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Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Official Report

MEETING OF THE PARLIAMENT

Wednesday 2 May 2012

Session 4

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Scottish Parliament

Wednesday 2 May 2012

[The Presiding Officer *opened the meeting at 13:30*]

Time for Reflection

The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick): Good afternoon. The first item of business this afternoon is time for reflection. Our time for reflection leader today is Pastor Stephen Hibbard of Sheddocksley Baptist church, Aberdeen.

Pastor Stephen Hibbard (Sheddocksley Baptist Church, Aberdeen): Presiding Officer, members of the Scottish Parliament, Archimedes cried “Eureka!” when he received the revelation about the displacement of water. We, too, can have moments of new discovery. We may call them epiphanies, revelations or paradigm shifts. We begin to see the world in a different light because of a new idea or experience.

Peter, a close associate of Jesus, had one such moment. He had been out fishing all night, yet caught nothing. Those professional fishermen returning from a trip with an empty boat—not a single fish—must have been frustrated, exhausted and, perhaps, critical of one another. They had nothing to sell and nothing to eat.

Jesus asked Peter to go out into the deep water and try one last time. Jesus was a joiner, not a fisherman. What did he know about fishing? It was the wrong time of day, and they had exhausted their effort and experience. However, one reason alone made Peter cast his net again: it was simply because Jesus said so. He was willing to place confidence in the advice of Jesus because he sensed something different about him. In Luke chapter 5, verse 5, we read:

“Master, we’ve worked hard all night and haven’t caught anything. But because you say so, I will let down the nets.”

The result was overwhelming: the catch was too large for one boat, so they called their partners and, together, they filled both boats to the point of sinking.

As our country’s political leaders, you all need wisdom, new ideas and fresh approaches, especially when the nets seem empty and we are faced with the challenge of catching.

We all want more jobs, increasing wealth, greater skills, healthier lifestyles, stronger families, supportive communities and safer streets, but we can get frustrated and worn out. What do we do when the nets are empty? What do we do when trying harder or depending on our own experience is not enough?

When you go to your window, to your contemplation space—a key design feature of this Parliament building—why not listen to Jesus for some inspiration? Why not ask him to show you where to cast the net? We can so easily find ourselves listening to the loudest or most critical voices rather than following that inner voice that makes us radical and creative.

My prayer is that you might be open to the revelation of the living Jesus, so that Scotland may be a more prosperous, peaceful and self-assured nation.

Scottish Executive Question Time

Finance, Employment and Sustainable Growth

13:34

Council Tax Benefit (North Ayrshire Council)

1. Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what discussions it has had with North Ayrshire Council regarding the proposed changes to council tax benefit by the United Kingdom Government. (S4O-00949)

The Minister for Local Government and Planning (Derek Mackay): We have been working closely with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, which represents all local authorities in Scotland, to agree protection for the most vulnerable when council tax benefit is abolished in the financial year 2013-14.

Kenneth Gibson: The minister will be aware that the measures in the Welfare Reform Bill, if enacted, will drain up to £2.5 billion from the Scottish economy by 2015. Will he advise us of the impact on North Ayrshire, where deprivation is high, and of what the Scottish National Party Government's action in covering the impending council tax benefit cut will mean for constituents on council tax benefit and the wider North Ayrshire economy?

Derek Mackay: The Scottish Government has expressed its concern about many of the welfare changes that the UK Government has proposed. We will do all that we can to mitigate the impact on our local communities. On the issue of council tax benefit abolition, our actions will ensure that, in North Ayrshire, more than 19,000 people will be protected by the Scottish Government in partnership with local government. In Scotland as a whole, the figure is 560,000. Pensioners, carers, the disabled and those who are unable to work will be protected by the actions of this Government.

Business Start-ups (Glasgow)

2. Humza Yousaf (Glasgow) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government how it supports entrepreneurs and small business start-ups in Glasgow. (S4O-00950)

The Minister for Energy, Enterprise and Tourism (Fergus Ewing): Such support is provided through our economic strategy and is delivered by the enterprise network and the business gateway, with assistance from business representative bodies and voluntary groups.

Humza Yousaf: We constantly come across entrepreneurs who want to start up viable businesses or expand their businesses and create jobs, but our banks, many of which are publicly owned, are simply not lending. The Scottish National Party in Glasgow has pledged to provide a loans to business fund to encourage business start-ups in the city, but will the minister tell me what discussions he has had with the banks to encourage greater responsible lending to Scotland's budding and ambitious businessmen and women?

Fergus Ewing: Mr Yousaf makes a reasonable point. Both the First Minister and John Swinney have had regular meetings with bank representatives and we are extremely active in encouraging the banks to return to acceptable levels of affordable lending so that viable businesses have access to the funding that they require to grow. I have met all the major banks and many others to emphasise the point, and we will continue to press the United Kingdom Government to use the powers that it has at its disposal to improve levels of lending by all the banks.

Research and Development (Small and Medium-sized Enterprises) (South Scotland)

3. Aileen McLeod (South Scotland) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government how it supports research and development in the small and medium-sized enterprise sector in South Scotland. (S4O-00951)

The Minister for Energy, Enterprise and Tourism (Fergus Ewing): The Scottish Government is working closely with the enterprise agencies and the Scottish Further and Higher Education Funding Council to enhance support for research and development in the SME sector in South Scotland.

Aileen McLeod: Given the importance of research and development to the SME sector and the wider regional economy, does the minister agree that the further education colleges in the south-west of Scotland, as well as the research institutes and other education facilities at the Crichton campus, have a central role in supporting the research and development efforts of the SME sector? Does he agree that it is therefore important that the sector is fully engaged in preparing for and participating in the forthcoming European Union horizon 2020 programme, once an agreement is finally reached by the Council and the European Parliament?

Fergus Ewing: Yes. I agree with the argument that Aileen McLeod makes in relation to South Scotland, and I entirely accept that universities and colleges are linked ever more closely with enterprise. For example, we have the knowledge

transfer partnerships, which bring together companies and universities to see what opportunities and businesses can emerge from their working together. I commend participation in the EU horizon 2020 programme to which the member referred.

Credit Unions

4. Margaret McDougall (West Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive how it encourages the use of credit unions. (S4O-00952)

The Minister for Energy, Enterprise and Tourism (Fergus Ewing): Our support includes encouragement of early awareness of credit unions among young people in schools through the curriculum for excellence and work with the United Kingdom Money Advice Service, which provides information about credit unions as part of its work to encourage everyone to manage their money effectively.

Margaret McDougall: The minister will remember our recent members' business debate on high-interest pay day loans, during which most members who spoke suggested that credit unions should be instrumental in helping people in debt, who often have loans with several different high-interest pay day loan companies. Will the minister update members on the progress that has been made in tackling high-interest pay day loan companies and on whether any financial support has been offered to credit unions so that they can help the thousands of people who are caught in an ever-increasing spiral of debt?

Fergus Ewing: The member is perfectly correct to highlight the problems and the hazards that pay day loans can cause for many people. Members were united in that view in what was an excellent debate. To answer the specific question, as part of the third sector, credit unions will be eligible to apply for future funding streams, and they can also access business support and advice through the just enterprise programme. We are considering what further support can be provided. Legislation on pay day loans is of course a reserved matter. I recently made representations to Norman Lamb of the United Kingdom Government, urging that consideration be given to using such powers to regulate pay day loans effectively in the whole of the UK.

Council Tax Arrears

5. John Wilson (Central Scotland) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what guidance it gives to local authorities regarding the recovery of community charge and council tax arrears. (S4O-00953)

The Minister for Local Government and Planning (Derek Mackay): Local authorities'

duties to collect and recover local tax arrears are set out in legislation. It is for each authority to interpret and apply the relevant legislation when seeking to collect both community charge and council tax debts. The Scottish Government does not currently issue guidance on collection or arrears.

John Wilson: There has been a period of welcome council tax freeze, but individual families are continuing to be hit with bills for outstanding community charge or council tax arrears that can date back up to 20 years. Those extra charges are hitting people incredibly hard and the 20-year recovery period often leaves people whose circumstances may have changed dramatically unable to challenge the charges. What advice can be given on freezing the recovery of historic community charge and council tax arrears, in particular where the debt is reported to be more than seven years old and beyond the period of available benefit records?

Derek Mackay: As I said, decisions on recovery of local tax arrears, including for council tax and the community charge, are for each local authority to make in line with requirements that are set out in legislation. Nonetheless, I am aware of the member's close interest in the subject and can tell him that, as responsibility lies with local authorities, the Government has not been involved in formal discussions, although we would expect local authorities to pursue debts and arrears pragmatically, taking individual circumstances into account.

Unemployment (West Dunbartonshire)

6. Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what financial assistance is provided to West Dunbartonshire Council to tackle unemployment. (S4O-00954)

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Employment and Sustainable Growth (John Swinney): West Dunbartonshire benefits from a range of direct funding from the Scottish Government to help people into employment. That includes support for the opportunities for all programme and almost £1.37 million in European funding.

West Dunbartonshire also benefits from funding to support the national training programmes—modern apprenticeships, training for work and get ready for work—and the community jobs fund.

Jackie Baillie: I thank the cabinet secretary for that response, but he will know that the number of young people in West Dunbartonshire unemployed for over a year rose by a staggering 630 per cent and that women's unemployment has doubled. West Dunbartonshire is, indeed, one of the most challenging areas in which to find employment,

with 30 people chasing each job. Therefore, I am disappointed that, when it came to enterprise zones, West Dunbartonshire was ignored. Enterprise zones there would have created growth and jobs. In addition, there was not one penny from the youth unemployment strategy fund. Can I implore the cabinet secretary to help to reverse the position for young people in my area and to agree to meet me to discuss the opportunities that we can progress together?

John Swinney: I quite understand the strength of feeling in West Dunbartonshire about the necessity of tackling the employment issue. That is why the Government is encouraged that we now see across Scotland unemployment at a lower level than in the rest of the United Kingdom and employment levels at a higher level. I point out to Jackie Baillie that a range of different interventions are being taken forward, not least by West Dunbartonshire Council, which is a Scottish National Party-led council that has invested significantly in supporting the process of employment creation locally, in addition to the programmes that the Government supports. I also point out to Jackie Baillie that she and I attended last week the official opening of the Aggreko plant in her constituency. Of course, it was a tremendous achievement of private sector leadership and determination, but it also had support from the Scottish Government and Scottish Enterprise to bring it about. That is just another example of the positive investments in West Dunbartonshire that the Government is presiding over.

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): Is the cabinet secretary aware that the local Labour MP opposed enterprise status in my constituency, as did some Labour local authority candidates? It is clear that Labour's approach is not consistent.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (John Scott): The question is about West Dunbartonshire.

Kenneth Gibson: Does the cabinet secretary agree that the Labour Party's position in West Dunbartonshire is at odds with its position elsewhere in Scotland?

John Swinney: The odd bit of hypocrisy from the Labour Party on any such question is not at all surprising. The Government makes a series of judgments on a variety of subjects, including enterprise areas, to ensure that we attract major investment opportunities to Scotland. That is taking its course in different parts of the country.

Jackie Baillie raised with me the issue of youth employment funding. The resources were targeted at a range of local authorities with the highest volume of youth unemployment and the highest intensity of difficulty, including Glasgow City

Council, North Lanarkshire Council, South Lanarkshire Council, North Ayrshire Council, Renfrewshire Council and East Ayrshire Council. Through its variety of interventions, the Government is supporting the aspirations of people in such communities to get back into employment and is addressing long-term issues, which will enable us to attract investment and so create jobs in different parts of Scotland.

Local Income Tax

7. James Kelly (Rutherglen) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what its plans are in relation to the introduction of a local income tax. (S4O-00955)

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Employment and Sustainable Growth (John Swinney): The Government believes that the current council tax system is unfair and will consult others later in the parliamentary session to produce a fairer local tax that is based on the ability to pay.

James Kelly: Will the cabinet secretary join me in deploring the Scottish Government's waste of £100,000 of taxpayers' money in attempting in March 2011 to cover up the impact of the local income tax? Will he look at whether £100,000 can be taken from other areas of the Scottish budget to be diverted to local council budgets, to alleviate in a small way the £658 million of cuts that the Scottish National Party Government is passing on to local authorities, which are undermining authorities' efforts to protect communities?

John Swinney: I have absolutely no intention of condemning one of my own actions, which was properly to protect ministers' right to receive advice—as is entirely provided for in the legislation that the Parliament approved—and to consider that advice in the proper fashion.

Mr Kelly's point about local government funding is rather misplaced. Despite all the challenges that the Government faces on public expenditure, local government will get a larger share of the budget than it had when we took office. I remind Mr Kelly that we replaced a Labour Administration that had short-changed local government for many years. When he wants to make his point about local government funding, he should think about the wreckage that the Labour Party created and that the current Government had to pick up and sort out when we came to office.

Small Business Bonus Scheme (East Kilbride)

8. Linda Fabiani (East Kilbride) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government how much support has been given to businesses in East Kilbride by the small business bonus scheme. (S4O-00956)

The Minister for Energy, Enterprise and Tourism (Fergus Ewing): Since this Government introduced it, the small business bonus scheme has reduced business rates taxation for South Lanarkshire businesses, which include businesses in the East Kilbride area, by a total of £21.3 million—3,558 businesses have received assistance by paying lower or no business rates. We have committed to maintaining the bonus scheme for the lifetime of the parliamentary session, to support tens of thousands of small and medium-sized businesses throughout the country.

Linda Fabiani: The scheme has certainly been a bonus for start-up businesses and in maintaining businesses in my constituency of East Kilbride. However, I have noticed that quite a few young people who are leaving school and are keen to start their own business have been attracted to so doing by hearing about the small business bonus scheme. Are there any systems in place to tie in the promotion of the small business bonus scheme with start-up grants, either through councils or through Scottish Enterprise, to allow young people—not necessarily graduates—who want to start their own business in their community to be given the whole picture?

Fergus Ewing: The business gateway provides advice to those who want to set up a small business or develop one. In addition, many recipients of the small business bonus have been able to use the money that has been saved to provide more training to new staff and young people. Last week, I visited Dalcross Logistics, in my constituency, to highlight the huge advantages of the small business bonus. The fact that 85,000 businesses have received benefit from the small business bonus has not only enabled them to survive, but has enabled many young people to gain opportunities to work in those small businesses. The Federation of Small Businesses points out that, thanks to the small business bonus, there are an increasing number of dynamic opportunities for our young people.

Renewables (Employment)

9. Chic Brodie (South Scotland) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government how many jobs have been created in the renewables industry in the last year. (S4O-00957)

The Minister for Energy, Enterprise and Tourism (Fergus Ewing): Scottish Renewables has estimated that more than 11,000 jobs are already supported by the renewables sector in Scotland. A number of major renewables investment announcements in the first few months of this year will result in hundreds of jobs across Scotland, while our skills investment plan estimates that the sector will offer 40,000 job opportunities by 2020.

Chic Brodie: Although we welcome the creation of enterprise areas such as the one at Prestwick, which will create more engineering skills and expertise in Scotland, as the minister indicated, supporting our renewables industry and meeting our energy plans requires the creation of a further 30,000 jobs—particularly for apprentices and young job seekers—over the next eight to 10 years. Will the minister engage further with the engineering industry bodies, Skills Development Scotland and the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning and the Cabinet Secretary for Infrastructure and Capital Investment to ensure that the issues of skills shortages, employee mobility and infrastructure are addressed so that the skills and people are appropriately located to meet that demand?

Fergus Ewing: I have so engaged with several of the institutes of engineers and have received the benefit of their advice and support. I will continue to do so. The member is absolutely correct to point to the opportunities in the area. Last Thursday, I visited Nigg, in the Highlands, where Global Energy Group has set up a Nigg training academy. I spoke to many of those who are now receiving the fast-track training to become full-time employees in the sector and I have never seen such commitment or enthusiasm among young people. Truly, Scotland is on the verge of a range of hugely exciting opportunities. I assume that all parties in the chamber will grasp those opportunities with both hands.

Kezia Dugdale (Lothian) (Lab): I know that the minister is aware of plans for a community wind turbine in Portobello. Given that the Scottish Government will need to use all the faculties at its disposal to reach its ambitious renewables targets, will the minister agree to meet me and the Greener Leith and Portobello transition town campaigners to address their current challenges with Scottish Water over insurance?

Fergus Ewing: I am happy to learn about the details of any particular case, although I must think carefully about having a meeting to discuss the merits of any case. I am keen to advance the issues in the way that the member describes in a positive fashion.

Since the member mentioned Portobello, I take the opportunity to say that, just along the road in Leith, Gamesa has chosen to invest in Scotland to the huge advantage of young people in this city and of the Scottish economy, which has received a massive boost of confidence from yet another global investor.

Mary Scanlon (Highlands and Islands) (Con): Given that the question related to jobs that have been created, will the minister state what percentage of those jobs will be temporary to fulfil

a short-term contract and how many are considered permanent?

Fergus Ewing: I have not looked down that particular side alley of statistical research. What I can say—I am sure that Mary Scanlon welcomes this—is that more than £7,000 million will be invested in the grid of Scotland, ahead of England, because we are making more progress. When we consider that, Gamesa coming to Scotland, Samsung investing in Scotland, Mitsubishi looking at Scotland and all the investments in Scotland, Glasgow, Edinburgh and the Highlands, surely the Conservatives can bring themselves to say, as their Prime Minister did recently, that there is truly a massive opportunity for this country.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Question 10 has been withdrawn, for entirely understandable reasons. I cannot say the same for question 11: we very much regret that Hugh Henry has not lodged his question.

Steel Industry (North Lanarkshire)

12. Richard Lyle (Central Scotland) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government how it supports employment in the steel industry in North Lanarkshire. (S4O-00960)

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Employment and Sustainable Growth (John Swinney): The Scottish Government recognises the importance of steel manufacturing to Scottish industry, particularly in the construction and growing renewable energy markets. We provide a wide range of practical advice and support to companies, through the business gateway, Scottish Enterprise and Scottish Development International.

Richard Lyle: Is the cabinet secretary aware that the North Lanarkshire Council Labour group has put out an election leaflet that says that all steel requirements for the new Forth bridge could have been sourced in North Lanarkshire? Does he agree that North Lanarkshire no longer has the capacity to provide a majority of the steel that is required to build a new bridge, given that Ravenscraig was closed by the Tories years ago? Does he also agree that, as usual, Labour is not being truthful at this time?

John Swinney: First, the Government does all that it can to support the development of manufacturing opportunities in Scotland. As Mr Ewing just said, a range of new opportunities in the manufacturing sector is emerging as a consequence of the clear policy direction that the Government has established in relation to the renewable energy sector, which will create employment and business opportunities for the steel industry in Scotland.

Secondly, Mr Lyle should not be surprised by anything that the Labour Party is prepared to put on a leaflet at this particular time in the calendar year.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I warn members to be cautious with their language.

Michael McMahon (Uddingston and Bellshill) (Lab): I have a question on the steel industry, but first I ask the cabinet secretary to acknowledge that today is the last time in 36 years that Richard Lyle will be able to call himself Councillor Richard Lyle. It is appropriate to recognise the 36 years of service that he has given to the community in Orbiston and Bellshill.

Richard Lyle and I have not always agreed, and we will not agree on this issue. Will the cabinet secretary acknowledge that on 3 February representatives of the Scottish Trades Union Congress and Community trade union and local MSPs and MPs met Tata Steel to talk about the failure of the Scottish Government to award the contract that would have given Tata the opportunity to supply steel for the Forth bridge?

Dalzell steelworks is geared up to meet the demands of the offshore wind sector and it cannot afford to be overlooked in that respect. Will the cabinet secretary give a commitment that that will not happen?

John Swinney: Mr McMahon's comments about Councillor Lyle—if I may still call him that—and his long public service as a local authority representative in the North Lanarkshire area were generous and well made. Of course, Richard Lyle continues to be a representative here in the Scottish Parliament, where he is very welcome. I associate the Government with Mr McMahon's generous tribute.

As I said to Mr Lyle, the Government wants to do everything that it can to support the development of the steel industry in Scotland. Mr Ewing has met Tata Steel and has agreed that Scottish Development International will work with the company to ensure that Tata can meet all the opportunities in Scotland that it is able to meet. The renewable energy sector is a particular opportunity. That is why the Government sees renewables as being so redolent of employment and investment opportunities for Scotland. I saw more of that just over a week ago, when I was in Japan and Korea. We will pursue those opportunities for the maximum benefit of the people of Scotland, and I assure Mr McMahon that we will include Tata Steel, as one of the key producers in the Scottish economy.

Economy (Greenock and Inverclyde)

13. Duncan McNeil (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab): To ask the Scottish

Government what action it is taking to ensure that Greenock and Inverclyde is not disproportionately affected by the current economic climate. (S4O-00961)

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Employment and Sustainable Growth (John Swinney): The Scottish Government works closely with a wide range of organisations, including Scottish Enterprise, Scottish Development International, Skills Development Scotland, VisitScotland, local authorities, organisations in the third sector, financial institutions and other specialist sectoral advisory bodies, to promote sustainable economic growth throughout Scotland, including in Greenock and Inverclyde.

Scottish Enterprise, which is our key economic development agency in the area, continues to contribute economic intelligence and to support key sector growth opportunities in the west of Scotland. That work is taken forward in collaboration with regeneration organisations, including the Riverside Inverclyde urban regeneration company. I am encouraged that senior Scottish Enterprise directors are scheduled to meet the member on 11 June to discuss the economic opportunities for Greenock and Inverclyde as part of that process of dialogue.

Duncan McNeil: The cabinet secretary will be aware that he and the Scottish Government's economic adviser have assured me that they recognise that communities such as Inverclyde will be disproportionately hit in the budget process. I took comfort from what was said, but since then, we have suffered a disappointing and significant loss of regeneration funding. We have lost out on exciting potential renewables jobs and enterprise area status, and our long-term youth unemployment has increased by 200 per cent over the past year.

Will the cabinet secretary use his office to come to Greenock and work with the agencies, the local authority, Scottish Enterprise and everyone else who is interested in dealing with the problem in the Inverclyde area? We can address the serious problems that exist only by working together and taking serious action. Will the cabinet secretary assure me that he will do that?

John Swinney: Mr McNeil knows that I am very familiar with the economic situation in the Inverclyde area. I have met representatives of the local authority in the past and would be happy to do so again and to take part in a discussion at the local level following the dialogue between Duncan McNeil and Scottish Enterprise that will take place next month.

I caution the member about the reference that he made to renewables opportunities. We are

seeing the first tranche of renewables opportunities, which, by their nature and factors of geography, are more concentrated on the east coast of Scotland, before opportunities on the west coast emerge. I assure him that the Government will do everything it can to support the development of renewable energy and other business opportunities in every part of the country.

A range of companies in Greenock and Inverclyde are supported by Scottish Enterprise as account-managed companies. That is a reliable and effective way of ensuring that companies are given proper support, but I would be happy to engage in further dialogue with Mr McNeil and the local authority on questions of improving economic opportunity in Greenock and Inverclyde. I will pursue that in the light of the discussion with Scottish Enterprise.

Stuart McMillan (West Scotland) (SNP): Does the cabinet secretary agree that, given the millions of pounds-worth of investment from the SNP Government in housing, regeneration, ship building and new schools—to name just four examples—it would do the current Labour-Conservative coalition in Inverclyde Council no harm to welcome that positive investment, instead of constantly undermining efforts to improve the area?

John Swinney: Mr McMillan fairly accounts for the investments that the Government is making and the proposals that it is taking forward in the area. The Government has made it crystal clear, since 2007, that we are determined to construct a positive relationship with every local authority in the country. In almost all cases, we have that relationship.

Certainly, in light of tomorrow's local authority elections, the Government's position remains the same. We are determined to construct a positive working relationship with all local authorities in the country—including Inverclyde Council—and we look forward to working with them in a spirit of collaboration, as members will always accept, to improve the economic prospects of each locality in Scotland.

Economic Activity (Perth)

14. Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): To ask the Scottish Executive what action it is taking to increase economic activity in Perth. (S4O-00962)

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Employment and Sustainable Growth (John Swinney): The Scottish Government is committed to increasing sustainable economic activity across all parts of Scotland, including in our cities, and we will use all available levers to support opportunities in Perth to increase economic activity and growth.

Our economic strategy provides us with the overarching economic framework to do just that.

We work closely with a wide range of organisations to ensure that we create and protect opportunities for employment and economic growth.

Liz Smith: Does the cabinet secretary agree that, in light of Perth's regained city status—about which we are all delighted—there is an even stronger case for relocating some civil service jobs to Perth and Kinross, which will provide additional economic incentives for that area?

John Swinney: Perth is certainly a fantastic place as a business location. I represent the city and know it well, and there are plenty of opportunities for that to happen. Decisions on the location of civil service organisations are taken based on efficiency and value-for-money criteria in all circumstances. There is already a large civil service presence in Perth, and we will continue to consider all possible ways in which we can relocate civil servants to Perth and other communities on the basis that I have just set out.

Renewable Energy (West Scotland)

15. Mary Fee (West Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what plans it has to increase the number of jobs in the renewable energy sector in West Scotland. (S4O-00963)

The Minister for Energy, Enterprise and Tourism (Fergus Ewing): Exciting plans. [*Laughter.*]

Mary Fee: I thank the minister for his brief answer. Following the announcement that Doosan Power Systems is shelving 200 jobs in my home town of Renfrew, which the Scottish Government knew about four months before the news became public, what assurance can the minister give the people of Renfrewshire that no more jobs will be lost on that scale and kept from public knowledge?

Fergus Ewing: A range of extremely exciting announcements has recently been made for the west of Scotland. Steel Engineering is to create 180 jobs with an investment of £3 million; Gamesa is investing £180 million in research and development; the international technology and renewable energy zone—ITREZ—at the University of Strathclyde will provide 700 jobs with an £89 million investment; and Scottish Power and Scottish and Southern Energy are creating 3,000 jobs and investing £7,000 million.

The member asked what plans we have: in addition to those announcements, we have other plans. We want to do more. We want to see the establishment of the international technology and renewable energy zone; the offshore renewable energy catapult; the power networks

demonstration centre; the advanced forming research centre; and, of course, SSE's Hunterston onshore test facility for offshore wind.

The west of Scotland is at the heart of a great many marvellous opportunities in this country, and we will do our best to ensure that all those opportunities are converted into jobs for Scotland.

Regional Pay

16. Jim Eadie (Edinburgh Southern) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what correspondence it has had with the Chief Secretary to the Treasury regarding regional pay. (S4O-00964)

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Employment and Sustainable Growth (John Swinney): This Government is opposed to the introduction of local market-facing pay in Scotland. I wrote to the Chief Secretary to the Treasury on 23 February setting out our view that we do not see merit in applying that approach to devolved pay in Scotland.

I wrote again to the chief secretary on 16 March to seek assurance that work on local market-facing pay would not lead to reductions in block allocations for the devolved Administrations through the Barnett formula. He has confirmed that there will be no impact on the block grant through the Barnett formula during the current spending review period.

The Scottish Government remains concerned about the potential implications for Scotland in the longer term, and about the impact of the United Kingdom Government's approach on the Scottish economy and on more than 30,000 public servants who are employed in Scotland by UK Government departments.

Jim Eadie: Does the cabinet secretary agree that regional pay has more to do with deficit reduction than it has with creating a level economic playing field across the UK? Does he share my concern that the UK Government's proposals will simply increase income disparities and the wealth gap that exists between the south-east of England and other parts of the UK? Does he agree that what Scotland needs is the economic levers to grow our economy, to create a fairer and more equal society and to protect our public sector workers?

John Swinney: Mr Eadie makes the important and substantial point that the approach that is being taken on market-facing pay is designed to do two things: to contribute to deficit reduction and—I do not know whether it is designed to do this, but it will certainly do it—to increase regional inequity in Scotland. That is my central concern about the UK Government's approach, which I think will be very damaging to different localities in

Scotland and to the Scottish economy. If such an approach by the UK Government is to become commonplace, that is another example of why this Parliament should be in control of all the issues that affect the livelihoods of people in Scotland.

Welfare Reform (Further Provision) (Scotland) Bill

17. Elaine Murray (Dumfriesshire) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what discussions it has had with the United Kingdom Government about the financial implications of the proposals in the Welfare Reform (Further Provision) (Scotland) Bill on the public sector. (S4O-00965)

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Employment and Sustainable Growth (John Swinney): The Welfare Reform (Further Provision) (Scotland) Bill is an enabling bill that will give the Scottish ministers powers to make consequential changes as a result of the Welfare Reform Act 2012. The financial implications of the proposals will reflect the need to adjust the entitlement criteria for devolved passported benefits to take account of the UK Government's welfare reforms and planned cuts to benefits, which the Department for Work and Pensions estimates will reduce benefit receipts in Scotland by £2.5 billion by 2015. We have had regular discussions with the UK Government at ministerial and official level on welfare reform, but there have been no specific discussions on the Scottish bill.

Elaine Murray: As the cabinet secretary knows, the bill process must be completed by April 2013, yet many of the details, such as those relating to entitlement to universal credit, remain to be set out by the UK Government in secondary legislation. Have the Scottish ministers made UK ministers aware of their concerns about the consequences of welfare reform for passported benefits? How and when were those concerns relayed? What response did UK ministers give on the timetable for the bill?

John Swinney: I assure Dr Murray that ministers—principally, the Deputy First Minister and I—have made clear to UK Government ministers our concerns about the direction and the substance of the welfare reform provisions that are emerging from the UK Government.

We have also made clear our concerns about timescales. I will give an example that relates to my responsibilities. We have to have some measures to replace council tax benefit in place by 1 April 2013. All the detail that we require to enable that to happen is not yet to hand. We must bear that in mind as we prepare for a seamless application of the changes that we intend to make, given the assurances that we have given to make good the deficit that the UK Government has created through its changes in that respect.

We have made those representations. We have not had a reassuring response as regards the implications of the timescale, but ministers are persisting in pursuing the issue to ensure that we have at our disposal all the information that we require to ensure that we can take decisions in the interests of the people of Scotland.

Jamie Hepburn (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP): The cabinet secretary mentioned that the DWP has not yet provided all the information to the Scottish Government. Does he agree that it is a disgrace that the DWP is not providing all the information that is necessary, given that the Scottish Government has to get on with the job of undoing some of the damage that the UK Government's welfare reforms will inflict?

John Swinney: That is a particular challenge, on which ministers are focused, because we want to take steps to protect people. For example, on council tax benefit, we have taken steps to make good the damage that is being inflicted by the arbitrary 10 per cent reduction that the UK Government is applying to the council tax benefit budget. I think that any reasonable person would acknowledge that, in public authorities and public bodies, we need adequate time to ensure that preparations can be undertaken effectively so that resources are deployed effectively and the needs of vulnerable people in our society are fully and adequately protected.

General Questions

Marriage Ceremonies

1. Angus MacDonald (Falkirk East) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what its position is on the types of marriage ceremony available to couples. (S4O-00939)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Health, Wellbeing and Cities Strategy (Nicola Sturgeon): Although the Scottish Government is satisfied that current marriage law provides the flexibility to enable most couples to have the type of marriage ceremony that best suits them, it recognises that non-religious belief systems are not explicitly covered by current legislation and intends to consult on the issue when a suitable legislative opportunity arises.

Angus MacDonald: The Deputy First Minister will be aware of the inequality in the type of marriage ceremony that is available to couples in Scotland. On the one hand, there is a ceremony for those who would like a ceremony that is centred around their own beliefs and aspirations and is linked to a particular church or faith group; on the other hand, there is the current alternative, which is devoid of all religious or spiritual content.

Given that the solution may lie in the inevitably lengthy legislative process, will the Scottish Government offer a temporary solution, perhaps through section 12 of the Marriage (Scotland) Act 1977, as has been provided to humanists since 2007, so that that inequality may be addressed quickly?

Nicola Sturgeon: I am happy to investigate the particular proposal that Angus MacDonald has made and to get back to him in writing. I understand the issue. There are some independent celebrants who argue that they should be permitted to offer a legally recognised marriage ceremony that would cater to couples who want a marriage ceremony that is tailored to their requirements and which is neither civil nor necessarily tied to a particular faith or church.

Under the 1977 act, a marriage can be solemnised by either an authorised registrar or by an approved celebrant who is appointed by the registrar general. The 1977 act provides for a number of ways in which a religious celebrant may be approved to solemnise marriage, depending on the particular circumstances.

As I said in my initial reply, we intend to consult on introducing a third category of non-religious celebrant when such an opportunity arises. However, I will give consideration to the proposal that the member has made and revert to him on it.

Agricultural Support (Map Scale)

2. Tavish Scott (Shetland Islands) (LD): To ask the Scottish Executive what map scale is used to assess land eligible for agricultural support under the integrated administration and control system 2012. (S4O-00940)

The Minister for Environment and Climate Change (Stewart Stevenson): The mapping scale used to assess land eligible for agricultural support under the integrated administration and control system 2012 is based on the Ordnance Survey's MasterMap topography layer and is 1:2,500 in rural areas and 1:10,000 in mountain and moorland areas.

Tavish Scott: Is the minister aware that a Shetland farmer faces potential financial ruin because of the IACS penalty regime? The National Farmers Union Scotland has told me that that farmer is not alone, and the union is in active discussions on solutions to the issue. Will the minister ensure that his department and the industry agree on the scale of maps to be used on an individual farm or croft? Will the Scottish Government, until that agreement is in place, consider introducing a moratorium to stop the unfair and entirely disproportionate penalties hitting crofters and farmers, not just in Shetland, but across Scotland?

Stewart Stevenson: We issue maps to other scales, where the original map may be to the scales that I have referred to. In relation to a series of ways in which individual farmers may mitigate the effects of errors, I am quite prepared—I am meeting the member this afternoon on another matter—to provide some further information to the member.

Rob Gibson (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP): Will the minister explain whether there was any discussion by the previous Labour-Liberal Government, or the Scottish National Party Government, with Ordnance Survey on a process to ensure that accurate maps on every part of Scotland are available so that the current problems would not arise?

Stewart Stevenson: I am not in a position to have access to all the discussions that previous Administrations may have had. I am not aware of such discussions having taken place since the baseline nearly a decade ago.

Agricultural Rent Reviews

3. Claudia Beamish (South Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what action it will take as a result of the Court of Session judgment on the Moonzie Farm rent review case in relation to section 13 rent reviews to ensure that the views of tenant farmers and tenants are taken into consideration. (S4O-00941)

The Minister for Environment and Climate Change (Stewart Stevenson): My colleague, the cabinet secretary Richard Lochhead, has already given an undertaking to stakeholders that he will look at the issues raised by the Moonzie case and, if necessary, tackle any problems by introducing further legislation.

The Tenant Farming Forum has been asked to assist in reviewing the position. It is scheduled to meet at the end of May to finalise the remit and membership of the rent review expert working group. Among other things, the panel of experts will look at the statutory formula for rent reviews and consider whether any changes are necessary.

Claudia Beamish: I thank the minister for his clarification on that matter from the perspective of the Scottish Executive and the cabinet secretary.

The minister may be aware that *The Scottish Farmer* recently stated that

"tenants are now citing the whole protracted Moonzie guddle as proof positive that the current rent review system is 'patently not fit for the 21st century'."

I ask for further reassurance that the minister and the cabinet secretary will consider the issue so that there can be clarity for tenants and landlords in what has been an extremely protracted and expensive case.

Stewart Stevenson: The member makes some perfectly reasonable points. There is a substantial divergence of opinion among the stakeholders involved in the issue about how we should take it forward, which is why we are setting up an expert group to discuss it. We will have that established before the end of this month—unless some hiccup occurs, which I do not anticipate.

The issue is complex—the Moonzie case illustrates that if it illustrates anything. We are motivated to give greater certainty and ensure that tenants have a fair rent.

The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick): Question 4, in the name of David McLetchie, has been withdrawn. The member has provided an explanation.

Domestic Abuse (Glasgow)

5. Paul Martin (Glasgow Provan) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what plans it has to widen access to services for victims of domestic abuse in Glasgow. (S4O-00943)

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice (Kenny MacAskill): The Scottish Government will provide additional funding in 2012 to 2015 to ASSIST—the advocacy support safety information services together project—which provides advocacy and support to victims of domestic abuse and their families in Glasgow city, as well as contributing to multi-agency risk assessment and safety planning. The additional funding will enable victims of domestic abuse throughout the Strathclyde police force area to benefit from ASSIST's services.

Paul Martin: Does the minister realise that as a result of the rule changes concerning violence against women funding in Glasgow, a number of overheads of Glasgow East Women's Aid have not been covered by the project? Will the minister meet me to discuss the issue further and to hear at first hand from Glasgow East Women's Aid about the challenges that it faces in respect of the funding package that is being provided to it?

Kenny MacAskill: There are two separate issues there. I am happy to look into the matter, and to discuss it further with Mr Martin if need be.

Glasgow City Council is carrying out a strategic review of women's services. That is separate from the ASSIST scheme, whose funding is increasing from almost £800,000 to more than £1 million, provided by the Scottish Government. The scheme is working, and there has been a reduction. We are at the lowest number for domestic murder, attempted murder and serious assault over a six-year period; overall there were 66 fewer victims. The Government is putting money where it is needed, which is working out in practice. I am aware of a review by Glasgow City

Council, but I am happy to enter into discussion with Mr Martin.

Transport Infrastructure (Aberdeen)

6. Richard Baker (North East Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what action it is taking to improve transport infrastructure in Aberdeen. (S4O-00944)

The Minister for Housing and Transport (Keith Brown): The Scottish Government is continuing to make record levels of investment in transport infrastructure projects throughout Scotland and the north-east, including Aberdeen. We remain committed to delivering the Aberdeen western peripheral route and improvements to the Haudagain roundabout.

On rail, we remain committed to service improvements between Aberdeen and Inverness.

Richard Baker: Is the minister aware of the increasing belief among businesses in the north-east that improvements on the Haudagain roundabout should begin before the Aberdeen western peripheral route is completed and that, in fact, that view is now shared by Aberdeen and Grampian chamber of commerce and Enterprise North East Trust? We are all frustrated at the on-going legal delays to the bypass but does the minister accept that he can make a difference by moving forward the timescale for the Haudagain? If he will not do so, can he really guarantee that the work will be completed within the next five years?

Keith Brown: That is exactly the same question that Richard Baker asked very recently—and, not surprisingly, my answer remains the same. We will complete the Haudagain roundabout once we have completed the AWPR and the Balmedie to Tippetty scheme. It is not just me who thinks that things should be taken in that order; if the member looks at the study that has been carried out on the project, he will see that those other schemes must be in place if we are to achieve the necessary benefits from the Haudagain roundabout. That is the sensible approach and we are taking it—and will continue to take it—in concert with our partners at the north east of Scotland transport partnership and Aberdeen City Council.

Mark McDonald (North East Scotland) (SNP): Does the minister agree that proceeding with the Haudagain project before the AWPR is completed and able to take some of the load off the roundabout will create an absolute transport nightmare? Does he also agree that it is a bit ironic for the Labour Party to be pushing the Haudagain roundabout, given that its council group's proposal relied on a third crossing over the Don, an option that the Labour Party itself opposed?

Keith Brown: I am very surprised to hear that there might be contradictions in the Labour Party's case, but what the member suggests might well be true.

We should rely on objective evidence, and the study that has been done shows that the real benefits from the Haudagain project will arise after we take forward the AWPR and the Balmedie to Tippetty scheme. That is the option that has been investigated; that is what the experts have suggested; and that is what we are going to do.

Care Homes (Southern Cross Healthcare)

7. Helen Eadie (Cowdenbeath) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what checks and investigations have been carried out into care homes formerly operated by Southern Cross Healthcare. (S4O-00945)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Health, Wellbeing and Cities Strategy (Nicola Sturgeon): Every care home formerly operated by Southern Cross received a full inspection visit before the new operators were able to register with the Social Care and Social Work Inspectorate Scotland. In addition, every home will receive an early unannounced follow-up inspection visit. As of 1 April, unannounced follow-up inspection visits had been completed for 81 of the 97 former Southern Cross homes and details of the inspection outcomes, including grades, can be found on the care inspectorate website.

Helen Eadie: The cabinet secretary will have received a letter that I wrote to her on 24 April in which I refer to the case of a constituent, Frances Gale, who was resident in Woodside Court nursing home in Glenrothes and who, as a result of total neglect, was on the brink of death as a result of dehydration, starvation and the very worst possible case of bedsores. Only through the family's persistence in demanding that a 999 call be made and the efforts of staff at Queen Margaret hospital and a professor at Victoria hospital is the lady alive today. How can it be, in this day and age, that our regulatory framework does not safeguard the care of people in residential homes in the way that it should? I ask the cabinet secretary to demand an urgent investigation into how this could have happened, with sanctions imposed against the home if that is appropriate and if the reports are substantiated. After all, the family was told to prepare for the worst when the patient was admitted to the Queen Margaret hospital's emergency department.

Nicola Sturgeon: As every member in the chamber will agree, the circumstances that Helen Eadie has described are completely and utterly unacceptable. I have made very clear my expectation that the care standards for elderly people should be high at all times, regardless of

whether an elderly patient is in a care home or hospital, and that any failings in the standards of care should be properly investigated.

Our regulatory system is robust and, as the member will be aware, I recently took steps to strengthen it further. Moreover, the care inspectorate encourages people to use its complaints system to ensure that incidents such as that described by Helen Eadie can be brought quickly to its attention. I am not sure whether Mrs Eadie has already been in contact with the inspectorate—I see that she is nodding—but I will certainly take steps to ensure that the substance of her question and the terms of her letter are brought to its attention to allow it to take any action that it considers necessary. Of course, it is able to take a range of actions and sanctions against any home that is found to be failing in the care that it provides to older people.

The Presiding Officer: Question 8, in the name of Bob Doris, has been withdrawn. The member has provided me with an explanation.

Emergency Towing Vessel Service (Pentland Firth)

9. Jean Urquhart (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking in light of the United Kingdom Government's decision not to renew the contract for the emergency towing vessel service in the Pentland Firth and other northern waters. (S4O-00947)

The Minister for Environment and Climate Change (Stewart Stevenson): Emergency towing vessels are crucial to protect mariners and the marine environment. We have urged the UK Government to continue to provide cover until a suitable alternative solution can be identified and put in place. Although we are pleased at the positive engagement that we have had with Oil and Gas UK on a potential solution for the northern isles, it is imperative that any transition to a new arrangement does not involve a gap in provision. The UK Government must also ensure that cover is in place for the Western Isles and the Minches.

Richard Lochhead recently wrote to Mike Penning MP on the issue, and will also raise it with David Mundell MP at the Scotland Office.

Jean Urquhart: Does the minister agree with me that, to understand precisely the service that is required, it will be necessary to fully consult all the other rescue services and the maritime industries, that that would be best done by the Scottish Government and that funding should be returned from Westminster to allow that to happen?

Stewart Stevenson: I agree that it is essential that all maritime interests and industries are fully

considered in any future proposals. The Scotland Office is leading on the issue and I assure members that the Scottish Government is engaged in the discussions.

The UK Government has consistently made it clear to us that the matter is reserved. We, in turn, have also been clear that if no commercial option is available, it is the UK Government's responsibility to fund provision of the service.

Tavish Scott (Shetland Islands) (LD): Does the minister accept that the current contract for emergency vessels is a great deal for salvage companies but absolutely terrible for Scottish taxpayers? Does he therefore recognise that the pursuit of the shared use of an alternative vessel is a sensible and constructive way to keep the seas safe, as Lord Donaldson originally wished? Does the Scottish Government plan to work with Scottish local authorities, the UK Government and the oil and gas industry to ensure that we achieve that shared objective?

Stewart Stevenson: I am glad that Mr Scott referred to a shared objective because that is where we are. The situation that we are in and the vessels that we currently have, as well as the timescale that is pressing us, make it difficult to find a vessel that would be suitable for all purposes.

I hope that the UK Government continues to work with the industry in a meaningful way, and that the industry is also able to help us. I also hope that all levels of government get engaged in this important issue. However, I have to say to the member that, if we had the independent powers of a normal country, we would have solved the problem long since.

HIV Prevention (NHS Tayside)

10. Jenny Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab):

To ask the Scottish Executive what HIV prevention resources are in place in NHS Tayside. (S4O-00948)

The Minister for Public Health (Michael Matheson): The Scottish Government sexual health and blood borne virus framework identifies prevention as a priority. Under the framework, NHS Tayside receives more than £2 million per annum for activities relating to HIV, sexual health and viral hepatitis and more than £600,000 per annum is spent directly on HIV prevention activities in the board area. That relates to activities at a whole population level as well as to interventions targeted at individuals who may be particularly at risk.

Jenny Marra: I thank the minister for his answer. Every other health board in Scotland apart from NHS Tayside has an HIV prevention officer and engages with the recommended

community development approach. In Tayside, the total number of people with HIV in December 2011 was 709. That is high for such a small health board and compares unfavourably with NHS Grampian, which has a much lower total of 500 people with HIV. What action is the Government taking to rectify the problem? Will it commit to more resources for prevention work in NHS Tayside?

Michael Matheson: NHS Tayside has recently completed a needs-based assessment of its services around blood borne viruses and HIV in the Tayside area. That work has highlighted a number of actions that those services will need to take. I have no doubt that NHS Tayside will look at how it can progress those actions to ensure that it has effective services in place.

First Minister's Question Time

14:34

Engagements

1. Johann Lamont (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab): To ask the First Minister what engagements he has planned for the rest of the day. (S4F-00641)

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

Johann Lamont: Given the further revelations in the past few days, why does the First Minister still believe that Rupert Murdoch is a fit person to run an international media company?

The First Minister: I have said that that should be judged by the relevant authorities—that means the Office of Communications, in terms of broadcasting, and in general terms the Leveson inquiry. That is where those matters should be judged in an independent manner.

The Labour Party's actions yesterday on a House of Commons committee served only to split that committee on political lines and were not advisable. [*Interruption.*] It is a statement of fact that the committee was split on political lines, when it was meant to be unified in pursuing an inquiry. That is exactly what happened. Incidentally, I note that the Labour leadership in London, unlike Johann Lamont, when asked that very question, said that the matters should be judged by Ofcom and the Leveson inquiry.

Johann Lamont: I presume that the First Minister is content to be on the same side as the Tories in their view of Rupert Murdoch. I would have a bit more respect for the First Minister if he allowed his back benchers to say what they think in our parliamentary committees.

The First Minister has in the past accused me of hypocrisy in raising the issue.

Members: Yes.

Johann Lamont: I agree—he has persisted in arguing that line lots of times. However, let me give him a real example of hypocrisy. I quote:

“The prospect of one person, especially Mr Murdoch, having more influence over the media in the UK would be a matter of concern, especially in Scotland.”

Those are not my words, but the words of the Deputy First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon, when Murdoch tried to take over ITV news. She was right then and I agree with her, so what made her change her mind? It cannot have been when she found out about phone hacking on an industrial scale. It could not have been when she found out that the phone of a murdered teenager was

hacked. Surely it was not when she found out that Joan McAlpine's phone was hacked. Did she change her mind when the First Minister told her to after he realised that he is the last person left defending Rupert Murdoch?

The First Minister: I condemn phone hacking regardless of who the victim is and who the perpetrators are. That has been my consistent position and it will continue to be my position. The most obvious explanation in answer to Johann Lamont's question is that there were two different subjects. The first was about ITV, in which News Corporation did not have a controlling stake or major interests. The second was about BSkyB, in which News Corp already had a 39 per cent stake. Most people, including Ofcom, after assurances were given on Sky news, said that the issue would not be one of plurality—that is what Ofcom reported to the Government.

As for alliances with the Conservative Party, I have to say that Johann Lamont is on very weak ground. Not only do we have a weekly attempt to build the grand alliance with the Conservative Party in this Parliament but, of course, when it came to the budget, the Labour Party decided to vote with the Conservatives and against apprenticeships in Scotland.

Johann Lamont: If the First Minister was so concerned about the Milly Dowler issue, he certainly would not have sought to rehabilitate Rupert Murdoch by inviting him to tea at Bute house. Further, he would not have sought to dissemble on who was responsible on the issue when he wrote an article in the first edition of *The Scottish Sun on Sunday*.

Is it not the truth that the First Minister's relationship with Rupert Murdoch is preventing any real scrutiny of News International's activities in Scotland? When the phone hacking scandal broke, the First Minister claimed that it was a London problem. Well, it is now well and truly on the First Minister's doorstep. It is time that we had a proper inquiry here in Scotland that investigates who else has been hacked and the full extent of the media influence over politicians and Government. A former First Minister has been hacked and an aide to the current First Minister has been hacked. Has the First Minister himself been hacked? Why is he blocking a Scottish inquiry into the activities of his old friend Rupert Murdoch?

The First Minister: Perhaps we can now get to the nub of the issue. It is time that the Parliament realised the full seriousness of what it is intended to do in Scotland. At present, we have a live police inquiry in Scotland, which has up to 40 officers working on it. That is a huge commitment of resource by Strathclyde Police.

I know that, because of the inaction in the past of the Metropolitan Police, people are sceptical about police inquiries into these matters, but there is no reason to be sceptical about the inquiry by Strathclyde Police. It is a live inquiry, huge resources are being devoted to it and the expectation is that the force will pursue the evidence without fear or favour and produce effective results.

There are implications for what should be done elsewhere, because a police inquiry has primacy. That means that any committee of this Parliament could not impinge on information to that inquiry, that any witness would have to be warned against incrimination and that anybody who was subject to adverse publicity in a parliamentary inquiry could quote article 6 of the European convention on human rights and use that as a defence in a future criminal inquiry. In other words, there could be a significant risk that a criminal investigation or inquiry would be compromised. It is vital that members understand that a real police inquiry is now taking place in Scotland—would that that had happened in 2005, when the issues were being carried through.

Even the Leveson inquiry, which is a judicial inquiry, has to bear in mind the existence of a live police inquiry. For example, when the chief constable of Strathclyde went before Leveson, he could not be questioned on all the aspects that are being considered by the current police inquiry. That is exactly why Leveson is looking at a range of issues that go beyond the criminal investigations.

I shall be absolutely delighted next month to go to Leveson and account for my contacts with News International and News Corp over the years. I am not certain that members of the Labour Party will have such a comfortable experience.

Johann Lamont: I do not think that even the First Minister himself believed that, never mind his back benchers. [*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick): Order.

Johann Lamont: This is our great, modern, new Scottish Parliament. We see a Tory secretary of state being brought before the House of Commons, we see a Tory Prime Minister being brought before the House of Commons, where we also see a parliamentary inquiry. [*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Order!

Johann Lamont: However, in the Scottish Parliament, the First Minister runs away from accountability.

These things are not incompatible, except in the First Minister's own head. The First Minister told us that

"the people who live in Scotland are the best people to make decisions about their own future. Of that there can be no doubt".—[*Official Report*, 25 January 2012; c 5603.]

Yet he is content to rely on a judicial inquiry in London and an inquiry that is being run by a parliamentary committee in London to determine the truth in Scotland. I look forward to hearing the First Minister answer a question under oath—indeed, I look forward to hearing him answer a question.

The question for the First Minister now is: why does he fear a parliamentary investigation here in Scotland? This started with Rupert Murdoch trying to take over BSkyB, but it turns out that he owns the Scottish National Party.

The First Minister: Johann Lamont gets her chance every week to ask me questions. The fact that she does not make a good job of it is hardly my responsibility.

I have already tried to explain the importance of police inquiries. Incidentally, Parliament can do exactly what it likes, but police inquiries take precedence on such issues.

I will now try to inform Johann Lamont about Leveson. The Leveson inquiry has been established under the Inquiries Act 2005, which means that the Scottish Government had to be consulted on the inquiry's terms of reference—as, incidentally, did the other devolved Administrations. We tried to broaden and strengthen the terms of reference—I will put that correspondence with the UK Government in the Scottish Parliament information centre, so that every member can see it.

In common with other political leaders, I will be going to Leveson next month and will be able to account for all my meetings. I will account for every single one of the five meetings that I have had with Rupert Murdoch over the past five years. I am sure that Gordon Brown will be delighted to explain the 17 meetings that he had over three years and David Cameron the 18 meetings that he has had over the past five years. It will be the responsibility of every leading politician to explain their meetings because the Leveson inquiry is considering—under oath—relationships between the press and politicians.

Johann Lamont asked me why I believe that the Labour Party is guilty of hypocrisy on the issue. I will give her two explanations. First, the events that we are discussing took place on the Labour Party's watch: it was in government in London and Edinburgh at the time. Secondly, the idea that, if the Labour Party complains hard enough, people will forget about 15 years of association with News International is for the birds. People look at the Labour Party and say, "Humbug and hypocrisy."

Prime Minister (Meetings)

2. Ruth Davidson (Glasgow) (Con): To ask the First Minister when he will next meet the Prime Minister. (S4F-00637)

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

Ruth Davidson: Let us simplify this a little. We know that the former First Minister Jack McConnell and his children were hacked. We know that the current First Minister's close parliamentary aide was hacked. Parliament and the people of Scotland deserve to be told whether the First Minister was hacked.

The First Minister's spokesman has repeatedly said that his boss will reveal all to the Leveson inquiry, but the First Minister reports to this Parliament, so this is his big opportunity. Dodging the question now, only to reveal all when he takes the stand later, will look like media manipulation of the very worst kind.

Is it the case that the First Minister was hacked but did not speak out to protect his new best pal, or did Rupert not need to bother tapping the First Minister's phone because he was already on speed dial? Parliament is asking and Scotland is watching. Was the First Minister hacked?

The First Minister: As Ruth Davidson rightly says, I will go to the Leveson inquiry and will speak about a range of matters under oath. That is where I will give my evidence, which is exactly the right thing to do. The inquiry was set up on a judicial basis by cross-party agreement.

In her question, Ruth Davidson referred to media manipulation of the worst kind. The two words that came to my mind when she said that were "Andy Coulson".

Ruth Davidson: Let us talk of inquiries, then. *[Interruption.]* The First Minister wants to speak at the Leveson inquiry. We have a First Minister who is willing to speak at an English inquiry but not to hold one in Scotland. *[Interruption.]*

The Cabinet Secretary for Infrastructure and Capital Investment (Alex Neil): It is not an English inquiry.

Ruth Davidson: An inquiry in England—*[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Order!

Ruth Davidson: The First Minister says that the police have primacy because their investigations are continuing, but the Culture, Media and Sport Committee at Westminster managed to hold an inquiry.

When it comes to the First Minister's conduct, we in Scotland need to look deeper than Leveson

allows. Therefore, I support calls for an inquiry in the Parliament, especially when the First Minister's intervention appears to contravene a law of his own making. The Judiciary and Courts (Scotland) Act 2008 states:

"In particular, the First Minister ... must not seek to influence particular judicial decisions through any special access to the judiciary".

The United Kingdom Secretary of State for Culture, Olympics, Media and Sport was acting in a quasi-judicial role on BSkyB, and the First Minister has admitted that he sought to influence him. Indeed, there were desperate calls between their offices.

Surely—*[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Order. We will hear the member.

Ruth Davidson: Surely, when there are questions as to whether a First Minister of Scotland may have acted in contravention of Scots law, a parliamentary inquiry is the minimum to which we are entitled.

The First Minister: I do not think that even Ruth Davidson's back benchers believed that absolute mince of a question. For goodness' sake, the First Minister of Scotland advocates jobs and investment for Scotland at every single opportunity, and that is what he should do.

As far as Leveson is concerned, it is not an English inquiry. If I had said that it was an English inquiry, members on the Tory benches would have been bouncing up and down, accusing me of racism, narrow nationalism and all that sort of thing. Surely Ruth Davidson has not lost her belief in the United Kingdom. Surely she knows that it is a cross-border inquiry. Surely she knows about and has read the input that the Scottish Government made as we tried to strengthen the inquiry's terms of reference. I am sure that she will be on the edge of her seat when I give evidence to Leveson next month.

The parliamentary committee at Westminster had its inquiry into whether it was misled on previous occasions, but the Conservative Party does not seem to have grasped the essential point in all of this. Questions have been asked about the Prime Minister referring people to independent adjudication, but I point out that there is an independent adjudicator who has not once been asked to adjudicate on anything. The Conservatives actually pay an independent adjudicator on the ministerial code and he has not been called into action once. I have referred myself five times. The fact that every single one of the referrals got kicked out of the park is neither here nor there. I think that I have stood up to examination rather better than Ruth Davidson's colleagues at Westminster.

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-00638)

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

Willie Rennie: The First Minister is responsible to this Parliament. Why will he not tell us whether his phone has been hacked? Despite all the excuses, we have seen the First Minister man the barricades to protect Rupert Murdoch from a Scottish inquiry. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Order.

Willie Rennie: What has happened? A year ago, the First Minister would have called Leveson a London-based court with a judge who has only been to Scotland for the Edinburgh festival. Now he says that that court is the right place for a decision on Scotland. When did he switch from being a roaring Celtic lion to being a Celtic mouse in support of all things English—of London courts, Trafalgar Square and morris dancing? Why cannot the First Minister decide to back an inquiry in Scotland?

The First Minister: I am sure that, if I am called on to give a definition of English nationality, I will do rather better than Willie Rennie has just done.

Leveson was established under the Inquiries Act 2005. It is a cross-border inquiry, we had input to the terms of reference, and it was set up by all-party agreement. If we care to look back to that halcyon day, we see that all parties decided that a judicial inquiry was the correct route. Even the previous Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, said as he was speaking to the House of Commons that his deepest regret was that he did not set up a judicial inquiry when he was in office because the civil service told him not to do so. We all subscribe to Leveson as the way in which to pursue the issues. Having subscribed to it, does Willie Rennie not think that we should abide by that?

When Willie Rennie reads the correspondence and the input that we had to the terms of reference in an effort to strengthen and broaden them, he will see that we should have every confidence that Lord Justice Leveson will hold a thorough inquiry and come up with substantial recommendations. I do not see anything wrong in that. In fact, if I had taken a different course and said last year, “No—we’re not to have Leveson. We must set up our own Scottish judicial inquiry,” every single one of the Opposition parties would have been bouncing up and down and suggesting that we were not prepared to rise to the moment. I rose to the

moment. Maybe Willie Rennie will try to do the same.

Willie Rennie: It does not really add up. The Scottish National Party has a view on absolutely everything from the price of dog food to the Americanisation of Hallowe’en. I cannot understand why the First Minister will not stand up and be counted on this. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Order. We will hear the member.

Willie Rennie: Is it not the case that the First Minister has traded favours with Rupert Murdoch? Is it not the case that he defend him on phone hacking, stood up for him on BSkyB, and is now protecting him in Scotland? Is it not true that he is never on the side of ordinary people or the victims and always on the side of the rich and powerful?

The First Minister: On being on the side of ordinary people, I have just been reflecting on the interview that Willie Rennie conducted with Gary Robertson last week. I will give members a flavour of it. The statement

“Lib Dem MP”

and

“former Sky employee ... will contact Vince Cable to ask him about the economic and investment point of view of the take-over bids”

was put to Willie Rennie, and he was asked:

“so you’re saying that was Jim Tolson.”

Willie Rennie said:

“Yeah I’m sure it was Jim Tolson, Jim Tolson used to work at Sky, and we’ve got significant numbers of employees”

at

“Sky in Dunfermline”.

Gary Robertson then asked:

“So its ok for a Lib Dem MP to lobby”

a potential

“minister ... in the case of Vince Cable”,

but why was it

“not ok for the First Minister to do it?”

The answer was because *The Sun* was not supporting the Liberal Democrats. I have news for Willie Rennie: neither is anyone else.

Willie Rennie: As usual—*[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Order.

Willie Rennie: As usual, the First Minister is selectively quoting. He knows full well that the reason why he was backing BSkyB and the reason why he was putting his interests above those of phone-hacking victims was because he

wanted the support of *The Sun*. Why cannot he just admit that?

The First Minister: Because of the 6,300 jobs in Dunfermline, Livingston and Uddingston and the 2,000 jobs in Glasgow and elsewhere, which the Labour Party did not even know about last week. Those jobs are the priority. Maybe that is the difference that people might reflect on tomorrow: where the Opposition parties have different priorities, ours are jobs, jobs, jobs, not muck, muck, muck.

Local Democracy

4. Rob Gibson (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP): To ask the First Minister what the Scottish Government's position is on the findings of the report by the Jimmy Reid Foundation, "The Silent Crisis: Failure and Revival in Local Democracy in Scotland". (S4F-00647)

The First Minister (Alex Salmond): The report makes a valuable contribution to the debate on local democracy. The Scottish National Party Administration has tried a new partnership with local government over the past five years through the abolition of ring fencing and the focus on outcome agreements. The Minister for Local Government and Planning has led a reform of community planning partnerships alongside the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and will shortly consult on the community empowerment bill. Most recently, the partnership approach led to the hugely important joint agreement between the Government and COSLA to protect more than half a million people across Scotland from the United Kingdom Conservative-Liberal Government's cuts to their council tax benefit.

Rob Gibson: I thank the First Minister for his answer and look forward to the details of the community empowerment bill. Alongside empowering local democracy, it is essential that local government works in partnership with the Government to protect the vulnerable and support the economy. Will the First Minister commit to continuing that partnership approach after tomorrow's elections and include the Jimmy Reid Foundation's thoughts in his work?

The First Minister: Yes, I will. I think that the progress of the partnership between councils and Government is vital for Scotland's future. It will include 600 hours of free nursery education, the opportunities for all guarantee for every 16 to 19-year-old in Scotland and of course the vital concentration on family budgets and the knowledge that the council tax freeze will be worth £1,200 to each average family over the eight years that we intend to implement that freeze.

Elaine Smith (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab): I declare an interest as a member of the

board of the *Scottish Left Review*, the parent board of the Jimmy Reid Foundation. Is the First Minister minded to set up the commission that the report asks for to look into democracy at the local level? If so, will he ensure that it considers the democratic deficit of a lack of women's participation in local government and ensure that any proposed change does not result in greater inequality between poorer and richer communities, which is also cited in the report?

The First Minister: A number of those issues were of course touched on in the late Campbell Christie's report as well as in the report from the Jimmy Reid Foundation. I would be very happy to meet Elaine Smith to talk about the issues in more detail to see what areas of the report could be prioritised and those that would have cross-party agreement. If she is willing, I would be very happy to address things in that way.

Khalil Dale

5. Elaine Murray (Dumfriesshire) (Lab): To ask the First Minister what information the Scottish Government was given following the abduction of Khalil Dale. (S4F-00642)

The First Minister (Alex Salmond): The whole Parliament will want to place it on record that we utterly condemn the brutal murder of Khalil Dale, who devoted his life to helping others. He was a nurse and a highly experienced aid worker who had saved a huge number of lives in his long service in many areas with the International Committee of the Red Cross.

Mr Dale had friends across the planet. He regularly travelled back to Dumfries, where he was well known and well loved. My sincere condolences—and, I know, those of the whole Parliament—go to his family and friends and particularly to his fiancée, Anne, and his brother Ian at what is a very sad time.

Mr Dale was abducted on 5 January 2012. As the Cabinet Secretary for Justice told the chamber on 26 January, Alistair Burt, the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, met the Cabinet Secretary for Culture and External Affairs on 19 January and informed her that the International Committee of the Red Cross was in the lead. Unfortunately and tragically, the organisation's efforts to secure Mr Dale's release did not succeed, and the tragedy that we learned about this week ensued.

Elaine Murray: I thank the First Minister for his reply and associate myself with his comments about my former constituent. I appreciated the need for discretion about the information that was made publicly available while the Red Cross attempted to secure Mr Dale's release and I appreciate the continuing need not to allow

publicity to interfere with solving this brutal crime. However, can the First Minister provide any comfort to Mr Dale's family and friends about the actions that were taken after 26 January? Does he have any information about who might have been responsible for Mr Dale's abduction?

How can we in Scotland assist in solving the crime? For example, has consideration been given to providing a reward for information that leads to the successful prosecution of the perpetrators?

The First Minister: The Cabinet Secretary for Culture and External Affairs spoke to Alistair Burt as recently as this morning, when he confirmed that the FCO and the International Committee of the Red Cross worked tirelessly with their collective resources to secure Khalil Dale's release. In the light of an atrocity and a tragedy, it is easy to say that things could have been done differently, but we as the Scottish Government have no reason to suppose that the Foreign Office did not act in what it saw as Khalil Dale's best interests in allowing the International Committee of the Red Cross to take the lead, as that organisation requested.

Fiona Hyslop was assured that Mr Dale's family are being kept fully informed through the FCO as arrangements are made for recovering his body. A number of parts of that information are obviously confidential, but that issue was raised and is being dealt with.

The responsibility that was claimed was well publicised and publicly declared. We have no reason to suppose that that assessment was not accurate. We will look carefully at any contribution that we can make to help the security of Scottish aid workers who work internationally.

As the member will be aware, this is not the first such tragedy in recent months. While the impact on family and friends is of course deeply felt, there should be admiration and respect across the whole Scottish community for the fact that we have citizens who are prepared to put their lives on the line to help others across the planet.

Empty Commercial Properties

6. Gavin Brown (Lothian) (Con): To ask the First Minister how many empty commercial properties the Scottish Government predicts will no longer be empty as a direct consequence of the proposals in the Local Government Finance (Unoccupied Properties etc) (Scotland) Bill. (S4F-00648)

The First Minister (Alex Salmond): Empty properties are a blight on high streets across Scotland. Our proposed reform of empty property rates relief will introduce an incentive to bring such premises back into economic use and regenerate our high streets. The reform will raise an estimated

additional £18 million a year for the Scottish budget over two years. That is a limited additional cost to business in comparison with the £1 billion cost of the United Kingdom Government's recent VAT rise.

Gavin Brown: I thank the First Minister for his answer but, unfortunately, it had nothing to do with the question that I asked, so I will ask the question again and I will simplify it. How many empty commercial properties will no longer be empty as a consequence of his bill?

The First Minister: Let me simplify the answer. I know that Gavin Brown pays close attention to the Federation of Small Businesses, which has consistently argued that the measure would be an incentive to bring properties back into active use.

I hope and believe that Gavin Brown will pay more attention to the views of the Federation of Small Businesses in the future. There is an assumption within the papers that the number of premises will be 5,500—which provides an interesting contrast. I am sorry that my answer to the question is so disappointing to Gavin Brown that he is chirping away quite merrily. We should contrast that figure of 5,500 with the fact that, in his region of Lothian, 10,800 premises are benefiting from the small business bonus, which has been introduced, maintained and championed by the SNP Government.

National Performing Companies

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Elaine Smith):

The next item of business is a debate on motion S4M-02738, in the name of Fiona Hyslop, on the national performing companies. I call Fiona Hyslop to speak to and move the motion.

15:06

The Cabinet Secretary for Culture and External Affairs (Fiona Hyslop): I welcome the opportunity to debate and celebrate the significant achievements of the five national performing companies during the first five years of direct funding from the Scottish Government. I agree with the Scottish actor Billy Boyd, who said,

"I think Scotland has some great stories."

The success of our national companies is a great story, and they are helping to tell the world the story of this confident, innovative and cultural Scotland in which we live. They help to shape our identity and hold an important place in the nation as leaders of our cultural life, showcasing the very best that we have to offer in the fields of dance, music, opera and theatre. This year sees not only the fifth anniversary of the direct funding relationship, but Scottish Opera's 50th anniversary, which I very much look forward to celebrating with it in June.

The move to direct funding was a result of the thinking generated by the Cultural Commission in June 2005 around the definition of what qualities a national company should have and the expectations that the people of Scotland should have of their national companies. Many of those have been incorporated into the criteria by which we determine national company status today, including excellence of output, reach throughout Scotland and international profile. With cross-party support from the Parliament, the then Minister for Tourism, Culture and Sport, Patricia Ferguson, introduced a new structure that was unique to Scotland to take the companies forward. The move to direct funding saw an immediate increase of £2.64 million of investment by the Government to stabilise the companies, and funding for the companies now stands at £23.5 million annually in revenue grant.

This Administration is proud to continue to support the companies in the face of deep cuts in public spending that have been imposed by the United Kingdom Government. We have managed to maintain revenue funding in 2012-13 for the five national performing companies at 2011-12 levels to ensure continued access to high-quality performances and services. In addition, we have maintained the national performing companies international touring fund. There has been no

reduction in the £350,000 budget for this year, with a similar allocation outlined for the remainder of this spending review period. That will enable the companies to continue to showcase the high quality of Scotland's contemporary culture internationally and to develop new international opportunities.

I have already announced a capital funding allocation of £11 million to support the redevelopment of Glasgow's Theatre Royal, which will support Scottish Opera, and of the Glasgow Royal Concert Hall, which will provide new rehearsal space for the Royal Scottish National Orchestra, in preparation for the Commonwealth games in 2014. Those two projects will support the construction industry to create employment in other sectors and will prepare Glasgow to upgrade its cultural estate.

The motion draws attention to the latest report covering the companies' activities during 2010-11. In the interests of transparency, I will continue to report annually on their activities. I will talk about key points in the report, to give a flavour of the companies' many and varied achievements. In 2010-11, the companies gave more than 900 performances and delivered just under 4,000 education and community events. More than 450,000 people attended performances and more than 110,000 people participated in outreach and education programmes.

All five companies are independent charities and are in good financial health. They operate a mixed economy and receive income from a variety of sources, including a revenue grant from the Scottish Government. The grant accounted for about 63 per cent of turnover during the first four years; the remaining 37 per cent was raised from performances, education work, merchandising and fundraising.

In that context, I note the Labour Party's amendment, which I am happy to support. I pay tribute to the many private supporters whose donations help the companies to deliver such a wide variety of projects.

Support enables new partnerships to develop. There has been highly innovative media sponsorship. I attended a performance of an excellent production of "La Bohème", which was supported by *The Sun* newspaper's £9.50 ticket offer. Some 97 per cent of the audience that evening was new to a Scottish Opera performance, and the paper reported that it had had to close all its ticket lines, because the tickets had sold out in advance.

The companies are creating opportunities for Scottish audiences to see work of an international standard and key Scottish artists. This year, Scottish Opera produced a new version of "The

Rake's Progress" with acclaimed director David McVicar. In 2010 the actor Alan Cumming starred in the National Theatre of Scotland's Edinburgh festival production of "The Bacchae". The wonderful violinist Nicola Benedetti has regularly performed with the RSNO and the Scottish Chamber Orchestra.

The companies also encourage talented UK and international artists to work in Scotland. I enjoyed an outstanding night of ballet at Scottish Ballet's thrilling production of "A Streetcar Named Desire". That world premier was conceived by American director Nancy Meckler and Belgian-Colombian choreographer Annabelle Lopez Ochoa.

Key to the funding relationship between the Government and the companies are the criteria that are used to manage the relationship and what the public can and should expect from our companies. I will talk about five areas in particular.

First, it is vital that people throughout Scotland have the opportunity to see a variety of work by the companies. The five companies between them worked with all 32 local authorities in 2010-11. Activity spans a range of classical and contemporary performing arts, education and community work and takes place in a range of places. In March, the Royal Scottish National Orchestra spent a successful week working in the Shetland islands, producing 24 events, which were attended by approximately 15 per cent of the island's inhabitants. Later in the year, Scottish Opera aims to tour to 50 Scottish venues, as part of its 50th anniversary celebrations.

Secondly, audiences remain enthusiastic about the work of the companies. The Scottish Chamber Orchestra and the RSNO are reporting increasing audiences for their Scottish seasons. In the first five years, the total audience for the companies' concerts and performances was in excess of 2.28 million. There are fluctuations year by year, as members would expect. The companies generate different programmes of work each year, and invitations to tour internationally or participate in festivals vary from year to year, which makes annual comparisons difficult.

Thirdly, the role of education, learning and community involvement is central to the purpose of all the companies. Each company delivers a range of work, to complement performances or to explore new ways of encouraging participation or involvement in the arts. I was pleased that Scottish Ballet went to Linlithgow academy, in my constituency, to talk about "A Streetcar Named Desire" because fifth years are studying the play as part of their higher studies.

In the first five years there have been more than 15,000 events and more than 500,000 participants. In 2011-12 there were more than

2,300 events and about 88,000 participants. The companies attract a range of audiences and participants to their projects. Early years projects, such as Scottish Opera's innovative "BabyO" and "SensoryO", and the Scottish Chamber Orchestra's popular big ears, little ears concerts allow parents, babies and toddlers to attend performances together.

On the other hand, Scottish Ballet's regenerate project offers opportunities for adults aged 50 and above to enjoy dance. Scottish Ballet recently performed a new piece at the national museum of Scotland as part of the science festival.

The fourth area is talent development. The companies understand the need to develop new talent, and they are running a number of successful schemes to ensure that new talented artists get opportunities to develop. That can be a challenge in the current climate. For example, Scottish Opera, working with the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland, employs a number of young talented singers, who are given a range of roles to allow them to develop their singing and performance skills. When I was Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning, the Scottish Further and Higher Education Funding Council, with ministerial guidance, provided additional resources to what is now the Royal Conservatoire to support a dance programme. An outcome of that has been the introduction of a bachelor of arts in modern ballet, by the Royal Conservatoire and Scottish Ballet, to train the next generation of dancers to the high levels that are required to pursue a professional career in dance. Of course, degree status also helps to support more teachers in dance for our schools.

Finally, I turn to the companies' international role. The Administration has placed a greater emphasis on bringing our cultural crown jewels to the attention of audiences across the world. The international touring fund supports international tours and events, and an emphasis is given to invitations from countries with which we wish to develop better economic and cultural ties. Today, I can announce that, with support from the Scottish Government's international touring fund, the Royal Scottish National Orchestra, with its new music director, Peter Oundjian, will perform six concerts in five venues across China in December and January. Overseas tours by the companies showcase Scotland's creative talent on a world stage and further enhance our global reputation. They also strengthen cultural and diplomatic links with countries, such as China, that are identified as priorities in our framework for international engagement. Indeed, when I was in Chicago recently for Scotland week, I was struck by the fantastic relationship that the National Theatre of Scotland has established with the Chicago Shakespeare Theater. Some of the links are very

well embedded—they provide a great opportunity for showcasing work in Chicago in particular.

The companies have visited a wide range of countries in the past five years. It is, of course, difficult not to mention the impact of “Black Watch” in raising Scotland’s cultural profile. All the companies are being encouraged to work with other Scottish Government agencies. Recently, both the National Theatre of Scotland and the Scottish Chamber Orchestra have supported events in Chicago, which I mentioned, and Bilbao.

Of course, not all the work requires our financial support, as the continuing success of “Black Watch” confirms. I am very hopeful for Scottish Ballet’s “A Streetcar Named Desire”, in which there is already a lot of international interest. However, the fund allows more projects across the arts to be seen and underlines the strength of Scotland’s cultural offerings.

The exchange of ideas and introductions across borders is also important. This year, the National Theatre of Scotland is again running its exchange festival, which brings together young people in Scotland with their compatriots from abroad to create theatre. The Uncommon Charter High School from Brooklyn is one of this year’s international guests. I visited it during Scotland week in New York and joined in their extreme ceilidh, and I look forward to welcoming them to Scotland in July. They will mix with young people from Aberdeen at an event in Stirling, which will really bring people together. The enthusiasm of the young people from Brooklyn was fantastic. They are keen to learn more about Scotland and will be able to showcase that work when they return to New York.

Those types of connection might not be obvious, in terms of international work, but they are important and show not only how serious we are about developing new talent, but also how the language of culture can reach across borders.

I want to put on record my appreciation of some of the new developments that are taking place, and my recognition of some of the senior level changes across both the RSNO, whose music director is moving on and whose chief executive has moved on, and Scottish Ballet, whose artistic director is leaving after 10 influential years. I pay tribute to Stéphane Denève, Simon Woods and Ashley Page for their major contributions to cultural life in Scotland. In turn, I offer a warm welcome to Peter Oundjian, the new music director at the RSNO; Christopher Hampson, the new artistic director at Scottish Ballet; and Michael Elliott, the new chief executive at RSNO.

The death of the great conductor Sir Charles Mackerras was a great loss to the Scottish Chamber Orchestra and its audiences, but I know

that, with the prodigiously talented principal conductor Robin Ticciati at the helm, the orchestra will carry on from strength to strength.

As we mark five years, it is clear that the companies have made a significant and enduring contribution to the nation, and in them we have much of which to be proud. The quality and range of their work showcases the many talented people who live, learn and work in Scotland. The companies regularly visit every part of the country, and those visits continue to highlight the cultural excellence that springs from Scotland to the many audiences across the world.

The Government will continue to work with the companies in that productive relationship, as we all accrue not only artistic but social and international benefits from their work. I look forward to hearing from members their reflections on the companies and the work that they have experienced as we celebrate a very successful five years.

I move,

That the Parliament welcomes the excellent work that Scotland’s world-class National Performing Companies continue to deliver; recognises that it is now five years since the start of a direct-funding relationship with the Scottish Government as set out in the recently published annual review of the companies; celebrates their ongoing commitment to delivering performances of quality and to distributing their work across Scotland; commends their innovative community and education projects, and recognises their importance in raising Scotland’s international cultural profile.

15:20

Patricia Ferguson (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (Lab): I am delighted to have the opportunity to debate our national performing companies, and I am sure that the debate will be consensual.

Scottish Labour decided to amend the Government’s motion only so that we as a Parliament could recognise the important contribution that is made to our national companies by local authorities and businesses and by the many individuals who contribute to their financial and artistic success. I thank the Government for indicating that it will agree the amendment at decision time.

The five companies that we now know as the national performing companies each have a long and proud history, but they have not been without their problems over the years. In the early years of the Parliament a number of those companies experienced a series of financial and artistic problems, which, by 2006, were largely behind them. With the creation of the National Theatre of Scotland, the time was right to create a new funding and governance regime that gave

performing companies equal status with the national collections and the recognition that they deserved.

Artistic excellence and aspiration was the mark of the new relationship, as was raising the bar for the amount and quality of the outreach work that the companies undertook. My colleague Claudia Beamish will say more about the value of that work, but anyone who has watched or participated in the work that those companies do in our schools cannot fail to be impressed by the standards that are achieved and delighted by the end result.

I have explained the rationale behind our amendment, but I ask the cabinet secretary to consider two points. I am sure that she will take my suggestions in the spirit of consensus in which they are made. First, the Government should recognise the significant contribution that some local authorities make in supporting the national performing companies, and the arts more generally. The cabinet secretary will be aware that when budgets are tight there is often a concern that the softest target for cuts will be the arts, and sport suffers in that way too.

I realise that we have moved on from the concept of ring fencing, and I am not suggesting that it should be reintroduced, but I wonder whether the cabinet secretary would consider raising with her cabinet colleagues the idea of incentivising or rewarding those local authorities that champion the arts. We know that the arts contribute to educational achievement, assist regeneration, boost tourism and generally add to the dynamism and character of an area. It is vital that the progress that Scotland has made in that area in recent years is not lost. Incentivisation would send a gentle signal to those local authorities for which the arts are not such a priority or those that are tempted to look for savings in the arts to take a more balanced approach.

The second of my suggestions concerns the national youth performing arts companies of Scotland. When I announced the new designation of national performing companies and their new funding arrangements back in 2006, I made it clear that, although the list contained the five companies that exist today, it would be open to other companies to apply for that status and perhaps to receive it.

Obviously, any aspiring company would have to meet the qualifying criteria and demonstrate that they perform at a significantly high level of artistic endeavour. I also made it clear that the designation was open to all, including both adult and youth organisations. I suggest to the cabinet secretary that now might be the time seriously to consider awarding that status to our youth organisations.

For the past three decades, the National Youth Choir of Scotland, the National Youth Orchestras of Scotland, the Scottish Youth Theatre and YDance have demonstrated a history of and a belief in excellence, have engaged in outreach work and have been strong ambassadors for our country wherever they have travelled. Like their adult contemporaries, the national youth performing arts companies of Scotland work in every local authority area in Scotland, and each year they involve some 162,000 young people in their activities but, as the document that the companies presented to the cabinet secretary's predecessor in 2009 stated,

"the statistics are colourless as the real impact of what we do is found in compelling performances on stages and concert platforms throughout Scotland and internationally; in improvisations and imaginative sessions in community halls, streets, stadia, and leisure centres; in myriad inspiring tuition sessions in schools and local venues in every part of Scotland".

I know that the cabinet secretary is reviewing the work of the youth companies, but I sincerely hope that she will give my suggestion serious consideration. It would be a bold move, but one that would be widely welcomed and which would give additional impetus to our youth companies and to all the young people with whom they work.

One of the hardest tasks of Government is to monitor the performance of the companies from the point of view of artistic quality, financial responsibility and outreach without interfering in their artistic freedom. Another important and complex area is the number of people who attend performances, which the cabinet secretary touched on. I fully accept that audience numbers are not the only measure of success or of value for money and that fluctuations occur for many reasons. The staging of an unpopular but important play, a focus on smaller venues, a change in artistic leadership or even the weather can cause audience numbers to drop.

The figures that were released recently by the Scottish Government show a 20 per cent increase in audience numbers over the five companies in the past year, but—and it is a significant "but"—that seems to have been accounted for solely by the National Theatre of Scotland, which increased the number of its performances in 2010-11 and, consequently, its audience. I do not want to single out any one company because, as I said, variations can be wildly misleading, but the performance of each of the companies is an issue that their boards will need to take seriously.

Fiona Hyslop: The member might be reflecting some coverage that the audience figures received when they were released. She might also be aware that the chief executive of the Scottish Chamber Orchestra highlighted the fact that international audiences in one year can distort

what happens subsequently, and international audiences have grown over the past years. Patricia Ferguson is absolutely right that it is the responsibility of the boards to ensure the cultural health—in terms of audience figures, participation and quality of performance—as well as the financial health of their organisations.

Patricia Ferguson: I entirely accept the point that the cabinet secretary makes, but I think that it suggests that the publications that give us those facts and figures need to reflect to a greater extent the rationale behind the raw numbers, because statistics—damned statistics—can be very misleading indeed. It would be helpful if that could be considered.

I want to recognise the work of Stéphane Denève and Ashley Page. As the cabinet secretary said, Ashley Page is departing as the artistic director of Scottish Ballet after 10 years in that role. Anyone who attended a performance of “A Streetcar Named Desire” will know that Ashley leaves Scottish Ballet having developed it into a strong player in the world of dance. Along with the board and the management team, he has transformed the company, and I know that he has many exciting projects to look forward to.

Stéphane Denève arrived in Scotland just as the Royal Scottish National Orchestra was about to become part of the family of performing companies. He has had a huge impact on the orchestra and I am sure that, like Ashley Page, Stéphane will not be a stranger to us. We owe them both a great deal and, of course, wish their successors well.

We are right to be proud of our five national performing companies, but I believe that the time has come to increase their number to six, to welcome the national youth performing companies of Scotland as the latest member of the national performing companies of Scotland and, in so doing, to recognise the achievements of our young people, all those who work with them and the great potential that they undoubtedly have.

I move amendment S4M-02738.1, to insert at end:

“, and congratulates those local authorities, companies and individuals that also support the work of the National Performing Companies.”

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Annabel Goldie, who has a very generous six minutes.

15:30

Annabel Goldie (West Scotland) (Con): I thank the minister for bringing the motion to the chamber for debate, and I am pleased to speak in the debate because I, too, want to pay tribute to the breadth and variety of cultural talent

throughout Scotland. I do not dance, I do not sing, I do not act and—this will astonish members—I do not do ballet. However, I certainly enjoy being a member of audiences who enjoy all those activities, so I want to thank the people in Scotland who nurture and encourage those cultural assets—not least the people who work in Scotland’s national performing companies. Scotland has a rich cultural life and we are fortunate to have such talent to enjoy. Further, as Patricia Ferguson and the minister have said, the growing international profile of the activities not only enriches our cultural scene, but opens up a broad range of opportunities.

The activities of the individual companies show energy and innovation. I was intrigued to see that, since its inception, the National Theatre for Scotland has played to more than 710,000 people in 160 productions. The RSNO continues to offer high quality varied fare and has been reaching out to new audiences with initiatives like “Naked Classics”, for which there is a £10 ticket. I have not attended a performance, but I am reliably informed by a friend that they are very good.

In 2010-11, Scottish Ballet danced to more than 56,000 people, and the Scottish Chamber Orchestra continues to delight audiences in Scotland and abroad with varied programmes. Also, Scottish Opera—the largest of our national performing companies—has continued to woo the younger audience with its £10 tickets for the under 26s and, as the minister said, with the intriguingly entitled “BabyO”, which is a performance for infants and their parents. It is with regret that I note that I am ineligible for either category.

As well as performances in Scotland, the national performing companies have delivered acclaimed productions to audiences around the globe. As I mentioned earlier, that has an important dimension beyond the arena of culture. I was interested in the minister’s announcement about the RSNO’s proposed trip to China and I wish it well with that.

It is right that we recognise the work that the national performing companies do and the benefits that they bring to Scotland, and that we congratulate them on that, but it is also right that we are objective and question whether there are areas of concern. Debate demands that we do not just accept the status quo as being the best that we can do: we can always improve.

The NPCs are in the fifth year of a direct-funding relationship with the Scottish Government. I will look at three issues that are appropriate to that. I note that in the 2010-11 annual report, the cabinet secretary takes pride in—she pointed this out earlier—the number of performances having increased by 31 per cent, from 692 in 2009-10 to 904 in 2010-11. That increase is a cause for

celebration, but it must be put in the context of the somewhat difficult year that the NPCs had in 2009-10 and—which is perhaps much more important—the four-year trend since the establishment of direct Government funding for the NPCs. Although performances have increased by 30.5 per cent between 2009-10 and 2010-11, the performance figures for 2010-11 represent an 8 per cent decrease from the number of performances in 2007. That scenario is worrying, when set against the overall budget situation. I ask the minister, when winding up, to confirm what discussions the Scottish Government has had, or is having, with the NPCs about the situation, and what the Government proposes to do.

Patricia Ferguson raised the issue of audience numbers and I listened with interest to the minister's response. However, once again—to go back over that four-year period—the audience numbers in 2010-11 represent a 10.5 per cent decrease from attendances in 2007-08. The minister was helpful in expanding further on that to Patricia Ferguson, but that is exactly the area on which content is needed in the annual report. It would be helpful. If there are genuine explanations, such as activity abroad that has drawn audiences of which we may be unaware, and which has affected domestic performances, that is fine, but what is going on should be known. The report would benefit from such detail.

On a separate front, educational events are up a staggering 69.7 per cent since 2007-08, which is impressive progress that represents the efforts in the past five years of the NPCs to promote cultural arts education. I am all for that. However, in the same period the number of people attending has risen by a somewhat disappointing 23.5 per cent. I fully accept that those figures do not take into account the qualitative aspect of the performances or the cultural yield per event, but if we assume certain fixed costs for putting on events, surely the more people who attend them, the greater the educational return and the greater the growth potential for new adult audiences. Perhaps the minister will allude to that in her closing remarks.

I applaud the work of the national performing companies and, as the minister and Patricia Ferguson did, I congratulate all those who are involved in the wonderful productions, which delight audiences. I hope that my observations can be taken on board. I want to help and strengthen the NPCs, but we will do that only if we are realistic about challenges and if we show willingness to address them.

I note the plea that I fill a generous six minutes. I do not know whether I have served you well, Presiding Officer, but it was an unusual request as I am accustomed to obeying you by observing brevity.

I support the motion, and I support the amendment in Patricia Ferguson's name.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We come to the open debate, for which we have a little bit of time in hand. Speeches of a generous six minutes can be made by everyone in the debate.

15:37

Clare Adamson (Central Scotland) (SNP): Unsurprisingly, I open with a quotation from Tennessee Williams, describing the creative process as he saw it. He said:

"I believe the way to write a good play is to convince yourself it is easy to do—then go ahead and do it with ease. Don't maul, don't suffer, don't groan till the first draft is finished. A play is a phoenix and it dies a thousand deaths. Usually at night. In the morning it springs up again from its ashes and crows like a happy rooster. It is never as bad as you think, it is never as good. ... An artist must believe in himself. Your belief is contagious."

Tennessee Williams's description of that creative process is probably true of all creative processes. Whether it is acting, performing, directing or writing, it is about the initial spark of enthusiasm; the inspiration that leads to the pain and self-doubt; the obstacles that are to be overcome during production; and finally the finished production, which is made possible by the self-belief, dedication and hard graft of all those involved. Thank goodness that our national performing companies are filled with writers, musicians, actors, dancers, performers and directors who are driven by that self-belief. I, for one, am glad—just as Tennessee Williams said—that "belief is contagious", because I certainly have the bug.

I quoted Tennessee Williams because of Scottish Ballet's interpretation of "A Streetcar Named Desire". I was lucky enough to see a performance and I consider it to be a masterpiece of storytelling and drama. At the post-performance talk in the evening, I also learned that it is groundbreaking. As the cabinet secretary mentioned, the director, Nancy Meckler, is normally associated with theatre direction, and is best known for her work with the Shared Experience theatre company. Nancy co-directed with the choreographer to bring the production together. I was enthralled by the dancing, but the music in the production is so powerful and evocative that I am sure that if I had shut my eyes, I would have heard the whole story through the New Orleans jazz. It was another innovative move to commission Peter Salem, who is a screen and television composer, to provide a new jazz score for the live ballet.

I commend those who are responsible for commissioning that brave and innovative production because without their firm belief in the

concept at the earliest stage and the way in which their contagious belief and excitement affected the creative process, our country's cultural reputation would not have been enhanced as it has been by Scottish Ballet's "A Streetcar Named Desire". Although our national performing companies have excellent international reputations for their craft and for big traditional productions such as Scottish Ballet's "Nutcracker", Scottish Opera's "Tosca" or the National Theatre of Scotland's "Peer Gynt", their willingness to innovate and experiment has led to great productions such as "A Streetcar Named Desire" and the National Theatre's "Black Watch", which I note has been ranked by the National Library of Scotland as being one of the 12 most significant plays in Scotland in the past 40 years.

That kind of self-belief and ability to infect and enthuse everyone with new and exciting ideas led to Scottish Opera's phenomenally successful "BabyO" project for six to 18-month-old babies, which Annabel Goldie mentioned. I am delighted to hear that it will be followed by "SensoryO", which is a 30-minute show that is designed for children from 18 to 36 months and their carers. "SensoryO" is rich in sound, rhythm and music and takes toddlers into a magical night-time world. The production has been developed specifically to introduce young audiences to live performance in a relaxed and intimate environment, and mixes live singing performances, smell, textures and actions to stimulate the imagination of the young. In short, it is a curriculum for excellence dream.

I saw my first opera in the Henderson theatre in Shotts as part of a Scottish Opera programme to take opera into our communities. The company is still doing the same today. I was a bit older than the audience for "BabyO" and "SensoryO" but seeing opera at primary school contributed to my lifelong love of live music and theatre performance, so I have no doubt that both shows will inspire future artists, performers and fans.

Finally, I want to mention the wonderful role that our national performing companies play in nurturing and supporting youth development in their crafts. Scottish Opera's "Connect" programme for 14 to 21-year-olds gives aspiring singers and orchestral musicians a unique practical introduction to the skills and experiences that are needed to perform opera. No matter whether they are singers or musicians, participants have a chance to develop their knowledge, technique and creative skills under the expert tuition of Scotland's top opera professionals, and are able to attend Scottish Opera rehearsals and productions to allow them to see what really happens when everything comes together.

In short, our national performing companies are truly the jewels in Scotland's cultural crown.

15:43

Malcolm Chisholm (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (Lab): I commend the cabinet secretary for bringing this debate to the chamber and I join her in praising the outstanding work of the national performing companies over the past five years during which, as part of their flexible, inclusive and democratic approach, there have been thousands of large-scale performances and numerous comprehensive educational events. The broadening of access to cultural output through community outreach projects and work with our educational institutions is essential in decentralising the national companies and opening up to a much wider audience what they have to offer.

In my speech, I will deal in turn with Scottish Ballet and Scottish Opera and—if I have time—with the orchestras and the National Theatre of Scotland. I start with Scottish Ballet partly because of a constituency connection with one of their projects that will become clear in a moment.

Since 2007, Scottish Ballet has performed in front of more than 330,000 people in venues ranging from big theatres to community halls. It has set the standard for partnership working as a means of bringing ballet to new audiences and has operated in conjunction with English National Ballet, National Dance Company Wales and National Galleries of Scotland. Such an approach encourages cultural bodies to share ideas, create new performance formats and ensure that content is kept lively, fresh and relevant to today's audiences.

For example, March this year saw the culmination of a project that was being run by Scottish Ballet and National Galleries of Scotland. "Desire", which is an innovative performance event that was created by the gifted students of Telford College in my constituency, and Broughton high school, which serves a large number of young people in my constituency, sought to convey complex and emotional themes based on Scottish Ballet's new production, "A Streetcar Named Desire". It was a great opportunity for young dancers and choreographers and is an example of just one of the many ways in which our cultural institutions are adapting the manner in which they work in order to encourage new talent from all backgrounds. The students of Telford and Broughton should be proud of their accomplishments, and I hope to see many more such initiatives that encourage exceptional standards of performance and ambition in our young people and set a precedent for the future.

endeavours of our national performance companies.

Outreach projects are also instrumental in introducing young people to opera, and in challenging preconceptions about who opera is for and what opera is about. As a fan, I have always felt that politics and opera go hand in hand, just as opera and love so often go hand in hand. We certainly see love and politics come together in “Tosca”, which I look forward to seeing in a few weeks. Opera is a celebration of life and human relationships in specific social settings, and is often presented in a manner that transcends the years, with themes that are eminently relevant to the most contemporary of settings. Of course, as in politics, operas sometimes end in tragedy.

Before I leave that theme, I recommend a superb book about it by Anthony Arblaster called “Viva la Libertà!: Politics in Opera”, which is one of the best books I have ever read about politics. I warn Annabel Goldie that its political approach is slightly left wing, but I am sure that she would still enjoy its coverage of all the great operatic composers.

Apart from its major production, Scottish Opera also conducts an annual primary schools tour, which is one of our longest established and most popular education programmes, in which about 10,000 children each year see the performances. The operas are tailored to the young audience and their narratives convey advanced themes, such as environmental awareness, the creation of the universe and the need to protect the earth’s natural resources. By entering an inclusive process of artistic expression with a young audience, Scottish Opera’s primary schools tour aims to help children to garner a sense of self-fulfilment, confidence and self-esteem, which is so vital for maximising interest in opera as an art form and for reassuring young people that it is relevant to them.

We have heard mention of Scottish Opera’s initiatives for younger people. Many of us heard about “SensoryO” on the radio this morning, and reference has been made to the “BabyO” programme for even younger young people. I congratulate Scottish Opera for all that. It has enjoyed five years of direct funding from the Scottish Government and it is in good order. I am sure that the same can be said of the other national performance companies.

I see from the clock that I have only one minute left to cover the orchestras and the National Theatre of Scotland. I give all due respect to them.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I can be more generous.

Malcolm Chisholm: The same themes can be reiterated with reference to the National Theatre of

Scotland and the orchestras. We all know of the outreach work that they do. The Royal Scottish National Orchestra, for example, does outreach work that reaches young people and holds performances in healthcare settings, including hospices and paediatric healthcare settings. It also has a massive geographic reach and has covered many of the regions in Scotland on its various tours.

The National Theatre of Scotland, too, has performed all over Scotland. I am told that during the five-year period of direct funding, 81 per cent of the Scottish population has been within 20 miles of a National Theatre of Scotland event. The events have been held in venues ranging from the Playhouse theatre in Edinburgh to a converted drill hall in Dumfries. The National Theatre of Scotland has also toured internationally, most famously with “Black Watch” in New York. I am sure that most of us have enjoyed seeing that great production, as well as others such as “The Bacchae”.

I was struck by another initiative, which I did not know about, to my shame: the five-minute theatre project that took place in summer 2011. It was intended as a participatory and creative celebration of the National Theatre of Scotland’s fifth birthday year. Joyce McMillan said in *The Scotsman*:

“this brave and ground-breaking event has subtly changed the landscape of Scottish theatre for ever, reconnecting with a myriad of grassroots impulses to dramatic expression that have long been undervalued or marginalised. Completely original in concept, performed live yet mediated through the internet and through a constant babble of online comment, this was a 21st century event that expressed and celebrated the wild and beautiful diversity of Scotland today in a thousand different voices”.

I wanted to quote that to show the range of work that the National Theatre of Scotland has been involved in. I also wanted to quote Joyce McMillan, because she is always right about the theatre and is usually right about politics, too, so I am happy to leave the last word to her.

15:51

Jean Urquhart (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): Our big five—Scotland’s five national performing companies—with their singing, dancing, music and storytelling to gladden the heart, are things of which we ought to be incredibly proud. As with most good things, there have been ordinary folk with determination and commitment behind each of those organisations since their inception.

The Scottish Orchestra, which was founded in 1891, became the Scottish National Orchestra in 1950. The youngest-ever musical director of Sadler’s Wells theatre, one Alexander Gibson from Motherwell, returned to Glasgow in 1959 to

become the first Scottish principal conductor and artistic director of the orchestra—a post that he held for a remarkable 25 years. During that time, in 1962, he founded Scottish Opera, which launched with a performance of Puccini's "Madame Butterfly" in the King's theatre in Glasgow, to great acclaim.

In 1969, Peter Darrell and Elizabeth West established Scottish Theatre Ballet in Glasgow, out of which grew Scottish Ballet and some fine performances—the most recent of which is "A Streetcar Named Desire". I had not noticed that it was on but, thanks to Clare Adamson and the fact that we had a free night, I went to see it. If members have not seen it, their lives are missing something.

In 1974, the Scottish Chamber Orchestra was founded and led by John Tunnell. In 1975, the old Theatre Royal was bought and transformed into the home of Scottish Opera and Scottish Ballet. I mention all that because it is fairly recent, relative to Scotland's history. It all happened in the past 60 years, and the companies are growing still.

For almost a century, the debate about whether we needed a national theatre rumbled on in Scotland. Then, the National Theatre—the other National Theatre—opened on the South Bank in London and the debate went quiet. We might have looked south, but that theatre in London did not feel to us as if it was our national theatre and it rarely looked north or toured in Scotland. In 1995, the National Theatre of Scotland—the theatre without walls—was born. There was a huge debate in Scotland about it at the time, but the right decision was taken because it has brought theatre to people throughout Scotland who otherwise would not have been reached. With great originality, Vicky Featherstone, the director, launched the new National Theatre with several theatrical pieces called "Home". None of those used conventional theatre spaces, but used places such as the old glass factory in Wick, a shed in an industrial estate in Evanton, an empty shop in Stornoway, a high-rise flat in Aberdeen and Edinburgh airport. There must have been one in Glasgow, but I cannot remember where it was.

The National Theatre of Scotland is holding a "mirror up to nature", as Shakespeare said, and doing what theatre should do, which is to allow us to look at ourselves. Malcolm Chisholm referred to that. One of the National Theatre's productions is "Calum's Road", the stage version of the true story of Calum MacLeod of Raasay, an island off Skye. He got so tired of waiting for the council to build a road that he built it himself—literally. He built one and three quarter miles of road: eat your heart out, transport minister. The National Theatre's production of "Black Watch"—the telling of the history of that Scottish regiment—has been hugely

popular and has toured the USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and Ireland.

The National Theatre of Scotland is about to open a production called "Enquirer". I understand that it is about the media—or, perhaps, just the newspaper industry—in Scotland. I cannot think for a minute what it will be about. It is also establishing a presence across all Scotland and produces work for all ages. It is truly national, as are the other companies; as has been said, the RSNO was recently in Shetland for the first time in a long time. The National Theatre of Scotland is working on a huge community project in Shetland in collaboration with Shetland Arts.

The SCO covers Scotland every year. It plays village halls as well as city halls and it sometimes even plays in sports halls. Scottish Ballet, too, takes smaller groups of dancers to such venues in addition to performing in Scotland's main auditoria. All the companies perform to all ages. For example, reference has been made to Scottish Opera's "BabyO" and "SensoryO" projects.

I, too, remember having an extraordinarily good time at a show that was performed by a company called Scottish Opera Go Round which, if I remember correctly, was a small sub-company of Scottish Opera. It was hugely ambitious, although it had a very small cast with young singers and a single pianist. Through innovative stage design and so on it fitted into the most extraordinarily small venues. The audience was always amazed by the pianist, who would sometimes play through a two and a half hour or three hour opera.

Collectively, the companies are huge employers of some of our most creative and talented people, be they actors, designers, technicians, singers, dancers or musicians. I hope that the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland satisfies the people whom the companies inspire to follow such careers by enabling them to develop their talents and skills.

Our national performing companies are entertainers, educators, employers and ambassadors. We should be proud of them all, take a keen interest in them, let them be part of our lives and ensure that they continue to be at the core of cultural Scotland, both at home and abroad.

15:57

Sandra White (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP): I align myself with the remarks made by Annabelle Ewing—sorry, I mean Annabel Goldie. She has changed.

Annabel Goldie: On a point of order, Presiding Officer. Some errors made in the chamber are

justifiable and acceptable, but others are much more difficult to thole.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That is not really a point of order.

Sandra White: I accept Annabel Goldie's explanation, given that we are talking about the performing companies. I align myself with some of her remarks, as I, too, have been told that I cannot sing, although I have sometimes been told that I can dance.

As we have heard, the five national companies have done, and continue to do, a great deal to promote Scotland's cultural profile throughout Scotland and around the globe. It would be remiss of me not to mention that four out of five of the national companies are based in Glasgow; indeed, three of them are based in my constituency of Glasgow Kelvin. The upgrading of the Theatre Royal and the Royal concert hall is welcome, but I make a plea for the Pavilion theatre in Glasgow, which is very short of funds and does not get any public funds at all.

I agree entirely with the sentiments that are expressed in Patricia Ferguson's amendment. I am glad that we have accepted her amendment. I welcome the fact that the Scottish Government is committed to ensuring the widest possible participation throughout Scotland, as shown by the fact that NPCs must meet certain criteria set out by the Scottish Government. One criterion is that, to be eligible for central funding, NPCs must ensure that they perform to a wide and diverse audience in Scotland, that they have community education programmes and that they work with other NPCs.

I have a revelation to share. I have discovered a composer through someone in my constituency and Creative Scotland. Last week, I had a meeting with Creative Scotland, which works closely with the national companies, to look at digitising the work of one of Scotland's greatest composers, Thomas Wilson, who produced more than 100 works in a range of different styles, including orchestra and ballet. I met Mr Wilson's widow to discuss her late husband's work and the digitisation of his manuscripts. During a very pleasant afternoon, Mrs Wilson told me about the many requests and visits that she had received from people from outside Scotland seeking her husband's work. Indeed, she told me about a Spanish teacher who had introduced schoolchildren to Mr Wilson's work. I heard a small piece, which was a delight. The point that I am trying to make is that, as well as the national performing companies, organisations such as Creative Scotland and others can work together to help to produce great artists who some people have not heard of.

That discussion led us to discuss the great effect and importance of widening the appeal of the performing arts to schools, communities and individuals that may previously have had little or no experience of them. The national and international importance of the national performing companies is undoubted, but it is equally important—if not more important—to use them to get as many people as possible involved in the arts.

The Royal Scottish National Orchestra, which is based in Kelvin, does a huge amount of outreach work, such as its monster music concerts, which are aimed at three to five-year-olds. The cabinet secretary and other speakers mentioned those concerts, which involve well-known songs and nursery rhymes, encourage the kids to join in in whatever way they can, introduce them to basic musical concepts—high and low, fast and slow—and give them an initial interest. I hope that they will get some enjoyment out of that interest as they continue to enjoy music. That work is followed up by mega music concerts for primary 5s to primary 7s and maestro music concerts for secondary school kids. All those concerts give kids the opportunity to learn more about music. The orchestra also provides teacher training sessions and packs to be used in class.

Although that programme of events is fantastic, I cannot help but think that there is something missing: what about kids in primary school up to primary 5? It could not be more important for them to get the same learning opportunities as others. Those years are formative and, as many studies have shown, will have a huge impact not only on the rest of the children's educational lives but on their lives as a whole. Perhaps the cabinet secretary and the RSNO may wish to consider that small gap within primary school when they review its work.

Fiona Hyslop: Sandra White makes an important point. I refer her to a report that I think I brought to the Parliament's attention when answering a question from Annabel Goldie recently. We have extremely strong evidence that participating in cultural activity—not only being an audience member, but taking part—has a massive influence on whether people attend or take part in cultural activities later. I am pleased that, in the debate, we are highlighting youth and children's activities, but I think that we cannot overestimate the impact that such early involvement has on audience development, let alone participation in culture and the arts. I embrace the point that Sandra White makes. It will form an important part of our youth strategy on the arts in future.

Sandra White: I thank the cabinet secretary for that and look forward to seeing that strategy in the future.

The link with education is important. It is great that the Royal Scottish National Orchestra runs an apprenticeship scheme along with the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland and that another NPC, Scottish Ballet, has set up a BA qualification in modern ballet, also along with the conservatoire.

I have touched on some of the things that the national performing companies do and I congratulate NPCs that are regularly involved in similar work.

Patricia Ferguson and Annabel Goldie mentioned audience numbers. We need to be careful that we do not judge performances simply by the number of bums on seats; it is important that we consider the performances themselves. I remember sitting on a committee when the 7:84 Theatre Company and other companies of that ilk had their funding slashed simply because of audience numbers. We must consider audience numbers carefully and weigh up not only bums on seats but exactly what performances offer.

16:04

Claudia Beamish (South Scotland) (Lab): For a number of reasons, I am delighted to have the opportunity to participate in this debate. I will start by focusing on what I see as the significance of the interrelationship between the national performing companies and other professional companies and amateur groups, using theatre as a model.

In January, I lodged a motion to congratulate Crossmichael drama club in Dumfriesshire on winning a United Kingdom competition and gaining the opportunity to perform in London's west end. I am delighted that a group with fewer than 10 members from a small village in my region won the competition, especially as there were entrants from throughout the UK—all amateur groups—on a scale up to Regent Rep in Bournemouth, which has more than 100 members. Amateur dramatics are far from amateur and are thriving throughout Scotland and Britain. They make a big contribution to the arts in Scotland.

I also highlight and pay tribute to our many professional theatre companies. Grey Coast Theatre does not exist any more, but it brought challenging and relevant work to some of our remotest islands. At that time, my partner was lucky enough to be an actor in the company when it toured to community halls across the islands of Scotland. We also have the innovative work of urban companies such as the Tron Theatre in Glasgow, which is now led by director Andy Arnold. Complementing the Edinburgh international festival is the Edinburgh festival fringe, which gives students and community groups an opportunity to explore and experiment

and audiences an opportunity to see performances from around the world.

Those companies are all part of a symbiotic creative relationship that stretches right into our national performing companies and also connects with our drama and music training in institutions such as the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland. With two acting and singing family members, I know how tough careers in this area can be, and all opportunities for people to develop their chances need to be taken up. I hope that the cabinet secretary will comment on the training aspects of the performing arts in her closing remarks.

I also want to focus on the enormous value of the national performing companies' outreach work, as other members have done, and we should not forget the role that is played by our theatre-in-education companies. As Malcolm Chisholm highlighted, opera is accessible. I still have a vivid memory from my time as a teacher in a rural primary school in Clydesdale of a series of workshops that were held by Scottish Opera. No one who experienced the coming together of children from several small primary schools to bring alive a Viking myth in shared song could doubt the impact on all concerned. The sense that opera was a remote, elite pursuit was dispelled for the many families and children who attended that performance, which I saw in the Memorial hall in Lanark. The comment about the ticket lines for opera being closed proves that opera is a popular performing art nowadays. The cabinet secretary also highlighted that.

I support Patricia Ferguson's remarks on the value of the support that local authorities can provide to make the arts and our national companies real to children. It was reassuring to hear from the cabinet secretary that all local authorities have been involved recently.

As a parent, I was lucky enough to have the chance to take both my children—a girl and a boy—to Scottish Ballet's summer schools for children from all over Scotland. For a small minority, they lead to a professional career but, for many others, they are an opportunity for self-exploration and working together beyond language. At the best Christmas outing ever, I was lucky enough to go with a rural primary school to Scottish Ballet's production of "The Snowman". We were all transported into a world of magic as the dancers literally flew through the air, and the young boys' attitudes to dance changed as the snowflakes fell and the story unfolded. Theatre is so important for the breaking down of stereotypes in society.

The outreach work and performances for children bring a sense of growing understanding of the value of participating in the arts and enjoying being part of an audience.

I also want to highlight the value of our national performing companies expanding beyond the national framework and helping to develop shared understanding with other countries. As a member of the cross-party group on China, I heard about Scottish Opera's visit to Beijing to perform "The Tale o' Tam". The universality of that work again went beyond language in the strict sense of the word. Cultural sharing of that kind is a vibrant way in which to develop understanding between countries.

Finally, I highlight the work of Òran Mór and the National Theatre of Scotland, which this week brought together writers from the middle east to perform in Scotland. The challenging situation in the middle east has meant that developing the plays has not been an easy task, and the writers have often not wanted their names to be revealed. Others have struggled to get visas to come here at all.

Abdullah Alkafri, who is the author of "Damascus Aleppo" said on Radio Scotland this week that he is glad to be here and is delighted that his stories have been given a platform. He said that the audience

"know the stories from the news ... but don't know the human part of the Middle East. It is good to get in touch more with the human side of the people ... more than the terror and the blood and misery ... we are like normal humans."

Abdelrahim Alawji, the author of "Sleeping Beauty Insomnia" commented:

"At the first level I feel guilty to be here involved in the theatre because the situation there is really tough. The theatre gives a chance to give a real picture about the people there avoiding clichés or stereotyping thoughts from the media ... and create real dialogue with the people".

Those plays are a precious opportunity for Scotland to explore and better understand the challenges that are faced by people in the midst of a stark struggle. For all those reasons and those highlighted by other speakers, we must protect funding for the arts.

On accessibility to the arts, including the work of our national performing companies, the most recent national indicator shows that the percentage of adults who have either participated in a cultural activity or attended or visited a cultural event fell slightly in 2010. It is only a small drop, but it is important that we support the arts when they come under pressure in challenging economic times, as other members have highlighted in the debate.

The Scottish Government stresses the importance of the national indicator. It states that

"Cultural engagement impacts positively on our general wellbeing—"

The Deputy Presiding Officer (John Scott): I would be grateful if you would draw to a close sometime soon, please.

Claudia Beamish: I am just about to, Presiding Officer. Thank you.

The Scottish Government states that cultural engagement also

"helps reinforce our resilience in difficult times."

I thank the cabinet secretary for her broad-sweeping opening remarks and I hope that today's debate, with cross-party support, will help to protect funding in challenging times, when we need the arts more than ever.

16:11

Annabelle Ewing (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP): I am very pleased to have been called to speak in this debate on Scotland's national performing companies and, indeed, to follow on from the very considerate contribution that Claudia Beamish made to the debate.

As we have heard during the debate, Scotland, a country of 5 million people or thereabouts, can be very proud to host five separate national companies, which I would just like to list for the record, although we all know who they are. It is enjoyable to repeat this diverse list. We have Scottish Ballet, Scottish Opera, the Royal Scottish National Orchestra, the Scottish Chamber Orchestra and, last but by no means least, the National Theatre of Scotland. Each of those five companies is a centre of excellence and I pay tribute at the outset to the dedication and commitment of all those involved. I also pay tribute to all those involved in the national youth companies. I should perhaps declare an interest because my niece, Ciara Ewing, and my nephew, Jamie Ewing, are both members of the national youth choir. They are enjoying their experience enormously.

I also have to confess, like the other Annabel in the chamber—we have been the subject of mistaken identity today and I hope that the other Annabel will not be too horrified by that state of affairs—my ballet days are well and truly behind me. However, until fairly recently, I used to list under the heading "Hobbies and interests" in a curriculum vitae, "Going to the theatre." I have had to drop that one, though, to reflect factual accuracy, because I do not seem to get to the theatre very much these days and certainly not as much as I would like, due to other calls on my time. However, I hope to rectify that in the years to come.

Unusually, I was at a local play a couple of weeks ago. It would be remiss of me not to mention that it was called "Off the Hook", and the

production was put on by the Crieff drama group. It played to full houses over three nights and was very much enjoyed by all who attended it. Having mentioned the Crieff drama group, it would be remiss of me and perhaps somewhat risky for me not to mention the Comrie drama group. Comrie is, of course, the fantastic village that I am very pleased to call home. Comrie drama group puts on successful plays throughout the year, together with an excellent panto every Christmas. Like Crieff drama group, Comrie drama group always plays to full houses. As in Crieff, many people in Comrie are involved in one way or another in productions, and they are to be commended for their commitment.

I mention those local examples to highlight the appetite across Scotland for theatre and other performing arts and to flag up the importance of the national touring that the national companies undertake, which is a key feature of their role in our country's cultural life. I ask the cabinet secretary to ensure that the locations that the fantastic national tours cover are constantly reviewed, to ensure that none of Scotland's communities—however large, medium-sized, small or dispersed it is—is left out of the fantastic programmes. I assure her that there is an audience out there for such visits and I am sure that such audiences would be enthusiastic.

In addition to national touring, the national companies do extensive international touring. I was pleased to hear the cabinet secretary confirm the £350,000 for the international touring fund. International touring is not just important to the national economy; it is also about showcasing on the world stage Scotland's cultural excellence and diversity and the modern and innovative productions for which our national companies are famed. In touring, our national companies act in effect as cultural ambassadors, and they do Scotland proud. We shall see further evidence of that in this year of creative Scotland, when our national companies will play a significant role in attracting international tourism and investment to Scotland. I am sure that the whole Parliament wishes them well in that endeavour.

The national companies' work has many international aspects in addition to international touring. We have heard about the excellent success of the National Theatre's production of "Black Watch". Having seen it, I agree that it is fantastic. I think that it is the best play that I have seen, save perhaps the 7:84 Theatre Company's "The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil", which I hope will make a comeback fairly soon.

We see internationalism in the work of all our national companies. Guest conductors are invited to perform with the Scottish Chamber Orchestra and the RSNO and artistic exchange partnerships

take place—between the National Theatre and China, for example. We heard about the National Theatre's work in Chicago and its great work in Brooklyn with the extreme ceilidh, to which the cabinet secretary referred. Malcolm Chisholm referred to the five-minute theatre project, which rightly excited the well-known arts commentator Joyce McMillan.

The cultural scene in Scotland is innovative and vibrant. The internationalism of our national companies is to be as treasured as the work that they do in Scotland is. The national companies contribute enormously to feeding the soul, as well as the national economy, and they are key players on the world stage. We should all be enormously proud of them. I sincerely believe that, as Scotland continues its journey to independence, we shall see increased global interest not only in our political endeavours but in our exciting cultural scene.

16:18

Jenny Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): As we have heard, the national performing arts companies have an important role. Not only do they allow Scots of all ages to experience the very best in theatre, dance, opera, ballet and music that Scotland and the rest of the world have to offer, they have the ability to inspire our youngsters to have a future in the arts. I will direct my remarks to opportunities for children and young people.

One of the most impressive achievements of the national performing arts companies has been the number of youngsters whom they have given the opportunity to experience and participate in the performances that they offer. In June last year, pupils from Dundee's Craigowl school took part in a fantastic project that the National Theatre of Scotland organised. They collaborated with pupils from nearby schools in Perth and Glenrothes to put on a 24-hour online theatre marathon.

That example is just one of a number of creative youth initiatives that are under way in Dundee at the moment. Just next week, youngsters from Dundee will participate in an evening of short performances at the Dundee Rep theatre, showcasing the best new talent that we have in the performing arts. Indeed, Dundee Rep has excelled under its inspirational artistic director, James Brining. I pay tribute to James, who is shortly to leave us to take up a post in York. He did a remarkable job at Dundee Rep, which is reflected not just in the critical acclaim that Dundee Rep has received during his tenure, but in its exemplary creative learning department, which seeks to develop the confidence and abilities of Dundee's youth in the performing arts. I wish James the best of luck and thank him, on behalf of

everyone, for the work that he has done for Dundee and for the performing arts in Scotland.

I appreciated the minister's comments, during Sandra White's speech, on children's attendance at performances. That is critical, as the minister said. A recent study was undertaken by Caishlan Sweeney at Dundee Rep on behalf of the Northeast Performing Arts Group, which surveyed schoolteachers in the region. Ninety-six per cent of the teachers who responded said that funding bus transport to theatre or other performances was the primary and major existing barrier to getting pupils to performances. All of us in the chamber know how parent teacher associations raise money, and we know that money to fund transport to performances is more readily raised by schools in more prosperous areas in our cities and towns than by those in more deprived communities. I have a copy of Ms Sweeney's report, which I am happy to share with the cabinet secretary so that she can see the evidence. Indeed, I invite the cabinet secretary to meet Caishlan Sweeney to see whether a collaborative solution across the arts can be found to solve that very real problem of access to performances.

As Patricia Ferguson suggested in Labour's opening speech, giving the national youth performing arts companies the same status as the national performing arts companies will give us the opportunity to educate our young people and to inspire and encourage them to learn valuable skills through participating more fully in all areas of the arts. The education of youngsters is one of the primary functions of our national youth performing companies. As well as developing their own programmes, they work alongside existing initiatives that make a huge impact on the lives of children in Scotland.

One such educational initiative, which I have talked about in the chamber before, is the El Sistema project—a project that I believe is worthy of further discussion in the chamber. By providing intensive music tuition to some of the most disadvantaged children in Scotland and across the world, El Sistema provides the opportunity for children to learn new skills, increase their confidence and achieve where they would otherwise not have been able to achieve. I know that the cabinet secretary is currently considering evidence from the Raploch project. The project is doing fantastic work in the Raploch—I visited it a few weeks ago and was delighted to see the looks on some of the children's faces as they rehearsed in their small groups and then came together in bigger groups. Recently, alongside the National Youth Orchestra of Scotland, they performed on stage at the Clyde auditorium in the BBC's music nation event. I visited them three days before they took to the stage, and their excitement was palpable.

Opportunities such as that foster aspiration and a sense of achievement in children. They teach children skills that they will maintain for life, and they offer children the chance to break out of a cycle of poverty that denies them the opportunity to learn in an extra-curricular setting. As some members will know, I have been campaigning for El Sistema to come to Dundee because I believe that it could benefit a great number of children in our city. The instrumental tuition figures in Dundee back that up. In Forthill primary school—a school in one of Dundee's most affluent areas—the number of children who are being taught music privately is 83. That contrasts starkly with the figure for Sidlaw View primary school, which is in one of the poorer areas of the city, where only four children are learning an instrument.

By extending the status of our national performing arts companies to our national youth performing arts companies, we have the chance to develop a successful working relationship between youth performing companies and projects such as El Sistema, so that projects can be expanded into areas such as Dundee, where they will benefit children immensely. The recommendation is worthy of further exploration and I hope that the cabinet secretary will consider it in her closing speech.

16:25

Joan McAlpine (South Scotland) (SNP): I am delighted to have been given the opportunity to speak in this debate on the work of our national performing companies. All the companies do sterling work, as members have said, but I will concentrate on the work of the Royal Scottish National Orchestra.

I became familiar with the RSNO's staff and grew to admire its work greatly when I was commissioning arts pieces for newspapers and working closely with the company. I should declare an interest: my daughter sings with the RSNO junior chorus. I pay tribute to Christopher Bell, who directs not just the junior chorus but the National Youth Choir of Scotland and has done incredible work to build Scotland's reputation as a place for young singers.

The RSNO has a long and illustrious history. It was established in 1891 to support the Glasgow choral union, which it outlasted. It became the Scottish National Orchestra in 1950 and gained royal patronage in 1991. World-class conductors such as Sir Alexander Gibson, Walter Susskind and Neeme Järvi helped to make the orchestra one of the finest in Europe, as did several generations of talented musicians.

I will concentrate on the current, sparkling company and on developments in recent years,

particularly under the creative direction of Stéphane Denève. The RSNO has been remarkably successful in reaching out to new audiences, attracting young people and engaging in educational, therapeutic and community work. It has attracted people who might not otherwise have gone to a classical music concert.

That was illustrated for me a few years ago, when I went to a Prokofiev concert in Glasgow royal concert hall. When we entered the foyer bar, ambient electronic music was playing. There were lots of young people around and I realised that I was one of the few audience members who were over 25—well over 25, it has to be said. The Prokofiev in question was conducting the orchestra—he was not the ghost of the famous Russian but his grandson, Gabriel Prokofiev, a London DJ, whom the RSNO had commissioned to perform his composition, “Concerto for Turntables and Orchestra”. He was joined by hip-hop DJ Beni G of the Mixologists, and the programme explored the links between classical and modern dance music. I had not known that such links existed; the evening was an education. We listened to the cutting-edge sound of “Iron Foundry”, a ballet score by Alexander Mosolov, which dates back to 1928.

That concert took place several years ago, but innovation is part of the RSNO’s programme every season. Annabel Goldie talked about the naked classics community programme, which has drawn in thousands of people who are not terribly familiar with classical music and want to hear it in a wider context, with explanations, a little bit of history, some multimedia and so on. The approach has worked incredibly well. Last year, 67 per cent of the audience for naked classics were people who were not season-ticket holders or would not normally attend another concert in the season. I think that Annabel Goldie said that she had not tasted naked classics—if I can put it in that way. Next year the company will do Stravinsky’s “The Firebird” and the entire cycle of Wagner’s “Ring”, which I am looking forward to hearing.

The cabinet secretary talked about the importance of education and outreach work, and several members talked about the RSNO’s tour of the Shetland Islands. I will talk about the company’s partnership with Rachel House children’s hospice, which provides services for children and young people who have life-limiting conditions. The RSNO visits Rachel House for three days, three times a year, and the same three musicians visit on each occasion. As a result, they build up close relationships with the children and their families and the music therapists and staff at Rachel House. They report that music is a marvellous communication tool, particularly for children whose condition makes communication quite challenging.

I know that the musicians get as much out of the experience as the families do. Last August, Rachel House hosted a magic-themed event, which was sponsored by the Miller Group and in which 40 children and young people who attended the hospice were dressed in the style of Harry Potter characters, fairies and pirates. A lot has been said about engagement with young people by our national performing companies, but I am sure that everybody will agree that that is possibly among the most magical uses of the national companies and the arts as a therapeutic tool.

We have talked a lot about the importance of reach and of reaching out to different parts of Scotland. One area that I represent is Dumfriesshire, which has this year seen some excellent RSNO performances up close as part of the out and about programme. In March 2011, Dumfries and Galloway Arts Association and Dumfries and Galloway Council held a workshop in which young local people created and recorded the score for a film that they had made themselves and which they later premiered. In addition, two workshops and informal performances were held with patients at Crichton hall in Dumfries, with the guidance of RSNO musicians on how to perform the pieces.

I join the cabinet secretary, Ms Ferguson and others in paying tribute in particular to the RSNO’s outgoing musical director, Stéphane Denève. During his tenure, average attendance figures rose year on year, and subscription numbers in Edinburgh and Glasgow are now the highest in a generation. Mr Denève can take great pride in the job that he has done with the RSNO and in his role in reinforcing the auld alliance between Scotland and France. It is heart warming to read about the warmth that he feels for Scotland as displayed on his personal website. He married his wife here and celebrated the birth of his child here. I thank him for his hard work and commitment and for the passion that he has shown for the orchestra and Scotland. I also welcome the new musical director, Peter Oundjian, to his role. I am certain that he can follow on from the recent success that I have outlined.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We move to the closing speeches. Annabel Goldie has a generous six minutes.

16:32

Annabel Goldie: The debate has been interesting and genuinely helpful. What our creative industries and NPCs do for Scotland and our economy has been universally recognised; indeed, Clare Adamson made a most impressive cultural contribution of her own. As I listened to what has been a positive debate, some lines of

Wordsworth came to mind. I am quoting from memory, so I may not be word perfect:

"For oft, when on my couch I lie
In vacant or in pensive mood,
They flash upon that inward eye
Which is the bliss of solitude;
And then my heart with pleasure fills,
And dances with the daffodils."

We have heard from many speakers about their daffodils—the enduring and memorable impact that a particular play, ballet or opera has made upon them, which they remember with great pleasure.

However, contributors to the debate have been frank in expressing some concerns and raising some issues. The issue of audience numbers for performances, coupled with the somewhat disappointing increase in education participants despite a substantial increase in educational events, is disturbing, given the consistent increase in cash-terms funding that NPCs have received under the Scottish National Party Government in recent years.

I note Sandra White's warning, which I do not dismiss. However, we have to note trends. The trend between 2007 and 2011-12, in terms of the Scottish Government core funding grant, is interesting. The grant has increased by 8.1 per cent in cash terms, which is an average of just more than 2 per cent per year. Despite that, as we have seen, audience numbers are down from five years ago, performances are down, and education participants have not increased proportionately to the number of educational events. I merely articulate that as food for thought; it is not a trenchant criticism of any of the companies.

On a positive note, Patricia Ferguson and Jenny Marra made some interesting suggestions about young people and how we might look at that cohort.

To return to the funding figures, there is another statistic that I find slightly troubling. Since becoming heavily dependent on central Government funding, two of our five NPCs have become more dependent on Government core grant. For the RSNO, the core grant in 2010-11 represented 59 per cent of its turnover, which was up from 57 per cent in 2007-08. For the Scottish Chamber Orchestra, the figure was 50 per cent, which was up from 49 per cent over the same period. Admittedly, those figures are not earth-shattering, but there is a trend. We should not lose sight of the fact that, since the establishment of direct Government funding, two fifths of our Scottish NPCs have increased their dependency on that funding.

I want to raise another point with the cabinet secretary. According to the 2010-11 annual report,

there has been a stagnation in the level of sponsorship and funding for NPCs overall. That is not to diminish the vital role that sponsors perform, nor the invaluable commitment of fund-raisers, which are to be commended. However, I note from the report that the proportion of NPC funding that comes from sponsorship and fundraising "remained at 8%". There is no further attempt to explain that figure.

Fiona Hyslop: I gently point out to Annabel Goldie that we have gone through the credit crunch and the recession. Interestingly, the arts and business figures for Scotland have increased despite the economic situation.

The Labour amendment recognises the role of private investment and sponsorship. To keep and maintain that position is very strong in the context of challenging times for many investments because of the financial situation that everyone is facing.

Annabel Goldie: I thank the cabinet secretary for that observation. I value what the sponsors and fund-raisers are doing; I simply point out that, if we cannot explain that trend nor how we might address it, the destination is troubling. It is right that we discuss it.

The general trend of future Government funding for NPCs underlines the need for those companies to be ever-more resilient and innovative, and to develop alternative business models and funding structures precisely because of the challenges to which the cabinet secretary referred. The NPCs cannot act in a silo: they must be enterprising and actively seek to leverage funding from other sources.

Patricia Ferguson made an interesting point about the possible role of local authorities. By way of being positive, I observe that there are a number of important events coming up in Scotland. We have the Commonwealth games and the Ryder cup, and a short time ago we debated tourism, which is one of Scotland's economic success stories. I would like there to be made widely available a published strategy from the NPCs on how they intend to use those events, engage with the buoyant tourism industry to promote their aims, harness the business opportunities and try to benefit from the opportunities that such activities present.

The cabinet secretary's annual reports and activities are instructive, but I would like more information about NPC development and a contribution from the NPCs in writing parts of the report. We want the reports to reflect what those companies are doing, what they think and what their vision is.

The debate has made it clear that I and others applaud the work of the national performing

companies. I want those companies to thrive and develop, and to continue to wow audiences in Scotland and further afield. I genuinely hope that the issues that members have raised today will be regarded constructively and taken on board by the cabinet secretary, and I hope that we can all help to steer the companies towards a more sustainable footing.

16:39

Patricia Ferguson: I, too, thank colleagues around the chamber for their interesting and thoughtful contributions to what has been a very good and consensual debate. That is a good thing, particularly as we are on the eve of being not quite so consensual, at least for 48 hours.

I want to reflect on some of the comments that colleagues have made. I always enjoy Clare Adamson's speeches; I particularly enjoy her quotes, as they are always highly pertinent. The quote that she used today was particularly apt. She did me the service of reminding me of an area that has had little mention—the technical skills that go towards making our national companies such a success. "A Streetcar Named Desire" is a particularly good example of those skills—I do not think that I have ever seen beer crates used in quite such a creative way as they were in that performance.

Clare Adamson was also right to talk about the innovation that we see in productions such as the National Theatre's "The Bacchae", which was amazing in many ways. The most recent of the National Theatre's offerings that I have seen was a performance of "An Appointment with the Wicker Man". I went to see it with my American intern, who, at the time, was new. I was not 100 per cent sure what he would think of it or whether he would catch the in-jokes and the almost smutty humour, but he was so enthralled by the entire thing that he decided to do the project that he was to complete for me on the National Theatre of Scotland.

I am very pleased that Brian O'Bannon has completed his report, which he has now given to me. In it, he makes the interesting point—I was reminded of it by Jean Urquhart—that Scotland waited more than 600 years for a national theatre. In my view and in Brian's, it has been well worth waiting for.

Malcolm Chisholm spoke about the collaboration between elements of the national collections and the national companies on the "Desire" project. Such collaboration is extremely important, and I would like to see it reflected in the reports that we get about the activities of our national companies and our national collections.

Malcolm Chisholm and Joan McAlpine drew our attention to the health benefits that can derive

from the field of culture. I have seen many projects through which the arts and the creativity of our companies have been used to good effect to assist people who struggle with mental health issues. I was delighted to hear Joan McAlpine mention the work that the RSNO does with Rachel House, which seems to me to be a fantastic way of using the skills and the dedication of our artists.

Malcolm Chisholm's comments on the five-minute theatre project reminded me of the 15-minute operas that I watched in Òran Mór a number of years ago, which Claudia Beamish mentioned. Not all of them were wonderful operas, but they were all very interesting and very different. It was a bit of a challenge that they were all presented in one afternoon, but it gave people a great opportunity to see some highly innovative things happening on a very small and localised scale. There was something extremely intimate about that experience that worked particularly well.

Malcolm Chisholm mentioned that opera and politics often go together. Although Sandra White's speech did not open with any opera, there was a wee bit of theatre and improvisation on the part of Ms Goldie, which was quite enjoyable, even if the cause of it was accidental. Sandra White was correct to identify that many of the national companies are located in Glasgow. One or two of them used to be located in my constituency, before the boundary changes were made. I am sad to have lost them, but I know that Sandra White will take good care of them. I am sure that she would agree that although Glasgow is fortunate to have those companies located there, it is a shame that the national collections do not better reflect the significance of the work that is held there. There might be opportunities for Glasgow's treasures to become part of that family of collections, but that is perhaps a debate for another day.

In an important speech, Claudia Beamish made very important points about the current performances about the Arab spring, which demonstrate the importance of portraying the human side of conflicts, to which I think that we are often desensitised by watching them on the television in our living rooms. That is a safe environment for us and, as we watch those tragic events unfold across the world, we become a little bit desensitised to them. Seeing them in the stark reality of a stage performance can help us to reconnect with what is actually going on, why it matters and why we should care about it.

I am indebted to Annabelle Ewing for giving me a slight prod in the direction of local performances. It is incumbent on me to mention that, in my schedule this week, I managed to fit in time to see a performance of "Oliver!", which was undertaken by the pupils of St Monica's primary school in my

constituency. I think that it is the first time that the school has ever tried to do something like that, but those primary school children were word perfect in song and dialogue and were perfect in movement. It was a fantastic experience and one that it was well worth taking a few hours out of campaigning to go to.

Jenny Marra mentioned her interest in the El Sistema project. I am sure that we all applaud and are all delighted with that project, which was originally brought here by Richard Holloway. Jenny Marra has a bit of competition in the struggle for El Sistema, as I have been trying to get it into Possilpark in my constituency for a wee while, and I think that the Deputy First Minister also has an interest in having it in her constituency. We might have a wee bit of a wrangle about that one. However, the important thing to remember is that the project makes a difference and has been seen to work. We might need to think about our strategy for rolling out that model or a similar one across Scotland.

Annabelle Ewing—sorry, Annabel Goldie; I have done it now. It is obviously going to be one of those days. Annabel Goldie mentioned the importance of working across the various areas that we have in our remit and thinking about tourism. I agree entirely. Our cultural activity is very much a driver of our tourism sector. In a previous debate, I asked the cabinet secretary whether she would give us a little bit more information about the kind of activity that our national companies would be undertaking around the Commonwealth games. I would be interested in any update on that that there might be.

I reiterate my genuine suggestion to the cabinet secretary concerning the national youth performing arts companies, which have a huge role to play. They would be appreciative of being given the responsibility that comes with being part of our national performing companies. I hope very much that that will merit discussion in the time ahead.

16:47

Fiona Hyslop: The debate has been very helpful and it was interesting to hear about members' experiences, views and opinions of the performing companies. I thank members for their many insightful contributions. I will try to address a number of the points that were made during the debate.

Patricia Ferguson mentions local authorities in her amendment and she made an important point about incentivising and rewarding them, although she steered clear of the ring fencing argument. That is a real challenge, and I reassure the member that in recent months I have met local

authority leisure, education and culture conveners to identify what can be done across the piece to help develop a network of good practice. The Government can also work with local authorities to ensure that we have a creative partnership, and to see what both sides can bring to the cultural field, nationally and locally.

That approach might address some of the points made by Jenny Marra about access to transport, which is an issue that applies to sport and not just to culture. We have made progress in supporting travel costs in the heritage field. However, I repeat my point about participating in culture and not just attending as an audience. To ensure audience development in the future, singing or taking part in musical activity is probably of greater value than attendance. The piece of research that I referred to is important in relation to that. However, how we work with local authorities, and how we address the access issue if transport is one of the major issues—we know that it relates to, for example, the cost of fuel during these pressing times—were reasonable points to raise during the debate.

Patricia Ferguson also made an important point about the national youth companies; indeed, a number of members talked about them. There is a good relationship between the national performing companies and the youth companies. Patricia Ferguson previously made the interesting proposal to Mike Russell that each of the youth companies should become a national performing company, although I do not think that that issue was raised today.

I have asked Creative Scotland to produce a national youth arts strategy and I am expecting those proposals shortly. I have requested that the strategy address the role of the youth companies, which have been consulted as part of the process. I look forward to Creative Scotland's proposals and to working with the Parliament to help to improve on what is already a vibrant arena for youth performance.

I must address the points that were made about audiences. We should listen to Sandra White—it is about quality and not just quantity. In Patricia Ferguson's latter speech, she talked about the value of intimacy in cultural performance, which can be lost if we are looking at sheer volume.

I reassure Annabel Goldie that in the period of direct funding from 2007 to 2012, Scottish audiences for the Scottish Chamber Orchestra increased by 26 per cent. For Scottish Opera, audiences increased by 19 per cent in the same period. Joan McAlpine referred to subscription sales. Since 2005-06, the Royal Scottish National Orchestra has doubled its subscriptions in Glasgow and trebled them in Edinburgh. There is an important point there about the information that is provided in the report. That point, and other

feedback, means that this has been a helpful debate for identifying what the Parliament needs in terms of report and interpretation. Some valuable points have been made about that.

Malcolm Chisholm, whom I might refer to as the token male in a debate dominated by women, talked about local collections and performances and outreach work. He made an important point about the pertinence of the modern expression of theatre in terms of the National Theatre of Scotland's five-minute theatre project, which is part of the NTS's fifth anniversary. I confess that I was part of the audience—the back of my head can be seen—for one of the performances in a railway carriage in Kinneil station in Bo'ness. It was not only a good celebration but a connection—how do we grow the writers and performers of the future and connect nationally?

Claudia Beamish made an important point about the Òran Mór and NTS spring productions—it is about content and value, the human aspects of communication, and telling stories that cannot be told any other way. Claudia made an excellent contribution in that regard. She also touched on issues around training. I give the example of Scottish Opera, which is unique in that it provides traditional artisanal skills and creates jobs in which artists can learn and practise their trades to the highest professional standards. It has third-party clients in the Royal Opera House, Scottish Ballet and the National Theatre of Scotland. The creation of a network of skills—whether it is performance skills or technical skills—is essential for sustainable creative industries in future. We are well placed to grow in that respect.

Annabel Goldie—sorry, I have done it as well—Annabelle Ewing referred to the Crieff and Comrie drama groups. I thought at one point that she was appealing for them to become national performing companies but her ambitions did not quite stretch that far.

The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick): Annabelle Ewing.

Annabelle Ewing: Thank you, Presiding Officer. I think that you are the first person this afternoon who has managed not to confuse Annabel and Annabelle. I am not at all bothered about it; I am sure that the other Annabel feels the same.

The cabinet secretary kindly referred to the Crieff drama group and the Comrie drama group. I will be very popular indeed. The point that I was trying to make was about the appetite for theatre throughout communities in Scotland—I am sure that the cabinet secretary was just about to deal with that point.

The Presiding Officer: I would never confuse Annabelle and Annabel.

Fiona Hyslop: I thank Annabelle Ewing for that important intervention. I will touch on geographical co-ordination because I have indeed asked the performing companies how they work together on the outreach work that they carry out for the performances that they put on across Scotland. In that respect, geographical co-ordination is important in ensuring that their performances reach audiences.

Co-ordination of activity is also important for tourism. For example, the companies have put on performances in support of the St Magnus international festival in Orkney, but I reassure Annabel Goldie that I am discussing with not only our collections, but our national companies ways of maximising Scotland's international presentation. In the recent debate on the year of creative Scotland and in questions that I have answered recently, I have stressed that very connection as an important means of promoting Scotland as a tourist destination.

We have high expectations of our companies. They must continue to produce high-quality work that inspires audiences, enriches lives and fosters creativity; to provide leadership in these sectors; to encourage the development of new talent; and, as I have said, to represent Scotland internationally.

I can also give the chamber an indication of the kind of support that we might expect the companies to provide for the Commonwealth games. In this Olympic and Paralympic year, Scottish Ballet's youth collective will, as part of the Olympic torch relay, perform live on 8 June a new piece of choreography set to Scottish song in George Square with children from the Gaelic school choir. Scottish Ballet is also teaming up with the National Dance Company Wales and English National Ballet for the first time for a ground-breaking Olympic-inspired national celebration of dance called Dance GB. This triple bill of new commissions will open in Glasgow and then go to Cardiff and London.

Meanwhile, the National Theatre of Scotland is going green and getting on its bike with a production called "The Last Polar Bears", which will have a four-week tour of primary schools in Ayrshire, Dumfries and Galloway, the Borders and East Lothian. Finally, the Scottish Chamber Orchestra has started its extensive summer tour of Scottish communities with sell-out performances featuring Nicola Benedetti. Given all that—and the fact that the Royal National Scottish Orchestra will play at the St Magnus festival in Orkney just before this year's Edinburgh international festival opens—the Parliament should certainly be reassured of the reach and range of our companies across Scotland.

As for the companies' international profile, Alan Cumming will star in the NTS's new version of

“Macbeth”; “Black Watch” will be back in the US, with performances in Washington, Chicago, Seattle and San Francisco; the Scottish Chamber Orchestra will visit Vienna and Rotterdam; the RSNO will play six concerts in China; and Scottish Opera will visit the city of Tianjin. I think that we can be proud of the reach of our national companies not only across Scotland, but internationally. Indeed, they are also taking part in and promoting the year of creative Scotland and, looking forward to the year of homecoming and the Commonwealth games in 2014, I think that we are very well placed to maximise their participation. I have already mentioned the investment that has been made in the RSNO’s move and in Scottish Opera.

In conclusion, this debate should be marked as a celebration of our national performing companies. They contribute a great deal to Scotland and, as Annabelle Ewing suggested, we should recognise their role in feeding Scotland’s soul.

I ask members to support the motion.

Advisory Committee on Hazardous Substances (Abolition) Order 2012

16:58

The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick): The next item of business is consideration of motion S4M-02734, in the name of Stewart Stevenson, on the Advisory Committee on Hazardous Substances (Abolition) Order 2012.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament consents to the making of the Advisory Committee on Hazardous Substances (Abolition) Order 2012, a draft of which was laid before the UK Parliament on 27 February 2012 and which makes provision that would be within the legislative competence of the Scottish Parliament if it were contained in an Act of that Parliament.—[*Stewart Stevenson.*]

The Presiding Officer: The question on the motion will be put at decision time.

Business Motions

16:59

The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick): The next item of business is consideration of business motion S4M-02754, in the name of Bruce Crawford, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, setting out a business programme.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees the following programme of business—

Wednesday 9 May 2012

2.30 pm Time for Reflection

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Ministerial Statement: The Future of European Structural Funds from 2014

followed by Finance Committee Debate: Fiscal Sustainability

followed by Public Body Consent Motion: British Waterways Board (Transfer of Functions) Order 2012

followed by Public Body Consent Motion: Inland Waterways Advisory Council (Abolition) Order 2012

followed by Business Motion

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Thursday 10 May 2012

9.15 am Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Stage 1 Debate: Police and Fire Reform (Scotland) Bill

followed by Financial Resolution: Police and Fire Reform (Scotland) Bill

11.40 am General Question Time

12.00 pm First Minister's Question Time

2.15 pm Themed Question Time
Justice and the Law Officers
Rural Affairs and the Environment

2.55 pm Scottish Government Debate: Scottish Government Growth Strategy

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Wednesday 16 May 2012

2.00 pm Time for Reflection

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Scottish Government Business

followed by Stage 3 Proceedings: National Library of Scotland Bill

followed by Business Motion

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Thursday 17 May 2012

9.15 am Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Scottish Government Business

11.40 am General Question Time

12.00 pm First Minister's Question Time

12.30 pm Members' Business

2.15 pm Themed Question Time
Health, Wellbeing and Cities Strategy

2.55 pm Scottish Government Business

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business—[Bruce Crawford.]

The Presiding Officer: Patrick Harvie has asked to speak against the motion. Mr Harvie, you have no more than five minutes.

16:59

Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): I am sure that I will not need all five minutes.

Yesterday afternoon, all members will have received a briefing from the Public and Commercial Services Union Scotland, describing the process that has taken place since the historic industrial action on 30 November, which was of a scale that has not been seen in Scotland for many years and which was a highly controversial subject in the Parliament.

After that action, the United Kingdom Government imposed an ultimatum on PCS and the other unions to accept the deal that is on the table, which will include public servants paying more, working for longer, and receiving less generous pensions. The unions were to respond to that ultimatum in December. The UK Government was not respectful during the negotiation process, and PCS continues to want genuine and meaningful negotiations to take place.

PCS balloted its members on continuation of the campaign, and more than 90 per cent of respondents rejected the Government's proposals for a new pension scheme. PCS also says that in

"the largest vote for action in any national ballot the union has held, 72.1% said they supported continuing the campaign, including with further industrial action alongside other unions"

and it has called for a day of industrial action on 10 May.

The briefing calls on members of the Scottish Parliament not to cross the PCS picket lines at the Scottish Parliament building and other government buildings.

I will certainly not be doing so, and members will reach their own view about whether they wish to do so, but business that is scheduled on a day of industrial action in this way can take place only if we expect members, their staff and Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body staff to cross the picket line. I therefore ask the Government not to press ahead with the business motion but to come back with a revised one on Wednesday next week that schedules business for 9 May but not for 10 May.

17:01

The Cabinet Secretary for Parliamentary Business and Government Strategy (Bruce Crawford): First, the motion that is before the Parliament is not a Government motion but a Parliamentary Bureau motion. Patrick Harvie is right that the dispute is between the UK Government and PCS.

I have previously made it clear that the Government fully respects the rights of employees to choose to withdraw their labour. We also believe that we have been afforded the privilege of being elected to the Parliament to represent the people of Scotland, and that is exactly what we should be doing. It is our responsibility to debate issues of significance and importance to the people of Scotland and, on the day in question, we will have a stage 1 debate on the Police and Fire Reform (Scotland) Bill in the morning and, in the afternoon, a Scottish Government debate on the Scottish Government's growth strategy. I would have thought that Patrick Harvie would have wanted to be here to be part of a debate in which we will talk about employment and jobs, concentrating on Scotland's areas of strength such as renewables, the life sciences, tourism and food and drink. I encourage him to turn up to the debate on that day. It is our responsibility to do just that.

The Presiding Officer: The question is, that motion S4M-02754, in the name of Bruce Crawford, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Beamish, Claudia (South Scotland) (Lab)
 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)
 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)
 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)
 Finnie, John (Highlands and Islands) (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)
 Gray, Iain (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Ingram, Adam (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
 Keir, Colin (Edinburgh Western) (SNP)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (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)
 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)
 McDonald, Mark (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 McGregor, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 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)
 McTaggart, Anne (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Milne, Nanette (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Neil, Alex (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Park, John (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Paterson, Gil (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Rennie, Willie (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD)
 Robertson, Dennis (Aberdeenshire West) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Russell, Michael (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Salmond, Alex (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Scanlon, Mary (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)
 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)
 Urquhart, Jean (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Wheelhouse, Paul (South Scotland) (SNP)
 White, Sandra (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Wilson, John (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow) (SNP)

Against

Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
Johnstone, Alison (Lothian) (Green)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 77, Against 2, Abstentions 0.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees the following programme of business—

Wednesday 9 May 2012

2.30 pm Time for Reflection

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Ministerial Statement: The Future of European Structural Funds from 2014

followed by Finance Committee Debate: Fiscal Sustainability

followed by Public Body Consent Motion: British Waterways Board (Transfer of Functions) Order 2012

followed by Public Body Consent Motion: Inland Waterways Advisory Council (Abolition) Order 2012

followed by Business Motion

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Thursday 10 May 2012

9.15 am Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Stage 1 Debate: Police and Fire Reform (Scotland) Bill

followed by Financial Resolution: Police and Fire Reform (Scotland) Bill

11.40 am General Question Time

12.00 pm First Minister's Question Time

2.15 pm Themed Question Time
Justice and the Law Officers
Rural Affairs and the Environment

2.55 pm Scottish Government Debate: Scottish Government Growth Strategy

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Wednesday 16 May 2012

2.00 pm Time for Reflection

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Scottish Government Business

followed by Stage 3 Proceedings: National Library of Scotland Bill

followed by Business Motion

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Thursday 17 May 2012

9.15 am Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Scottish Government Business

11.40 am General Question Time

12.00 pm First Minister's Question Time

12.30 pm Members' Business

2.15 pm Themed Question Time
Health, Wellbeing and Cities Strategy

2.55 pm Scottish Government Business

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

The Presiding Officer: The next item of business is consideration of business motion S4M-02755, in the name of Bruce Crawford, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, setting out a timetable for stage 2 of the Criminal Cases (Punishment and Review) (Scotland) Bill.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees that consideration of the Criminal Cases (Punishment and Review) (Scotland) Bill at Stage 2 be completed by 18 May 2012.—[Bruce Crawford.]

Motion agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next item of business is consideration of business motion S4M-02756, in the name of Bruce Crawford, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, setting out a stage 2 timetable for the Long Leases (Scotland) Bill.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees that consideration of the Long Leases (Scotland) Bill at Stage 2 be completed by 25 May 2012.—[Bruce Crawford.]

Motion agreed to.

Parliamentary Bureau Motion

17:05

The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick): The next item of business is consideration of a Parliamentary Bureau motion. I ask Bruce Crawford to move motion S4M-02757, on committee membership.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees that Nanette Milne be appointed to replace Jackson Carlaw as a member of the Health and Sport Committee.—[Bruce Crawford.]

The Presiding Officer: The question on the motion will be put at decision time.

Decision Time

17:05

The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick): There are four questions to be put as a result of today's business.

The first question is, that amendment S4M-02738.1, in the name of Patricia Ferguson, which seeks to amend motion S4M-02738, in the name of Fiona Hyslop, on national performing companies, be agreed to.

Amendment agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S4M-02738, in the name of Fiona Hyslop, on national performing companies, as amended, be agreed to.

Motion, as amended, agreed to,

That the Parliament welcomes the excellent work that Scotland's world-class National Performing Companies continue to deliver; recognises that it is now five years since the start of a direct-funding relationship with the Scottish Government as set out in the recently published annual review of the companies; celebrates their ongoing commitment to delivering performances of quality and to distributing their work across Scotland; commends their innovative community and education projects; recognises their importance in raising Scotland's international cultural profile, and congratulates those local authorities, companies and individuals that also support the work of the National Performing Companies.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S4M-02734, in the name of Stewart Stevenson, on the draft Advisory Committee on Hazardous Substances (Abolition) Order 2012, which is United Kingdom legislation, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament consents to the making of the Advisory Committee on Hazardous Substances (Abolition) Order 2012, a draft of which was laid before the UK Parliament on 27 February 2012 and which makes provision that would be within the legislative competence of the Scottish Parliament if it were contained in an Act of that Parliament.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S4M-02757, in the name of Bruce Crawford, on committee membership, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that Nanette Milne be appointed to replace Jackson Carlaw as a member of the Health and Sport Committee.

National Multiple Sclerosis Week

The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick): The final item of business today is a members' business debate on motion S4M-02534, in the name of George Adam, on national multiple sclerosis week.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament notes the importance of National MS Week, which takes place this year from 30 April to 6 May; recognises the particular significance of MS to Scotland, which has the highest prevalence of MS anywhere in the world; congratulates the MS Society Scotland, along with local branches of the society such as the Paisley and District branch, for what it considers its excellent work supporting those affected by MS, and considers that this good work, conducted across many local authority areas, is being undermined by savage cuts to disability benefits including Employment and Support Allowance and Disability Living Allowance, with people with MS being among those hardest hit because of the complex, fluctuating and often hidden nature of the condition and its symptoms.

17:07

George Adam (Paisley) (SNP): I am extremely pleased to bring this debate to the Parliament because, as members all know, the issue is very close to my heart. I am pleased that you are in the chair, Presiding Officer. That is no slight to your colleagues, but I know about and appreciate the work that you have done with the MS Society throughout the years and which is on-going.

Most of the people who have known me for years will know that Stacey and I have been married for a long time—if I can call 16 years a long time. When I first met Stacey, like most people, I was totally unaware of what multiple sclerosis was. The only people who I knew had it were Tiger Tim Stevens and Stuart Henry. Both were DJs—one with Radio 1 and the other with Radio Clyde—and in the 1980s, there was all kinds of publicity in the media when they started to slur their words and various other things happened. They had to say publicly at the time that they had MS. Stuart Henry was a bad example, because the form of MS that he had meant that, eventually, he died, in 1995. I assumed that that happened to everyone who had MS. A lot of the public are ignorant of the issues.

I will mention Renfrewshire Council, so, as usual, I declare that I am a councillor with that council. I also declare that I am slightly emotionally compromised, as I dearly love my wife. The support of my wife and her family is probably one of the reasons why I am standing here today.

There is a lack of understanding of MS, partly because there are four basic versions of the condition. There is benign MS, where people can have a small relapse followed by complete

recovery. There is relapsing-remitting MS, which Stacey initially had when we first met. There is also secondary progressive MS, which Stacey has progressed to. I keep mentioning my own circumstances and Stacey, because this is about the people who are suffering with MS. I also keep getting told not to use the word "suffer", but it is difficult to watch someone I love suffer day in, day out without using that word. There is also primary progressive MS.

In Scotland, 10,500 people live with MS. We have one of the highest rates of MS in the world. The minister will be aware that there has been much talk about vitamin D deficiency in Scotland. There has been the shine on Scotland campaign on the issue, with Ryan McLaughlin talking about his mother's MS. I am no expert on the matter, but research in Australia indicates that the incidence of MS is higher among people who were born in November and December, whose mothers were pregnant during the winter months in Australia. There might be something in the idea of giving women the opportunity to take vitamin D supplements during pregnancy and of giving vitamin D supplements to younger children. In Canada, some states give vitamin D to younger people and pregnant women.

Two new cases of MS are diagnosed in Scotland every 24 hours. I would like us to look at providing vitamin D as a preventative measure. If we could prevent families like Stacey's from having to learn that, at the age of 16, their child has the disease that would make things a lot better.

The Social Care (Self-directed Support) (Scotland) Bill can make a big difference to the day-to-day lives of people with MS. As a member of Renfrewshire Council, I know the difficulties that are faced by people who go through the process of getting direct payments and who then try to find out what is available for them. The idea behind the bill is to offer flexibility. MS requires that flexibility because of the condition's unpredictability and fluctuation. It is right to provide such support, through which we can help people to remain in work for longer and to live independently for as long as possible.

I have said previously that self-directed support must be flexible and available consistently throughout Scotland. As a local councillor—until tomorrow—I know that there may be problems in some areas. Although we can discuss the issue in Parliament, nine times out of 10 it is the local authority that will deliver the care or the service that the individuals needs. For me, that is a problem—and, as the minister and the Presiding Officer will be aware, I am a great one for breenging in and trying to solve problems. I think that there is a large "S" on my chest—sometimes I

have to admit that there is not and that we have to look at the issues, but sometimes we can say, "We can solve this." On Renfrewshire Council, I became the councillor everyone came to about MS, because they knew that I understood the condition, what they were going through and how to help them. However, it should not have to be like that. It should be a lot easier for people to access services through the systems that are in place in local authorities.

The Westminster Government's changes to the welfare system will also affect people with MS. I believe that all the individuals involved should be offered some flexibility, and I do not believe that Westminster is going about it the right way.

One of the biggest issues is the change to the disability living allowance, which is becoming the personal independence payment. In the United Kingdom, 69,000 people who have MS receive some form of DLA. They will have to go through a whole process to reassess their situation. For some people with MS, worry and fear can trigger an attack. The last thing that we need is for people to go through the process and have that kind of problem.

Westminster is looking for a 20 per cent cut in DLA. This is about people's lives and their condition, yet the UK Government is effectively looking not at the individual but at the number that it has to cut. There must be a better way. I know for a fact that, for a lot of people who suffer from MS, the mobility element alone can make a huge difference to their lives and to their ability to get about. Westminster should think again on the issue.

I have said previously that one person in three cannot name a single symptom of MS.

The Paisley and district branch of the MS Society is very good at supporting people with MS. Its convener, Angela Stirling, is in the public gallery tonight with her colleague June Pratt, who is the social secretary. They take their roles, including the social side, extremely seriously. They ensure that everybody gets not only all the information that they need regarding the latest developments on MS but the opportunity just to sit down and have a chat. Stacey has constantly told me that Revive MS Support in Maryhill is very popular with people who have MS, mainly because of the tea and sympathy that it provides. People there listen and talk to people with MS.

The Presiding Officer is indicating to me that I should wind up—I am sorry.

Provost Celia Lawson of Renfrewshire Council held an event that raised more than £20,000. The Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Employment and Sustainable Growth was at it. The council got

Revive MS Support to come in and do some outreach work in the Ralston sports hub.

I could say, "My name is George Adam and my wife has MS," but that would be to do an injustice to my wife and other people who have the disease. It is important to see the people behind the condition. We must remember that when we make decisions.

I want every member who is present to tell the world that they will join the MS Society and fight back against multiple sclerosis.

The Presiding Officer: Many thanks, Mr Adam. I was gently trying to remind you to wind up because I did not want Stacey to shout at you.

17:16

John Finnie (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): I congratulate George Adam on the motion. It is not only timely, but relevant. He spoke about individuals; everything that we do in Parliament should be figured around individuals.

I declare an interest as a director of the MS Therapy Centre in Inverness. My role is extremely minor and involves attending meetings and the odd event. The true spirit of what is done there is in the manager, Jackie McIntosh, and in the staff and the volunteers.

MS is a pernicious disease and the symptoms differ from person to person. The one thing that unites them is the devastation that is caused by the diagnosis. In a previous career, I assisted someone who had work-related issues and I distinctly recall the mixed feelings that that individual had when they were finally given a definitive diagnosis. The report that we all received in our e-mail inboxes—"Fighting Back: Ordinary people battling the everyday effects of MS"—mentions the emotional impact, which struck me as being important. The report also touches on the mental wellbeing not only of the individual who is unfortunate enough to have the disease—I, too, would use the term "sufferer"—but of the family, friends and loved ones. It is devastating.

I will touch on a few points. George Adam mentioned relapsing-remitting MS. The report talks about "a rollercoaster of emotions", which that form of MS must be. I know individuals who feel that that is the case.

As a councillor and an MSP, I have asked about research into MS and have received good and detailed responses from the Cabinet Secretary for Health, Wellbeing and Cities Strategy on that and on the level of national health service support. We all hope that as much support as possible is given to people with the disease.

It is a cruel fact that—as the report mentions—people with MS feel stigmatised as a result of having the disease. Unfortunately, that feeling is not exclusive to MS sufferers. It has a significant impact on people's wellbeing. The report says that there is no evidence to support those feelings of stigmatisation, but that is not the point: the point is that people should not feel stigmatised.

George Adam touched on the UK Government's attack on welfare. I share the view that it is shocking. I have assisted a person in relation to childcare issues and recall the trauma that was associated with the assessment process. Again, that trauma not only affected the individual but had wider implications. George Adam is to be commended for his motion, which lays out why MS sufferers will be among those who are hardest hit by the welfare reforms which, as we have heard, are money driven rather than being about assessed need.

Scotland has the highest prevalence of MS in the world, but we need not be insular about that. The disease is very much an international issue and some of the research that has taken place worldwide is to be commended. The international community will deal with the condition.

I congratulate the MS Society, its branches and the therapy centres throughout Scotland. In any fight, we need resilience and strength of mind, and in my experience that is to be found in abundance among MS sufferers and their supporters. The fightback will never stop until a cure is found. I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in tonight's debate.

17:20

Nanette Milne (North East Scotland) (Con): I am happy to take part in the debate, and I congratulate George Adam on bringing it to the chamber because it is important to acknowledge national MS week, to salute the valuable work that is done by the MS Society and by everyone who supports people who are diagnosed with MS, and to show that we, as parliamentarians, want to do what we can to help people who are coping with MS and other disabling neurological conditions.

MS is a complex condition. It is of as yet unknown etiology, although it appears that environmental factors of various kinds can trigger the disease if there is a genetic predisposition to it. We know that its incidence is at its highest in northern Scotland, that it affects more women than men, and that on average it first presents in young adults, but there are enormous variations within that.

When my husband was diagnosed with the condition in his late 60s, it came as a relief to him that his quadriceps muscle's wasting was not the

result of a spinal problem that would require surgery. So far, his symptoms are confined to that one area, and with luck they will do little more than have a relatively minor impact on his lifestyle. Others have rapidly increasing and widespread problems, and many have spells of good health with relapses from time to time.

Because of the complexity of MS and the variability of its symptoms, it is difficult for people in general to develop a proper understanding of the condition—hence, the importance of regularly reminding people about it, as happens through national MS week.

The last time I spoke on MS was in 2004 in a members' business debate that had been secured by Tricia Marwick. At that time, there was concern about the postcode lottery that neurological patients, including those with MS, faced in accessing appropriate healthcare, and about the need for a code of national standards of care. I am pleased that clinical standards for neurological healthcare were published in 2009 and that health boards are implementing them. I also welcome the Government support for a neurological advisory group to be led by the Neurological Alliance.

Having checked with NHS Grampian before the debate, I am pleased to say that there have been significant improvements in its area since 2004. As well as the four full-time neurologists who were employed then, there are now another three who work part time, and they are all experienced in diagnosing and managing patients with MS. The waiting time to see a neurologist has come down from a year to 12 weeks for a routine appointment, and to two to three weeks if the appointment is urgent. MS specialist nursing time has almost doubled, and most newly diagnosed patients are contacted within 10 working days and seen within two to three weeks. If an existing patient requires an appointment, the waiting time is based on their needs at the time. For example, it is five working days for a relapse, two to four weeks for continence problems, and 10 weeks otherwise. There is also in Grampian a rehabilitation consultant who has a specialist interest in MS. Things have improved significantly up there, but there is no room for complacency.

I note the MS Society's support for the Scottish Government's Social Care (Self-directed Support) (Scotland) Bill, which is embarking on its progress through Parliament. I welcome it because I agree that people with MS, and many other disabling conditions, ought to be able to choose the support that is right for them, at the right time. If we get the legislation right, SDS should offer that flexibility. I look forward to working with the MS Society and other interested organisations, as well as with patients and carers, as the bill proceeds.

I agree with the MS Society, however, that legislation alone will not deliver meaningful choice and control for people with MS, and that SDS must be understood and flexibly applied throughout Scotland, as George Adam said. I am also aware that there is often a lack of services for people to choose from, for example in respite care facilities.

Four minutes is nowhere near long enough to deal adequately with the many facets of MS and the needs of those who live with it, but I hope that the debate will help to raise awareness of the condition and improve our understanding of what is needed by the many patients in Scotland who are diagnosed with it.

17:24

Margaret Burgess (Cunninghame South) (SNP): I, too, record my congratulations to George Adam on securing a debate on such an important issue. We have heard that Scotland has one of the highest levels of MS in the world; recent research shows that its prevalence in Scotland is 200 per 100,000 of the population. In Ayrshire, that increases to 240 per 100,000. Currently, 950 people are registered with NHS Ayrshire and Arran as having MS.

It is therefore not surprising that Ayrshire has a very active branch of the MS Society, which is based in Kilwinning in my constituency. It is the largest branch in Scotland and it provides a range of support services to people with MS and their families. The service is managed and staffed solely by volunteers. It has been in existence for 42 years and has built up excellent relationships with the health board and the three Ayrshire councils. I spoke last week to branch members who told me that once they are diagnosed with MS, patients in Ayrshire receive excellent treatment and services. However, they also told me that the situation is not the same everywhere else in Scotland. We need to ensure that the very best treatment is available to all those who have MS, wherever they live.

The Kilwinning branch has adopted a ward in the Douglas Grant rehabilitation unit at Ayrshire central hospital. It is a purpose-built unit that offers specialist services to people who have neurological conditions. The local MS branch supports it by donating furniture, furnishings, televisions and other items to enhance the quality and experience of the people who use the unit. With the help of the staff of Hunterston B power station, they have also been able to provide lifting hoists and a specialised shower that is of great benefit to both staff and patients. Many people may think that such things should be supplied by statutory sources, but the branch's view is that it will take that matter up later because it wants to

make things better in the short term for people with MS.

I have not used the word "suffer" in relation to people with MS, because the local branch told me that they do not like to use it. However, the secretary, Harry, said to me, "To be honest, Margaret, I suffer. Some days I'm really suffering. The consultant said not to use the word, but I suffer." We must recognise that.

The Kilwinning branch resource centre is also a place where, as George Adam mentioned, people can go and just talk to someone. They can get help with forms, in respect of all the complications that are going to arise because of welfare reform, which is a concern to people with MS. We must recognise that, because of the variability of their condition, it has always been difficult for them when they are trying to get the benefits to which they are entitled.

The branch also has a grants system. It distributes more than £25,000 a year to people in Ayrshire who have MS. The only criteria are that a grant should improve a person's quality of life or alleviate crisis for individuals or their families. Outwith Ayrshire, the branch has donated £37,000 over the past two years to the University of Edinburgh's J K Rowling research unit. As surveys continually stress, research to find a cure is the number 1 priority. I do not think that any of us would disagree with that.

All of that is done by fundraising all year round throughout Ayrshire and Arran. We heard about the report that said that there is little public awareness of MS, but it is our job to improve public understanding and to remove preconceptions surrounding the condition. However, the Scottish public give generously every day to the MS Society. Parliament should acknowledge that.

I pay tribute to all the volunteers, many of whom have MS, in Ayrshire and throughout Scotland who raise the funds and who work in and manage their local MS Society branches, because their efforts and dedication make a real difference to the quality of life of people who are living with MS.

17:28

Mark McDonald (North East Scotland) (SNP): I congratulate my colleague George Adam on bringing his motion to the chamber. I know that the issue has for him and others a great deal of personal resonance. That is the case for me, too, because my best friend's wife is one of the 10,500 Scots with MS.

George Adam spoke about his understanding of MS and he mentioned prominent 1980s DJs who had the condition. I am a little bit younger than

George Adam, so I do not recall those instances. What brought the condition to my attention was Brian Irvine, the Aberdeen footballer, announcing that he was suffering from MS. "Suffering" was the term that he used at the time; I know that we try not to use that term, but as Margaret Burgess has identified, many people who have MS tell you directly that it is a condition that leads to varying degrees of suffering for them, on occasions.

On Monday, I was delighted to visit the Aberdeen branch of the MS Society, which operates from the Stuart resource centre in Mastrick. I also visited the stall that the society's Inverurie branch is running in the Bon Accord centre all this week. The Stuart resource centre is unique in being a dedicated centre for the MS Society's use. A range of activities are provided there, from gentle exercise to Thursday afternoon Scrabble and dominoes sessions, which give members an opportunity to interact and engage.

At the Stuart resource centre, I spoke to a number of branch members. They raised a few concerns with me, which I will take the opportunity to highlight. One concern, which a number of members have highlighted, is about not just the benefits changes that are coming but the uncertainty about them and the lack of information. A service user told me that lack of information heightens stress, which is the last thing that people need. That struck a chord with me. All the uncertainty about what is taking place at Westminster is having a detrimental impact on those people's health and wellbeing, before there has even been an announcement about whether the changes will have an economic impact.

Another concern is the signposting of services and bodies such as the MS Society. Many people said that, when they were diagnosed, they were not given information or directed to the organisations that could benefit them. That is not unique to people with multiple sclerosis; many people have told me that, at the point of diagnosis, the health service needs to provide better signposting to organisations that can provide support and interaction with other people who have conditions.

My friend whose wife has MS is diabetic. From his experience with his wife, he suggested that he, as a diabetic, has had more support to cope with diagnosis, and more psychology input and education sessions than his wife has had. He says that that needed to be looked at. It might be just a geographical issue, but the minister might want to look at provision of psychology input, education sessions and helping people to cope with the initial diagnosis, which can often cause great stress.

I will make a final brief point about stigma. In an article in Monday's *Press and Journal*, Marsali Craig—a woman with MS in Aberdeen—said that

people misunderstand multiple sclerosis and often dismiss people with MS as being lazy or drunk. We need not just education for people who are diagnosed with MS but education about MS for the wider population. I hope that all members will do everything they can to tackle stigma.

17:33

Mary Scanlon (Highlands and Islands) (Con):

I, too, thank George Adam for giving us another opportunity to debate multiple sclerosis. I spoke in the previous MS debate, in December, which Rhoda Grant secured. Like other members, I thank the Presiding Officer for her continued support since 1999, which is highly valued, given that families and friends of people across the chamber are affected by MS.

I will address the importance of MS week and raise related issues. I will not deal with the Welfare Reform Act 2012, except to say that one of the many changes proposed by the occupational therapist Professor Malcolm Harrington, who is advising the Westminster Government, was to have a category to acknowledge and understand the importance of fluctuating conditions in determining benefit payments. Such a category did not exist at the beginning of the Welfare Reform Bill process. Mental health issues, myalgic encephalomyelitis and multiple sclerosis are the three conditions that relate to that welcome change.

Last week, I was pleased to host a briefing on the health effects of vitamin D deficiency—I thank the many colleagues who attended that briefing, including George Adam. I raise the issue in this debate because a lack of vitamin D is often linked to many conditions, in particular, to multiple sclerosis. Dr Helga Rhein, a general practitioner at Sighthill health centre in Edinburgh, has carried out considerable research into that both in her own clinics and wider afield. As others have said, the further north in Scotland one goes, the higher is the prevalence of MS. We all know that the best way in which to get vitamin D is through summer sunshine, but I understand that between October and April, the sunlight in the United Kingdom—let alone in Scotland—has too low a level of ultraviolet B for vitamin D to be made. On its website, the MS Trust states that, as George Adam has highlighted,

"Vitamin D may also play a role before birth as more people with MS are born in May than in November"—

after the summer months.

The Food Standards Agency recommends that pregnant women and those in groups that are at risk of vitamin D deficiency should take supplements of 10 micrograms a day. In 2009, the Scottish Government adopted the National

Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence guideline that all pregnant and breastfeeding women should be advised about the benefits of vitamin D supplements. However, according to a publication by Ahmed et al, in Glasgow only 25 per cent of the women who were advised to take vitamin D actually took the supplement.

The shine on Scotland campaign website also states—I think that I am repeating George Adam again—that

“researchers in North America suggested that high doses of vitamin D could dramatically cut the relapse rate in people with multiple sclerosis. According to scientists in Canada, more than a third of sufferers taking high levels of supplementation did not fall ill during the period of the trial, representing a marked change in the pattern of their disease.”

Vitamin D deficiency is also linked with many other medical conditions, including depression, but that is for another day.

Given that 80 per cent of the Scottish population is estimated to be vitamin D deficient and given the consistent link with MS, I ask the minister to provide a paper to the Parliament that clarifies or confirms the recommendations of the United Kingdom scientific review of the subject, which I believe is being carried out at the moment. We have heard so much about the link between vitamin D deficiency and MS that we need a peer review of all the research, the emerging evidence and the papers that link—or otherwise—those conditions. I hope that the study by the Rowett institute of nutrition and health into MS in the northern isles will be included in that. I also ask the minister to update GPs on the latest research and give consideration to GP testing for vitamin D deficiency and the ability to prescribe a supplement where appropriate.

17:38

Paul Wheelhouse (South Scotland) (SNP): I, too, congratulate George Adam on securing the debate and the MS Society on its work in raising the profile of the impact of MS on those with the condition—both on the emotional and relationship side of life and on their social and working life—through “Fighting Back”. As members have said, we all know that there is a particularly high prevalence of MS in Scotland, with 10,500 people having the condition. I am also reliably informed by the MS Society that the number of people with MS is particularly high in the south of Scotland—indeed, 1,700 of those 10,500 sufferers are in the south of Scotland. Jo O'Neill of the MS Society told me that the Scottish Borders has one of the highest rates of MS.

I have raised issues with the Cabinet Secretary for Health, Wellbeing and Cities Strategy regarding the implementation of clinical guidelines

on neurological health to ensure that there is no postcode lottery in the provision of services. As things stand, in the Scottish Borders we have only limited access to specialist multidisciplinary teams of consultants, physiotherapists and nurses. Indeed, the physiotherapy provision that we have is funded by the central Borders branch of the MS Society.

The relative lack of specialist nursing provision is not directly the responsibility of the Government; the Government funds NHS Borders and the board makes clinical decisions. I want to use this opportunity to highlight the plight of people in the Borders who have MS and to call on NHS Borders to respond in kind. The board does not currently have specialist consultant-level support and there is no purely NHS-funded physiotherapy support, although the board has 0.6 full-time-equivalent specialist nurse provision.

Appropriate specialist, rather than generalist, provision can have an impact on people with the condition. Information that the MS Society provided to me in August 2011, which probably relates to 2010, suggests that, by treating patients in the home, MS nurses could generate savings of as much as £1,800 per course of treatment, so it would make good financial sense for NHS Borders and other boards in Scotland to invest in such services. I hope that NHS Borders will use its common sense and address the need for specialist provision, given that we know that the south of Scotland has the highest prevalence of MS, according to the MS Society. It is about priorities.

The MS Society cited a survey, saying:

“Over 60% of respondents reported that their MS nurse always helps them when they want to know about different treatments, or their current medication. Over 70% stated that their MS nurse is always the first point of contact when they have any questions about their MS”,

and

“80% said their MS nurse had provided support to their family and carers.”

MS nurses are important posts and we should do all that we can do to encourage our local health boards to provide such services. In a report by the MS Society, an MS patient was quoted as saying:

“Having an ms nurse has enabled me to remain in work and cope well with the condition ... It is great to have a familiar face who knows who you are and someone who can help you make very important decisions.”

I sincerely hope that NHS Borders will respond to that call, and I congratulate George Adam on bringing the debate to the Parliament.

17:42

Chic Brodie (South Scotland) (SNP): I welcome the debate and congratulate George Adam on securing it in this important week.

We are all creatures of our past. I was very lucky, in that in my formative years in business and manufacturing I had a senior management mentor who helped to train me in personal, people, financial and management skills, at NCR in Dundee. Lawrie Elder had MS, but not for him was lying down in the face of what some people wrongly perceived as a barrier to a successful career, a full and active social life and a very happy marriage.

Scotland has one of the highest levels of MS in the world, with 10,500 sufferers, whose immune system assaults the myelin that surrounds the cells in their nervous system. Most sufferers are struggling with the fluctuations of the relapsing and remitting form of MS.

Diagnosis of MS can have a severe emotional impact not just on the individuals but on their families and partners, as George Adam said. The good thing about Lawrie Elder was that he talked openly about MS. The condition did not diminish his self-confidence. He had a loving relationship in all ways with his wife and partner, and a strong bond with his family—in his early forties, he adopted two boys.

MS is something that we should and we must talk about. It is a condition, not a disease, and there is no stigma to be offered to or received by people who are in such circumstances. I agree with Mark McDonald in that regard. Lawrie proved that developing and disseminating knowledge and understanding of his condition could become a spur to his business, social and emotional life. If occasionally his condition was mistaken for drunkenness, that did not inhibit him in the occasional libation—or two, or three. He epitomised the 49 per cent of those with MS who say that the condition led them to take up new hobbies or interests and who have shamed the so-called “fit” who are ill equipped to understand fully what the condition means.

I do not diminish the challenge of the condition and am too ill equipped to know the answer to it, but our priorities must be to ensure that our health boards meet the highest standards that are set in clinical neurological services, as the minister said earlier this year; that physiotherapy and psychological support services and other services are readily available; and that Healthcare Improvement Scotland ensures that those services are fully provided.

A lot—much more than in Lawrie's time in the 1970s—is being said and done across Scotland. I am not sure whether the proposals that have been

discussed, such as the early prescription of vitamin D, are part of the answer, but I am sure that the answer and the solution will come, and I hope that they will come sooner rather than later. In the meantime, as in Lawrie's case, it behoves us all to provide understanding, communication, care, aspiration, support, courage and love. All of those are great palliatives.

I congratulate George Adam again, and I am signing up to the MS Society.

17:46

The Minister for Public Health (Michael Matheson): I, too, congratulate George Adam on securing time for this important debate. There is no doubt from the speeches that have been made that a significant number of members who are participating in the debate have direct experience of the impact that MS can have on an individual's life. I know that the Presiding Officer organised one of the most effective lobbyings of Parliament a number of years ago—I will not mention how many years ago—in highlighting to MSPs the issue of MS.

I offer my thanks to the many organisations—the MS Society and others—that provide a tremendous amount of support and assistance to individuals who have the condition. John Finnie and Margaret Burgess referred in particular to facilities and organisations that they are aware of, which offer assistance and support to individuals who have the condition.

I should, of course, mention in particular the Paisley branch of the MS Society, representatives of which I had the pleasure of meeting earlier this evening. The branch does a tremendous amount of work in the Paisley area, and a number of its young volunteers have been awarded the Government's saltire award for their outstanding work. I hope that it can continue that important support.

In the past few weeks, I also met the MS Society, at the invitation of Margaret Burgess, to discuss a number of issues about the progress that is being made and where the Government's priorities are on continuing to improve services for individuals who suffer from neurological conditions, including conditions such as MS. We share the MS Society's view that everyone with MS should be able to access the care and support that they need. Given the prevalence of MS in Scotland, it is extremely important that we achieve that.

A key priority that we have taken forward to improve services for individuals who have a neurological condition has been to ensure more effective implementation of clinical neurological standards. Their implementation has been taken

forward over the past 18 months in order to ensure that the care that individuals with MS receive is safe, effective and person centred. Of course, it will take time to ensure that that is effectively delivered across the country.

I have been struck by the commitment that health boards have shown in their willingness to ensure that the neurological standards are effectively implemented. Nanette Milne clearly set out the progress that boards are making to achieve that. We have provided the neurological alliance of Scotland with £40,000 to establish a national advisory group, which will oversee and support boards in that work in the months and years to come. That will ensure that we establish the right standards—as we have done so far—and that they are properly maintained.

One of the important elements in driving forward that agenda is the peer review process that Healthcare Improvement Scotland has been undertaking with health boards. The boards are able to compare with one another the actions and work that they are doing to see whether they can make further improvements.

On Paul Wheelhouse's point in that regard, we expect the peer review work to be completed and published by the summer. That will allow us to see exactly how NHS Borders compares with NHS Grampian, for example, and what progress the boards have made. We will be able to see where there are continuing gaps, and boards will be left in no doubt about the work that must be undertaken to address those issues.

Several members have mentioned vitamin D, which has clearly attracted a considerable amount of media attention. I will address some of the issues. I recognise the particular interest that MS organisations have in that regard, and it is fair to say that a significant amount of research is being done internationally to examine a variety of ways in which we can more effectively prevent or treat MS.

Mary Scanlon made a point about the need to review the literature and the research that exists. In 2010, the Institute of Medicine in the United States published a 1,000-page document that reviewed all the world literature and research that has been produced to date. It broadly concluded that vitamin D supplements have a value in dealing with pain conditions, which they can effectively assist in treating. However, the research around MS was at that point inconclusive, and it was not clear that some form of supplementation would do what many people are under the impression that it would with regard to preventing MS and being effective in treating it. The Chief Medical Officer for Scotland has asked the scientific advisory committee on nutrition to undertake a full review of vitamin D

supplementation, and to include links to MS and other conditions.

That process is under way, and it will take a considerable amount of time to examine all the peer-reviewed evidence. We expect to have the committee's draft report and finalised recommendations in 2014. At that point, we will be happy to inform Parliament of those recommendations and the actions that we will take as a Government. I am sure that members will recognise that, in order to deal effectively with the issue of vitamin D, we must ensure that we are clear about the clinical consequences of going down that particular route. We must have clear clinical evidence in order to justify any changes in the present arrangements.

I have a few points to make on the issue of welfare reform, which many members have raised, and which is regularly raised with me by a variety of organisations that represent the needs of disabled people. I welcome some of Mary Scanlon's points on the flexibility that the UK Government is seeking to introduce into the system. However, we continue to have concerns about the way in which the personal independence payment system will work. Part of the difficulty in assessing any possible impact is the lack of information around the scheme, which I know causes considerable uncertainty for individuals.

It is extremely important that the UK Government provides as much information on that system as possible to try to allay some of those concerns. It is also important that any assessment process that is undertaken as part of the personal independence payment scheme recognises fluctuating conditions such as MS and the way in which people can experience a rapid change in their condition in a very short period of time.

Self-directed support is another issue. George Adam mentioned the need for greater control over individual care arrangements, and some of the difficulties and challenges that individuals may face with regard to the use of direct payments. The purpose of the Social Care (Self-directed Support) (Scotland) Bill is to begin to remove the inconsistencies, so that no local authority can turn round and say, "No—you do not get direct payments for that." People will have a legal entitlement to the options, which will include a form of direct payment, so that there is greater consistency across local authorities. The way in which care will be provided under that system depends on the option that the person chooses.

People will be able to have full control of their care package if they choose to do so, they will be able to have partial control of it, or they will be able to allow the local authority to continue to manage it in the way in which care packages have traditionally been provided. The bill will give

people much more direct control of their care than they are presently afforded, and it will remove some of the anxieties that people may have about direct payments and some of the inconsistency in the way in which care is provided by local authorities. We are taking forward the integration of health and social care precisely to address such inconsistency between local authorities. Too often, the services that are provided are organised for the purposes of the system rather than to meet the needs of the individual who requires the care. We will ensure that the system provides much greater consistency across the country.

Meeting closed at 17:56.

I hope that I have reassured members that, as a Government, we want to continue to see improvements in clinical standards for people with neurological conditions. In areas in which there is further research to be done, we have committed to doing that. We look forward to the publication of the advisory committee's report and, in particular, its recommendations on vitamin D. I will continue to engage regularly with individual members on particular issues that they may have locally as part of the continued efforts to improve services for people with multiple sclerosis.

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