been done on it.

One issue that nobody has mentioned is the positioning of candidates on the ballot paper, which I suspect affects Labour and the SNP in particular. When a party runs more than one candidate, it is to an individual candidate's advantage to have a surname such as Adam and to be placed higher on the ballot paper. In fact, Kenny Gibson produced some really interesting research in the aftermath of the 2007 elections to show that, when parties ran more than one candidate, people who were placed higher on the ballot paper were more likely to be successful. I can also say anecdotally, from my experience in Labour, that in 2007 some experienced councillors lost out to new candidates. We need to consider the issue in the context of the 2012 elections.

John Mason: I agree with the member that there is a problem in that regard, but does he have a solution? We have struggled with the issue. For example, random naming, which has been done by some pension funds, is quite confusing.

James Kelly: The issue is a difficult one, which the Parliament will need to consider in the aftermath of the 2012 elections. I know that people have suggested that party candidates be grouped together or that parties be given the opportunity to rank candidates.

Kevin Stewart: After the most recent election I thought about changing my name to Aaron Aardvark. Robson rotation, which involves putting candidates in different positions on ballot papers so that there is no such advantage, is used in some places, including New Zealand. However, there is a difficulty, in that such an approach might make counting much more difficult. I do not know whether it would be worth our tinkering with the approach, given the experience in the count after the 2007 election.

James Kelly: As I said, the issue needs proper consideration after the election; it cannot and should not be considered now.

As members look ahead to May, I think that we all agree that there should be a good turnout, so it is important that we raise awareness of the STV system. The Scottish Government's testing exercise showed that awareness is low, so there are major challenges to overcome. As David McLetchie said, the number of rejected papers in 2007 was three times the number in 2003.

John Wilson (Central Scotland) (SNP): Will the member take an intervention on that point?

James Kelly: No, sorry. I need to make progress.

I commend Sarah Boyack for the points that she made about registration. There is no doubt that we have more transient populations in Scotland nowadays, which presents great challenges for the electoral registration authorities. If up to 15 per cent of eligible voters are missing from the register, as Sarah Boyack said, it is clear that people are underrepresented. We must ensure that as many people are registered as possible if we are to reinforce the role of local democracy.

Members made interesting points about the count. The political anoraks among us enjoy the count starting after the polls close at 10 pm, but it is right that we give proper consideration, through the consultation, to the impact of the approach on council and election staff. We should take cognisance of the issue. If it is right that the count takes place the following morning, so that it can be conducted properly, that should happen.

We have concentrated on process, but the election is about people. It is about the pensioner couple who have had their care package cut. It is about the probationary teacher who cannot find employment. It is about the parent who must buy a home computer and printer so that they can print out their child's homework. Such challenges come against the backdrop of the SNP's proposed cuts of £700 million in next year's local government budget. I look forward to the election in May and I look forward to exposing the issues and the SNP Administration's shallow approach to local government.

11:29

Derek Mackay: I, too, look forward to the local government elections, for a range of reasons. They will be the first local government elections for some time in which I have not been a candidate. In some respects, I will miss having the opportunity to stand in a council election. Many members remarked on the fact that my name will not appear on the local ballot paper. That might encourage people to go out and vote in Renfrew North and in Mark Griffin's ward.

I can exclusively reveal today that while I have departed my seat in Renfrew North, "Alex Salmond for Renfrew North" will not appear on the ballot paper at the local government elections. In my first week in office, when looking for somewhere to carry out my duties as a minister-designate while the First Minister was away in China, I occupied his office; I may have taken his seat for a week, but he will not be taking mine at the local government elections in May.

The debate has focused mainly on the election process. That is because it is important that Parliament considers all the factors that were raised during the 2007 elections to ensure that we have fair, free and transparent elections in which we can be confident that the right process is in place to deliver a clear and sound result in which we can all have confidence. I appreciate the tone of the speeches that have been made from across the chamber in trying to ensure that that is the case. Sarah Boyack raised several pertinent points about the election process and asked some specific questions.

I am disappointed that the Liberal Democrats—the so-called champions of proportional representation—have been absent from this very significant debate on the local government elections. Having checked the *Official Report* of the previous debate on Gould, I note that the Liberal Democrats said on that occasion that they were very good at winning elections, yet the chamber is empty of Liberal Democrats this morning. I make that point because those who are enthusiastic about proportional representation in local government should be here to continue to remind us that PR has made a positive difference in local government in Scotland regarding how coalitions have been composed and how local government has been taken forward.

On the timing of the count, clarity is more important than curiosity, and that is why the consultation is taking place. Sarah Boyack mentioned the pick-and-choose approach that should be avoided in terms of the Gould recommendations, and she is absolutely right. We have studied closely every recommendation in the Gould report. I am left wondering, though, why the Labour Party is moving away from its position on

votes for 16 and 17-year-olds. A number of Labour figures, including the party's UK leader and Margaret Curran, have supported votes for 16 and 17-year-olds. I wonder why Labour members have not considered that issue fully in this debate and why, too, some of them have moved away from their position in the previous parliamentary debate.

Sarah Boyack: I have tried to be absolutely clear in saying that with less than four months to go, we must focus on what will happen at these elections. We are more than happy to debate with ministers on the future shape of local government that they are after, but we must now be getting young people out to vote at these elections.

Derek Mackay: I completely disagree. There is clearly an issue about timing in respect of the Gould recommendations. If the Labour Party's position is that the franchise should be extended to 16 and 17-year-olds, I welcome that and hope that it is consistent with other decisions that this Parliament might take.

On the proportional representation campaign, there are questions about the voter education and information process that several members have mentioned. In addition to the council-led campaigns that will be delivered locally, the Government will commit £1.5 million towards the information campaign to meet the aspirations that have been outlined by members from across the chamber.

There is, too, the issue of people being missing from the electoral register. Valuation joint boards take that very seriously and are already proactive in addressing it. I entirely take the point that that may also have a social and economic element, in that poorer people appear to be less likely to vote, and specific actions could be considered to deal with that. However, that legislative duty remains at Westminster, further making the Government's point that all powers should be transferred to Scotland in relation to legislation and the administration of local government elections, in order to ensure that we can tackle issues in a holistic way. It is not good enough for the UK Government simply to say that we should be in charge of the administration of elections—that is, the donkey work and, incidentally, paying for them—but not be in control of the franchise, the electoral system and all the legislation that relates to how we deliver any such campaign and registration process. There must be a greater focus on registration, so for the first time there will be a dedicated campaign on registering to vote. Many councils already do that through a no vote, no voice campaign.

This Government has delivered a local government agenda and localism. We have not gone into the details of budget, but I remind the Opposition that the share of local government

spend coming from the Scottish Government is greater than that which we inherited from the previous Administration.

That said, I return to the election process. It is important that we have come to such consensus on this issue. Margaret Mitchell made a fair point about the complexity of multiple systems being presented on one day. However, with regard to concerns about the interplay between future UK elections and local government elections, I hope that we will not have to have future Westminster elections in Scotland and that, as a result, they will not interfere with the polling day for Scottish Parliament or local government elections.

On the question whether STV is an electoral system or a television channel, it is of course an electoral system. Although the amount of spoiled ballot papers might be low—and was in fact lower in 2007 than the amount of spoiled ballot papers for the Scottish Parliament elections—many people might still not fully understand the system or what they have actually done on their ballot paper. That is the reason for the huge voter education and information phase that comes after the registration phase. As for the point about council cuts and letting local people decide, I absolutely agree. If the UK Westminster Government had not made these cuts to Scotland, they would not have been followed through at a local level. Nevertheless, I point out that 32 of the 32 local authorities have signed up to the Scottish Government's funding package.

As for 16 and 17-year-olds, if they are good enough to die for their country, they should be able to elect their country's Government. That is why we support giving them the vote. I was a wee bit disconcerted by Margaret Mitchell's argument that, if we give 16 or 17-year-olds the vote, they might well not use it. I am sure that the very same argument was levelled at the suffragettes when they campaigned early in the last century to give women the vote.

George Adam, who, as he reminded us, is an elected member, said that he looked forward to the council elections. Of course, he is not standing as a candidate; indeed, many of us have been freed from those elections. Nevertheless, there will be a huge debate about what local government should look like over the next five years. For example, people have considered whether it is right to have three or four candidates in a multimember ward but again, in the spirit of Gould, we would not want to change that at this time. Although the issue of party rankings and where candidates feature on a ballot paper was also considered, it turned out that the public were indifferent on the matter and, in any case, any change in that respect serves party interests

rather than voter interests. As a result, we have not amended the legislation to that effect.

On postal voting, there will, of course, be campaigns to encourage turnout. We have encouraged that approach and, indeed, more people have signed up to it. As colleagues have pointed out, a black belt in origami was needed to complete the postal vote form in a previous election, and we have tried to simplify that process.

Although John Pentland veered off the issue of process to talk about the budget, I absolutely agree with his points about voter turnout and the Government certainly wants to encourage local people to take an interest in their council.

Dennis Robertson asked about bulk stress testing of the ballot paper. I confirm to the member that the stress relates to the system, not to my emotional state come polling day. We have tested the ballot paper and the system itself to ensure that there is no repeat of the electronic debacle that some people encountered in the previous elections.

Motivating people to vote should not come down solely to systems or processes. After all, political parties and candidates have a duty to do the same in their manifestos, their campaigns and what they choose to do at election time. Hanzala Malik made very important points about ensuring that every part of society is encouraged to take part in our democracy—which, as Helen Eadie reminded us, is free and peaceful. We do not face the same difficulties that other parts of the world face, which is why I am reassured by the consensus and confidence that members have expressed in the Government's approach.

I must address Anne McTaggart's inaccurate comment that we are not making changes in the spirit of Gould. Everything that we are doing is being done in that very spirit and there have been no changes outwith the six-month approach that we have been asked to take.

I am not sure that we will pick up Chic Brodie's suggestion that our campaign slogan be "the fray in May"—campaigns will consider their own slogans. Finally, Jamie Hepburn made very helpful comments on the importance of empowering this Parliament.

This debate has not been about who will run Scottish local government. That is for the electorate to decide. Instead, the debate has been about how we run the election and, given all the recommendations that have been made, I think that it has been very constructive and positive.

Scottish Executive Question Time

General Questions

11:40

Seabird Breeding Colony Special Protection Areas

1. Claudia Beamish (South Scotland) (Lab):

To ask the Scottish Executive to what extent it monitors the site condition of seabird breeding colony special protection areas, including the corresponding marine extensions. (S4O-00569)

The Minister for Environment and Climate Change (Stewart Stevenson): Scottish Natural Heritage operates a site condition monitoring programme for protected areas in Scotland to determine the condition of the natural features. It uses a range of information sources to assess the condition of special protection areas for seabirds, including national population censuses and breeding surveys.

Claudia Beamish: The minister will be aware that one of the SPAs with marine extension is St Abb's Head, which is in the region that I represent. It supports in excess of 20,000 seabirds and is truly a site of European importance. Does the minister accept that, if the monitoring of the site is not sufficiently robust, licences for marine activities could be erroneously granted and negative impacts on the seabird populations might result?

Stewart Stevenson: The member makes the point that, if we have insufficient information, we might not deal with proposals for developments correctly. I accept that point. That is why we monitor the activities of seabirds. I know, in particular, that the Isle of May, near St Abb's Head, is an important seabird colony, particularly for gannets.

We have recently published an atlas of all marine activity, under the banner of Marine Scotland. We work with third parties, such as the RSPB, and use information from them. A wide range of information about St Abb's Head and many of the other SPAs flows into our decision-making processes.

Roderick Campbell (North East Fife) (SNP):

The Isle of May, in my constituency, is a significant seabird and grey seal colony. However, the long-term trend of decline in the number of seabirds continues. What further action can the Government take to address the decline in the seabird population, given its role in creating sustainable tourism?

Stewart Stevenson: I absolutely recognise the value of birds as a tourism icon, as well as the fact that they contribute to biodiversity. Ironically, some of the decline in the Firth of Forth has been attributable to the cleaning of the sewage outputs. Less sewage is being discharged into the Forth, which means that there is less food for some of the seabirds. Sometimes, the unintended side effects of good environmental interventions can result in situations such as the one that the member describes.

I should say that, in the Firth of Forth, the numbers of some species are improving while those of other species decline. It is a matter that we keep a close eye on, and we are always open to suggestions about how we can respond to any decline in specific species.

Jamie McGrigor (Highlands and Islands) (Con): Does the minister accept that the health of seabird populations is also a barometer of the health of the marine food chain, and that that applies equally to fish stocks? Is enough research and development being done on the subject?

The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick): Minister: seabirds.

Stewart Stevenson: Seabirds and perhaps also water birds are affected by the marine environment and, to varying degrees, rely on sea stocks. When we had a closure in the North Sea some 20 years ago, it was interesting to see that the puffin population rose because there was greater availability of fish.

We are absolutely aware of the interaction between fish stocks and seabird—and, indeed, water bird—populations.

Single Police Service (Governance and Local Accountability)

2. Graeme Pearson (South Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive how it will ensure that a single police service will have effective governance and be locally accountable. (S4O-00570)

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice (Kenny MacAskill): We have set out our proposals for governance and accountability in the Police and Fire Reform (Scotland) Bill, which I am delighted to say has been brought to Parliament for its consideration this week. The bill will provide for clear and effective governance, strengthening the connection between police services and communities and involving the Parliament and many more elected members across Scotland.

Graeme Pearson: Is the cabinet secretary aware of the concerns that police and staff organisations have expressed about the costs that the new single police force will have to bear, which

are estimated to include £25 million-plus in VAT and £80 million in redundancy costs? Can he offer any information to current employees that will give them comfort for the future?

Kenny MacAskill: With regard to VAT, Mr Pearson will know from his experience on the Justice Committee and his vast experience in a previous life that VAT was a source of concern at the Scottish Police Services Authority. Currently, a single Scottish police and fire service will have a VAT liability. We have written to the Treasury about that and we await a reply. Frankly, it seems ridiculous that a public sector organisation that does such valuable work should lose money through the actions of the Treasury.

On other aspects, we are more than happy to engage with staff. Indeed, I met police officers and civilian staff down at Galashiels when we launched the bill. Fundamental matters to do with the balance between civilian and uniformed staff are ultimately ones for the current chief constables and the future chief constable.

Jamie Hepburn (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP): The cabinet secretary will be aware that an issue has been raised as part of the consideration of a single police force about ensuring that we have a transparent, open and independent complaints system. How will that be achieved when a single police force is created?

Kenny MacAskill: The Police Complaints Commissioner for Scotland will get additional functions that will allow it to investigate serious incidents and other matters involving the police, which will include those in which there is an indication that a criminal offence has been committed. The Crown Office will still direct those investigations, whereas the others will be carried out at the request of the chief constable or the Scottish police authority. Allegations and complaints about senior officers may also be investigated by the commissioner at the request of the authority.

In addition, the Police Complaints Commissioner for Scotland will be able to investigate incidents that have not been referred to it, where it is in the public interest for it to do so. It will decide whether the public interest test is satisfied. As a consequence, the body will get a new name that reflects its new and expanded role—it will become the police investigations and review commissioner.

Tribunals (Devolution)

3. Christina McKelvie (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what progress has been made regarding the devolution of reserved tribunals to Scotland. (S4O-00571)

The Minister for Community Safety and Legal Affairs (Roseanna Cunningham): The Lord Chancellor wrote to me on 31 October outlining the basis of proposals to transfer the administration of reserved tribunals to Scottish ministers and responsibility for judicial leadership to the Lord President. Discussions are on-going at official level on the detail of the proposals, and we expect the United Kingdom Government to consult in the near future.

Christina McKelvie: Does the minister share my concern about the UK Government's proposals to introduce a charge of up to £1,750 that must be paid before an individual can take a case to an employment tribunal? Does she agree that that amounts to an attack on fundamental employment rights, particularly of lower-paid workers, and that it demonstrates the need for not just the management but the control of charging of employment tribunals to be fully devolved to the Scottish Parliament sooner rather than later?

Roseanna Cunningham: The member will have noted from my answer that the current discussions revolve around the devolving of the administration of the tribunals. Fees and the setting of fees will not be devolved—that is a reserved matter and will remain so regardless of any administrative reform, so the Scottish Government will have no influence on that. It may well have taken a different view from that of the UK Government, but it will be unable to do so until after the autumn of 2014.

I agree that the sums that are being considered are significant and could have a detrimental effect on the most vulnerable employees but, because the substantive law on employment is currently reserved to the UK Government, we cannot effect any change in that.

Independence Referendum (Franchise)

4. Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what its position is on the House of Lords having an influence in determining the franchise for the proposed independence referendum. (S4O-00572)

The Cabinet Secretary for Parliamentary Business and Government Strategy (Bruce Crawford): The Scottish Government has a mandate to hold a referendum on independence and will do so in the autumn of 2014. We will publish our proposals in a consultation document on 25 January. It is for the Scottish Parliament to determine the franchise and other details of the referendum, not the unelected House of Lords.

Kenneth Gibson: Does the cabinet secretary agree that it is a negation of democracy for Baroness Taylor of Bolton, a member of an unelected body, to attempt to interfere in the

independence referendum franchise, given that that body lacks accountability to the Scottish Parliament or anyone else and is stuffed full of Labour and Tory appointees, hereditary peers and 26 Church of England bishops? I am heartened that he agrees that it is this Parliament, which is elected by the people of Scotland, that should determine the franchise.

Bruce Crawford: Perhaps I should say that I agree with the general thrust of Mr Gibson's question. [*Laughter.*]

The Scottish Government will publish a draft bill along with the consultation paper next week. That will provide an opportunity for political parties, civic Scotland and indeed anyone in Scotland to give us their views on how the referendum should be conducted. When the bill comes before this Parliament, it will be for members to determine the franchise for Scotland's referendum.

Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab): I thank the minister for his response that there will be a publication next week. In the light of the discussion that we have just had on the Gould report and on having everything settled six months before we have elections or referendums, will the date of the proposed referendum be published next week so that we can all have a proper plan?

Bruce Crawford: I am afraid that Ms Boyack will have to wait just a little bit longer and hear what we say next week, but she can be absolutely sure that the referendum that we bring forward will be of the highest international standard, and of course it will agree with the Gould recommendations.

Young Carers

5. Bill Kidd (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what it is doing to identify young carers and how this is resourced. (S4O-00573)

The Minister for Public Health (Michael Matheson): With partners, we are taking a number of important steps to maintain momentum on identifying and supporting young carers. They include the Eryc and Trayc mascots and the associated toolkit for primary schools, a planned toolkit for secondary schools, work with colleges and universities, a resource for general practitioners throughout Scotland, inclusion of a question on young carers in the school census, and identification through six young carer authorisation card pilot areas.

The Scottish Government also provides funding to the Scottish young carers services alliance and health boards to identify and support young carers, and we encourage local authorities and others to identify young carers and commit funding to meet their needs.

Bill Kidd: I thank the minister for that full reply. He will be aware that young carers often have specific issues that relate to school work. The extra pressures in dealing with both school and caring responsibilities can be both isolating and exhausting for young carers. What resources are targeted specifically at that area?

Michael Matheson: The member raises an important issue, which has been raised with me directly by a number of young carers. It is vital that young carers can continue to participate in the education system in a way that allows them to fulfil their potential. That is why we committed some £100,000 to taking forward the Eryc and Trayc initiative through the website and toolkit that were on display in the Parliament last week. A key part of that is to ensure not only that young carers are identified in our education system but that young people in our schools understand the role that young carers have, and that teachers are educated about the difficulties that some young carers face. Whether they are late in arriving at school because of their caring responsibilities or late with an assessment, teachers should recognise and understand those difficulties.

We are also taking forward through the health service's information service for carers a range of initiatives that will identify young carers, and we continue to work with local authorities to encourage them to do everything that they can do locally to ensure that young carers receive the support and assistance that they require.

Nanette Milne (North East Scotland) (Con): The Scottish Government pledged in its document "Getting it Right for Young Carers: The Young Carers Strategy for Scotland 2010-2015" to improve respite resources for young carers. What progress has been made in that area, specifically in Aberdeenshire, where there are more than 3,000 young carers?

Michael Matheson: Much of the respite that is provided to cared-for people is organised through local authorities, but we have provided £2 million for the short break fund in order to provide short breaks across Scotland, and some £290,000 of that has been provided specifically for respite facilities and short breaks for young carers. It is important that local authorities, in looking at how they support cared-for people, recognise the role that young carers play and provide them with the resources and support that they require in order to continue their caring role.

Retail Sector (Support)

6. Margaret McCulloch (Central Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive how it supports the retail sector. (S4O-00574)

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Employment and Sustainable Growth (John Swinney): The Scottish Government recognises the vital role that the retail sector plays in employment and increasing sustainable economic growth. That is why we continue to support it. Almost two thirds of Scottish retail premises are benefiting from a business rates reduction through one of our rate relief schemes, including the small business bonus scheme.

Support for town centres forms a key part of our regeneration vision and we are committed to undertaking a national review of our town centres in the coming year. We plan to hold a joint conference with the Scottish Retail Consortium this year to consider the role of a modern town centre, in which retailers will continue to contribute and thrive.

Margaret McCulloch: Is the cabinet secretary aware of the news that d2 Jeans, La Senza and now Peacocks, which owns Bonmarché, are all going into administration? Retail is not one of the Government's key growth industries, but the sector is a major employer in my region. Nowhere is that more apparent than in East Kilbride, where all those firms have outlets in our shopping centre.

What priority does the Government give to retail? When the cabinet secretary has discussions with the retail sector, will he announce them and give me details of them, please?

John Swinney: I acknowledge the serious issues that Margaret McCulloch raises in connection with the prospects for individual retail outlets. I am aware that discussions continue in relation to some of the companies to which she referred. The hope is that further retail opportunities will arise from that dialogue. The Government will be happy to assist in any way that it can to resolve questions, particularly in our dealings with the banking sector.

As I said in my initial answer, the Government acknowledges the contribution that the retail sector in general makes to employment. We will continue our dialogue with the Scottish Retail Consortium on all such questions. The Government will be happy to consider how the interventions that we make through training, education and other activities can support the retail sector's development in Scotland.

Campus Police Officers

7. Gordon MacDonald (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government how many campus police officers there are in secondary schools. (S4O-00575)

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice (Kenny MacAskill): The latest recorded figures from 2011 show that 58 campus police officers were

deployed across Scotland to cover 63 secondary schools. Those figures are being audited and we expect them to have increased.

Campus officers help to provide consistent and positive interaction between young people, the police and the community. Decisions on whether to deploy officers to secondary schools are matters for police forces in discussion with local authorities.

Gordon MacDonald: I recently attended a meeting at which the value of campus police officers in schools was discussed. The campus police officer who is based at Firrhill high school in my constituency has built up positive relationships with pupils that have improved their welfare and provided them with support, which has helped to prevent offending behaviour. Given the Scottish Government's preventative spend agenda, does the cabinet secretary agree that it would be better to spend the income from Scottish court fines on providing additional police officers for campus duty than to send it to the Treasury in London?

Kenny MacAskill: I agree with the member about the benefits of campus officers. I spoke to the campus officer at Gracemount high school in my constituency on Monday.

Fine payments that are received in Scotland are remitted to HM Treasury. A proportion of those receipts is returned to Scotland as part of the Scottish block grant. Nevertheless, the current arrangements constrain the Scottish Government's ability to link fine income to measures to reduce crime or support victims.

The Scottish Government has put in place measures to seize the proceeds of crime to support community activities, and we will continue to explore all options for fine payments to stay in Scotland. We will certainly continue to support the good work that campus officers do.

Job Losses (Vector Aerospace)

8. Annabelle Ewing (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what recent discussions it has had with Vector Aerospace regarding potential job losses at Almondbank. (S4O-00576)

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Employment and Sustainable Growth (John Swinney): Through Scottish Development International and Scottish Enterprise, the Scottish Government is having regular meetings with Vector Aerospace to secure new areas of business growth for Almondbank in Perth. Tailored advice and support for staff who face the loss of their job will be made available through the Government's partnership action for continuing employment initiative.

Annabelle Ewing: I know that the cabinet secretary will be aware of the importance of the Almondbank site to Perthshire and of the highly skilled and committed workforce there. I therefore ask him to reflect on what further steps he could take to seek to ensure a future for the site.

John Swinney: I directly associate myself with Annabelle Ewing's remarks. The Vector Aerospace site at Almondbank in Perthshire has a long and substantial engineering tradition, and many of my constituents and those of my colleague Roseanna Cunningham are employed at the facility. The Government is committed to ensuring that their skills, talents and attributes can have continuing involvement in business and employment activity in Perthshire, and I assure the member that ministers will do everything that they can through our agencies and other interventions to support the continuation of that important engineering tradition.

First Minister's Question Time

12:00

Engagements

1. Johann Lamont (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab): To ask the First Minister what engagements he has planned for the rest of the day. (S4F-00405)

The First Minister (Alex Salmond): I am delighted to announce that, later today, I will officially open the new headquarters of the global financial services firm FNZ, which supports more than 200 jobs in Edinburgh and recruits a large number of graduates. It is yet another example of a global company that supports jobs and investment and is expanding its operations in Scotland.

Johann Lamont: I am sure that we were all shocked yesterday to learn that every day for the past three months 200 Scots have lost their jobs. Unemployment has gone up 10 per cent over the same period, there has been a 25 per cent rise in the number of women who are unemployed—which must have an impact on families—and over the past year there has been a 123 per cent increase in long-term youth unemployment. In the light of those figures, what changes can we expect in the First Minister's budget bill when it is published tomorrow?

The First Minister: As Johann Lamont is well aware, the Scottish Government places the highest emphasis on job creation. That has been the hallmark of all the budgets.

The unemployment figures here are extremely serious, as the unemployment figures across these islands are, but Johann Lamont should understand that we in Scotland do not currently have the ability to increase demand in the Scottish economy. That ability lies with the Westminster Government. That is exactly why in the past month the First Minister of Wales, the First Minister of Northern Ireland and I have repeatedly called for the United Kingdom Government to change economic direction and give us either an increase in demand now or the economic tools to do the job for Scotland.

Johann Lamont: I know that there is a pattern, but I did not expect to get "hunt the alibi" quite so early.

This is not a game. We can trade figures, but we need to confront them. The reality is that although the First Minister is saying that job creation is his highest priority, it is not working. It seems to me that, although the First Minister has been in power for five years, he simply does not get it. Last summer, he claimed that the unemployment

figures demonstrated not that they were not the Scottish Government's fault, but that

"the economic policy of the Scottish Government is delivering, and is continuing to create and safeguard jobs across our communities".

When the figures are good, the First Minister is fabulous, but when they are bad, where is that alibi? With 200 Scots losing their jobs each and every day on his watch, does he still stand by the statement that he made in the summer?

The First Minister: If Johann Lamont cares to reacquaint herself with the statements that were made in the summer, she will find that they made it quite clear that the growth in jobs and activity that we saw in Scotland over that period would be put at risk unless the United Kingdom Government was prepared to change course. She and Labour members seem to think that only the Scottish National Party holds that view. I have Labour's five-point plan for growth, which was announced in November 2011, before the admission last week that Labour's new economic policy is identical to the Conservative Party's economic policy. The five-point plan includes a £2 billion tax on bank bonuses, a temporary reversing of January's VAT rise, a one-year cut in VAT to 5 per cent on home improvements, and a one-year national insurance tax break. Each of those is the province of the Westminster Government. The only area that is the province of the Scottish Government—the switch to capital investment—is exactly the policy that is being pursued by John Swinney, both by transferring revenue to capital and through the non-profit distribution programme.

I do not mind so much—well, I do mind, but I think that people in Scotland mind even more—that the Labour Party is now in cahoots with the Tories both on the constitution and on economic policy. However, I do mind that the Labour Party is in cahoots with the Tories in denying this Parliament the economic tools that it needs to do the job for Scotland.

Johann Lamont: I am sure that that response will be a great comfort to the 200 people every day for the past three months who have lost their jobs. The First Minister's response to the serious situation that those families are in is, "It wasnae me. I didn't do it. Somebody else did it—and by the way, you've all got problems and I haven't".

This is a man who takes himself seriously—we know that—but it is about time he also took his job seriously. What concerns me is not just his breathtaking complacency about the horrendous unemployment figures, but the fact that he clearly did not see it coming. He now has in his back pocket more than £0.5 billion extra from Westminster as a consequence of budget decisions. Will the First Minister give us and the people who are confronted with unemployment in

our communities an assurance that every coin of that money will be spent on tackling unemployment and on giving our young people some hope for the future?

The First Minister: Johann Lamont sounds ever more like her predecessor: he pursued that theme week after week, but it did not do him a great amount of good. The people of Scotland know where the economic power lies at present, which is precisely why they are demanding the economic powers from Westminster.

The classic illustration is the £500 million figure that Johann Lamont has just mentioned. Is she not aware that two thirds of that spending—which is specified by Westminster—is directed into the second part of the comprehensive spending review?

We believe that Scotland needs investment in the economy now. That is precisely why we have jointly with the Labour First Minister of Wales been calling for the change in the economic course of the UK Government that will allow us to deploy those funds. While we have been calling for that change of course, the UK Labour Party has decided to back the Tories on the economy.

Johann Lamont: I have said it already: I am not playing a game, and I am not pursuing a theme. I am talking about the issues that are of concern to the people of Scotland. At the moment, 200 Scots a day are losing their jobs, and the First Minister settles for party-political jibes.

Given the seriousness of the situation, and the First Minister's pathetic response, I fear for the people who have lost their jobs and for those who are worried about losing their jobs. An uncaring Prime Minister, and what looks increasingly like an ultracomplacent First Minister, are uninterested in what the people of this country are talking about.

A man who has been in the job for five years must at some point surely take responsibility, but this is a man who wanted Scotland to join an arc of prosperity, which is now an arc of insolvency. This is a man who graduated—[*Interruption.*]

This is a man who graduated from the Fred Goodwin school of economics and backed the deal that broke the bank—[*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick): Can we have a bit of quiet, please?

Johann Lamont: I think that members sometimes have a problem with what they are hearing. The reality is—[*Interruption.*] The reality is that, in the real world, 200 people each and every day are losing their jobs on the First Minister's watch. When will the First Minister stop congratulating himself on how well he is doing his job and come up with a serious plan to create jobs for the people of this country?

The First Minister: I am afraid that the apolitical script that has been written by Paul Sinclair is no better than the scripts that were written by previous advisers.

Let us have a look at the detail of one of the really serious issues—[*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Okay. Can we settle down, please? Enough!

The First Minister: I do not think that the Labour Party will want to look at the detail. Let us have a look at the detail of one of the really serious issues. Unemployment among women in Scotland is 7.8 per cent, which is far too high. The figure is 7.8 per cent in England and 4.7 per cent in Northern Ireland. We might judge from that that Northern Ireland has the best position, but if we look at employment in Scotland—the number of people in jobs—and look at economic activity among women in Scotland, the figures are much higher than in any other part of these islands. However, 7.8 per cent is a substantial and worrying critical figure. That is precisely why the Scottish Government now has 25,000 new modern apprentices in Scotland—40 per cent more than we inherited from the Labour Party. In 2010-11, nearly 10,000 of those were young women, and 45 per cent of modern apprenticeships in Scotland are now started by women, compared to the level of 27 per cent that we inherited from the Labour Party. The same applies to training for work in Scotland, with the number of women getting that opportunity rising fast and, at 36 per cent, the 40,000 women in Scotland who have benefited from European structural funds is a much higher figure than was previously the case. We are doing our bit with the powers that are under our control to rebalance and preserve justice in the economy in Scotland.

Those are the detailed figures. The Labour Party wants detail but does not like it when it gets the detail because it shows up the record that it had. We have an Opposition that has an economic plan that depends on economic policies being changed at Westminster. However, it will not call for the powers for the Scottish Parliament to do that and it now actually supports the economic policies in the House of Commons. It is little wonder that, when I was in the Gulf this week, gaining jobs and investment for Scotland, *The Gulf Today* led with the headline, "Labour faces poll disaster" on the forecast from Unite the Union.

Prime Minister (Meetings)

2. Ruth Davidson (Glasgow) (Con): To ask the First Minister when he will next meet the Prime Minister. (S4F-00398)

The First Minister (Alex Salmond): Well, it has not been through lack of trying that I have had no

recent meetings with the Prime Minister. I am delighted to say that, the cock crowing for the seventh time, the Prime Minister has now agreed to meet me after the Scottish Government publishes the referendum consultation next week. I look forward to that meeting. That shows that persistence always pays off, even when one is meeting the Prime Minister.

Ruth Davidson: I am sure that the First Minister is looking forward to meeting the Prime Minister. As he explained, it is proper to meet the Secretary of State for Scotland in the first instance, because he is leading the process for the Government.

The First Minister's goal is to separate Scotland from the United Kingdom and to replace those enduring links with ever-closer union with the European Union. Can the First Minister tell me how many times he or the Scottish Government has written to the relevant EU commissioner, asking about Scotland's accession to the European Union?

The First Minister: We have discussed a range of issues with European Commissioners over the years. I hope and believe that Ruth Davidson is familiar with the very substantial legal opinion that would secure Scotland's position within the European Union. One of the most famous opinions was, I believe, commissioned by the Scottish Conservative Party from Lord Mackenzie-Stuart, the only Scottish judge to preside over the European Court of Justice. Unfortunately, the Scottish Conservative Party did not get the opinion that it thought it would get, as Lord Mackenzie-Stuart pointed out that Scotland and the rest of the United Kingdom would be in exactly the same position with regard to the European Union.

I know that the idea that Scotland as a nation would stand in equality with other nations is a difficult concept for the Conservative Party. That is perhaps why Ruth Davidson, in her first question, seems to suggest a new constitutional formulation whereby the First Minister of Scotland gets to meet the Prime Minister only if he first goes through the Secretary of State for Scotland, who is appointed by the Prime Minister.

Ruth Davidson: That was an extraordinarily long way of giving me no specifics at all on a very simple question. We know for a fact that, for example, the current Commissioner for Enlargement and European Neighbourhood Policy, Štefan Füle, has never received correspondence from the Scottish Government on the topic, which begs the question: who has the Scottish Government been in contact with and what advice has been given?

In 2007, the Scottish National Party asserted in a published document that an independent Scotland would continue in the EU, and the First

Minister continues to make that assertion. However, the former president of the European Commission Romano Prodi; European commissioners Franz Fischler and Joe Borg; Professor Robert Hazell and Dr Jo Murkens, who are experts on government and constitutional law; and even the International Law Commission say that that is not the case. They all say that Scotland would have to reapply to be a member of the EU, with the consequence that our farmers would be bankrupt without European payments while Scotland waited for renegotiation, and Scotland would be forced to adopt the euro on accession.

The First Minister believes that, if he says something often enough, it becomes fact, but the Scottish people demand more than mere assertion. The weight of expert opinion is that Scotland would not become automatically a member of the European Union. Will the First Minister publish any evidence that he has to support his claim, because the people of Scotland deserve an answer to the question?

The First Minister: I offer the evidence of Emile Noël, former secretary-general of the European Union, and Eamonn Gallagher, former director-general of the European Union, who, along with Maître de Roux, who edited a dictionary of the European Union, have indicated that Scotland is part of the European Union and, since the European Union has no provision to expel a member state or any part of a member state, the negotiation on Scotland's representation would be conducted from within the European Union.

In the question, I think that Ruth Davidson actually said that there would be a disaster with European payments. However, I had thought that the Conservative Party's position is that the European Union would face disaster without the payments to it from the United Kingdom. The Conservative Party had better reconcile those two things. The only conceivable threat to Scotland's current membership of the European Union comes from members of Ruth Davidson's party in the House of Commons who openly advocate the United Kingdom's withdrawal from the European Union. Scotland is a European nation. As expert and legal opinion indicates, we would put our position from within the context of the European Union.

The concept of Scotland as a nation standing in equality with other nations might be difficult for the Conservative Party to grasp—which probably explains its latest record low in the poll ratings this week—but the Scottish people do not find it at all difficult. Hence the SNP's resounding position not just in the opinion poll ratings, but in being with the Scottish people in regarding Scotland as a nation that is equal and capable of exercising that

equality in Europe, along with all the other European nations.

The Presiding Officer: We have a constituency supplementary question from Sandra White.

Sandra White (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP): The First Minister will be aware of the proposed cuts at BBC Scotland and, in particular, the axing of “Newsweek Scotland” and “Scotland at Ten”. Does the First Minister share my concerns about that, particularly about the effect on political debate in Scotland, especially at the current historic juncture when there is a need for a full and informed debate on our future? Does he agree that the only way in which to achieve that is to have control of our own broadcasting company?

The First Minister: In a time of such significance for Scotland, I have deep concerns about the potential impact of job losses and programming cutbacks to BBC Scotland’s output, particularly in relation to news and current affairs. I recognise that the BBC is being forced to make difficult decisions because of the damaging licence-fee settlement that the UK Government has imposed. That reinforces why Scotland needs greater accountability and responsibility for broadcasting in our country. *[Interruption.]* I hope that even one or two of the Conservative members who are mumbling—I was going to call them the serried ranks, but that sounds too big for the Conservative Party in Scotland—are actually concerned about the jobs of people who work in news and current affairs in BBC Scotland.

Mark McDonald (North East Scotland) (SNP): The First Minister will be familiar with Sings of Macduff from his time representing Banff and Buchan. Does he share the concerns that are being expressed regarding the conduct of Allied Irish Banks in placing the firm in administration, in spite of the insistence of the owner in Wednesday’s *Press and Journal* that there is no cash-flow problem and nor has the company ever defaulted on a loan or supplier payment? Can he advise me of whether the Scottish Government has contacted the administrator and AIB to ascertain what has occurred and to ensure that the future of the business is secured?

The First Minister: This is the second time in two weeks that a member has asked about a constituency concern that involves the conduct of financial organisations or other people around companies that have been moved into administration. I know that Fergus Ewing met Michael McMahon this morning about the question he asked last week.

I am aware of Sings’s situation, and I share the concerns about it. Yesterday, Fergus Ewing wrote to the company’s administrators about the position. On the point about the conduct of AIB, Mr

Ewing will speak to the bank later today to discuss its approach and seek an urgent meeting. I can confirm that, of course, partnership action for continuing employment representatives are on standby to offer support, and they will maintain close contact with the administrators.

The details that Mark McDonald has brought to the chamber about the company’s trading position, profitability and lack of exposure and debt, should give every one of us the most serious concerns. In the current economic position, the very least we can expect is that lenders, banks and financial organisations are as supportive as possible of companies in Scotland. If the information that has come into the public domain is anything like accurate, the most serious questions will have to be asked in this particular case.

Cabinet (Meetings)

3. Willie Rennie (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD): To ask the First Minister what issues will be discussed at the next meeting of the Cabinet. (S4F-00404)

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

Willie Rennie: A year ago, the First Minister’s Government told us that national control of the police and the abolition of local policing would save £200 million a year. At the time, the Cabinet Secretary for Justice admitted that the numbers were not

“pound perfect in any way”—*[Official Report, 12 January 2011; c 32006.]*

So what is the annual saving in the Government’s plans that were published this week?

The First Minister: The Cabinet Secretary for Justice set out the plans and anticipated savings under a range of scenarios. That statement seemed to attract substantial support from across the chamber, and most people in Scotland seem to believe—rightly—that we are offered substantial savings through having a national police service in Scotland.

Of course, the Liberal Democrats are perfectly entitled to take a different view. I just point out to Willie Rennie that they took that different view very volubly during the election—in fact, it is the only thing I can remember them saying during the election in Scotland—and the election result did not indicate resounding support for their position.

Willie Rennie: The First Minister has obviously not read the document. He does not know the annual figure, which is the basis on which he proposed his plans. I can tell him that his own document makes it clear that almost all the headline figures that he cites are not attributable to

structure—the savings that are described in the document are not attributable to the proposed changes. The First Minister promised us £200 million but he has sold us national political control of the police for nothing.

Perhaps the First Minister has seen the chart that shows the structure of the review that is being done. The project board is made up of two deputy chief constables, a chief superintendent, a superintendent, two chief inspectors, an inspector, another inspector and a sergeant, all of whom have been taken from front-line duty to deal with governance and structure, and there are 12 other units like them. Is it just those officers who are working on reorganisation or are there more?

The First Minister: I would have thought that most people would welcome the fact that the people who are looking at the organisation of the new police service in Scotland are serving police officers. It is an important innovation by Government to ask the people who do the job to formulate the plans for the future.

I also gently point out to Willie Rennie that, if his party had had its way, we would not have 1,000 extra police officers on the streets and in the communities of Scotland, or the lowest level of recorded crime in Scotland for more than 30 years. The savings that have been identified in Kenny MacAskill's central assumption were £1.7 billion over 15 years. I hope that that convinces Willie Rennie of my reading abilities.

As we see from *The Herald* newspaper this morning, the Liberal Democrats have arrived at a position that the Advocate General—a post that is held by Lord Wallace, who sits in a non-elected house and was appointed by the party that came fourth in the Westminster election, and resoundingly fourth in the Scottish election last year—appears to know better than the democratic Parliament that has been elected by the Scottish people, and better than the Lord President, who is the highest judicial officer in Scotland. In the future, Willie Rennie should be the last person to talk about politicians dictating to the people.

Willie Rennie: As usual, when he loses the argument, the First Minister resorts to cheap shots. He would do better to focus on the withdrawal of the local connection between the police and communities. He should be concerned about that—not about taking cheap shots at other politicians.

The First Minister: I am afraid that Willie Rennie lost even the support of his coalition partners at Westminster in making that point.

Willie Rennie describes my position on the Advocate General dictating to the Scottish judiciary and the Scottish Parliament as “taking cheap shots”; I regard it as being a very serious

constitutional position. Perhaps, when he has the opportunity to think about it further, he will agree with me.

The basic disagreement between Willie Rennie, who proposes that we keep the current structure of eight police forces in Scotland, and the rest of us, who think that the single police service offers economies, efficiencies and further improvements in police performance, is essentially about local policing. When we think of local police, most of us think of the local constables, sergeants and superintendents who serve our communities throughout Scotland and the 1,000 extra officers that we now have doing that. Willie Rennie seems to think that local policing is about having eight chief constables in Scotland, whereas we think that it is about local officers on the streets and in the communities of Scotland.

International Business Connections

4. Colin Beattie (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP): To ask the First Minister what progress is being made in building international business connections. (S4F-00407)

The First Minister (Alex Salmond): I have already mentioned the fact that I will officially open the headquarters of the global financial services company FNZ in Edinburgh later today. I hope that that will be recognised and welcomed across the chamber.

On Tuesday, at the world future energy summit in Abu Dhabi, I signed an agreement with His Excellency Dr Sultan Ahmed Al Jaber, the chief executive of the leading alternative energy company Masdar. It is the first agreement of its kind between Masdar and a nation and will lead to significant collaboration, resulting in investment in low-carbon projects, development opportunities and a partnership to boost Scottish universities' research into renewable energy.

Colin Beattie: I welcome both those developments. Does the First Minister agree that Westminster politicians should support the Scottish Government's efforts to attract investment to Scotland instead of pettily fearmongering that there is uncertainty about the referendum—a claim for which they have been unable to produce a single shred of evidence?

The First Minister: I am beginning to get somewhat perplexed by Opposition politicians in the Parliament telling me that they are concerned about unemployment and investment in Scotland while the Prime Minister and the Chancellor of the Exchequer—supported in this, as they are in so much else, by the Labour spokesman at Westminster—try to damage investment in Scotland.

Therefore, we should all be grateful to the widely respected Channel 4 news factcheck blog—which is not, incidentally, owned by the Scottish Government or Alex Salmond—which, this week, totally demolished the claims of the Prime Minister and the Chancellor of the Exchequer. It pointed out not only that Scotland punches way above its weight in attracting international investment, but that that percentage is increasing and that, last year, for the first time, Scotland attracted more international investment jobs than the City of London. It concludes:

“Alex Salmond ... is right to claim Scotland is a bonnie investment. And according to the companies we spoke to, the matter of Scottish independence is of little concern.”

I think that the Scottish people would rather take the word of Channel 4 factcheck than any unionist politician, when they look at their self-interest and how they are prepared to attempt to damage Scotland's economic prospects to pursue a political argument.

Further Education Colleges

5. Neil Findlay (Lothian) (Lab): To ask the First Minister whether the Scottish Government supports the aims of the National Union of Students Scotland campaign, our future, our fight. (S4F-00399)

The First Minister (Alex Salmond): Yes. The Scottish Government supports the principal aims of the campaign by NUS Scotland, which is why the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning made it clear in his letter to college principals last week that they will receive funding in the next academic year to allow college places to be maintained.

Neil Findlay: I am sure that the 60,000 students who have e-mailed members throughout Parliament, protesting at the disproportionately high cuts to college places, local access, teaching quality and—especially—student support will be very interested in the First Minister's response.

Senior managers, principals and trade unions have raised similar concerns. Will the First Minister show leadership and accept that at a time of extremely high youth unemployment, it will be impossible to maintain student numbers while colleges are subjected to a £36 million cut in teaching grant and an £11 million cut in student support?

The Presiding Officer: First Minister—

Neil Findlay: I am not finished yet.

The Presiding Officer: You are finished.

Neil Findlay: Oh, come on!

The First Minister: Neil Findlay will want to look at student support, which compares extremely

favourably with what is on offer elsewhere in these islands. The commitment on places in the cabinet secretary's letter stands, as do the Scottish National Party's manifesto commitments.

I am never very sure which Neil Findlay I am hearing from in this chamber. I am sure that people would be interested to learn, for example, that when West Lothian Council held a budget meeting on 11 January, a councillor—Neil Findlay—voted against increasing resources to support 30 more young people into work through a range of interventions.

Members: Oh!

The First Minister: I see Neil Findlay nodding. I look forward to hearing how MSP Neil Findlay will work to stop Councillor Neil Findlay from trying to prevent opportunities for West Lothian's young people. *[Applause.]*

Robert Wiseman Dairies (Sale)

6. Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): To ask the First Minister what impact the sale of Robert Wiseman Dairies to Müller Dairy will have on the Scottish economy. (S4F-00400)

The First Minister (Alex Salmond): As the member will be aware, Robert Wiseman Dairies has accepted an offer of £279.5 million from German company Müller Dairy. Wiseman currently processes and delivers around a third of the fresh milk consumed in the United Kingdom and employs 1,000 people in Scotland. More than 1,000 producers are contracted to supply the company as members of the Wiseman milk group. A quarter of those producers farm in Scotland from milk fields in Aberdeenshire, Fife, the central belt and south-west Scotland.

The Scottish Government has made it clear to Wiseman and Müller that it wants the takeover to have the effect of protecting jobs and investment. On Tuesday this week, the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and the Environment met William Keane, the managing director of Robert Wiseman Dairies, and received assurance that the Wiseman brand will maintain its existing presence in the Scottish dairy market.

It was also made clear to the cabinet secretary that for farmers, there will be no change to the current milk contract as a direct result of the takeover. Shareholders of Wiseman have 21 days to consider the takeover. I will meet senior representatives from Müller as soon as possible after that period is over.

Murdo Fraser: I am surprised that the First Minister seems to be so sanguine about the loss of another Scotland-headquartered company when in opposition the SNP took a different view.

When Scottish Power was taken over by Iberdrola, the now Deputy First Minister said that

“it is now time for some explicit economic patriotism”

and that we should defend our national companies

“when they are under threat of extinction.”

That, she said

“is what grown-up national Governments do the world over”.—[*Official Report*, 7 September 2005; c 18931-18932.]

Why does the SNP say one thing in opposition and something quite different when it gets into government?

The First Minister: I thought that Murdo Fraser, in lodging his question, wanted a serious account of what the Scottish Government is doing and has done to protect jobs in Scotland and contracts in the rural industries of Scotland. If we want to have a political debate about it, I might add that Murdo Fraser and I support the sort of economic powers that will allow us to build a competitive base to ensure that there is more decision making in Scotland.

Murdo Fraser seems to be recanting the policy that he took into the Scottish Conservative leadership election. Who knows, if the Scottish Conservatives had adopted more of the approach to economic decision making that may or may not be favoured by Murdo Fraser now, perhaps—just perhaps—its slide in the opinion polls, as recorded this week, would not have been as rapid.

12:34

Meeting suspended.

14:15

On resuming—

Scottish Executive Question Time

Culture and External Affairs

European Commission (Status of an Independent Scotland)

1. David McLetchie (Lothian) (Con): To ask the Scottish Executive whether it plans to enter into discussions with the European Commission to establish the Commission's view of the status of an independent Scotland in relation to the European Union in advance of the proposed independence referendum. (S4O-00579)

The Cabinet Secretary for Culture and External Affairs (Fiona Hyslop): We are already in the European Union and an independent Scotland would continue membership, fulfilling the responsibilities that that brings. The Scottish Government regularly meets European commissioners to discuss a range of issues and it will continue to do so.

David McLetchie: This exchange is a reprise—a better-informed reprise, I trust—of the exchange between Ms Davidson and the First Minister at First Minister's question time. What emerged from that was the mere dogmatic assertion on the part of the Scottish National Party that Scotland would automatically continue as a member of the EU on the same basis as the United Kingdom. There is modest legal support for that assertion, but there is a whole body of legal, academic and political opinion to the effect that, as a new state, Scotland would have to apply for and negotiate the terms of membership of the EU, which might be nowhere near as advantageous as those that presently apply.

Regardless of whether the Scottish Government's or my view is correct, does the minister not agree that the position should be established definitively before a referendum vote so that the voters know where we stand, and that the Scottish Government should be taking steps to establish that now?

Fiona Hyslop: In his answer to Ruth Davidson, the First Minister cited Eamonn Gallagher, Emile Noël and Lord Mackenzie-Stuart. The member asks whether Scotland would be better off. There is an important point to consider. Ruth Davidson mentioned farmers. If Scotland were an independent member state, under the reforms to the common agricultural policy, the new negotiated position would mean that our farmers

would be hundreds of millions of pounds better off than they are.

I refer the member to more recent coverage. Aidan O'Neill, who is a Queen's counsel, has said that

"the most likely position that the Luxembourg court would take"

would be that Scotland, and England, Wales and Northern Ireland

"should each succeed to the UK's existing membership of the EU, but now as two States rather than as one."

Even more recently, on 15 January, when a European Commission spokesperson was asked to comment on the status of Scotland and the rest of the UK in the EU in the event of Scottish independence, he said:

"We will not comment on hypothetical questions".

I suggest that David McLetchie should let the Scottish people answer the question and decide their own future in a referendum made in Scotland.

Stuart McMillan (West Scotland) (SNP): I invite the cabinet secretary to welcome Denmark taking over the presidency of the EU. Denmark and Scotland are both small European seafaring nations with a shared Nordic heritage and similar natural resources, one of which can take its place at the helm in Europe, while the other is denied the position of a normal nation.

Fiona Hyslop: I welcome Denmark taking over the presidency of the Council of the EU. I met the Danish ambassador at an event here in the Parliament last week. Of course, Denmark and Scotland are closely aligned in our vision for the future. We share a vision of a low-carbon society with a 40 per cent reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by 2020, which is well above the EU's 30 per cent target, and we share the target of generating 100 per cent of our electricity from renewable sources. Those ambitions are reflected in the Danish presidency's priority of a green Europe. In the next six months, whereas Denmark will be chairing key EU meetings at which it can advance that agenda, Scotland will be left having to request permission from the UK Government even to attend those meetings.

Year of Creative Scotland 2012 (Rural Areas)

2. David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what plans it has to ensure that the year of creative Scotland 2012 benefits rural Scotland. (S4O-00580)

The Cabinet Secretary for Culture and External Affairs (Fiona Hyslop): We are working with partners to ensure that events and activities to celebrate the year of creative Scotland take place the length and breadth of the country,

including in our rural communities. We are using the emphasis on creativity to highlight and promote Scotland's rich and diverse cultural life for the benefit of our communities and visitors alike. For example, we recently announced funding under the year of creative Scotland for the Fife music hub, which is a year-long project that involves working with communities in central Fife to enable them to participate by playing and ultimately performing their own music. Such events will engage our communities and visitors and provide a welcome boost to rural economies.

David Torrance: How will Government activities for the year of creative Scotland 2012 build on the work being undertaken by councils such as Fife Council, and how does the Government plan to support art and culture community events with the year of creative Scotland 2012 funding? Will the cabinet secretary join me in encouraging organisations and individuals throughout my constituency and Scotland to apply for funding under the first in a lifetime and culture and tourism initiatives? The funding is available through Creative Scotland and the closing date is the end of January.

Fiona Hyslop: I certainly encourage the member's constituents and others to apply for that funding. The music initiative that I just mentioned was one of the first in a lifetime programmes for which funding has already been announced. I know that Fife Council is embracing the year of creative Scotland and that it sees great opportunities to promote cultural activity and attract visitors to Fife to experience the fantastic cultural opportunities that will be provided, not only from the new programmes but from the existing wealth of talent and capability in Fife and across Scotland.

Joan McAlpine (South Scotland) (SNP): Does the cabinet secretary agree that the big Burns supper that takes place in Dumfries on 27 and 28 January is a wonderful start to the celebrations of the year of creative Scotland? What is she doing to support the festival?

Fiona Hyslop: I am delighted that the big Burns supper received funding from Creative Scotland. It is a fantastic way to begin the year of creative Scotland. I look forward to visiting the festival on 27 January to mark the launch of the exciting and innovative programme. It is fantastic to see contemporary artists celebrating the life and work of our national bard.

Artworks of National Importance

3. Kevin Stewart (Aberdeen Central) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what plans are in place to allow artworks of national importance to be displayed throughout the country. (S4O-00581)

The Cabinet Secretary for Culture and External Affairs (Fiona Hyslop): There is a wealth of artworks of national importance throughout Scotland in both national and local collections. The national collections are expected to continue to display work from their collections as widely as possible.

Kevin Stewart: Aberdeen art gallery and museums worked with the British Museum and National Museums Scotland to feature the event, unmasking the Lewis chessmen, from 7 October 2010 to 8 January 2011, which cast fresh light on one of the most important archaeological discoveries ever made in Scotland. During the 13-week showing, 43,696 people visited the event, compared with the previous year's figure of 39,533 over the same period. A similar increase in visitor numbers was also recorded for a showing of "Diana and Actaeon" by Titian.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (John Scott): Can we get to the question?

Kevin Stewart: Certainly. Can the cabinet secretary assure me that works of national importance can be displayed throughout the country, and particularly in Aberdeen to boost visitor numbers at Aberdeen art gallery?

Fiona Hyslop: Yes. The National Galleries of Scotland is developing its galleries without walls model to enable greater access to its collection and to develop partnerships across Scotland. I will encourage discussions between the National Galleries of Scotland and cultural institutes in Aberdeen so that there can be greater collaboration. The member might also be interested to know that the National Galleries outreach team is working with Aberdeen City Council to create a collaborative film portrait of the city, which will form part of the Scottish national portrait gallery's portrait of the nation project.

Broadcasting and the Arts (Diversity)

4. Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): To ask the Scottish Executive what the Cabinet Secretary for Culture and External Affairs is doing to ensure that diversity is represented in broadcasting and the arts. (S4O-00582)

The Cabinet Secretary for Culture and External Affairs (Fiona Hyslop): The Scottish Government is continuing to seek a more plural and diverse public service broadcasting sector in Scotland by developing the case for a Scottish digital network, particularly through our call for the Scotland Bill to be amended to grant this Parliament powers to establish public service broadcasting institutions.

We are also engaging with the BBC as it develops its response to the licence fee settlement, particularly calling for the quality and

diversity of its programming in news and current affairs to be maintained and for the preservation of the Radio 1 "Introducing in Scotland" programme, which has introduced such a diverse range of new performers and on which we will have a members' business debate later this afternoon.

More generally in the arts, Scotland's national companies, galleries, museum and library are all encouraging wider access to their productions, exhibitions and services. Just last week, Creative Scotland announced funding of over £1.2 million to create first in a lifetime opportunities for people to enjoy or take part in creative activity for the first time.

As the member knows, however, both broadcasting and equal opportunities are matters that are currently reserved to the Westminster Parliament under schedule 5 to the Scotland Act 1998.

Patrick Harvie: Over the past few years, significant research has shown a serious gender imbalance in representation on television, where two thirds of all possible broadcast roles are taken by men. For well over two thirds of the time for which women feature in news programmes, they are represented in what broadcasters generally regard as softer items, such as cookery and health news. Women's sport represents some 2 to 5 per cent of broadcast sports coverage. Will the cabinet secretary begin a discussion with broadcasters to ensure that they begin to make serious commitments to repair that serious imbalance, so that the gap between the real world that we see outside and the world that we see on our TV screens is smaller?

Fiona Hyslop: Yes—I will take up that commitment. I will raise the issue when I speak to the BBC trust and BBC senior management.

In my capacity as a constituency MSP, I met the manager of the Scottish women's football team only this week. That team has just received a new ranking—its highest ever—of 22nd in the world. I think that it is performing slightly better than its male counterpart.

Patrick Harvie is right to identify broadcasters' performance in showing sport and representations of women. The younger generation that is coming through sees role models on the television. The point is an important one to raise, particularly given that the Scottish Women's Convention is visiting the Parliament this week, as members will be aware.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Regrettably, Ken Macintosh did not lodge question 5.

Cultural Priorities 2012-13

6. John Wilson (Central Scotland) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what its cultural priorities are for 2012-13. (S4O-00584)

The Cabinet Secretary for Culture and External Affairs (Fiona Hyslop): I set out my priorities for culture for 2012-13 when I addressed the Education and Culture Committee on 25 October last year. The priorities include minimising the impact of spending reductions on Scotland's cultural and heritage sector as far as possible and delivering key cultural capital projects over the next three years that will contribute to economic growth.

In addition, 2012 is the year of creative Scotland, which will involve a range of activity throughout the country that will promote and celebrate Scotland as a culturally vibrant and creative nation for our communities and our visitors. We will continue to focus on the creative industries, which are one of seven priority areas for economic growth.

John Wilson: I welcome the cabinet secretary's answer and the recent announcements from VisitScotland about hoping to attract more visitors from overseas and more staycationers. How do such policies fit with the priorities that the five national performing arts companies are setting? I look forward to the cabinet secretary's response.

Fiona Hyslop: In December, I met the senior management of not only the national performing companies but the national collections, along with Creative Scotland and VisitScotland, to ensure that we are all working together to maximise the opportunities in the year of creative Scotland. All five national performing companies are closely engaged in that as programme partners.

I am pleased that the National Theatre of Scotland and Scottish Ballet have succeeded in achieving awards from the Creative Scotland first in a lifetime programme, which I talked about earlier. They will undertake two exciting new projects that will take their work to communities the length and breadth of Scotland.

Year of Homecoming 2014

7. Bill Walker (Dunfermline) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what progress is being made regarding the programme for the year of homecoming 2014. (S4O-00585)

The Cabinet Secretary for Culture and External Affairs (Fiona Hyslop): We are working with partners to develop the events and activities that will take place during homecoming 2014. It is envisaged that the programme for 2014 will feature a number of major events, a regional programme across Scotland and a celebration of

key anniversaries. Announcements on the detailed programme will follow in due course. My colleague the Minister for Energy, Enterprise and Tourism leads on homecoming 2014.

Bill Walker: I thank the cabinet secretary for her helpful response. Does she agree that the city of Dunfermline—as Scotland's ancient capital, the burial place of King Robert the Bruce, the location of the highly successful annual Bruce festival and the birthplace of Scotland's greatest philanthropist, Andrew Carnegie—is an ideal candidate to host major Scottish cultural and historical events in 2014?

Fiona Hyslop: I am sure that the member will make the case for that and encourage people in his constituency to grab the opportunities. The town of Dunfermline played a constructive role in previous homecoming activities, of course. Indeed, I distinctly remember fantastic artwork that involved light and candles in Dunfermline abbey. I am sure that there will be great opportunities to take that forward for 2014.

One of the themes of homecoming 2014 will be ancestry, so there will be opportunities to capitalise again on Scotland's history and diaspora—the last is important. I am sure that members across the chamber will want to grab opportunities to promote their areas, to increase tourism and to grow their constituencies' economies as a result of homecoming 2014.

Annabel Goldie (West Scotland) (Con): The 2009 homecoming event attracted a disappointingly small proportion—only 8.6 per cent—of visitors from overseas, and it was overshadowed by the financial shambles surrounding the gathering, which left a trail of unpaid debtors. How will the Scottish Executive increase the number of visitors from overseas for the 2014 event? How will that event avoid a repeat of the gathering fiasco?

Fiona Hyslop: Homecoming 2009 was very successful. There was not just one event; events took place across the year, and there were key signature events. Some 71 per cent of tourism businesses stated that homecoming 2009 was a positive initiative for Scotland, and 90 per cent of organisers who delivered events stated that they would want to take part in similar events in the future.

Annabel Goldie is quite right to identify issues that arose from the gathering, which was dealt with in an investigation by the Parliament, but she will, of course, remember that it was a Conservative peer who helped to develop the initiative. She is also right to question the robustness of future plans, and I am sure that she will do that as they are brought forward. However, to ensure that homecoming 2014 is a success, it is

important that we build on the success of not just 2009, but the themed focus years. The year of food and drink helped to maximise the uptake and promotion of Scotland's fantastic resources, and the year of active Scotland helped to promote the Highlands and other areas as destinations of choice for active holidays. We are now embracing the year of creative Scotland. That will culminate in another focus on ancestry after the year of natural Scotland next year. There are many positive things that we can do and we will ensure that we do them. We will work together collectively and build on the success of previous events.

I reiterate that the year of homecoming will be what people make it in their local communities. Homecoming is not just one event; rather, it is a series of events. It will be so again in 2014.

International Development Funding (Consultation)

8. Malcolm Chisholm (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what consultation it carried out before announcing the criteria for the latest round of international development funding. (S4O-00586)

The Cabinet Secretary for Culture and External Affairs (Fiona Hyslop): The Scottish Government spoke with both the Scotland Malawi Partnership and the Network of International Development Organisations in Scotland in advance of the funding rounds for Malawi and sub-Saharan Africa being launched in December. That involved discussions about the funding priorities, timings and application papers. The priorities for funding reflect those that were set out by the Government of Malawi and our manifesto commitments to strengthen our international work in areas in which Scotland has particular expertise to offer.

Malcolm Chisholm: Did the Government consult organisations that work in Zambia, Tanzania and Rwanda, which are, of course, also eligible for funding? Why did the priorities that were set exclude health and education, for example, as possible areas for work in those countries?

Fiona Hyslop: I refer the member to my first answer and particularly to our manifesto commitments to help to promote areas in which we have particular expertise.

For example, the Government of Rwanda's 2020 programme and priorities set out its goals. Highlighted within that development plan are the

"Inadequate and expensive electricity supply"

as

"a limiting factor to development"

and the fact that

"the agricultural sector has continued to perform poorly, with consistently declining productivity",

as well as people's need for access to clean water and sanitation provision. In developing our programme we have taken account, under the Paris principles, of the needs of different countries.

Malcolm Chisholm mentioned Tanzania, Rwanda and Zambia. They will receive greater funding under the model that we put forward, which has also had a longer lead-in in programme time. NIDOS asked us to provide that. We have consulted the sector and reflected individual countries' interests and requirements. In doing so, we have used Scotland's expertise and increased the funding that is available to the countries that Malcolm Chisholm mentioned.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Question 9 has been withdrawn for entirely understandable reasons.

Cultural Legacy (Rural Scotland)

10. Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what steps are being taken in 2012 to promote the cultural legacy of rural Scotland. (S4O-00588)

The Cabinet Secretary for Culture and External Affairs (Fiona Hyslop): As the year of creative Scotland, 2012 will include the promotion of a wealth of cultural and creative events and activities that will draw significantly on the cultural legacy of rural Scotland. We are working closely with a wide range of partners to use the emphasis on creativity to highlight and promote Scotland's rich and diverse cultural life and heritage for the benefit of communities and visitors alike, particularly through the promotional and marketing tools available on the VisitScotland and Creative Scotland websites.

Rhoda Grant: Recent tourism figures have shown that our cities are doing much better than our rural areas, and that larger hotels are doing better than guesthouses and bed and breakfasts.

How will the cabinet secretary ensure that tourists are encouraged to visit remote and rural areas so that they can experience the unique culture and heritage of those areas?

Fiona Hyslop: That is a very important question. Much of VisitScotland's marketing is helping to attract people to other parts of Scotland, not just to the cities. One of Scotland's attractions for visitors is its unique heritage and the warm welcome that people can receive.

I was pleased to hear that the 17th Hebridean Celtic festival will take place in Stornoway—I understand that the Proclaimers, the Waterboys

and Kassidy are headlining—but we need to ensure that we promote activities elsewhere. It is a great opportunity to tackle the need, which Rhoda Grant has identified, to get tourists to visit all parts of Scotland.

That is one of the reasons that creativity has been used as a driver to attract tourism—not just international tourists, but tourists from across the United Kingdom. The statistics that came out last week show how successful that has been, but Rhoda Grant is right: we have a wealth of talent and fantastic scenery and heritage to promote, and it is important that we drive the advertising and marketing into those areas. Members will see from the new VisitScotland advert for the year of creative Scotland that we are certainly trying to do that.

Infrastructure and Capital Investment

Construction Jobs (A96 Upgrade)

1. Dennis Robertson (Aberdeenshire West)

(SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what can be done to secure the procurement of A96 construction jobs for the north-east and for Scotland as a whole. (S4O-00589)

The Cabinet Secretary for Infrastructure and Capital Investment (Alex Neil): We will seek to maximise the employment and training opportunities for local people when the A96 projects move to the construction phase. That will build on the approach taken to securing community benefits through major infrastructure projects such as the Forth replacement crossing, which is expected to support more than 1,200 new jobs and has involved the award of subcontracts worth more than £20 million to 118 Scottish companies.

I will now put my card in, Presiding Officer.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That is much appreciated.

Dennis Robertson: I think that I caught most of what the minister was saying; I am not sure whether his microphone is not working or he is not facing it.

Following the Government's recent announcement on the dualling of the A96, will the cabinet secretary advise me on the impact—if any—on the Inveramsay bridge project?

Alex Neil: I do not think that it will have any direct impact, as the Government is treating the Inveramsay bridge scheme as a project in its own right. Obviously when we are planning the A96 work we must take into account the timing of the Inveramsay bridge contract, but Dennis Robertson can be assured that we are working on both projects.

Richard Baker (North East Scotland) (Lab):

Does the cabinet secretary agree that if local businesses in the north-east are to benefit from the work on the A96 and the Inveramsay bridge, and from other local infrastructure projects, there must be a fundamental change in Scottish Government procurement policy? Does he appreciate the concerns of local construction companies, which say that they are now not even able to win third contracts for work locally? That has been a major factor in 15 local companies going out of business in the past 18 months. Will those concerns be addressed in the forthcoming procurement bill?

Alex Neil: The problem lies not with the Scottish Government's procurement policy, but with the fact that we must adhere to European procurement directives, whereby any project over £4,348,350 must go to European-wide competition. Inevitably, based on the criteria, we must accept the most competitive tender. Whoever was in Government would have had to—and did—accept those rules. The difference between us and Richard Baker's party is that we have committed to dualling the A96 and it never did so.

A83 (Upgrade)

2. Jamie McGrigor (Highlands and Islands)

(Con): To ask the Scottish Executive what plans it has to upgrade the A83 and prevent future landslips from closing the road. (S4O-00590)

The Minister for Housing and Transport (Keith Brown): We continue to plan for and manage the risk associated with landslides across Scotland and we understand their impact on local communities. Transport Scotland is looking at protective netting, shelters and the potential for planting of the hillside around the Rest and be thankful. The improvement and strengthening of the parallel forestry road as an emergency alternative will also be investigated, and discussions were held on that before Christmas. Transport Scotland is also looking at the safety of the whole A83 trunk road, including the feasibility of removing pinchpoints and pedestrian safety in villages. Discussions have already started between officials and the local community. Transport Scotland has a programme of meetings, which I will not list in the interest of brevity, which I will pass on to the member. Further meetings with other local community groups are planned and I have kept in regular contact with the local member, who has also raised the issue.

Jamie McGrigor: I thank the minister for mentioning all those points. If they come to bear, that will be a great thing.

The minister has told me that there is the potential for a far larger landslide to occur. Is he

aware of the anxiety that is now being experienced by my constituents and others who have to sit at traffic lights in the area? Will he do everything in his power to ensure that the road is opened fully to two-way traffic as soon as possible, to keep things moving? Will he also recognise that everyone in Argyll and Bute—and, indeed, beyond—knows that capital investment is going to be needed on the route to prevent further landslides and closures? The Scottish Government must accept that and the strategic importance of the A83—something that, with due respect, it is currently failing to do.

Keith Brown: Obviously, I do not accept the member's latter point. We understand the strategic nature of the A83 and the need for people to use it, and we are very much aware of what happens when it is not open to local people. That is why we and Transport Scotland will do the various things that I have mentioned.

The very thing that makes us a spectacular part of the country is what leads to landslips, and no Government can prevent landslips from happening. We can, however, try to mitigate the effects of those landslips either for the safety of individuals or for the convenience of people who are trying to move around the country, to which the member refers. Therefore, we will take the actions that I have mentioned. Capital expenditure will come into it, and that expenditure could be absolutely huge depending on what we want to do, which is a question for the Government.

Social Rented Housing (Glasgow East End)

3. John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what plans it has to support the building of more social rented housing in the east end of Glasgow. (S4O-00591)

The Minister for Housing and Transport (Keith Brown): I have taken the east end to mean the two local housing forum areas of east centre and Calton and Baillieston, Shettleston and greater Easterhouse. Current planned expenditure in 2011-12 for new social rented housing is £24.477 million, with 47 unit approvals and a possible additional 50 units for Scottish Veterans housing association. Support is being provided through a number of routes including the transfer of management of development funding, which, since 2003, has been managed by Glasgow City Council; Glasgow Housing Association new build; the Commonwealth games village; and Scottish Veterans housing association. Future years' programmes have not yet been agreed but carry forward commitments from 2012-13 onwards for social rented housing in the east end and are currently worth in excess of £41 million.

John Mason: Does the minister agree that, as well as producing houses, house building is very

good for producing jobs because it is labour intensive and creates jobs and apprenticeships?

Keith Brown: I very much agree with that. That is why we have said that the huge cut in capital expenditure of around 32 per cent over the next three years will be detrimental to our efforts to create more jobs in the construction industry. We take that point on board, which has been underlined by John Swinney's moves to try, where possible, to take money from revenue and put it into capital. Those projects—whether road building, transport projects or housing—create jobs so that, instead of having people claim benefit, we can give them wages and they, in turn, can pay tax. That seems to be a virtuous circle.

Elaine Murray (Dumfriesshire) (Lab): On the capability of housing associations such as Glasgow Housing Association and others to build more social rented housing, how does the minister respond to the view of the Scottish Federation of Housing Associations that the current subsidy of £40,000 is not sustainable to meet the Scottish Government's manifesto commitment to build 6,000 affordable homes for rent annually?

Keith Brown: We have had discussions with the Scottish Federation of Housing Associations on that issue, most recently this week, and we know of its concern. However, we should consider the success of the innovation and investment funding of around £110 million, which will result in there being more than £400 million of expenditure on housing next year. We should also consider the fact that Shelter, which has made a similar point, asked for £610 million to be dedicated to new house building and we have provided about £600 million. From that, it is evident that we are doing as much as possible on affordable housing and, in most cases, almost as much as the stakeholders have asked of us. However, we have heard the concerns of the SFHA that the member mentions and we will continue to discuss those with it.

Broadband Take-up (Glasgow)

4. Anne McTaggart (Glasgow) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what plans it has to increase broadband take-up in Glasgow. (S4O-00592)

The Cabinet Secretary for Infrastructure and Capital Investment (Alex Neil): Broadband access is generally available in Glasgow, but to take up such access the household is required to purchase it from a broadband provider. Data from the Scottish household survey for 2009-10 indicates that 60 per cent of households in Glasgow had broadband access, compared with a figure of 64 per cent for Scotland as a whole. Total home internet access was 63 per cent in Glasgow, compared with 67 per cent in Scotland.

Earlier this month, the Scottish Government issued a publication entitled "Digital Participation in Scotland: A Review of the Evidence". The findings of that research will inform our approach to addressing digital participation and broadband take-up in Glasgow and throughout Scotland. We will work on that during this session of Parliament with the public, private and third sectors, particularly through the digital participation action group, which was set up after the GovCamp Scotland event that was held towards the end of last year.

Anne McTaggart: As Glasgow's broadband infrastructure could support higher uptake than the present level, and given that there is an issue about computer access, does the cabinet secretary agree that greater public access to computers should be supported in schools, libraries and further education college community campuses?

Alex Neil: Yes, I agree. It might be of interest to the member to know that, in the Chancellor of the Exchequer's autumn statement last year, he announced an additional £100 million for the development of superfast broadband services in the capital cities and six other cities in the United Kingdom. Glasgow was identified as potentially being one of those other cities. Obviously, we are actively pursuing that with the UK Government.

Railway Investment (Highland Main Line and Inverness to Aberdeen Line)

5. John Finnie (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what investments it has planned for the Highland main line and the Inverness to Aberdeen railway. (S4O-00593)

The Minister for Housing and Transport (Keith Brown): Two extra services each way were introduced on the Highland main line in December 2011. As the next step, journey-time improvements are expected for some services on the line from December 2012. Network Rail is examining a number of options to improve the Inverness to Aberdeen railway line, including reducing journey times by approximately 20 minutes, enhanced service frequency and possible new stations at Dalcross and Kintore.

John Finnie: I thank the minister for that reply, for the on-going consultation on the 2014 rail franchise and, most important, for the £50 million investment in the Caledonian sleeper service. Highland concerns about the sleeper service have now moved on to the Highland Chieftain service, which is run by East Coast. In effect, that means the United Kingdom Government, but it is yet to consult on something that is to change in 2013. Will the minister write to the UK Government to

encourage it to act and end the uncertainty connected with the Highland Chieftain?

Keith Brown: The member mentions the 2014 rail consultation. Despite all the comments that have been made on that, some extremely productive discussions have taken place throughout the country when Transport Scotland officials and others have gone to railway stations to talk to people at first hand. That kind of consultation is absolutely essential when a major franchise is being let. I am not sure why the UK Government has not yet initiated such a consultation for the 2013 franchise, which begins before ours, but I am happy to look into writing to the UK Government as the member suggests.

Mark McDonald (North East Scotland) (SNP): I draw the minister's attention to the situation at Inch station in Aberdeenshire, where northbound trains have to stop at the platform opposite the village because of restrictions that are caused by the single track. Consequently, passengers with mobility issues or prams and pushchairs have to cross the footbridge to access the village. Will the minister meet me and local councillor Allison Grant to discuss the matter and to see whether a solution can be found?

Keith Brown: The member will be aware that many of the improvements that we have carried out to railway stations along the lines of those suggested at Inch station come from a process and project that is managed jointly by us and the Department for Transport. As the member well knows, that has recently led to the improvements that have been announced for Dyce station. I am more than happy to meet the member to discuss the issue.

Noise and Vibration (Stirling-Alloa-Kincardine Railway)

6. Dr Richard Simpson (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what steps it has taken to compensate households affected by noise and vibration from coal freight trains on the Stirling-Alloa-Kincardine railway line or to ameliorate the disturbance. (S4O-00594)

The Minister for Housing and Transport (Keith Brown): Clackmannanshire Council and Transport Scotland have employed Network Rail to install acoustic barriers by way of noise mitigation. Contractors have been appointed by Network Rail, and works have now commenced. As a result of noise and vibration monitoring and assessment, acoustic barriers will be installed at 68 properties.

Network Rail manages the process of evaluating other claims for compensation, under part 1 of the Land Compensation (Scotland) Act 1973, for residents who consider their properties to have

been devalued as a result of the reinstated railway.

Dr Simpson: I thank the minister for his reply and for agreeing to meet me to discuss the issue in further detail.

Does the minister accept the facts that have been made clear to the Public Petitions Committee, namely that the parliamentary private bill committee on the railway was misled, as were the public, the minister and then leader of Clackmannanshire Council and I, as the local member of the Scottish Parliament at the time? Scottish Power and DB Schenker stated on the record at the Public Petitions Committee that night trains were always going to run and were critical to the adequate supply of coal to Longannet. The impact study, which Keith Brown ordered as leader of Clackmannanshire Council, presumably advised by Transport Scotland, was based on the false premise that there would be no night trains. Will the minister now ensure that our mutual constituents are compensated for the overall permanent effect of the night trains and for the three years of hell that they have been through since the line opened? Will he also undertake to ensure that noise levels are retested after the mitigation measures are completed in March?

Keith Brown: Richard Simpson's final point sounds like a sensible proposition and I undertake to look at it and discuss it further with him when we meet.

The private bill committee was established when neither he nor I were in the Parliament, and it will have to answer to his points. He has made the point about the undertakings that were given previously and that he and I received when he was MSP for the area and I was leader of the council, and we have been through the discussion before. What is most important now is that we try to take the necessary action to address the concerns of local residents.

Compensation claims are a matter for Network Rail, but I will keep a close eye on the situation.

Scottish Water and Business Stream (Meetings)

7. Chic Brodie (South Scotland) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government when it last met the board of Scottish Water and the management team of Business Stream. (S4O-00595)

The Cabinet Secretary for Infrastructure and Capital Investment (Alex Neil): I met Richard Ackroyd and Ronnie Mercer on Thursday 12 January 2012. Mr Ackroyd is chief executive of Scottish Water and Mr Mercer is chair of Scottish Water and Business Stream. I last met the board of Scottish Water on 29 November 2011 and the

chief executive of Business Stream on 26 October 2011.

Chic Brodie: I know that the cabinet secretary is fully aware of the challenge of fuel poverty in Scotland. A major element of that has been the rapid increases in energy prices. The almost simultaneous timing of those increases and the similarity in their percentage level suggest a lower level of competition among the current major suppliers than is either desirable or in customers' interest. Subject to state-aid provisions, will the cabinet secretary ask the board of Scottish Water to consider the creation of a subsidiary à la Business Stream that will enter the domestic energy marketplace to create much-needed competition and secure the interests of customers who would, additionally, be stakeholders in such a company?

Alex Neil: I agree with what the member said about the levels of fuel poverty and the impact of the price increases that were announced before Christmas. I welcome the recent average 5 per cent price reduction, but that has to be compared with the average price increase of 15 per cent that was announced prior to Christmas.

Scottish Water is already diversifying into renewable energy and has a subsidiary company that leads that diversification. I would be happy to send the member more details of Scottish Water's involvement in renewable energy.

Construction (Lanarkshire)

8. Michael McMahon (Uddingston and Bellshill) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what recent discussions the Cabinet Secretary for Infrastructure and Capital Investment has had with construction sector representatives in Lanarkshire and what issues were discussed. (S4O-00596)

The Cabinet Secretary for Infrastructure and Capital Investment (Alex Neil): I have regular discussions with representatives of the construction sector and Construction Scotland, the industry leadership group that represents the construction sector throughout Scotland. I am currently planning a follow-up summit with key members of the sector to consider specific issues in relation to procurement. The construction sector in Lanarkshire will be represented.

Construction Scotland is an industry-led initiative that aims to drive improvements in Scotland's construction sector. Its members are drawn from the public and private sectors. It seeks to encourage best practice, improve research and increase communication across the construction sector. It is currently leading on the development of a refreshed strategy for the sector, supported by Scottish Enterprise and the Scottish Government.

We continue to support the construction industry through investment in infrastructure, social housing and skills and training.

Michael McMahon: I thank the cabinet secretary for that full answer, but I will bring him to a specific issue in my constituency. Is he aware that the construction of the M8 upgrade, which is now due for completion six years later than planned, will eventually allow for the creation of a new road leading from Peter D Stirling Ltd's Mossend railhead depot to the new M8 network?

If that road is not given planning approval, it will result in the loss of a great deal of potential construction work, of increased road and rail freight and of new jobs for my constituency, which is badly in need of them following recent construction job losses. However, there are obstacles in the way of the plan that Transport Scotland and Scottish Enterprise could help to address.

Will the cabinet secretary instruct officials at Scottish Enterprise and Transport Scotland to enter into discussions with me and residents in Bellshill who would be affected by the proposed road, so that all viable options for the railhead road can be explored and the proposal's economic benefits can be delivered in due course?

Alex Neil: I am well aware of the project to which Michael McMahon refers. The upgrade of the M8 is vital to the future of not only the Lanarkshire economy but the Scottish economy.

I am more than happy to meet Michael McMahon, Scottish Enterprise and Transport Scotland to try to address any blockages to the M8 project. However, I must be careful not to make any comment on a pending planning application.

With that restriction, I will be happy to pursue the matter and discuss it in detail with the member if he writes to me with more detail of his concerns.

Agenda for Cities

The Deputy Presiding Officer (John Scott):

The next item of business is a debate on motion S4M-01740, in the name of Nicola Sturgeon, on the agenda for cities.

14:57

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Health, Wellbeing and Cities Strategy (Nicola Sturgeon):

This is an important debate not only for our cities, but for the regions in which they sit and, I argue, for all of Scotland. It is good to see so many members in the chamber—city MSPs and even some who represent non-city areas. I look forward to hearing the views of members of all parties during the debate.

This is the first debate on cities that I have had the opportunity to lead as cities minister and I am pleased to do so. I spent the first half of my life so far living in a city region 25 miles or so from a city, and I have spent the second half living in Glasgow. Therefore, like many others, I know, not only theoretically but from first-hand experience, how important the vibrancy of our cities is. It is important not only to the economic life of the cities and Scotland as a whole, but to the social, cultural and educational life of our country.

Cities and their regions really matter. They are the drivers of economic growth. We know that that is the case not only from domestic experience but from a wealth of international experience. We know that successful cities contribute disproportionately to the wealth of nations and create benefits and opportunities way beyond their boundaries. Therefore, the agenda for cities that I published in December was written and developed with a clear objective in mind: to ensure that our cities and regions are able and supported to make the fullest possible contribution to sustained economic recovery and, beyond our economic recovery, to vibrant economic growth by stimulating economic activity and creating jobs.

As we all know, our cities face a range of challenges, including pockets of endemic poverty, inequality and deprivation. In many of them, poor health remains a key challenge. I will be frank at the outset of the debate. The cities agenda will not, in and of itself, address all the challenges that our cities face but is part of a joined-up package of Government approaches, policies and strategies. With our early years work, our anti-poverty strategy and the equally well strategy, it is part of the Government's comprehensive approach to tackling the issues. The cities agenda is deliberately and purposely focused on economic growth.

Our cities are recognised as centres of knowledge, innovation and culture, and they have many strengths and assets to build on individually. We can see that if we take a quick tour around our cities. Aberdeen is up there with Houston, Texas as one of the top two energy cities in the world. Dundee has an international reputation in life sciences and a global reach in the computer games industry. Stirling and Inverness are our two smallest and newest cities. Each of them has fantastic natural heritage and a proud history, but they both punch their weight in the here and now, Stirling with its sporting excellence and Inverness in leading medical research and development in diabetes. Edinburgh and my city of Glasgow are United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization cities of literature and music respectively, which makes Scotland the only country in the world with two UNESCO-designated creative cities.

Our cities individually are success stories. We should be proud of each and every one of them—I am, and I am sure that we all are. However, although we are proud of our cities and they are big in a Scottish and even a United Kingdom context, in the global context, they are relatively small, and their size means that they do not always have the scale to put themselves on the global map for key segments of the investment market.

Nevertheless, even in what are incredibly difficult financial times here in Scotland and across the world, we know that investment interest and opportunities remain for the right projects at the right scale. Alone, our six cities will at times struggle to achieve the required scale, but if they come together and collaborate, they have the potential to create a range of compelling investment propositions.

We have some terrific and enviable assets to promote and exploit. We need to get better at doing that in a co-ordinated way to make it easier for international investors to understand what Scotland—as team Scotland—has to offer. We want to support our cities to work better together to build on their combined strength and develop strong investment propositions at a scale that we know will be attractive to potential investors.

With that purpose and focus in mind, we have established and created the Scottish cities alliance, which will be supported and facilitated by the Scottish Council for Development and Industry to deliver the agenda for cities. The alliance will be led by the six city leaders and myself as the cities minister and it will draw upon the expertise of the public, private and academic sectors. It will forge collaborations and create the momentum that is required to ensure that our cities and their regions can play their part in our economic recovery and

beyond, and attract the investment and jobs that we know they can attract.

In the public sector, we must ensure that our national agencies—whether that is Scottish Enterprise, Highlands and Islands Enterprise, VisitScotland, Scottish Development International or the Scottish Futures Trust—are aligned with the ambitions of our cities. I know that the private sector is also keen to engage nationally and the Scottish cities alliance will consider how it can work most effectively with that sector to build on successful examples of such an approach at a city and regional level, such as the Aberdeen city and shire economic forum and the Glasgow economic commission.

It is also crucial to draw in the academic sector. I am delighted that the University of Glasgow and the University of St Andrews are together establishing and funding a Scottish cities knowledge centre, which will support the alliance in its work. The centre is intended to pool expertise on city growth issues, draw on the wealth of international experience that we know is out there and provide the alliance with a solid evidence, research and evaluation base.

I readily recognise that the Scottish cities alliance needs to be more than a forum for strategic thinking, discussion and talking. It should be judged on its ability to deliver tangible outcomes. It is therefore critical that it moves forward with purpose and momentum. We want to see real progress in the current session of Parliament, and I hope that the Parliament will come back to the issue in future to measure, judge and scrutinise the alliance's performance and achievements. That will involve cities successfully taking propositions of scale to market and attracting new and significant investment to Scotland.

When I launched the cities agenda before Christmas, I announced a £5 million cities investment fund to help to give the alliance the momentum that it will require. As I said at question time last week, the detailed operation of the fund will be finalised after we have consulted the six authorities and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, but the clear intention is for the fund to support collaborative programmes between cities that promote growth, lever in additional investment and protect and create jobs. Programmes that allow wider regional collaboration to create additional scale will also be supported.

In today's climate, £5 million is a significant investment, but it is important to see it not as a fund in itself but as a catalyst to draw in other funding—that is the intention. I can announce today that we are adding to the £5 million cities fund. The Scottish Government is investing a further £2 million in the fund in recognition of the

importance of the agenda. The additional funds will focus on collaborative programmes for sustainable cities that will help to move us more quickly towards a low-carbon economy. Taken together, we now have a £7 million catalyst fund that will be used to ensure that the alliance can move rapidly to deliver tangible outcomes, supporting the priorities of our economic strategy.

Far more important than the size of the fund is the impact that we will ensure it has—and it is that on which I believe its success should be judged. The Labour amendment mentions the previous cities growth fund, and I should say at this stage that we will support the amendment. I am happy to acknowledge the cities growth fund, which was designed and implemented at a time when we lived in different financial circumstances from today. However, the independent evaluation made the point that the fund did not have the anticipated impact. My point is therefore that, whatever the size of the fund we create, our driving priority must be to ensure that it has an impact, that it levers in additional funding and that it provides tangible benefits.

I will touch on a point that has been raised with me by non-city MSPs. It was raised by Willie Coffey at last week's question time—I am not sure whether he is in the chamber today. He and others have asked whether the cities agenda and the fund that goes with it will in any way downplay or disadvantage other parts of the country. My emphatic answer to that is no. As I have said, we focus on our cities as a catalyst to deliver benefits for the wider regional economies and all of Scotland, and we do so with a clear understanding that our cities need to strengthen effective partnerships—not just with each other, but with their wider regions—that recognise the co-dependent relationships that they have with their neighbours.

I firmly believe that a growth agenda for our cities will bring national benefits. Some 86 per cent of Scotland's population lives within an hour's drive of one of our cities. It is to cities that so many of us travel for employment, to study, to access services and for cultural and leisure facilities. However, it is not a relationship of dependency on our cities; it is a relationship of co-dependency and interdependency. Without the wider regions, our cities would lack the resources—particularly the human resources—that they need to thrive and succeed. The fact is that, as a nation, we need healthy city, regional, rural and island economies to deliver, so it is right that we tailor our approaches to ensure that we optimise the contribution that each can make.

The last point that I want to make in my opening speech is to stress that the cities agenda is the start, and not the end, of a process. Very often—

this commentary is not just on previous Governments; I am sure that it applies to this Government at times, although not often—Governments produce strategies that almost become an end in themselves. It is important that we regard the cities strategy as a starting point. It is what happens now that matters—how we take forward the framework for collaboration and apply the resources in the cities investment fund to lever maximum advantage. That is how we will determine whether the agenda succeeds. I am determined to ensure that it does, so that we have the most successful cities possible and, through our cities, deliver success for the nation.

I look forward to the debate and I am delighted to move,

That the Parliament recognises the vital contributions that Scotland's cities and their regions can make to delivering the aspirations of the Government Economic Strategy; welcomes the commitment shown by the cities to work collaboratively with each other, with the Scottish Government and with national agencies to optimise that growth for the benefit of Scotland as a whole; notes that the focus of the Scottish Cities Alliance is on creating collaborative opportunities for enhancing sustainable economic growth, attracting large-scale private sector investment and creating jobs; notes that the four themes of the collaborative work are connectivity, sustainability, knowledge and liveability, and welcomes the publication of *Scotland's Cities: Delivering for Scotland* alongside the Cities Investment Fund, which is designed to support the Scottish Cities Alliance in developing collaborative programmes that promote growth, lever investment and protect and create jobs.

15:10

Drew Smith (Glasgow) (Lab): Scottish Labour welcomes the debate and the publication of the strategy for cities, which can help to shape the Scottish Government's cities policy and provide a framework for strategic collaboration between city authorities.

Since the abolition of the cities growth fund, to which the Labour amendment refers, there has been a complaint from Scotland's cities that the Government does not always understand the challenges and opportunities that our cities present. Our cities are the powerhouse of Scotland's economy. As the cabinet secretary said, they are our major population centres and 86 per cent of us live within an hour's drive of a city. Our cities are home to many of our most important cultural and intellectual institutions, and they are our major transport hubs. In the modern economy, we must harness the potential of such advantages to ensure prosperity through innovation and growth. We need design and planning, not accident and by-product.

We are not seeking to pitch one part of the country against another or to put undue emphasis on the urban over the rural. Rather, we

acknowledge that the success of Glasgow, Edinburgh, Aberdeen, Dundee, Inverness and Stirling can not only improve the wellbeing of the people who live and work in those cities but drive forward the prosperity of the city regions and the whole of Scotland.

We debated cities strategy briefly in the opening days of this parliamentary session, in the context of a wider debate about the cabinet secretary's portfolio priorities. During the debate, the cabinet secretary talked about bringing forward a stand-alone debate on cities strategy as soon as possible, and it appears that today is the first opportunity that she has had to do that, as she said.

During the debate on the cabinet secretary's portfolio priorities, I expressed hope that the Parliament would be an active partner with the cabinet secretary in developing her new area of work as cities minister. It is slightly unfortunate that our first chance in that regard comes after the strategy has been published rather than beforehand, which would have enabled us to inform the strategy. Members of all parties could have contributed usefully to an earlier debate. However, we can make a useful contribution at this stage, too, and I accept the cabinet secretary's comments about the collaborative approach that she wants to take in the spirit in which I am sure she made them.

Scottish Labour particularly welcomes a number of aspects of the cities strategy. I am pleased that it will continue to be led by the cities themselves. Given the work that SCDI did on the six cities review, I welcome its continued involvement and its role as chair of the leadership group. The cities minister's role should be as an enabler and occasional fixer in times when a lack of joined-up government means that the priorities and problems that the cities might encounter are not understood.

This is the first debate on cities in this session, but previous Governments were not silent on this area of policy. Labour's cities growth fund, which the Scottish National Party scrapped, provided £173 million between 2003 and 2008.

Joe FitzPatrick (Dundee City West) (SNP): Does the member acknowledge that the cities growth fund was rolled into the local government allocation that the cities received?

Drew Smith: I entirely accept that point, but rolling the fund into the allocation meant that it was used to pursue the Scottish Government's priorities, whereas its purpose had been to allow cities to pursue their own priorities.

We welcome the cabinet secretary's announcement of the £5 million cities investment fund and the £2 million for sustainability projects,

but we must regard the funding in its proper context, which is the scale of the future resource that might be required to do the policy justice. It is a matter of regret that the Government has not taken the opportunity to restore the cities growth fund, as Labour said it would do in its manifesto.

Members will have read the briefing from the Scottish Wildlife Trust, which describes the approach to sustainability as a missed opportunity. I have raised the issue with the cabinet secretary in written questions, to which she has responded. I am glad that the Government has responded by providing a dedicated funding stream for projects that will promote sustainability. That element of funding has significant potential, as it could encourage collaboration between our six cities to determine what could be done to make them greener and to share learning between them.

The original £5 million amounted to just £830,000 per city. We have several questions about how the fund will operate, and the cabinet secretary alluded to where we could look for more detail. The funding is to be used to prepare business cases in order that other moneys can be leveraged in to support the cities agenda. That might be of more value to smaller authorities than to larger ones, so how will we ensure that we get the maximum benefit in deciding which projects are to be supported? Who will be directly involved in deciding on bids? What criteria will they use? Will only local authorities be able to bid, or will other partners be involved too? SNP back benchers have even suggested that community groups might be able to bid. I appreciate that the cabinet secretary said that the Government will consult the cities on some of those points, but I hope she agrees that a good starting point for the strategic use of what is a welcome but small fund would be to use the criterion that was applied by the previous cities growth fund, whereby projects had to be of regional significance and benefit.

The Scottish cities knowledge centre is a welcome development, and I congratulate Glasgow and St Andrews universities on it. Evaluating and understanding what works and undertaking comparative work on what is being done elsewhere will be valuable and essential in ensuring the future development of the cities agenda. That is perhaps more important than ever in a time of straitened public resources. I hope that those with an interest in developing a bolder cities policy can look forward to some imaginative reports emanating from those experts.

You would be surprised, Presiding Officer, if I did not mention some of the priorities that my, and indeed the cabinet secretary's, city—Glasgow—might wish to be part of the debate. On connectivity, Labour again urges the Scottish Government to investigate all options to provide

support for air route development. Glasgow City Council has stepped in to provide a small fund in the absence of a national scheme. Although the council is to be congratulated on that, the fund does not replace the support that Government previously provided, and it cannot alone ensure that our key transport and business hubs are connected to the markets around the world where opportunities for increased trade exist.

That is one of a number of areas in which the strategy does not go as far as it could have done. It does not respond to the calls from Edinburgh and Glasgow for further reform of the disbursement of business rates. There is no mention of surface public transport links, particularly a link to Glasgow airport, which remains a key missing link without which the city cannot grow properly. Indeed, a link to regional and national public transport infrastructure could benefit the whole country. Today's debate comes at a time when Glasgow's newspaper, the *Evening Times*, has launched a campaign to save stations on the rail network because Transport Scotland seems to have misunderstood the very nature of an urban environment and has identified rail stops as being too close together. Of course they are close together. That is how people live in a city; indeed, it is probably one of the definitions of a city.

In Dundee, there have already been calls for the fund to be used to create a jobs task force, and in Edinburgh we need action to tackle the fact that the capital has the highest percentage of unemployed 16 to 24-year-olds. Aberdeen and Inverness desperately require improvements to their trunk road connections, but on a slightly smaller scale, they also require assistance to link the major trunk roads within their city boundaries at locations such as the Haudagain roundabout.

The Deputy First Minister's appointment as cities minister has perhaps been branded by more cynical types than me as part of the SNP's local government election campaign. Only last weekend, she was pictured with her group of wannabe city fathers at the Glasgow campaign launch. I say "city fathers" advisedly, because it appears that the SNP forgot to select many women to run for the council. If the agenda for cities is the opening salvo in the campaign, I am afraid that the Deputy First Minister's bang has been somewhat undermined by the lack of buck provided.

The Scottish Labour Party welcomes this slightly overdue debate, and we welcome the publication of the strategy, as far as it goes. We would have welcomed an investment fund that was more akin to the cities growth fund. The purpose of our amendment is to highlight the level of ambition that that fund demonstrated, which goes well beyond what the cabinet secretary outlined today.

I hope that, during the debate, there will be some support for more ambition. Getting support for Scotland's cities right could help us to get much more right for Scotland's economy. In each region, there are opportunities to do more. We must recognise that, as the cabinet secretary rightly said, the publication of one document and the creation of one strategy group to talk about the big ideas that we need are not enough. We need the big ideas to be advanced now. We hope that the cities alliance will set out a radical vision that is bold enough to make clear the tools that it needs to really do the job.

I move amendment S4M-01740.1, to insert at end:

"; further recognises that this new fund builds on the success of the previous Cities Growth Fund, which provided substantial and targeted support for the development of Scotland's cities amounting to £173 million between 2003 and 2008, and further welcomes the initiative as a renewed focus on the actual and potential contribution of Scotland's cities to economic prosperity and job creation through better connectivity, sustainability, better use of knowledge and improved liveability for all those who live and work in Scotland's cities, their regions and in the country as a whole."

15:20

Jackson Carlaw (West Scotland) (Con): Well, I had good news and bad news. The good news was a call from the business team, saying that the Conservative spokesman had an opportunity in this afternoon's debate to speak for a little longer than they might normally expect; the bad news was the debate itself. When I read the motion, studied the report and mulled everything over, I was inclined to give half a round of applause, invite everyone to join in a quick chorus of "Kumbaya" and then sit down.

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): Do it!

Jackson Carlaw: I am tempted, but I do not know whether it will help the Presiding Officer to stretch out the afternoon.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Elaine Smith): Please do not do it, Mr Carlaw.

Jackson Carlaw: I accept the report and its contention that cities are a good thing; that Scotland has some; and that they are generally to be commended. Indeed, I share the ambition and am broadly sympathetic to the approach. Nevertheless, I have to say that the dynamic that will deliver it is to be found not in the chamber but in the entrepreneurial ability of those in the cities who function in the civic and corporate worlds or in the private sector to realise the potential that I think we are all seeking to achieve.

It is so unusual and rare for a Conservative in this chamber to be confronted with a motion that mentions

“attracting large-scale private sector investment”

in such a positive way that I would support it several times over just for that phrase. However, I point out to those who embrace such an idea that we need to be careful about the language that we use about the private sector. The producers of alcohol in Scotland, who are huge contributors to the Scottish economy, are not wicked; the producers of oil in the North Sea are not polluting evildoers; and those who are involved in the private healthcare sector are not just profiteers. We have to recognise that the self-same people on whom the economy relies are the private sector that we are celebrating in this motion.

When I looked at the structure of the Scottish cities alliance, I thought, “Well—fine.” However, my one concern, which I hope the cabinet secretary and all those involved in the alliance will share, is that the structure must not become an end in itself. The problem with community health partnerships was that the clinicians withdrew because they thought the whole thing had become bureaucratic and there was really no point to it. It is crucial for business and all the other parties that the structure seeks to embrace to believe that it does something and does not just exist. I am sure that that is the intention, but it will be important to drive that forward if it is not, like many other programmes, to become mired in good intentions instead of action.

I found page 12 of the report fascinating, because it illuminated a deep split in the Scottish National Party Government. It says:

“However, for recovery to be sustained—and for faster sustainable economic growth to be delivered—the main driver will be increases in levels of private sector investment. This requires appropriately functioning capital markets, and for a climate to be created where companies and investors with available capital feel confident about investing.”

I realised that that was a call from the Deputy First Minister to the First Minister to accelerate the timescale for the referendum on Scotland’s future in the certain knowledge that the prerequisite for feeling confident about investing is a clear statement on Scotland’s economic future.

Like others in the chamber, I come from a business background. If one reads the report from a business perspective, one has to ask: what do businesspeople think about politicians? Largely, they are oblivious to them and get on with their business without them. Business does what it needs to do. It needs to succeed not because it wants to contribute to a Government strategy but because it has to succeed in order to exist. Business has its own dynamic.

Drew Smith: I commend to the member the Glasgow Economic Commission, which has involved the private sector in its work; indeed, the Glasgow Chamber of Commerce is one of the key partners. It is not entirely accurate to say that business is not interested in certain strategic decisions if there is an opportunity to allow it in.

Jackson Carlaw: I fully accept that point, but I am sure that Mr Smith would accept that, as they go about their day, most businesspeople concentrate on their business. I doubt that they all have the Parliament channel on so that they can watch proceedings in here with avid fascination.

Nicola Sturgeon: They are certainly not watching Mr Carlaw.

Jackson Carlaw: I am the first to admit that they would be very disappointed if they were watching this afternoon.

Businesses do what they need to do, and businesspeople want politicians not to get in the way but to positively assist. That means that they are interested in what we do with regard to connectivity, whether it be in transport or information technology, what we do for the education of young people, who will be the next generation of the workforce, and what ways we find to allow them to innovate and succeed.

Cities co-operating, which is part of the underpinning of the ambition of this report, will achieve synergies. Scotland has more cities that are household names across the world than a country of our size should expect to have. That is a great thing. We have huge opportunities in tourism, and we recognise the opportunities that would be afforded if tourists had far greater access to our country through the use of smart card technologies and through various cities working together to attract that tourism and make it easier for people to get around our country.

This is not a strategy that we believe should involve the devising of new rules, regulations and frameworks; it should be one that allows people to get on with what they have to do.

In unveiling the growth plan this afternoon, the cabinet secretary discussed the £5 million cities investment fund. I am glad that she did not make too much of that. Kevin Stewart will be the first to tell us that the expansion of the international arrivals terminal of Aberdeen airport also cost £5 million. We need to keep in mind what we can expect £5 million to achieve in the context of all of our cities.

At the end of the day, people are what will make the strategy work, along with entrepreneurial talent, civic co-operation, a degree of altruistic planning between the various cities and interventions that aid the path of development

rather than those that require businesses to employ consultants to enable them to understand what all that was supposed to mean and what they now have to do to comply with it.

Maureen Watt: Will the member give way?

Jackson Carlaw: Of course. [*Interruption.*]

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Can we have Maureen Watt's microphone on, please?

Maureen Watt: It was my fault; I did not have my card in.

The member should get out a bit more. What he calls for is precisely what is happening in Aberdeen, where people are getting together in the way that he suggests they should, through the Trinity Group and ACSEF, which the cabinet secretary mentioned. That is why economic growth in Aberdeen and Aberdeenshire is leading Scotland at the moment.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I would be grateful if you could come to a conclusion, Mr Carlaw.

Jackson Carlaw: I will do so by saying that my son is at university in Aberdeen, so I get to visit Aberdeen quite regularly. I congratulate Maureen Watt on what will be an excellent press release in the moments after the debate.

I support the motion and, like everyone else, hope that what is a worthwhile document and strategy can be delivered in a way that is of practical benefit.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We now move to the open debate. Although we are not awash with time, we have a little bit of leeway for interventions.

15:28

Joe FitzPatrick (Dundee City West) (SNP): Members will not be surprised to hear that my speech will focus on my home city, Dundee.

The opening statement by the cabinet secretary, the additional £2 million and the fact that there is a member of the Cabinet with a responsibility for cities demonstrate our SNP Government's commitment to our cities. The strategy, which will be implemented in collaboration with our cities, is to be welcomed across the chamber.

It is important to recognise the good work that has been carried out by previous Administrations under the auspices of the cities growth fund which, although welcome, was restrictive in terms of what it could be used for. By rolling the cities growth fund into cities' allocations, John Swinney removed the strings on how that money could be used that had been applied by previous Administrations. The cities growth fund did not

show the results that might have been expected across Scotland, but Dundee was an exception in that regard. The use of the fund to pay for our central waterfront was an excellent example of how money can be used to benefit not only the city but the city region. That was the result of a cross-party approach that should be welcomed.

Statistics such as the fact that 67 per cent of Scotland's gross value added is generated in the six city regions demonstrate the importance of our cities in driving forward the economy and, given the current difficult economic situation, it is more important than ever that we support our cities and optimise economic growth and job creation. The cabinet secretary talked about Scotland's six cities working together and building on their combined strengths to provide sustainable economic growth and attract large-scale private sector investment.

I look forward to the number of our cities increasing to seven, and I fully support the fair city, Perth, in its bid to be awarded city status as part of the diamond jubilee celebrations. Perth is just 22 miles from Dundee and we share many economic, social and cultural links, which I hope will be strengthened over the coming years, regardless of the decision on Perth's city status. I certainly support Perth in its campaign.

A prime example of how a city can help to invigorate a region is the Victoria and Albert museum project in Dundee and our central waterfront redevelopment. The central waterfront project is expected to create at least 1,000 jobs over 10 years, to generate more than £500 million of GVA for Scotland's economy and to bring in an additional £270 million of private sector investment. Members will be pleased to hear that the project is moving forward. As we speak, preparatory work is under way on the Tay river bed for the foundations of the V&A, which will be the centrepiece of our new waterfront. Yesterday, the old walkways to Tayside house came down as part of the redevelopment of the area around the museum site, and we look forward to Tayside house being demolished in the near future.

We heard yesterday that the non-Government-funded aspect of the V&A project has received a boost—the funding campaign has announced that £5 million of private funding is expected to be in place by the end of the year. It is estimated that the V&A at Dundee will attract 500,000 people in its first year and 300,000 people a year thereafter, which it is clear will have a hugely positive impact on the city of Dundee, on Tayside and probably on Scotland as a whole.

Dundee currently has a strong economic base in the creative industries, such as the computer games industry, and it is a world leader in life sciences, but it has huge potential in another area that could result in a radical increase in the city's

economic output and skilled jobs base. This week, we had the announcement that one of the four enterprise zones that are to be created will be the low carbon/renewables east enterprise area, which will be formed by Dundee port in conjunction with the port of Leith.

Dundee port is already a key renewables site, and there is strong interest from manufacturing companies. The recent memorandum of understanding that was signed with Scottish and Southern Energy will ensure that Dundee is a key strategic location for the development of its technology. The creation of the enterprise zone will enable Dundee to offer incentives to attract private investors and to secure a great many good-quality engineering jobs and, of course, apprenticeships. People in Dundee are very proud of the way in which the city has moved forward with life sciences and video games, but there has been a feeling that its manufacturing base had been eroded over decades, so there is great excitement about the potential that the new renewables industry offers our city.

By working together, Dundee and Edinburgh can ensure that not just one city gets the benefit that enterprise zone status brings and that a hub is created that will be worth far more than would have been the case had the two areas worked separately.

Jenny Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): The member and I both welcomed this week's announcement of the enterprise zone. Has he had any indication from his Government about what form the incentives will take?

Joe FitzPatrick: Dundee City Council is engaging with the cabinet secretary to ensure that, by working together, Dundee and Edinburgh get the best impact for us. It is important that any support not only is appropriate but is the best support for bringing industry here and is not just about providing financial grants, although many grants are available to encourage industry into Scotland. At First Minister's questions today, the First Minister set out just how well Scotland is doing in encouraging international investment in Scotland compared with other parts of the United Kingdom, as is shown on the Channel 4 FactCheck site.

It is not just our cities that will benefit from investment in Dundee and Leith, because the potential for the surrounding areas is also huge, with new employment opportunities created, private investment stimulated and economic growth boosted across the Tayside and Lothian regions.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I would be grateful if the member could start to conclude.

Joe FitzPatrick: The development of Dundee as a base for renewables and the site of the V&A would not have come about were it not for the support of Dundee City Council, which is why the cabinet secretary's comments about the importance of the leaders of city local authorities for the agenda for cities are particularly welcome. It is clear that the Scottish cities alliance, supported by the cities investment fund, has a vital and challenging role in creating jobs and increasing sustainable economic growth. I hope that it will have cross-party backing, and I look forward to us all working in a collaborative way across Scotland.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I remind members that if they wish to speak in the debate, they should press their request-to-speak buttons, and that if they intervene, they should then press them again.

15:36

John Park (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): I welcome the opportunity to speak in the debate. I want to focus on the challenges for the Fife region of being between two of Scotland's largest cities—Dundee and Edinburgh—and the opportunities that come with that as well. First, though, I associate myself with Joe FitzPatrick's comments about Perth's attempt to achieve city status, which I hope happens over the coming months or years. That would be good not just for the people of Perth but for those in the surrounding area.

The west Fife town of Dunfermline's closeness to Edinburgh brings both opportunities and challenges. The history of the area shows that, over the years, it has moved from mining work to defence work to electronics. The people of Fife have had to deal with that and with demographic changes over that time. It has been difficult, because people have had to acquire new skills, unemployment has fluctuated and people have had to move into new areas. However, the area's closeness to the city region of Edinburgh has brought benefits. For example, following the closure of the naval base at Rosyth dockyard in 1995 and the departure from the area of all the naval families, we saw growth in the Dunfermline and west Fife area from people who came there to live and work.

The downside to that—this relates to sustainability, which we have touched on—is that although people come to live in an area, they often work elsewhere. For example, many people live in south Fife but work in Edinburgh and the Lothians. They put a lot of stress on the Forth road crossing and on public transport links. Even with the best intentions of growing a population and making a place more effective for people to live in, with communities being built around the city regions,

major planning challenges are sometimes thrown up.

Another specific issue about Dunfermline that worries me greatly is that the naval families who left used the town centre and shopped there frequently but, as a result of the expansion of the town, many people have moved into the eastern part of the town and the town centre is now on the western periphery. That brings huge challenges because the area is not getting the benefit of people living there and using local shops and businesses. That kind of situation is a challenge for us as parliamentarians, because we must ensure that planning frameworks are about serving communities rather than about deciding the best place to put houses on any land that might be available.

The cities document sets out a number of interesting points, particularly on capital investment. The public sector also has a wider role—for example, it can set employment standards.

Scotland has had quite a lot of inward investment over the years. Some forms of that have been better than others. Companies such as Chunghwa Picture Tubes and Motorola came for a period and then moved to low-wage economies. Recently, Amazon has come to Fife. I hope that it will stay there for a period and grow its company and that the quality of the employment will grow, too. In any public sector investment in areas to bring in such companies, we must encourage high-quality employment practice as much as we can and we must attract companies that take a longer-term view and which will stay as long as they can for the benefit of a community.

A wider issue relates to the public sector. Many people who live in and around Fife get the benefit of working in the public sector in Dundee or Edinburgh, because Fife is quite close to those places. The Scottish Trades Union Congress reported this week that there is stress and pressure on public sector jobs, and a prediction of 70,000 job losses has been made. I hope that the Scottish Government is in a position to look at how we ensure that people are mobile across the public sector and not just within sections of the public sector. The issue is not just mobility within the national health service but how we move people from the NHS to local government, between local authorities and into other parts of the public sector.

When we face job losses, there will be people who want to leave—people who are of a certain age or who want to take their career in a different direction—but there will also be people who want to stay and work in the public sector, because they have the public service ethos. We in the Scottish Parliament should find a mechanism, or the

Scottish Government should develop a mechanism, to ensure mobility across the public sector, which would ensure that people stayed in work and could perhaps work in their own locality.

Finally, I will talk about the sustainability of city regions. Fife and many other parts of the country could have a jobs bonanza as a result of renewable energy. Offshore wind is the big issue in Fife just now—many companies are looking closely at investing in Fife because of that. When people are employed for such work, we must have the infrastructure in Fife. I would hate to see us having to import labour or bring people from other parts of the UK or Scotland to work in Fife. Conversely, people from Fife might have to move to other parts of the country to work in renewable energy. That is a huge challenge.

The issue is how we plan the next five to 10 years. We have a difficult economic situation to deal with, but I believe that there is huge potential, particularly if we get the reindustrialisation of Scotland right in the future. I welcome the document and the collaborative approach that has been taken across the chamber to ensure that the document succeeds and delivers for our cities and regions.

15:43

Sandra White (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP): I thank John Park for his thought-provoking speech, which touched on issues that concern me, too. I will talk about community involvement and community benefit clauses to ensure that local people are employed when employment is available.

Like the cabinet secretary, I have lived in the centre of Glasgow, and I still live there. Members might not know that she and I shared a tenement building—perhaps she did not want to mention that. I am still there, but she is perhaps in a better place—I do not know.

As the Deputy First Minister said in her foreword to the Scottish Government's document "Scotland's Cities",

"In their own right, our cities are recognised as centres of knowledge, innovation and culture."

Through working collectively, they can build on those strengths.

Our cities are unique. As the cabinet secretary said, Glasgow is designated as a UNESCO city of music and Edinburgh is designated as a UNESCO city of literature. Scotland is the only country to have two UNESCO-designated creative cities, which is a unique and fantastic feat for which we not only in the Scottish Parliament but in Edinburgh and Glasgow should pat ourselves on the back.

It is apt that, as we speak, musicians across Glasgow are tuning up their instruments and readying themselves for the start of Celtic Connections, which kicks off today. More than 200 artists from around the globe will come together at more than 300 events across the city. Celtic Connections has been very successful for more than a decade, and the key to its success is effective collaboration in different genres of music. An analogy can be applied to the Government's approach. If we stretch the analogy, we could look at the Scottish cities alliance as a band with the Scottish cities knowledge centre, the action teams, the cities investment network and the leadership group all being members that feed into the final production, or the delivery group.

The cabinet secretary mentioned the make-up of the Scottish cities alliance and the interactions in it to foster innovation and collaboration and drive economic growth. I think that all members would endorse her comments.

Framework 2 in the cities strategy identifies the crucial role of capital investment in achieving sustainable economic growth. Central to that aim is the need to improve the ability to secure finance. The document goes on to state:

"The Scottish Cities Alliance, supported by the Cities Investment Network will"

work to

"create and promote strong investment propositions aligned to distinctive City Visions".

It will also be charged with packaging and marketing those

"in a coherent Scotland wide way that is clear and accessible for international investment funds".

Both of those points are undoubtedly welcome. That is a great example of the joined-up approach that I have already mentioned. We need to ensure that it runs through the Scottish Government's strategy for cities.

The Scottish Government proposes using innovative funding mechanisms to secure further access to finance. It proposes using mechanisms such as the national housing trust and tax increment financing—or TIF, as we normally call it—which I would like to concentrate on

As a mechanism, TIF secures funding against future business rate income that will be generated by the resulting development. It was developed in partnership with the Scottish Futures Trust, and Scotland's local authorities have estimated that it could be worth hundreds of millions of pounds and could generate more than 17,000 new jobs. I am sure that we would all welcome that.

In Glasgow, a current example of TIF funding under consideration is the ambitious project for the

Buchanan Galleries, which will see new retail companies and restaurants and vast improvements to Buchanan Street bus station and Queen Street station, all the way down into Buchanan Street. Things will be joined together all the way along to Cathedral Street. I know that concerns have been raised about that TIF and the proposal that has been put forward. One concern that business leaders have raised with me is the time that the proposal—or even a decision—is taking to come to fruition. Will the cabinet secretary indicate when she sees the proposed plans being settled?

Drew Smith: The member can correct me if I am wrong, but has the SNP group in Glasgow City Council not expressed concerns about that project? It has not supported a speedy resolution to the matter at all.

Sandra White: It is not just the SNP group in Glasgow City Council. One reason why concerns were expressed was that there were three meetings with Glasgow City Council officers, and they could not produce the papers. I can speak to the member afterwards. If he speaks to Labour councillors, perhaps we will find out why the papers were not produced when they were supposed to be. There are genuine concerns, but I want to move things forward and find out when the project will go ahead and whether there is a date for that. I ask the cabinet secretary that question.

Other issues have been raised with me, including whether there can be only one TIF proposal per city. Perhaps the cabinet secretary could say in summing up whether there can be only one TIF, or whether two TIFs can be applied for per city. Obviously, there is great interest in that.

I have asked the cabinet secretary how we can ensure local community involvement in the cities strategy. She replied:

"The detailed criteria for the fund will be finalised after consultation with the six city local authorities and with COSLA."—[*Official Report, Written Answers*, 12 January 2012, S40-0567.]

I would like to know when the consultation process will be finalised, and when we will hear about the detailed criteria. I mentioned the areas that John Park spoke about—I wonder whether, in the cities strategy, we can ensure that there is room for communities to be involved. I got the answer that there would be room, but I wonder whether community benefit clauses will be put in for any jobs that are created through the cities strategy, to ensure that—as John Park mentioned—local people will benefit by being able to get those jobs.

I think that my time is up; I am being nodded on. Perhaps the cabinet secretary can answer some of the issues that I have raised.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I remind members that speeches should be six minutes. I have a little bit of leeway for members who take interventions, but not an awful lot.

15:50

Kevin Stewart (Aberdeen Central) (SNP): I begin by declaring an interest as a member of Aberdeen City Council, as a former chair of Nestrans—the north east of Scotland transport partnership—and as a former director of the Aberdeen BID Company Ltd, which will all feature in my speech.

I welcome the opportunity to participate in the debate; in my view there are never enough opportunities to talk about the great city of Aberdeen. I very much welcome the Scottish cities alliance, and the collaboration that it is hoped it will bring about. Far too often, our cities have been in competition rather than being collaborative. We, as a country, have lost out on many things because our cities have been competing against one another. One of the best examples is the Energy Technologies Institute: Aberdeen, Glasgow and Edinburgh tried to get it, but it ended up in Loughborough. That was a major loss for Scotland and for all three cities.

I turn to Aberdeen and will look first at connectivity, which is mentioned in the cities strategy. I will begin on a bit of connectivity for which we in the north-east have waited far too long: the Aberdeen western peripheral route. I hope that the court proceedings will be dealt with very quickly so that we can get on with the job of building that bypass and dealing with some of the other problems in the roads network. I say to Drew Smith, who mentioned the Haudagain roundabout, that nothing can be done there until the western peripheral route is in place. If we started on the Haudagain roundabout without the AWPR, the whole city of Aberdeen would be in gridlock.

Jackson Carlaw mentioned Aberdeen airport. I am extremely pleased at the level of investment in the airport in recent times, in particular for the runway extension, which has since brought us new routes to places such as Baku and Frankfurt and is good for the city and shire economy.

There is not just the airport. There has also been investment in deepening the harbour mouth, which has allowed better access because stormy weather sometimes caused difficulty in that regard. I, like my colleague John Finnie, who is sitting to the left of me, want improvements in the Aberdeen-Inverness railway and to the A96. The Government is committed to doing those things.

It is not all about connectivity. We must also consider sustainability. Other places could learn many lessons from things that are going on in

Aberdeen. I have mentioned in the chamber previously the success of Aberdeen combined heat and power. CHP, along with district heating systems, has failed in many other places—for what reasons, I do not know—but lessons could be learned from Aberdeen city in that regard. I pay tribute to the folks who have been involved in that.

Members had the opportunity last night to meet the Aberdeen renewable energy group and others to discuss the European offshore wind farm development, which I hope will come to fruition in our city very soon.

Officials from Aberdeen City Council met Government officials yesterday to discuss possible funding for hydrogen buses in the city, which could also lead to a massive amount of European money coming to the city. That is worth exploring. I hope that, given the low-carbon economy agenda, some of the £7 million catalyst fund can be considered for that project.

Neil Findlay (Lothian) (Lab): I have no comment to make on any of the issues relating to Aberdeen, but is there a contradiction between what Kevin Stewart says about building roads and extending airports and what he says about sustainability?

Kevin Stewart: We want sustainable growth. Domestic short-haul flights produce much more carbon than long-haul flights. I want Aberdonians and folk from the north-east to be able to travel on long-haul routes without having to go down to the south-east of England to get connections. So, no: I do not see a contradiction at all.

Knowledge is the other major item on the agenda. Aberdeen has the University of Aberdeen, the Robert Gordon University and Aberdeen College, all of which are worthy institutions. Beyond that, we have knowledge in many other areas—particularly in the subsea industry, in which we are the leaders. Dennis Robertson, who is not in the chamber, would say that Westhill is the capital of that industry. It is slightly away from Aberdeen, but not that far away.

In culture, we have the Aberdeen international youth festival and Aberdeen Performing Arts, in which regard we are at the top of the tree.

Aberdeen has a huge amount to give and could, in co-operation with the other five cities—which will, we hope, be joined soon by Perth—do even greater things. Collaboration rather than competition is the key. I wish the cabinet secretary all the best with the alliance.

15:57

Jenny Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): The north-east and Glasgow are always very well represented in these debates, perhaps because

we have the most ambitious politicians—I do not know. I rise to make the case for the city of Dundee.

The Deputy First Minister will be aware of some of the current initiatives, especially after Joe FitzPatrick's speech, but let me briefly recap. The Victoria and Albert museum is due to be built by 2015, and already the streets surrounding the waterfront including Union Street—the old main thoroughfare down to the port—boast new businesses and an air of prosperity. Private fundraising for the project is well under way.

We wait with bated breath for an announcement of jobs in renewables. Our port is ready, we have a trained workforce and we have new build for suppliers. The Government's agreement with Gamesa fell through before Christmas, but we are pinning hopes on the latest memorandum of understanding that the First Minister signed with Scottish and Southern Energy just before Christmas. We hope and trust that that will yield jobs by Easter.

Joe FitzPatrick: For clarification, the memorandum of understanding is not between the Government and the private company; it is between the private company and Port of Dundee Ltd.

Jenny Marra: I thank Joe FitzPatrick for that correction, although I think that the Government was quite involved in the memorandum of understanding and supported it. The member will agree that we are all hopeful that it will lead to some real jobs in our city.

However, that is not enough. Therefore, Labour has been busy campaigning on other initiatives to bring deserved prosperity and opportunity to our city. Over Christmas, I announced our campaign to bring the Sistema Scotland big noise project, which runs successfully in Stirling's Raploch, to Dundee. The project is backed by local musicians such as Ged Grimes from Simple Minds and entrepreneur Chris van der Kuyl of the Smith group. Together, we think that Dundee children would benefit enormously from the rise in concentration, attainment, confidence and optimism that Sistema brings. It is perhaps even more necessary now that SNP-controlled Dundee City Council just this week is taking £3.5 million out of this year's education budget, and is targeting music and physical education teachers.

Neil Findlay: I think that the project to which Jenny Marra refers was originally run by the Venezuelan Government. Is that not an excellent example of a socialist Government in action?

Jenny Marra: I thank Neil Findlay for that endorsement. I know that he agrees with my campaign to bring the big noise project to Dundee. It is a radical project that tackles the deep roots of

poverty, and I know that the member is committed to doing that.

The £3.5 million that Dundee City Council has taken out of the education budget this week—through which it is targeting music—comes on top of the £4.5 million cut to education last year, which we were told would make education better. The SNP is telling primary 4 children that they cannot start learning to play a musical instrument now, but must wait until primary 5. Perhaps that is delayed preventative spend. I do not know whether the Government would like to clarify that, but I know that it agrees that El Sistema is a perfect example of preventative spend. That is one of my suggestions for the money that the Deputy First Minister might have available for Dundee.

Yesterday, I wrote to Dundee City Council asking it to go Dutch. In Holland, local authorities bulk buy energy on behalf of local residents. When Ed Miliband was Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change, he changed the law to allow communities to bargain collectively for their energy prices. Local authorities in Manchester are doing that with the Energy Saving Trust. I have asked Dundee City Council to set up such a scheme, which would result in the fuel bills in Dundee's 14,000 council properties falling by 20 per cent each. That is Government action that people would like. I ask the Deputy First Minister to consider similar schemes for all Scottish cities in her strategy. That is a project of low cost but with high results for which the Scottish people would thank her.

More than 2,000 Dundonians have signed up to my campaign to bring the national football academy to Dundee. Dundee is ideally placed at the centre of Scotland and is accessible for elite athletes from all parts of the country to come to train. It is the only major city in Scotland without an indoor football facility. The Deputy First Minister's colleagues on Dundee City Council have backed Labour's campaign and have pulled together a working group to put our bid together. We expected an announcement from the Minister for Commonwealth Games and Sport on the national football academy before Christmas, but we are sure that it will come soon.

For years, visitors and commuters who use the trains in and out of Dundee have been baffled by how expensive it is. It is cheaper to buy a single ticket from Dundee to Perth and another from Perth to Glasgow than it is to buy a direct ticket. That is because Dundee falls outwith the subsidised zone, which is designed to boost local economies and encourage business. I ask the Deputy First Minister, as part of the strategy and at no cost, to liaise with ScotRail and Transport Scotland to consider whether Dundee can be included in the subsidised zone.

Last but by no means least, Dundee's Labour group and I have jointly called for a high-level jobs task force for Dundee. The group, which should be chaired by a prominent local businessperson, would pull together all the initiatives and resources to make the case for jobs in Dundee to national and international companies. Dundee's allocation of the cities strategy money could go towards leveraging in investment, either by bolstering our economic development department or seed funding for the jobs task force. We look forward to hearing the Government's proposals.

16:03

Jim Eadie (Edinburgh Southern) (SNP): Most of my adult life has been spent living and working in city environments. I was born and bred in Glasgow, I lived for 10 years in London and now, after 14 years as a resident of our capital city, I am proud to have the privilege of representing an Edinburgh constituency.

Our cities can be a powerful engine for sustainable economic growth and, as the cabinet secretary and my colleagues Sandra White and Kevin Stewart have outlined, each of them has a key role in helping to deliver the Government's economic strategy. I welcome the publication of the agenda for cities and the £5 million of additional funding that is associated with it. Our cities are great places to live. Edinburgh emerges in survey after survey as one of the most attractive places to live and work, with quality of life there rated as being among the best in the UK.

The success and prosperity of Edinburgh and Scotland are inextricably linked. If Scotland is to succeed, Edinburgh, as our capital city, must grow and prosper. It has attracted, and will continue to attract, talent and investment from around the world, which power growth and jobs for the city and the country. Therefore, the extent to which our capital achieves the targets that are set out in the City of Edinburgh Council's economic strategy should be of interest to us all and not just to members from Edinburgh and the Lothians. That strategy has the ambition for Edinburgh to be

"a confident, creative and inspiring city ... where the public, private and third sectors collaborate with common purpose; and ultimately a city which puts the people of Edinburgh at the heart of its economic success."

I hope that members all agree with that. Edinburgh is keen to work alongside our other great cities in developing collaborative propositions that can be delivered at a scale that will be attractive to potential investors. I acknowledge that the Government is fully aware of the need for such collaborative working and is committed to the establishment of a Scottish cities alliance, but Jackson Carlaw made a fair point when he said that such an alliance should not be

an end in itself. It should be designed to pull together representatives of government, our six cities, and the private sector—all at the highest level. It would, however, be helpful to understand how the priorities for collaborative working that are set out in the agenda for cities will be determined and what measures will be used to evaluate the success of the approach. I also endorse Drew Smith's call for comparative work that would allow us to learn lessons from other locations on what works best and how to apply those lessons to Edinburgh and Scotland.

As I have already said, Edinburgh is one of our great cities. That makes it all the more important that we set out a vision of our capital as a place that its people and businesses can be proud of. The City of Edinburgh Council's economic strategy aims to focus on four specific areas, each of which is designed to consolidate and expand Edinburgh's already outstanding role as an engine of local and national prosperity. The four areas are: physical development; attracting inward investment; enhancing the support services that the council provides to businesses; and, most important, helping to get unemployed people back into work or learning.

John Park made a valuable contribution when he reminded us about the role of the public sector and the need for high-quality working practices as well as well-paid employment, and I endorse his comments about the role that renewables can play in the re-industrialisation of Scotland.

One of the key challenges facing Edinburgh is the growing jobs gap that has been identified by the council.

Kezia Dugdale (Lothian) (Lab): Does the member welcome today's news that the SNP voted for the Labour amendment to abandon Edinburgh City Council's plans to privatise many public services in Edinburgh? Will he put his support for that move on the record?

Jim Eadie: As always, I am grateful to Kezia Dugdale for having her finger on the pulse. I do not think that it is a secret that the SNP was opposed to the private sector bid that would have involved the contracting-out of in-house services. We preferred the in-house bid, so I am happy to agree with her about that.

I return to the point about the challenges that face Edinburgh, and the growing jobs gap that the council has identified. By 2018, 37,000 more people could be looking for work in the city than there are jobs available. Tackling the jobs gap and creating the conditions for growth, investment and employment is the key economic challenge that is faced by all who have an interest in the city's prosperity and wellbeing. We simply must address that issue and continue to work to resolve it. I

would therefore welcome the cabinet secretary's view on how Edinburgh should address such challenges.

Seven growth sectors have been identified in the Government's economic strategy, including life sciences and our universities, both of which have already been referred to this afternoon. They are areas of particular strength for Edinburgh. Our capital city's prosperity has always been sustained by its long tradition of academic excellence, and that is more relevant than ever. The city's great universities work hand in hand with the private sector and public agencies to deliver outcomes that are recognised around the globe. That is particularly true in life sciences, renewable energy, and green technologies. Academic and intellectual excellence in those areas is a vital part of our knowledge economy and a major contributor to our economic prosperity.

The University of Edinburgh, which has its King's buildings in my constituency, is in every way at the heart of the city, and has for hundreds of years enhanced beyond measure the capital's quality of life. In the 21st century, it plays an important ambassadorial, cultural and international role in promoting the city and Scotland. Indeed, *Times Higher Education* recently ranked it as the seventh-best university in Europe. If it is to continue to flourish, it is important that we continue to make progress on issues such as digital connectivity, transport links and support for university start-ups.

As the convener of the cross-party group on life sciences, I welcome the Scottish Government's decision to develop a dedicated enterprise area for life sciences, which will include the Edinburgh bioquarter to the south of the city. I endorse the comments of Mike Capaldi, the bioquarter's commercialisation director, who said that the measures that have been proposed by the Scottish Government will

"add to our already strong proposition ... for Translational Medicine and Regenerative medicine".

Edinburgh is a vibrant, dynamic and exciting centre with a proud history, an eventful present and the potential to have a truly outstanding future. That will happen only if all of its stakeholders work together for the benefit of the people and businesses of this great capital.

16:10

John Finnie (Highlands and Islands) (SNP):

This has been an interesting debate. One of the most important things that we can do is be positive about our cities. We need some innovation in the economic climate that we face.

I will speak unashamedly about the Highland capital—the city in the Highlands, which is a

popular destination for many—and refer to a Highland Council document, "Inverness City Vision: thinking about the Inverness of the future". It is significant that that document was the subject of widespread consultation in conjunction with the Highlands-wide local development plan. The contribution from organisations such as Architecture and Design Scotland was welcome. Significantly, there was a lot of public interest in the consultation. Some of that was reflected in Scotland's housing expo, which took place in Inverness and was a great success.

The first point of the Inverness city vision is that the economy should be at the heart of everything. That priority is shared with the Scottish Government—indeed, it is the bedrock of everything that we are trying to achieve—and we know that cities play a significant role in economic growth not only for the nation but for their surrounding regions.

Collaboration is mentioned in the vision. It is important that not only the Scottish Government and local authorities but—in the Highlands—Highlands and Islands Enterprise collaborate. I look forward to a significant chunk of the additional £5 million that the cabinet secretary announced making its way north.

We hope for positive involvement from the UK Government, but that will prove to be challenging, given the £1.3 billion that has been removed from the budget and the significant attack on capital expenditure.

Collaboration between the cities through the alliance is also important. In line with that, I commend Jimmy Gray, the Labour provost of Inverness, for the important role that he plays in the alliance for Inverness and, indeed, the Highlands.

Many other aspects of collaboration will help to bring our cities forward. I commend an initiative that is taking place under the cabinet secretary's other portfolio with health and social care in the Highlands. That will improve the wellbeing of the Highlands and provide opportunities for asset management and the sharing of resources. For instance, if we get greater work across the public sector, it will result in the opportunity to free up resources such as Inverness castle.

I also commend the role of the Inverness BID Ltd. It is a member-led organisation of large and small businesses that are involved in a constructive dialogue about the future.

We have heard about the enterprise areas. There is not time to go into all the benefit that will come to the city and the Highlands from that initiative. However, the cabinet secretary referred to life sciences, and Inverness is proud to have world experts in diabetes and world leaders in

health research. Developing a niche in such matters provides cities with opportunities.

I will mention one site that was included in the enterprise area announcement: Nigg. It is not only of Highland, Scottish and UK significance, but of western European significance. The investment in that site will bring rich rewards not only to the immediate Nigg area but to the city of Inverness and the wider region. It will provide the opportunity for growth in the city. There are 111,000 people in the travel-to-work area of Dingwall and Inverness, so that opportunity will be welcome.

The investment will also be an opportunity to repatriate many of our workers who were involved in the initial oil boom of the 1970s and who now work overseas in, for example, Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan. It would be really good to see those families return.

The other matter that is mentioned in the Inverness city vision is strengthening the city centre. There are always negative comments about its city centre, but we need to be positive. One of the positive things that we can say is that, in the Highland Council area, nearly 8,000 businesses no longer pay rates. Whatever the challenges, that is something with which we have been able to help.

It is important to recognise that, as is mentioned in the Labour amendment, we must build on the city centre regeneration that took place previously. Part of the regeneration in Inverness concerned the visual appearance, which is hugely important to an area that relies on tourism.

I will race through a few other points. A better connected Inverness is what is sought. The infrastructure plan highlights firm commitments relating to the A9 and the A96. The plans are ambitious, but there is a solid commitment. I hope that Highland Council will meet its end of the commitment by completing the southern distributor road, with the eastern end being funded by the Scottish Government.

The A96 corridor is an ambitious plan to develop to the east out towards Nairn. That is an area of excellent agricultural land so, although I support the plan in general, I hope that we keep some quality agricultural land, because we all need tatties.

Improved rail times to the central belt, which require line upgrades, are important. I am a huge supporter of rail. The announcement of the £50 million investment in the Caledonian sleeper is very welcome. That helps with our carbon emissions and there have traditionally been difficulties with the flights to London getting slots anyway, so the sleeper will be a sound investment. I also welcome the commuter trains from Moray, Badenoch and Easter Ross.

The city benefits from a £51 million investment in Inverness College, which forms part of the University of the Highlands and Islands college system. That will not only retain our young folk but will, I hope, encourage others to come in.

Much more could be said about the culture of Inverness. We are very proud of Eden Court theatre, the city arts, Inverness Caledonian Thistle—which attracts people and has raised the city's profile—and the Gaelic hub that we hope to develop.

It is important to have families living in city centres; we need to have them living above the shops and in other currently empty spaces. There is a lot to be positive about and I hope that everyone will continue to be positive.

16:16

Hanzala Malik (Glasgow) (Lab): I am grateful for the opportunity to take part in this important debate. I have listened close and hard to the debate and I have to say that a lot of very positive things have been said about many cities, including Glasgow. It would be remiss of me not to add my bit for my city by saying how wonderful Glasgow is, how wonderful its citizens are, how well we are doing in Glasgow, that we are the second-biggest retail outlet in the UK after London and that we reach out to many parts of the world.

On a serious note, we are discussing an important issue. One thing that is missing is the link between our cities and our strategy in our overseas commitments and our vision of what we want to achieve in the long term. We want to see how we can add more and what else we can bring to the table. Although we recognise the skills, abilities, knowledge and structure in our cities, we do not have a clear and distinct policy for the development of our infrastructure, which would support our investments overseas and, more important, encourage overseas investors to invest in Scotland.

Four of our major cities have twinning agreements and memorandums of understanding across the world. In the 18 different countries with which we engage, Scottish cities are engaged with 27 cities or destinations. My point is: how does that impinge on our structure? How will we make sense of all that now that there is a Scottish Parliament? We need to understand that before the Scottish Parliament, Scottish cities dealt with overseas issues. Now that we have a Scottish Parliament, we need to be more focused in how we continue our engagement overseas.

The Scottish badge is recognised around the world and many people appreciate the good things that we do. We have invented a lot of good things. We have a good country and a good tourism

business and industry, but what else can we do? How can we promote our cities better? How can we interlink these—

Mark McDonald (North East Scotland) (SNP):

I agree with what the member says. He may not be aware that Aberdeen City Council officials are in Ghana speaking to businesses that have moved from the north-east to see whether the infrastructure that is in place in Aberdeen can be repeated in Ghana following the boom in the offshore sector there. We can learn a lot from cities elsewhere, but our cities can also project a lot to the world in terms of best practice and lessons that we can pass on from our experiences.

Hanzala Malik: My learned friend will be pleased to know that I agree with him. That is exactly the point that I am making. For example, four cities in Scotland have twinning agreements with four German cities—they are all different cities. We have four cities in Scotland twinned with four cities in France. I want to encourage a joined-up policy and find out how we can benefit from that twinning. What is the point of having twinings if no benefit comes to the country?

We have twinning agreements with cities all over the world—in China, Russia, Cuba and Pakistan. What is coming back? Are they just documents that are signed and put away, or will we actually get some trade from them? We have some limited cultural exchanges, but a lot of expense goes into the issue. A lot of trade delegations go out, but it is important that we as a Parliament assist the cities in coming up with a structure that is more useful, productive and focused on what we are trying to do.

Cuba has twinning agreements with more than 50 countries. It does not trade with them; they are bits of paper. We need to avoid that approach and ensure that our twinings are meaningful and not just cultural exchanges. We have to learn from each other. The cities growth fund and the Government's economic strategy are just as important as the twinings.

I listened to Drew Smith talk about our infrastructure and transport. One thing that is dear to me is the Glasgow airport rail link. It would be a very important piece of infrastructure for this country. That is true for all our airports: we need good, positive transport infrastructure so that our businesses can be encouraged and we can encourage others to come here to develop. If our infrastructure is poor, people will be reluctant to come. Companies do not have money to burn, and they are looking for safe havens. They cannot find a safer, more developed and hungrier country to develop in than Scotland, but we must have the infrastructure in place to encourage them to come here. That is why it is so important.

We have recognised the skills, ability and positive things that there are in cities in Scotland. One city that has not been mentioned so far is Stirling—that is a wonderful city, too. We need to encourage a strategy that will be beneficial to us in terms of our infrastructure and industry.

16:23

Stuart McMillan (West Scotland) (SNP): I welcome today's debate and the publication of the new cities strategy. I am sure that the strategy will be welcomed in Scotland's cities, and I hope that the Parliament can unite behind the initiative.

I have to express a wee bit of concern that there are no Lib Dems present this afternoon. Although they lost the votes in the cities last year—and the regions and towns—the document and initiative are things that Lib Dems should show an interest in. Unfortunately, they are not here to defend themselves.

The creation of the Scottish cities alliance is long overdue. As a non-city dweller, one thing that has really annoyed and disappointed me over the years is the constant bickering between those who have led Glasgow and those who have led Edinburgh about which city is better. I am sure that there are arguments on both sides, but as a non-city dweller I found the discussion boring and tedious. It also belittled those two marvellous cities.

I am delighted by the creation of the strategy and the Scottish cities alliance, and I welcome the fact that the six cities—not just the two—can work together to make their economies better and help Scotland to become better. As I said, the constant attacks detracted from Glasgow and Edinburgh's successes and opportunities. I accept that some of that might have been a bit of banter between the two cities, but we have grown up and I welcome that. A successful Scotland needs its two largest cities to work together.

I will talk about how the west of Scotland can benefit from the strategy, but first I want to talk about Dundee. I studied in Dundee, which is a marvellous city. Before I went, I had the impression that it was dour, drab and dreich, but I found it to be a wonderful city. The people are tremendous and very similar to the folk in Inverclyde, where I am from, and there is a range of things to do. Many people have come to live, work and study in Dundee, and it is a wonderful melting pot. I hope that the strategy will benefit the city.

The cabinet secretary talked about the wider regional benefits of the strategy and touched on the question that Willie Coffey asked in Parliament last week. When she appeared before the Economy, Energy and Tourism Committee, Chic

Brodie, Angus MacDonald and I made the point that we do not represent cities. We asked her how the strategy will affect the areas that we represent and whether funding for our areas will be reduced. The cabinet secretary gave an assurance, as she did today, that funding to our areas will not be reduced. I am happy to accept that. There are challenges to do with deprivation and poverty in the west of Scotland that are similar to the challenges in our cities. It is vital that the strategy is a success for the west of Scotland, and if Glasgow is a success, the west of Scotland can also be a success.

I stay in Inverclyde, which many members visited in June. Many people from Inverclyde commute to Glasgow and elsewhere for employment. If there is more investment and collaborative working, I anticipate that there will be greater opportunities for people in Inverclyde, if not elsewhere in the west of Scotland. The strategy presents opportunities for the area. There has been huge investment in Glasgow during the past four years and more investment is planned, so I stress that business opportunities for the wider region should be actively promoted by the relevant Government agencies. However wonderful our cities are, not everyone wants to live in or put their business in a city.

Members who visited Inverclyde last year will have appreciated the beauty and splendour of our area. Mark McDonald talked to me about the area and said that he thought that Inverclyde must have a massive tourism industry. That is unfortunately not the case, because there has been a lack of vision from many people who have led in Inverclyde over the years. I am glad to say that things are moving forward, but opportunities have been missed in the past.

Inverclyde was decimated by the Tories when they were last in power and we have lost 20,000 people, who moved to find employment. However, many people have not given up. The people who stayed still have hope and aspire to make Inverclyde better. I recognised much of what John Park said in his excellent and thoughtful speech, because similar things have happened to the area in which I live.

Drew Smith said that the Scottish Wildlife Trust talks about a “missed opportunity” in its briefing. I studied in Sweden and spent a lot of time in Stockholm, which is a stunning city. The Swedes are proud of the mix of green and built-up areas in the city. I gently remind Mr Smith that the Scottish National Party is not yet in power in Glasgow, so if he is questioning the lack of green space and parks in the city, he needs to look a bit closer to home.

I whole-heartedly agree with what Sandra White and John Park said about community-benefit

clauses, because we must ensure that there is community buy-in.

Neil Findlay talked about a socialist Government. It appears that he has not read the memo from his current leader, Ed Miliband, who talks about responsible capitalism. If Mr Findlay wants to put in a bid, I am sure that the trade unions are listening.

The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick): You really need to wind up.

Stuart McMillan: Okay. I welcome the strategy and I look forward to the six cities progressing and communities in the west of Scotland benefiting from the strategy.

16:29

Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): It is always a wee bit disturbing when I say at the beginning of a speech, “I agree with Jackson Carlaw.” Perhaps it is disturbing for him as well; I certainly hope so. Like Jackson Carlaw, I found myself a bit underwhelmed by this document, which rarely raises itself beyond the level of the glossy strategy documents of which we have seen very many. It has very nice pictures in it, but I am afraid that it never quite gets beyond that.

Jackson Carlaw can relax now, because the agreement between us ends there. I not only thought the document underwhelming, but found issues in it to object to. I should say, in case I do not shout loud enough at 5 o'clock, that I will be voting against the motion. That is mainly because of what I described as the central contradiction in John Swinney's and the Government's overarching economic policy—the idea of sustainable economic growth. The cabinet secretary says that the strategy is deliberately focused on economic growth, and that, for me, is its weakness. Mr Carlaw will happily tell me that polluting oil companies and money-grabbing healthcare companies are not doing those things simply because they are evil, but that they are contributing to gross domestic product. That is one of the problems with GDP as a measure of our success as a society. Cities are not only places where business owners get rich, or poor, but places where people live in communities, yet their interests do not show up in GDP or measures of economic growth.

There are some wrong assumptions in the document, particularly where it says, in the cabinet secretary's introduction and elsewhere, that cities have higher carbon emissions per capita than other parts of the country. That may appear to be true if we use the conventional methods in the UK, which do not account for urban land in terms of carbon sequestration, but in reality urban land—parks, gardens, golf courses and so on—absorbs

substantial amounts of CO₂ that are not counted in the existing figures. If we also take into account the high-density housing such as tenement accommodation in many of our cities, it is clear that cities have lower per capita CO₂ emissions than most of the rest of our country. There will still be huge challenges in reducing those emissions, and I do not want to underplay that.

The backing for growth showed up again today at question time when the Government talked about its backing for retail growth. I cannot help but see the contradiction between that and the objectives that are stated in the document about reducing waste output and energy consumption. I do not see how the two can be squared. That is a very serious problem, particularly for Glasgow—a city whose economic strategy seems to have been gambled on the basis of the phrase, “Let’s go shopping forever.”

Low-carbon and sustainable energy aspirations are stated throughout the document, but let us think about what we are building. I visited the company that intends to build Laurieston’s transformational regeneration area—the new buzz phrase. I hope that it will get the planning permission that it needs for that, because truly high-quality housing is very much needed on the site. However, when I ask people what they are doing to build sustainable housing for the 21st century, the answer is, “Well, it meets the building regs.” If we are remotely serious about building differently, and powering our cities differently, we need to start right now with community heating, CHP, and a host of new technologies that are not being put in place. There is nothing to prevent local authorities, if the Scottish Government were to back them in doing so, from borrowing to invest in publicly owned and community-owned renewables that could be generating income, not just clean energy.

The document contains rhetoric about low-carbon transport, but let us follow the money. The most substantial investments are in road building. In Glasgow, what is spent on the M74 dwarfs all the investment not only in the local roads that people use daily—money to deal with potholes, for example—but in sustainable transport. I commend Kevin Stewart, who may have been a single breath from saying, “It’s not just about building more roads and expanding the airports—it’s also about sustainability.” With that remarkable level of doublethink, he will go far in the dysfunctional industry that we have.

Any talk about connected cities seems to relate only to the drive time to get to cities, and to contain nothing about travel within cities. Furthermore, in looking at the transport elements of a document about cities, I was astonished to see nothing at all about buses. How can we

address the transport needs of a city such as Glasgow—in which most households do not have access to a car—if we are not prepared to acknowledge that people are receiving a grossly inadequate bus service? The service will not improve unless we take action.

I am not criticising only the current Government or its current strategy; I would level the same criticisms at the Glasgow City Council document “Future Glasgow”. It is a glossy document containing bland aspirational phrases with which few people could disagree. By the looks of the photographs, by 2061 everyone in Glasgow will be involved in a Ready brek advert, not in real life in a city. We can do so much better, but not with glossy documents with pretty photographs.

16:35

Alex Johnstone (North East Scotland) (Con):

Before Patrick Harvie’s contribution, I was tempted to say that the debate had largely been about motherhood and apple pie. However, by using that expression, I am leaping from metaphor to cliché in a single bound, and let us not go there.

The speech that we heard just a moment ago was perhaps the best of the debate—although I believe that Patrick Harvie had his tongue very much in his cheek when he suggested that “Let’s go shopping” may be the basis of future economic development. Many an economist appears to have taken that view in recent years, but I still do not believe that we can build our entire economy on retail—although retail is very important for many of our cities. During the debate, we have heard a great deal about what is good in our cities, and many of us have found a great deal on which we can agree. The published document is very much something on which we can all—with the possible exception of Patrick Harvie—agree. The future of Scotland relies on the success of its cities—cities that are very different in both scale and potential.

I am lucky enough to represent North East Scotland, a region that contains two of our larger cities. Dundee is an example of a city that has had to work hard for many years. It has delivered a great deal of success through its research and its education and it has demonstrated achievements in life sciences and in the programming industry, which we have heard a great deal about. In recent years, miracles have been achieved with the regeneration of more than one part of the city—and I am thinking in particular about the waterfront. I pay particular tribute to Joe FitzPatrick. During his time in the Scottish Parliament, he has become an outspoken advocate for the city of Dundee, although he now finds himself with a little bit of competition, as Jenny Marra is on the same ground. It is good that

the city has people who are willing to step up and defend its interests.

When it comes to defending the interests of a particular city, we have some competition in the form of Kevin Stewart, who has become an outspoken advocate for the city of Aberdeen—and, yes, there is a great deal to advocate about the city of Aberdeen. In comparison with Dundee, Aberdeen has, over the past 30 years, found itself in the right place at the right time. Not every city can be as lucky as that. Aberdeen has demonstrated a great deal of what other cities should be trying to achieve. We can consider the achievements of the Aberdeen city and shire economic forum—as the cabinet secretary suggested it was called. It has actually changed its name slightly, just to confuse us all. It is now Aberdeen city and shire economic future. The acronym is exactly the same, but it now means something different, which we had better take into account. It has achieved an enormous amount by bringing together people in the private sector and by making progress with initiatives that benefit that whole city region in the north-east.

I also commend the work of Nestrans, of which Kevin Stewart was once the chairman. Nestrans has demonstrated the importance of local authorities working together to strengthen transport links within a city region. Transport partnerships in other parts of the country have operated with varying degrees of success, and Nestrans has been an example of how things can be done correctly.

If we look again at that Aberdeen model, however, there are other things that we need to take into account. Earlier, we heard Jackson Carlaw say that what will deliver the strategy is our people, and that interference is not always the best or most beneficial approach for Government to take. Aberdeen has demonstrated in recent years the kind of altruism and support on the part of the successful businessmen of the area that, a generation or two ago, was the hallmark of other major cities such as Glasgow and Edinburgh, when fortunes were being made there. Aberdeen has been the city where money has been made and Sir Ian Wood came forward to offer substantial amounts of money to the city—for example, £50 million for the development of Union Terrace gardens. It is horrifying that a small number of people have been able to stir up as much negative publicity as they have and have tried to prevent Aberdeen from enjoying benefits similar to those achieved in other places at other times.

Patrick Harvie: The member talks about a small number of people opposing the scheme. Could he remind us of the results of the referendum?

Alex Johnstone: There has not been a proper referendum. Those who participated in the so-called referendum were a self-selecting and small sample, who came from across the entire world. Until we get a representative test of public opinion in Aberdeen, there is nothing that I would accept as providing a measure.

In her opening speech, Nicola Sturgeon made it clear that she wants the public and private sectors to work together to achieve objectives, and in the document there is a clear indication that private enterprise has a great deal to contribute to the development of our cities. Throughout the debate, that has been made clear by many speakers, none more so than my colleague Jackson Carlaw, who explained that private enterprise has a great deal to deliver and will do so most effectively when it is left to its own devices. Minimal interference is often the way to go. At the end of the debate, however, we saw an extraordinary exchange. As Jim Eadie proposed that principle, he was challenged from another corner of the chamber by someone who wanted to know why the SNP was not so much in favour of private sector involvement in the city of Edinburgh. Of course, when challenged, Mr Eadie backed down immediately. Therein lies the problem.

The Presiding Officer: The member needs to wind up.

Alex Johnstone: This Government understands the contribution that can be made by the private sector and, from its front benches, we regularly hear of the importance of the private sector in the development of our economy and, today, of our cities. However, when challenged, those who sit at the back are not prepared to make that same commitment. That is why this Government has a long way to go.

16:43

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): Like other members, I welcome the opportunity to debate the important contribution that Scotland's six cities make to our economy and our society.

My experience of cities is the reverse of the cabinet secretary's. I was born and brought up in Aberdeen, Hong Kong, which is a truly global city that is on a different scale to our cities in Scotland. I now live in a city region, in Dumbarton, that ancient capital of Strathclyde, which is probably one of Scotland's oldest cities. I acknowledge that Patrick Harvie is, indeed, a son of the rock.

Regardless of whether someone lives in Glasgow, Edinburgh, Dundee, Aberdeen, Inverness or Stirling, they will be fiercely proud of their city, its culture and its unique contribution to Scottish life. That has been demonstrated by every member this afternoon.

We have heard today that the majority of our population lives in and around cities—some 86 per cent of us. However, it is their importance in driving our economy that truly sets our cities apart. Our cities are, without question, the powerhouse of our economy. It is right that we should pay them special attention and it is right for us to invest in them. That is the case because we face bleak and challenging prospects.

No one can be anything other than deeply concerned about the significant rise in unemployment. In the past three months, unemployment has risen by 19,000—a staggering 200 people each and every day. The Scottish unemployment rate now stands at 8.6 per cent, which is higher than the UK average. All that comes on top of figures from the Scottish Retail Consortium that show the worst December of trading since at least 1999—despite my best efforts.

We know that consumer confidence is low, that sales are declining and that cost pressures remain intense. We know, too, from the Scottish Chambers of Commerce survey that business confidence is low. That is due in part to the euro zone crisis, but it is also due to public sector spending cuts. The SCC warns that there are few signs of improvement and that many companies expect to cut jobs in 2012. The situation is undoubtedly grim, but that is all the more reason why we should strive to mitigate the impact that it will have on our people and communities.

Therefore, like other members, I very much welcome the renewed focus on our cities. There is little to disagree with in the overarching principles of the strategy: improving connectivity and sustainability, developing knowledge and enhancing cities as appealing places in which to live, work and play. None of us disagrees with any of that—except, perhaps, Patrick Harvie.

I know that for my constituency of Dumbarton—and, indeed, for the whole of the west of Scotland—to thrive, we need a vibrant and thriving Glasgow. Academics tell us that, as do experts who work in economic development. The same is true for each of the regions surrounding our six cities, so it is spurious to demand that the jam, such as it is, be spread even more thinly across non-city local authorities.

Although I welcome the £5 million that the cabinet secretary announced in December and the further £2 million that she has announced today, I am sure that she will acknowledge that, in the face of the scale of the challenge that lies ahead, that funding is just a drop in the ocean. I welcome her recognition that it is a catalyst, rather than the totality of the resource that is available.

Of course, the context is that of a real-terms cut in the local government settlement. The SNP is always keen to tell us that local government has an increased share of the budget. That is all well and good, but it does not fit with the information from the Scottish Parliament information centre, which tells us that the budget for local government will decline by 6.1 per cent over the course of the spending review period, while the overall Scottish Government budget will decline by 2.7 per cent, so I ask the SNP not to tell me that local government is somehow getting a better deal. We need to be honest and recognise the challenge that we face.

I turn to the cities growth fund that was established by the Labour Scottish Executive, which, as we know, amounted to £173 million over a four to five-year period. The ambitions then were very similar to the ambitions that are set out in the present Government's cities strategy. The difference would appear to be in the scale of the resourcing. What additional resources does the cabinet secretary envisage being directed to our cities that will enable them to do what we all want them to do, which is to step up a gear and put in place the very projects that will improve connectivity and harness the potential of our cities to grow our economy? I accept that funds are more limited now, but although I share her view that we need to ensure that every penny that is spent is spent well, we need to look seriously at providing extra investment for our cities.

I understand from Richard Baker and Lewis Macdonald that in Aberdeen the focus should clearly be on the energy sector, including renewables. There are huge challenges to do with connectivity and broadband access that are severely hampering development.

In Dundee, Jenny Marra rightly urged the creation of a high-level jobs task force to give more people in the city the opportunity to work, and Joe FitzPatrick rightly mentioned the Dundee waterfront project, which has transformed the cityscape and which, interestingly, was supported in its initial development by the cities growth fund. However, I say earnestly to Joe FitzPatrick that simply rolling up a dedicated fund into a general settlement inevitably reduces focus. The Government has acknowledged that by making two separate allocations amounting to £7 million, instead of rolling that money up in the local government settlement.

Joe FitzPatrick: Does the member not accept that the decision of John Swinney and the SNP Government to remove the strings that were attached to the cities growth fund was exactly what cities across Scotland were asking for?

Jackie Baillie: Losing the focus and rolling up specific funding into a general settlement does not work. The Government has accepted that by

setting aside a separate £7 million for a new cities investment fund.

For Glasgow, Drew Smith outlined the need for the air route development fund to help build our international links, the need for the Glasgow airport rail link and more besides. Sandra White highlighted Glasgow's rich musical contribution: Celtic Connections starts today. I confess to some trepidation when she started to compare the cities strategy and its delivery to a kind of band. I had visions of the cabinet secretary as the lead singer, perhaps joining Jackson Carlaw in a duet.

All our cities, but particularly Stirling, Inverness, Glasgow and Edinburgh, have a key role in attracting overseas tourists and pumping new money into the economy. We need to look to VisitScotland to do more in that regard.

Jim Eadie rightly spoke about our academic and intellectual excellence and its importance to our economy and business. We need to support our academic institutions and ensure that they remain at the cutting edge of innovation and research.

I say to the cabinet secretary that cities excite much passion, which has been demonstrated in the debate. We recognise their importance to our everyday lives, whether we live or work in a city, or enjoy the many and varied cultural diversions that our cities offer. Every member has recognised their importance to the economy. The cabinet secretary therefore has broad support for the cities strategy, but we urge her to put in place the resources that will make it real and let all our cities flourish.

16:51

Nicola Sturgeon: I know that it is traditional to say that it has been a good debate, but I have really enjoyed it. It has been interesting and at times quite thought-provoking. The consensus that it has generated is very welcome, although it is always healthy to have someone who breaks the consensus—step forward, Patrick Harvie. I like and respect him, but I disagreed with much of what he said, although not everything; I quite like the idea of going shopping forever, but perhaps that is just a personal opinion.

More seriously, I agree with Patrick Harvie that GDP is not the only measure of success. As I said in my opening remarks, I believe that what makes our cities great is their contribution to our culture, society and educational opportunities. I also believe, however, particularly in this economic climate, that somebody who sees a focus on economic growth as a weakness is not on the same page as this Government, nor, I suspect, on the same page as many people across the country.

Patrick Harvie: We might get closer to being on the same page if the cabinet secretary could answer one question. Why does the cities strategy document have nothing to say about her constituents and mine who rely on buses in Glasgow, or about investment in improving the dismal bus service that our constituents put up with? Most households in Glasgow do not have access to a car, so why do we not have a cities strategy that has something to say about that?

Nicola Sturgeon: The cities strategy is not a declaration of all our policies on these issues. I will pass on Patrick Harvie's comments when I meet FirstBus tomorrow morning, but I point out to him that one of the biggest investments that this Government is about to make in the transport network of the city of Glasgow is in fastlink, which will be hugely important for the bus infrastructure across the city and which I hope all of us across the chamber will welcome.

I will address three themes in my concluding comments: money, the leadership of the agenda by the cities, and collaboration. If I have time, I will touch on some of the other points that have been made in the debate.

On the subject of the first theme, which is money, I say to Drew Smith and Jackie Baillie, echoing a point that Joe FitzPatrick made very well, that the cities growth fund has not been scrapped. For me, the much bigger question about the cities growth fund is what impact it had. I am not knocking it, and I do not want anybody to suggest that I am, but the independent evaluation of the fund said that it was difficult to see what it supported that was different to things that were supported through other Government programmes and that, overall, the fund had not had as great an impact as it could have had.

My point is that, regardless of how much money we have in a fund, the real challenge is to ensure that it has a big impact. That will be the challenge for the cities investment fund. As I said earlier, I would be happy to hear members' views—I have heard many during the debate—about how the fund should be spent and what the requirements and rules for the spend should be. I expect to bring a proposal to the first leadership group meeting of the Scottish cities alliance in late February, so if anybody has views and thoughts that they want to feed in, I would be very happy to hear them.

Sandra White's point about community benefit was good. Community benefit clauses have been used to good effect—the Raploch in Stirling provides a good example of that. We expect such provisions in the projects that the Scottish cities alliance develops.

The second theme that I will touch on is the importance of the cities leading the agenda, which was the key theme in Jackson Carlaw's speech. When I say to him that "Kumbaya" would have been preferable to his speech, I mean no disrespect to his speech—I just would have loved to hear him lead us all in a chorus of that song in the chamber—[*Interruption.*] There is indeed time yet.

Jackson Carlaw was absolutely right. There is a sentence that members might not hear from me very often. He was right to say that the dynamic that is needed to deliver the aspirations in the strategy will not come from within the Parliament. The cities alliance is a partnership. The Government's role is to be a supporter, enabler and facilitator—Jim Eadie also made that point well. The Government's job is not to dictate to cities or usurp the role of city councils. The agenda should and will be led by the cities, but it is important that the cities work with others, too.

I agree with other members that John Park's speech was very thoughtful. He made a good point about the challenges and the benefits in an area such as Fife, which is sandwiched between cities. Stuart McMillan made a similar point.

Hanzala Malik set the debate in the international context. He was absolutely right to say that our cities have things to teach cities elsewhere in the world and things to learn from them.

The third aspect that I will touch on is collaboration. John Finnie talked about the benefits and the importance of collaboration. I echo his comments about Provost Jimmy Gray, who launched the agenda with me before Christmas.

It is understandable that Kevin Stewart and many other members spoke passionately about their cities. If I was here in a constituency capacity, I would speak just as passionately about Glasgow and particularly about the south side of that wonderful city. It is right that members should talk about the importance, benefits and attributes of their cities, but the approach in the document recognises not just what is valuable about cities individually but how we can support them to be greater than the sum of their parts.

Kevin Stewart was absolutely right to say that competition between our cities is sometimes appropriate, but sometimes it gets in the way and leads to the disadvantage of all. Stuart McMillan was right to say that, in the past, the rivalry between Glasgow and Edinburgh for its own sake has not been in the interests of either city. Collaboration is key to success in what we aspire to do.

In the couple of minutes that are left, I will touch on some other issues that were raised. I agree

with much that Drew Smith said about the air route development fund. The Government is seeking to work with the European Commission to find the flexibility that we need to support air routes in such a way. I made that point last week when I launched the second daily Emirates flight from Glasgow to Dubai. Emirates is another example of a company that is keen to invest in Scotland and which seems to be oblivious to all this nonsense talk of uncertainty that we hear from other parties in the Parliament.

I echo Joe FitzPatrick's point about Perth's city bid, to which I give my whole-hearted support. I hope that Scotland will have seven cities before too long.

Sandra White asked about TIF. I am sure that she will appreciate that I cannot comment on the Buchanan Galleries. The business case is still under consideration and it would not be appropriate for me to comment on that today.

TIF is in a pilot phase and we are supporting a limited number of pilot projects. If the Government sees TIF as a successful initiative, we will be keen to explore how to take more advantage from it.

Jenny Marra talked about Sistema Scotland. In my constituency capacity, I met Sistema representatives before Christmas. I hope to see their fantastic work at first hand in the Raploch before too long and I am keen for them to take that to other areas, not just in Dundee but in the city of Glasgow.

In conclusion, a range of extremely good points has been made. There is consensus on the importance of our cities, not just as cities, but as the drivers of growth and success in the rest of the country. The agenda for cities, like the fund that I have announced, is a catalyst. It is meant to focus us on what more we can do with our cities working together to ensure that they fulfil their potential. I look forward to continuing to work with members and those in the public and private sectors and communities to ensure that we can take advantage of this opportunity and ensure the success of all our cities.

The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick): That ends the debate. I say to the cabinet secretary that, despite the invitation to Jackson Carlaw to join her in singing, there will be no singing in the chamber.

Dr Richard Simpson (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): On a point of order, Presiding Officer.

The Cabinet Secretary for Parliamentary Business and Government Strategy (Bruce Crawford): He is going to sing.

Dr Simpson: I do not want to sing, although I will if Bruce Crawford asks me to.

I seek the Presiding Officer's guidance on the rules regarding the admissibility of Scottish Parliament motions and the abuse of the system in order to mislead Parliament in contravention of rule 3.1.8 of the members' code of conduct, which requires that members act honestly.

Presiding Officer, you may be aware of motion S4M-01746, which was lodged on 18 January, in the name of Bob Doris MSP. In that motion, Bob Doris cites a motion for an Opposition day debate in the House of Commons in order to assert that the Labour Party supports the privatisation of the national health service. The move was accompanied by an SNP press release that stated:

"Scottish Labour's MPs including the party's deputy leader Anas Sarwar and shadow Scottish Secretary Margaret Curran voted in favour of using the private sector throughout the NHS."

In fact, the House of Commons motion in question is backed by the trade union Unison as part of its our NHS, our future campaign and was drafted to oppose the Conservative-led

"Government's plans to open up the NHS"

in England

"as a regulated market, increasing private sector involvement in both commissioning and provision of NHS services",

which will

"risk putting profits before patients".

It can in no way be honestly portrayed as support for increased private sector involvement in the NHS; in fact, the precise opposite is true.

In view of the fact that such manifestly false assertions have found their way into a motion of the Parliament, what provision is there for members to be required to withdraw motions if they are found to be demonstrably false and misleading, considering that they will remain on the record even if they are amended? Will the Presiding Officer confirm that the chamber office is unable to prevent the lodging and publication of such erroneous motions, as accuracy is not currently one of the admissibility criteria under rule 8.2.2 of the standing orders? If so, does she agree that that should be changed in order to protect the Parliament's integrity?

Finally, is it appropriate that a member who wantonly and mischievously misleads Parliament in this way should be able to continue as deputy convener of the Health and Sport Committee?

The Presiding Officer: The criteria for the admissibility of motions do not currently include accuracy. It is for the member who lodges the motion to determine whether it is accurate.

Dr Simpson has had a lengthy opportunity to make his point, which is now on the record. I am quite sure that if the member in question needs to reflect on Dr Simpson's words, he will do so.

Decision Time

17:04

The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick): There are five questions to be put as a result of today's business. [*Interruption.*] Will members settle down, please?

I remind members that, in relation to the debate on local government elections in 2012, if the amendment in the name of Sarah Boyack is agreed to, the amendment in the name of Margaret Mitchell will fall.

The first question is, that amendment S4M-01741.2, in the name of Sarah Boyack, which seeks to amend motion S4M-01741, in the name of Derek Mackay, on local government elections in 2012, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Baker, Richard (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Beamish, Claudia (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Brown, Gavin (Lothian) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (West Scotland) (Con)
 Chisholm, Malcolm (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (Lab)
 Davidson, Ruth (Glasgow) (Con)
 Dugdale, Kezia (Lothian) (Lab)
 Eadie, Helen (Cowdenbeath) (Lab)
 Fee, Mary (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Ferguson, Patricia (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (Lab)
 Findlay, Neil (Lothian) (Lab)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Goldie, Annabel (West Scotland) (Con)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Gray, Iain (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Henry, Hugh (Renfrewshire South) (Lab)
 Hume, Jim (South Scotland) (LD)
 Johnstone, Alex (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kelly, James (Rutherglen) (Lab)
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab)
 Lamont, John (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Macintosh, Ken (Eastwood) (Lab)
 Malik, Hanzala (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Marra, Jenny (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Martin, Paul (Glasgow Provan) (Lab)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McCulloch, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 McDougall, Margaret (West Scotland) (Lab)
 McGrigor, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 McLetchie, David (Lothian) (Con)
 McMahon, Michael (Uddingston and Bellshill) (Lab)
 McMahon, Siobhan (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 McNeil, Duncan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab)
 McTaggart, Anne (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Milne, Nanette (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Murray, Elaine (Dumfriesshire) (Lab)
 Park, John (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)

Pearson, Graeme (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Pentland, John (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)
 Scanlon, Mary (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)
 Scott, Tavish (Shetland Islands) (LD)
 Simpson, Dr Richard (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Smith, Drew (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Smith, Elaine (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Stewart, David (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)

Against

Adam, Brian (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Allan, Dr Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Biagi, Marco (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Brodie, Chic (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Burgess, Margaret (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Campbell, Aileen (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 Campbell, Roderick (North East Fife) (SNP)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Crawford, Bruce (Stirling) (SNP)
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don, Nigel (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Eadie, Jim (Edinburgh Southern) (SNP)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
 Fabiani, Linda (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Finnie, John (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gibson, Rob (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Ingram, Adam (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
 Johnstone, Alison (Lothian) (Green)
 Keir, Colin (Edinburgh Western) (SNP)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 Lyle, Richard (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 MacAskill, Kenny (Edinburgh Eastern) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Angus (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 Mackay, Derek (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Mackenzie, Mike (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 Maxwell, Stewart (West Scotland) (SNP)
 McAlpine, Joan (South Scotland) (SNP)
 McDonald, Mark (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)
 McLeod, Aileen (South Scotland) (SNP)
 McLeod, Fiona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (West Scotland) (SNP)
 Neil, Alex (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Paterson, Gil (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Robertson, Dennis (Aberdeenshire West) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Salmond, Alex (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)

Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Thompson, Dave (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Walker, Bill (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Watt, Maureen (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Wheelhouse, Paul (South Scotland) (SNP)
 White, Sandra (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Wilson, John (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow) (SNP)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 53, Against 68, Abstentions 0.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S4M-01741.1, in the name of Margaret Mitchell, which seeks to amend motion S4M-01741, in the name of Derek Mackay, on local government elections in 2012, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Brown, Gavin (Lothian) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (West Scotland) (Con)
 Davidson, Ruth (Glasgow) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Goldie, Annabel (West Scotland) (Con)
 Hume, Jim (South Scotland) (LD)
 Johnstone, Alex (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Lamont, John (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McGrigor, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 McLetchie, David (Lothian) (Con)
 Milne, Nanette (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Scanlon, Mary (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)
 Scott, Tavish (Shetland Islands) (LD)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)

Against

Adam, Brian (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Allan, Dr Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Baker, Richard (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Beamish, Claudia (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Biagi, Marco (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Brodie, Chic (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Burgess, Margaret (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Campbell, Aileen (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 Campbell, Roderick (North East Fife) (SNP)
 Chisholm, Malcolm (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (Lab)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Crawford, Bruce (Stirling) (SNP)
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)

Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don, Nigel (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Dugdale, Kezia (Lothian) (Lab)
 Eadie, Helen (Cowdenbeath) (Lab)
 Eadie, Jim (Edinburgh Southern) (SNP)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
 Fabiani, Linda (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Fee, Mary (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Ferguson, Patricia (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (Lab)
 Findlay, Neil (Lothian) (Lab)
 Finnie, John (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gibson, Rob (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Gray, Iain (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Henry, Hugh (Renfrewshire South) (Lab)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Ingram, Adam (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
 Johnstone, Alison (Lothian) (Green)
 Keir, Colin (Edinburgh Western) (SNP)
 Kelly, James (Rutherglen) (Lab)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 Lyle, Richard (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 MacAskill, Kenny (Edinburgh Eastern) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Angus (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 Macintosh, Ken (Eastwood) (Lab)
 Mackay, Derek (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Mackenzie, Mike (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Malik, Hanzala (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Marra, Jenny (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Martin, Paul (Glasgow Provan) (Lab)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 Maxwell, Stewart (West Scotland) (SNP)
 McAlpine, Joan (South Scotland) (SNP)
 McCulloch, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 McDonald, Mark (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 McDougall, Margaret (West Scotland) (Lab)
 McKelvie, Christina (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)
 McLeod, Aileen (South Scotland) (SNP)
 McLeod, Fiona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 McMahon, Michael (Uddingston and Bellshill) (Lab)
 McMahon, Siobhan (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 McMillan, Stuart (West Scotland) (SNP)
 McNeil, Duncan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab)
 McTaggart, Anne (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Murray, Elaine (Dumfriesshire) (Lab)
 Neil, Alex (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Park, John (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Paterson, Gil (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Pearson, Graeme (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Pentland, John (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)
 Robertson, Dennis (Aberdeenshire West) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Salmond, Alex (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Simpson, Dr Richard (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Smith, Drew (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Smith, Elaine (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab)
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)

Stewart, David (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Thompson, Dave (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Walker, Bill (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Watt, Maureen (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Wheelhouse, Paul (South Scotland) (SNP)
 White, Sandra (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Wilson, John (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow) (SNP)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 17, Against 104, Abstentions 0.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S4M-01741, in the name of Derek Mackay, on local government elections in 2012, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Adam, Brian (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Allan, Dr Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Biagi, Marco (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Brodie, Chic (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Burgess, Margaret (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Campbell, Aileen (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 Campbell, Roderick (North East Fife) (SNP)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Crawford, Bruce (Stirling) (SNP)
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don, Nigel (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Eadie, Jim (Edinburgh Southern) (SNP)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
 Fabiani, Linda (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Finnie, John (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gibson, Rob (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Ingram, Adam (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
 Johnstone, Alison (Lothian) (Green)
 Keir, Colin (Edinburgh Western) (SNP)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 Lyle, Richard (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 MacAskill, Kenny (Edinburgh Eastern) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Angus (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 Mackay, Derek (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Mackenzie, Mike (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)

Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 Maxwell, Stewart (West Scotland) (SNP)
 McAlpine, Joan (South Scotland) (SNP)
 McDonald, Mark (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)
 McLeod, Aileen (South Scotland) (SNP)
 McLeod, Fiona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (West Scotland) (SNP)
 Neil, Alex (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Paterson, Gil (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Robertson, Dennis (Aberdeenshire West) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Salmond, Alex (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Thompson, Dave (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Walker, Bill (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Watt, Maureen (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Wheelhouse, Paul (South Scotland) (SNP)
 White, Sandra (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Wilson, John (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow) (SNP)

Against

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Baker, Richard (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Beamish, Claudia (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Chisholm, Malcolm (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (Lab)
 Dugdale, Kezia (Lothian) (Lab)
 Eadie, Helen (Cowdenbeath) (Lab)
 Fee, Mary (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Ferguson, Patricia (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (Lab)
 Findlay, Neil (Lothian) (Lab)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Gray, Iain (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Henry, Hugh (Renfrewshire South) (Lab)
 Kelly, James (Rutherglen) (Lab)
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab)
 Macintosh, Ken (Eastwood) (Lab)
 Malik, Hanzala (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Marra, Jenny (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Martin, Paul (Glasgow Provan) (Lab)
 McCulloch, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 McDougall, Margaret (West Scotland) (Lab)
 McMahon, Michael (Uddingston and Bellshill) (Lab)
 McMahon, Siobhan (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 McNeil, Duncan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab)
 McTaggart, Anne (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Murray, Elaine (Dumfriesshire) (Lab)
 Park, John (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Pearson, Graeme (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Pentland, John (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)
 Simpson, Dr Richard (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Smith, Drew (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Smith, Elaine (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab)
 Stewart, David (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)

Abstentions

Brown, Gavin (Lothian) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (West Scotland) (Con)
 Davidson, Ruth (Glasgow) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)

Goldie, Annabel (West Scotland) (Con)
 Hume, Jim (South Scotland) (LD)
 Johnstone, Alex (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Lamont, John (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McGrigor, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 McLetchie, David (Lothian) (Con)
 Milne, Nanette (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Scanlon, Mary (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)
 Scott, Tavish (Shetland Islands) (LD)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 68, Against 36, Abstentions 17.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament notes the importance of local democracy and in particular this year's local elections; welcomes the response of the Scottish Government, local authorities and others to the Gould report and the improvements that have been made in electoral administration as a result; further notes that preparations for the local government elections in Scotland in May 2012 have been taken forward in a collaborative manner with electoral professionals and local authorities including work to procure, develop and test a system of electronic counting to be used in the elections; calls on all of those with an interest in these elections to work to further increase and improve voter engagement and participation, and supports the recommendation of the Scotland Bill Committee that the UK Government should amend the Scotland Bill to devolve responsibility and powers for all elections that take place in Scotland, except those to the UK and EU Parliaments.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S4M-01740.1, in the name of Drew Smith, which seeks to amend motion S4M-01740, in the name of Nicola Sturgeon, on the agenda for cities, be agreed to.

Amendment agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S4M-01740, in the name of Nicola Sturgeon, on the agenda for cities, as amended, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Adam, Brian (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Allan, Dr Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Baker, Richard (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Beamish, Claudia (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Biagi, Marco (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Brodie, Chic (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Brown, Gavin (Lothian) (Con)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Burgess, Margaret (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Campbell, Aileen (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 Campbell, Roderick (North East Fife) (SNP)
 Carlaw, Jackson (West Scotland) (Con)

Chisholm, Malcolm (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (Lab)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Crawford, Bruce (Stirling) (SNP)
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 Davidson, Ruth (Glasgow) (Con)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don, Nigel (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Dugdale, Kezia (Lothian) (Lab)
 Eadie, Helen (Cowdenbeath) (Lab)
 Eadie, Jim (Edinburgh Southern) (SNP)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
 Fabiani, Linda (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Fee, Mary (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Ferguson, Patricia (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (Lab)
 Findlay, Neil (Lothian) (Lab)
 Finnie, John (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gibson, Rob (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Goldie, Annabel (West Scotland) (Con)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Gray, Iain (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Henry, Hugh (Renfrewshire South) (Lab)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hume, Jim (South Scotland) (LD)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Ingram, Adam (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
 Johnstone, Alex (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Keir, Colin (Edinburgh Western) (SNP)
 Kelly, James (Rutherglen) (Lab)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab)
 Lamont, John (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 Lyle, Richard (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 MacAskill, Kenny (Edinburgh Eastern) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Angus (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 Macintosh, Ken (Eastwood) (Lab)
 Mackay, Derek (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Mackenzie, Mike (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Malik, Hanzala (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Marra, Jenny (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Martin, Paul (Glasgow Provan) (Lab)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 Maxwell, Stewart (West Scotland) (SNP)
 McAlpine, Joan (South Scotland) (SNP)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McCulloch, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 McDonald, Mark (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 McDougall, Margaret (West Scotland) (Lab)
 McGrigor, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 McKelvie, Christina (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)
 McLeod, Aileen (South Scotland) (SNP)
 McLeod, Fiona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 McLetchie, David (Lothian) (Con)
 McMahon, Michael (Uddingston and Bellshill) (Lab)
 McMahon, Siobhan (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 McMillan, Stuart (West Scotland) (SNP)
 McNeil, Duncan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab)
 McTaggart, Anne (Glasgow) (Lab)

Milne, Nanette (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Murray, Elaine (Dumfriesshire) (Lab)
 Neil, Alex (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Park, John (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Paterson, Gil (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Pearson, Graeme (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Pentland, John (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)
 Robertson, Dennis (Aberdeenshire West) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Salmond, Alex (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Scanlon, Mary (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)
 Scott, Tavish (Shetland Islands) (LD)
 Simpson, Dr Richard (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Smith, Drew (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Smith, Elaine (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Stewart, David (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Thompson, Dave (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Walker, Bill (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Watt, Maureen (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Wheelhouse, Paul (South Scotland) (SNP)
 White, Sandra (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Wilson, John (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow) (SNP)

Against

Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Johnstone, Alison (Lothian) (Green)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 118, Against 3, Abstentions 0.

Motion, as amended, agreed to,

That the Parliament recognises the vital contributions that Scotland's cities and their regions can make to delivering the aspirations of the Government Economic Strategy; welcomes the commitment shown by the cities to work collaboratively with each other, with the Scottish Government and with national agencies to optimise that growth for the benefit of Scotland as a whole; notes that the focus of the Scottish Cities Alliance is on creating collaborative opportunities for enhancing sustainable economic growth, attracting large-scale private sector investment and creating jobs; notes that the four themes of the collaborative work are connectivity, sustainability, knowledge and liveability; welcomes the publication of Scotland's Cities: Delivering for Scotland alongside the Cities Investment Fund, which is designed to support the Scottish Cities Alliance in developing collaborative programmes that promote growth, lever investment and protect and create jobs; further recognises that this new fund builds on the success of the previous Cities Growth Fund, which provided substantial and targeted support for the development of Scotland's cities amounting to £173 million between 2003 and 2008, and further welcomes the initiative as a renewed focus on the actual and potential contribution of Scotland's cities to economic prosperity and job creation through better connectivity, sustainability, better use of knowledge and improved liveability for all those who live and work in Scotland's cities, their regions and in the country as a whole.

"Introducing in Scotland"

The Deputy Presiding Officer (John Scott):

The final item of business is a members' business debate on motion S4M-01065, in the name of Joan McAlpine, on saving "Introducing in Scotland". The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament expresses its concern that the BBC is considering scrapping *Introducing in Scotland*, a radio show based at Pacific Quay in Glasgow that aims to find the best new unsigned music talent in Scotland, as part of the BBC's so-called Delivering Quality First plans; believes that giving new artists a platform for their music is a valuable public service; considers that the show's producers and presenters, Ally McCrae and, previously, Vic Galloway, have done valuable work over the last 11 years in giving new talent exposure to the listening public; is further concerned that, if such programmes are centralised to London, unsigned musicians from Scotland will have less coverage; notes the support for *Introducing in Scotland*; notes that the petition to save it has received nearly 6,000 signatures in less than one week, and further notes that the petition is available for signing at: www.petitionbuzz.com/petitions/introducingscotland.

17:10

Joan McAlpine (South Scotland) (SNP):

I thank all those members across the parties who supported the motion and who will speak in the debate today. Cuts to the BBC's radio output are very much in the news this week after it was revealed that one in three Radio Scotland production staff is to lose their job. At First Minister's question time, we heard the deep concerns about the loss of two high-quality Radio Scotland programmes, "Scotland at Ten" and "Newsweek Scotland". Their absence will concern members across the chamber and will, no doubt, be discussed in the coming days and weeks. In particular, I look forward to the matter being addressed next Tuesday at the Education and Culture Committee's timely round-table discussion on broadcasting and democracy in Scotland. However, today I will talk about another radio programme that is threatened by the BBC's "Delivering Quality First" operational restructuring plans.

Politicians are less likely to have heard the music show "Introducing in Scotland" than to have heard the current affairs programmes that are threatened, and I would be surprised if any had ever appeared on it. Nevertheless, we should be just as concerned at its loss. "Introducing in Scotland" has a loyal following of young people and makes a vital contribution to the creative industries, which are among Scotland's key economic strengths and a growth area for jobs. The "Introducing in Scotland" radio show is hosted by Ally McCrae and is broadcast every Sunday

night from midnight to 2 am. It is the only Scottish opt-out on Radio 1 and listeners can also hear it on the internet. The show has a remit to provide the

“best new unsigned, undiscovered and under the radar music in Scotland”,

and it has an excellent track record—pardon the pun—of doing just that.

Under Ally McCrae, this year, and his predecessor, Vic Galloway, in the 11 years before that, “Introducing in Scotland” has been the only outlet on Radio 1 to showcase up-and-coming bands and solo artists from Scotland to a Scottish audience. In addition to the weekly show, which has been moved to something of a graveyard slot in the past year, the show reaches a pan-United Kingdom audience once a month. Pretty much all Scottish success stories from the past decade are where they are today because of early exposure through airplay and live sessions on the show. In fact, two of Scotland’s most successful pop exports, the producer Calvin Harris, from Dumfries, and the band Frightened Rabbit, from Selkirk, who come from the South Scotland region, were first played on the show. Calvin Harris had his first live session on it way back in 2007 and, in a short space of time, was invited to work with Kylie Minogue. That shows the influence that the show has. The BBC’s proposal to replace the show with a UK-wide programme will mean less exposure for the Calvin Harris of the future.

The BBC insists that the weekly UK-wide show with which it wants to replace the opt-outs from Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales will be an improvement, but that is not what fans think, and 7,000 of them have signed a petition to save the Scottish show. Per head of population in Scotland, that is a higher proportion than the number of people in the UK who signed the petition to save BBC 6 Music, which most people will remember as a very successful campaign that achieved its purpose after a blaze of publicity. The campaigners to save “Introducing in Scotland” have been diligent in their enthusiasm over the past few weeks and months. They are not all people who are involved in politics; they are simply driven by a real love of and enthusiasm for new music. They have taken their case to the BBC trustee for Scotland, to the head of Radio 1 in London, to the Cabinet Secretary for Culture and External Affairs, Ms Hyslop, and to the Minister for Culture, Communications and Creative Industries in London, Ed Vaizey.

The campaigners point out that, on average, between 21 and 26 tracks by Scottish artists are played on the show every Sunday. If it is replaced by a UK-wide show, that number will be reduced considerably to about one in four songs on the playlist, and it would be even less if it were

determined according to Scotland’s UK population share.

The implications are wider than those for one radio show, however enjoyable and popular it is. Many Scottish artists go on to support a network of jobs in Scotland in areas such as marketing, management, tour support, security, promotional opportunities and work for recording studios and session musicians. It is notable that the Musicians Union has been very supportive of the campaign to save “Introducing in Scotland”.

The music industry in Scotland is a real strength. We can see that in the growth of the festivals movement, which results in thousands of tourists coming to Scotland. In the past two decades, live performances here have increased by 82 per cent. Many music business contacts to whom I have spoken, including Paolo Nutini’s manager, Brendan Moon, who is a big supporter of the campaign, believe that the 82 per cent growth is linked directly to shows such as “Introducing in Scotland” and the talent that they promote.

It is the BBC’s role, as a public service provider, to serve hard-to-reach audiences, which includes young people. The BBC has a duty to showcase culture and to support talent development in every part of the UK. The moving of the show to London could damage the vibrant music scene in Scotland by limiting access and opportunities for Scottish artists to be heard.

It is important to talk about access because, at present, the show is based in Glasgow. For people throughout the country from places such as Inverness and Aberdeen and from rural areas such as Selkirk, Glasgow is much more accessible than London, where they will have no relationship at all with the producers.

I will finish with the words of Scott Hutchison of Frightened Rabbit, who began in Selkirk. He said:

“It would be a travesty if the show was cut from the BBC radio schedule in Scotland, and scrapping it would reinforce the popular fallacy that the industry does not exist outside London.”

17:16

Mark McDonald (North East Scotland) (SNP):

I congratulate my colleague Joan McAlpine on securing this extremely important debate on a vital issue that relates to the cultural fabric of Scotland. Scotland’s music has a strong international reputation, not just because of our folk music, but because of major international artists, from Annie Lennox to Franz Ferdinand and Amy Macdonald, who have found success beyond these shores and in charts throughout the world.

A concerning feature of the BBC proposals is the effect on opportunities for new and up-and-coming artists, who sometimes need a leg-up to make themselves known to the industry, which all too often is very focused on existing major acts and less so on up-and-coming ones. Such acts might need a bit of cultivation and assistance to make the breakthrough, and shows such as "Introducing in Scotland" are vital for that.

When I was at university in Aberdeen and not long after that, there was a furore because the local radio station Radio Northsound had dropped its hour-long session in which it played music from local bands. If a local band produced an EP, its songs could be played on the show, which would give them exposure to the wider public in the north-east who perhaps did not go to the gigs that took place in the evenings. When that slot went, the argument was that, if those bands wanted to get exposure, most of them would have to leave Aberdeen to cultivate their reputations in the Glasgow music scene, which often drew bands away from Aberdeen. I do not have a problem with artists leaving the area in which they started to make a success of themselves, but that should be out of choice, not necessity and starvation of opportunity.

That is the concern that I have in relation to "Introducing in Scotland". I was struck by the parallel that exists between the two cases. The further we force people to go to gain recognition, the more difficult we make it for them to make a breakthrough. Bands that previously would have gone from Aberdeen and the north-east to the Glasgow music scene to make their name and cultivate a reputation—and which might have got a leg-up through "Introducing in Scotland" being broadcast from Glasgow—now might think that, to make the breakthrough, they will have to go to the London music scene. To be perfectly honest, it is much more difficult for a band to make its name and cultivate a reputation in London, because London attracts people from throughout the UK, whereas in Scotland we have a smaller population and therefore, by definition, fewer bands than there are at a pan-UK level.

A number of Aberdeen bands have gone on to make a modest success of themselves and gain a strong reputation. The punk band The Xcerts gained a number of important support and festival slots having started playing in local clubs in Aberdeen. Another band, Driveblind, went to the United States to make a success of themselves. Bands like that, who left after making a reputation for themselves, might now find themselves having to leave to make their reputation if we lose such opportunities for them.

I call on the BBC to look at what it is doing and to think about the impact that its decision is likely

to have on cultural output from nations such as Scotland. Let us not forget Wales and Northern Ireland, which are just as important to this issue. We should unite in solidarity with the campaigners in those nations who are trying to save their local opt-out and the opportunities that it provides to their local artists. Hopefully, a united campaign, as is being fought, and as Joan McAlpine has highlighted tonight, will be successful. I call on the BBC to reverse its decision.

17:21

Drew Smith (Glasgow) (Lab): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak briefly in an important debate, which is attracting considerable interest in the Parliament, on the subject of contemporary music in Scotland and the specific issue of "Introducing in Scotland".

I congratulate Joan McAlpine on securing the debate and all those who have been involved in the campaign. As an avid listener to "Introducing in Scotland" for many years, and as a keen gig-goer, I fully support the sentiments that Ms McAlpine expressed in her motion and I enjoyed her speech. I also associate myself with the remarks that she made about "Newsweek Scotland" and "Scotland at Ten".

The contemporary music industry in Scotland is often overlooked, but it makes a significant contribution to the Scottish economy and to our cultural life. My city of Glasgow is, of course, a United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization city of music. That designation recognises the extent of interest in classical and traditional music but also the importance of the Glasgow contemporary music scene.

I listened carefully to Mark McDonald's speech. As a former student of the University of Aberdeen, I well remember the Aberdeen music scene and Mark McDonald made a cogent case for what happens when something as important as the radio slot is removed from the scene and people have to turn their attention elsewhere. I well recall many long nights spent in Drummond's in Belmont Street in Aberdeen and many other quality establishments. That is a point well made. Without the opportunities provided by "Introducing in Scotland", which is based in Glasgow but provides a showcase for talent from all over Scotland, contemporary music will have a very serious problem.

In previous parliamentary sessions, Pauline McNeill campaigned extensively with the cross-party group on the contemporary music industry. It developed a music manifesto that focused on recognising the successes of music promoters and the recording industry, and improving conditions, particularly for live musicians. She even arranged

for gigs to take place in the garden lobby of the Parliament, which I enjoyed attending. I am sure that, having raised some of these issues again, Joan McAlpine might want to think about what more we can do to promote contemporary music.

I was pleased that, during last May's elections, Scottish Labour was the only party to develop and promote a comprehensive music policy, which included initiatives on instruments and recording facilities. Pauline McNeill was very much the driving force behind that work.

"Introducing in Scotland" is a vital part of the Scottish music scene. Many successful bands made early appearances on the show and Joan McAlpine mentioned some of them. More than that, the show has been a showcase for live music, and not just music from Glasgow. It allows listeners around Scotland and in other parts of the UK to hear the best of unsigned talent. Later commercial success is only one element of what makes a band great.

I fully endorse the motion. I look forward to hearing what action the Cabinet Secretary for Culture and External Affairs is taking to put pressure on BBC Scotland or will take if she has not already had the chance to do so. If we were talking about the closure of the BBC orchestra or a reduction in the coverage of traditional music, we would rightly be up in arms. Although I regularly enjoy those types of music, pop and rock is often forgotten by the powers that be, perhaps sometimes because of the stuffiness of the corporation.

I regret that I was not able to attend the lobby that Joan McAlpine organised, but if I can help the campaign in any way, I make clear my willingness to do so.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Annabelle Ewing, to be followed by Annabel Goldie.

17:24

Annabelle Ewing (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP): Presiding Officer, I hope that that does not cause too much confusion for the hordes of people who are listening to the debate.

To be fair, I imagine that the debate will attract widespread interest, perhaps later on online facilities, among the people whom we are trying to help tonight: the listeners—the loyal fan base, as Joan McAlpine said—of the excellent programme that we are discussing.

I am pleased to be called to speak in this important and timely debate. I congratulate my colleague Joan McAlpine on securing the debate and commend her for her hard work in ensuring that the excellent campaign is brought to the

attention of members of the Parliament and the wider public.

I have a confession to make: I am not an alumnus of the University of Aberdeen. However, I am an alumnus of the University of Glasgow and I recall the days when Simple Minds used to play at the Queen Margaret union. I guess that that shows my age a bit, so I will move swiftly back to the topic of the debate.

As we have heard, "Introducing in Scotland" is the only Scottish opt-out on BBC Radio 1. It is Glasgow based and has been on air for about 11 years. It is currently ably presented by Ally McCrae and was previously ably presented by Vic Galloway. It is important to mention the current and past presenters because they know, and are known by, the Scottish music scene. They are well respected, taken seriously and, as Joan McAlpine said, physically accessible. That is of particular significance, as the purpose of the radio show is to showcase the nascent musical talent in Scotland—in particular, to showcase those who are not signed up to a music business contract.

The programme is pivotal in giving new, young artists the chance to experience some airplay and live sessions in the studio. At the same time, it gives that new, home-grown talent exposure to the public. Over the past 10 years or so, it has played a significant role in bringing on new acts in Scotland. We have heard the views of many of those acts that are now household names here and further afield. It also feeds the music industry, supports jobs and gives pleasure to thousands of the listening public.

Therefore, we must query why on earth the BBC is planning to scrap that successful format. Paradoxically, we hear that the plan is part of the delivering quality first restructuring programme. That is a bit of a misnomer. The BBC is surely scoring an own goal, as scrapping the programme would be the opposite of delivering quality first. It would be relegating quality to the bottom of the ladder and promoting bean counting and penny-pinching to the top of the agenda.

It is penny-pinching, as I understand that the fairly minimal cost savings to the BBC of scrapping the programme would be far outweighed by the potential costs to the music scene in Scotland. That is not to mention the small matter of the £300 million that the BBC receives from licence payers in Scotland.

I fail to see how the decision is well judged. It does not fit with the BBC's public service broadcasting obligation or its obligation to showcase and support culture not only in the city of London—as great as it is—but elsewhere in the UK. It is simply unimaginable that an independent public service broadcasting organisation in an

independent Scotland would ever contemplate abandoning our nascent musical talent in the way that the BBC in London seems intent on doing.

I, too, urge the BBC to think again.

17:28

Annabel Goldie (West Scotland) (Con): I was just swithering about whether there ought to be a collective noun for Annabels, and then Annabelle Ewing and I would be included as one.

I welcome the opportunity to speak in the debate and thank Joan McAlpine for lodging the motion. It is important that the Parliament debates such issues. It is also important to emphasise the positive presence that Scotland's music talent represents and to emphasise that the new, unsigned part of that talent is a vital element.

There is much in the motion with which I sympathise and agree, but I am sure that it has not escaped Joan McAlpine's hawk eye that I have not signed it. That was not because of any major disagreement with it, but because of a slight nagging unease that, perhaps, an opportunity was being overlooked.

I will advance my argument. First, I pay tribute to the very talented musicians that we have in Scotland and to the courage and commitment of new artists. I confirm support for the excellent work that, as Joan McAlpine said, Ally McCrae and Vic Galloway have done in nurturing that new talent and, as the motion says, giving that

"talent exposure to the listening public".

Undoubtedly, those are positive factors and they should be recognised.

I appreciate that it is hard for new musicians to break into the music business. I am aware that with the growth of social media sites, YouTube and music talent television programmes, there are already more forums available for exposure of that talent and for networking than has previously been the case.

I want to make it clear that in no way do I diminish the efforts on the part of both listeners and campaigners to raise their concerns. They have done so passionately and the social media to which I have referred has been an important conduit for that campaign.

However, prior to the debate I reflected on what talented new musicians who are trying to break through want to achieve, and I think that the answer is publicity and exposure that are as widespread as possible and not restricted to Scotland. That desire must be considered alongside licence fee issues.

Mark McDonald: I accept the member's contention, but does she not accept that musicians need first to develop local and national exposure before they can go on to achieve wider exposure and that removing the steps that allow them to achieve that is counterproductive?

Annabel Goldie: If I had more time, I would like to take issue with the member's proposition. My point is that it is right that we have to try to achieve a degree of exposure and publicity. The argument that I am advancing is that perhaps we cannot always achieve what we would desire to achieve in an ideal world. What we desire to achieve must be considered alongside licence fee issues and what is sustainable, cost wise.

I will explore those two themes a little further. As I understand the current situation, "Introducing in Scotland" is a Radio 1 network programme. For three out of the four weeks it broadcasts in Scotland and on the fourth week it broadcasts UK-wide. I believe that what is proposed is a Radio 1 programme that will broadcast UK-wide every week and on which one of the co-presenters will still be Ally McCrae. At the same time, apart from the other social media outlets to which I referred, music talent in Scotland will continue to be covered by Radio Scotland and Radio nan Gàidheal, which already broadcast a wide range of music.

I move to what I accept might be the slightly tedious but nonetheless inescapable issue of cost. Some rather stark facts have to be considered. The BBC informs me that the listening audience for the existing programme is about 9,000 people. Interestingly, in Wales, whose population is only three fifths of Scotland's population, the listening audience for its counterpart is 12,000. My information from the BBC is that the current programme costs about 22p per listener, whereas the average cost for other specialist music programmes is only 0.8p per listener. I am informed that the cost of the new programme will be about a fifth of the cost of the current one.

I bring those facts into the debate, because whatever we want or might aspire to achieve in an ideal world has to be balanced by the other relevant factors. On the one hand, I can totally understand the interest in and support for "Introducing in Scotland", but I am anxious that a better opportunity and a bigger potential audience may be provided by the new programme.

Let me conclude as I began. There is no major disagreement with the motion. It has been important to debate the issue. I think that the BBC will understand the obligation to ensure that the reservations expressed in the motion, and what has been said in the debate, are taken into account and to ensure that the new proposed programme manifestly addresses the concerns.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you. Perhaps, in the spirit of the debate, the collective noun for a pair of Annabels could be a peal of Annabels.

17:34

Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): First, I thank Joan McAlpine for bringing the debate to the chamber. It is good that we recognise that there is strong public support for retaining “Introducing in Scotland”. She made an important point about BBC 6 Music and the successful campaign to save it. I am happy to add my voice to the campaign to retain “Introducing in Scotland”.

Annabel Goldie made some points about the BBC. We recognise that it faces financial pressures and that there will be some changes to output, but it is right to question the proposal that is on the table. “Introducing in Scotland” promotes unsigned music talent in Scotland, and it plays an important role in doing so.

Scotland has a vibrant music scene. Its contribution to our economy, at both national and local levels, is often overlooked, but it does play an important role. It is one that is often delivered on a shoestring budget. Alongside the big corporate events, such as T in the park, that bring people from all over the United Kingdom and further afield, there are lots of smaller venues, practice rooms and studios and lots of local networks of music enthusiasts, bands and people who are passionate about promoting and creating music in their communities. “Introducing in Scotland” gives them the opportunity to engage with a wider audience, as well as providing an effective showcase for their talents.

Annabel talked about the level of exposure that bands get and how there might be opportunities for Scottish bands to reach a wider audience, but Mark McDonald was right in his comments about stepping stones and different levels of exposure. There is more immediacy in having something that is rooted in Scotland, with the knowledge that goes with that, and having presenters who engage with the gig scene here. It would be a shame to lose that.

There have been huge changes in the way in which we consume and have an interest in music. Annabel talked about internet promotion—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Perhaps you might wish to be a bit clearer.

Claire Baker: I am sorry. I meant Annabel Goldie. It is quite an informal atmosphere tonight.

Annabel Goldie talked about the importance of self-promotion and how the internet has opened up such opportunities, but we should recognise

that mainstream promotion is still hugely important. Radio 1 and the “Introducing in Scotland” programme give valuable exposure and support important talent development. I very much welcome this evening’s debate.

17:37

The Cabinet Secretary for Culture and External Affairs (Fiona Hyslop): I join other members in congratulating Joan McAlpine on securing the debate. I thank all members who have spoken in support of retaining the “Introducing in Scotland” programme on Radio 1. I listened to the programme when it was on an earlier slot, when I travelled around my constituency in my car.

I am interested in some of the remarks that have been made by members. I am particularly pleased that punk is alive and well in Aberdeen, and I say to Drew Smith that we should make no apology for recognising the status of contemporary music alongside classical and traditional music.

Many cogent points have been made, and I hope to pick up on some of them during my remarks. It is also important that we look at what has brought us to this situation. A number of people have made remarks about the other cuts that are happening in the BBC, and during question time earlier I made it clear that the Scottish Government has already raised its concerns with the BBC about quality, range and output, in relation to proposals for news programmes in particular.

Today’s debate focuses on “Introducing in Scotland”. Joan McAlpine arranged for me last month to meet a delegation from the music industry, including artists who have appeared on the programme along with others from the wider music sector. They told me how the programme supported and fed the talent and material that can be produced and how that is then exposed on the programme.

Annabelle Ewing made the important point that the programme is meant to be about delivering quality first—the BBC’s agenda—but that there is a damage in limiting the finding of tomorrow’s quality. It was important to make that point.

More recently, when we issued the Scottish Government’s response to the BBC trust’s consultation on how it will operate within the constraints of the current licence-fee settlement, we were able to draw on the experience of the delegation in highlighting the real cultural impact that is made by “Introducing in Scotland”.

I was impressed by the delegation I met and what the people had to say. They talked about how “Introducing in Scotland” has made a real

difference to many careers of new and emerging musically talented individuals and bands, but they also talked about how the programme has supported the producers and the creative industry in general and how it has kept them informed of new and emerging bands and solo performers.

The BBC has responsibility for public service broadcasting generally; it also has a leadership role in the development of creative industries, as it frequently reminds me. In that context, "Introducing in Scotland" has not just artistic and cultural value but social and commercial value, which might not have been foremost in early thoughts about cuts to BBC funding and output. The creative industries are hugely important to the Scottish economy. The sector is one of the seven key growth sectors in the Government's economic strategy. It generates well over £5 billion annually and supports 60,000 jobs.

The commercial and international success of performers such as Biffy Clyro, Calvin Harris and Franz Ferdinand, who got their first break from "Introducing in Scotland" and went on to make us proud, demonstrates that performers can come from Scotland, be exposed in Scotland initially and then have a big international impact. That relates to Annabel Goldie's point. "Introducing in Scotland" has played a key role in giving opportunities to emerging talent. An important part of the message that we heard in the debate is that bands do not have to start out in London if they are to succeed.

When I met the delegation of young performers I was struck by their energy and commitment. I am sure that if programmes such as "Introducing in Scotland" exist to give them a chance, they will seize such opportunities. For me, the case for preserving "Introducing in Scotland" is clear. It has been great to hear many other members make a persuasive argument in that regard.

I will draw out three further points that are illustrated by the threat to "Introducing in Scotland", which we all hope will soon be lifted, when the BBC reflects on the result of the consultation and the petition, which has received well over 7,000 signatures in a short time. The BBC has responded to other campaigns and I hope that it gives a good hearing to the representations that are being made.

First, we should note that the threat is not just to "Introducing in Scotland" but to "Introducing in Northern Ireland" and "Introducing in Wales". Our focus is on potential harm in relation to the promotion of new and innovative popular music from Scotland, but I am sure that all members also wish the campaigns in Northern Ireland and Wales well. Vigorous campaigns are going on in all three countries, which illustrates how important it is that

the BBC live up to its duties to the nations in these islands.

Secondly, the situation is by no means entirely, or even mainly, the fault of the BBC, which has been forced to make decisions as a result of the damaging licence-fee settlement that the UK Government imposed after talks that were held behind closed doors over 48 hours. That reinforces Scotland's need for greater accountability and responsibility for broadcasting. As a result of the cuts agenda, the licence fee is being top-sliced for purposes other than the BBC's purposes.

We must think about the direct consequences of the licence-fee settlement, whether for the news or for contemporary music. We argue that the Scottish Parliament and the Scottish Government should have an opportunity to influence licence-fee settlements. That simple request has been made by the Scottish Government in the context of the Scotland Bill. Had there been such an approach to the licence-fee settlement in the past, we might perhaps not have the wider concerns about what the BBC delivers and the continued quality of its output in Scotland, particularly in news and current affairs, on which we have sought assurances. At a time of momentous importance for our nation, the issue is resonant. We have deep concerns about the impact of programming cutbacks and job losses.

Thirdly, the issue that we are considering illustrates the risk of having only one publicly funded public service broadcaster—the BBC—however great it is in many regards. If there were greater diversity and plurality of public service broadcasters, for example through a Scottish digital network, as was proposed by the Scottish Broadcasting Commission and unanimously endorsed in the previous session of the Parliament, we would have a great opportunity to develop and preserve the kind of innovative broadcasting that "Introducing in Scotland" so well exemplifies.

I reiterate my support and the Scottish Government's support for "Introducing in Scotland" and my firm hope that the campaign to preserve the programme will be successful. The issue is not just one programme and its listeners, as we have heard, but the impact on the wider music and creative industries scenes. We should all call on the BBC, the coalition Government and others to reflect on the lessons that we can learn from the campaign. We want to create truly world-class public service broadcasting for Scotland, and given what I have heard in the debate I am sure that many members want "Introducing in Scotland" to be an integral part of that.

Meeting closed at 17:45.

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