



The Scottish Parliament  
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

## Official Report

# MEETING OF THE PARLIAMENT

Tuesday 13 November 2012

Session 4

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## Scottish Parliament

*Tuesday 13 November 2012*

[The Presiding Officer *opened the meeting at 14:00*]

### Time for Reflection

**The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick):** Good afternoon. The first item of business is time for reflection, for which our leader is Ms Ravinder Kaur Nijjar, who is from the Scottish Sikh Council and is chair of Religions for Peace—European Women of Faith Network.

**Ms Ravinder Kaur Nijjar (Scottish Sikh Council and Chair of Religions for Peace—European Women of Faith Network):** Members of the Scottish Parliament, ladies and gentlemen, I begin with the Sikh greeting Waheguru Ji Ka Khalsa, Waheguru Ji Ki Fateh, which means the “Pure Ones” belong to the Lord and all victory to the Lord.

Last week, the presidential election in America was world news. World peace and justice ultimately rest in the hands of political and world leaders. World leaders have to show by example the way forward for humanity.

Today, as I celebrate Diwali, I am reminded of a leader who was not known throughout the world—a spiritual leader who, through his actions, treated all mortals as one, regardless of their religion, race, wealth or gender. That spiritual leader was Guru Hargobind Ji, the sixth prophet of the Sikhs, who lived in the 17th century.

Today is Diwali, the festival of light. Sikhs, Hindus and Jains celebrate the festival. Sikhs call it Bandi Chhor Diwas, or liberation day. For Sikhs, Diwali is a reminder of standing against injustice, upholding righteousness and regarding the whole human race as one family.

Guru Hargobind Ji was imprisoned by the Mogul Emperor Jahangir on religious grounds and false charges. After considerable pressure from influential Muslim religious leaders, Jahangir decided to release the Guru, but the Guru refused to leave until he had secured the freedom of 52 Hindu princes who were imprisoned as well.

The emperor agreed to release the princes on the condition that those who could hold on to the Guru’s cloak would be freed. The emperor thought that only four or five princes would be freed in that manner. However, Guru Hargobind Ji had a cloak made that had 52 long tassels of varying lengths, so all 52 princes could hold on to one tassel each and leave the prison.

Guru Hargobind Ji became known as the Bandi Chhor—the deliverer. To celebrate his release, Sikhs lit small clay lamps called Diwas at the golden temple. The light signified the triumph of good over evil.

The altruistic act of the Guru is what is required in the world today. In an ideal world, leaders should sacrifice their own needs and their countries’ needs for the greater good—for the good of humanity. In reality, we hope that there will be at least a balance between the two sometimes conflicting demands. The light from the Diwali lamp reminds us to kindle the divine light in ourselves and see it in others and, in that way, truly recognise that we all belong to the one human race.

## Topical Question Time

14:04

### Stow College

#### 1. **Hugh Henry (Renfrewshire South) (Lab):**

To ask the Scottish Government what its position is on the appropriateness of the comments by the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning in relation to the chair of Stow College. (S4T-00116)

**The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning (Michael Russell):** The Scottish Government believes that, like any other sector, the college sector needs to be led and governed by people of the highest quality and standards. Chief among their attributes must always be mutual trust and respect. The Scottish Government expects all those who lead and govern our colleges to conduct themselves consistently with that approach.

**Hugh Henry:** Leaving aside the recording of meetings for accuracy or, indeed, whether it is in the public interest to publicise what the cabinet secretary says or how he behaves at meetings, I think that the issue is his reaction to the event. I have been contacted by further education staff who believe that the cabinet secretary is behaving inappropriately and that he is attempting to bully and intimidate. On reflection, does he not agree that he could have handled the situation better?

**Michael Russell:** The issue is that, in a meeting of chairs and principals, a recording was made with a surreptitious device. Alas, nobody was told that the meeting was being recorded and no permission was sought from anybody who was present. That has led to a breakdown in the relationship that should exist between the individual concerned and not just me but many of his colleagues.

**Hugh Henry:** I think that Mr Ramsay might dispute that the recording was “surreptitious”. Many education staff are contacting me to say that they are frightened to speak out about how the cabinet secretary is treating them. Surely how he has behaved towards Mr Ramsay reinforces their fears. Is it not time for the cabinet secretary to reflect and to rebuild relationships and to start that process by apologising to Mr Ramsay?

**Michael Russell:** I am glad to say that the meeting in question was very positive, as are most of my meetings with the college sector. We are engaged in a process of radical reform in which it is important that all parts of the sector debate and discuss what should take place. Anything that diminishes those debates, such as surreptitious and secret recording, is to be regretted.

Having said that, I am gratified by the messages of support and encouragement that I have had in recent days from principals, chairs and many others in the sector. I am confident that the collaborative efforts that we are making to change the college sector for the good—not for individuals but for young people in the sector—is on course.

**George Adam (Paisley) (SNP):** Will the cabinet secretary confirm that there is no dispute between the Scottish Government and Stow College?

**Michael Russell:** There is no dispute between the cabinet secretary, the Government or anybody else and Stow College or its staff, students or board. The matter relates to the conduct of one individual—that is where the dispute occurred.

**Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD):** Did the cabinet secretary have any discussion with Stow College’s management board before demanding the resignation of its chair? Furthermore, have there been other similar instances in which he has called for the resignation of the chairs or principals of individual colleges or for the resignation of leading figures in Skills Development Scotland or, indeed, any other organisation?

**Michael Russell:** I have no dispute with any college or board. As I have indicated, my dispute is with an individual. It would therefore have been inappropriate for me to meet the board to discuss the issue. I met the chair. I also point out that I have no power to demand any individuals’ resignation. I pointed out to the individual concerned that the relationship of trust between us had broken down, and I asked him to reflect on that. I have no power to remove anybody from any position in the college sector. Indeed, all power of direction to the college sector was removed by a Labour minister some years ago.

### High-speed Rail Link (Edinburgh to Glasgow)

**2. Gordon MacDonald (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what plans are being made to introduce a high-speed rail link between Edinburgh and Glasgow. (S4T-00120)

**The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick):** I call Keith Brown.

**Alex Johnstone (North East Scotland) (Con):** Not very high speed today, minister. [*Laughter.*]

**The Presiding Officer:** You deserved that, minister.

**The Minister for Transport and Veterans (Keith Brown):** It is vital to link the key economic centres in Scotland, as it is across the United Kingdom. We have carried out a high-level assessment, which demonstrates that a new high-speed line with journey times of less than 30 minutes could be built by 2024. The Scottish

Government will enter talks with our partners in both cities and the rail industry to see how we can work together to realise the vision of an Edinburgh to Glasgow high-speed line that connects to England's network.

**Gordon MacDonald:** Will the minister outline the benefits for Scotland's two major cities of almost halving the journey time between Glasgow and Edinburgh?

**Keith Brown:** There will be substantial benefits. We are told that there is a substantial economic benefit every time that there is a reduction of even a minute in journey time between Glasgow and Edinburgh. There will be benefits in terms of accessibility and there will be social and environmental benefits from upgrading the link—and of course that will make a fifth option available.

There are wider benefits of a high-speed link for the rest of Scotland and the United Kingdom. Also, the announcement shows the Scottish Government's intent to ensure that high-speed rail comes to Scotland as soon as possible.

**Gordon MacDonald:** Will the new high-speed line be linked to the cross-border service to London? Does the minister plan to meet the UK transport minister to discuss the UK plans for high-speed rail?

**Keith Brown:** I hope to meet the Secretary of State for Transport, Patrick McLoughlin, in the next week. Of course, the intention is to have a high-speed link all the way from London to Scotland. Indeed, if that does not happen, capacity constraints on the west coast main line, which will reach a critical stage by 2024-25, will be such that billions of pounds will again have to be spent on the line in advance of further high-speed rail connections. We will have a conversation about that with the UK Government.

In that context, I welcome the comments of the Secretary of State for Transport, who said at the Conservative Party conference that he hopes to have a three-hour rail journey time between London and Scotland. That will form the basis for some of our discussions.

**Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab):** Will the minister tell the Parliament about the proposed technology and route? Does he envisage conventional rail or maglev technology, as we proposed in the 2007 elections, being used? When will he publish details of his proposals? Does he not get it that cuts to the Edinburgh to Glasgow improvement programme mean that commuters in the central belt are missing out on reduced journey times and that 2024 is a very long way off?

**Keith Brown:** The member does not take account of the fact that we are announcing an initiative that will halve the journey time between Edinburgh and Glasgow.

It is true that what we announced yesterday was our intent, just as I imagine happened when the Forth bridge and the Glenfinnan viaduct were proposed, or when the Secretary of State for Transport announced an aim to have a journey time of three hours.

We must now make the plans go forward, which includes working out the route. The intention is to use some of the existing network, although there is the possibility of having a largely new line. As far as plans that I have seen are concerned, it is not the intention to use maglev technology, for fairly fundamental reasons.

It is the intention to start looking into the issue in some detail. We are right to say that we have the ambition to introduce a high-speed rail link between Edinburgh and Glasgow. Such ambition is important and is the hallmark of this Government.

**Alex Johnstone:** Given the timescale and indeterminate budget for the proposal, would it not have been better to invest a little resource in improving the existing service and cutting journey times? Is the proposal simply an excuse for not investing in the Edinburgh to Glasgow route between now and 2024?

**Keith Brown:** Given that we recently announced a £650 million package of investment in that very line, the question points to the absurdity of the Conservative position. The Conservative Secretary of State for Transport recently announced an aim to have a three-hour journey time between London and Edinburgh but gave no detail on the study and its costs or the possible costs of new construction. I did not criticise him for that and I note that neither did Alex Johnstone, although he criticises the Scottish Government for its intention to improve the link between Edinburgh and Glasgow.

It is right that we state our ambitions. What is not right—and not surprising—is the Conservative Party's complete lack of ambition on the issue. We have the ambition for Scotland. We have stated our intention and we will get to work on ensuring that it happens.

**Willie Rennie (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD):** Yesterday, the Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Infrastructure, Investment and Cities was quoted as saying, "We now know" that building a high-speed link within 12 years that cuts journey times to 30 minutes is possible. Can the minister point to a single piece of documented evidence that backs up that claim?

**Keith Brown:** If Willie Rennie looks at “Fast Track Scotland: Making the Case for High Speed Rail Connections with Scotland”, which we published some time ago, and at the work that has subsequently been done by the Scottish partnership group for high-speed rail, he will see the rationale that has been put together.

It is extremely important that we recognise that we have made a statement of our intention. As the cabinet secretary said yesterday, we have work to do on planning for the new link and we must identify the funding for it. However, we have stated our ambition, as we have done on many transport projects. If someone does not have the idea in the first place, they are not going to make those vital changes to the infrastructure for the people of Scotland. It is probably a good thing for Scotland that we have a Government that is willing to take on those big projects, to state that ambition and to follow it through by completing those projects on time and on budget.

**Mark Griffin (Central Scotland) (Lab):** In an article in *The Herald* on 5 July the minister is quoted as saying that one of the reasons for revising EGIP was the need to tie it in with a future high-speed rail network in Scotland. How will this new announcement impact on EGIP and is the minister still committed to seeing the future phases of EGIP implemented as previously stated?

**Keith Brown:** I give Mark Griffin my assurance that we intend to see EGIP through. As I said at the time, I reckon that we can achieve around 80 per cent of the benefits that the original £1 billion scheme had proposed. There is every possibility that we can increase that percentage—perhaps not to 100 per cent, but getting towards 100 per cent of the benefits of the previous scheme. We remain absolutely committed to the EGIP works taking place.

**Neil Findlay (Lothian) (Lab):** Given the desperate situation following the Hall’s closure, will the minister look again at EGIP and the cuts to it and reflect on the advantages that we would get from a new station at Winchburgh?

**The Presiding Officer:** I think that that is a bit wide of the original question.

## Universal Benefits

14:16

**The Presiding Officer:** The next item of business is a debate on motion S4M-04778, in the name of Alex Neil, on universal benefits. I call Alex Neil to speak to and move the motion.

**The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing (Alex Neil):** Thank you, Presiding Officer, and congratulations on your appointment to the Privy Council. I am sure that everybody in the chamber wishes to echo those congratulations. [*Applause.*]

The debate centres on the universal services and benefits that support the health and wellbeing of the people of Scotland. That includes the progress that has been made by parties from across the chamber under devolution, including the delivery of free personal and nursing care for our older people, the abolition of prescription charges for all, the entitlement to free eye examinations for all and the national concessionary travel scheme for older and disabled people. There is also, of course, the unswerving commitment to having in Scotland a national health service that is free at the point of need and kept in public hands, unlike down south.

Those policies form the bedrock of supporting Scots to lead healthy and independent lives and until recently I thought that nearly everyone in the chamber shared that view. It cannot be right to tax ill health by charging for prescriptions—an approach that could force some in our society to sacrifice their health as they look to balance their weekly budgets.

Securing the visual health of Scotland means keeping eye examinations free for all—examinations that have long since moved beyond a simple eye test and that enable an assessment of a patient’s entire visual health. I am convinced of the benefits of eye examinations and the role that they have in supporting the people of Scotland to manage their wider health and wellbeing.

**Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con):** I am grateful to the cabinet secretary for giving way. Can he explain why we are returning to this issue, when we debated it just a few weeks ago—is it because the Scottish National Party took such a hammering in the debate that it has now come back for round two?

**Alex Neil:** The simple answer to that question is no, we did not take a hammering.

For the older generation, I am convinced that helping people to be independent and to live at home for as long as is appropriate is an important



part of helping older people to continue to live active and fulfilling lives.

**Johann Lamont (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab):** Does the minister think that it is acceptable that the level of care that an elderly person receives in order to be sustained in their own home is a 15-minute visit, for which the carer is told to “task and go”?

**Alex Neil:** I will come to that point later. However, free personal care is something that Labour and the Liberal Democrats introduced and I am surprised that they are thinking about scrapping it.

It must also be right, through the concessionary travel scheme, to continue to help our older people and those with disabilities, including disabled veterans, to get about using bus services and—for residents in our northern isles and Western Isles—ferries to and from the mainland. Supporting active and healthy lives by allowing people throughout Scotland to access services, meet friends and families and enjoy fuller participation in society without being constrained by financial cost is the right thing to do.

**Gavin Brown (Lothian) (Con):** Does the cabinet secretary accept that some of the expenditure on concessionary travel is deadweight expenditure?

**Alex Neil:** If the member means that somebody such as Fred Goodwin might get a bus pass—although I doubt that he would use it—my argument is that we should let Fred Goodwin get the bus pass as long as he pays for it through much higher taxation, which would help to pay for everybody. The fact that Fred Goodwin gets a bus pass is no reason to scrap it for those who need it, which is what the Tory philosophy would be.

**Johann Lamont:** Will the member take an intervention?

**Alex Neil:** I will take another intervention. I am glad that I am so popular.

**Johann Lamont:** What is the cabinet secretary's estimate of the comparative benefit of a council tax freeze to Fred Goodwin as opposed to somebody in a band A house in my constituency?

**Alex Neil:** The Labour Party supported the council tax freeze. It tried to outbid us with the council tax freeze; now, as Arthur “Bleak” Midwinter has said, everything is on the table. I wonder whether, under Labour's scenario, people would have to pay to visit their general practitioner, if

“nothing is off the table”.

Let us look at the facts on free personal care, which was introduced by Henry McLeish when he

was First Minister. That policy provided a valuable and hugely beneficial service to more than 30,000 older people in care homes last year and, over the past couple of years, to around 46,000 older people in their own homes. The free personal and nursing care policy has often—rightly—been held up as a real success of this Parliament and one of the distinctive policies of devolution, supported on all sides of the chamber. It provides valuable support to thousands of older people in their own homes and in care homes.

**Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP):** The cabinet secretary mentioned Henry McLeish, and I will mention Jack McConnell. Both tried and failed to get the attendance allowance, which was saved to the Department for Work and Pensions by the introduction of free personal care, returned by Westminster. The last that I knew, the figure was £40 million per annum. Does the cabinet secretary not think that it is disgraceful that that money is retained by the DWP?

**Alex Neil:** Absolutely. I was going to make the point myself. The DWP has retained around £300 million. It was Alistair Darling who robbed this Parliament of that money when he was Secretary of State for Social Security by removing some older people's eligibility for attendance allowance.

We have heard from experts such as Professor David Bell. In an article in *The Economist* of August 2010, he wrote:

“Since free personal care was introduced in 2002-03, the number of long-stay geriatric beds in Scottish hospitals has fallen from about 2,700 to 1,700,”

which he believed represents

“a bigger saving to the NHS than the extra cost of personal care.”

In other words, it makes not only humanitarian sense and healthcare sense, but economic sense to have free personal care for our older population.

**Duncan McNeil (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab):** Does the cabinet secretary accept that, although we all support that policy, the issue is how we pay for it? Does he believe that a regressive pay freeze should not be subsidising free personal care?

**Alex Neil:** It is a pay freeze that Ed Balls supports. It is no longer clear that Labour members all support free personal care—that is the whole point. It appears that Labour no longer supports free personal care.

In 2006, partly as a result of the work of the Parliament, the previous NHS eye test was replaced by a comprehensive eye examination. That extended service delivered 1.9 million eye examinations last year alone, which represents an increase of almost 1 million on the number of NHS

eye tests that were carried out in 2005-06. I think that we should be proud of the fact that we have enabled such a significant increase in the number of examinations while extending sustainably the content and value of the service.

The rationale behind the policy has long been the recognition that eye examinations will diagnose conditions that may previously have gone untreated and that, by early diagnosis, more complex or long-term problems can be avoided fully or in part.

**Dennis Robertson (Aberdeenshire West) (SNP):** The issue is about more than just eye tests and the diagnosis of conditions; it is to do with wellbeing.

Does the cabinet secretary recognise that the money that has been spent on that has been preventative spend, because the fact that people are diagnosed early enables them to go straight to the hospital rather than their having to wait weeks or even months for a referral by their general practitioner?

**Alex Neil:** My colleague's point is very well made.

**Willie Rennie (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD):** I whole-heartedly agree with the minister on eye checks, the investment in which has been extremely valuable.

However, I return him to the motion, which says that

"the only way that these universal services and benefits can be protected and maintained is through independence for Scotland."

If the Scottish National Party loses the referendum, what will happen to universal benefits?

**Alex Neil:** That is a very good question. Far from being better together, we would be a lot poorer together if we voted no in the referendum.

I will certainly not take any lessons from a Liberal Democrat who supports a Tory-led Government, with all the cuts that it is imposing and the destruction of the NHS that it is engaged in south of the border.

The funding of the general ophthalmic service to run the free eye examination programme currently amounts to around £70 million a year. That funding covers the previous NHS eye test programme and the extension of the new programme. As I have said, the benefit of eye examinations can be substantial. Research by the Association of Optometrists that was published this year indicated that the increase in eye examinations could realise an initial annual benefit of around £400 million—that is for a spend of £70

million. As Mr Robertson said, that is preventative spending.

The report also suggested that the initial annual benefit accrued by those people who were previously not eligible for a free eye test could be worth around £40 million. Therefore, I believe that those who oppose free eye tests are getting wrong not just the health argument, but the economic argument.

**Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab) rose—**

**Alex Neil:** I have not let Jackie Baillie in so far, and I could not go through my speech without getting what will no doubt be a constructive intervention from her.

**Jackie Baillie:** I have never had such a long and insincere welcome, but I thank the cabinet secretary for giving way.

I accept what he says about eye tests. Does he agree, therefore, that means testing entitlement to optical vouchers is a barrier to people receiving the kind of treatment that he has just described?

**Alex Neil:** It is rather rich of Jackie Baillie to complain about that when she is thinking of getting rid of eye tests. It is clear that that is on Arthur Midwinter's agenda. He said:

"nothing is off the table."

That means that the abolition of free eye tests is on the table.

I turn to free concessionary travel, which is not only a transport policy, but a health policy. In 2006, the national concessionary travel scheme for older and disabled people was introduced. It now provides concessionary travel to 1.2 million older and disabled people across Scotland, including disabled veterans.

**Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab):** Will the minister take an intervention?

**Alex Neil:** I cannot take any more interventions.

Many of those people would face significant obstacles in their day-to-day lives if—as some propose—the service were removed. That would impact on their broader quality of life and their opportunity to access other services, including—we should not forget—important health services, which have a positive impact on health and wellbeing. The idea that we would deny older people the use of concessionary fares to travel and to see their friends and family is beyond belief in a civilised society.

Similarly, the cost of offsetting the prescription charges that this Government abolished was £57 million last year, which is under 5 per cent of the total budget spent on prescribing and less than 0.5 per cent of the entire health budget. If prescriptions had been charged for, which was the

previous approach, an estimated 600,000 adults in households with an annual income of less than £16,000 a year would have been liable to pay for their prescriptions. Many people would have had to take a real and difficult decision about how they funded their medicines and their spending on basic provisions and services.

The Labour First Minister for Wales, Carwyn Jones, put it well when questioned on free prescriptions last month. He said:

"We believe it's important that we have an NHS that's free at the point of delivery. We are not going to change the policy on free prescriptions."

He is so committed to the policies of free prescriptions and concessionary travel that he stated that they will be in the Welsh Labour manifesto for the next National Assembly for Wales elections in 2016. Why can Johann Lamont not tell us today that she will make a similar commitment on behalf of the Labour Party in Scotland for 2016?

Reference has been made to "something for nothing". The older generation benefits from concessionary fares and from free personal and nursing care, and to say that that is "something for nothing" is absurd, not only because they have worked all their days and we have a moral duty to look after them in their twilight years, but because those people still pay taxes. Many of them still pay income tax, some may pay other taxes and every one of them will pay value added tax. If they contribute to our society, why should we not look after them and ensure that they are properly looked after? That is the mark of a civilised society. Sixty years ago Nye Bevan promoted and believed in such a society; so did John Smith, until his premature death. This is about ensuring that we maintain our social contract with the people. We will maintain universal free benefits for all our people in the years to come.

I move,

That the Parliament recognises and values that Scotland's National Health Service is universally available and free at the point of need; further recognises that other universal benefits, including free eye examinations, concessionary travel, free prescriptions and free personal and nursing care are also vital to supporting many in Scotland to live full and healthy lives, and believes that the only way that these universal services and benefits can be protected and maintained is through independence for Scotland.

**The Presiding Officer:** Johann Lamont will speak to and move amendment S4M-04778.4. Ms Lamont, you have 10 minutes, but if you take interventions, we will compensate you.

14:33

**Johann Lamont (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab):** Thank you, Presiding Officer.

I am the leader of the Scottish Labour Party and its priorities will be to meet the needs of the people of Scotland. If the minister wants to reflect on what the Welsh Labour Party is doing, he may reflect on the point that it does not have a policy of free tuition and that it is making different choices and persuading people on that basis.

The minister must confront a simple thing in this debate, which is not that there are good policies, but that there are competing demands and that there is a gap between rhetoric and the reality in our communities. Two months ago, I called for a debate about what Scotland's priorities should be. That debate was endorsed by leading public finance experts concerned by the lack of Government action in the face of the worst financial crisis for a generation. Whether it was Crawford Beveridge, the chair of the First Minister's council of economic advisers; Robert Black, the former Auditor General for Scotland; or Bill Howat, the former chief executive of Western Isles Council, who chaired the independent review of Scottish Executive spending, they agreed that there is an urgent need for a serious debate.

Frankly, to suggest that the minister is the only member here who is concerned about older people, the national health service and concessionary travel simply does not serve the people of this country well.

There is a serious debate to be had, but of course the Scottish National Party did not want that. It has tried to close the debate down through a mixture of name calling, denial, distortion and outright falsehoods. Ministers failed to debate in public and I am disappointed that John Swinney still refuses to engage in this debate, despite the fact that in commissioning Beveridge and Christie he acknowledged that there is a debate to be had.

When I heard that the SNP had called for this debate, I had hoped that it had been forced to address these issues, which concern hard-working people up and down the country. However, given what has been said and given the motion, it is clear that the SNP is not there yet. It is clear that it is capable of viewing this issue only through the prism of the referendum and that this is yet another proxy debate for independence.

**Mark McDonald (North East Scotland) (SNP):** Will the member give way?

**Johann Lamont:** I will make this point. Last year, the Christie commission report said:

"Contentious issues such as the continuation of universal entitlements must be considered openly and transparently, rather than in the current polarised terms."

What we have is a debate between competing good things, not between a compassionate minister and someone who he alleges will ask people to pay for visits to their general practitioner.

It is a diminution and a distortion of the debate for the minister to conduct it in those terms.

**Alex Neil:** Every time the member speaks on this issue she calls for a debate, but she is still to tell us what her policy is. Is it her policy to keep free prescriptions—yes or no? Is it her policy to keep free eye tests and free personal care, or is it her policy to charge for those things? She should tell us what her policy is.

**Johann Lamont:** The minister refuses to listen. We are saying that there are good policies; let us look at their cost, their benefits and the opportunities.

**Alex Neil:** We have done that.

**Johann Lamont:** No, the minister has not, and I will say why. He says that free personal care is important to sustain people in their own homes. I am saying that the reality is that old people are being contained in their own homes, receiving 15-minute visits and being tucked up in their beds at 6 o'clock. Their carers are being told to focus on tasks, not the individuals. That is not free personal care, that is a slogan.

We know that this is not an easy debate to have. The easy option for me would be to sit back and pick off the Government when it makes difficult decisions, but I care too much about Scotland for that. The fact is, the debate that I called for is not about universality versus means testing, but about what we can and cannot afford. It is about what is sustainable in the long term. It is about priorities and choices and engaging the Scottish people as adults. If we choose to spend money on one thing we cannot spend it on something else. For too long we have been happy to tick the box and ignore the connection between the soundbite and the delivery of policy.

Indeed, that gap is widening. The minister said that what we need to do is increase taxation, but every time the Scottish Government sees a tax, it cuts it. The underfunded council tax freeze disproportionately benefits Fred Goodwin, not the poorest people in our communities. That is self-evident.

**Mark McDonald:** Will the member give way?

**Johann Lamont:** This will be good.

**Mark McDonald:** It will be. A pensioner couple live next door to me in a house which is in the same council tax band as mine. I could probably afford to pay a several-hundred-pound hike in my council tax, but they could not. Why would it be fair for them to have to face that?

**Johann Lamont:** So there is no benefit to them, you have the benefit and they feel good about you getting the benefit—that does not make any sense—[*Interruption.*]

**Gavin Brown:** Encore!

**The Presiding Officer:** Order.

**Johann Lamont:** Everyone knows that a council tax freeze disproportionately benefits people who are better off. When it is underfunded, people pay in terms of public services as well. We know that there is an issue about the council tax and its unfairness, but if the council tax is regressive, a council tax freeze is also by definition regressive.

We must face up to the consequences of our policy decisions and ask ourselves whether things are still being delivered to the standards that we expect and whether we are right to prioritise them over other areas now under attack. The Government has made a policy commitment to free university tuition fees, free prescriptions, free concessionary travel and free personal care for the elderly. However, the contention is that none of those things is free; the truth is that the money comes from elsewhere in the budget and the issue then is about budget choices, not cuts. We know that there are huge costs from free personal care, prescriptions, health and social care and travel concessions—

**Kevin Stewart (Aberdeen Central) (SNP):** Will the member give way?

**Johann Lamont:** The member should listen to this. All those things are desirable, but the truth is that if we want to keep them we must be honest about how they are funded. If that does not happen, we will have a cynical slogan, not a policy.

The Scottish Government often talks about its balanced budget, but the reality is that it is a fixed budget. Every pound that goes on these things is a pound less for other public services.

**Kevin Stewart:** Will the member give way?

**Johann Lamont:** It could be that the SNP Government has got its priorities right—

**Kevin Stewart:** Will the member give way?

**The Presiding Officer:** Mr Stewart, the member is not giving way.

**Johann Lamont:** The idea that we cannot debate those priorities is an outrage. I would have been happy to engage with the First Minister, the finance minister and other ministers on the subject of the real world, the things that actually matter and the things that are more important than others. That engagement did not happen.

**The Minister for Parliamentary Business (Joe FitzPatrick):** Does the member think that the £350 million that has been prioritised for a new Trident system could be better spent?

**Johann Lamont:** We know that the SNP's position is to spend on defence all the money that would have been spent on Trident. That is not about providing services.

I am more than happy to test any public spending commitment against its benefit to the people of this country, but what do we get from the SNP? Last week, the First Minister denied the Auditor General for Scotland's position that the health service is on an amber warning. We are not even allowed to say that there have been cuts to the further education sector, never mind have a serious debate about their impact. We know that the situation is hurting people now. The First Minister's choice to slash funding for colleges has helped to lead to 70,000 fewer students studying in our colleges and thousands of college places have been sacrificed so that he can claim that university tuition is free. That is not fair; it is not a progressive beacon; and I think that it is wrong.

Perhaps the First Minister has got it right, but he should make the argument and present his evidence that investing in university tuition fees is better for the economy and for fairness than investing in our colleges. At least we can have the argument. He says that no such choice is being made, but we know that such choices are being made across the country.

**Maureen Watt (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP):** Does the member realise that, as today's figures show, tuition fees south of the border have increased the rate of inflation and that that affects everyone?

**Johann Lamont:** The price of the First Minister's university tuition fees policy is not being borne by no one; it is being borne by every young person who wants a college place, who is sitting on a waiting list or who, having lost their job, cannot retrain. The fundamental insult is that they are not even allowed to say that it is happening as a result of Government choices; it is happening by accident somewhere. If that choice is being made, those who are making it should at least have the courage to face up to the consequences and explain to people why they are making it.

Only two years ago, John Swinney was keen for us and the public to have

"the widest possible debate about the range of options ... contained"

in Crawford Beveridge's review. The Government needs to understand that this is not about parliamentary knockabout between me, Alex Neil and the First Minister or about degrading people's positions; it is genuinely about saying that if we want good public services that people can rely on and that ensure that our older people are not isolated or living in fear we need to stop sloganising and start working together on the

consequences of the decisions that are being made. The SNP has forced students to top up their budgets with loans by cutting college bursaries by £900—

**Alex Neil:** Will the member give way?

**The Presiding Officer:** The member is winding up, Mr Neil.

**Johann Lamont:** Those with the most limited means are now financing the best off. Those are the First Minister's values, not mine.

The reality is that, although this Government pretends that it is not making choices, it is. It is choosing to pretend that we have free personal care, when we have elderly people who are vulnerable in their homes. It is pretending that we have free education, when people are denied college places and young people in our schools are being denied the basics to learn.

There are important issues about the quality of services and about protecting vulnerable people, but we will do neither if we settle for the approach of the SNP Government, which is to pretend. It is in denial about the reality that everyone across this country knows: we have a fixed budget, we have choices to make, and the test of those choices must be about fairness, equality and ensuring that those who are most vulnerable get the services that they need and deserve.

I move amendment S4M-04778.4, to leave out from "that Scotland's" to end and insert:

"Scotland's public services and the vital role that they play; is concerned that the Scottish Government's spending choices are having a detrimental impact on public services; notes that the Auditor General for Scotland has put the NHS system on an amber warning; is concerned that older people are facing increased charges and a deteriorating level of care; is dismayed at the cuts to the college, housing and local government budgets; is concerned that it is families and the most vulnerable who are bearing the brunt of these cuts, and calls on the Scottish Government to take action now to protect public services and the people who rely on them instead of putting Scotland on pause until after the referendum on independence."

14:45

**Gavin Brown (Lothian) (Con):** The debate over universal services cannot be ignored any longer. We have the convergence of two critical factors: weakened public finances and the demographics of an ageing population. In the short to medium term, we need to focus specifically on the weakened public finances. When many of the universal services that the cabinet secretary mentioned came into being, as a country we were awash with cash. In some cases, we quite literally could not spend the money and we built up about £1 billion in end-year flexibility. In an era of declining budgets, we are in a very

different game and we have to make choices and focus on priorities.

Audit Scotland has said that in 2009-10 the combined cost of free personal care, eye tests and concessionary travel was around £870 million and rising. In these very difficult times, the expression used by Margo MacDonald on a previous occasion is absolutely right: we have to look at how we can cut our coat according to our cloth.

**Alex Neil:** The member mentions the costs in terms of expenditure, but he has not looked at the other side of the balance sheet, which is how much is saved. As I have already said, the free eye tests cost £70 million but generate £400 million-worth of benefit. If we do not spend the £70 million, we do not get the £400 million.

**Gavin Brown:** It is not fair to say that we are not looking at the other side of the balance sheet. I think that it is extremely important, as the Christie commission said, to look at both the costs and the benefits and to consider not just whether the expenditure is good value for money but whether it is optimal value for money. If we spend money on one thing, we cannot spend it on another and there is potentially an opportunity cost.

On this side of the chamber, we do not dismiss free eye tests but I point out to the cabinet secretary that, on the first page of the executive summary of the Association of Optometrists paper that he quoted, it says quite clearly:

"It is difficult to calculate the value for money from NHS funded eye examinations as health improvements will not be fully felt for many years."

That is not to dismiss free eye tests, but I gently point out that there is a debate to be had about universal services. The points that the cabinet secretary made are, simply, not exactly correct.

On concessionary travel, which the cabinet secretary also mentioned, the previous Auditor General, Robert Black, rightly pointed out that

"the cost of providing free transport to people over 60 and still in employment is £34 million. That is dead-weight expenditure if ever I saw it."—[*Official Report, Finance Committee*, 25 January 2012; c 587.]

The debate is about not simply whether there should be concessionary travel, but the terms on which that should be provided. For example, could it be given at age 65? Could it be that people who are in work over the age of 60 would not get concessionary travel until they hit the age of 65? That would save £34 million, which is not to be sneezed at in the position in which we find ourselves.

**Christine Grahame:** Will the member give way?

**Mark McDonald:** Will the member give way?

**Gavin Brown:** I will not, at this time.

The second challenge that we face is the demographics. In the medium to long term, we have an ageing population, in line with almost all developed countries. That leads to greater demand for services, which will inevitably cost more. Between 2008 and 2033, the number of people aged 75 or above will double. That cannot be ignored by the Parliament or, indeed, by any other part of Scotland.

**Christine Grahame:** Will the member take an intervention on the demographics?

**Gavin Brown:** I will not, at this point. Let me develop the argument.

Interestingly, Professor David Bell, whom Alex Neil quoted in support of his argument, has said:

"The reductions in the budget that are in train imply that avoiding the question"—

on universal services—

"is no longer tenable."

Professor Bell said that in 2010 and yet, in 2012, the SNP Government refuses even to have the debate or to open up the books and let us look carefully, one by one, at the costs and benefits.

One point in the motion that Mr Neil was keen to avoid but which Willie Rennie helpfully mentioned in his intervention is about independence. That part is downright whimsical. The reality is that the debate on universal services must take place regardless of whether we separate. As I have said, the debate is driven primarily by the demographics of the country.

We have heard it all now in this chamber. We have heard that there would be more public spending in a separate Scotland, with milk and honey and lower taxes for all, although today we heard from Alex Neil that it would be higher taxes for all. Now we hear that people will not get older in a separate Scotland. Under the SNP, we will all remain at exactly the same age. To be fair, Alex Neil looks younger just about every time I see him. Oil of Olay might work for him but, for the country as a whole, it is absurd to suggest that we do not have to address the issue if we become independent or separate.

**Mark McDonald:** Will the member take an intervention?

**Gavin Brown:** Mr McDonald really ought to quit while he is behind. I invite him to sit down and take his rightful place.

I want to focus on the final part of our amendment. We believe that there should be a debate and that, to have a sensible, informed and measured debate on this critical subject, the forecasts must be published. As Johann Lamont

mentioned, Christie said that the debate must take place in a non-polarised and transparent environment.

Therefore, our amendment closes with a plea to the Government to publish the forecasts for spending on universal services for each of the next 10 years. That ought to be possible, because in 2010 the Government was able to give four-year figures to the independent budget review. Give us 10-year figures so that all members, even those with differing views, can take a far more strategic and long-term view on the issue. I wrote to the cabinet secretary to ask for those figures and was told:

"The Scottish Government has no current plans to publish information in this form."

I leave the cabinet secretary with a question. Is the reason why he will not publish the information that he simply does not have it and does not know, or is it because he knows, but does not want members to see the figures? I ask the Government to answer that question in the closing speech so that we can have an informed debate.

I move amendment S4M-04778.3, to leave out from first "recognises" to end and insert:

"believes that a fully informed and measured debate on the subject of universal services is necessary; notes the conclusions of the Independent Budget Review and the Commission on the Future Delivery of Public Services; believes that the combination of continued financial pressure and demographic change will cause immense challenges for public services, and calls on the Scottish Government to publish, by the end of 2012, the most accurate possible forecasts for spending on universal services in Scotland for each of the next 10 years."

**The Presiding Officer:** We move to the open debate, with speeches of six minutes. We have some time in hand, so if members take interventions, we will do our best to ensure that they are compensated.

14:53

**Aileen McLeod (South Scotland) (SNP):** I am pleased and genuinely proud to speak in support of the Scottish Government's motion on universal benefits. First and foremost, I am proud because the motion underlines the absolute determination of Scotland's SNP Government to continue to protect the interests of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged in our society during these tough economic times. It is precisely during these extremely difficult times that the people of Scotland need to be confident that their Government is working for them—in so far as the devolution set-up allows it to do so—by delivering policies that protect the vulnerable and promote the social justice agenda in Scotland.

Let there be no doubt that that social justice agenda is under attack from our political

opponents in the Parliament, whose targets are the range of universal benefits that the Parliament has supported from the earliest days of devolution: free prescriptions, free eye examinations, free personal and nursing care and concessionary travel. The universal benefits that the Scottish Government will continue to deliver despite the attacks are not only measures to deliver social justice and promote social inclusion; they also contribute massively to reducing the long-term costs of health and social care that would otherwise arise.

One of the four principles that the late and much-missed Campbell Christie's commission endorsed in its report, produced in June 2011, was to prioritise expenditure on public services that prevent negative outcomes from arising. Measures such as free eye examinations, free prescriptions and free personal care each make a vital contribution to the preventative agenda that the Christie commission endorsed and which the Government is committed to implementing.

**Johann Lamont:** Will Aileen McLeod give way?

**Aileen McLeod:** Let me develop this point.

The abolition of prescription charges is one of the key policies that the SNP Government introduced in 2007. In a parliamentary answer that I received yesterday, Alex Neil confirmed that, prior to the SNP abolishing prescription charges in April 2011, long-term conditions—including Parkinson's disease, asthma, cancer, multiple sclerosis and HIV—did not entitle people to free prescriptions. Does the Scottish Labour Party think that the estimated 254,000 people who went to the doctor for asthma in 2010, the 4,162 HIV sufferers or the 145,746 people who were diagnosed with cancer between 2006 and 2010 are getting something for nothing?

**Jackie Baillie:** Will Aileen McLeod give way?

**Aileen McLeod:** No thanks. [*Interruption.*]

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Elaine Smith):** The member said, "No thanks."

**Aileen McLeod:** The proposal that Scotland should return to a regime of means testing to determine eligibility for those public services is totally unacceptable. Such a policy would have a disastrous impact on hundreds of thousands of ordinary Scots who are already experiencing immense financial hardship as the economy struggles to recover. It would deepen divisions in our society between the haves and the have-nots and would inevitably lead to growing resentment between those who were required to pay for services and those whose means fell beneath some arbitrary level. It would lead to the stigmatisation of the elderly, vulnerable and disadvantaged in our communities and would

impose an utterly obscene health and welfare tax on all citizens of Scotland, including the hundreds of thousands who spent their working lives paying taxes so that they might enjoy a modest level of comfort in later life.

**Neil Findlay (Lothian) (Lab):** Will Aileen McLeod give way?

**Aileen McLeod:** No thanks.

Those people are not living in a something-for-nothing society. They have spent their lives building our society.

Means testing would also add to costs. Administering means-tested systems would require new departments, civil servants and bureaucracies. It would create anomalies and confusion about entitlements. It would dissuade citizens from seeking early diagnosis of illness for fear of the costs that they would have to meet for medication. It would lead to a two-tier system of care, as those with higher incomes squeezed out those who were unable to self-finance their health and care needs as they got older.

The Scottish Government has entered into a social contract with the people of Scotland, and the universal provision of the benefits that I have discussed is a central plank in that contract. However, social contracts cannot simply comprise fine words and good intentions. They must have substance at their core. For the Government, that substance is the universal provision of public services, by which it honours its commitment to social justice. Sadly, no other party in the Parliament can claim to uphold or deliver that commitment and no other party—particularly not the Scottish Labour Party—can be trusted with it.

Over the next two years, the people of Scotland will reflect on their constitutional future. It is increasingly clear that the choice will be between, on the one hand, an independent Scotland armed with the economic powers that we need to create a society that has a commitment to social justice at its heart and, on the other hand, a Scotland that is harnessed to a London-based Tory or Labour Government that is determined to dismantle the welfare state north as well as south of the border as it chases the votes of a mythical middle England whose Government appears to have given up entirely on the principles of social justice and social inclusion.

I believe that Scotland will choose independence over an increasingly impoverished political union. I also believe that Scotland will continue to choose the SNP over an absolutely impoverished Scottish Labour Party.

I support the Government's motion.

14:59

**Duncan McNeil (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab):** I have been around in the Parliament for as long as many others, although there are not as many of us as there used to be. We were around for some of those debates, and obviously we believed in what we were doing at that time, particularly around supporting people in elderly care. There is no doubt about that. However, in looking back over that time, I do not remember there being a great debate about the Scottish welfare system in those years. It is not about that; we are talking about a short-term crisis.

Members can call me a cynic if they like, but I recall that many of the policies that are being lauded in this afternoon's debate came about partly as a result of political wheeling and dealing rather than as a result of sound cost benefit analysis and a clear objective to create a better Scotland. In some cases, they were about coalition politics. We extended to the whole of Scotland the free travel that was already available in Fife and Strathclyde.

We were anxious at that time to be different from down south, and the policies were sometimes reactions to what was happening elsewhere. As politicians, we all like our nuggets in the manifesto, do we not? We all had our offers to people in our manifestos, to harvest their votes. Let us get the issue into perspective. This is not a debate about the Scottish welfare system, and it never has been.

As I said, we thought that it would be a good idea to extend the free travel that was being delivered locally in places such as Strathclyde and Fife. For good measure, we made it available to everybody aged 60 and over. Did we really believe at that time that 20 per cent of those people—I am saying "we", because we did most of it—

**Bruce Crawford (Stirling) (SNP):** Twenty per cent?

**Duncan McNeil:** It is 20 per cent according to Bruce Crawford's own figures.

Did we expect that 20 per cent of the people who were entitled to a card would use it to travel to work? Is that what we intended? The unintended consequence has been that the lowest-paid workers in Scotland have faced increasing costs to travel to work because the scheme is not being funded as it should be.

**Christine Grahame:** On a side point to that, does the member agree that subsidised bus travel—whether it is for pensioners, the disabled or others—keeps the buses running, and that if those subsidies were not provided, some of the bus services simply would not be there, whether or not people use them for travel to work?



**Duncan McNeil:** Yes, but as I mentioned, the scheme is not being funded as it should be. SNP candidates in Inverclyde who have some knowledge of the bus system have protested loudly that that is not being done.

Who would have thought, when we put in place support for elderly care, that that would be at the cost of quality? When care workers go into pensioners' homes, they do not even take their coats off and they do not make eye contact with people. That is not quality. Given the expense of the system, that should not happen.

Who would have thought that, as the Health and Sport Committee has discovered, free personal care would be subsidised by a wage freeze and the pushing down of the wages of workers in the field?

**Alex Neil** *rose—*

**Duncan McNeil:** I see Alex Neil rising to his feet. Of course I accept his intervention.

**Alex Neil:** Even if there is a widespread problem with carers not having enough time with the people whom they are caring for, surely the abolition of free personal care is not the way to solve it.

**Duncan McNeil:** Everyone in the chamber recognises the need to support elderly people in the community. We all agree with that; there is no difference of opinion on it. However, there is a difference on whether the commitment is there to ensure that that is properly funded and that the outcomes are what we would want for our own parents—that should be the test.

More recently, who would have believed that free tuition fees are to be paid for by those who are striving to get to university? What an irony. If we do nothing else, it is time to acknowledge that we did not get it right in times of plenty.

The words of Campbell Christie—who has been lauded today by SNP members—are crystal clear. He says:

“Alongside a decade of growth in public spending, inequalities have grown, too. Between the highest and lowest achievers at school, between the life expectancy and health of the richest and the poorest, and between the static wages of the lowest paid and the booming bonuses of the highest, our public services have somehow failed to make our country fairer.”

We have a big responsibility to get this right, in hard times. That is the cause that motivates those of us on this side of the chamber. We want to get a fairer Scotland that shares the burden better. In the face of what Crawford Beveridge has called the biggest public finance crisis since the second world war, those of us who value public services cannot allow the quality of those services, and the standing that they have in the community, to ebb

away. At a time of disinvestment, it is even more important to plan that disinvestment. It is up to Scotland's policy makers, as the Joseph Rowntree Foundation has said, to secure social justice and sustainable economic growth. The real test will be achieving fairness in the midst of cuts. Deciding how to cut spending and who should take more of the strain is even more important than deciding how much that cut should be. We face a reality check for devolution and we have a chance to prove that the new reality matches the rhetoric.

15:06

**Bob Doris (Glasgow) (SNP):** The Labour Party's attack on universal benefits is deeply ill judged and dangerous. When Scots realise how ending universal provision might affect them and their families and Scottish society more widely, they will firmly support the retention of universality. I believe that that will happen, and that the false choice that the Labour Party has presented today will be exposed.

I stay in Maryhill and represent Glasgow in the Scottish Parliament. If prescription charges still existed, an estimated 8,600 people in the Maryhill and Springburn constituency would have had to pay for medicine. In Glasgow, that number would be nearly 78,000. Is that really the sort of NHS that the people of Glasgow or Scotland want us to return to? I say to the Labour MSPs in the chamber today that that figure represents 600,000 people in Scotland—that is the number of people whom they want to tax when they are not well. I do not think that that is appropriate.

**Neil Findlay:** The member mentions tax. Where are the progressives in the SNP? Where are the progressives who are arguing against the regressive council tax freeze or a 10 per cent corporation tax cut? Where are they? I do not think that we could find a progressive on those benches if we used the Hubble telescope.

**Bob Doris:** I will look for Neil Findlay's progressive tax agenda when we have all the tax powers restored to this Parliament.

I do not want a society in which constituents of mine and of Neil Findlay, who are on £16,000 a year, have to decide between getting medicines or paying household bills. That is no way to support the unwell in Scotland and it is no way to run an NHS that is free at the point of need.

**Parkinson's UK—**

**Johann Lamont:** Will the member give way?

**Bob Doris:** Ms Lamont should listen to what Parkinson's UK says. It believes that reintroducing prescription charges would be divisive and unfair, would be a false economy and would lead to higher care costs, including hospital and care

home admissions. There are 10,000 people in Scotland who are living with Parkinson's disease.

**Johann Lamont:** Will the member give way?

**Bob Doris:** I want to talk about the extension of free eye tests, Ms Lamont. The cabinet secretary has already spoken about the benefits of those tests. Since the extension of free eye tests in 2006, on which there was cross-party agreement, there has been a 24 per cent increase in the number of eye tests that have been taken. The Association of Optometrists estimates that those tests represent a potential benefit of £440 million, as they alert optometrists and ophthalmologists to a number of potentially devastating health problems for individuals and prevent the need for expensive remedies to be provided by our NHS and wider society.

Eye tests can diagnose diabetes, cancers and tumours, hypertension, strokes and MS, among other things. Catching those conditions early—through the universal provision of those tests—makes treating such conditions much easier, better for the patient and cheaper for society.

**Johann Lamont:** Will the member take an intervention?

**Bob Doris:** Is it on eye tests?

**Johann Lamont:** If the member gives way, I will tell him.

**Bob Doris:** No, thank you. Sit down.

The Scottish Government has built on that with the eye care integration project, which began being rolled out in 2010 and will be complete by 2014. That will lead to 95 per cent of all referrals to ophthalmologists and eye specialists in hospitals being done digitally. That is important, because it is an example of building service design on universal benefits.

The position of the Labour Party in Glasgow is confused on universal benefits. It keeps saying that nothing is off the table. However, I congratulate Glasgow City Council, as SNP councillor John Letford did at the recent council meeting. He congratulated the Labour administration on its affordable warmth dividend, under which it gives £100 to all pensioners who are over the age of 80. It does not ask them how much money they have in the bank or what means they have of paying. It just gives the pensioners the money.

**Johann Lamont:** Will the member take an intervention?

**Bob Doris:** Is it on that point?

**Johann Lamont:** Yes. Does the member agree with his minister's decision to means test the

central heating programme that used to be universally available to anyone over 60?

**Bob Doris:** I am glad that the member mentioned the central heating programme, which has gone from strength to strength under the Scottish Government.

I am talking about not just Labour councillors in Glasgow, but the deputy leader of the Scottish Labour Party, Anas Sarwar, who also supported the affordable warmth dividend scheme. Either the Labour Party agrees with universal benefits or it does not, or it just chooses what it believes in for opportunistic reasons.

I said that I believe that what the Labour Party is doing is very dangerous, and I mean that. I appeal to the Labour Party this afternoon. If the Labour Party wants to take free prescriptions from the 600,000 people who benefit from them by reintroducing prescription charges, to put at risk the 77,000 people who will eventually benefit from free personal care, or to put at risk the 1.2 million people who get concessionary bus travel, it will alienate people from the welfare state. We are not talking about a something-for-nothing society; people pay their taxes throughout their lives, and they deserve to get something back from the welfare state for that.

The Labour Party talks about a something-for-nothing society, and Ruth Davidson of the Conservatives talks about people not contributing to society. All of that makes for a perfect storm to undermine the welfare state. The first thread that the Labour Party has sought to unpick is universal provision. That is dangerous, and the SNP and the Government will have nothing to do with it.

15:12

**Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab):** I welcome the debate today because it gives us a chance to bring to the chamber the debate that Scotland needs to have about the political choices that are facing us.

The SNP Government has been in power since 2007, telling us that things will be better only if we have independence. That is the politics of the never-never. As the Opposition, our job is to hold the SNP Government to account now, to tell it like it is, and to expose the complacency and the assertions that simply do not stack up. Johann Lamont's amendment is the key challenge to the SNP Government. It is about the reality of what is happening to people under SNP rule.

We need a reality check. When the SNP put its manifesto out there in 2011, it knew what was coming down the tracks from the Tory Government and that funds would be tight, but it made promises that it is simply not keeping.

Nowhere is that more evident than in what is happening in councils across the country. Last year's budget choices by the SNP undermined the services that underpin and complement the universal services that the SNP motion talks about.

Let us look at the reality of what is happening to bus services. I introduced free bus travel for the over 60s, so I understand the detail. I am deeply proud of the principle of free bus travel, and I know that it has transformed the lives of older people. However, that scheme is being undermined by cuts to the bus service operators grant, which has been the last straw for bus companies. Fuel costs are rising, passenger numbers have been hit by the recession and the funding for concessionary travel is simply not keeping pace with those rising costs. What is the result? Ministers might like to think about it. Fares have been put up for all passengers who do not qualify for free bus passes. To ministers, that will look like marginal costs, but to a hard-pressed bus user who has no alternative, it is real hardship. Since the SNP came to power in 2007, bus fares have risen by 19 per cent.

Services are being slashed across the country. Last year alone, 136 bus routes were axed—that is the traffic commissioner for Scotland's figure—which leaves local authorities to pick up the pieces. However, because of last year's budget cuts, they do not have the cash to subsidise all the new services that are needed. That is the reality that the SNP ministers do not want to discuss. They proclaim the benefit of free bus passes without dealing with the inconvenient reality.

We need to debate the political choices and we need a framework in which to debate them. Our political choices and our passion are driven by fairness, social justice and the desire to support our communities through these tough economic times.

The political argument that the SNP makes in the motion is that all would be well if Scotland were independent. To say that Scotland would be the only country in Europe to escape any tough choices during the recession is not credible. No one out there believes that.

**Maureen Watt:** Clearly, Scotland would not be the only country in that position. Sarah Boyack should look at Norway, which has used its oil fund as a cushion against all the economic downturns.

**Sarah Boyack:** That point goes to the heart of the debate. The tax take from Norway's citizens is not comparable to the low-tax regime that the SNP wants to impose—look at the cuts in corporation tax that the SNP wants to impose. All that adds up. The SNP is not owning up to the situation. Maureen Watt has just made my point.

The funding for the council tax freeze is not enough to offset the straitjacket that the SNP has put in place. A key issue that Professor David Bell, adviser to the Finance Committee, asks Parliament to consider is not just the annual cost but the cumulative cost. We are now seeing the results of that in our communities.

**Mark McDonald:** Will Sarah Boyack give way?

**Sarah Boyack:** I would love to take an intervention from Mr McDonald.

**Mark McDonald:** If all that Sarah Boyack says is true, why did the Labour Party in Stirling cut the council tax there?

**Sarah Boyack:** I spoke to our council colleagues in Stirling only the other week. They told me of the SNP's mismanagement of Stirling Council's budget, which led to overruns in the social care budget. That mismanagement was by the council's former convener, who has now been promoted to even more responsibility. I think that that councillor is now known in Stirling as the five-jobs council member.

The issue is about the reality. The problem of the pensioner who came to my surgery on Friday is that, in theory, her council tax is frozen, but in reality, a minor change to her pension has led to a big council tax hike. The SNP's council tax freeze does absolutely nothing to protect her and her husband.

Our proposed funded council tax freeze was for two years. Alex Neil was absolutely wrong to say that we "tried to outbid" the SNP. Local government funding needs to be sustainable, and we need an honest debate about that. We are talking not just about cuts to bus services, but about massive cuts to housing budgets and social care budgets and about huge job losses. The situation is not just bad news for individuals who will not have access to affordable rented housing, or to the care that an elderly or vulnerable relative needs, or for individuals who will lose their jobs; it is bad news for all our communities.

The position is bad economics, too. Only today, the Institute for Public Policy Research called the SNP's economic policy "financially illiterate". The policy is bad for social justice and means that, under the SNP, people are hurting in communities across Scotland. That is why we pushed such issues centre stage in May, and people responded by supporting us in greater numbers.

There is a headline universal care service for free personal care, but the reality is 15-minute care visits, hikes in costs for care homes and the privatisation of care services. When I met Unison representatives in Edinburgh last month, they told me about the reality of 15-minute care visits and of not being paid for their journey time. They must

make 13 or 14 visits a day, which leads to stress, and staff turnover is higher because of that stress. Such jobs are not well paid and do not provide career development. That means poor-quality services for our most vulnerable older people and people with learning disabilities. That is the cost of the SNP's council tax sleight of hand and that is why Johann Lamont is right to say that we cannot trust the SNP.

We need to allocate resources and to ensure that services are fit for purpose and that they fit social justice and protect our communities through these tough economic times. Those are our principles. That is why Labour is not scared of the debate and why we think that it is absolutely essential.

15:19

**George Adam (Paisley) (SNP):** We keep hearing from the Labour Party that it wants an honest debate—we had that last year during the election when it decided that it would do many of the things that it has now changed its mind about. It keeps on talking about its cuts commission. I will quote Gerry Rafferty, who was from Paisley—I have

"Clowns to the left of me, jokers to the right  
Here I am, stuck in the middle with you." [*Laughter.*]

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Order.

**George Adam:** This debate is about people. I must admit that I am emotionally compromised because, as many members will know, my wife Stacey has multiple sclerosis, which is a long-term condition. We all have family and friends who suffer from such conditions, but when members look at the whole situation, they will see that the debate is about priorities and the kind of future Scotland we want. Free prescriptions, the national bus concession card, healthcare that is free at the point of delivery and free education are the core values of the Scotland that I want. That rings true with the public, too.

Consider prescription charges; they were a tax on the ill. Bob Doris was correct that people would decide whether to pay for their messages or their medication. That situation happened over and over again. During my time as a councillor in Renfrewshire Council, the Renfrewshire disability steering group was set up. That group is constantly worried about the situation; the Scottish Government is the only one that is supporting it, while the dark cloud of Westminster looms over it and there is the possibility of more cuts.

**Johann Lamont:** Does George Adam share the concern of the Auditor General for Scotland, who says that the NHS is on an "amber warning" and that we have a billion pounds-worth of repairs backlog, of which half is deemed to be a high or

significant risk to the services that we would all rely on if we were ill?

**George Adam:** We have come to the crux of the argument: we constantly hear things from Labour, but we are not offered solutions. The SNP stood for election on protecting the NHS. We have done that; the money has stayed in the national health service. That is the difference between us. Labour offers absolutely nothing.

Older people should be looked after with dignity and respect. During remembrance Sunday I, of course, did my duty and went to Paisley cenotaph and spoke to some of the older—and not so old—soldiers from the area. They, too, were discussing issues about priorities, and the fact that there is a young man from Paisley who won a Military Cross, who has been invalided out of the armed forces, and who now has a bus pass and is able to get about and move on with his life. Such issues are real issues for real people. We must move away from the politics and the academic argument and think about the individuals whom we serve.

We are talking about a fairer Scotland. Duncan McNeil asked how we should pay for that. Here is an idea: Trident cost £1.245 billion, so why not instead go for 29,643 nurses, or 34,585 teachers or 42 to 62 secondary schools? Those are the things that we want for Scotland, rather than spending billions on weapons of mass destruction.

**Michael McMahon (Uddingston and Bellshill) (Lab):** Will George Adam tell us how that money will be spent twice, given that Angus Robertson has said that that money will go on defence spending in Scotland?

**George Adam:** That is complete nonsense, and I am glad that I have had the opportunity to put that on the official record. Politics is about priorities; my priorities are the people of Scotland.

We must wonder how we are to move on. I have mentioned my personal circumstances once or twice in the past. I wrote a letter to the Labour Party MSPs in Renfrewshire asking them where they stood on universal benefits.

**Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab):** Will the member give way on that point?

**George Adam:** Hold on a second, until I finish. I had no response from any of the Labour members, but I did hear one comment. I know that there is knockabout in politics, but Mr Hugh Henry had the audacity to ask me whether I have personally benefited from the decisions of the SNP Government. My wife has a long-term condition, and it is wonderful what the SNP has done to look after people like her. That is why I say that it is about people and not about playing politics, which the Labour Party does. I am proud that my wife gets by every day and I am proud of the deal with

the Scottish Government. We live in a world—*[Interruption.]* Does Mr Bibby want to intervene now? He wanted to intervene earlier.

**Neil Bibby:** Mr Adam should realise what is happening in the NHS and in his constituency. We have 2,500 fewer nurses in the NHS and that is affecting the Royal Alexandra hospital in Paisley. There has been a scandal about the lack of blankets and basic materials at the RAH in Paisley—a scandal that Mr Adam has denied. There have been proposals to close a children's ward in Paisley, because of money. Is that a price worth paying?

**George Adam:** The problem with the Labour Party is that it would rather play pantomime with people's lives than deal with the issues and represent the people whom we are elected to Parliament to serve. I am proud to stand on the SNP's record and I will gladly stand on the SNP's record in Paisley in the next election.

15:26

**Willie Rennie (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD):** I will give a bit of advice to George Adam. If he wants to get far in the SNP, he should not accuse Angus Robertson of talking "nonsense" and he should not accuse Stewart Stevenson of being a clown. *[Laughter.]*

Johann Lamont and I disagree on much, but I do not doubt her sincerity; I do not doubt that she cares about the future of Scotland. Probably every member of the Scottish Parliament cares about the future of Scotland. It does not serve the debate well for members of the SNP to accuse members of the Labour Party of not caring. That is simply not the case; we are all here because we care.

The big challenges that Scotland faces should be at the forefront of our minds. Gavin Brown talked about the demographic challenges, including the 50 per cent increase in the number of over-60s by 2033, which will put huge pressure on our public services.

**Mark McDonald:** Will Willie Rennie give way?

**Willie Rennie:** I will not, just now.

There are massive pockets of deprivation. Climate change is a massive responsibility and we have already missed our emissions targets. We face challenges on sustainable growth and on coming out of the recession and tackling high unemployment. Poor health is another challenge. In some areas of Scotland, healthy life expectancy is about 20 years lower than it is in our best-off areas. Those are the big challenges that we should have at the forefront of our minds, and tackling them is the golden principle.

Universalism is not a golden principle. The Liberal Democrats and the Labour Party supported many policies including free dental and eye checks, concessionary bus travel, free tuition and free personal care. We delivered on those policies—they were not the SNP's ideas; the Liberal Democrats and the Labour Party delivered on them, working together. We believe in elements of universalism, but it is not the golden principle.

If we think that universalism is the golden principle, we should not be charging for any dental treatment in Scotland, but there are charges for dental treatment in Scotland. If the SNP believed absolutely that universalism was a golden principle it would abolish those charges.

**Alex Neil:** Will Willie Rennie give way?

**Willie Rennie:** I will not, just now.

The SNP says that it wants free education, but colleges charge for courses. If the SNP thinks that universalism is a golden principle, why does it not come forward with proposals to abolish such charges? It does not do so because universalism is not a golden principle.

There are charges for social care and for residential care. Universalism is not a golden principle. We support elements of the approach, but that does not mean that it must apply everywhere.

It is about return on investment. That is why the cabinet secretary was right when he talked about the £70 million investment in eye checks having a £440 million return. That is a good return for the investment. The policy has improved people's health. People go and get their eyes checked, because they know that it will not cost them anything, and an awful lot more problems are being identified as a result. Preventative health is at the centre of the policy.

Free personal care, which enables people to stay in their homes, is a good investment. Especially in the light of the coming demographic changes, we must find a new way of looking after people, because the current models of care are challenging.

On tuition fees, despite what we have done down south, I think that it improves social mobility. People from all sorts of backgrounds are encouraged to go to university. It is a good investment—it is a great return in terms of what we get back.

**Mark McDonald:** On the point about demographic change, does Willie Rennie agree that one of the ways to counter demographic change is to tailor an immigration policy to attract skilled working-age migrants? Does he agree that the immigration policies that are being pursued by the UK Government run counter to that and

potentially damage Scotland's ability to counter demographic change?

**Willie Rennie:** We can have a separate debate about immigration, but it is not the centre of this debate. This is about the choices that Scotland faces; it is not about whether the Labour Party has bad intentions and everybody else has good intentions. It is about the choices that we make—the return for the investment.

Today we have had an admission from the SNP that if it does not win independence, universalism—which it has developed with prescription charges and which we and the Labour Party developed in other areas—will go. That is what the SNP is saying in the motion—that the only way to secure those things is for the SNP to win in the referendum. It is saying that if it does not win the referendum, those things go—so much for the golden principle of universalism. We need a little bit more honesty from the SNP. Enter this debate, because it is a debate that is well worth having.

I think, for what it is worth, that we should be looking to invest in nursery education because the return on investment that we can get from investing in two-year-olds getting 15 hours of nursery education could change their lives forever. Studies show that £1 invested now could return £11 later. In England, they are making significant progress towards 40 per cent of two-year-olds—the most impoverished—getting 15 hours of nursery education. I do not hear that from the SNP here, despite repeated requests to it to do so. That is the kind of investment that we should be looking for. It is not whether universalism is right or wrong, it is the return that we get for the investment.

15:32

**Fiona McLeod (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP):** I want to make my speech perhaps a bit more reflective than some of the previous ones because I feel that, at its heart, this debate is about social justice and values—the Scotland that we want and the Scotland that we aspire to.

In essence, this should be a philosophical debate, and I was a bit concerned when I heard from Duncan McNeil the revelation that the Labour-Liberal Executive for eight years was only chasing political votes when it made decisions about what benefits it should accrue for the people of Scotland.

I also believe that it is a fundamentally flawed theorem—

**Duncan McNeil:** Will the member promise the chamber that she will look at the *Official Report* tomorrow and give me an apology?

**Fiona McLeod:** Mr McNeil clearly said that the Labour-Liberal Executive brought in a lot of policies because it was chasing votes. That is the expression that he used and that is the expression that I wrote down.

I want to be more reflective about this issue. I believe that it is a fundamentally flawed theorem that in hard times it is inevitable that there will be harsh cuts. It is in hard times that we have to go back to first principles and to what Beveridge talked about—the duty of individuals to combine as a society with the strong supporting the weak. In hard times, that is more important than at any other time.

This has become a debate that is very much about universalism versus means testing.

**Johann Lamont:** Will the member take an intervention?

**Fiona McLeod:** I would rather not because I am trying to be reflective about the position that we are all in today.

There is a lot of evidence on universalism versus means testing. Universalism is less costly to administer as it removes judgment, which is an incredibly important point. We cannot possibly go back to the early 20th century, when we talked benevolently about the “deserving poor”. Universalism ensures that judgment is removed and that all are protected from the ills of society.

There was a lovely piece of research by Korpi and Palme in 1998 on what they call the paradox of redistribution. In that, it is clearly evidenced that, in targeting, we are less likely to reduce poverty and inequality. It is universalism that ensures that we work towards the ending of poverty and inequality in our society.

I would say that a welfare system is a normal, first-line function of a modern civilised society—the kind of society that I would like to say that Scotland is now and that I certainly expect it to be after 2014.

**Sarah Boyack:** The point is not that we are against universalism. The SNP has got rid of universal services such as free central heating—[*Interruption.*] On Alex Neil's watch, the SNP removed the free central heating scheme and it is now means tested. The issue is which services are universal and how those services are defined. [Interruption.] If the member is being reflective, that is the debate that we are trying to have.

**Fiona McLeod:** The cabinet secretary has pointed out that the member is not right about the free central heating scheme. However, I would like to return to my argument, rather than sit on the sidelines watching someone else's debate.

Beveridge referred to the five great evils: want, disease, ignorance, squalor and idleness. Let us hold firm to the absolute belief that, in policy and practice, we will see the end of those great evils.

The only point of controversy that I will raise is that I find it abhorrent that quotes from politicians going back 20-odd years are still being promulgated today—Bob Doris has already mentioned some of them. Mrs Thatcher said that there was

“no such thing as society”.

Johann Lamont said that Scotland is a “something for nothing” society; and Ruth Davidson said that 88 per cent of us in Scotland do not contribute to the economy. Such statements are an insult to the people of Scotland; they are also anathema to the people of Scotland. That is why the people of Scotland, in 2011, voted for the SNP Government and its social contract, and that is why, in 2014, the people of Scotland will vote yes.

My great desire to see a welfare state that exists to ensure that all are protected is epitomised by my profession as a librarian. Libraries were one of the first and earliest universal benefits for society—Innerpeffray library was founded in 1680. If we were having a debate about whether people should start to have to pay to access knowledge through their public library, I hope that everybody in the chamber would unite against that. I hope that, at the end of the day, everybody unites to support the welfare state continuing in Scotland.

15:37

**Drew Smith (Glasgow) (Lab):** I agree with at least some of what Fiona McLeod said about universal benefits, but she is wrong to say that the targeting of benefits and the universal provision of them are mutually exclusive. Both are required, and the decision on which weapon to deploy is tactical, based on which will be more effective in the given time, with the available resources and to the desired end.

To my mind, therefore, there is something not quite right about our debate on universal benefits this afternoon: universalism has been pitched as an idea under threat and targeting is being caricatured. Ideology should never be irrelevant to political debate, but SNP posturing about being the last defenders of universalism is neither helpful nor particularly accurate.

In my late teens and early 20s, I avoided dentists. As I got older and slightly more sensible, I opted to return. After my first visit back, I was asked whether I paid for my treatment. I confessed that I did not have any idea whether I paid for my treatment because I had not been since I was a

child. I then asked how much it cost and said that I could probably afford to pay for it.

Thanks to the Scottish Government, my confusion about charging for dental treatment has been resolved by the motion that we are debating—the SNP is reinventing universalism, restoring the NHS to the heady days of its foundation. However, we know that that is not true. We understand that the NHS will cost more next year but that the money available to pay for it will be less. The question is: what will give?

The core of my answer would be a quotation from Nye Bevan, who talked about applying “the language of priorities”, and this statement:

“If resources get even tighter and if the cuts agenda continues ... we will have to prioritise on the basis of ... need ... need has to be the key criterion in the allocation of resources.”—[*Official Report, Health and Sport Committee*, 30 October 2012; c 2905.]

That is a direct quote from the cabinet secretary two weeks ago at the Health and Sport Committee.

**Alex Neil:** I agree about the language of priorities. Does the member agree that spending money on our people in education, health and similar services is a much higher priority than wasting billions more on a Trident nuclear defence system that Labour supports along with the Tories?

**Drew Smith:** I am delighted that the cabinet secretary has joined the anti-Angus Robertson faction in the SNP Government. The SNP has said quite clearly that the money would be spent on defence—on guns, soldiers and all those things—in an independent Scotland.

I will tell a brief story. At around the time when I was elected to Parliament, an elderly couple were admitted to hospital, where it was determined that they would need long-term care and would not return home. Unfortunately, the husband died within a few days of being discharged after waiting weeks for a care plan to be put in place. The wife fared better, but her daughter was told that she should accept a place in a home without the father. Causing a fuss would result in the elderly woman being boarded around the hospital, with—as the nurse pointedly remarked—all the risk of infection that that would bring.

At my surgery, I regularly hear similar stories and complaints about the unfair system of charging and cost cutting in elderly care; we all do. However, that case sticks in my mind because the woman who faced the dilemma was my mum, and the couple who were languishing in hospital were my grandparents.

Given that varying tax is not an option—we know that, when faced with the issue of tax, the

SNP's immediate response is to try to cut it—this Parliament of ours operates on a budget that is largely fixed. New tax and borrowing powers will begin to change that but, for the moment, we have what we have. We know that we will have less to spend next year than we did last year. Debating whether everything that we did yesterday is what we should do tomorrow and discussing where every penny of the same money is prioritised to best effect is not the same as cutting; it is doing what we were elected to this place to do.

When the history of these years comes to be written, it will be asked how we handled ourselves when the biggest crisis hit. How did we work out what really mattered? How did we ensure that the most vulnerable were not hit harder than ourselves?

The SNP has been given the opportunity that few Governments get but which this Parliament was created for: to take the hardest decisions together, and to debate honestly and on the basis of evidence. I hope that its bringing forward of this afternoon's debate is a sign that the Government is willing to begin to engage on the policies that it trumpets in its motion and the policy areas that it deliberately ignores. If not, people might come to think that the wrong choices were made and that the hard decisions were ducked, all to get a referendum answer that never came.

The Auditor General has NHS Scotland on amber warning, but we know that health is not the only area that should be of concern. Free personal care is universal, but dignity in old age is not. Bus travel is free for 60-year-olds who commute to work but, at the other end of the spectrum, vulnerable two-year-olds get less support than even the Tories can manage to provide down south. Tuition is free for university students, but college kids can get on the bus to look for a place.

That is the reality of Scotland. College budgets have been cut by a quarter. Local councils are introducing charges for services that are relied on by the vulnerable in our communities—people such as Elizabeth, a constituent of mine who lives at Dundasvale Court in the Cowcaddens area of Glasgow. When she contacted me two weeks ago, she said:

"Each time I have had a fall I am referred to the Community Falls Prevention Programme",

which is "a free NHS service" that is offered to people aged 65 and over who have fallen. She went on to say:

"In 2004 the occupational therapist who assessed my needs recommended installation of a community alarm to enable me to summon help if required. I used it for the first time on 5 August 2012 when I fell at home and broke my arm and gashed my face. I received a letter dated 15 October 2012 announcing the introduction of a charge, set

at £12.00 per 4 week period. This service is offered to people who"—

in the words of the service—

"live alone, are over 65 years and have health issues that make them liable to fall."

Liz describes herself and people like her as a captive audience for that charge.

In my city, where the poorest of our citizens still die earlier, where the neediest are being hit hardest, where the efforts that we made in the good times were not sufficient and where already hard lives are, we know, about to be lived harder, I fear that self-congratulation disguised as ideology will do many of the people whom I represent little good at all.

I support the Labour amendment.

15:44

**Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP):** I want to pick up on something that Johann Lamont said about us being on a fixed budget: of course we are and we know that much of the budget of various portfolios is also fixed. Some 80 per cent is allocated to salaries, transport, buildings and so on, leaving us with 20 per cent to reallocate.

In my parliamentary committee, as no doubt in others, there are calls for additional spending across the various portfolios. I do not want a list just now, but I ask Johann Lamont in free debate to add all the commitments together, give us the total bill and tell us where it is coming from, when we see what is being done in the budget debate.

I do not want to be in a Parliament that pitches college students against university students. For goodness' sake, having no tuition fees benefits such students who are, like me, from a working-class background—and they are often the same people.

**Johann Lamont:** I believe Christine Grahame when she says that she does not want to see colleges competing against universities, but her education minister is making precisely that happen. If someone is a part-time student, they pay tuition fees; if someone is a college student, they are getting their courses cut. That is the choice that Christine Grahame's minister is making; he is making that conflict, and we are asking the Parliament to deal with that.

**Christine Grahame:** I am going to develop the argument, because we are also being asked somehow to pitch free personal care for the elderly against nursery accessibility—all very laudable, but again not the arguments that I want or think that we have to make. I want to pick up later on Drew Smith's reference to resources.



Let me remind members of what I said in my earlier intervention in the cabinet secretary's speech: our introduction all those years ago of free personal care has saved Westminster and the Treasury £300 million to date. If Westminster had offered justice to this Parliament in that regard, that £300 million could have been reapplied to attending to the elderly in their homes. I acknowledge the issue that members from the other side of the chamber have raised about the limited time that is spent with the elderly, but it has gone on for longer than the past four or five years.

Some members touched on the council tax freeze. Some funding for local authority spending is based on property, but to get rid of the freeze without putting something else in place based on income and other resources would be a huge disadvantage to many pensioners and would penalise them—they may live in large houses, but they are their homes. The council tax freeze is a broad-brush stroke, but it is fair at least to that group.

On concessionary travel for the over-60s, I do not know how Robert Black worked out that the cost for those in work is £34 million. I did not know that if I swished my card through, which I do rarely, it would show who I am, so I must investigate that. I do not know where the £34 million figure came from or whether it is just a guesstimate. However, it is blinkered just to regard concessionary travel as a travel item, because it has a huge health and mental health benefit to the elderly. It takes them out of their isolated existence and cold homes—and my goodness, they are going to get colder; how useless is Ofgem in the winter?

Concessionary travel gives the elderly a reason to get dressed up a bit, go out, speak to their friends on the bus or even to strangers on the bus, get somewhere at the other end, have a cup of tea and a scone, and then come back, having done something with their day. It has a huge health and mental health benefit.

**Dr Richard Simpson (Mid Scotland and Fife)**  
(Lab): Will the member take an intervention?

**Gavin Brown:** Will the member take an intervention?

**Mark McDonald:** Will the member take an intervention?

**Christine Grahame:** Who shall I pick? Richard Simpson.

**Dr Simpson:** I thank the member for taking my intervention. No one is denying what the member says about concessionary travel for the elderly, but is she saying that people like me who still go to work—I am 70—can have a bus pass and be

subsidised by the Government and the taxpayer? We argue that the resources should be focused.

**Christine Grahame:** For a start, the member does not have to use a bus pass; he could choose not to use it or he could put the money saved through using it in a charity box. However, to means test people means two things: it is costly in administration and it makes some people fall out of using the resource. Concessionary travel is a huge benefit. In the run-up to the most recent election, the Labour Party accused the SNP of planning to get rid of concessionary travel, so it has a bit of a cheek to come up with its policy now.

I listened to all the evidence on prescription charges when I was the convener of the Health and Sport Committee. There is no way in which we can make a complete list of exemptions that is fair—we cannot do it. We heard evidence that people picked which of their prescriptions to take. Prescription charges were a false economy and extremely unjust. Introducing free prescriptions is one of the best things that this Parliament has done.

We know that means testing, as posited by Labour, immediately creates injustices. It has never worked for those who fall just outside a category and it tends to take them out of every other category. The thing to do is to tax at the top. Why are all parties across the chamber not united in attacking the benefits cuts from Westminster? Those benefits cuts will cause misery to many Scots and no doubt lead to increased demands on our health service and other services, where disabled people are being challenged to prove that they are not fraudulent.

Let us consider the drop in the value of the state pension. Members perhaps do not realise that the graduated pension, which pensioners paid for over many years, and the state earnings-related pensions have been frozen. People who put in money in early years to boost the state pension are now seeing that pension reduced. Their employee pension schemes are not paying out in the way that they thought they would. Their savings—for they are not the credit-card generation—are being eroded, with 0 per cent interest. Those are the major issues that we should be looking at, but of course we do not control anything to do with them.

It is an irony that, although Scotland is resource rich, we cannot command those resources and so we cannot deliver social justice. That is really what independence is all about. It is not pie in the sky and it is not a magic wand, but it would give us the means to deliver social justice. If we had independence, we good people would not be standing in this chamber making choices that pitch the needy against the needier, which is a

disgraceful thing for any Parliament to have to discuss.

15:51

**Jenny Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab):** The Government motion is spurious in the extreme. Universal benefits were first introduced by the reforming liberals in 1908. Campbell-Bannerman laid the foundations for the welfare state—the safety net that would catch people when they fell. The great Labour Government of 1945 went on to create the modern welfare state, with our finest achievement: the NHS.

It is disingenuous today to call the spending decisions that Labour has challenged “benefits”. To take the Government’s motion to its logical conclusion, every spending decision made by this Government would become a benefit. The decision to fund rehabilitation programmes—a benefit. The decision to fund Scotland’s new football academy—a benefit. They would be pledges never to be challenged or questioned because they had been enshrined in the immortal language of universal benefit, which no man should put asunder.

Can we not have a more mature debate? Are we seriously saying that every spending pledge made by this Government—or by this Parliament over the past 14 years—should become unchallengeable and not open to scrutiny or tested against the evidence of achievement because it is paid for from the public purse? Do all spending decisions become sacrosanct universal benefits and, if they do, is this really the kind of country that we want to run? Is that really the sign of a robust, thoughtful, efficient and effective Government? Does it not actually reek of stagnation of thought, imagination and ambition?

The spending priorities of this Government and this Parliament are only enablers for work, creativity, business and enterprise, which we want to flourish in our country. We want a health service that focuses its resources on showing people how to take responsibility for their own health and wellbeing and how to be fit and productive, and to maintain good mental health; not a health service that sees fit to pay for my prescription, which I can well afford. We want an education system that is available to everyone who wants to learn; from people who want to undertake blue-sky biomedical research to boys who just desperately want to work outside and build houses. However, that is not the reality in today’s Scotland.

In Scotland this summer, some school pupils who tried to get on to university courses through the clearing system could not—because they were Scottish. The same courses listed places available to students from the rest of United Kingdom or

international students. For Scottish and European Union students there was no room at the inn, because the protection of free tuition fees for Scottish and EU students in effect acted as a cap on places for home students. Who did those home student places go to? They went to the first people to qualify and get the grades to get through the university gates. The first entrants will always come from the more affluent backgrounds—those with more support and resources to get qualifying grades at the first sitting. They take up the funded places. What of those who have been in a disrupted classroom, have had little support at home to encourage attainment and have taken two years to get their qualifications? They go into the clearing system and are refused entry.

The sickening but inevitable finding from Scotland’s Commissioner for Children and Young People’s recent big blether across Scotland was that children at a young age in our communities say that opportunities go to children from richer families. Those were the words that came from our young children’s mouths, and that is borne out across our system.

Let us consider music tuition in Dundee and the campaign that one of our national newspapers has recently run. In Sidlaw View primary school, which is in a deprived area of my home city, four children are learning to play a musical instrument. In a similar primary school in the richest area, 83 children have taken up the same opportunity. Educational opportunity is not blind, and children know it, but I do not see the SNP jumping up to make music tuition a universal benefit. Making it a spending priority would be enough for me.

Unfortunately for the children in question, that inequality is replicated throughout the system. Those who did not get a university place through clearing might look to wider access schemes, but the Scottish Government pulled the £1 million funding for the award-winning wider access programme at the University of Dundee just this year. It would be better to spend that money paying the tuition fees of those who can afford to make a contribution—that is where the spurious benefits argument leaves us. Down the road, thousands of young people were on the waiting list for a college place this summer. I checked today; more than 500 young people are still waiting for a college place in Dundee. Education is not a universal benefit for them, because they cannot get in to take advantage of it.

Is not now, when 25 per cent of young people in Scotland are sitting at home without a job, the best time to consider how we can redeploy our increasingly limited resources to unlock the potential of those young people and get them into the job market, by hook or by crook?

15:57

**Maureen Watt (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP):** In Scotland, we have a proud tradition of universal provision of welfare and public services that neither discriminates within nor divides among our society.

Johann Lamont asked why we are debating universal benefits today. It is because—astonishingly—that universality is under threat from Labour.

Universal benefits such as concessionary travel for the elderly, housing benefit, jobseekers allowance and, of course, healthcare exist to ensure the maximum opportunities and the maximum quality of life for all, regardless of a person's background or circumstance. It is our responsibility to ensure that people in Scotland continue to have access to the highest-quality public services possible without stigma being attached to those who rely on them.

Access to high-quality public services is part of our identity and a large part of what binds us as a society. It is therefore no surprise that the people of Scotland overwhelmingly oppose the UK's ruthless cuts to public services, which threaten to tear our social fabric and impact on the poorest in our society. The unstinting protection of public services is at the heart of Scottish Government and SNP policy. That protection goes well beyond front-line services, and the importance of various aspects of universal benefits to ensuring our health, wellbeing and quality of life should not be underestimated.

Concessionary travel is a perfect example of that. The benefit to the 1.2 million elderly or disabled people or the veterans who are entitled to concessionary travel does not stop at their saving money on their bus fares. People who use concessionary travel—especially those on low incomes—also benefit from improved access to other services in their communities and beyond. That in turn facilitates social networking and promotes inclusion for those who might otherwise be isolated, as well as supporting those who are in work or in voluntary positions.

Evidence suggests that concessionary travel also improves the health, wellbeing and safety of elderly and disabled people by encouraging a more active lifestyle and by keeping people engaged in their communities. Ultimately, by contributing towards the broader quality of life of older and disabled people, concessionary travel helps to reduce demand for social and healthcare down the line and therefore supports savings in other parts of the public sector. For example, raising the age of eligibility for concessionary travel to 66 would affect around 40,000 people and save £8 million in the short term. However,

that would most likely result in NHS bodies having to meet increased costs for transport to and from medical services, which might otherwise have been provided under concessionary travel.

The same is true of stringent means testing. The current approach is relatively cheap and simple to administer because it depends on either proof of age or disability. The fact is that the administration costs associated with any further eligibility checks would be prohibitive and would largely cancel out any potential savings. To me, that underlines the short-sightedness of UK Government cuts, which are aimed at cutting back on services that are not only vital but represent good value for the taxpayer.

Johann Lamont asks that we consider the issue in open and transparent debate, but that is exactly what we are doing. What Labour and its Westminster cronies cannot get their heads around is preventative spend. The choice that this Government is making is the choice to intervene early—

**Johann Lamont:** Will the member give way?

**Maureen Watt:** Let me just finish the point.

When we came into office, money was being spent on firefighting problems as they arose; this Government is trying to prevent the problems arising in the first place. Gavin Brown mentioned free eye tests. Would people go for eye tests, dental checks, breast screening or bowel cancer screening if they had to pay for it? I think not.

**Johann Lamont:** Does the member think that having carers, who are now on poorer wages than they were before, make a 15-minute visit to someone they are not supposed to speak to—they do a task and then head off—is a price worth paying for the theoretical view of the world that she presents? That is what is happening in our communities. Does she think that it is preventative spend for someone who is isolated and lonely to get a 15-minute care visit?

**Maureen Watt:** This is absolutely not theoretical, Ms Lamont. The member should take up the issue with the council that is providing the service. That is the choice that the council has made about how it spends the money that it gets.

Westminster's cuts to the welfare system threaten to have similar knock-on effects on our society as a whole. Dismantling the welfare system—I say this to Duncan McNeil—is precisely what we are talking about. We are trying to protect the welfare system in Scotland. Willie Rennie gets it all wrong when he says that such cuts might not last post the referendum. We know that the Westminster Government has said that there are more cuts to come down the line, so we have seen

only a little of the cuts that we will get from Westminster.

To take one example, the regressive bedroom tax threatens to cut claimants' housing benefit by 14 per cent—or 25 per cent where one or two bedrooms are deemed to be unoccupied. In this context, that even includes where the Government thinks that children could share. It seems to forget that children grow up and need single rooms later on in their lives or that, for example, a person with a respiratory condition may need an extra room for the respiratory equipment. As with most UK Government cuts, the bedroom tax is likely to hit the poorest in our society the hardest. Housing associations warn that it could force more people into homelessness if people cannot afford to support a house that George Osborne deems to be too big for them or their family. That is not to mention the unwelcome invasion into family life of rules on which family members should be sharing bedrooms.

**Sarah Boyack:** Will the member give way?

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (John Scott):** The member is in her last minute and should be drawing to a close.

**Maureen Watt:** The worst part is that the UK Government perceives a need for the policies based on the belief that housing policy can be applied uniformly across the UK. Of course it cannot.

I support the motion.

16:04

**Dr Richard Simpson (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab):** I wonder whether anyone in this chamber believes that having a universal benefit has no cost to our system. Does anybody believe, without doubt, that universal benefits are progressive and benefit the less well-off? If people believe that, they are not in the real world. In a time of plenty, introducing universal benefits makes sense because of the ease of administration, to which Fiona McLeod referred, and the buy-in from everyone. Those are positive features that we all welcome and acknowledge. We do not contest the popularity of the so-called free services; we are saying that nothing is truly free. We in the Labour Party believe that we should have an honest and non-polarised debate about the consequences of the choices that the Government has made and is going to make.

I start with free personal care. At the beginning of the century, Lord Sutherland's report showed us the real problems of the demographic changes that we face—or the population time bomb as it is now known. At the time, it seemed unfair to me that the NHS and hospices provided care free at

the point of need for someone with terminal cancer, whereas someone who had dementia and was not among the poorest had to pay the full costs of residential care. However, we now know that the costs of free personal care were substantially underestimated at the time.

Moreover, we should recognise that the policy simply reduces the cost of residential care by about £9,000 per annum. There is still means testing, and the remaining cost for those who come above the threshold is about £24,000 per year. Anyone who reads David Bell's articles on the issue and follows the issue with interest will know that the Welsh chose a different line from us, which means that there is a difference of only about £70 a week, and people there get the attendance allowance. The Government should consider that in the current circumstances and see what the benefits might be.

What are the policy consequences? Audit Scotland has shown that the threshold of eligibility for community care has risen steadily in the past five years, leaving many people, for whom preventive and early intervention would be invaluable, at the mercy of market forces and reliant on their own resources. As other members have said, plenty new community charges have been introduced, while others have risen steeply. In the meantime, care staff and third-sector staff are having their wages cut in an atrocious way, and mainly women are affected. Where is the equality and social justice in that?

The NHS is free at the point of need or, more properly, it is paid for mainly by taxes and in part by co-payment, which exists in every European country. Even in the years of plenty before the banking crisis, the SNP did not eradicate all co-payments. There remain substantial co-payments, for example for dental work and spectacles. Labour, along with the Liberal Democrats, introduced free eye tests. Research has shown that that is an effective and worthwhile measure. The research was done not by optometrists, who have a vested interest, but by the University of Aberdeen. A properly published and peer-reviewed study has shown that the measure has a significant effect in saving some people from blindness.

We need to ensure that universal benefits are focused. Has the Government even asked those responsible whether it is necessary for people to have an annual eye check-up? I have asked, and the answer is that it is not necessary and that we could extend the period between universal checks. That is the sort of question that we need to ask in applying universal benefits. Another possible approach to universal benefits in a time of austerity is to keep the benefits free and universal but examine how effectively they are applied. For

example, it seems ridiculous that people who are working get bus passes.

In principle, no one in our party would argue against free prescriptions, but when faced with the reality of a period of austerity, Labour took the hard decision to reintroduce prescription charges. Those hard times in the 1960s required hard choices and hard decisions. Has the Scottish Government done a cost benefit analysis of free prescriptions? No—nothing has been published. That is the sort of tough decision that we really cannot expect of a head-in-the-sand Government and an NHS that is on an amber warning, which it denies, and that is led by someone whom I would characterise as Alex in Wonderland. They are in denial.

The recent cuts of 2,300 nursing posts and 180 allied health professionals are bound to affect front-line services adversely—unless, of course, the SNP is saying that all the extra nurses that it employed between 2007 and 2011 were never needed in the first place.

We have lost prescription income of between £50 million and £75 million but waiting time targets are becoming ever more challenging. Every breached target that is reported means a lowering of professional morale. We have just learned that NHS Lothian's performance against its colorectal waiting time targets has come down from 98 per cent to 86 per cent. That is a lot of patients who are not getting operated on appropriately. The board is going to send 500 patients abroad, and we are sending 8,000 patients to England. It goes on and on. The Government cannot spend the money twice.

Scotland used to have the highest level of uptake of innovative drugs of the four home nations; now, it has the lowest. The result of that will be a lessening of our research budget. In addition, there is the obscene and absurd sight of a new medicine that has been approved for unrestricted use by the Scottish Medicines Consortium being approved in different ways by different local groups, with the patients getting different approaches. It is absurd. The individual patient treatment request system is also under increasing criticism.

Free prescriptions are not free; they come at a price. No one suggests that we go back to the old system, which was outdated and unfair, but we need to examine whether the current system is the most effective way of spending the money.

The SNP promise of an independent Scotland that will fulfil all our dreams in a land flowing with milk and honey is simply utopian unreality or, perhaps, a pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. Perhaps a better image would be that our Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing is the wizard of

Oz: a loud voice behind a curtain, safe until all is revealed.

16:11

**Kevin Stewart (Aberdeen Central) (SNP):** Christine Grahame said that we had heard little about the dismantling of the welfare state by the Government south of the border. I think that we should examine the impact of Tory welfare cuts and tax changes on the people of Scotland.

George Osborne has said that £10 billion of welfare cuts will be necessary by 2016. That is on top of the £18 billion of cuts that he is already making, with £2.5 billion of cuts in Scotland alone. The Institute for Fiscal Studies calculates that pensioner households in the United Kingdom will be £451 worse off next year. It also says that the average family with children in the UK will be £1,335 worse off this year. Massive changes are being made to housing benefit, council tax and social funds. I am pleased that the Scottish Government is doing something to mitigate some of those cuts but, unfortunately, with a fixed budget, we do not have the ability to tackle them all.

**Jenny Marra:** If that is the case, will Kevin Stewart explain to me why the SNP forfeited the Parliament's constitutionally decided tax-varying powers?

**Kevin Stewart:** We have not done that at all. Ms Marra is saying the opposite of what Ms Davidson said the other week. Ms Marra obviously wants to raise income tax, while the Tories want to lower it. To be frank, people are paying enough as it is, and Ms Marra is leading folk up the garden path with that nonsensical intervention.

We see the dismantling of the welfare state, led by a Tory-Liberal Westminster Government, and we hear from the Labour Party in the Scottish Parliament a further dismantling of the welfare state and universal benefits. The Labour Party seems to be in cahoots once again with its Tory-Liberal partners: there has been an attack from every quarter on universal benefits and the welfare state.

If Johann Lamont will not listen to what we have to say in the chamber today about keeping universal benefits as they are, perhaps she will listen to some folk outwith the chamber, some of whom would usually be supportive of her. On BBC Radio Scotland on 29 September, Dave Moxham, the deputy general secretary of the Scottish Trades Union Congress, said:

"we're a supporter of universal benefits almost per se ... I haven't heard a clear argument apart from affordability, and there has not been any principled argument, or policy argument, as to why they are bad things."

He called Johann Lamont's view on the issue an "extreme position". I agree with Mr Moxham.

On Radio Scotland on 28 September, Lindsay Scott of Age Scotland said:

"means-testing has been proven time and time again not to do what it's supposed to do."

He noted that

"respected institutions such as the Institute for Fiscal Studies, the Pensions Policy Institute"

and

"the Joseph Rowntree Foundation have all called it unacceptably complicated, and stigmatizing, and expensive."

In *The Times* on 1 October, Ros Altmann, the director general of Saga, said:

"extending means-testing for pensioners would be a move in the wrong direction. It would be impractical, expensive to administer and a further disincentive for moderate earners to save for old age."

She added that universal benefits

"ensure that all those who need money will actually get it",

rather than pride getting in the way of their claiming it. She also said:

"the reason we have all these additional ... benefits is because our state pension is so low for so many people".

She added:

"Where to draw the line would be almost impossible to determine."

Those outside figures agree with the policies of the Scottish Government. However—

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

**Kevin Stewart:** I am just coming to Lewis Macdonald.

It is not just outside figures. On 14 June 2007, Lewis Macdonald said in the chamber:

"all the parties in the Parliament are committed to making free personal care work."—[*Official Report*, 14 June 2007; c 824.]

Does Labour really believe that abandoning such policies when times get tough is the right thing to do?

**Lewis Macdonald:** I am grateful to Mr Stewart, not least for reminding me of that clear commitment, which I hope he has taken on board, too.

Mr Stewart referred to principle. Can he tell me, in principle, which benefits he would wish to retain as universal benefits and which he would wish to vary? What is the difference, in principle?

**Kevin Stewart:** We are dealing with the devolved situation that we are in. We stood on a

manifesto, and today we are discussing a motion that shows our commitment to continue our manifesto commitments. That is all that we can do at present. I wish that the debate was much wider and that we could discuss all benefits, but unfortunately we do not have those powers yet. I hope that the day when we have them will come sooner rather than later, but while we are in the situation that we are in, I will continue to support the manifesto commitments that we made at the 2011 election to continue the social contract that we made with the Scottish people.

I support the motion.

16:18

**Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green):** I welcome the debate. There have been good and honest speeches on both sides—from both the Labour Party and the SNP. There have also been speeches by members from both those parties who have tried to cast their opponents as moustache-twirling villains who just do not care. I do not think that that is the kind of debate that we ought to have. I think that we can all do better. However, perhaps it is the kind of debate that we end up having when the question is cast as one set of cuts versus another, with each side blaming the other for the social consequences—such as the undermining of health, dignity or wellbeing—that each side's set of cuts creates.

I support the Government when it makes a clear commitment to the value of universal benefits and services. We heard many specific examples of that value during the debate. I support the Labour Party when it brings a critique about the consequences of spending priorities and makes it clear that a circle cannot be squared—that we cannot have Scandinavian levels of public services and pay American levels of taxation.

Both sides are right in those positions. Some of us would cut the universal services and benefits while others would increase taxation, but the choice cannot be avoided. Also, the choice cannot be made by saying, "Trident, Trident, Trident." My commitment to disarmament is, I hope, clear to everyone, but even setting aside Angus Robertson's dream of a £2.5 billion annual Scottish defence budget, the cost of Trident in itself will not fill every financial hole.

**Kevin Stewart:** Does Mr Harvie agree that one of the ways of stopping some of the cuts that we are seeing from Westminster would be the closure of tax loopholes, including those that let multinational companies avoid taxation, evidence of which we have seen in recent weeks?

**Patrick Harvie:** I agree very much indeed, and I hope that the member will agree with my call on Mr Swinney to prevent those same tax-avoiding

companies from benefiting from schemes such as regional selective assistance grants in Scotland.

Earlier, there was an exchange between Alex Neil and Johann Lamont about the relationship between taxation and services. Alex Neil responded to that criticism by saying to Labour, “You supported the council tax freeze as well, so how dare you criticise it?” There were some of us who said, before the election, that the council tax freeze was unsustainable, and the Government must still answer that point. If the council tax freeze continues unabated and if the Government continues with its policy of sticking with council tax, despite the fact that its majority in the chamber gives it an opportunity to replace it with something fairer, and comes to the next election—with whatever range of powers we have at that time—with a commitment to cut corporation tax as well, services and benefits will suffer as a consequence.

Although there is little in the Government’s motion that I disagree with, I lodged an amendment to delete the end of it, because independence is not the only way in which to protect public services and universal benefits. I will be voting and campaigning for a yes vote in the referendum because I think that it offers more opportunity than risk, but it offers no guarantee. The way in which to protect those services and benefits is to raise taxation from those who are able to pay.

There is not much that I disagree with in the Labour amendment, either. My only regret is the lack of a clear position. Towards the end, the amendment says that we should “take action”, but it does not specify what action.

Duncan McNeil’s speech was one of the most serious in today’s debate, but it still had no clear prescription. It got closer than most, though. He kept saying that we must get this right but then he talked about the need to plan disinvestment. That contrasted with Sarah Boyack’s speech, which critiqued the way in which the SNP makes comparisons with Norway without being honest about Norwegian levels of taxation. We need to be honest about both, and we need to stop talking in terms of a fixed budget. Right now, even with the existing powers that we have under the current devolution settlement, we could empower our councils to raise taxation in progressive ways—if we only had the political will. That would enable us more accurately to compare ourselves with Norway—a country where the biggest part of people’s individual personal taxes goes to their local communities and smaller shares go to the regional government and central Government.

I will not be supporting the Conservative amendment. As always, the Conservatives focus on the costs, not the value, of the public sector,

public services and universal benefits. Why is there no call for a long-term assessment of the costs of business support services or grants to the private sector from the Scottish budget; of the value, dubious though it is, of the small business bonus; of the inequality between rich and poor in our society and the poverty impact of the UK Government’s welfare cuts; or, indeed, of the scale of tax avoidance by the wealthiest in our society?

The phrases “something for nothing” and “free services” have riddled this debate. We need to be honest about the fact that free services are not free; they are paid for on a collective basis. We choose to pay for those services in that way because we make a judgment that our society is better off, collectively, when we do so. However, that cannot happen except by the raising of taxation from those who are most able to pay. That should be where this debate takes us.

16:24

**Mark McDonald (North East Scotland) (SNP):**

While I was offering to make interventions during the debate, I was struck by the notion that nobody appears to take me seriously any more. Luckily, I do not either, so I am not really offended.

I heard what Patrick Harvie said. When we talk about free services, we mean that they are free to access rather than free in terms of the cost of delivery. I absolutely agree with his point about the collectivism that lies behind those services.

Today’s debate would be okay if we were talking in purely esoteric terms, but we also need to look at real people. Let us look at a 62-year-old woman who acts as a carer for her 66-year-old disabled husband. She also works in the local supermarket. Although she is in work, she qualifies for and receives a free bus pass as a result of being over the age of 60. That helps her to get to and from work, and enables her and her husband to use the bus to go around Scotland for holidays, and to go into town to access leisure pursuits. It also helps to reduce her outgoings because if she was not eligible for the free bus pass, she would have to pay to use the bus and would have to weigh that up in her weekly budget. She and her husband require a variety of medications, and thanks to free prescriptions, they do not have to worry about rationing their medication, which they had to do before.

They also see the benefits of free personal care. I note that individuals are now being used to define the norm, but that is always dangerous when we consider free personal care. I speak to many people who receive benefits directly as a result of free personal care, and the difficulties that I have come across are often the result of the local

decision-making process or the practices and staffing arrangements of particular private contractors. It is for individual members to take up those issues with local authorities rather than simply suggesting that they relate to the general principle or to the way in which central Government allocates funding to local authorities.

**Hanzala Malik (Glasgow) (Lab):** I just want to confirm that I take every member in the chamber seriously, including Mark McDonald. I do not want him to think for a minute that I do not. However, I am seriously disappointed at the lack of SNP interest in such an important debate. Also, some members have not taken interventions, and that is a shame. We are here to do a job of representing our people to the best of our abilities, and when we do such things, we fail them.

I am a patient with diabetes and my sight is now failing. Rather than receiving treatment, I have been given another appointment to come back in a year. I wonder why.

**Mark McDonald:** By admitting that he takes me seriously, Mr Malik has probably guaranteed that he will never go anywhere in the Labour Party. He made a point about members not taking the debate seriously, but I am not going to speak about where members from other parties are and what their commitments are. It would be wrong for me to do so. Most of my colleagues are committed to the agenda at hand.

Mr Malik made a point about his hospital waiting time. My Glasgow colleague Bob Doris is sitting beside me. He is one of Mr Malik's MSPs and I am sure that he would be happy to meet with him as a constituent to discuss the matter further and in detail. However, the point does not relate to the issue that we are dealing with today.

I was speaking about a couple who are my constituents—

**Neil Findlay:** Will the member take an intervention?

**Mark McDonald:** I want to make some progress.

The couple I mentioned also benefit from the council tax freeze. The point that I made—which Ms Lamont chose, as is her right, to misrepresent—is that that couple and other low-income households benefit disproportionately from the council tax freeze in comparison with higher-income households. They save more as a proportion of their income than higher-income households, especially those that are in the same council tax band.

The National Union of Students Scotland has sent us a briefing that reminds us that in 2011, all Labour, SNP, Liberal Democrat and Green MSPs signed a pledge that they would not introduce

tuition fees in Scotland. The Tories did not sign up to the pledge, but we know their views on the matter.

Labour members have argued today that we knew that tough choices were on the horizon, yet the SNP somehow did not see them coming. If that is the case, the Labour MSPs who signed that pledge and who now tell us that free tuition at universities needs to be reviewed did not see them coming either. Perhaps they should have thought about that before signing the pledge.

The NUS Scotland briefing says clearly that a “move away from the universality of undergraduate education would ... be an incredibly regressive step”,

and that a benefit of free tuition is that it protects progression opportunities for Scotland's college students. We should remember that many college students go on to university education.

If we extend the logic that is being put forward, which is that a person's income somehow dictates the services that they are entitled to access, that perhaps leads one to assume—

**Johann Lamont:** Will the member take an intervention?

**Mark McDonald:** I am sorry; I am in my last 10 seconds.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** You can take an intervention if you would like to.

**Mark McDonald:** Okay.

**Johann Lamont:** Will the member explain how somebody progresses from college to university education if they cannot access a college place because of his Government's cuts?

**Mark McDonald:** One would assume that if the choice was between free university tuition and college education—that is the choice that Johann Lamont seeks to advocate—the NUS would be four-square behind her, as defenders of college education and university education, but it is not calling for the Government to make such a choice. The NUS recognises that the Labour Party is presenting a false choice.

If we extend and extrapolate from the logic that the Labour Party puts forward, it means that those whose income is above a certain level should send their children to private school and should take out private healthcare insurance, rather than mooch off the state. However, in our society, we recognise that certain benefits should be delivered on a universal basis. People pay taxation on the basis of their income and they are entitled to receive something back as a result, irrespective of their income.

Universality removes stigmatisation. One of my constituents told me that, when they received their



prescription for free at the chemist's while others around them paid for their prescriptions, that marked them out as somebody who was on a low income and they felt stigmatised as a result. Many people had that feeling when they received free prescriptions while others had to pay.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** You must draw to a close now, please.

**Mark McDonald:** By removing the need for people to pay for prescriptions, we have removed that stigmatisation and the feeling of a divide in Scottish society, and everybody benefits.

16:32

**Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con):** This debate has been a rerun of a debate that we had a few weeks ago. The SNP's scheduling of the rerun tells us that Johann Lamont has—credit to her for it—got under the SNP's skin on the issue and that, in the debate five weeks ago, the SNP took a hammering. It has had to come back on to the pitch to try to redress the balance. The home team was 0-3 down at half-time and has limped back on the pitch, but without its star striker, who so disappointed in the previous debate. The Deputy First Minister has been left in the dressing room, so who, instead, has come on, but the super-sub? Well, the sub, anyway—the shiny new health secretary, Alex Neil. He will be recognised by Aberdeen Football Club fans of a certain vintage as the John Hewitt of the SNP Cabinet. He comes on, gets the ball, dribbles it up the pitch then blotters it over the bar.

We have heard in the debate nothing new from the SNP—not from Mr Neil or anybody else. No arguments have been made that we did not hear five weeks ago and I struggled to hear a single SNP member come up with a new angle on what we heard five weeks ago, with just two exceptions. One was the cabinet secretary, who told us—I wrote it down, because it was so interesting—that the answer is higher taxes. “If we do not have enough money, we will put up taxes”. Members can check the *Official Report* on that.

The second point—I wrote it down, too—was from Mr Doris, who told us that, since the SNP Government introduced means testing for the central heating scheme, that scheme has

“gone from strength to strength”.

There we go—SNP back benchers say that the way to improve public services is to bring in means testing.

Let us deconstruct—if we can—the SNP's motion. It presents universality as a matter of principle. That is clearly incorrect—a point that Willie Rennie and others made perfectly fairly. There are areas—even in the NHS—where people

must already make contributions, including dental treatment or optical charges. People might get free eye tests, but when they need glasses or contact lenses, they must meet a proportion of the cost, and that contribution is means tested. The same applies in audiology and elsewhere. At the same time as the SNP is telling us about universality, it is bringing in means testing. It has already done that in the central heating scheme.

**Bob Doris:** Will the member take an intervention? It might be important.

**Murdo Fraser:** I will give way in a second.

As we speak, the Cabinet Secretary for Justice is extending means testing in the legal aid budget. Universality is not a matter of principle, but a question of where the line is drawn.

**Bob Doris:** I was going to let Murdo Fraser away with one inaccuracy, but as he has made the same point twice, I will correct it. The central heating programme had eligibility extended. It is now called the energy assistance package and it continues to go from strength to strength. Rather than have means testing, we have widened criteria.

**Murdo Fraser:** I distinctly remember Mr Neil, when he was the Minister for Housing and Communities, saying something along the lines—I would have to check the record to be sure—that the right approach is to target resources better at those who are most in need. That is how the situation was approached: abandon universality and target those who are most in need. The minister can correct me if I have misinterpreted what he said.

**Alex Neil:** Will the member take an intervention?

**Murdo Fraser:** Yes, please.

**Alex Neil:** Murdo Fraser has got so many facts wrong that I do not know where to start. The central heating programme was not universally available, but was available only to certain people, so he was factually wrong about that. We extended the programme to many more people in the same way as we extended the free bus passes to disabled veterans. Are the Tories against that, too?

**Murdo Fraser:** The resources were targeted at those who were most in need. That is exactly what I thought Mr Neil said.

The debate is all about choices. We know that bringing in free prescriptions for people like me who can afford to pay for them will impact elsewhere in the NHS. That point was made by Audit Scotland, by Crawford Beveridge—the First Minister's hand-picked chief economic adviser—in the report that he prepared for the SNP, by

Professor Charlie Jeffery in the report for Age Scotland, and by the British Medical Association.

The most laughable part of the motion—it is so laughable that the cabinet secretary made little attempt to defend it—is the part that refers to voting for independence as being the only way to protect universal benefits.

**Mark McDonald:** Will the member take an intervention?

**Murdo Fraser:** No. I need to explain this point. If there is time, I will let Mark McDonald come in.

I did not hear a single SNP back bencher explain the link between the two; it is an extraordinary non-sequitur. Even Patrick Harvie, the yes campaign's leading light, accepted that that was the case.

As Gavin Brown fairly said, the demographic challenges that face us will face us regardless of the constitutional future that we chose—unless the SNP has something up its sleeve that it has not told us about. If we become independent, the choices that we make will depend on who is elected and in power at the time. The SNP is telling us that it would be in power for ever in an independent Scotland. Would the First Minister go on and on and on and on, like a Scottish version of Robert Mugabe or Fidel Castro? I see that that dismays SNP members as much as it dismays the rest of us.

We need

“a fully informed and measured debate on the subject of universal services”.

We make that call in our amendment—a call that is echoed by the Royal College of Nursing's submission for the debate. To inform the debate, we are calling on the Scottish Government to publish

“forecasts for spending on universal services in Scotland for each of the next 10 years.”

What could be fairer than that? What a reasonable request it is; to know, whether or not we become independent, where we are going and what the challenges are.

I hope that the minister, when he winds up, will agree to accept the amendment, and to that reasonable request. That is how we will progress the debate—not on a ridiculous proposal in a ridiculous motion from an increasingly ridiculous Government.

16:39

**Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab):** The economic forecast remains bleak. Unemployment is rising and remains persistently above the level in the rest of the UK. There are 30,000 fewer

public sector workers and our public services are under enormous strain.

I say that, not to talk Scotland down but in recognition of the reality of the situation that communities face throughout Scotland. I say with all due respect to Fiona McLeod that we cannot consider the issue in the abstract when people are struggling.

Experts tell us that over the next few years our budget will fall by £5.5 billion. The SNP knows that and we know that, but the SNP has managed to identify only about 25 per cent of the savings that are required. It does not take a genius to work out that three-quarters of the cuts are still to come.

The truth is that the SNP does not want to tell us before its referendum how bad the situation is. The truth is that the SNP's sole concern is to secure independence—it gives that away in the motion. Does the SNP really care about pensioners who are struggling to heat their homes this winter as energy prices rocket? Does it really care about the hard-working families who are having to rely on food banks to feed their children? Does it really care about the increasing number of young people who are out of work and on the dole?

Patrick Harvie was right to say that it is not about who cares the most. He was equally right to say that the SNP cannot hang around for two years waiting for independence, which it says will be wonderful, while doing nothing now to help the pensioners, hard-working families and young people who are struggling.

**Patrick Harvie:** I agree that the Government should not wait for the referendum to make changes such as empowering councils to raise revenue progressively, but nor should we wait for the Labour Party, which must say what balance it wants to strike between raising taxation and making a set of cuts that is different from the cuts that the SNP is making.

**Jackie Baillie:** That is exactly the debate that we want to have across parties in the Parliament—[*Interruption.*] Dearie me! We can tell that it is nearly Christmas. SNP members are getting noisy. The SNP has sent out the Government's very own pantomime dame, Alex Neil, who is, as ever, rising to the occasion. Alex Neil is famous for not letting the facts stand in the way of a good story. His Orwellian doublespeak in the debate has been the stuff of legend. Murdo Fraser was right to say that we have learned something interesting, which is that Alex Neil is in favour of higher taxes. The First Minister is in favour of lower taxes. Who is right?

Presiding Officer, I know that you will find this hard to believe, but I have in the past accused the Government of being most interested in division

and denial. The Government keeps presenting me with new evidence to support that contention. Let me tell members a story about the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing. In the *Airdrie & Coatbridge Advertiser*, which I have taken to reading quite avidly, our very own Alex Neil appeared in a serious story on 17 October about a pensioner whose leg has had to be amputated because of a failure to diagnose a problem early enough. That is clearly very distressing for her and for her family, so how helpful is it that her MSP is none other than the health secretary? Does the health secretary take responsibility and help to sort out the problem? No. We understand from the article that he

“has written to the Prime Minister”,

even though health has been devolved for the past 13 years and the responsibility lies with none other than Alex Neil.

**Alex Neil:** For the record, I say that the article was wrong in that respect.

**Jackie Baillie:** I am delighted to hear it.

Out in the real world, families are squaring up to the economic challenge and are considering what they need, rather than what they want. It is time that the Government did the same. We need an honest debate. We need to be explicit about the choices that we make and we should not let things happen by default. Cuts are being made by the SNP. The SNP denies it, but the doctors know it, the nurses know it, the homecare staff know it and the man and woman in the street know it.

At the heart of the debate is an issue of fairness. The SNP cannot simply say that it is a question of universal services versus some kind of targeted provision. The issue is far more complex than that and the SNP does people a disservice by pretending otherwise. Most mature countries have a mix of universal and targeted social policies. I do not disagree with much of the analysis about some of the benefits that are gained, but we need to ensure that the policies are properly costed and that they do not have unintended consequences.

The NHS functions largely as a universal service that is free at the point of need. Everyone can receive the service and we absolutely support that. However, there are parts of it that are not universal. NHS dental treatment is means tested, optical vouchers for people to get their glasses are means tested, and travel to hospitals is means tested. The systems for dental treatment and optical vouchers are exactly the same as the old system for prescriptions. The SNP says that to reintroduce any element of prescription charges would be an attack on ill health, so does the cabinet secretary believe that the current means testing for NHS dental treatment and optical vouchers are attacks on bad teeth and poor

vision? The cabinet secretary is not standing up. My goodness! I take it from his silence that we are not seeing policy being made on the hoof—those are attacks on bad teeth and poor vision.

To be more serious, a wide range of homecare services and residential care services are means tested.

**Christine Grahame:** Will Jackie Baillie take an intervention?

**Jackie Baillie:** No, thank you.

To turn to social care, I say genuinely to Maureen Watt that the SNP is not protecting public services, which was the contention that she made in her speech. Just look at what is going on in local government, which is shouldering the burden of the SNP cuts: 83 per cent of the Scottish Government's budget cuts have been passed on to local government—the very people whom we expect to deliver on the increasing demand for social care.

For the first time, people are paying for essential services such as home helps, community alarms and aids and equipment for the disabled. Costs have risen by as much as 50 per cent in the past few years and there is a postcode lottery of care with different charges, different eligibility criteria and a system of rationing that sees 15-minute care visits as somehow ticking the box. That is not about fairness. It is about the consequences of choices that have been made by the SNP.

The cost of making prescriptions free was £57 million last year and is projected to rise to £61 million next year—enough to pay the salaries of 2,000 nurses. That is the choice. Bob Doris said that we can have free prescriptions and that that helps people in poorer communities as well, but tell me something, Bob; what does the SNP tell people when they are refused life-saving cancer drugs because of the SNP cuts? The truth is that the choice that the SNP makes is to not fund cancer drugs, but instead to remove 2,500 nurses and midwives from the NHS, thereby taking their numbers to a seven-year low. The truth is that the choice that the SNP makes is to provide an advantage for people such as Fred Goodwin—bankers, the lot of them—when food banks are appearing in our towns and cities. The truth is that the choice that SNP makes is that older people are cut off from essential services because they cannot afford to pay, and the SNP cuts to local government are making things worse.

Add to that the backlog of maintenance in the NHS, which amounts to £1 billion. The SNP needs to realise that the time for soundbite policies and retail politics is over. It is time for the SNP to be honest and truthful. This is not just a debate that Labour is calling for—why not listen to the BMA, the Royal College of Nursing and Audit Scotland

when they express their concerns about the health service or, for that matter, to Campbell Christie, Crawford Beveridge and Professor David Bell about the sustainability of services?

**Kevin Stewart:** Will Jackie Baillie give way?

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I am afraid that Jackie Baillie is in her last minute.

**Jackie Baillie:** This is a debate about the SNP's myth versus everybody else's reality. In closing, I will continue with my Christmas theme and leave members with the words of three wise men. Mike Russell—in writing and probably recorded—

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Quickly, please.

**Jackie Baillie:** Mike Russell wrote:

“Put bluntly, universality now drags down both the quality of service to those most in need”.

Kenny MacAskill said to the Justice Committee:

“it is right that those who can afford to pay towards the cost of their defence should do so”.—[*Official Report, Justice Committee*, 18 September 2012; c 1717.]

And none other than Alex Neil, in this chamber on 14 May 2009, when speaking about the changes to the central heating programme, said:

“It would be inappropriate to use scarce resources to provide free central heating systems for some of our retired bankers”.—[*Official Report*, 14 May 2009; c 17481.]

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** You must close.

**Jackie Baillie:** The SNP must stop pretending.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I call Michael Matheson. You have until 5 o'clock, minister.

16:49

**The Minister for Public Health (Michael Matheson):** This has been an interesting debate. There have been some reruns from the previous debate on the subject, but in the time between that debate and this debate Labour still has not come up with a single policy in the area of universal benefits.

Universal benefits are often viewed as the touchstone of a progressive society and as a progressive policy for any Government. They are often also viewed as a touchstone issue that reflects how progressive a Parliament is, and they set out how we want to define the society that we all choose to live in. They are part of creating a society that some on the Labour benches do not believe in—one that is fair and just for all.

I regret the fact that there are those who like to talk about universal benefits as though they are “something for nothing”. They are certainly not something for nothing, because the people who

get those benefits have often paid their tax and worked hard to get the benefit of them.

When we look at the issue of universal benefits, we must reflect on the financial climate that was created by the disaster that was started under the Labour Party and continued under the Tories and Lib Dems at Westminster, and on the way in which they have ravaged public service spending through the cuts that they have imposed on the Scottish Government's budget and on public service budgets in England.

It is also right that, when we look at this issue, we do so in the way that Gavin Brown recognised. Not only do we face the financial constraints within which we are operating; we also face a demographic shift as a society. People are living longer, which is great, and more people are living with long-term conditions. The issue is not about deciding whether we should get rid of universal benefits; it is about looking at how we can support people with long-term conditions much more effectively in the community and what we can do to prevent long-term conditions in the future.

Gavin Brown referred to the free eye test. He will be aware that the free eye test is much more than a sight test—it is an eye health test. The evidence suggests that some £40 million is gained in preventative benefits from that free eye health check. It is a good example of making an investment now to get the benefits in the future through the preventative spend that this Government has given a commitment to making, ensuring that we have the right policies in place to serve us in the future.

**Gavin Brown:** Should the medium-term forecasts for expenditure on universal services be published or hidden?

**Michael Matheson:** In the previous debate, John Swinney set out very clearly how we will take forward our spending commitment on universal benefits. We have made it clear that preventative spend is a key part of ensuring that we have sustainability in our public finances. John Swinney is taking that forward, which is the first time that that has happened in this Parliament in 13 years.

People question why we abolished prescription charges. Some called it nothing more than a fig leaf to the electorate. At one point it had the support of the Labour Party, but the Labour Party has now abandoned the whole idea of free prescriptions.

**Dr Simpson rose—**

**Michael Matheson:** Have a seat, Richard Simpson, because I am coming to you.

We abolished prescription charges because 600,000 people in Scotland on a yearly income of less than £16,000 found themselves having to pay

for their prescriptions and having to worry about what they could afford—whether they could take all the items or only some of them. We decided that it was much fairer and more just to abolish prescription charges for everyone in Scotland.

**Dr Simpson:** Will the minister give way?

**Michael Matheson:** Have a seat, just now.

**The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick):** Dr Simpson, sit down.

**Michael Matheson:** We now know that the Labour Party has abandoned free prescriptions for the people of Scotland.

I turn to the issue of free personal care and free nursing care, which is often referred to as one of the touchstone policies of the Parliament. Some of us have been here long enough to remember that the Labour Party was not united on the introduction of free nursing care for the elderly. There was great division within the Labour Party over it, but it is a policy that some 77,000 older people in this country benefit from day in, day out. I am proud that I supported a policy from which those 77,000 people benefit on a daily basis.

I recognise that some Labour members support universal benefits: some of them support the provision of free personal care; some of them supported the provision of free eye checks; and, at one point, some of them even supported free bus passes and free prescriptions. After today's debate and the debate that we had a couple of weeks ago, however, I am none the wiser about where Labour now stands in the debate that it is locked into on the "something for nothing" culture.

I do not know whether, in Labour's view, the "something for nothing" culture is one in which an elderly person benefits from free personal care. I do not know whether Labour no longer supports something for nothing in the form of free eye checks. I do not know whether it is Labour's view that the veteran who benefits from the free bus pass is getting something for nothing. I do not know whether Labour thinks that the 600,000 people in Scotland who benefit from free prescriptions are examples of the "something for nothing" culture.

Johann Lamont asked for some honesty in the debate. I will give her some honesty. We support free prescriptions, the free bus pass and free personal care for the elderly. Where honesty is missing in the debate is in the Labour Party's position on those important issues.

**Johann Lamont** *rose*—

**Michael Matheson:** I give way to Johann Lamont to see whether she can make amends.

**Johann Lamont:** Does the minister believe that free personal care is properly and fully funded? If

so, why are people across the country getting 15-minute visits and why are care workers having their terms and conditions reduced?

**Michael Matheson:** We go back to the old chestnut of people getting 15 minutes of home care. It is always interesting that Johann Lamont wants to define free personal care by reference to people getting more time from the carers who come into their home. What she chooses not to refer to is the £300 million of attendance allowance that has been denied to the Scottish Government by the UK Government, which was cut when we introduced free personal care.

Johann Lamont has been in the Parliament long enough to recall that, when Henry McLeish was First Minister, he made it clear that he was unhappy about the response that he got from the UK Government, a position that was continued by Alistair Darling. If we had access to that £300 million, we could be investing it in services for the elderly in Scotland.

Richard Simpson questions the provision of free prescriptions. [*Interruption.*]

**The Presiding Officer:** Ms Marra.

**Michael Matheson:** Did he ever consider the £91 million that it now costs us, annually, to pay for the private finance initiative deals that were signed under Labour in Scotland? That money could be better used for our NHS and for investing in public services.

**Dr Simpson:** Let us have a little reality in the debate. [*Interruption.*] Does the cabinet secretary accept that the Government still conducts means testing for some prescriptions? I will tell him which prescriptions means testing is conducted for—those under the minor ailments scheme. The same system of means testing is used for that scheme as before, so let us have some reality. The Government carries out means testing for many, many things.

**Michael Matheson:** Richard Simpson asks for some reality. Just over a year ago, he stood for election on a manifesto that was committed to the policies that he now wants to get rid of. That is the reality that people in Scotland recognise—that they cannot trust the Labour Party to stand up for the needy and to create a socially just society.

The debate is much more than a debate that sets the needy against the needy, which some may wish to characterise it as. We do not accept the confines of the debate, which is set within the limited vision of the Westminster budget. This is about being able to make decisions for ourselves and creating the society that we want to create—a socially just and fair Scotland, in which people can rightly know that services will be there in their time of need.

We are not here simply to manage the Tory cuts for the people of Scotland; we have a vision that goes beyond the Westminster system. It is only sad that we now have a Labour Party that wants to throw out social justice in its desperation to create some meaning for itself. However, as a society, the people of Scotland can be sure that the Scottish Government will remain committed to delivering a socially just and fair Scotland.

## Decision Time

17:00

**The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick):** There are three questions to be put as result of today's business. The first question is, that amendment S4M-04778.4, in the name of Johann Lamont, which seeks to amend motion S4M-04778, in the name of Alex Neil, on universal benefits, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

**Members:** No.

**The Presiding Officer:** There will be a division.

### For

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)  
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)  
 Baker, Richard (North East Scotland) (Lab)  
 Beamish, Claudia (South Scotland) (Lab)  
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)  
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)  
 Chisholm, Malcolm (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (Lab)  
 Eadie, Helen (Cowdenbeath) (Lab)  
 Fee, Mary (West Scotland) (Lab)  
 Ferguson, Patricia (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (Lab)  
 Findlay, Neil (Lothian) (Lab)  
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)  
 Gray, Iain (East Lothian) (Lab)  
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)  
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)  
 Henry, Hugh (Renfrewshire South) (Lab)  
 Johnstone, Alison (Lothian) (Green)  
 Kelly, James (Rutherglen) (Lab)  
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab)  
 Macdonald, Lewis (North East Scotland) (Lab)  
 Macintosh, Ken (Eastwood) (Lab)  
 Malik, Hanzala (Glasgow) (Lab)  
 Marra, Jenny (North East Scotland) (Lab)  
 Martin, Paul (Glasgow Provan) (Lab)  
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)  
 McCulloch, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Lab)  
 McDougall, Margaret (West Scotland) (Lab)  
 McMahon, Michael (Uddingston and Bellshill) (Lab)  
 McMahon, Siobhan (Central Scotland) (Lab)  
 McNeil, Duncan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab)  
 McTaggart, Anne (Glasgow) (Lab)  
 Murray, Elaine (Dumfriesshire) (Lab)  
 Pearson, Graeme (South Scotland) (Lab)  
 Pentland, John (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)  
 Rennie, Willie (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD)  
 Scott, Tavish (Shetland Islands) (LD)  
 Simpson, Dr Richard (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)  
 Smith, Drew (Glasgow) (Lab)  
 Smith, Elaine (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab)  
 Stewart, David (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)

### Against

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)  
 Adamson, Clare (Central Scotland) (SNP)  
 Allan, Dr Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)  
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)  
 Biagi, Marco (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)  
 Brodie, Chic (South Scotland) (SNP)  
 Burgess, Margaret (Cunninghame South) (SNP)  
 Campbell, Aileen (Clydesdale) (SNP)  
 Campbell, Roderick (North East Fife) (SNP)  
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)  
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)

Crawford, Bruce (Stirling) (SNP)  
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)  
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)  
 Don, Nigel (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)  
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow) (SNP)  
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)  
 Eadie, Jim (Edinburgh Southern) (SNP)  
 Ewing, Annabelle (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)  
 Fabiani, Linda (East Kilbride) (SNP)  
 Finnie, John (Highlands and Islands) (Ind)  
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)  
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)  
 Gibson, Rob (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)  
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)  
 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)  
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)  
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)  
 Maxwell, Stewart (West Scotland) (SNP)  
 McAlpine, Joan (South Scotland) (SNP)  
 McDonald, Mark (North East Scotland) (SNP)  
 McKelvie, Christina (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)  
 McLeod, Aileen (South Scotland) (SNP)  
 McLeod, Fiona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)  
 McMillan, Stuart (West Scotland) (SNP)  
 Neil, Alex (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)  
 Paterson, Gil (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)  
 Robertson, Dennis (Aberdeenshire West) (SNP)  
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)  
 Russell, Michael (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)  
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)  
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)  
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)  
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)  
 Thompson, Dave (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)  
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)  
 Urquhart, Jean (Highlands and Islands) (Ind)  
 Watt, Maureen (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)  
 Wheelhouse, Paul (South Scotland) (SNP)  
 White, Sandra (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)  
 Wilson, John (Central Scotland) (SNP)  
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow) (SNP)

#### Abstentions

Brown, Gavin (Lothian) (Con)  
 Carlaw, Jackson (West Scotland) (Con)  
 Davidson, Ruth (Glasgow) (Con)  
 Fergusson, Alex (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)  
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)  
 Goldie, Annabel (West Scotland) (Con)  
 Johnstone, Alex (North East Scotland) (Con)  
 Milne, Nanette (North East Scotland) (Con)  
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)  
 Scanlon, Mary (Highlands and Islands) (Con)  
 Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)  
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)

**The Presiding Officer:** The result of the division is: For 40, Against 61, Abstentions 12.

*Amendment disagreed to.*

**The Presiding Officer:** The next question is, that amendment S4M-04778.3, in the name of Gavin Brown, which seeks to amend motion S4M-04778, in the name of Alex Neil, on universal benefits, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

**Members:** No.

**The Presiding Officer:** There will be a division.

#### For

Brown, Gavin (Lothian) (Con)  
 Carlaw, Jackson (West Scotland) (Con)  
 Davidson, Ruth (Glasgow) (Con)  
 Fergusson, Alex (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)  
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)  
 Goldie, Annabel (West Scotland) (Con)  
 Johnstone, Alex (North East Scotland) (Con)  
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)  
 Milne, Nanette (North East Scotland) (Con)  
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)  
 Rennie, Willie (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD)  
 Scanlon, Mary (Highlands and Islands) (Con)  
 Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)  
 Scott, Tavish (Shetland Islands) (LD)  
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)

#### Against

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)  
 Adamson, Clare (Central Scotland) (SNP)  
 Allan, Dr Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)  
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)  
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)  
 Baker, Richard (North East Scotland) (Lab)  
 Beamish, Claudia (South Scotland) (Lab)  
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)  
 Biagi, Marco (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)  
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)  
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)  
 Brodie, Chic (South Scotland) (SNP)  
 Burgess, Margaret (Cunninghame South) (SNP)  
 Campbell, Aileen (Clydesdale) (SNP)  
 Campbell, Roderick (North East Fife) (SNP)  
 Chisholm, Malcolm (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (Lab)  
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)  
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)  
 Crawford, Bruce (Stirling) (SNP)  
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)  
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)  
 Don, Nigel (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)  
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow) (SNP)  
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)  
 Eadie, Helen (Cowdenbeath) (Lab)  
 Eadie, Jim (Edinburgh Southern) (SNP)  
 Ewing, Annabelle (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)  
 Fabiani, Linda (East Kilbride) (SNP)  
 Fee, Mary (West Scotland) (Lab)  
 Ferguson, Patricia (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (Lab)  
 Findlay, Neil (Lothian) (Lab)  
 Finnie, John (Highlands and Islands) (Ind)  
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)  
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)  
 Gibson, Rob (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)  
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)  
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)  
 Gray, Iain (East Lothian) (Lab)  
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)  
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)

Henry, Hugh (Renfrewshire South) (Lab)  
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)  
 Ingram, Adam (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)  
 Johnstone, Alison (Lothian) (Green)  
 Keir, Colin (Edinburgh Western) (SNP)  
 Kelly, James (Rutherglen) (Lab)  
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)  
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab)  
 Lyle, Richard (Central Scotland) (SNP)  
 MacAskill, Kenny (Edinburgh Eastern) (SNP)  
 MacDonald, Angus (Falkirk East) (SNP)  
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)  
 Macdonald, Lewis (North East Scotland) (Lab)  
 Macintosh, Ken (Eastwood) (Lab)  
 Mackay, Derek (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)  
 MacKenzie, Mike (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)  
 Malik, Hanzala (Glasgow) (Lab)  
 Marra, Jenny (North East Scotland) (Lab)  
 Martin, Paul (Glasgow Provan) (Lab)  
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)  
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)  
 Maxwell, Stewart (West Scotland) (SNP)  
 McAlpine, Joan (South Scotland) (SNP)  
 McCulloch, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Lab)  
 McDonald, Mark (North East Scotland) (SNP)  
 McDougall, Margaret (West Scotland) (Lab)  
 McKelvie, Christina (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)  
 McLeod, Aileen (South Scotland) (SNP)  
 McLeod, Fiona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)  
 McMahon, Michael (Uddingston and Bellshill) (Lab)  
 McMahon, Siobhan (Central Scotland) (Lab)  
 McMillan, Stuart (West Scotland) (SNP)  
 McNeil, Duncan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab)  
 McTaggart, Anne (Glasgow) (Lab)  
 Murray, Elaine (Dumfriesshire) (Lab)  
 Neil, Alex (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)  
 Paterson, Gil (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)  
 Pearson, Graeme (South Scotland) (Lab)  
 Pentland, John (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)  
 Robertson, Dennis (Aberdeenshire West) (SNP)  
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)  
 Russell, Michael (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)  
 Simpson, Dr Richard (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)  
 Smith, Drew (Glasgow) (Lab)  
 Smith, Elaine (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab)  
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)  
 Stewart, David (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)  
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)  
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)  
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)  
 Thompson, Dave (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)  
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)  
 Urquhart, Jean (Highlands and Islands) (Ind)  
 Watt, Maureen (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)  
 Wheelhouse, Paul (South Scotland) (SNP)  
 White, Sandra (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)  
 Wilson, John (Central Scotland) (SNP)  
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow) (SNP)

**The Presiding Officer:** The result of the division is: For 15, Against 98, Abstentions 0.

*Amendment disagreed to.*

**The Presiding Officer:** The next question is, that motion S4M-04778, in the name of Alex Neil, on universal benefits, 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)  
 Allan, Dr Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)  
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)  
 Biagi, Marco (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)  
 Brodie, Chic (South Scotland) (SNP)  
 Burgess, Margaret (Cunninghame South) (SNP)  
 Campbell, Aileen (Clydesdale) (SNP)  
 Campbell, Roderick (North East Fife) (SNP)  
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)  
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)  
 Crawford, Bruce (Stirling) (SNP)  
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)  
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)  
 Don, Nigel (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)  
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow) (SNP)  
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)  
 Eadie, Jim (Edinburgh Southern) (SNP)  
 Ewing, Annabelle (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)  
 Fabiani, Linda (East Kilbride) (SNP)  
 Finnie, John (Highlands and Islands) (Ind)  
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)  
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)  
 Gibson, Rob (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)  
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)  
 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)  
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)  
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)  
 Maxwell, Stewart (West Scotland) (SNP)  
 McAlpine, Joan (South Scotland) (SNP)  
 McDonald, Mark (North East Scotland) (SNP)  
 McKelvie, Christina (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)  
 McLeod, Aileen (South Scotland) (SNP)  
 McLeod, Fiona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)  
 McMillan, Stuart (West Scotland) (SNP)  
 Neil, Alex (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)  
 Paterson, Gil (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)  
 Robertson, Dennis (Aberdeenshire West) (SNP)  
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)  
 Russell, Michael (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)  
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)  
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)  
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)  
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)  
 Thompson, Dave (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)  
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)  
 Urquhart, Jean (Highlands and Islands) (Ind)  
 Watt, Maureen (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)  
 Wheelhouse, Paul (South Scotland) (SNP)  
 White, Sandra (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)  
 Wilson, John (Central Scotland) (SNP)  
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow) (SNP)

**Against**

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)  
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)



Baker, Richard (North East Scotland) (Lab)  
 Beamish, Claudia (South Scotland) (Lab)  
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)  
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)  
 Brown, Gavin (Lothian) (Con)  
 Carlaw, Jackson (West Scotland) (Con)  
 Chisholm, Malcolm (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (Lab)  
 Davidson, Ruth (Glasgow) (Con)  
 Eadie, Helen (Cowdenbeath) (Lab)  
 Fee, Mary (West Scotland) (Lab)  
 Ferguson, Patricia (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (Lab)  
 Fergusson, Alex (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)  
 Findlay, Neil (Lothian) (Lab)  
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)  
 Goldie, Annabel (West Scotland) (Con)  
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)  
 Gray, Iain (East Lothian) (Lab)  
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)  
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)  
 Henry, Hugh (Renfrewshire South) (Lab)  
 Johnstone, Alex (North East Scotland) (Con)  
 Johnstone, Alison (Lothian) (Green)  
 Kelly, James (Rutherglen) (Lab)  
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab)  
 Macdonald, Lewis (North East Scotland) (Lab)  
 Macintosh, Ken (Eastwood) (Lab)  
 Malik, Hanzala (Glasgow) (Lab)  
 Marra, Jenny (North East Scotland) (Lab)  
 Martin, Paul (Glasgow Provan) (Lab)  
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)  
 McCulloch, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Lab)  
 McDougall, Margaret (West Scotland) (Lab)  
 McMahon, Michael (Uddingston and Bellshill) (Lab)  
 McMahon, Siobhan (Central Scotland) (Lab)  
 McNeil, Duncan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab)  
 McTaggart, Anne (Glasgow) (Lab)  
 Milne, Nanette (North East Scotland) (Con)  
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)  
 Murray, Elaine (Dumfriesshire) (Lab)  
 Pearson, Graeme (South Scotland) (Lab)  
 Pentland, John (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)  
 Rennie, Willie (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD)  
 Scanlon, Mary (Highlands and Islands) (Con)  
 Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)  
 Scott, Tavish (Shetland Islands) (LD)  
 Simpson, Dr Richard (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)  
 Smith, Drew (Glasgow) (Lab)  
 Smith, Elaine (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab)  
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)  
 Stewart, David (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)

**The Presiding Officer:** The result of the division is: For 61, Against 52, Abstentions 0.

*Motion agreed to,*

That the Parliament recognises and values that Scotland's National Health Service is universally available and free at the point of need; further recognises that other universal benefits, including free eye examinations, concessionary travel, free prescriptions and free personal and nursing care are also vital to supporting many in Scotland to live full and healthy lives, and believes that the only way that these universal services and benefits can be protected and maintained is through independence for Scotland.

**The Presiding Officer:** That concludes decision time, and we will now move to the members' business debate. Members who are leaving the chamber should do so quickly and quietly.

## British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly (Autumn Plenary 2012)

### **The Deputy Presiding Officer (Elaine Smith):**

The final item of business is a members' business debate on motion S4M-04327, in the name of John Scott, on the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly's autumn plenary. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

17:05

**John Scott (Ayr) (Con):** Thank you, Deputy Presiding Officer. It is my privilege to open this debate in my capacity as leader of the Scottish Parliament delegation to the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly.

As members may be aware, the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly—BIPA—was initially established as the British-Irish Inter-Parliamentary Body. Its first meeting was held in London in 1990, when the constitution was agreed and the first plenary session was held. Originally the body consisted of 25 members of the United Kingdom Parliament and 25 members of the Irish Parliament.

In 2001, following the 1998 Good Friday agreement and the establishment of the British-Irish Council to foster further dialogue between Governments in the British isles, the membership of the body was enlarged to include representatives of the legislatures in Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland, the Isle of Man, Guernsey and Jersey, with Scotland having five members of the enlarged 68-member assembly. In 2008, the name British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly was adopted to reflect the new era of relations between Britain and Ireland, following the signing of the St Andrew's day agreement in 2006.

Although the connections between the peoples of the British isles are clearly close and long-standing, sadly it has not always been possible to say the same of relations between their political representatives. The creation of BIPA has provided not only an arena for parliamentarians to pursue a peaceful political dialogue on issues in the north of Ireland, building on the foundations laid by the peace process, but a forum for parliamentarians from across the British isles to discuss topics of mutual concern and to promote co-operation among us all.

The recent BIPA plenary session in Glasgow was only the second occasion on which the plenary has been held in Scotland. It was a great pleasure to welcome colleagues from across the British isles and to showcase the quality of hospitality that the city of Glasgow and, indeed, Scotland offer.

The plenary session focused on the topics of the Scottish economy and Scottish-Irish relations. A wide range of speakers addressed the plenary, including Fergus Ewing, our own Minister for Energy, Enterprise and Tourism; Teresa Villiers MP, Secretary of State for Northern Ireland; Graeme Smith from the Scottish Trades Union Congress; Graham Riddell from VisitScotland; and Iain McMillan of the Confederation of British Industry Scotland.

The plenary session provided an opportunity to engage with the Irish diaspora organisations in Scotland, who also attended the dinner that was hosted by the deputy lord provost of Glasgow City Council, Gerald Leonard, and addressed by the Presiding Officer. I should say what a wonderful setting Glasgow City Chambers was for that occasion and, on behalf of the Scottish parliamentary delegation, I thank the deputy lord provost for the generous welcome and hospitality that he provided.

Looking around the chamber, I see members who have had involvement in BIPA in previous sessions of Parliament, as well as my colleagues in BIPA in the current parliamentary session, who are Willie Coffey, Alison McInnes, Michael McMahon and Mary Scanlon. Past members from all parties include Iain Smith, Bruce Crawford, Hugh Henry, Robin Harper and Murray Tosh, to name but a few. At the Glasgow plenary we were very pleased to welcome James Dornan, who is currently one of our associates.

During the debate, I look forward to hearing from colleagues about their experiences of involvement in BIPA and their views on how the assembly can develop. Although the initial impetus for the establishment of BIPA arose from the Northern Ireland peace process and encouraging dialogue between parliamentarians who previously had little contact—and little in common—my view is that BIPA has moved on from those beginnings to focus on issues that can bring tangible benefits to all our constituents, notably in the fields of transport connections, energy and economic development.

In addition to my role on the BIPA steering committee, members of the Scottish Parliament delegation are involved in three of the four BIPA committees—those dealing with European issues, economic affairs, and environmental and social affairs. Those committees have been working on a range of reports recently, including on the small and medium enterprise sector, the Irish community in Britain and human trafficking. The committees meet at different times from the plenary session, as well as during plenary sessions on occasion.

The BIPA committee reports are sent by the BIPA secretariat to the Governments that are represented on the British-Irish Council and are

invaluable in providing a short and focused analysis of a particular issue. We in BIPA are increasingly looking to disseminate the findings of those committee reports to our own Parliaments and parliamentary committees to supplement the work that is carried out in all the Parliaments and Assemblies across the British Isles.

The location of the British-Irish Council offices in Edinburgh is emblematic of the key role that MSPs can play in fostering greater co-operation not only between parliamentarians across the British Isles but with the British-Irish Council itself.

Following the BIPA plenary in Dublin, in May this year both the Dáil and the House of Commons held debates in their respective chambers to discuss the outcomes of the plenary session. Therefore, I am delighted that we are having this debate following the Glasgow plenary, and I look forward to future debates in the chamber following BIPA plenary sessions.

17:11

**Willie Coffey (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP):** My thanks and congratulations go to our Deputy Presiding Officer, John Scott, for bringing the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly's work to the Parliament's attention.

The British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly was not exactly on my radar until I was asked to join it last year. The body has a diversity of political interests, and at first it seemed to me that it might be an assembly of the middle ground that offered recommendations to please everyone and achieved very little. However, nothing could be further from the truth. The members who attend the assembly are certainly not slow in representing their views, but they have shown determination to understand and find common ground with their colleagues, no matter their politics. That is quite an achievement if we consider the origins of the assembly, which was established in 1990 to help to further the peace process.

Even after only my first three plenary sessions, my view is that the assembly is doing some fantastic work, and the members and support staff who make it all possible are to be congratulated. Under the excellent leadership of Joe McHugh TD and Laurence Robertson MP, as co-chairs, business agendas are put together that certainly offer members the opportunity to engage directly on issues of importance.

In Glasgow last month, there was a very welcome opportunity to look at the Scottish economy and Irish-Scottish relations. As well as keynote contributions from the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Theresa Villiers, and our Minister for Energy, Enterprise and Tourism, Fergus Ewing—John Scott mentioned them—

there were contributions from Ailish Forde and Jane Richardson from Diageo. It would be fair to say that there was considerable interest in what the speakers had to say and, as far as I recall, all the sessions ran over time due to the number of members who wished to raise points of interest. It is clear that there is keen interest in what is happening in Scotland, not just among our Irish colleagues, but among our counterparts in the UK Parliament, the Channel Islands, the Isle of Man, Jersey and Guernsey.

Mrs Villiers stated her support for Northern Ireland being given control of corporation tax, but she was equally adamant that any further devolutionary changes in Scotland would be put on ice until the independence referendum. That certainly caused some discussion in the assembly that morning.

Mr Ewing took a number of questions from various delegates, including one from our Deputy Presiding Officer. It would be fair to say that Mr Ewing spoke with great enthusiasm about Scotland, the huge potential for renewable energy, our shared interests with Ireland and our prospects for the future.

It is interesting that we also heard from Sir William McKay on the age-old West Lothian question. If I have to be perfectly honest, I think that that flew over the heads of the majority of the delegates who attended.

BIPA is an excellent forum. It brings together people with polar-opposite political views but allows them to come together in common purpose when the opportunity comes their way.

So far, my experiences of BIPA have been first class: first, in Brighton, where we were guests of our UK Parliament hosts; and then on a memorable visit to Dublin, where the assembly was addressed by Taoiseach Enda Kenny and was later hosted by President Michael D Higgins. But where other than in Glasgow's famous Curlers in Byres Road would it be possible to slip in unnoticed with members from the UK House of Lords, senators from Seanad Éireann, TDs from the Dáil and Sinn Féin and Ulster Unionist members from the Northern Ireland Assembly not only to spend time together but, crucially, to develop a closer understanding and to maintain friendships that are now well established? Glasgow indeed offered our colleagues a very warm welcome and left a great impression.

I very much look forward to further engagement with colleagues in the assembly. Once again, I offer my thanks to our staff in the Scottish Parliament, who work so hard to make these occasions such a success. Go raibh an t-ádh libh, agus feicfidh mé sibh i nDún na nGall—best wishes, and see you in Donegal.

17:16

**Michael McMahon (Uddingston and Bellshill) (Lab):** I, too, congratulate John Scott on bringing the debate to the Parliament. As is the case in other jurisdictions, including at Westminster and in the Dáil, I hope that in future the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly will be not the subject of a members' business debate—John Scott has had to use his member's time for this—but an issue that is built into the programme of the Parliament. As the work of BIPA is becoming much more important, it should become an integral part of our debates and discussions in this Parliament.

I first became involved in BIPA when it was the British-Irish Inter-Parliamentary Body, which was more commonly known as "the body". I was an associate or substitute member at first, but I was slightly frustrated by that because, although I could participate in debates at the plenary sessions, where I could hear a vast array of speakers from a host of different jurisdictions speak on important matters, I could not follow through on the on-going work of the body's committees. I could hear the work of the committees being reported back to the plenary session, but I was unable to engage in taking that work forward. That was a bit of a frustration, especially for anyone who had an interest in a particular subject. As a full member of BIPA, I now participate on an on-going basis in committee D, which deals with environmental and social issues.

The development of BIPA from the BIIPB is a good-news story, but I have some criticisms about my early experiences of the body. Although Willie Coffey is right that there is a social dimension to what goes on and that meeting colleagues from other jurisdictions in a social setting can be beneficial to building up good relations, I felt that initially that was the focus of the body and there was too much emphasis on that. One cannot say that now about BIPA, which is a much more substantial institution. The elected representatives who have got us to this point deserve great credit for removing that almost talking-shop attitude from the discussions and for introducing much more important, substantive and substantial issues.

However, I understand that the body, as it was, had to walk before it could run. In the initial stages in the post Anglo-Irish agreement days, many of the issues were pretty tortuous and there was a lot of trepidation—there was a lot of finessing and caressing of political issues—and things were pretty difficult. It is to the great credit of the MPs, TDs and others who were involved in those initial days that the body played such a huge role in bringing people together and helping to move forward the peace process. Having served that purpose well, BIPA can move on to discuss, in a much more constructive and substantive way,

economic, social and political issues, and I think that it is starting to do that.

As someone who is now more involved in the committees, I feel that their work has become more central to the work of the plenaries and involves other members much more as we move forward. When I first became a member of committee D, it had just completed a substantive report on the Irish diaspora in Britain. Although I had criticisms of the report, it is useful. We went on to produce a short report on flooding that helped to inform all the jurisdictions. Last night, I was in Belfast, where we had the latest leg of our inquiry into human trafficking, which has been an important piece of work. In January, we will be in Edinburgh to talk about the issue again.

We must congratulate all those who are involved in BIPA, which is an important organisation. I am delighted to be a part of it and I look forward to the years ahead and to continuing to put effort into identifying areas in which we can work together across the British isles so that we benefit from one another's knowledge.

17:20

**Mary Scanlon (Highlands and Islands) (Con):**

I, too, thank my colleague John Scott for securing the debate. I join him in acknowledging the hospitality and splendour of Glasgow city chambers. I agree with Michael McMahon that, given that Westminster, Stormont and the Oireachtas have had full plenary debates on BIPA, it would be appropriate for the Scottish Parliament to do the same in future.

Like Willie Coffey, I was not too familiar with BIPA until it was mentioned by a minister in responding to a members' business debate on Irish people living in Scotland. I was asked to speak in that debate because my mother came from Donegal and, like many others, settled in Scotland. I am proud of my Donegal roots and equally proud of my father, who was born and bred in Scotland.

I have attended three sessions of BIPA, the first of which took place in the Grand hotel in Brighton, when I was placed beside a Sinn Féin delegate for dinner. Then there was the Dublin meeting, and the meeting last month in Glasgow. I commend the work of the co-chairs Laurence Robertson, MP for Tewkesbury, and Joe McHugh, Fine Gael TD from Donegal. John Scott mentioned the development of the body to 2008. BIPA is important, because no other body brings together parliamentarians from all the Administrations in these islands and from such a variety of political backgrounds.

The address by the Taoiseach, Enda Kenny, in Dublin has been one of my highlights to date. As a

previous member of the then BIIPB, he spoke from experience about the developments between our countries. He described the Queen's visit to Ireland as "ground breaking", "momentous and unique" and

"a turning point in British-Irish relations."

The focus at BIPA meetings is on working together, building trust, forging relationships and developing understanding between parliamentarians from all the islands.

More than €1 billion of trade flows across the Irish Sea every week. In 2011 alone, Ireland's exports to the UK increased by more than €600 million. Exports from Ireland to the UK are greater than Irish exports to Brazil, Russia, India and China put together. In turn, Ireland is the United Kingdom's fifth-largest export market. As well as the greater economic benefits from working closely, in the energy sector there is much to be gained from interconnectors and shared research and development in marine energy. More is being done to share health services between the north and south of Ireland and to provide access to specialist services in the UK for people who live in Ireland.

At the meeting in Glasgow, committee C, of which I am a member, had an update on wave and tidal energy from Neil Kermode of the European Marine Energy Centre. Energy will be the focus of our next meeting, in Donegal, which will come midway through the Irish presidency of the European Union. As John Scott said, in Glasgow, the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland gave an address, which was followed by a robust question session. Current and future issues were discussed, as were several issues from the past. The session was conducted in a manner respectful to all.

As Willie Coffey said, there was a debate on the West Lothian question. The debate that I found most interesting was the one that was led by Frank Feighan TD, who spoke of the decade of commemoration, which will run from 2012 to 2022 and commemorates a period that shaped the history of British-Irish relations until the present day. Between 2014 and 2018, we are likely to focus on the great war and the anniversary of Bannockburn, but 1912 to 1922 was also a unique period in Irish history, with the introduction of the third home rule bill and the signing of the Ulster covenant in 1912, the outbreak of the first world war, the Representation of the People Act 1918, which gave the franchise to women over 30, the establishment of the Irish Free State and much more.

The joint statement by Prime Minister David Cameron and the Taoiseach in March this year says it all for me:

"2012 also marks the beginning of a decade of centenary commemorations of events that helped shape our political destinies. This series of commemorations offers us an opportunity to explore and reflect on key episodes of our past. We will do so in a spirit of historical accuracy, mutual respect ... and reconciliation."

That is what BIPA is all about.

It must be better to build good relations with trusted neighbours and to work together to mutual advantage for the sake of all the people who live in Scotland, England, Wales, Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland, the Isle of Man, Guernsey and Jersey.

17:26

**The Cabinet Secretary for Culture and External Affairs (Fiona Hyslop):** I am glad to have the opportunity to comment on the valuable work of the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly and to acknowledge that Glasgow was the venue for the assembly's 45th plenary session and that the agenda had a strong Scottish theme.

The First Minister, who is a former member of the BIIPB, wrote to welcome the assembly to Scotland and offer his best wishes for a lively and productive plenary session. My colleague Mr Ewing addressed the assembly and told me how successful the event was. Reports suggest that the sessions were lively. The speeches by Michael McMahon, Willie Coffey, John Scott and Mary Scanlon reflected that well.

I was particularly interested to see the comments of the assembly's co-chairmen—Laurence Robertson MP and Joe McHugh TD—who said that, although the discussions on Scottish efforts to boost trade and tourism provided much food for thought for members of the other Parliaments and Assemblies in attendance, the overriding issue of the 2014 referendum on Scottish independence dominated the plenary. They added that, although the referendum debate would clearly continue to dominate public discourse in Scotland for the next two years, it was important that the assembly maintain its focus on building economic links and policies between Administrations to aid recovery and boost employment and trade.

Mary Scanlon was right to recognise the value of exports to the Irish economy in particular. She may be pleased to know that, only last month, I attended a British Irish Chamber of Commerce event as part of the promotion of such relationships.

The assembly exemplifies how we, the elected representatives of the people of these islands, can collaborate to tackle the major social and economic issues that transcend our borders, irrespective of our different political perspectives.

Although it previously focused on the peace process, the fact that its members now have a greater focus on working together to build economic links between our islands is a testament to the efforts of the people of these islands, as well as groups such as BIPA.

That is not to say that the role that BIPA plays in the peace process has concluded. Indeed, I encourage members to remember the genesis of the assembly and to be sensitive to that when considering its activities and future plans. The murder on 1 November of Northern Ireland prison officer David Black served as a stark reminder that security issues will remain on the agenda for British-Irish relations for some time to come. It also demonstrates the need for vigilance and attention to the Good Friday agreement and issues that affect peace, reconciliation and progress in Northern Ireland.

The fact that representatives of the Administrations from the UK, Ireland, Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland, Guernsey, Jersey and the Isle of Man attend BIPA adds much to the assembly's work. As I know from my role representing Scotland on the British-Irish Council, we face many of the same problems. The difficulties and challenges that we have to overcome—especially in such challenging economic times—are often similar, and it is essential that we co-operate with, and learn from, one another as we seek to overcome them.

In that regard, the BIC, which is the intergovernmental body, has agreed to share information on various work streams more proactively with BIPA. By sharing our experiences, we can learn from one another. That not only helps us as parliamentarians but, more important, makes a difference for the people whom we represent. The willingness of BIPA members to encourage engagement and co-operation on matters of mutual interest and concern is of great benefit to us all. That will be even more important for an independent Scotland, as it will allow us to continue to meet and discuss common interests with our BIC and BIPA counterparts as representatives of a sovereign Scotland.

I end by expressing my thanks to all those who worked so hard to make the Glasgow plenary a success, particularly the co-chairs, Laurence Robertson MP and Joe McHugh TD. I look forward to hearing more about the next plenary in Donegal, which I understand will discuss a joint energy strategy for Britain and Ireland—an issue on which the British-Irish Council has spent much time, and one to which it has paid much attention. It is another issue that is of great interest to Scotland and one on which we have much to contribute. In terms of co-operation, it is probably

one of the areas in which we can have the most dynamic intervention.

**Mary Scanlon:** Will the cabinet secretary take an intervention?

**Fiona Hyslop:** I was about to end my speech, but I will take an intervention.

**Mary Scanlon:** Issues have been raised regarding working towards a closer relationship between BIPA and the British-Irish Council. Can the cabinet secretary confirm how the British-Irish Council will give its input on future discussions, particularly on energy, which is an area on which we can work together to our mutual advantage?

**Fiona Hyslop:** Mary Scanlon will be interested to know that, at the BIC summit in Dublin last January, which I attended, the council charged the new BIC standing secretariat—which, as John Scott mentioned, is now located in Edinburgh—with engaging with the BIPA secretariat to discuss the implementation of those areas for improvement on which the BIC and BIPA are agreed. They were set out in the letter that the BIC secretariat sent to the BIPA secretariat following the 2010 summit in Guernsey. I understand that that work is continuing.

On the work streams, extensive work has been carried out between the different jurisdictions on energy in particular. It is a recurring theme at the British-Irish Council, and the willingness to engage is clear from the seeking of a response from the BIPA secretariat as to how that information can be shared. However, I endorse the view that there can be no suggestion that BIPA should be seen to hold the BIC to account. That is the role of the legislatures from which the member Administrations are drawn; it is not the role of BIPA.

In relation to some of the agenda items, such as human trafficking, which Michael McMahon mentioned and on which the Scottish Parliament has been strongly involved in legislating, and particularly energy, we are starting to see the progression of the relationships, be it through BIPA or the BIC. Discussion of the substantive issues can help us proceed in the decades to come, for example in relation to renewable energy and social justice. Experiences vary—we are not saying that they are all the same—and the solutions will not necessarily be the same, but we can exchange ideas, for example on youth employment.

I have already seen a testing of our approaches, which can be informed by the approaches of our closest neighbours. That is the type of relationship that we want to foster. The role of individual parliamentarians in BIPA, whether they are from this Parliament or others, is really important, because we have to test ourselves, just as the

parliamentarians in the Scottish Parliament have to test the Government on what it does. If we are better informed because we know about other examples of what is happening, it can help us to produce better policy solutions. That is important, because it is ultimately the people whom we serve—the people whom we have the opportunity and the privilege to represent in the Parliament—who must be at the forefront of our thinking.

I hope that that explains some of the relationships. I am happy to engage with members on the subject in the years to come.

*Meeting closed at 17:34.*

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