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Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Official Report

MEETING OF THE PARLIAMENT

Thursday 22 November 2012

Session 4

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CONTENTS

	Col.
PRESIDING OFFICER'S RULING	13797
GENERAL QUESTION TIME	13799
Household Dangers	13799
Sex Offenders.....	13800
Beta Blockers.....	13801
Low-carbon Economy	13802
British Sign Language	13803
NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde.....	13804
Scottish Energy Skills Academy	13805
FIRST MINISTER'S QUESTION TIME	13807
Engagements.....	13807
Prime Minister (Meetings).....	13812
Cabinet (Meetings)	13815
Wind Turbine Manufacturing (Areva)	13816
Out-of-hours Paediatric Services (Lothian, Fife and Borders)	13817
Year of Homecoming 2014.....	13818
ASYLUM SEEKERS (DESTITUTION)	13820
<i>Motion debated—[Linda Fabiani].</i>	
Linda Fabiani (East Kilbride) (SNP).....	13820
Mary Fee (West Scotland) (Lab)	13822
Sandra White (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP).....	13824
Jamie McGrigor (Highlands and Islands) (Con)	13826
Christina McKelvie (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)	13827
Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green)	13829
The Minister for External Affairs and International Development (Humza Yousaf).....	13830
FURTHER EDUCATION	13834
<i>Motion moved—[Michael Russell].</i>	
<i>Amendment moved—[Liam McArthur].</i>	
The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning (Michael Russell).....	13834
Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD).....	13840
Neil Findlay (Lothian) (Lab)	13846
Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)	13848
George Adam (Paisley) (SNP)	13850
Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab)	13853
Joan McAlpine (South Scotland) (SNP)	13855
Rob Gibson (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP).....	13857
Patricia Ferguson (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (Lab)	13859
Mike MacKenzie (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)	13861
Colin Beattie (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP).....	13864
James Kelly (Rutherglen) (Lab).....	13866
Jamie Hepburn (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP).....	13868
John Pentland (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab).....	13871
Mark McDonald (North East Scotland) (SNP)	13873
Alison Johnstone (Lothian) (Green).....	13875
Richard Lyle (Central Scotland) (SNP).....	13878
Jenny Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab).....	13879
Liam McArthur	13880
Gavin Brown (Lothian) (Con).....	13883
Hugh Henry (Renfrewshire South) (Lab).....	13885
Michael Russell.....	13887
DECISION TIME	13892

Scottish Parliament

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[The Presiding Officer *opened the meeting at 11:40*]

Presiding Officer's Ruling

The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick): Good morning. I would like to make a statement before we start.

The standing orders of this Parliament explicitly state that members shall respect the authority of the Presiding Officer. It is inevitable that decisions of the chair will not meet the approval of all members at all times. That has always been the case. Nevertheless, it is imperative that the authority of the chair is respected at all times. If that were not the case, the Parliament would be unable to carry out the functions that the people of Scotland have asked us to undertake.

Yesterday, Michael McMahon showed gross discourtesy and disrespect to the chair. However, as I did not clearly hear what the member said at the time, I decided to speak to him privately and to take time to study the *Official Report* of proceedings once it was available. I acknowledge that Mr McMahon apologised. Had Mr McMahon not done so, I would have referred the matter to the Parliamentary Bureau, so serious did I consider the discourtesy to the chair.

Taking all of the circumstances into account, I have decided to exclude Mr McMahon from the chamber for the duration of today's chamber business. This is not a decision that I have taken lightly.

Members will recall that, on 30 October, I referred to Donald Dewar's words on the opening of the Scottish Parliament when he explained to us:

"This is about more than our politics and our laws. This is about who we are, how we carry ourselves."

I told members then that I expected them to consider very carefully their choice of words and the tone in which they are delivered. It is a matter of regret that, a few short weeks later, we have witnessed the type of behaviour that Mr McMahon displayed yesterday.

We have important business in front of us. Those who elect us to this place look to us, as parliamentarians, to show leadership and to debate the issues before us with respect and dignity for the institution of Parliament. As Presiding Officer, I will support to the limits of my power the conduct of parliamentary business in this chamber. I will, however, not tolerate

behaviour that falls short of the standards that the people whom we are privileged to represent expect of us.

General Question Time

11:42

Household Dangers

1. Christina McKelvie (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what measures it takes to raise awareness of household dangers to young children. (S4O-01516)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing (Alex Neil): The Scottish Government is committed to improving child safety throughout Scotland through leadership, improved partnership working, awareness raising and targeted funding. Our commitment is set out in a range of frameworks, strategies and initiatives, including the curriculum for excellence, the national parenting strategy, don't give fire a home and good places, better health.

We fund the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents to undertake home safety training and awareness raising. We also fund child safety week in Scotland each year to raise awareness of childhood accidents and how to prevent them. We fund discrete pieces of work such as ROSPA's blind cord safety campaign across Scotland. That is in addition to on-going funding for fire safety work.

Christina McKelvie: The cabinet secretary will be aware of the terrifying experience of little Eilidh Paterson of Larkhall, who was caught in blind cords at her home recently. Thankfully, quick-thinking paramedic Alex Kennedy managed to save Eilidh, and we pay tribute to him for that.

Will the cabinet secretary offer his support to the make it safe campaign run by Debbie Paterson, Eilidh's mum, and the *Hamilton Advertiser* in conjunction with ROSPA to raise awareness of that type of household danger in the hope of preventing any more families from facing such a terrifying ordeal?

Alex Neil: I can think of nothing worse than having to watch one's child go through that kind of experience. I support the campaign 100 per cent and would be delighted to lend my voice and support to the petition.

Although the number of deaths and injuries from accidents among children is falling and the number of accidents is falling, any incident of the kind that Christina McKelvie described, which could have been much more serious, must be avoided. Action must be taken to ensure that that happens. The work that ROSPA is doing and the awareness-raising campaign to which I referred

are absolutely essential, and I am happy to support the campaign and the petition.

Sex Offenders

2. Paul Martin (Glasgow Provan) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government how many of the 33 recommendations in the Justice 2 Sub-Committee's report, "Justice System (Child-Sex Offenders)", on managing registered sex offenders have been delivered since 10 May 2007. (S4O-01517)

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice (Kenny MacAskill): In Scotland, we have in place a strong legislative framework, robust monitoring arrangements and agencies working together with the expertise to protect the public from sex offenders. Of the 33 recommendations, 31 have been implemented: nine were implemented before 10 May 2007 and 22 have been delivered since then.

Work to implement the protection of vulnerable groups scheme in Scotland began on 28 February 2011. To date, 279,000 people have become scheme members. Once implementation is completed, research into the impact of the scheme will be conducted.

The Criminal Justice and Licensing (Scotland) Act 2010 amended Scotland's sexual offences prevention order regime. That has resulted in the police successfully applying for conditions that require offenders to take specific action where previously there was no such obligation. The 2010 act also allows us to prescribe in regulations the increased frequency with which homeless sex offenders must verify their personal details to the police. Those regulations will be brought forward to Parliament shortly.

Paul Martin: For the purposes of the *Official Report*, can I ask the minister to advise me whether recommendation 10 has been fully implemented?

Kenny MacAskill: Yes, the position is that recommendation 10 required homeless offenders to report more regularly to the police. As I mentioned, the Criminal Justice and Licensing (Scotland) Act 2010 has made those amendments. We are bringing forward the regulations, so the matters are in hand and are being dealt with. The ground has changed since 2007, but the Scottish Government is doing what it can to ensure that we deliver and seek to keep our people safe from those who would harm not just our children but anybody in our communities.

Patricia Ferguson (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (Lab): I am not sure from the cabinet secretary's response whether that particular recommendation has been implemented.

Does the cabinet secretary regard as seriously as I do the fact that, by its very nature, the burden of rehousing sex offenders falls disproportionately on registered social landlords, particularly in our cities and often in our most deprived areas? Does he think that the amendment following recommendation 10 is sufficient to offer protection to those communities?

Kenny MacAskill: Let me remind both Paul Martin and Patricia Ferguson that section 100 of the Criminal Justice and Licensing (Scotland) Act 2010, which came into force on 1 November 2011, amended Scotland's sexual offences prevention orders scheme by allowing for positive obligations in SOPO conditions. A sexual offences prevention order can now place a positive obligation on the offender to report more frequently or at a specified time to a prescribed police station.

The 2010 act also allows us to prescribe in regulations how frequently homeless sex offenders must verify their personal details to the police. Those regulations will be considered by Parliament shortly. That is us delivering on what was required and, indeed, recognising what needs to be done.

The Government is not a housing allocation agency; that matter falls to housing associations and local authorities. The decision on where people are housed is a matter for the organisations that are charged with it. Under the multi-agency public protection arrangements, they have to work with other agencies, including the police in particular, to ensure that we keep our communities as safe as they can be. The decision about where someone is housed is a matter for the MAPPA regime.

Beta Blockers

3. Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government whether it plans to review beta blocker prescribing recommendations following a study recently published in *The Journal of the American Medical Association* suggesting that beta blockers did not prolong the lives of patients. (S4O-01518)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing (Alex Neil): The safety, efficacy and quality of medicines is currently a reserved matter, with the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency being the United Kingdom-wide authority responsible for such issues. I understand that there are no current plans to amend beta blocker prescribing recommendations as a result of the study.

Kenneth Gibson: Beta blockers were hailed as one of the great medical advances of the 20th century. Their inventor, Scotsman James Black, won the Nobel prize in medicine in 1988.

The cabinet secretary will be aware that the journal's study involved some 45,000 patients over 42 months, and it showed that beta blockers do not reduce the risk of heart attacks or strokes, or deaths from either. Given that the study was similar to another recently published in the *Journal of American Geriatrics Society*, does he share my concern that tens of thousands of Scots may be taking beta blockers needlessly when another form of treatment may be more appropriate?

Alex Neil: I understand from the MHRA that the safety and efficacy of beta blockers and their licence indications, including use following heart attack, have been clearly demonstrated through randomised clinical trials. Clinical guidance in the UK has a strong evidence base and provides clear recommendations on the place of beta blockers in the treatment of hypertension and on the most clinically effective use of beta blockers following a heart attack.

The United States study has a number of methodological implications that can influence findings and, furthermore, it does not reflect how beta blockers are used routinely in UK clinical practice. Therefore, the study's findings are not considered to have significant implications for the use of beta blockers in the UK, and it is unlikely that beta blocker prescribing recommendations will need to be altered in the light of those findings.

Low-carbon Economy

4. Joan McAlpine (South Scotland) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what steps it is taking to explore the role of liquid air energy storage in developing Scotland's low-carbon economy. (S4O-01519)

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Employment and Sustainable Growth (John Swinney): Electricity storage could play an increasingly valuable role in Scotland's power network. We are working with engineering institutions and other expert stakeholders to assess the potential for all emerging storage technologies, including liquid air energy storage, to contribute to our energy objectives for Scotland.

Joan McAlpine: My interest in the matter stems from an approach by a constituent who works with companies that specialise in that technology. My constituent is keen that those companies develop their research in Scotland and that they will, perhaps, relocate here from other parts of the United Kingdom to take advantage of our clean energy. What encouragement will the cabinet secretary offer in that regard?

John Swinney: In terms of the business development aspects of any company that is wishing to develop in the low-carbon economy, the low-carbon economy is clearly a major focus of the

Government's economic strategy, which is taken forward on our behalf by Scottish Enterprise and Highlands and Islands Enterprise, with Scottish Development International providing international support. At the business development level, there are a variety of interventions that could be applied. I am very happy to pass on any particular business connections that have come to Joan McAlpine in the direction of the enterprise agencies.

At a policy level, there are clearly issues in relation to the United Kingdom Government's electricity market reform agenda that will be relevant. The Scottish Government is constructively engaged with the UK Government on that agenda.

British Sign Language

5. Mark Griffin (Central Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what progress the Scottish studies working group has made in promoting opportunities to learn British Sign Language in schools. (S4O-01520)

The Minister for Learning, Science and Scotland's Languages (Dr Alasdair Allan): The promotion of opportunities to learn British Sign Language arose during the work of the languages working group. British Sign Language is already part of the learning experience of pupils in a number of Scottish schools. Local authorities and schools have the responsibility for developing language approaches that meet the needs of all their learners, including British Sign Language where appropriate.

Mark Griffin: The minister will know that students in our schools are under pressure to study courses to achieve formal qualifications, whether that is for the purposes of employability or going to college or university. Will there be a qualification attached to the opportunity to learn—and learn about—British Sign Language?

Dr Allan: Mark Griffin raises an important subject. There are, of course, some schools in which British Sign Language-related courses are happening, including Dingwall academy and Clydeview academy in Gourrock. There are other schools, although there are perhaps no centrally held figures on them.

I am certainly open to ensuring that we have the widest possible access to British Sign Language courses. For instance, in the one-plus-two languages programme for Scotland, there is recognition of the fact that, if someone's first language is sign language, that should be recognised and celebrated as a linguistic achievement.

NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde

6. Bob Doris (Glasgow) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government when it last had discussions with NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde and what matters were discussed. (S4O-01521)

The Minister for Public Health (Michael Matheson): Ministers and Scottish Government officials regularly meet national health service boards and discuss matters of importance to local people. I last met the chair of NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde on 12 November.

Bob Doris: I welcome the recent statistics that showed a 13 per cent drop in cancer rates in Glasgow. I also welcome initiatives such as Scotland's detect cancer early programme, which was launched at Springburn health centre this February. However, cancer rates in the city still outstrip those in the rest of Scotland and, across a number of health indicators, the Glasgow effect shows the health of Glaswegians of all socioeconomic groups to be poorer than comparable people elsewhere. How is the Scottish Government working with NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde to tackle that effect?

Michael Matheson: Like Bob Doris, I welcome the recent figures that show a drop in cancer deaths in Glasgow over the past 25 years. However, there is more to be done to make further improvements on reducing the rates of death from cancer. I assure him that tackling health inequalities is one of the Scottish Government's top priorities.

As part of the detect cancer early programme, we are working with general practices in the most deprived areas in greater Glasgow and Clyde to improve access to cancer services and on the uptake of screening. We are committed to ensuring that the patients who require the most urgent treatment have swift access to the full range of services that they need from the NHS. The detect cancer early programme throughout Scotland is backed by some £30 million over the next three years.

NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde is also delivering the keep well anticipatory care programme, which targets people who are at high risk of ill-health in the most deprived areas of Scotland. For greater Glasgow and Clyde, that is supported by some £4.2 million of funding each year over the next three years.

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): The minister will be aware that Greater Glasgow and Clyde Health Board is about to embark on a review of all its services. Will he ensure that included in the consultation is an option for services to be delivered north of the River Clyde at the Vale of Leven hospital in collaboration with the Golden Jubilee hospital?

Michael Matheson: It is important that, as NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde undertakes the review, it considers all the options that are available to it and how it can best deliver services to the people of its area. I expect it to consult local organisations and elected members in the area on how it intends to take the consultation forward.

Scottish Energy Skills Academy

8. Lewis Macdonald (North East Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government how it plans that the Scottish energy skills academy, as stated by the Minister for Energy, Enterprise and Tourism, will be anchored in the north-east of Scotland. (S4O-01523)

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Employment and Sustainable Growth (John Swinney): Aberdeen College, Banff and Buchan College, the Robert Gordon University and the University of Aberdeen have set out a proposal to develop energy skills in the north-east by aligning the curriculum that they offer to support the oil and gas industry's training needs through the provision of a one-stop shop. The Scottish Further and Higher Education Funding Council and Skills Development Scotland are fully supportive of that approach, given those institutions' importance to the industry.

My officials have met representatives of the four institutions, along with the funding council, Skills Development Scotland, Scottish Enterprise and the energy technology partnership, to discuss the proposal and alignment of it with the development of the energy skills academy, which was announced in the budget on 20 September.

Lewis Macdonald: Given the demand for additional trained technicians in the energy sector in the north-east and the need for universities and colleges to have some certainty about future funding, will the cabinet secretary tell us whether funding for the initiative will be provided separately from the mainstream funding for further and higher education and whether it could be allocated for a number of years at a time by, for example, providing support for additional apprenticeships in the energy industries?

John Swinney: I confirm to Mr Macdonald that there is a separate funding stream for the energy skills academy, which is distinct from the normal budget allocations to the funding council that are conveyed on to the further and higher education sectors. In the budget statement in September, I committed £3.25 million over financial years 2012-13 and 2013-14 to establish a Scottish energy skills academy.

Mr Macdonald went on to ask about modern apprenticeships. I would consider funding for modern apprenticeships to be, again, distinct from

that £3.25 million allocation for the energy skills academy but, of course, further detail on that will be developed and shared with Parliament.

Maureen Watt (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): Will the cabinet secretary join me in commending the proactive approach taken by north-east university and college principals Professor Ian Diamond, Professor Ferdinand von Prondzynski, Rob Wallen and Paul Sherrington in convening a meeting on 17 December in Aberdeen, to which MSPs have been invited, to discuss the challenges and opportunities in the development of an oil and gas academy?

John Swinney: I welcome that initiative. It is an indication of how our higher and further education institutions are responding positively to the Government's call to engage heavily with the business sectors of our economy to guarantee that the business community can rely on a strong and effective supply of skilled personnel to support business development. In the North Sea oil and gas sector, the demand for skills is very high at the moment, because of the intense level of business activity in that sector.

First Minister's Question Time

12:00

Engagements

1. Johann Lamont (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab): To ask the First Minister what engagements he has planned for the rest of the day. (S4F-00991)

The First Minister (Alex Salmond): I thought that the chamber would like a quick update on the severe weather situation that many of our fellow citizens face, given that it will occupy ministers a good deal today.

As at 10.30, there were 12 flood alerts in Scotland and a flood warning for Glen Lyon in Perthshire. The catchment area of the Water of Ruchill has experienced heavy rain this morning, which may lead to the river becoming bank-full in Comrie. Additional flood defences have been installed around the village, and it is hoped and believed that they will hold. Other areas that could be affected by flooding include Whitesands in Dumfries and Dalmellington in Ayrshire. The resilience unit has been activated for most of this week and Scottish ministers, with their partners, are attending to their job and function in protecting the people of Scotland from the severe weather conditions.

Johann Lamont: We certainly hope that ministers are doing their job.

In February 2011, more than 18 months ago, John Swinney, as Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth, made an announcement on college funding that still left a cut this year. On Tuesday, Mr Swinney said that he was always on top of the figures, as is his duty. He confirmed that he knew at the time that the First Minister was giving the wrong figures on colleges, despite nodding away along with the rest of the front bench.

When in the past 18 months did John Swinney inform the First Minister that college funding was to be cut this year? How often did he update him?

The First Minister: Ministers will attend to their job in doing their best to protect the people of Scotland from the extreme and severe weather conditions.

The mistake for which I apologised last week was my mistake. I read out a briefing—

Hugh Henry (Renfrewshire South) (Lab): That is not what you were asked.

The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick): Mr Henry, please.

The First Minister: —that suggested that college funding was increasing this year compared with last year, because it had been forgotten to include in a table the £11 million of additional funding that had been devoted to the colleges last year. That was why the mistake was made. I came to the chamber and apologised in full. Mr Russell has also come to the chamber and apologised in full. In any other parliamentary chamber that I can think of, when a minister or anyone else comes to the chamber to give an apology and explanation, that is accepted with good grace as the right thing to do. The same should be the case in this chamber.

I have looked carefully at the mechanism that was introduced in this Parliament for all members—not just ministers—to correct inadvertent errors. I note that it has been used six times by ministers and once by another Scottish National Party member. It has not been used by any other member in the chamber. Is that because other members have never made mistakes, or is it because they have chosen not to correct the mistakes that they have made?

Johann Lamont: Whatever that was, it was not a gracious recognition of the mistake that the First Minister made.

Last week, I was accused of being a puppet. It turned out that there was only one puppet in here and it was Pinocchio.

The Presiding Officer: Ms Lamont, could you watch your language?

Johann Lamont: The fact of the matter is that, last week, we were able to hand the First Minister the document that was written by his own cabinet secretary that proved that we were right. Despite that, he chose not to be honest with us.

The First Minister did not answer the question that I asked him. Are we honestly expected to believe that the issue was not discussed at Cabinet? It surely cannot be right that levels of investment in Scotland's colleges were not discussed at Cabinet, or at least by the finance secretary, the First Minister and Mike Russell. Did such discussions take place? If so, will the First Minister spell out when they took place? If they did not take place, why was that the case? Does that explain why he got the maths wrong last Thursday?

The First Minister: I read out the wrong figure from a briefing paper—that is the explanation. Let us examine Johann Lamont's fantastic conspiracy theory. Why would I read out the wrong number from a briefing paper if I was aware of the various documents that had been presented? Why would the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning present the comprehensive information to the Education and Culture Committee if the

explanation was not that I simply read out the wrong figure from a briefing paper?

I point out that the figure was wrong because we increased college funding last year, and that was not counted in the figure in the table that I read out. Incidentally, that table was lodged in the Scottish Parliament information centre last week. I hope that Johann Lamont has bothered to read it.

The explanation for all Johann Lamont's wondering is that I made a mistake by reading out the wrong figure. Can we now move on to the substantive issue of college funding in Scotland and the Government's efforts to protect and defend the education system in Scotland from cutbacks from Westminster and a surrender on policy by the Labour Party?

Johann Lamont: It does not take the First Minister long to get to the alibi when he is under pressure. Please take responsibility for something. [*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Order.

Johann Lamont: When the First Minister accidentally read out the wrong figure from a briefing paper, why did his finance secretary and his education secretary, who knew that the figure was not true, start nodding in agreement with him? That goes to the heart of the Scottish Government's pretence of competence—the approach is to keep people in the dark, assert the opposite of the truth and hope that no one notices.

The worrying thing is not that the First Minister allegedly got one specific figure wrong but that, if we are to believe him, he did not know whether spending on Scotland's colleges was going up or down. Which is worse—that the First Minister is so incompetent that he does not know when spending is going up or down or that he deliberately misled the people of Scotland and denied the impact of his choices on the workforce in colleges and on communities across Scotland?

The First Minister: If people are to be held responsible for their body language when other people are making statements, the Labour Party is on very difficult ground, given the looks, glowers and other forms of body language that infect the Labour benches. [*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Order.

The First Minister: I will introduce Johann Lamont to some of the substantive points. She says that it is evading responsibility to point out that there are severe cuts at Westminster that are affecting the people of Scotland. It is not evading responsibility to point out that, under the system of finance and government that the Labour Party has supported in Scotland, our budget has a direct relationship to the budget at Westminster, through the Barnett formula. It is therefore relevant to look

at what is happening to budget funding in England and Wales.

Johann Lamont knows that the budget for Scotland's colleges is going down by 1.7 per cent this year in comparison with last year. I wish that the situation was otherwise, but that is the reality. However, south of the border, the figure is 5 per cent. Given that our budget is directly related to the education budget south of the border, that is surely relevant information.

Another argument that I have put consistently to Johann Lamont is about support for the regionalisation programme. Through the non-profit-distributing mechanism, the Scottish Government is investing massive sums in the colleges of Scotland—colleges such as Forth Valley College, whose campus has been reinvigorated, and Kilmarnock College and Inverness College. Huge expenditure has been made in the Glasgow colleges.

That is the strategy—through the regionalisation concept and that investment—to bring about and protect the college infrastructure of Scotland, so that it can serve its duty to the students of Scotland. That is not evading responsibility; that is living up to the responsibility of doing the best that the Government possibly can do for the students and college students of Scotland in the face of attacks from Westminster. Johann Lamont and her party have supported the system that brings about the cut in funding.

Johann Lamont: For what it is worth, my body language says, "What on earth was all that about?" The questions are about the First Minister's choices in education and his inability to be honest about what he chooses to support and not to support.

This is a man who, at 12 o'clock, can give the most exact answer ever given to a Parliament at any time, anywhere, but who has to admit by 5 o'clock that his statements were the opposite of the truth. That is because we provided the information, not because he offered it. Whether we are talking about Europe, Doosan investing in Scotland or the number of jobs in the renewables sector, the First Minister just makes it up. Does he honestly expect us to believe that he, his finance minister and Mike Russell did not agree college cuts in the months before they came to the chamber to deny them?

I ask the First Minister again: which is worse—that he does not know what his Government is doing to the colleges of this country, or that he is prepared knowingly to mislead the people of Scotland? [*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Order.

The First Minister: I note that Johann Lamont has never made use of the facility for making a correction to what she has said in the chamber. I have a full list of the number of times that her statements in the chamber have been at variance with the facts. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Order.

The First Minister: For example, on 9 February, she claimed that there was an £800 million steel contract for the Forth crossing, but actually the steel contract is around 10 per cent of the total contract. She has claimed that there were falling numbers of people in the national health service since the Government took office, which is also not true. Those claims and Johann Lamont's apparent position that she never makes mistakes are at severe variance with the facts that we can produce for members. The difference is that when we made a mistake, both the education secretary and I apologised to members and corrected it. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Mr Henry, that is enough.

The First Minister: The Labour Party never corrects its mistakes. It does not correct the mistakes that it regularly makes in the chamber, and it does not correct or apologise for its great mistakes, such as the war in Iraq, which was imposed on us by a Labour Government, and the private finance initiative programme, which will be foisted on Scotland's finances for years and generations to come. There has been no apology from Johann Lamont not just for attempting to tear up the Scottish National Party manifesto but for tearing up the Labour manifesto on tuition fees, prescription charges, transport for older people and free care for the elderly. Each of those was identified in Labour's manifesto last year and each is being consigned to the dustbin of history by her cuts commission. That is why the Government is trusted and the Labour Party is not.

Johann Lamont: This goes to the heart of the problem with the Scottish Government. The idea that that was an answer to the question that I asked is complete nonsense. I asked the First Minister which is worse—that he is so incompetent that he does not know that his spending choices are leading to cuts in colleges, or that he thinks that he can get away with misleading people? I have said that we need to be honest not just about what we choose to spend money on but about the consequences. What the First Minister has done is deny those consequences. I ask him to reflect again on the choice that he is making to cut spending on colleges at the very time when our young people need them most.

The First Minister: A mistake was made and apologised for. On the question of honesty, as

deputy leader of the Labour Party, Johann Lamont promised to freeze the council tax on page 69 of Labour's manifesto, retain the commitment to free personal care, retain the abolition of tuition fees for Scotland's students on page 32 of the manifesto, and retain the concessionary travel scheme on page 64. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Order.

The First Minister: No charging for prescriptions was promised on page 42 and protecting front-line police numbers was promised on page 48. Every single one of those solemn Labour commitments is in the process of being sacrificed and jeopardised. That is nothing like honesty. More important, that is why, as those facts become known to the people of our country, it will be a gey long time afore the Labour Party gets anywhere near government in Scotland.

Prime Minister (Meetings)

2. Ruth Davidson (Glasgow) (Con): To ask the First Minister when he will next meet the Prime Minister. (S4F-00990)

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

Ruth Davidson: In the First Minister's answers to the Labour Party leader, we have all just seen him diminish his office. In one of his answers, he said that we must

"move on to the substantive issue of college funding",

and I believe that he said that we should recognise his Government's efforts to "protect and defend" the college budget. Let us look at that.

Last week, the First Minister repeatedly told us that the further education budget for 2012-13 is £546 million yet, in the draft budget for 2013-14, the Government says that the revenue budget for further education will be reduced to £511 million. Can he confirm that that represents a £34 million single-year cash cut? I can tell him now that that is more than 5 per cent.

The First Minister: It is actually £512 million, based on the figures that have been presented and according to the table that I have here, which I always present with great care to the chamber. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Order.

The First Minister: Can Ruth Davidson understand that the decline in funding through the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills budget to the English further education sector is far greater than the decline that has happened in Scotland, or that is projected in Scotland? Each year, the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning, in conjunction with the Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Employment and

Sustainable Growth, has managed to put extra funding into the college budget. That is the process of protection. If Ruth Davidson would care to glance at what is happening to colleges south of the border, she will see why we are protecting the colleges of Scotland.

Ruth Davidson supports the position in which our education budget is directly related to the education budget that is being pursued by her colleagues in England and Wales. I support the position in which Scotland will have its resources, in order to dictate our own priorities, so that we can invest in the students of this country. As long as we are under that constraint from Westminster, we will do our best to defend colleges and other public services in Scotland.

However, when budgets are collapsing south of the border, it ill behoves the Conservative Party to come to this chamber and suggest anything other than that that protection is being pursued for the benefit of the people of Scotland.

Ruth Davidson: Although the First Minister is in charge of budgets in this country and has cut the colleges' budget over the spending review period by 24 per cent, which is significantly more than the overall reduction in the budget, there is still no acknowledgement that any responsibility lies with him. Last Thursday—at the fifth attempt, by my count—the First Minister told the Parliament that the further education budget in 2011-12 was £555 million and that the budget for 2012-13 is £446 million. I apologise; it is £546 million. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Order, Dr Allan.

Ruth Davidson: The First Minister stated that, in 2011-12, the budget was £555 million and that the budget for 2012-13 is £546 million, yet today the Parliament's independent information service—the Scottish Parliament information centre, to which the First Minister referred earlier—insists that the true figure for 2011-12 was actually £576 million and that the budget for 2012-13 is £526 million. Can he explain that discrepancy, either now, or at 5 o'clock?

The First Minister: Given that Ruth Davidson—no doubt inadvertently—made an error of £100 million in the first figure that she quoted, we look forward to the correction in the *Official Report*. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Order. *[Interruption.]* Order, Mr Henry.

The First Minister: If Ruth Davidson was prepared to examine the documents that have been presented to the Education and Culture Committee, which I have had cause to examine in great detail over the past few days, she will find the explanation that she is looking for, which is

that the money—the £15 million—was allocated to help with reorganisation in this financial year. It was given to the Scottish Further and Higher Education Funding Council in the last budget revisions, which allocated it to be spent in this financial year. She will find that point detailed in the explanation to the committee. That means either that she has not read the explanation, or that she chooses not to tell Parliament.

When we come to accuracy in this chamber, Ruth Davidson might remember that during her contribution last week on college funding she told Parliament that she was giving us examples of

“courses that are now no longer available under the education secretary's stewardship”,

and she put forward a list of courses. I am putting into SPICe a list of where those courses are available. The higher national diploma in technical support, which she said was “gone” under Mike Russell's stewardship, is available at Kilmarnock College, City of Glasgow College, Cardonald College, Langside College, Anniesland College, North Glasgow College, Edinburgh College, Forth Valley College, West Lothian College, Aberdeen College and—famously—Stow College in Glasgow.

That goes for the other subjects that Ruth Davidson said were no longer available. Once she has read the list in SPICe, will we get another apology from Ruth Davidson for coming to the chamber and inadvertently giving us misinformation, or will the Conservative Party hold to the idea that the Opposition parties never come to this chamber with inaccuracies? The only difference is that the Opposition parties never correct their inaccuracies and they never apologise.

Ruth Davidson: I would be absolutely delighted to put into SPICe exactly which colleges the courses have been cut from, under Mike Russell.

In that half-answer that the First Minister gave me, he tried to account for £15 million of the discrepancy that I raised, which is the difference between the figure in the chart that was given to the committee and the figure that is available in SPICe, but he did not mention the Skills Development Scotland money of £5 million, did he?

The First Minister: That was also mentioned in the budget debate at stage 3. Of course, the £15 million discrepancy adds to a £30 million difference in the figures if it is allocated in the correct year, as the documents show. I am delighted that Ruth Davidson seems to acknowledge that the £15 million figure exists. She forgot to tell us about it in her question a few minutes ago.

I remind her of what she said in the chamber last week. She did not say that the courses are not available in one college; she said:

"I will give a few examples of courses that are now no longer available under the education secretary's stewardship".—[*Official Report*, 15 November 2012; c 13517.]

She then went through the courses and said that they are "gone". She did not say specifically that they are not available in one college; she told the chamber that they are "no longer available"—that they are "gone". Unfortunately for Ruth Davidson, there are students studying those courses across Scotland at the present moment. They are not "gone". They are there. They exist. It is happening.

Perhaps Ruth Davidson will come to this chamber and not give us the old Tory adage, "Never apologise, never explain." The Tories never apologise and they cannot explain.

Cabinet (Meetings)

3. Willie Rennie (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD):

To ask the First Minister what issues will be discussed at the next meeting of the Cabinet. (S4F-00992)

The First Minister: Issues of importance to the people of Scotland will be discussed.

Willie Rennie: Just what does it take for the education secretary to lose the confidence of the First Minister?

The First Minister: The education secretary is taking forward—under the most difficult financial circumstances that are being visited upon us by a Government that the member's colleagues support in Westminster—a position in which no student in Scotland pays tuition fees. That is not just the students at our universities, but the 23,000 students in our colleges, who would be paying tuition fees if Willie Rennie and his colleagues had their way.

Willie Rennie: As usual, the First Minister is an expert on every other Government. The last thing that he is is an expert on his own Government. It is astonishing that, after all that has happened in recent weeks, the First Minister believes that Mike Russell should stay. It is wrong that the First Minister puts his interests above those of the colleges. We know that the relationship with college leaders has been wrecked. Principals will not speak out, in case their colleges suffer. The education secretary has got his figures wrong yet again, according to SPICe.

Mike Russell is so out of control that he is even reporting his own Government to the ombudsman. Does the First Minister accept that we need a change of approach, figures that we can all agree

and an education secretary who we can trust to deliver? When will he grasp the thistle?

The First Minister: I have a list here of major figures in Scottish colleges who have supported Mr Russell in the recent disagreement with regard to Stow College. Mr Russell is pursuing the brief in an excellent manner across the range of his responsibilities.

Willie Rennie asked me a question: under what circumstances would I lose confidence in one of my ministers? I think that circumstances in which people across the country would be entitled to lose confidence would be if one had taken a firm and solemn manifesto commitment, such as there being no tuition fees for the students of a country, and then torn it up for seats at the Cabinet table at Westminster. In those circumstances, not only one's colleagues but, more important, the people would lose confidence.

If Willie Rennie looks around at his diminished and reduced number of colleagues, he will see that the confidence that the Liberal Democrats have lost is the confidence of the people of this country—and the single biggest issue on which they lost that confidence was their decision to reintroduce tuition fees and the demonstration that they would do anything to support the Conservative Party in return for a share of power. Perhaps, when that realisation and the extent of the loss of the people of Scotland's confidence in them dawn on Willie Rennie, he will be entitled to ask whether Scotland will ever lose confidence in a Government that maintains the principle of free education in this country.

Wind Turbine Manufacturing (Areva)

4. Dennis Robertson (Aberdeenshire West) (SNP): To ask the First Minister what benefits Scotland will receive following the announcement that French firm, Areva, is to locate its United Kingdom turbine manufacturing site in Scotland. (S4F-01000)

The First Minister (Alex Salmond): Earlier this week, I met Areva, which has announced that it will locate its turbine manufacturing site in Scotland. It will be one of its three major European sites. That is fantastic news for Scotland, with the potential to create 750 jobs in manufacturing and the supporting supply chain. It is further good news from the renewables sector, which has seen £2.8 billion of investment in Scotland since 2009 and delivers economic benefits to communities the length and breadth of our country.

Dennis Robertson: I find it extremely encouraging that overseas companies continue to look at Scotland as a place to invest. Does the First Minister agree that the situation is perhaps slightly hampered by the UK Government's

confused and divided approach to its energy policies and that the only way of rectifying things is to take powers over energy policy, and indeed everything else, back to this Parliament?

The First Minister: I think that there is a great deal of strength in that particular argument. The Opposition benches should remember that Areva was one of the companies that recently signed a letter expressing concern at aspects of UK Government energy policy.

On Monday, however, I was absolutely delighted to find among the many welcomes for Areva's announcement of its intentions a welcome from John Hayes, the junior energy minister in the Westminster Parliament, who was of course recently involved in a speech that was never delivered in which he was going to cite his opposition to wind technology. Although I welcome John Hayes's salute for Areva's intentions, I gently point out to the Conservative Party that it is not possible to manufacture wind turbines if one does not believe in wind energy playing a role in energy policy.

Out-of-hours Paediatric Services (Lothian, Fife and Borders)

5. Dr Richard Simpson (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): To ask the First Minister what action the Scottish Government will take in response to concerns that out-of-hours paediatric services at NHS Lothian, Fife and Borders are at risk due to a shortage of trainee doctors. (S4F-00999)

The First Minister (Alex Salmond): We are very much aware of the situation in the south-east of Scotland and have made it clear to the three national health service boards involved that we will support every effort to ensure that the best quality paediatric services are maintained for children across the region.

Following a meeting earlier this week with NHS Lothian chief executive Tim Davison, the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing allocated up to £100,000 in this financial year and committed a further £500,000 over the next two financial years to support the appointments of four fixed-term clinical fellows, which will be followed up with a further national and international recruitment campaign for permanent trained staff to maintain services at St John's hospital in Livingston. I hope that the member recognises the importance of that announcement.

Dr Simpson: I thank the First Minister for his reply and for the announcement. However, I wonder what the families and children in Fife, Lothian and the Borders are feeling and what they believe, given that the First Minister said in June that the closure of the paediatric ward at St John's was unsatisfactory and that remedial action was

well under way to prevent a recurrence. However, the situation has not improved; it is very much worse, with 13 staff down in the medical field. We know from the Lothian NHS Board announcements that St John's paediatric ward is under threat of closure, that services across Fife, the Borders and Lothian are stretched to breaking point and that remedial action has not yet been taken.

Is this yet another broken promise? Is this another case of the public being misled, with the First Minister saying what he likes in the chamber regardless of what is happening in the real world of the NHS?

The First Minister: A serious recruitment issue has occurred because there are staff on maternity leave and because of other matters. That affects 12.3 whole-time staff out of 47 and, because that is 25 per cent of trainee numbers, that creates a significant difficulty.

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing has met the health board and has suggested the action that I have outlined, which is designed to address the circumstances. We will also be working with NHS Education Scotland to develop Scottish-based programmes of study to support the development of advanced nurse practitioners to help to sustain the provision of specialist paediatric services across the country. That is a response to the immediate situation that has arisen and a longer-term response to enable the position to be better across Scotland.

That is significant action in the face of a real problem and I would have thought that it would be welcomed across the chamber.

Year of Homecoming 2014

6. Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): To ask the First Minister what the Scottish Government is doing to ensure that the 2014 year of homecoming is a success. (S4F-01003)

The First Minister (Alex Salmond): The year of homecoming in 2009 attracted 95,000 visitors to travel to Scotland and exceeded its target by generating an estimated £53 million in additional tourism revenue for Scotland in what was a difficult year for global tourism.

The themes for 2014 will hope to build on that success and the organisation is on-going.

Murdo Fraser: I thank the First Minister for his response. He will be aware that the gathering 2014, which was to be the centrepiece of the year of homecoming, has been cancelled by Stirling Council for perfectly understandable reasons. He may also be aware of concerns that North American visitors are less likely to come to Scotland in June to attend an event at

Bannockburn than they would be to attend a clan gathering event in July or August.

How will the Scottish Government and its agencies ensure that we have enough attractive events in 2014 to make up for the cancellation of the gathering, so that the large number of American visitors that our tourism industry is hoping for will still come here?

The First Minister: I direct Murdo Fraser to the president of the Council of Scottish Clans and Associations, Susan McIntosh, who said:

“we welcome the opportunity to work with the homecoming 2014 team to ensure that plans for the battle of Bannockburn ... event are developed with a clan audience in mind.”

On seeing the significance of that 700th anniversary and understanding how it must play a part in the year of homecoming, we took advice from a variety of quarters. That included a 26 May 2010 press statement, which said:

“the Scottish Conservatives believe that the 700th anniversary of the battle of Bannockburn must be the centrepiece of these national celebrations ... The fate of the nation was decided in the battle of Bannockburn in 1314 during the wars of independence and it must be the focal point for homecoming in 2014.”

The author of that statement was Murdo Fraser. I am following Murdo Fraser's advice to the letter and I hope that it was not that statement that resulted in the disgraceful decision not to elect him as leader of the Conservative Party.

Asylum Seekers (Destitution)

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Elaine Smith): The next item of business is a members' business debate on motion S4M-04864, in the name of Linda Fabiani, on open your eyes to destitution in Scotland.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament believes that many volunteers and organisations, including churches, charities and community groups, work hard to try to alleviate some of the problems experienced by asylum seekers living in destitution; commends the campaign, Open your Eyes to Destitution in Scotland, by the Scottish Refugee Council and the Refugee Survival Trust, which argues that current UK laws can force asylum seekers, many of whom have fled war and torture in their own countries, to beg or leave them with no home, money or food; recognises calls for an improved decision-making process in dealing with asylum claims, for proper support for asylum seekers waiting to be granted protection or returned home safely and for those asylum seekers who have been in the UK for more than six months to have the right to work, and welcomes support for the campaign.

12:36

Linda Fabiani (East Kilbride) (SNP): I thank those members who supported the motion, with particular thanks to Patrick Harvie, Malcolm Chisholm and Mary Fee, who quickly signed up to allow the motion to have cross-party support and thus the debate to take place. I also thank the Scottish Refugee Council and the Refugee Survival Trust for the open your eyes to destitution in Scotland campaign, the petition and of course the assistance that they have given today.

An example of what the motion talks about—destitution of asylum seekers—is a man who, having fled, sought asylum in 2007, hoping that his wife and children would be able to join him when his claim had been recognised. He was dispersed to Glasgow, but in 2008 his case was refused and he found himself destitute.

He was able to gather evidence to submit a fresh claim but, again, his case was refused and he found himself on the streets, suffering from a complex range of health problems, including hearing problems, heart disease, high blood pressure, diabetes and depression. At one point he slept under a bridge; at other times he used the basic night shelter set up by the Glasgow destitution network in a church. He began to suffer from insomnia and additional mental health difficulties. His health continued to deteriorate as he struggled to survive without any support for food or shelter.

Earlier this month, he collapsed on a Glasgow bus. He was rushed to hospital in East Kilbride in my constituency, where he died. He was aged only 52. He had not received support since 2009, save for emergency grants from the Refugee

Survival Trust and Positive Action in Housing. He had not seen his children for eight years.

It is because of cases such as his, seen daily by organisations such as the Scottish Refugee Council and the Refugee Survival Trust, that the campaign has been launched. I have deliberately not said where the man came from or explained his asylum case because those details do not matter. What matters is that in this day and age, in our country, we have people living in destitution and suffering in that way. It does not matter whether they fled here or were born here; they are flesh-and-bone people with human needs like the rest of us—for shelter, for belonging, for sustenance and for esteem.

How do such things happen to asylum seekers? People can become the victims of destitution for a number of reasons, including errors, delays and complexities at certain points in the asylum process and support system. The United Kingdom Government is following a deliberate policy of making refused asylum seekers destitute in order to force them to return to the countries that they fled and to deter new applicants. That is quite clear in the UK Government's regulations.

If someone faced going back to a country where they believe they would be killed or tortured or become homeless and starve, what would be the incentive to leave the UK? The policy does not seem to be working as the UK Government thinks that it is.

The UK Government says that those who do not qualify for international protection should return voluntarily to their country of origin. How many Iraqis from central and southern Iraq who have left there over the past few years would consent to go back, irrespective of how hard life is made for them in the UK or whether they were given a lot of assistance to encourage them to return to where they fled from?

Many in the Scottish Parliament have campaigned on this issue for many years. I think that it was about a year after the Parliament was set up that the dispersal programme started for folk coming to Glasgow. I can see the faces of members from all parties—starting with the Deputy Presiding Officer and going round the chamber—who have been campaigning on the issue since then.

Successive Administrations have tried to do the best that they could within their devolved competences. I think that in this Parliament we have always felt very strongly that these matters are not reserved. It does not matter whether asylum and immigration are reserved; regardless of party affiliation in this Parliament, we have felt that they are not reserved and that we shall do whatever we can do here about them. Meanwhile,

those of us who have fought successive Westminster Governments over the way in which they have dealt with the issue will carry on that fight.

I want to be clear that having the right policy for dealing with asylum seekers not only is the right thing to do but pays dividends for the country. The UK topped a recent poll in *Monocle* magazine on international soft power, soft diplomacy and so on. That success owes much to this year's Olympics, not least because the Somalia-born refugee Mo Farah, who came to the UK as a child from his war-torn homeland, won two gold medals for this country.

The campaign against dawn raids run by school pupils from Drumchapel high, fronted by a group of asylum seekers and indigenous girls, is well known to the Scottish Parliament. The National Theatre of Scotland has now translated that campaign into one of the most powerful pieces of modern theatre, which has been a big success at the Citizens Theatre and is off to Stratford. It carries a positive message of a community working together to challenge some of the injustices faced by asylum seekers. The campaign had successes, but I do not have time to go into them. Unfortunately, we still have people being carted off from their homes and sent away, but some gross excesses were prevented by the work of the Glasgow girls. I am sure that members who have seen the theatre production will recognise it as a particularly powerful expression of the values that we want Scotland to project to the world.

It is unacceptable that asylum seekers can be forced into destitution in this country and left in legal and financial limbo for months, if not years. The open your eyes to destitution in Scotland campaign is a reminder to us all that it is time to tackle that injustice. We need improved decision making and proper support, as well as something for which we fought for years and which was given for a short time but taken away again: why the heck should asylum seekers not be allowed to work, given the skills that they bring to this country, to support themselves and stop their stigmatisation?

I do not think that such things are an awful lot to ask for. I hope that the Scottish Parliament will again send that very clear message down to the UK Government.

12:43

Mary Fee (West Scotland) (Lab): I welcome the members of the refugee women's strategy group who are in the public gallery for this debate, along with staff from the Scottish Refugee Council. I met the refugee women's strategy group a few months ago, and found the meeting not only

informative but inspiring. I heard harrowing tales about what refugee men, women and children have endured not only in their own countries but here in the UK, where they thought that they had found comfort and safety.

I heard that many asylum seekers find themselves living on £30 a week, which comes in the form of a pre-loaded card, so many do not have access to tangible, hard cash. I also heard that, as many of us know, some people are stuck in the asylum process for many years, which leaves them destitute and often alone, with, in some cases, mental health problems or learning difficulties.

There needs to be a radical change to the way in which asylum seekers are treated when they come to the UK. However, I fear that public misconceptions about asylum seekers make that difficult for policy makers in both the Scottish and UK Parliaments.

The open your eyes to destitution in Scotland campaign is a significant and important one and I am pleased to add my support to it.

The complexity of the asylum process is a major reason for the number of asylum seekers and refugees who are destitute, as is the refusal of the right to work. What I find concerning is that many highly skilled asylum seekers and refugees will lose their skills if they end up spending a decade in the complex asylum process.

I will focus on women in the asylum process. Although many women flee their countries for the same reasons as men, many flee due to issues that are gender specific—rape, sexual violence, forced marriage, domestic abuse and female genital mutilation. Women in the asylum process must be treated in a manner that recognises their particular needs as women. I remember being told of examples of women who had to explain their need for asylum with their children in the room. Can anyone imagine the mental and emotional turmoil that that must create for women, especially if they have to discuss issues around abuse, rape and genital mutilation?

Women, who are the primary care providers in most families, are predominantly the sole care provider in many asylum-seeking families. The stress of surviving on as little as £30 per week would take a serious toll on anyone's health, never mind someone who has travelled thousands of miles to escape persecution.

I will tell the Parliament the story of a destitute refugee woman. Mrs B fled from Zimbabwe when she found herself on the wrong side of the Mugabe regime. She sought asylum in the UK five years ago, but her case was refused, as was her appeal, despite a Supreme Court ruling this summer that it was not safe for anyone who

opposed the Mugabe regime to return to Zimbabwe. Her appeal was refused earlier this year, which meant that she was destitute for five months. She was homeless, penniless and not entitled to emergency accommodation such as a hostel bed.

She suffered from poor mental health and the antidepressants that she was given did not help. On occasions, people from her church were able to offer her a bed for a few nights. On other nights, she was left to sleep on a floor mat, in a sleeping bag, in a temporary shelter. During the day, she volunteered in a charity shop, and when the shop closed she walked the streets with her bag, having no idea where she would sleep that night. Sometimes she was able to borrow money from friends for essentials such as sanitary products, but she felt that begging was deeply shameful.

Some people suggested that Mrs B could perhaps meet a man who would "take care of her". Although she rightly did not take that advice, the Scottish Refugee Council informs me that women regularly feel forced into sexually exploitative situations.

Mrs B lodged fresh evidence and in recent weeks she has been granted support. As positive as the support will be, it seems that she is back at square one. As a result of being destitute for five months, there has been a serious impact on her physical and mental health. Mrs B's story brings to life why the open your eyes to destitution in Scotland campaign is so important and needs all our support.

On a final note, I hope to re-establish the cross-party group on asylum seekers and refugees in the new year and I look forward to the support of those members who are in the chamber. Thank you.

12:49

Sandra White (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP): It is a great pleasure to speak in this debate. I congratulate my colleague Linda Fabiani on securing the debate and on all the work that she has done on the issue. I also congratulate the members of the previous cross-party group on asylum seekers and refugees, the Refugee Survival Trust and the Scottish Refugee Council.

I start by commenting on the news that came through today or last night that 150 unopened boxes of applications for asylum in the UK have been found. They have been there for God knows how many months, or even years. That shows just how bad the system is in this country. We must highlight the fact that those applications are sitting there, unopened, while people are waiting for them just to be looked at, never mind put through the system. We really need to take that on board.

Zimbabwe, Iraq and Afghanistan have been mentioned as countries from which asylum seekers have fled. Those people absolutely deserve our help and security. What has not been mentioned is the fact that there are some people in this country who cannot go back to their own country. That is recognised by the UK, which tells asylum seekers who come from countries on a list that it holds: "Sorry, you can't get asylum, but it's too dangerous for you to go back to your own country so we're going to make you destitute." Those people have nowhere else to go and through no fault of their own have had to flee violence, yet the UK will not give them the succour that they deserve. We must remember that there are certain people in this country who are told that they cannot go back to their own country because it is not safe, but, because they will not be given asylum here, they can go out and sleep on the streets.

Linda Fabiani mentioned the gentleman who died on the bus. I met that gentleman. He got help, to an extent, as everyone else did—he had a sleeping bag from the Simon Community. He slept in a graveyard one night, in the winter time, and he was not a young man. Perhaps lots of people in Glasgow knew that gentleman pretty well, yet we could not help him in the end. That is a terrible indictment not just of us, but of humanity. That is what this is about—it is about humanity, and trying to help those people, because we are all human beings.

People have mentioned constituents. Whether or not people have a right to remain here, if they live in my constituency, they are obviously my constituents. I will tell members about two of my constituents. One is a gentleman who has leave to remain—he has a British passport. The other is a lady who is still awaiting a final decision, having been here for six or seven years. They applied to the UK Border Agency to get married—they were living together, having met at college, where they were learning English—and the UKBA said yes.

However, now the lady has been refused leave to remain, and they are looking at an appeal. She has been told to go back to her own country and apply from there, and that her husband should go back with her. I will not name them or say which country they come from, but I ask members to guess how old they are. They are 63 years of age, yet—despite the fact that the husband has a British passport—they are being told to go back to their country and that maybe they will be able to apply to come back in. What does that say about the UK as a whole? A 63-year-old couple, who are doing nobody any harm whatsoever and who bring great joy to the community that they live in, are being told that they cannot stay and that they must go back. That shows what an absolute disgrace the asylum system is.

I will finish on a wee point that other members will probably make. Those people are my constituents—but they are everyone's constituents, too. We deal with such people daily and it is about time that the UK Government recognised that and recognised that we should be able to represent our constituents.

Christina McKelvie (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP): Hear, hear.

Sandra White: There are some good MPs who will do that work, but there are some MPs who will not. As parliamentarians, we cannot cross that line. We need to get those powers here, so that we can represent those two 63-year-olds, who do nobody any harm and bring a great deal of good to our country.

12:53

Jamie McGrigor (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I, too, congratulate Linda Fabiani on securing today's debate. I have much sympathy with the humanitarian points that she and other members expressed. I put on record my party's recognition of and thanks to the organisations that have been mentioned that give support to asylum seekers in Scotland. I am particularly aware of the good work of Positive Action in Housing, which is ably led by Robina Qureshi. I declare an interest in that I have personally donated to that organisation and taken part in demonstrations against early morning break-ins.

However, asylum policy is obviously an extremely difficult issue that requires calm and serious consideration. We would all agree that many of those who come to Britain to seek asylum have been through terrifying experiences. However, the current position is that asylum seekers can apply for permission to work only if they have not received an initial decision on their claim within 12 months. That is in line with the current requirements of the European Union directive on the reception of asylum seekers.

It is my understanding that the UK Government has no plans to reduce the time period to six months or to extend access to the labour market to all asylum seekers who have been refused asylum but who face a temporary barrier to their return. The UK Government fears that extending the permission-to-work policy in that way would risk abuse of the asylum system by economic migrants and would detract from the aim of encouraging those whose claim has failed to return home voluntarily.

Through the asylum improvement project, the UK Government is focused on implementing new ways of speeding up the processing of applications while improving the quality of decision making. Overall, performance has improved

recently. In particular, the Border Agency is making decisions more quickly and is consistently deciding more than 60 per cent of asylum cases within 30 days without sacrificing quality.

As we are all aware from the media coverage this morning of the new report from the Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration, the Border Agency needs to make much greater progress. Nevertheless, we have seen a significant improvement compared with what was left to us by the previous Labour Government. Therefore, although I can agree with parts of Linda Fabiani's motion and have enormous sympathy with the open your eyes to refugee destitution campaign, I am unable to sign up to the motion completely. I believe that the focus must be on securing an asylum system that is fair and measured and which, crucially, deals with cases in the shortest possible time so that some of the problems about which we have heard today are not suffered by asylum seekers waiting months for a decision to be made.

12:56

Christina McKelvie (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP): I commend my colleague and friend Linda Fabiani for bringing the debate to the chamber. It is an issue on which, together, we have campaigned long and hard, and we have spent many a cold morning outside Dungavel detention centre. I believe that Parliament is at its best when it debates issues of humanity such as this.

I will give a definition of destitution:

"Extreme want of resources or the means of subsistence; complete poverty ... A deprivation or lack; a deficiency."

Those are the reasons why I support the open your eyes to refugee destitution in Scotland campaign. The campaign's website can be found—I take the opportunity to give it a plug—at www.stopdestitution.org.uk. It seeks to build public and civic society opposition in Scotland to asylum destitution. The Scottish Refugee Council, of which I view myself as a friend, and the Refugee Survival Trust, which is another friend, are asking individuals and organisations to sign a petition that they will present to the UK Minister for Immigration.

Members will remember the tapestry of deceit that was manufactured in 2003 to make legal an illegal war in Iraq. Let us look at the human costs of that war. I will tell members about a young man called Adar. Adar is an Iraqi Kurd who was forced to flee Kirkuk after his father, a high-ranking military man, was executed and his own life was threatened. He claimed asylum in 2008, but his case was refused, as were a subsequent appeal

and a fresh claim. Adar is 27 and has been destitute for two years. He survives by relying on a network of friends who will put him up for weeks and, in some cases, months at a time. At various times he has slept in a night shelter that was set up by the Glasgow destitution network. He says that it is almost impossible to sleep there, but that it is far better than being on the streets.

Survival is extremely difficult for Adar. He eats at drop-in centres for asylum seekers such as the cafe that is run by the Unity centre and others across the city. Occasionally, he has received small grants from organisations such as Positive Action in Housing and the Scottish Refugee Council, or has been given money by friends. I declare an interest in that I am a financial contributor to Positive Action in Housing, and have been for a number of years.

Adar desperately wants to be allowed to work. In Iraq, he worked as a designer in a factory making windows and doors, but he will not risk working illegally here. He is a very moral man who wants to do things by the book and continues to report to the Home Office. In recent times, he has found the stress of his situation to be increasingly intolerable and finds it difficult to sleep at night. He feels as though he is no longer seen by others as a human being but, however difficult his situation, he cannot consider returning to Iraq, where he fears for his life. In Scotland, he says, at least he is alive.

That testimony is heart breaking; imagine not being able to go home for fear of losing your life, and not being able to make the place of your sanctuary your home because of the disgraceful UK Home Office policy. It is an utter disgrace. Imagine being left outside in this weather. Imagine catching a weather report last night and realising that you need to seek shelter—any shelter—from the elements. Imagine not knowing where your next meal is coming from. Imagine that all that is a result of a terrible war in your land, which was not caused by you, and that the country that waged that war will not help you in your time of need. Imagine wanting to work to support yourself and not being able to do so because of draconian rules that have been imposed upon you. That is what destitution means for Adar. That is Adar's life.

That is why the campaign is so important. It is important not just for Adar and all the others like him, but because people—human beings—should expect nothing less than care, compassion and support in times of need. To turn our back on our brother or sister in times of need is not a Scottish value; helping, supporting and caring are Scottish values. We need to assert those values, we need to ensure that people seeking sanctuary are treated with dignity and humanity and we need to have control of the system to ensure that those

good values are used to create the best of circumstances for people who are nationless.

We need to stop destitution. As has already been said, humanity is not a reserved matter, so let us open our eyes and see—yes, really see—the impact of destitution. I urge everyone who can do so to support this extremely important and worthwhile campaign.

13:01

Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): As others are, I am grateful to Linda Fabiani for securing the debate. I suppose that my only regret is that there is something so dysfunctional about our political culture that the chamber and the press gallery were packed not so long ago while we heard howls of outrage about what is happening in college budgets—which are important, but which we have all seen printed in black and white—whereas a debate like this does not attract the same attention. A debate like this should attract similar howls of outrage.

Not so long ago, Parliament debated the living wage. We debated the concept and the fairly simple assertion that people ought to be able to expect a decent income to live on that affords them a standard of dignity. During that debate, we acknowledged that many people in this country who live on out-of-work benefits are on incomes that are so low as to result in a degree of poverty that we should regard as unacceptable. However, many asylum seekers in this country live on just about half that amount, if they are lucky. As Mrs Fee mentioned, very often that is provided not even in cash but through a card that must be spent only in certain outlets.

A wee while before that, we debated a call from international development non-governmental organisations that challenged us to attempt to live, as so many of the world's poorest people do, on the equivalent of \$2 a day. I think that a former First Minister, Jack McConnell, took up that challenge and made an effort to live in the UK on that meagre income.

“Destitution” is a word that should have such a powerful impact. Destitution means absolute levels of poverty way below what we think is acceptable for people who put in a day's work, way below what we think is acceptable for people who are out of work and way below the outrageous levels of poverty that exist around the world and in which so many hundreds of millions of people live. Destitution is having nothing. There was a time when people in the UK talked about destitution as being something that is deserving of sympathy and charity—as an unhappy circumstance that people might fall into. Very often, what people got—I am talking about a time before the welfare

state—was charity rather than change in society that would eradicate that destitution.

In this debate, destitution means something different. It means a deliberate act of Government policy; that has to be remembered. This is not destitution as a merely unhappy circumstance about which we can do nothing and that affects those few poor souls who have fallen through the net. This is destitution as a deliberate act of policy. Let me quote the Home Office document from 2007 that has been provided in the briefing to all members:

“For those not prioritised for removal, they”—

that is, refused asylum seekers—

“should be denied the benefits and privileges of life in the UK and experience an increasingly uncomfortable environment so that they elect to leave.”

That is Home Office policy from 2007.

Destitution, in that circumstance—for asylum seekers and those who have been refused asylum in the UK—is a deliberate act of Government policy. How outrageous that is, in its own right. Even if that policy was successful—Linda Fabiani has demonstrated that it is unsuccessful in achieving its objective—rather than just imposing destitution on people, it forces them to choose between destitution and the return to an environment in which they fear for their lives. Either circumstance is a moral outrage, and we should hear louder howls of outrage in the chamber than those we heard over another issue less than an hour ago.

I know that not all members will agree with my next comment, but my hope is that one day we will see an asylum system in place in Scotland that is based on compassion and the purpose of which is to provide asylum to those who need it, instead of the system operated by the UK Government, the purpose of which is to say no to the maximum numbers possible.

13:06

The Minister for External Affairs and International Development (Humza Yousaf): I, too, thank Linda Fabiani for raising this important issue. The debate has been a sobering one, in which we have had to face up to the reality—the reality that people will not find on the pages of the press or in tonight's *Edinburgh Evening News*—that some of our asylum seekers, who are the most vulnerable people in Scotland, have to live through daily.

Patrick Harvie, Sandra White, Christina McKelvie, Linda Fabiani, Mary Fee and Jamie McGrigor all made excellent and powerful contributions about what destitution means for certain groups of people.

Scotland has always been a welcoming country, with a long and proud history of sheltering asylum seekers and refugees who flee persecution to find safety. I am very proud to be the son of immigrants. My father was an economic migrant; my mother, whose family had to flee Kenya for safety reasons after the African uprising that made, at that time, life for Asians in the region difficult, chose to come to Scotland.

Migrants have been coming to Scotland for centuries. It saddens me to hear, as I am sure it saddens all members in the chamber, the heartbreaking details of the situations—whether those of Mrs B, Adar or the individual to whom both Sandra White and Linda Fabiani referred—that some asylum seekers find themselves in, in modern 21st century Scotland.

The Scottish Government continues to be appalled that in this day and age there are people who face destitution in our country. The Scotland that we aspire to live in would not force vulnerable individuals into hardship and deprivation. Scottish Governments—this Scottish Government in particular—have always been clear that asylum seekers should be welcomed, supported and integrated into our communities from day 1, and that they should have access to health and education services.

Communities across Scotland provide essential support and extend compassion to asylum seekers who face incredibly hard times. Those actions can often make a world of difference. In that vein, I want to record my thanks to the Scottish Refugee Council, Migrants' Rights Scotland, the Refugee Survival Trust, Shakti Women's Aid and all the other organisations that do an outstanding job in providing not just the basics that people need to live on, but a safe space for our country's asylum seekers and refugees to thrive in and to become active members in many communities. It is amazing how asylum seekers can go into a community or school and energise it—people see the effect of that among members of such communities.

The Scottish Government would have liked to go further in our help for asylum seekers. For example, we are on record as noting our ambition that asylum seekers be able to work while awaiting decisions on their applications. It is ludicrous that people who come to this country after fleeing persecution cannot contribute. When we read the pages of certain right-wing newspapers that express outrage that asylum seekers are claiming X, Y or Z, those stories are not usually mired in truth. Such people want to contribute, but the UK Government denies them the opportunity to do that. Unfortunately, the present constitutional settlement does not allow us to take action on those issues.

Sandra White mentioned a couple of issues in particular. I undertake to send ministerial correspondence once again to the UKBA and ministers in the UK Government to highlight the issue that has irked many members in relation to representing their constituents to the UKBA. Time and again, this and previous Scottish Governments have hit their heads on the proverbial brick wall while attempting to reason with the UK Government and the UKBA on how they treat asylum seekers.

As a progressive global state, an independent Scotland would have the opportunity to give asylum seekers a place of safety, and would have the power to implement fair, sensible and humane policies on immigration.

Linda Fabiani mentioned the "Glasgow Girls" production. I had the pleasure of seeing the performance on the same day as her. I did not know that she would be there, but I ended up sitting right next to her. They let anybody into the theatre nowadays, I must say. It was a moving production, and I recommend that every member take the chance to see it. It was moving to hear the tribute that was paid to the work that she undertook, along with other members—some of whom are no longer members, including Bill Butler—to fight child detention, and to hear the words that she spoke in the chamber in 2005, which are still relevant to the debate. I agree with her whole-heartedly that, although the matter is reserved to Westminster, human dignity and fair treatment are not.

Mary Fee's speech was powerful and relevant. We are aware of some of the unique barriers that prevent women who seek asylum—and who also suffer domestic abuse or other violent behaviour—from accessing support. They can include living in and adapting to a new culture, a lack of language skills, the rights that they have in the UK and the fear of hindering their asylum claim or, even, losing their children. Those obstacles are real, and Mary Fee gave a powerful account of them.

We are aware that asylum-seeking women are not explicitly referred to in the Scottish Government's "Safer Lives: Changed Lives: A Shared Approach to Tackling Violence Against Women in Scotland" strategy. We will ensure that the needs of all women, including asylum-seeking women, are expressed in our strategic approach to tackling violence against women. We will also consider those issues as part of a review of the refugee integration strategy.

Patrick Harvie's whole speech was excellent, but I will pick up on the point about the Azure card—the support that is given under section 4 of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999—which is one of the most dehumanising aspects of the system. Some asylum-seeker families cannot

even use the card to buy children's clothes because the products that they can buy are restricted. In 2011, my colleague Keith Brown, who was then the Minister for Housing and Transport, wrote to the Home Office asking how it could extend the scope of section 4 support. Unfortunately, he was rebuffed. We will keep pursuing that issue; we will keep doing the best that we possibly can.

I thank the organisations that passionately and tirelessly pursue the case for asylum seekers and refugees in Scotland. The services that they provide consist of more than simply a roof over asylum seekers' heads; they also offer protection and much-needed advice.

Regardless of what side of the constitutional debate members sit on, we are almost unanimously agreed that this Parliament would implement a more humane policy on asylum seekers and refugees. However, the fact that those powers do not rest with us does not mean that we do not take responsibility. If an asylum seeker is living on the streets of Scotland, that automatically becomes the responsibility of every councillor, MSP, MP and minister in Scotland. Even if all we can do is shout, we have a duty to ensure that we shout our very loudest.

However, many of us are tired of shouting. Scotland will soon have the chance to do things differently. I want to live in a Scotland where troops of officers can no longer hammer down doors at the break of dawn and drag women and children out of their beds. I want to live in a country whose families are not locked up like criminals in detention centres, even if the Government tells us that those detention centres are "family friendly". I want to live in a Scotland where the underlying principle of asylum is not suspicion, but compassion. That is why I hope that many others in Scotland will vote to take those powers and bring them to this Parliament in 2014.

13:15

Meeting suspended.

14:30

On resuming—

Further Education

The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick): The first item of business is a debate on motion S4M-04914, in the name of Michael Russell, on further education. Cabinet secretary, you have 14 minutes.

14:30

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning (Michael Russell): On Tuesday, I apologised to the chamber for the answer that I gave to Mr Malik on 28 June. I repeat that apology now. The mistake should not have happened and I take full responsibility for it, but I do not believe that it should be allowed to distract us from the real issues facing our young people and our further education sector. Larry Flanagan of the Educational Institute of Scotland suggested last weekend that all of us should move on to discuss those issues. That was a wise suggestion then and it is even wiser now.

According to the BBC's Seonag Mackinnon, a similar point was made by Unison when it asked that the debate focus on

"places and college services rather than a political bunfight over who said what to whom."

Today, I want to talk about the continuing achievements of colleges in providing the economically relevant learning and training that people need to get a job, to prosper and to contribute to the future of our country. That is what the post-16 reform programme will achieve.

Willie Rennie (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD): Will the cabinet secretary take an intervention?

Michael Russell: Could I just make a little bit of progress?

I want to encourage a genuine dialogue that seeks to intensify our national focus on meeting the genuine needs of our learners.

Willie Rennie: I agree with Mr Russell wholeheartedly about moving forward on the challenges that face the colleges but after all the events of recent weeks, does he believe that he is the right man to take that forward?

Michael Russell: I do, and I shall explain that in my speech. I thank the member for his intervention.

In having the type of debate that we have to have, we must start by recognising that the current context is one that certainly makes change difficult, but also makes it essential. Such change

is taking place throughout these islands; indeed, I note from today's *Irish Independent* the headline

"No extra cash for colleges without reform",

which is a quote from the Irish Minister for Education and Skills, Ruairi Quinn.

There will be different solutions in different places but the problems are very similar. However, this debate—and I—must also be mindful of the events of the past fortnight in this place and elsewhere. I accept the point made by Liam McArthur during the week that this renewed focus on further education should give the Government and the Parliament an opportunity to consider our approach afresh, to assure ourselves that our aims are capable of being met and to look at changes of style or substance as required. That is why I was keen to agree to having a debate today, as suggested originally by Mr McArthur.

As minister, I have engaged closely with the college sector over the past year—that has been crucial in delivering the reforms that have taken place so far—but I want to scale up that effort and to listen even more as we go forward. Let us start with priorities. My priority is education and opportunity based on the ability to learn, not the ability to pay. Liz Smith is entirely entitled to argue, as she did in the debate last week, that extra funding should be found for colleges by charging university students for their education. I profoundly disagree with that position and I think that the evidence from south of the border bears out the contention that such an approach drives out the poorest students and those least likely to go to university.

Applications to study at university are down by more than 20 per cent in parts of the United Kingdom, with a drop of 10,000 in the number of young people applying from the north-east of England. Applications from Scottish students, meanwhile, are marginally up.

However, there is another strong reason why I do not believe that this is an appropriate approach for Scotland and Scotland's college sector. The illustration is this—the National Union of Students correctly highlights that from next year, those in England aged 24 or over who want to take a level 3 apprenticeship can look forward to the prospect of having to take out a loan to go to work. That is not a situation that I want to see imported into Scotland. Here, our fee waiver and tuition fee support regime make the situation vastly preferable, to the benefit of tens of thousands of our college students.

Indeed, figures from the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills make it clear that budgets for FE in England were projected to fall by £200 million between 2011-12 and 2012-13. That

is a projected fall of 5 per cent, compared with the actual fall in Scotland of 1.7 per cent.

Gavin Brown (Lothian) (Con): Will the cabinet secretary take an intervention?

Michael Russell: Can I just make some progress, please? I have a lot to say and I will bring the member in.

Yes, funding is tight and decisions are hard, so how we react to them is crucial. We have to ensure that college funding is able to support the tasks that we really need to be done in Scotland.

I will briefly outline those tasks. In last week's debate, I identified five areas in which college reform was needed. First, reform has to help young people. We need to focus our system much more closely on employability and we need more courses that are fully focused on employment as the outcome—that is demanded by the economic circumstances that we are in. The sector therefore needs to help employers more. They require courses and students who are better prepared for, and ready to undertake, actual work.

We must also be mindful of those who work in the sector. There is presently a complete Balkanisation of terms and conditions, with at least 42 different sets. I am keen to continue my dialogue with trade unions on those matters, and I commit myself to that. I think that the reforms will ultimately benefit staff; I know that many of them, while disagreeing with some or all aspects of change, concur with that view. For a start, staff will have the right to representation on boards and there should be a national set of terms and conditions—two things that are long overdue.

Our present system, established by the Tories 20 years ago, also excludes local authority employees and elected members from chairing boards, and precludes those over 70 from appointment. It creates circumstances in which boards can become self-perpetuating, sometimes because they just cannot find new blood. We need to open them up to much wider influences.

Finally, that also means taking a wider strategic view. The college sector must serve communities and regions and be mindful of the need for joined-up provision.

Tavish Scott (Shetland Islands) (LD): On the cabinet secretary's point about the wider view, given that he now admits that his budget was cut in last year's negotiations with his Cabinet colleagues, what is his strategy for this year's budget negotiations?

Michael Russell: The strategy, as ever, is to continue to deliver for the young people of Scotland; that is my focus, and it will continue to be my focus.

Within that context, though, there is much that needs to change. I recognise the difficulties caused by reform taking place at a time of budget pressure, which is a point that has been made. Despite the difficult financial position that we face over the spending review, the Scottish Government has added to the baseline budget for the sector: in 2011-12, we found an additional £11 million; in 2012-13, there was a further £39.5 million; and for 2013-14, we have already provided £17 million. Overall, we have improved the situation by returning to college budgets some £67.5 million over those three years. That is £67.5 million that we have managed to avoid cutting. I intend to continue with those efforts into 2014-15, if I can.

Gavin Brown: The cabinet secretary said that he has found an extra £17 million for the 2013-14 budget. If the 2012-13 budget was £546 million, as he claims, and the draft budget for 2013-14 is £512 million, does he accept that that is a £34 million cash-terms cut in a single year, which is far bigger than cuts elsewhere?

Michael Russell: I think that I have laid out those figures to the best of my ability—*[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Order.

Michael Russell: As I said, I laid out those figures to the best of my ability. Answers were given to members by the First Minister today, and I am endeavouring to ensure that we understand the objectives that we have and how we are trying to pay for them. I say to Mr Brown that that is what I am trying to do.

The approach of seeking in-year revision to try to assist differentiates the Scottish National Party Government from its predecessors, which ran up huge underspends in a time of plenty. We are faced with a situation in which every penny of public money must be put to good use in times of dearth. We must retain our focus on the reform programme and the improvements that it will bring.

Neil Findlay (Lothian) (Lab): Can the cabinet secretary cast his mind back and point to a year during the period when Labour was in power when we had such a crisis in our colleges?

Michael Russell: It is sometimes hard to remember, because there were so many crises under Labour. I point out that reform is essential. I would have thought, given the fondness of Labour for a reform agenda, that it might have seen that. However, let me carry on.

The first key measure that the college sector must look at is the volume of learning, not the headcount, important though that can be, because it varies from year to year for many reasons. Together with innovative, employer-facing

provision delivered through Skills Development Scotland, we are maintaining the overall volume of learning, but of course the detail of delivery will change from place to place.

I know that that task has required huge effort from college staff and management. However, in a sector that has been largely unreformed for two decades, we have found the capacity to maintain the overall volume of learning, despite the budget reductions.

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Will the cabinet secretary take an intervention?

Michael Russell: No, I am sorry. I must make some progress.

The colleges have achieved what they have—and I pay tribute to them—because, as the Auditor General for Scotland's report shows, they have a record level of reserves, which was over £200 million at the end of 2010-11. I have been gratified that so many of those who lead and govern the sector have understood and respected our decisions and have used their own resources to move forward, even though they may have disagreed with aspects of what was being proposed.

College sector reform—I repeat this—is therefore not only necessary, but possible. There is and there remains a compelling case for change. However, I accept that no Government, whatever its majority and its hue, can inspire sustainable change without dialogue with and the ability to work alongside those who lead, who govern, who teach and who study.

Regionalisation, which is at the very heart of our changes, is about improving the prospects for those who study, who teach and who lead, and it is driven most of all not by geography but by the need to deliver for all communities. I mentioned the volume of learning as the key measure of performance, but there is another key measure, and that is the quality and economic relevance of what is delivered.

Let me paint two quick scenarios. In the first scenario, colleges see the need to use their resources to deliver a high volume of short or part-time courses that respond to particular social, cultural or economic demands. In the second scenario, which is the relevant one during a recession, colleges decide that the priority for both the learner and the economy is to use the resource more intensively by offering a higher proportion of full-time courses to meet a strategic employment imperative. We have moved, in a number of years, from the first scenario to the second. Those who are preoccupied solely with headcount fail to understand that.

Of course colleges should be inclusive; they should work with those who are furthest from the labour market—and I have seen that clearly at John Wheatley College. Colleges should ensure that those with learning and other difficulties are assisted. I discussed that matter with the cross-party group on learning disability and I am keen to see the Scottish Further and Higher Education Funding Council take it forward in outcome agreements.

There are other bodies and schemes that deliver training, and my colleague Angela Constance is deeply involved with those. There are ways in which we need to bring together those schemes with the third sector, private training providers, colleges and SDS. Above it all, and surrounding it all, is the opportunities for all initiative, through which we strive to ensure that every young person is offered a place in education or training if they are not in work. That is a unique offer that is being made by this Government.

I will touch briefly on two other issues. On mergers, I will approve no merger unless I am satisfied that the legitimate interests of all those affected—learners, employers, staff and the community—have been taken into account. The mergers that are being explored are the results of decisions by the governing body of each institution. They do produce significant benefits. According to the SFC, the savings will exceed £50 million by the academic year 2014-15. They bring overdue efficiency to a sector that retained its former configuration for too long. We have seen that at the City of Glasgow College and I am confident that we will see the same following the merger of the rural colleges and the creation of the new multi-campus Edinburgh college.

The Government has been challenged to reform our public services to meet the demands of the future. The independent budget review, which now guides the policy of the Labour Party, highlighted the number of colleges across Scotland and challenged us across the public sector to

“encourage progressive changes and joint action between public bodies to produce new and more effective service delivery models.”

That is precisely what we are doing.

I also want to touch on the reform and renewal of the college estate, because there has been a transformation. When we came into office in 2007, a number of redevelopments were under way. I am glad that they were undertaken by our predecessors, and we have carried on that good work. However, that good work, be it in Dundee, Fraserburgh, Thurso, Glasgow, Inverness or Kilmarnock, will also have an effect on how services are delivered.

I want to mention one more thing that we can do. In his review of college governance, Professor Russel Griggs asked us to establish a strategic forum in the sector. I am going to put that into practice. The initial membership of the forum will be the chairs and regional leads, and I will meet them shortly to listen to their views of how the Scottish Government should take forward the programme of reform—yes, in the light of the issues that have been raised in recent weeks. I hope, in time, to expand the forum, listening to those people and bringing in other views and voices. Indeed, if the Opposition spokespeople want to meet the forum at any stage for discussion, I will be happy to facilitate that once it is up and running.

Presiding Officer, I do not claim, and you know that I do not claim, to be a shrinking violet or a model of perfection. I am committed to getting the best for the students, young people, learners, staff and others in all the sectors for which I am responsible.

The joint amendment from Labour, the Tories and the Lib Dems has some positive aspects. The proposers might have found me willing to accept it if it were it not for the political pejoratives within it.

I am passionate about education and about working with others who share the same passion. Education changes lives, transforms prospects, opens up opportunities and creates new worlds. Our college sector is achieving much, but it can achieve more. Change is challenging, but it is essential. In moving my motion, I say this to the other parties, to the Parliament, to the sector, to students and to Scotland: I want to ensure that we do the best by every learner. I ask everyone in the chamber and in the sector to be part of that. I will listen to them and work with them to achieve such progress. Let us not be distracted from that aim.

I move,

That the Parliament recognises the key role that colleges and their staff play in supporting Scotland's young people, communities and the economy; further recognises their substantial commitment to regionalisation, including the mergers in Edinburgh and Lothians and Scotland's rural colleges; further recognises that college provision is being prioritised to better address economic needs and support young people at risk of unemployment; welcomes the commitment of the Scottish Government to maintaining both the volume of teaching and full-time equivalent student numbers, including through in-year additional budget support; further welcomes the continuing renewal of the college estate, demonstrated in new facilities delivered or planned at Stirling, Dundee, Alloa, Fraserburgh, Inverness, Kilmarnock and Glasgow, and supports the protection of the college student support budget in 2012-13.

14:45

Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD): It seems that barely a day goes by without there

being apologies offered to the chamber or attempts made to surreptitiously amend the *Official Report*, so in that spirit I will start by offering an apology of my own. Looking back at the debate on colleges last week that was initiated by Liz Smith, I appear to have misled Parliament. That was inadvertent and what I said was certainly said in good faith. Nevertheless, when I suggested that Mike Russell

“is not a man who ever finds it easy to say, ‘I am wrong’”—
[*Official Report*, 14 November 2012; c 13444.]

I may have created a false impression. The education secretary may still not find it easy to say sorry, but he is certainly getting what many would consider to be some long-overdue practice.

It is right that we are having this debate today but it is testimony to the mess that has been created by the Government and, in particular, the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning in their handling of Scotland’s college sector. Most striking about this omnishambles is the extent to which it has been largely self-inflicted through an unwillingness to properly listen and an over-fondness to assert and lambast. In a remarkable show of chutzpah, Mr Russell chose this of all weeks to refer his colleague, the Minister for Transport and Veterans, to the ombudsman over the boorach that has been created over the Gourock to Dunoon ferry service. I dare say that Keith Brown is tempted to return the favour in relation to colleges.

No one disputes that there is complexity in college funding, not least given the differences between spending in academic and financial years. However, as the Education and Culture Committee has established, instead of making the situation better and clearer, Mr Russell has excelled at making it worse and more opaque. Not only has he been hung by his own petard, Mr Russell has managed to use it to string up the First Minister as well, nodding along happily all the while.

It is not as if offers of help were not made. During last week’s debate, Liz Smith rather helpfully intervened to suggest that there was confusion around college funding figures due to a lack of consistency in how the figures are measured. Did Mr Russell respond to that plea of mitigation on his behalf with grateful and humble thanks and a statement of his determination to make things better and clearer in the future? Not quite. He said:

“the figures are quite clear on where we are. Where we are is quite clear from the baseline figures, and the additional money that we have added in every single year is quite clear.”—[*Official Report*, 14 November 2012; c 13428.]

No doubt he is a further candidate for the Alex Salmond award for

“about as exact an answer as anybody has given in any Parliament”.—[*Official Report*, 15 November 2012; c 13513.]

What is quite clear is that there is a cut in college funding this year. Audit Scotland calculated it to be in the order of 24 per cent in real terms over the spending review period. In its briefing, Scotland’s Colleges pointed to a reduction in revenue funding of £113 million between 2010-11 and 2014-15. In terms of the teaching grant and fee waiver, it estimated the drop to be around £73 million by the end of the current financial year.

Against the backdrop of a 6 per cent real-terms cut in the Government’s overall budget, it is hard to square those figures from Audit Scotland and Scotland’s Colleges with the assertion from Mr Russell and Mr Salmond that colleges are a priority for the SNP. It is that fundamental contradiction that needs to be addressed. Doing so will require additional funding to be made available for specifically the teaching budget, which I will return to shortly.

Margo MacDonald (Lothian) (Ind): Will the member give way?

Liam McArthur: I certainly will.

Margo MacDonald: I am not going to apologise for anything. The member has just said that additional money is needed for teaching. I agree, but where will it come from?

Liam McArthur: I rather expected that question from the SNP back benches, but nevertheless it is clear that after the budget last year, £250 million-worth of announcements were made by the Government, so I think that the Government has the capacity to deliver the money.

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Employment and Sustainable Growth (John Swinney): He gives no answer.

The Presiding Officer: Order.

Liam McArthur: Nevertheless, the results of the Government’s spending are choices that it has made. The risk of the shambles of the last few days and weeks is that it distracts Mr Russell and the Government from the task of addressing genuine concerns in Scotland’s college sector. In that context, I see the purpose of today’s debate as being to allow Parliament an opportunity to set out where it thinks that Government needs to rethink its approach and chart a different course. I am grateful to Hugh Henry and Liz Smith for their support in helping to make that happen.

However, this is not just about the money or changes in policy in various areas, important though those are; it is also about a change in attitude and style, as Mr Russell acknowledged in

his earlier remarks. If that proves impossible for the current incumbent, we will need a change in education secretary as well.

There is no getting away from the fact that recent events have called into question the competence of the SNP Government and the judgment and approach of the education secretary himself. Nowhere is that more clearly illustrated than in Mr Russell's ludicrously heavy-handed treatment of the former chair of Stow College. With growing evidence that that scandalous, intimidatory behaviour is symptomatic of the education secretary's style, it is little wonder that some in the sector are now openly expressing a lack of confidence in his ability to respond positively to their needs.

As Graham Hay, chair of Angus College, stated at the weekend, Mr Russell acts in a "telling not listening style". On the regionalisation process, Mr Hay added that there was

"no real engagement with the sector, he knew exactly what he wanted to do and was forcing the sector down that route. He certainly didn't appreciate contrary opinions. For a government that keeps talking about independence, independent views are not warmly welcomed."

Jamie Hepburn (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP): I wonder whether he is one of the college principals who are so terrified by the cabinet secretary that they are afraid to speak out against the Government.

Liam McArthur: Given that he is the chair and not the principal, I suspect that his job is not on the line in quite the same way.

That is not a healthy relationship or one that demonstrates mutual respect, and given how critical our colleges are to helping Scotland to emerge strongly from the current economic difficulties, it is not a relationship that we can afford to leave as it is.

Despite those serious misgivings, I support a number of the initiatives for our colleges that the Scottish Government is pursuing, which the cabinet secretary has outlined. Indeed, they command the support of the whole chamber. As I have stated before, and as is reflected in my amendment, they include recognising the benefits that are achievable through closer working on a regional basis by colleges, universities, local authorities and employers. Such collaboration must, however, always be driven by educational need, and the pace at which it happens can be critical to its success.

With reduced budgets and an expectation among ministers that college reserves are to be raided to pay for mergers, it is not hard to see why concerns exist among people, from Audit Scotland to the chair of Angus College. Mr Russell is simply wrong to assert that those who question what he is

doing or the way in which he is doing it are opposed to change and do not have the interests of colleges at heart. Although that is the narrative that he may wish to create, it is entirely false.

Mr Russell's performance during the debate last week exemplified that. His motion—although perhaps not his remarks—today suggests that he has learned little over the past eight days. Last week, Mr Russell asserted his belief that colleges had been guilty of failing students, staff, employers, local communities and even Scotland itself. Prior to his arrival as education secretary, the college sector was—in his words—littered with "duplication and ... inefficiency and waste".—[*Official Report*, 14 November 2012; c 13427.]

That year zero view of the world and blasé denial of the significant contribution that our colleges have made over many decades is frankly ridiculous. It flies in the face of the facts and, indeed, the findings of the David Hume Institute report, which was published last month.

Mark McDonald (North East Scotland) (SNP): Will the member take an intervention?

Liam McArthur: I have got to make progress.

The authors of that report highlight the substantial value of the college sector to the Scottish economy, which is potentially up to £1.2 billion over the next eight years. Although they accept that colleges must adapt to meet new challenges and new opportunities, as Jeremy Peat has observed,

"change must not be at the cost of the crucial role the colleges play in providing opportunities to many from diverse parts of society; nor must the critical close relationships with local businesses be placed at risk."

There is evidence, however, that the way in which the Government is pursuing its reform agenda and targeting spending in a sharply declining budget is having a disproportionate impact on some of the groups to which colleges have been particularly successful in extending access and opportunities. NUS Scotland makes the point that shifts in college participation away from part time to full time, from mature students to young students and from women to men have implications for participation and accessibility. As John Henderson of Scotland's Colleges has said,

"One of the enormous strengths of the college system is its ability to cater for a diverse range of students at different times in their lives. Any narrowing of that risks limiting the opportunities available."

Although the Government is right to reflect the specific challenges facing our young people—particularly with youth unemployment currently standing at around 100,000—it is wrong to downplay the importance of ensuring that colleges are able to continue to meet the needs of a wider group of learners.

The cabinet secretary and some of his back benchers have dismissed the reduction in course provision as simply the stripping away of “hobby” courses. That is palpably untrue and again betrays an unwillingness by Mr Russell to face up to the consequences of the decisions and choices that he and his Government have made. I suggest, for example, that the reduction by a quarter in the number of female students studying at colleges in Scotland since 2007 is a statistic that should have Mr Russell asking serious questions about the impact that his approach to college funding and reorganisation is having.

For those from less well-off backgrounds, there must also be concerns at what is happening with the reduced opportunities available. As Murdo Fraser reminded us last week, the proportion of those from the 20 per cent most deprived cohort has fallen from 83.3 per 1,000 in 2007-08 to 72.5 per 1,000 in 2010-11. Again, I see no useful purpose served by the cabinet secretary dismissing that alarming trend, not least given the commitment to extending access that is shared across the Parliament.

For the sake of the choice and quality of the provision on offer to students, the opportunities available to the wide range of individuals that colleges have been so good at supporting, the connections that local businesses have with colleges in their area and the morale of staff who work in this critical sector—for all those reasons—I believe that the education secretary must look again at the approach that he is taking to funding, to reform and to the relationship that he has with those in the sector. If that does not happen as a matter of urgency, confidence in the SNP Government and in this education secretary will continue to erode, potentially to the point of no return.

I have pleasure in moving amendment S4M-04914.1, to leave out from “their substantial commitment” to end and insert:

“that colleges are vital in providing educational opportunities for individuals from a wide range of backgrounds and circumstances; is concerned that the Scottish Government’s planned cut to college budgets in 2013-14 puts at risk efforts both to widen access and to ensure the quality of course provision; believes that, while regionalisation has the potential to increase collaboration and deliver benefits for colleges, students and employers, these outcomes will only be achieved if restructuring is driven by educational need and at an appropriate pace; further believes that confidence in the Scottish Government, not least within the sector, has been shaken by the failure of ministers to demonstrate a grasp of the allocated budget and their heavy-handed treatment of college staff and governors, and believes that confidence can only be restored if the Scottish Government takes urgent steps to change its approach to the sector, including giving an urgent indication that it will revise its 2013-14 draft budget to prevent a cut to college funding and agree that it will set out clearly the costs and benefits of reform to

the college sector as recommended by Audit Scotland.”

14:56

Neil Findlay (Lothian) (Lab): I see that, as for the football team during a run of bad results, the chairman has turned up to give the dreaded vote of confidence to the manager. Surely it is only a matter of time before the cabinet secretary goes on gardening leave.

For a multitude of reasons we are back debating Scotland’s colleges just a week after our last attempt. Yes, of course there is the small issue of fabricated figures, spin and the political dark arts—or, as Mr Russell’s fellow right-winger Alan Clark once famously said, being “economical with the actualité”—but I suggest that we are here for the more important reason that, across the Opposition parties, there is a concern for the college sector and the disaster that is unfolding in front of us. That disaster is being driven by the cabinet secretary and will get worse if it is allowed to proceed unchecked.

Even on the Government benches, there must be some who, deep down in quiet times of reflection, know that the policy agenda being pursued by their Government is wrong and is having a detrimental impact on their constituents. I live in hope that someone somewhere on the Government benches will find the backbone to speak up for their area.

Let me, as always, be charitable to the cabinet secretary—

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

Neil Findlay: No, sit down.

Stewart Stevenson (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): I will stand up for my constituents, if the member will let me.

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

Neil Findlay: Presiding Officer, it is good to get them animated so early.

I can see how some people could get confused with the college figures. The system is opaque and complex: money cut here; money transferred there; and money that used to go to the funding council given to SDS, only for the colleges to bid back into SDS for the same money that they once got directly. We have had in-year revisions and, at one stage, we had week-to-week revisions. That accountancy sleight of hand is not based, as the cabinet secretary has claimed, on his standing up for colleges and securing more funding; it is a blatant attempt to try to camouflage the reality of what is going on by creating a funding shambles that is difficult to follow or scrutinise effectively.

Mark McDonald: In an earlier intervention, Mr Findlay asked whether there was a crisis when Labour ran the college sector. I quote from an EIS response to a Scottish Executive consultation on changes to FE college boards of management:

“The Executive will be familiar with the many critical situations which have developed during the past few years where two colleges have required direct intervention and many more have received specific cash injections to keep afloat.”

Does Mr Findlay believe that that might have constituted a crisis on Labour’s watch?

Neil Findlay: Mr McDonald, if we want to trade quotes from the EIS, just wait a minute, please.

The funding shambles was confirmed by Professors Peat and Gallacher and former college chair Mr Buchanan when they appeared before the Education and Culture Committee. On that occasion, each was asked to give a figure for what their college budget was being cut by this year. Professor Peat said:

“I will kick off by saying that I cannot, at this stage, give you a figure for what that cut is in absolute terms.”

Professor Gallacher said:

“I agree with Professor Peat. There are many complex issues involved. However, there is no doubt that, over the past number of years, the college sector has experienced a significant cut in its budget, which has undoubtedly had major implications for trying to maintain both the range and the quality of provision.”

Paul Buchanan said:

“Likewise, I am unable to give a figure, but there is definitely a downward trend, which appears to continue into next year as well.”—[*Official Report, Education and Culture Committee*, 25 September 2012; c 1445.]

The problem is that, instead of listening, the cabinet secretary dismisses anyone and everyone who just happens to see the world a little bit differently from him.

Audit Scotland has made it clear that there will be a 24 per cent cut between 2011-12 and 2014-15; the University and College Union says that there is a £34 million cut; and Scotland’s Colleges says that there are huge waiting lists. The Scottish Parliament information centre has said:

“Over the spending review period as a whole for 2012-13 to 2014-15, even without taking revisions into account, there is a clear reduction in further education funding.”

Common Knowledge, or CKUK, identifies a 34 per cent cut in part-time places for students with learning disabilities. It tells me that no more outreach work is done at Reid Kerr College with that client group and that courses have been cut by 50 per cent. Clydebank College’s courses for adults with learning disabilities have been cut from 16 to 5, and there have been cuts in outreach at Cardonald College.

I ask members to listen to two personal stories. Lesley, who is aged 25, is a young woman with learning difficulties. She applied for a cookery course—not a hobby course—in a Glasgow college, but she was refused a place because she was too old—25 years old and written off. Mark, aged 24, after two years at college, was ready to go on to his third year, but he was telephoned during the summer to be told that the course had been cut and that he would not be returning to college after the holidays. What has Mr Russell to say to Lesley and Mark?

None of that is my evidence—it comes from people who work in the sector and understand what is going on. I believe that the four college trade unions at Angus College and Dundee College reflect the real views of the college sector when they say:

“Continually we are told that the cuts in FE funding are as a result of restraints from Westminster—not true.”

The Presiding Officer: You need to bring your remarks to a close, Mr Findlay.

Neil Findlay: I am coming to the end.

“These are happening through choices made by the current Scottish Government and have a direct impact on the life chances of the Scottish population. We have no confidence with the current Education Secretary in his dealings with the FE sector.”

I could not have put that better myself. Staff and students in Scotland’s colleges have lost confidence in the cabinet secretary and, more important, his policy. It is time for him to go.

15:02

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): The fact that we are back in the chamber discussing the Scottish Government’s handling of its college policies says it all. How ironic it is that a debate that was supposed to be about the important issue of improving career guidance services in Scotland has turned into a debate about the career guidance for one cabinet secretary.

What happened last week was a turning point, when competence disappeared from the SNP government at its highest level. However, it is the credibility question that is most troubling and, as many people in the sector have commented, it is a wholly unwelcome diversion from many of the real issues in the college sector. The debate should be about education and jobs, and I will come on to those in a minute.

Let me be clear that our ability to scrutinise the true situation that exists for colleges and, indeed, the ability of the witnesses who attended the Education and Culture committee, has been seriously undermined by the lack of accurate data. Mike Russell’s problem is that he has lost the

confidence of the sector, the public at large and politicians across the chamber. That situation is not good for Scottish education.

Notwithstanding the fact that the academic year does not match the financial year—that is not the fault of any Government or even the cabinet secretary—new interpretations of the budget figures seem to emerge every time the Scottish Government makes an attempt to clarify them. The public sees a First Minister and an education secretary who cannot make up their minds about whether college budgets are going up or down. It is bad enough that they both misled the Parliament with dodgy figures, but they did not even seem to know what the right ones were. Mike Russell was nodding when the first Minister produced the wrong figures at First Minister's questions; he was again seen nodding vigorously when he thought that his boss had set a wrong right in the 5 pm statement. But were those figures the whole truth?

If the First Minister is correct in amending the baseline figure to £556 million for the financial year 2011-12, instead of the £545 million figure quoted in the Audit Scotland report, does that not mean that the college budgets have actually suffered a cut of more than 24 per cent? Likewise, as a result of the mess created by the Scottish Government with recent figures, there is a danger of fixing too much attention on the budget year 2012-13 and losing sight of what will happen in budget year 2013-14, when it now seems likely that there will be an even greater cut than was previously stated. What does that say about the long-term planning for colleges in their courses, staff and student numbers?

How does that affect education and jobs? I repeat what I asked in last week's colleges debate. Why, when youth unemployment is growing and we have a flagship policy that promises an education or training opportunity for all 16 to 19-year-olds, does the SNP Government still believe that it is right to cut the budgets of further education colleges, which are essential for training young people in the skills that will be needed when the Scottish economy returns to sustainable economic growth? As we have already agreed, colleges could hardly be more important in that respect, nor in reaching out to the many people for whom further education was previously too remote. Last week, all parties in the Parliament, including the Scottish Government, praised colleges for the diversity and flexibility of their work and their potential to widen access.

Worse still, as a result of the Scottish Government's changed policy focus to provide greater student support, there is now less money available for bursaries, which, as everyone knows, are provided specifically to help students who

come from poorer sections of society. When the Scottish Government talks to other parties about Conservative policies, it should be mighty careful about seeking the moral high ground. Student support is a vital element of any college budget, but so too are bursaries. The Government should remember that student support will be of little use if students cannot find places in the first instance.

The Scottish Government says that further education must change. I do not think that anyone disagrees. It is clear that it wants to move away from a system where institutions matter more than people, towards one that is built around the needs of a wide range of students and much greater flexibility. Those reforms are the basis for regionalisation. They bring enhanced educational opportunities and much greater responsiveness to local demand. That should be the driver for college reform; it should not always be about money.

I have previously complimented the Scottish Government on several of its early years policies, which can make a crucial difference at the most important stage in the educational journey. Completely the opposite is true of its policies on the tertiary education sector, where the focus is entirely wrong.

The Scottish Conservatives cannot support a policy that is ripping the heart out of institutions that have done much in recent years to make further education more accessible and more flexible, and that aspire to higher standards. That is why we fully support the amendment lodged by Liam McArthur, call for a major rethink of the Scottish Government's priorities within the education budget and demand that the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning resign.

The Presiding Officer: We move to the open debate. I say to members that time is really tight.

15:08

George Adam (Paisley) (SNP): I declare an interest in the debate, as I have a 19-year-old daughter who is attending a college course in social care, one of the subjects that is no longer available, according to the Tories. She will be quite shocked by that.

Mr Findlay was as confused as ever. He said in his speech that we should talk about our areas. I am happy to talk about my area, my record and the SNP's record.

The purpose of the reforms is to strengthen the college sector when massive cuts are being inflicted on Scotland by the Westminster mix of Tories and Lib Dems. That is the important point that we must think about. Westminster is making cuts like we have never seen before.

During the past weekend—the cabinet secretary repeated it again today—the EIS general secretary, Larry Flanagan, stated that political parties should get back to the issues, rather than having arguments

“based around personal spats and party-political squabbling.”

All of us—certain people in particular—should learn that lesson and focus on the young people who are involved.

Hugh Henry (Renfrewshire South) (Lab): Larry Flanagan is right. We should get back to the facts. Would he not support getting to the truth of the figures?

George Adam: With the greatest respect, Mr Henry and I have known each other for some time and, if we start talking about the truth, we could get on to difficult ground. Let us get back to the issues and ensure that we move the further education system forward, rather than try to score petty political points.

The fact is that we live in challenging times. Cuts have been made to the Scottish budget that have never been seen in the Parliament’s lifetime. The cuts take us back to another time, when the party that is governing at Westminster governed Scotland without a mandate—I refer, of course, to Mrs Thatcher’s time. Some things never change; the Tories’ attitude to Scotland certainly does not.

The reality of the situation is that the Scottish Government is maintaining college student support at record levels; it is protecting student numbers in further education; and it is maintaining full-time-equivalent teaching activity. The allocation of a further £17 million to colleges for 2013-14 will support students and protect numbers.

The reforms will strengthen the sector. At this time, it is necessary to have a renewed focus on offering high-quality courses that are in line with what employers want and need. That came across particularly strongly when people from the private sector spoke to the Education and Culture Committee. We all know that education in all its forms is invaluable, but that must be the aim. Otherwise, we will let down our young people and not provide them with the skills that they need to have long-term careers and a high quality of life.

Willie Rennie: From the member’s experience, does he think that the education secretary has the absolute confidence of colleges across Scotland?

George Adam: In my experience, I would say that he does, because I have yet to meet anyone who is whimpering in fear of the education secretary. Unless I am to be accused of bullying, I would say that he has the colleges’ full confidence.

The regionalisation of the sector makes sense. It will produce the high-quality courses that we need. That must be the primary aim, but there are other benefits: duplication will be reduced and merged colleges will be able to concentrate more on strengthening the courses that they offer and tackling drop-out rates. Duplication within relatively local areas will be removed. Each region will be able to offer the best courses that are available, reflecting local need. Support for regionalisation is widespread in the college sector. In a recent meeting, Audrey Cumberford of Reid Kerr College suggested to me that regionalisation was the only way to go and that it was the way forward for her college.

The facts speak for themselves. In the coming financial year, further investment will be available to support our students and to protect those who attend colleges. That record is impressive when it is compared with that of the previous Administration, which in its two terms provided 39 per cent less in cash terms. The Westminster Tories and their friends are to cut investment in further education by £1.1 billion.

It is important that we protect student numbers in FE. In 2013-14, there will be provision for more than 116,000 FTE students—the same number as in 2011-12 and 2012-13. We must look strategically at how the regions are organised and at the employment requirements of each region. That is why a £40 million fund from the Scottish funding council and the new employability fund will enable Skills Development Scotland to do work in the regions to look at the opportunities that exist for training and employment and to match them with the skills that are in demand in local areas. That is an important focus.

The recent Audit Scotland report on Scotland’s colleges found that college reserves totalled £206 million at the end of 2011, which was double the 2006-07 figure of £98.9 million. Mike Russell told the Education and Culture Committee:

“the state of college reserves is very high indeed, so we expect colleges to contribute to the merger process, which they are doing.”

The Presiding Officer: The member needs to wind up.

George Adam: He went on to say:

“The Edinburgh merger resulted, I think, in 40 per cent of the costs being met from the reserves of the colleges involved.”—[*Official Report, Education and Culture Committee*, 23 October 2012; c 1564.]

Moving towards a more regional approach will make the college sector more efficient and responsive to the needs of students and local economies. Such reform offers the best way forward for our students. It will produce high-quality courses that are targeted at providing the

fulfilling career paths that employers require and which reflect the regions' requirements—

The Presiding Officer: I regret that I must stop you there, Mr Adam.

15:14

Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab): I start by saying, as Labour members did last week, that I truly value the positive role that our colleges play in improving opportunities for young people, for lifelong learners, for women and for people with learning disabilities. We should be positive about that role, about the role that dedicated staff play in doing their work and about the students who study at our colleges and who go on to play a vital role in our communities and in the economy.

It is therefore vital that we stand up for our colleges and highlight the effects that the SNP Government's cuts and policies are having on staff and students. However, it would be remiss of me not to say that it is extremely difficult to have a constructive debate about the future of our colleges when the Government gives the Parliament misleading information. It is abundantly clear that, in relation to statements about this year's college budgets, Mike Russell has either been grossly incompetent or knowingly misled the Parliament. It is one or the other—either way, neither is good enough.

It is inconceivable that Mike Russell did not know that college budgets were being reduced in June. It is still unclear to me—although I asked about it on Tuesday—why he nodded last week as the First Minister gave the wrong figures. It is also unclear why Mr Russell took five months to apologise, when the issue was first raised by me in a point of order that was made on 28 June, immediately after he had responded to another point of order. It is a challenge to have the debate in those circumstances.

I am not content to accept the cabinet secretary's admission as a one-off because I am not yet convinced that he is ready to face up to the facts. Like him, I use Twitter, and I recently saw that he had engaged with the EIS Edinburgh College branch on female student numbers. On 8 November, the EIS representative challenged him on the 43,000 drop in the number of female students in our colleges, as reported by *The Herald*. On 9 November, he tweeted a reply in which he claimed, "figures simply not true."

I have received figures from the Scottish funding council, via SPICe, which show that the female head count in non-advanced FE courses was 161,559 in 2006-07 and 118,447 in 2010-11, which is a drop of 43,112. Will the cabinet secretary repeat his claim on Twitter that those

figures are "simply not true"? I am happy to give way.

Michael Russell: I also said in reply to the tweet that, if the college emailed me, I would give it a fuller account. I am still happy to do so.

I made the point in last week's debate and I have said several times—possibly even in committee—that there is a difference between full-time equivalent numbers and head count. We cannot simply go by head count—we must deal with full-time equivalents. I am happy to explain that again, and I will do so.

Neil Bibby: I am perfectly aware of the difference between full-time equivalent and head-count numbers. However, the fact is that the cabinet secretary said "figures simply not true." He now says that he will look into the matter. Even if he could prove that the figures were untrue, the sort of dismissive attitude that saying "figures simply not true" shows to concerns that are raised results in people losing confidence in him.

It is obvious to everyone apart from the Government the extent to which people who want to study at college are being hit by the Government's policies and cuts. The staff at our colleges are also paying the price for the cuts.

Last week, SNP members such as Mark McDonald claimed that staff morale is improving. To be honest, I am more inclined to take my advice from college staff and trade unions that are working on the ground. Emma Phillips of Unison, who gave evidence to the Education and Culture Committee on staff morale, said that the union had collected quotes from speaking to staff, such as:

"This is the worst I've felt in 11 years",

"Services are stretched to breaking point and morale is at an all-time low"

and

"We do not know where the axe will fall next."—[*Official Report, Education and Culture Committee, 25 September 2012; c 1481.*]

That is the human face of Mike Russell's policies. No wonder Scottish union reps at Dundee College, Angus College and Jewel and Esk College say that they have no confidence left in him. A massive number of jobs have been lost and, with the SNP Government's cuts, we are likely to have many more.

Last week, I made it clear that college cuts are disproportionately affecting people with learning disabilities. I do not intend to repeat all the points that I made, but it is shocking that, according to the Scottish Consortium for Learning Disability, an average 34 per cent cut has been made in part-time college courses for people with learning disabilities. That is a scandal and the Government needs to provide the funding to reverse those cuts.

The SNP Government needs to start listening. The SNP likes to ridicule on occasions when Labour and the Conservatives agree, with chants of “better together”. It speaks absolute volumes for the SNP’s education policies when the Tories think that the SNP’s cuts to colleges are too deep. Who needs Michael Gove when we have Michael Russell?

Mike Russell has admitted that he misled the Parliament on college funding figures. He has also finally admitted that waiting list issues need clarity. Labour members have called for that for some time, and I am pleased that he has finally come round to our way of thinking.

It is clear that staff and students in Scotland’s colleges have lost confidence in him and that he is damaging our college education system. It is time for Mike Russell to go.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (John Scott): Time is extremely tight, so speeches should be up to six minutes; shorter speeches would be welcome. That includes interventions.

15:20

Joan McAlpine (South Scotland) (SNP): I want to concentrate on the importance of colleges in preparing young people for jobs and meeting the needs of employers. There are areas of agreement on that. Page 3 of the briefing for the debate from Scotland’s Colleges says:

“Scotland’s Colleges welcome the move to regionalisation as set out in ‘Putting Learners at the Centre’ and are committed to working with the Scottish Government to ensure it is delivered successfully.”

In the current financial climate, I think that most learners have the same purpose in mind: to equip themselves for the world of work. For that to happen, colleges must provide courses that lead to jobs, and they can do that only if they look at market demand and listen to employers. So let us listen to what employers are saying.

One of the most revealing pieces of evidence that was given to the Education and Culture Committee was in the written submission from the Federation of Small Businesses. The FSB, which has 20,000 members in Scotland, reported that, in the past, only 10 per cent of its members were contacted by a college over the space of a year. Almost half of that 10 per cent found the interaction helpful, but let us not kid ourselves: that level of interaction is just not good enough.

In her subsequent oral evidence to the Education and Culture Committee, Mary Goodman of the Federation of Small Businesses said that she hoped that college reform would address that problem. She said:

“colleges have the potential to meet the needs of local businesses far better than they currently do. There is a lot of good practice out there, but it could be far more widespread.”—[*Official Report, Education and Culture Committee*, 2 October 2012; c 1500.]

Jim Hume (South Scotland) (LD): The member has been quoting. I would like to quote Liz McIntyre of Borders College. Just last month, she said:

“The current level of cuts for next year is ... going to have an impact on colleges ... student places and ... jobs”.

Will the member comment on that?

Joan McAlpine: Ms McIntyre gave evidence to the Education and Culture Committee this year, as she did last year. Obviously, she is entitled to her view. Her robust comments show that college heads are not the intimidated creatures that some Opposition politicians have tried to suggest they are.

I want to talk about employers, as it is important that colleges listen to them. The committee had a session with employers, including the Scottish Chambers of Commerce. Amy Dalrymple of the Scottish Chambers of Commerce said:

“The issue is not about funding and co-investment as much as it is about rethinking and changing attitudes around business involvement and engagement.”

In the same session, James Alexander from the Scottish Council for Development and Industry said that the Scottish Government’s regionalisation programme could help to solve that fundamental problem. He said:

“It is ... important for colleges to spend more time engaging further with businesses, particularly local businesses. That might be more likely as a result of regionalisation, as a big regional college might be more able to engage with a broader range of businesses to ensure that the courses that it offers and the skills that it delivers meet the needs of employers in its area so that people going through the college system can get the skills that employers can immediately put to use.”—[*Official Report, Education and Culture Committee*, 2 October 2012; c 1510, 1501.]

That is what it is all about. If colleges do not talk to business, they will not be able to provide the courses that employers need, and that means letting down their students. We saw that in the past before the current reforms. Some—although not all—competing colleges, which were often geographically close to each other, duplicated popular courses. That meant that the market could not absorb the students once they were qualified, and there were no jobs at the end of their courses.

Neil Findlay: Whatever happened to the concept of lifelong learning? Is it not the case that some students who go to college will never work because of circumstances? Some organisations that work with disabled people have told me that.

What are we saying for those young people whose places are being cut?

Joan McAlpine: I know quite a lot about learning disability, because I have a learning disabled sister, and I have constantly asked the cabinet secretary about the subject, both in the committee and through the cross-party group in the Scottish Parliament on learning disability. If the member had attended the cross-party group, he would have heard charities for learning disabled students say that a lot of college provision for such students was not fit for purpose because students were sent to repeat courses over and over again.

The issue of learning disability is important because it is individual colleges that make the decisions on that. As a result of representations by the cross-party group to the cabinet secretary, he has said that he will ensure that learning disabled students—indeed, all disabled students—are considered in the colleges' outcome agreements. That is a positive approach. Neil Findlay cannot just keep repeating accusations all the time. I was at the committee when the issue was discussed there and at the cross-party group when it was discussed there, but he was not.

I was making a point about employment. At a time of high youth unemployment, and given that our money from London has been cut by £1.3 billion this year, it is right that we focus on courses for young unemployed people. That is what our opportunities for all commitment for 16 to 19-year-olds is about. That also applies to what we are doing for young people outwith colleges. The number of modern apprenticeships has doubled since the previous Labour-Liberal Democrat Administration, despite the fact that we have a great deal less money. The people on those modern apprenticeships are trained both in colleges and outwith them.

Everybody knows that there are financial pressures because of the cut from London. The regionalisation programme is a way of reforming colleges so that they deliver for our young people despite that cut.

15:26

Rob Gibson (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP): We were challenged to have the backbone to speak up for our area. Not for the first time, I have been talking to the principal of the North Highland College of the University of the Highlands and Islands and others who are connected with the college. The principal told me a number of things that add to the debate. He said:

“my College Board, and our staff are too focussed on providing our students with as high a quality education as we can”.

He continued:

“for what it's worth, I think Mike Russell has done a very good job in the changes he has initiated in the Highlands and Islands FE region, and while some people may not agree or understand all the detail of the changes, I believe the intervention of the Cabinet Secretary has moved us along a trajectory that I believe will bring benefit both to the Colleges and to the University of the Highlands and Islands.”

That is a local example of a college that is getting on with the job. That example affects Thurso, Wick, Dornoch and Alness in my constituency.

Tavish Scott: Will Mr Gibson take an intervention?

Rob Gibson: Not at the moment. I will come to the member in a second.

The remark in the amendment about the ministers'

“heavy-handed treatment of college staff and governors”

is shameful. Here we have a college principal and his staff saying that they are getting on with the job.

Tavish Scott: Will Mr Gibson give way on that point?

Rob Gibson: Not at the moment. Let me finish this point.

Liam McArthur, as a member of the Highlands and Islands family, ought to recognise the way forward for that region. He should withdraw those remarks, which are in such bald terms, because they are not true. It will be interesting to see whether he withdraws them.

Willie Rennie: Will the member give way?

Rob Gibson: I am not speaking about Mr Rennie; I am talking about Mr McArthur.

Willie Rennie: Will the member give way?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Order.

Rob Gibson: Liz Smith talked about a loss of confidence. There is no loss of confidence whatsoever in North Highland College, so her generalised remarks do not reflect the truth and she should withdraw them.

Willie Rennie: Will the member give way?

Rob Gibson: No, thank you.

Willie Rennie: On that point?

Rob Gibson: No, thank you.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Gibson does not appear to be giving way.

Rob Gibson: There has been investment in the college in a fashion that has allowed the development of the engineering, technology and energy centre, which the First Minister opened in the autumn and which Mr Russell recently visited.

The centre, which cost about £8.8 million to set up, will deliver courses that will allow people to take part in the industries that will provide work in future. I welcome the fact that the Government has been able to partly fund that. It is one of the things to which the cabinet secretary referred in his speech.

Willie Rennie: Let me return to the member's earlier remarks. He will have met many principals and chairs across Scotland who are outraged by the cabinet secretary's behaviour. It is unworthy of him to dismiss their remarks as irrelevant.

Rob Gibson: I expect nothing more from people who do not have the facts about what is going on out there—[*Interruption.*] The Opposition does not want to accept that. With respect to sufferers of seasonal affective disorder, I think that the Opposition is suffering from a unionist political version of seasonal affective disorder and does not want its murky view to be dispelled by evidence of actual life in colleges and progress round the country.

I am just one person speaking about my local college. It is important to recognise some of the people who are being taught in the college. This year, 2,018 people have enrolled part time and 368 have enrolled full time on national certificate courses. Part-time students are being taken on in considerable numbers. Of the people who have come in, 23 per cent are in care subjects, 17 per cent are in engineering, 16 per cent are in business, 14 per cent are in land use and 10 per cent are in hospitality. People are learning a wide range of skills in the college that serves my area.

I would like to hear such news from other members, because around our country there are many people working in colleges who are not so-called spokespeople but are students and staff, who are getting on with the job.

"We have got to stop all the ... moaners from stealing the whole show. There are very good things happening in Colleges in Scotland and the public deserve to be told about this as well."

That is what Gordon Jenkins, the principal of North Highland College UHI in Thurso, said yesterday in an email to me.

15:32

Patricia Ferguson (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (Lab): This could be considered a timely debate, given the events of the past few weeks, but its importance owes more to its subject matter than it does to its relationship with the travails of the cabinet secretary, so I will devote most of my speech to the subject matter.

However, first, I remind members that, in a members' business debate in June, I talked about

the effect of the Scottish Government's cuts on my local college and on one of its departments in particular. In his response to the debate, the Minister for Learning, Science and Scotland's Languages, Dr Allan, acknowledged the cuts to North Glasgow College and to the budgets of colleges across Scotland, and I give him credit for his honesty.

The very next day, however, in his now-infamous answer to Mr Malik, the cabinet secretary denied that there were cuts. I am sure that, on reflection, Mr Russell regrets not listening to the point of order that Neil Bibby made on 28 June, because if he had listened to Mr Bibby pointing out the discrepancy between his utterances and those of Dr Allan he would surely have checked the figures and apologised to the Parliament there and then. History shows that the cabinet secretary took another course of action.

For Mr Russell's benefit, let me tell him about the consequence of his cuts to North Glasgow College. Last year, the college experienced a cut of £1 million. This year, it faces a further reduction of £823,000. The college sought to make voluntary severance arrangements with its staff and, as a result, lost 31 jobs in 2011-12 and a further 16 in the current year. As I said in June, the cutting of 31 jobs last year equates to the loss of some 500 years' experience and a great deal of on-going anxiety for staff. The cut has also resulted in places being reduced on courses as diverse as communications and support for learning.

This year, places have been lost in plumbing, tourism and music and sound production, among other subjects. I have witnessed at first hand my local college's efforts to minimise the effect of these cuts on the young people it serves, the staff it employs and the range of courses and number of places available, but it cannot continue to absorb cuts of this magnitude.

The situation is no better elsewhere. In 2011-12, Glasgow's colleges lost 39,258 weighted student units of measurement—or the equivalent of a John Wheatley or Stow College being entirely lost to us. Of course, we also know that this loss in numbers has disproportionately affected women, with the number of women in Scotland's colleges dropping by 24 per cent since this Government came into office. By comparison, the drop in the number of men studying is 13 per cent. Of course, that is still too much but, as I have said, a disproportionate number of women have been affected.

That has happened not by accident but because of the Government's deliberate policy to favour full-time courses over part-time ones. It seems obvious to me that part-time courses will be more attractive to many women, particularly those with childcare or other caring responsibilities who need flexibility to be able to balance their working,

educational and caring responsibilities. I find it hard to understand how the Scottish Government can be so blinkered in its approach, particularly when women's employment opportunities have been hit so badly by the economic situation. For many women, the chance to upskill or train for employment can be considered only when part-time training is available.

Last week, I heard references being made to "hobby" courses in what seemed a deliberate attempt to downgrade the loss of part-time courses. Surely the cabinet secretary understands that, just because a course is part time, that does not mean that it is not worth while and that even the courses that do not lead directly to a qualification are often the first step back into employment and training for many women, particularly those who are in, as the jargon has it, "hard-to-reach" categories but who I prefer to think of as the people who most need our help.

This Government and this cabinet secretary have lost all credibility on the issue of further education. The cabinet secretary might have apologised to the Parliament for misrepresenting the figures, but he has yet to apologise to the thousands of students who have struggled to find a place, to those dedicated members of teaching staff who face an uncertain future and to the communities of this country who, day by day, see their local colleges being diminished by his policies and actions.

It is clear that staff and students in Scotland's colleges no longer have confidence in Mr Russell and that his existence in this post is damaging college education. I take no pleasure whatever in saying that I believe that he needs to consider his position and resign.

15:38

Mike MacKenzie (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): In his speech just a few moments ago, Liam McArthur accused the cabinet secretary of lodging with the ombudsman a complaint against his own Government about the Dunoon ferry service. I and a number of members from the Highlands and Islands region were copied into the same email from the Dunoon ferry campaigners that Mr Russell received, and Mr Russell copied me into his reply. I can therefore confirm to the chamber that what Mr McArthur said was entirely inaccurate and, indeed, untrue. I ask the member to accept my word for this if he will not accept the cabinet secretary's but, if he is not prepared to do that, I am sure that Mr Russell and I will be happy to co-operate in carrying out the minimum amount of research that would be required to get to the truth. I ask Mr McArthur to take a bit of time and, when he discovers the truth, to come back to the

chamber at the earliest opportunity and make due apology to Mr Russell and the chamber.

Liam McArthur: Will the member give way?

Mike MacKenzie: No, I am not prepared to take an intervention. This debate should not be about the cabinet secretary or who said what when—*[Interruption.]*

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr MacKenzie is not taking interventions at the moment.

Mike MacKenzie: I invite the member to speak to me after the debate, which is—or should be—about further education. *[Interruption.]*

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Order.

Mike MacKenzie: Last week I paid tribute to the cabinet secretary because he was on the verge of pulling off that difficult task of making a virtue out of necessity. This week, I renew that tribute. The further education system has been in need of reform for many years. Hugh Henry admitted as much in last week's debate and he agreed that reform was necessary—reform that Labour failed to carry out when it was in office, when its budget was rising year on year, and which Hugh Henry failed to carry out when he was education minister, albeit briefly.

Hugh Henry: Will the member take an intervention?

Mike MacKenzie: No, I took a number of interventions last week and did not even get halfway through my speech.

The need for reform was evident in that daft system in which colleges sometimes operated in competition with each other like pseudo-businesses—some colleges did well and others did not, and two colleges that were close together would sometimes struggle in competition with each other, running identical courses, each with half-full classes. We heard a lot about that last week and we heard about needless and wasteful duplication.

We should remember, too, that further education is not really about colleges. It is not even about the further education sector. It is about young people and it is about training and educating and equipping them for life. The system was failing many of those young people because it was not always—

Jenny Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): Will the member take an intervention?

Mike MacKenzie: No, I have to make progress.

The system was not always about supplying education that was relevant to the needs of those young people for today and tomorrow. How do we know that? We know that because in an era of

rising unemployment, particularly youth unemployment, we hear from industry sectors of skill shortages. We hear that they are desperate for young people but that they cannot get sufficient numbers who are adequately trained or educated. We hear that from the oil and gas sector.

Willie Rennie: Will the member take an intervention?

Mike MacKenzie: No, thank you. With estimates of 22 billion barrels of oil still to come out of the North Sea, with a value of more than £1.5 trillion, the sector offers not just short-term employment but rewarding long-term careers.

Willie Rennie: Will the member give way now?

Mike MacKenzie: No, I will not, thank you. We hear about skill shortages from the renewable energy sector. With some estimates suggesting that there will be investment of more than £100 billion in the sector in Scotland in the next decade, the sector offers great career opportunities for young people.

Jenny Marra: Will the member take an intervention?

Willie Rennie: Will the member give way now?

Mike MacKenzie: No, thank you. No, thank you.

There is a need to reform and to refocus our further education sector and to address those pressing problems, because it is fundamentally wrong to deny our young people—

Willie Rennie: Will the member take an intervention?

Mike MacKenzie: No, thank you.

It is fundamentally wrong to deny our young people the opportunity of meaningful careers. It is also wrong because it deprives us of the ability to fully realise our economic opportunities.

Claudia Beamish (South Scotland) (Lab): Will the member take an intervention?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The member is in his last minute.

Mike MacKenzie: The buildings in our further education estate are not all capable of accommodating the necessary reforms, so large amounts of capital investment are required to facilitate the reforms. The Scottish Government has provided that investment partially through the non-profit-distributing mechanism. That is why, in this period of reform, it is misleading and entirely false to consider only revenue spending.

There is one further matter that I must touch on before concluding. Colleges have reserves of around £206 million—or they did at the end of

2011. That is equivalent to about 40 per cent of this year's revenue budget.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Draw to a close now, please.

Mike MacKenzie: Under those circumstances, it is only proper that colleges contribute to the costs of the reforms, which, by and large, they support.

The cabinet secretary has been carrying out the reforms—

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

Mike MacKenzie: He has been carrying them out under difficult circumstances.

15:44

Colin Beattie (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP): I am happy to be given the opportunity to speak positively about what the Government is doing to protect our further education in the face of Westminster Government cuts.

Let us consider some of the positive indicators. The SNP Government has increased baseline college student support by 25 per cent since 2006-07, a rise of £20.5 million from £63.7 million to £84.2 million in 2011-12. The Government is clearly committed and determined to maintain support to further education students, and its actions over the past six years certainly evidence that.

In the 2013-14 budget, an additional £11.4 million has been allocated to the student support budget to maintain support at more than £95 million. That is 40 per cent more than during the previous two Administrations. The 2013-14 budget also includes a commitment of an additional £17 million for student support and college places. Of that £17 million, £11 million will be devoted to student support and the remaining £6 million will be for college places.

This Administration is protecting student numbers for further education. The Scottish Government will put in place provision for more than 116,000 full-time equivalent students in 2013-14, again maintaining the same numbers as in 2011-12 and 2012-13.

Tavish Scott: Mr Beattie is a thoughtful and intelligent member of the Public Audit Committee. As Audit Scotland presented its report to him and the rest of the committee, he knows that college funding has been cut by 24 per cent. Does he want to comment on that figure?

Colin Beattie: I do not think that anybody is denying that there is an overall budget pressure on further education; in the points that I am

making, I am trying to draw out the positive aspects in which the Government is taking specific action to protect students.

This year, the Scottish Government has taken major action to reform and improve Scottish colleges. The Government is committed to improving the structure, funding and training opportunities that colleges provide. Our colleges play a vital role in building up people's aspirations for the future by providing them with crucial life and work skills, and they contribute hugely towards Scotland's performance in education and, importantly, the economy.

To maintain and build on the colleges' importance, the Scottish Government has set about the structural regionalisation of colleges. Regionalisation within defined regions across Scotland is the best way to achieve improvements in college funding and the quality of our colleges, the provision of high standards of education and training opportunities, and improvements in colleges' accountability.

One of the first examples of a successful merger is that of the newly formed Edinburgh College. I would like to take a moment to praise the previous Jewel and Esk College, which existed in my constituency since 2008 and is now a member of Edinburgh College. I have been very impressed with the efforts and teaching at Jewel and Esk, and I look forward to its continued development as part of the merged college.

Neil Findlay: Has the member spoken recently to the college unions at Jewel and Esk to find out their views on the Government's handling of FE?

Colin Beattie: I have not spoken to the college unions, but I can quote Jim Ewing, chair of the Edinburgh merger partnership board. He said in *The Scotsman*:

"Working together as one college will provide more opportunities for students, staff and the community, and reflects the growing desire of the Scottish Government for colleges to work together to deliver a smarter, more economical model going forward."

The three combined colleges all agreed that a merger would create more opportunities for Edinburgh and the Lothians by delivering efficient services to students and opportunities for the new college as an employer across the region. Edinburgh College will develop a broader and deeper curriculum to better support individuals, communities and businesses.

The proposals and guiding principles that the Scottish Government has put forward for post-16 education reform have been strongly supported by the three individual colleges and are now supported by Edinburgh College and its stakeholders. Those who are truly involved in the

reforms have confidence in the Government, regardless of doomsayers.

Claudia Beamish: Will the member take an intervention?

Colin Beattie: I think that I have taken enough interventions for the moment.

Edinburgh College is now the largest further education institution in Scotland and among the largest in the UK. It is better placed to serve the economic and skill needs of the growing Lothians population, and it will be no surprise that the first of the new college's key principles is to put students first.

The Scottish Government, too, puts students first. The opportunities for all initiative is now fully operational, offering 16 to 19-year-olds a place in education or training. I am eagerly anticipating the progress that Edinburgh College will make, and I am pleased that it is leading the implementation of the necessary reforms.

The Government has continued to support further education, despite the unparalleled cuts from Westminster. The regional reforms are specifically designed to make colleges more efficient and responsive to the needs of students and those who will eventually hire them. Colleges will also be able to focus on how they can improve the local economy in these times of UK cuts and fiscal austerity, creating business innovation centres and working with local businesses to forge close links and ensure relevance of outcome from the colleges in terms of students having relevant courses and training to fit them for the commercial world.

Political point scoring at this point is not helpful, when we are dealing with the fall-out from Westminster-driven cuts. [*Laughter.*]

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Order.

Colin Beattie: Regardless of what some people might think, the situation is the result of Westminster cuts. I am sure that those who are involved, whether they are teachers, students or college staff, are tired of negativity. I applaud the cabinet secretary and the Government for doing a remarkable job protecting Scottish further education in a situation of ever-reducing resources.

15:50

James Kelly (Rutherglen) (Lab): When I arrived in Parliament this morning I did not expect to be speaking in the debate, but I am taking the place of my colleague Michael McMahon, whose voice has been silenced in the debate. If he was speaking in the debate, I know that he would want to speak up for his constituents in Bellshill and

Uddingston who have been denied places at college; he would want to focus on the cuts in college funding that are producing a crisis in our further education sector; and he would want to highlight the shambolic record, particularly in recent days, of Michael Russell, the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning, aided and abetted by the First Minister, Alex Salmond.

A lot of figures have been bandied about on both sides of the debate, but let us start by looking at the facts about the money. I will quote the figures from an independent source: the Auditor General for Scotland. Based on his figures, not any political party's figures, there will be cuts of 24 per cent over the next four years in the further education budget. In terms of the reduction from last year to this year, it goes from £555 million to £546 million, a drop of £9 million. Going forward, there is a further £34 million drop to £512 million. Those are drops in cash terms; they do not take account of inflation. When we build in inflation, college budgets will be under even more pressure.

The response from the SNP, as we just heard from the previous speaker, is simply to blame the Westminster Government. It is time that the SNP and its back benchers took responsibility for their own budget.

Mark McDonald: I will make the same offer to Mr Kelly as I made to his colleague Mr Bibby the other week: if he can identify where we could extract funding in order to replace or increase funding in college budgets, we are more than happy to listen to him. Has he identified a budget line in that regard?

James Kelly: Absolutely. The Scottish Government has over 250 spin doctors, and £19 million is spent on national health service spin doctors. I would rather have places for college students than have spin doctors, who cannot even get their figures right.

Stewart Stevenson: Will the member take an intervention?

James Kelly: No, thank you. [*Interruption.*]

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Order.

James Kelly: When a minister is under threat of resignation, Mr Stevenson is perhaps the last person who should be on their feet defending him.

Let us look at Michael Russell's record in recent days. We have heard about the flip-flop over the figures for college funding. However, one of the areas that appalled me was Mr Russell's treatment of Kirk Ramsay. I have to be honest, because when I first heard that Mr Russell was saying that a private meeting had been recorded, I thought that perhaps he had a point. However, as the story developed, it turned out that there were between

80 and 100 people in the room at the discussion and that details of it were all over the internet.

James Dornan (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP): Will the member take an intervention?

James Kelly: No, thank you.

It was clearly a very public discussion. What appalled me even more was that Mr Russell then summoned Kirk Ramsay to Edinburgh alone, without explanation, to face up to him and his officials, and told him that, if he had the power, he would sack him. I believe that that is a cowardly act and not one that is fit for someone who heads up the country's education service.

The impact of those actions and budget decisions is that we have 70,000 fewer people in college places at this time.

Chic Brodie (South Scotland) (SNP): Will the member take an intervention?

James Kelly: No, thank you.

Patricia Ferguson rightly pointed out the impact on women.

Chic Brodie: Will the member give way?

James Kelly: The member should sit down. I am not taking the intervention. [*Interruption.*]

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Order.

James Kelly: When Mr Russell was challenged recently about the 21,000 people on waiting lists, he said that it was a falsehood. He should go and tell that to the fairies at the bottom of the garden, because we have heard plenty of practical examples.

I know that, if Michael McMahon was here today, he would want to speak up vociferously on behalf of his constituents, and I know that the staff and students in Scotland's colleges are demoralised and have lost confidence in Mike Russell. Mr Russell, it is time to go.

15:56

Jamie Hepburn (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP): I have done a quick calculation, and if £19 million is being spent on those 250 spin doctors, they must be earning £76,000 each. I look forward to the figures being further presented by Mr Kelly. However, even if they are correct, is the Labour Party's solution to sack people? That seems to be the only suggestion that we have heard from the Labour Party.

I welcome today's debate, because the provision of decent college places is something that should concern us all. It is important at the outset to reflect on the position of the EIS general secretary, Larry Flanagan, who said last weekend that students and teaching staff want to see the

political parties get back to the issues rather than having arguments that are

“based around personal spats and party-political squabbling”.

I would have hoped to see—

Claudia Beamish: Will the member give way?

Jamie Hepburn: I would love to give way to the honourable Claudia Beamish.

Claudia Beamish: Just for the record, I have not used that title for a very long time because I do not believe—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Could you lift your microphone, please?

Claudia Beamish: Sorry, Presiding Officer. That is not the title by which I wish to be addressed. I have not used it for many years, since I became an adult, which was rather a long time ago. Thank you.

What does the member think about the fact that, in the press release that we were all party to, Mr Flanagan went on to say:

“Now that the true extent of the cuts are no longer in dispute, we would argue that before decisions are taken about future spending on Further Education there should be an extended period of discussion during which the voices of those most closely involved in the provision and receipt of college education - the staff and students - are clearly heard.”

Would the member like to comment on that?

Jamie Hepburn: Before I do so, Presiding Officer, I know that time is tight in the debate, but I hope that I will get some time back for that intervention. I see that I will not. Well, I would like to thank Claudia Beamish for the amount of time that she took.

In this debate, it is important to focus on the issues rather than on the party-political squabbling. That is the point that I was trying to make.

I return to the issues. I was delighted to attend Cumbernauld College’s award ceremony last week, when I saw hundreds of young people from Cumbernauld and Kilsyth and beyond being honoured for their achievements. I would have thought that this debate, if anything, should be about encouraging such achievements. I will return to the local situation later if time allows, Presiding Officer.

It is important to focus on the reality of the situation for Scotland’s colleges. In that regard, I return to the point that Claudia Beamish made. Between 2007 and 2014-15, the SNP in Administration will invest £5 billion in colleges. That is 39 per cent more in cash terms than was

spent under the two terms of the previous Administration.

Indeed, college student support is at record levels. In 2013-14 an additional £11.4 million will be allocated to the student support budget, so that it will be maintained at more than £95 million. That is 40 per cent higher than its level when Johann Lamont was a Scottish Executive minister. It is therefore little wonder that NUS Scotland president, Robin Parker, said:

“It’s fantastic that the money is now in place to provide financial help to the poorest students.”

It is important to place that on record.

I want to talk about some of the changes that are happening on the ground, because that is what the debate should be about. We see a different approach here in Scotland. There are massive cuts to the college budgets south of the border, but no impetus for reform of the sector. Here in Scotland we see reform of the college sector to provide a renewed focus. The approach is not that radical—after all, before the current structure was put in place by Michael Forsyth we had a rather similar model of regionalisation, albeit with different regions. Scotland’s Colleges welcomed the move to regionalisation in the briefing that it provided for this debate.

Lanarkshire is the region that affects my constituents most directly. It is important to note that the four colleges in that area are establishing a federation. At one stage there was an idea that colleges would be forced to merge, which was plainly untrue. In Lanarkshire we see a different approach, which I know the cabinet secretary has welcomed.

I have spoken regularly to the principal of Cumbernauld College, who, I have to say, would not be described as a shrinking violet or someone who is easily intimidated, as it has been suggested that college principals are. He speaks freely with me and talks about the challenges that are faced by the sector; I know that he has spoken to the cabinet secretary and the Minister for Learning, Science and Scotland’s Languages. The principal is behind the idea of regionalisation and an agreement has been established between the four colleges that are involved. That will provide a new focus for the sector in the area that I represent. The colleges are working to build on existing high attainment levels, increase activity levels, deliver regional specialisms, provide high-quality learning experiences and continue to equip learners well to help them secure good-quality enterprise skills, jobs and careers. That is what colleges should be about, and I am glad that Cumbernauld College and Lanarkshire are getting geared up to do that. They will work with the Scottish Government towards that end.

16:02

John Pentland (Motherwell and Wishaw)

(Lab): The FE sector is in a dire situation and we must honestly address the funding deficit, the damage that has been done and the cabinet secretary's dismal performance. I understand how painful that must be for the cabinet secretary and how upset he must get when he is asked difficult questions such as, "If you knew the figures were wrong, why didn't you tell the First Minister?" and, "Is that an apology?"

I do not want to dwell on the debacle of the college budget inaccuracies for too long, but it is important to have the correct perspective on the figures. Even the true bottom line figures do not do that. The drop in final budgets from £555 million to £546 million hides inconvenient truths about how those figures are composed. The bottom line figure for 2012-13 includes £15 million for college transformation. Without that funding in 2013-14, the bottom line figure drops to £512 million, so I ask the cabinet secretary please to stop his pretence. This is not about bolstering the college sector; it is about managing its decline.

Recent figures show that students from deprived areas are still disadvantaged in terms of getting to university, which makes college education an especially important factor in tackling deprivation. I am surprised that the cabinet secretary does not seem to understand that. While colleges struggle, universities have been cushioned from the cuts, which has prompted accusations of the rich being propped up at the expense of the poor. Universities attempt to address that by taking students from colleges. However, in my constituency, Motherwell College has had to refuse more than two thousand applications, so that will not be an easy route. I know that some people will have found places elsewhere, but for a variety of factors—not the least of which is costs—people tend not to travel far for college places. Given the axed courses and shortage of places, some people will not even have applied.

There is also evidence that young people are staying on at school longer, which will increase future demand. In North Lanarkshire, more than 2,000 16 to 19-year-olds are not in education, employment or training. That figure will be an underestimate by 20 per cent or more, and I would bet that quite a few of those 2,500 young people applied to colleges. From their point of view, the Scottish Government's pledge to 16 to 19-year-olds looks like a bad joke. For many, the FE sector is the doorway to higher education and the key to the labour market, and they must feel that the Scottish Government has locked that door and thrown away the key.

This is the second year that there has been a problem for Motherwell College following cuts in

funding, courses and staff. Nationally, cuts in FE teaching budgets saw staff numbers slashed by 1,300 last year. There is also a problem for older students, with the Government policy prioritising places for 16 to 19-year-olds as it tries to massage the youth unemployment figures.

James Dornan: If the Government were trying to massage the unemployment figures by creating college courses, why would it have made the priority full-time courses and not part-time courses? That would have allowed it to massage the figures more than it could through the figures for full-time courses.

John Pentland: I am not surprised by the number of interventions from SNP back benchers. I assume that the First Minister is planning a reshuffle.

It is estimated that 70,000 people are being deprived of lifelong learning because part-time courses have been dropped. Those cannot be dismissed as mere "hobby" courses, because they all contribute to our ideal of a learning society. We might think that such large numbers of people being affected would concentrate the minds of ministers—for electoral reasons, if for no other—but I am told that the view has been expressed that there are no votes in college funding.

Understanding the damage that has been caused is not just about recognising the big numbers that are involved. The individual consequences can, in many ways, bring home more strongly the short-sightedness and unfairness of the cuts. Deprived of a job, a course and the prospect of a life that is going somewhere, what do people do? Some rise above it and make a voluntary contribution to society, some sink into apathy and despair and some take out their anger on society. Everyone has to meet the costs of apathy and alienation, so what is the point of all the talk of preventative spending if we then cut college budgets? Would it not be far better to invest in the future of our people?

Colleges also have a wider social role. A school in my area has a link arrangement with Motherwell College to enable secondary 5 and 6 pupils who have additional support needs to study part time in order to assist with the transition from school. That arrangement has now been cut back to just S6 students. How long before it goes completely? Is that what Mike Russell means by "substantial commitment"?

Especially after recent events, it is clear that students and would-be students including the thousands in North Lanarkshire have no confidence in Mike Russell. College heads and staff have no confidence in Mike Russell. Many members here—possibly even among his colleagues—have no confidence in Mike Russell.

The Government's policies are wrong and must change. If that means that Mike Russell must go, that is fine by me.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Elaine Smith): I call Mark McDonald to be followed by Alison Johnstone. Time is very tight.

16:09

Mark McDonald (North East Scotland) (SNP): I will start by putting to bed the issue about bullying. On "Good Morning Scotland" on 17 November, Derek Bateman said:

"we also spoke to the college lecturers association. They told us as far as they're concerned there is no culture of ... bullying from government. The EIS said that bullying's not an issue that they're concerned with. They think actually that the publicity this has had has distracted from the real issues ... The civil service union, the PCS, said there was no sign of bullying or fear".

Let us put the matter straight to bed right now and instead talk about the reform that is necessary in the college sector.

I have already quoted from a 2004 EIS response to a consultation by the then Scottish Executive on proposed changes to further education college boards of management. In the same response, the EIS also said:

"It is, therefore, the view of the EIS that the continued atomisation of the further education sector through individually managed colleges is not in the best interests of students, staff or the public purse."

Eight years on, we finally have an education secretary who has grasped that bull by the horns and is driving forward the much-needed reform of the college sector that has been called for for many years.

In the north-east, which I represent, the new regional lead for the Aberdeen and Aberdeenshire region will be Ken Milroy, the former chair of Aberdeen College. On his appointment to that position on 20 July, he said:

"By planning on a regional basis we have the opportunity to re-think, re-shape and join up education to better meet the needs of learners in Aberdeen and Aberdeenshire. By sharing resources and engaging with businesses to maximise local career opportunities, we will further support the local and national economy."

That sharing of resources in the north-east will happen not just within the further education sector but between the FE sector and the higher education sector because, as well as collaboration between Banff and Buchan College and Aberdeen College, there will be collaboration with Robert Gordon University and the University of Aberdeen. Indeed, I suggest that the north-east provides a strong model of best practice that other areas should consider replicating.

Alison McInnes (North East Scotland) (LD): Will the member take an intervention?

Mark McDonald: No, thank you.

Another point is that colleges across Scotland currently have £200 million in reserves. Having looked back at the *Official Report* of last week's debate, I see that the Conservative finance spokesperson, Gavin Brown, said:

"I note that Angela Constance and Marco Biagi think that the solution to our college crisis is to spend the reserves. We should not worry about what might come in the future; if we spend those reserves, everything will be absolutely fine."—[*Official Report*, 14 November 2012; c 13468.]

I know that Mr Brown is the finance spokesperson, but he clearly does not understand the concept of reserves. The reserves were built up during the good times. When we come into times of difficulty and when reform is required, that is when we should draw down the reserves to cushion colleges and to make the necessary changes through reform and reorganisation to drive things forward.

Gavin Brown: Will the member give way?

Mark McDonald: No thank you. Mr Brown can deal with that point in his summing up. My time is tight.

That is what developing and building up reserves is for. [*Interruption.*]

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Order. The member is not giving way.

Mark McDonald: I will make no apologies for speaking about the capital investment programme, because the fantastic new facility at Banff and Buchan College in Fraserburgh is delivering real benefits to students. The students now have better facilities, with a more special space that allows them to meet with their colleagues and to work together on group projects. In a rural setting in which many people have to travel great distances from home to attend college, it is especially important that students have a space that they can use outside the regular class environment. That new facility is also much more accessible—I take on board the cabinet secretary's point about the need to ensure that outcomes are in place—which ensures that disabled learners, by which I mean not just the learning disabled but all disabled learners, are catered for.

In addition, the new facility at Banff and Buchan College and the re-cladding project at Aberdeen College will help to drive down energy costs significantly. That will allow money to be spent on reinvestment in front-line services instead of being spent on heating and lighting inefficient buildings. That is a benefit that will be recognised and seen by students.

Regionalisation will also provide local benefits through having a federal structure that will lead to increased efficiency and an enhanced learner experience. A jointly planned curriculum covering the whole region will be of benefit to learners because it will put them at the centre and it will align with identified demand across the north-east. That will also ensure that the colleges deliver break-even financial positions.

However, the benefits will be felt not just within the north-east. Geoff Fenlon, the principal and chief executive of Carnegie College, has said that the 13 regional colleges

“will present us all with a fantastic opportunity to create something new and exciting.”

I think that we need to grasp that “new and exciting” opportunity and feed that into the wider collaboration not just within the further education sector but between further education and higher education. I emphasise again that the north-east region has best practice, which should be considered as such, in that regard.

16:14

Alison Johnstone (Lothian) (Green): This is an important debate to be having as we scrutinise the budget and as we work together to ensure that people have every opportunity to access education and meaningful employment—to be skilled and reskilled.

Patricia Ferguson and others have raised the issue of women in college. *The Herald* reported that thousands of women have been hit by college cuts. Its report highlighted that female college numbers have dropped by a quarter over the four years to 2010-11, while over the same period male numbers have reduced at only half that rate. There are still more women in college than men, but changes have clearly hit them hardest—we have lost more than 40,000 women from further education in four years. Let us not get bogged down in full-time equivalents versus head count—this is about individual opportunities.

Why is that the case? Although the Government has given such welcome and well-publicised support to students, anyone dropping by the debate could be forgiven for being confused. The answer lies in the Government’s decision to prioritise full-time college provision to support young people who are at risk of unemployment. It is well recognised that a key benefit of colleges is their ability to offer flexible learning. That is essential for many women as they often have multiple caring roles in their households. Not surprisingly, the stats show that evening and weekend and distance learning courses are more popular with women.

The debate is about opportunity, people’s lives and the quality of those lives. It is vital that it does not become a numbers game about employment statistics. The decision to focus on 16 to 25-year-olds’ full-time courses is a reaction to youth unemployment. We all agree that bringing young people into college is important, but we must recognise the link between adult unemployment and future generations. We will not break the cycle of poverty or disadvantage with a focus on young people that may limit parental opportunities, whether those parents fit the 16 to 25-year-old age bracket or not. It is incredibly important to give people with children who want to learn the opportunity to do so. Parents are children’s first and on-going educators.

Are colleges soft targets in comparison with what is too often viewed as the more elite university sector?

The Minister for Youth Employment (Angela Constance): Will the member give way?

Alison Johnstone: Yes—but be brief, please.

Angela Constance: Does Ms Johnstone accept that it remains the case that the majority of courses remain part-time? Does she accept that childcare funding has increased by 42 per cent? Does she accept that there are no campus closures? Those are all beneficial to women who want to access their local colleges.

Alison Johnstone: I will try to come on to those issues.

In contrast with the Westminster Government, the Scottish Government has shown that it believes that access to education should be based on the ability to learn and not the ability to pay. What the Government must do now is ensure that the benefits are available equitably to those who want to learn. My experience in Lothian tells me that that is not solely about college funding; the minister raised childcare, which is a vital part of the debate.

With a local MP and councillor, I recently visited Stepping Stones children’s centre in north Edinburgh. We spent time meeting, listening to and learning from a lively group of young mums. I was struck by their burning desire to learn and improve themselves. We met on Wednesday, and one of the young mums was due to start college the following Monday, but had not been able to confirm childcare arrangements because she did not yet have a final college timetable, which she would not get until she started the course. She told me that there is a nursery connected to the college, but that she could not afford, and often did not need, the half-day minimum booking. She suggested that the nursery placements were filled by families with steady work.

I have just found out that that determined young woman managed to secure childcare, although some months into her course. I am delighted that she sustained the college place; the professionals who have been working with the young woman described the start to her college career as “extremely stressful”. Most worrying, the other young mums, aware of their friend’s difficulty, said that they had simply resigned themselves to the fact that while their children were young, college might not be an option.

The Minister for Children and Young People (Aileen Campbell): Will the member give way?

Alison Johnstone: I think that I am about to address Aileen Campbell’s point.

I appreciate that the Government is investigating the possibility of providing the current five morning or afternoon sessions in a more flexible format, and I would welcome an update on that. If childcare could be offered in the college setting so that people did not have to pay for childcare while they were travelling, that would be a great advance, and one that would be warmly welcomed by a lot of people in that position.

A local English lecturer has written to me to express concerns about cuts to higher English courses at her college, which is an important access course for a great many people. The loss of more than 1,000 college staff will, of course, lead to the loss of courses. Although budget cuts mean that we ensure that there is no unnecessary duplication, we must ensure that course provision is accessible.

Access to education and lifelong learning for all brings many benefits to individuals. It increases wellbeing, boosts self-esteem and confidence and is well worth protecting and funding. Education in its broadest sense is about much more than qualifications.

The Greens will support the Lib Dem amendment. Confidence in the Scottish Government has been shaken and people rightly expect the education secretary to understand that his political decision to focus on full-time courses will impact on people who have different needs. We all can and do make mistakes, but people expect the education secretary to know the education budget inside out. Reassuring nods from ministers are cold comfort to those who are impacted by the reality of losing millions from the college pot.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The next two speakers have been advised that I can give them only 4 minutes each.

16:20

Richard Lyle (Central Scotland) (SNP): Due to a cut in my speaking time, I will not take interventions.

In my 40 years in politics, I have heard many Labour and Tory ministers having to apologise to various Parliaments regarding unintentionally wrong figures that they have given. I am reminded of the old saying, “Let he or she who is without sin cast the first stone.” The cabinet secretary has apologised and, as far as I am concerned, we should move on. I contend that he is doing an exceptional job. The personal attacks on his character should stop, but I know that they will not, because the Labour Party, the Tories and the Liberals will play personal politics rather than concentrate on facts. That is their agenda now, and we all know it.

It is the job of the Opposition to oppose, but it is also the job of Opposition to provide other options—John Pentland should remember that—not personal attacks. Personal attacks show that the Opposition parties have nothing to contribute. On many occasions, I have sat in the chamber and listened to Labour, Tory and Liberal members bleating about budget cuts and bleating that more money must be spent on this and that. Have they told us what they would do? No. It is a case of power without responsibility.

The debate should concentrate on what is happening in education. I did not get the opportunity to go to university, but my wife and I ensured that both our children did; we ensured that they got a good education. In its first term in office, the SNP Government ensured that they did not have to pay graduation fees when they left university, as many other students did. We are protecting students in Scotland. The Scottish Government has done the best for students and university graduates under the stewardship of an exceptional cabinet secretary. He is working hard and for the best for Scotland and the education system.

The Government has done many things to improve our education system. I intend to give figures to support my contention that work is being carried out in the education sector. I do not intend to nod my head and, if I give a wrong figure, it will be unintentional. I also intend to be clear.

Our college reforms will strengthen the sector at a time when the Scottish budget faces unprecedented cuts from the Tory-Liberal Democrat Government at Westminster. While the Opposition parties obsess about political point scoring, we are overseeing reform and taking action.

Despite the UK Government passing down unprecedented cuts to Scotland, we are

maintaining college student support at record levels. We are protecting students and we are maintaining FTE teaching activity. We have no tuition fees. I believe that Labour and the Tories would bring back tuition fees—the Tories and Liberals have already done so in England.

Our college reforms will strengthen the sector, resulting in higher-quality training and skills provision. It is the first time in almost 20 years that reform of the sector has been considered, and the SNP believes that it is necessary.

We are maintaining college student support at record levels. I support the cabinet secretary.

16:24

Jenny Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): The date for the merger of Dundee College and Angus College has just been announced as 1 November 2013. That gives us one year to make a smooth transition to a new single college.

The key to a successful transition rests with those who are at the heart of further education. It is vital that they have confidence in the education secretary to deliver the kind of institution that they expect and deserve. For the hundreds on the waiting list who want to learn—in Dundee, that figure stood at more than 500 last week—that means that the courses that they choose to do are still available.

The education secretary's role is to show the type of leadership that will inspire confidence among the students and staff at Dundee College and Angus College that their needs are at the core of his reforms, but for many that confidence just is not there.

Colleges have always been the great champions of second chances for those who are not ready for further education when they leave school. A few weeks ago, I was lucky enough to attend Angus College's graduation ceremony. I saw many mature women cross the stage and pick up qualifications in accountancy and marketing. In doing so, they were creating more opportunities and better lives for themselves and their families. However, the Government's funding model will mean fewer and fewer second chances for older students, and women in particular. Women are being hit the hardest.

At that graduation ceremony in Arbroath, Damien Yeates, the head of Skills Development Scotland, said that people in Scotland are now expected to have approximately eight different jobs in their lifetime, so where are the opportunities for reskilling? I will take the example of the renewables industry that Dundee and Angus are waiting for a share of. Should our Government not be harnessing the skills of engineers who lost

their jobs when firms such as NCR moved production from Dundee? Those people have immensely transferable skills that could be used in the renewables industry. Letting those over-25-year-olds take a short course would provide a strongly skilled and varied workforce to attract international renewables companies to our region.

Opportunities for retraining must be supported by a Government that takes our economy seriously and wants to support a strong and flexible economy and workforce, but second chances are going under this education secretary. That is not what I say; it is what our colleges say. At a time of recession, retraining should be one of the highest political priorities, but how can we have confidence that an education secretary who cannot get his bottom-line figures correct will realise the impact—which I have just outlined—that the cut to the teaching grant is having?

Dundee and Angus trade unions said this week that they have no confidence in the education secretary. The future of our college training sector is too important to be left to a politician who cannot get his figures right. It is time for the cabinet secretary to go.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We come to the closing speeches. I call Liam McArthur, who has six minutes.

Liam McArthur: Are you sure that it is now?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Yes, it is now, Mr McArthur. Please make your closing speech.

16:27

Liam McArthur: I started my earlier speech with an apology. Mike MacKenzie has since invited me to clarify the record at the earliest opportunity in relation to the Gourrock to Dunoon ferry. I will quote from a letter from the cabinet secretary to *The Herald*:

"I have backed calls for an appropriate inquiry ... I absolutely support the right of"

the members of the ferry action group

"to go to the Ombudsman."

I think that it is beyond peradventure that he has written to the ombudsman.

Today's debate has done a number of things. It has rightly underscored the importance of the college sector to Scotland. Although the role of the colleges is not simply economic, there is no getting away from the fact that in these difficult economic times, when unemployment—particularly youth unemployment—is rising more quickly in Scotland than anywhere else in the UK, colleges are of critical importance in laying the foundations for recovery. Despite the tone of much

of the debate, I do not believe that anyone in the chamber disagrees with that simple truth.

Despite the wording of his motion, Mr Russell appeared to accept that college students and staff face significant challenges. In doing likewise, Jamie Hepburn was an honourable exception among SNP back benchers. On the basis of one email from the principal of North Highland College, Rob Gibson appeared to dismiss anyone who raised concerns anywhere else in the country as moaners and anyone who disagreed with the Government's approach on the matter as somehow suffering from a mental health disorder.

Rob Gibson *rose*—

Liam McArthur: Sit down.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Can I stop you for a moment, Mr McArthur? I remind members that the only person in the chamber who can tell anyone to sit down is the Presiding Officer. If anyone does not wish to take an intervention, I expect them to decline the request politely.

Liam McArthur: I apologise to Rob Gibson and to you for that, Presiding Officer.

Colin Beattie made a plea for no political point scoring over Westminster cuts. That demonstrates that there is no willingness to accept that many of the challenges that the college sector faces are a direct result of decisions by the SNP Government and the cabinet secretary. As Jeremy Peat of the David Hume Institute put it,

"This is a difficult time for the sector, facing the challenges of coping with constraints on funding, implementing rapid and substantial organisational change and of playing a key role in meeting the government's challenge to provide an opportunity for all".

It will simply not wash to blame Westminster, Opposition parties and forces of conservatism in the college sector. The issues are serious and have serious consequences for colleges, staff, students, businesses and our economy. Neil Findlay, Patricia Ferguson and Jenny Marra among others set out local impacts. Many have quoted Larry Flanagan. He is right to say that we need to focus on addressing the serious issues, but the cabinet secretary's actions undermine efforts to do so.

That is not to say that Mr Russell is doing everything wrong or that he has not taken action that will be in the college sector's long-term interests. However, it is demonstrable that he prefers to assert rather than genuinely listen, that he is intolerant of anyone who dares to express a contrary view or even question his decisions, and that he has been so obsessed with creating the impression that he is right and everyone else is wrong that he has ended up misleading

Parliament and the people of Scotland over funding.

This is not a case of reading a table incorrectly or even a case of muddled thinking when faced with the undoubted complexity of college funding. If that had been the case, it would not have taken until 18 October for Mr Russell to put the record straight by writing to the Education and Culture Committee. I cannot believe that, with historic numbers of Government ministers and special advisers, no one spotted the error for more than four months.

I see that in a press release of 10 September, which is still happily carried on the Scottish Government's website today, Mr Russell again cheerfully claimed that within the cumulative amount of funding that had been paid out to colleges since 2007

"lies an increase in funding for the coming academic year".

Surely to goodness somebody in the Government would have spotted that. Surely someone realised that the figures are going down and not up.

Even if it took four months to wake up to the facts and identify the error, it beggars belief that Mr Russell allowed the First Minister to assert repeatedly that college funding is going up and not down. If someone cannot correctly identify the detail of the decisions that they are taking, it is difficult to see how they can be expected to deal with the consequences.

It is little wonder that we are witnessing a loss of confidence in the education secretary across the college sector. The situation is compounded by the fallout from Mr Russell's histrionics over the so-called spy-pen-gate. As James Kelly highlighted, Mr Russell's shameful overreaction to the former chair of Stow College recording a meeting that was attended by more than 80 people and whose details are freely available on the internet exposed a side of the education secretary that many had long suspected and of which a number had felt the full force in the past.

At a time of major reforms to the college sector, a wide range of Government commitments to be delivered and deep funding cuts, one would expect the education secretary to be in full listening mode. The fact that he is not has done great damage to him and the Government as a whole. Even when what he is doing is right, he has left himself weakened and compromised.

It is right that we have had the debate this afternoon, but it is regrettable that it was necessary. If it is to serve a useful purpose, it must deliver what is needed for students, staff and businesses across Scotland. If it is to safeguard and improve quality, choice and access in college provision, it must signal a change in funding

arrangements for the college sector, a change in attitude and approach from the Scottish Government and—I believe, on the basis of today's debate—a change in the education secretary.

16:33

Gavin Brown (Lothian) (Con): The debate is critical for students, staff and the wider Scottish economy. At a time of a high unemployment rate and a particularly high youth unemployment rate, we must—for everybody's sake—get it right for colleges across Scotland.

Richard Lyle called for facts—he said that the debate had not had enough facts and figures—so let us turn to facts and figures. Every SNP speaker has complained that the blame lies at the door of Westminster cuts. All SNP members want to blame Westminster and they say that it is all because of the cuts—

Stewart Stevenson: That is a good starting point: there is less money from Westminster.

Gavin Brown: I do not know whether Mr Stevenson is interpreting for the back benchers around him, to explain what is going on in the college debate.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Can members please desist from making comments from a sedentary position? If members want to request an intervention, they can do so, and the member who is making a speech can decide whether to take it.

Gavin Brown: Thank you, Presiding Officer.

There has been nothing from the SNP but blame at Westminster's door. Let us look at the Scottish Government's budget document. Early on in it, the Scottish Government clearly states what it believes to be the total departmental expenditure limit figure for 2012-13. It claims that that figure is £28.603 billion. For next year—2013-14—it claims that the figure is £28.441 billion. I accept that that is a cash-terms cut: if my calculations are correct, it is a cash-terms cut of just under 0.5 per cent.

The Scottish budget as a whole for next year is therefore being cut by just under 0.5 per cent.

Mark McDonald: Will the member give way?

Gavin Brown: I will not give way at this stage because Mr McDonald, who namechecked me several times, refused to give way to me and to other members. Let me make some progress.

Using the First Minister's figures, the college budget will go from £546 million in 2012-13 to £511.7 million in 2013-14, which is a cut of £34 million or just over 6 per cent. Therefore, the Scottish budget as a whole is going down by 0.5 per cent while the college revenue budget is going

down by 6 per cent. That shows the priority that the SNP Government gives to colleges. It is its political choice to reduce the college budget and to reduce it year on year.

There have been interesting contributions from SNP back benchers. Joan McAlpine claimed that the FSB is behind what the Scottish Government is doing, and there were claims that the SCDI is behind what it is doing. During the debate, I sought those organisations' written submissions to the Education and Culture Committee. The FSB said:

"We recognise the need for colleges to operate more efficiently and for greater collaboration however we are concerned about a decline in further education spending, despite additional allocations in the 2013-2014 budget."

The SCDI said:

"SCDI members remain concerned that despite"

the increase in the 2012-13 budget,

"the long-term trend for college funding is a substantial cut."

The organisations that were quoted in defence of what the Government is doing therefore said something quite different in black and white in their written submissions to the Education and Culture Committee.

Several members have proposed that the way to get through things is to spend the reserves. It is true that I was critical of those who suggested that as the primary way forward last week. There will be a cut of £34 million in the next financial year, but we see from the budget that there will be a further substantial drop in the year after that—in 2014-15. The budget will not be £511 million; it will be down to £470 million. If the answer is to spend the reserves, it could mean that half of the reserves are spent in only two financial years in trying to plug the gap that the Scottish Government has created. I do not understand how anybody can suggest that that is a sensible way forward and a sustainable solution to what the Scottish Government is imposing on the college sector.

Students are worried about what is going on, and staff are extremely worried, too. It is absolutely clear that, next year, the Scottish budget for colleges will go down substantially in revenue terms. I call on the cabinet secretary to acknowledge in his closing speech the fact that the college budget will go down substantially next year and substantially further the year after that.

I also call on the cabinet secretary to start to be a champion of the sector. The sector needs a cabinet secretary who will stand up for it and put its case forward to other cabinet secretaries and the First Minister. It needs someone who is prepared to fight for it, not somebody who will say—as this cabinet secretary did a year ago, just

before there was an increase—that the settlement for colleges is “full, fair and final”. Scotland’s colleges, people and students deserve better.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Before I call Mr Henry, I want to clarify the order of speakers for the debate, because there was some confusion when I set out the closing speakers. Because only the Liberal Democrat amendment was selected for the debate, the order of the opening speakers was Government, Liberal Democrat, Labour and Conservative. However, for the closing speeches, the order reverts back to normal and therefore becomes Liberal Democrat, Conservative, Labour and Government.

16:40

Hugh Henry (Renfrewshire South) (Lab): Mike Russell is no Sean Penn, but I am reminded of the film “Dead Man Walking”, in which Sean Penn appeared, because it is unprecedented to have the three main opposition parties together calling for the resignation of a Government minister. There is no doubt that we have a crisis in further education.

Chic Brodie: Will the member take an intervention?

Hugh Henry: No, thank you.

People at staff level across Scotland are speaking out, but people at senior level are being gagged. There is a crisis in morale. As my Labour colleagues have articulated during the debate, the issue is the impact that the cuts are having on students the length and breadth of Scotland—including, tragically, students with learning difficulties.

The problem is that, when we try to reflect our constituents’ concerns, we are faced with college-cuts deniers on the SNP benches. That is what they are. They deny consistently that there are college cuts—or they did until recently.

Chic Brodie: Will the member take an intervention?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Brodie, please sit down.

Hugh Henry: This is not just a parliamentary spat; it is about whether we can believe anything that is said by those who are charged with protecting Scotland’s colleges. Staff in Scotland’s colleges have watched Mike Russell’s performance in recent weeks with astonishment. Other members have referred to the Kirk Ramsay episode, which revealed an inappropriate use of Mike Russell’s position and power to deal with an issue for which he admitted he had no responsibility. Mike Russell said that he did not think that it was right for Kirk Ramsay to make a

recording of a meeting, but the details of the meeting had, in fact, been put on the internet by Scotland’s Colleges. We were able to see in full detail exactly what was said by Mike Russell and by just about every speaker at the meeting.

There is an issue when Mike Russell very publicly berates someone who has a hearing impairment and who uses something to assist them. Disability discrimination legislation talks about supporting people to overcome their impairments and disabilities, but that seems to have mattered not a jot to the cabinet secretary. It was astonishing that he bothered to take legal advice on whether he could do anything, when his Government did not bother to take any legal advice on membership of the European Union and then went to court to avoid telling us whether it had taken any legal advice.

Mike Russell has denied, spun and twisted, and in that he has been ably supported by Alex Salmond. They have denied the facts. They said one thing in the chamber and were forced to apologise only when they were discovered. They did not come to apologise because they had realised that there was a problem and wanted to put the record straight; they came back to Parliament only when the facts were prised out.

Members should listen to some of the things that Mike Russell has said over the months. He has said, “My figures are impeccable.” Oh, yes: aren’t they, indeed? How about this one? He said:

“One of the problems is that sometimes figures are misrepresented”.—[*Official Report, Education and Culture Committee*, 23 October 2012; c 1553.]

They certainly are, and Alex Salmond was very good at doing that, was he not?

Then, it took five months—five months!—for Mike Russell to come and apologise. He knew that there was a problem in June, because Neil Bibby made a point of order and pointed out that what he had said was not true and had been contradicted the day before by Alasdair Allan, as Patricia Ferguson said. Mike Russell knew then that there was an issue of accuracy, but still he did not come to Parliament to apologise. His apology was prised out of him five months later.

Last week, Alex Salmond, apart from telling us that he was giving us the most accurate figures that the Parliament had ever seen, did not know, and his officials did not know, despite—

Chic Brodie: Will the member take an intervention?

Hugh Henry: No.

Alex Salmond and his officials did not know the figures, despite our having given them Audit Scotland’s figures and, indeed, their own figures.

The press was given the information. We have a problem when ministers are either incompetent or are knowingly misleading colleges.

Jamie Hepburn talked about investment in colleges. Investment in colleges went up every year since devolution, with the exception of 2008-09, when there was a small reduction for the first time, and now, when there is a significant reduction. In every year since devolution before the SNP came into power, there was an increase in the resource budget in real terms.

Mike Russell asked college heads to take an 18 per cent cut and they more or less agreed to thole that. He then went back on his word and came back for more, despite college heads having tightened their belts. He told colleges that appointments would be done through the public appointments process, but he went back on his word and started to impose people himself. He broke his word on two issues. His ministerial interference on appointments risks the loss of charitable status.

Mike Russell said that there was a “false concept” in relation to waiting lists, but now it appears that he is auditing the false concept. What is happening now is that there is a shift of money away from urban areas, the areas of greatest deprivation and the areas of greatest need. There are cuts, cuts, cuts by the SNP Government.

Staff throughout Scotland are losing confidence. As we heard, trade unions in Angus College and Dundee College have lost confidence. Jewel and Esk College EIS members passed a motion of no confidence. George Adam said that colleges across Scotland have confidence in the cabinet secretary, but the EIS-Further Education Lecturers Association branch committee at his local college, Reid Kerr College in Paisley, declared that it has no confidence in Mike Russell. Over the next week we will hear more college staff say that they have no confidence in Mike Russell, because across Scotland we are witnessing the human cost of the callous disregard for our colleges.

If Mike Russell had any integrity and decency he would step down. He would go now.

16:48

Michael Russell: I think that, among people who have watched this afternoon’s debate at home, the commonest view will be that the debate has been unpleasant, not just for me but for the Parliament, the sector and the country.

It has been unpleasant for the Parliament because people watching from the outside did not get—except from SNP members—the focus on places, colleges and services that Unison, for example, wanted; instead, what they got from the

Opposition parties was the political bun fight that they said they did not want.

It has been unpleasant for the sector because of substantial misrepresentation—for political purposes—of what is taking place. I have had a substantial number of letters and phone calls from people in the sector in the past couple of weeks. I have not made anything of it, because I stand by my decisions.

I have not asked the permission of people to quote them but I will quote two without their permission. I will not name them; perhaps later they will want to stand up. One letter says:

“You and I have had a number of, from my perspective, valuable discussions which I hope, have in part, formed your thinking. I am sure you will agree it is always valuable to have such constructive and challenging views.”

Another says:

“If it is any small comfort to you as someone who is leading that change process, there are a number of leaders within the sector who are supporters of reform, who understand the need and crucially how to enact sustainable positive change. It is deeply regretful that given the behaviour and attitudes of a few, changes in legislation may be the only way forward.”

I appreciate those views—

Willie Rennie: Will the cabinet secretary give way?

Michael Russell: No, I am not giving way—and I give notice that I will not give way in this speech because I want to cover a lot of ground. A lot of ground has already been covered in the debate.

More widely, there is substantial support for change within the system. I was intrigued to hear Liam McArthur quote the chair of Angus College; indeed, I was even more intrigued to hear Jenny Marra’s assertion of what is being thought in Angus College about change. On 14 August 2012, the principal of Angus College said, on his own website:

“I am delighted the past year has proven to be our most successful year to date but we are approaching a new era and our over-riding aim is to build on our strengths and deliver the best service to our communities. We will continue to improve lives by realising our aspirations and by achieving excellence in learning, facilities and leadership. We look to the future with ambition in our eyes.”

Despite what we have heard, that is the view of Angus College.

This has also been a disappointing debate for the country, because the people looking at this will be saying: “Is that it? Is that all the Scottish Parliament can do?” After the Scottish Parliament heard full and comprehensive apologies not just from me but from the First Minister, what we have seen actually dishonours the whole process. *[Interruption.]*

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Elaine Smith): Order!

Michael Russell: As the First Minister rightly pointed out today, this is I think the only Parliament in the world that would not take and accept an apology but would endeavour to carry on with the process for what are entirely political reasons.

If the Opposition parties in this Parliament wish to have a dialectic or debate that is intolerant of every error of fact, they had better start looking at their own contributions this very day. I am not just talking about the contribution from the leader of the Tories regarding all those courses that apparently no longer exist—but which, of course, do exist. We also need to look at some other issues that have arisen today. If members want a purely factual debate, I suggest that a number who have made contributions in this chamber should check the *Official Report* very carefully indeed. I draw Gavin Brown's attention to last week's *Official Report*, in which he talks about

"a 6 per cent real-terms cut to the Scottish DEL budget".—
[*Official Report*, 14 November 2012; c 13469.]

He will want to check whether in actual fact he said the same thing today. I am also extremely keen to see Mr Kelly justify his assertions about the number and cost of spin doctors. Fortunately, the chamber knows the means by which corrections can be made. Members can follow the lead of SNP members in being sure to make corrections, and I hope that that they will do just that.

The key moment in this debate—[*Interruption.*]

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Order, please.

Michael Russell: The key moment in this debate was not simply the repetition of my own apology; it was not even my invitation for others to join in. The key moment was this: I announced in my speech a new strategic forum, indicated how I would start it off and expand it and invited the Opposition spokespeople to meet with it to find a means by which we could learn from the processes of the past few weeks. Not a single response came from an Opposition spokesperson—not one. There were many protestations of support for change but, when the opportunity existed to take part in that process and, indeed, possibly, in their own terms to correct it, answer came there none. When I heard those protestations of support for change, I was reminded of the words of the late Donnie Stewart, who talked about giving assistance short of actual help. There is no support for reform in this chamber apart from on these benches, and that was obvious today.

There were one or two deeply unpleasant moments. I have to say that the worst of them, which was pointed out by my colleagues to my right, came when Mr Colin Beattie raised the issue of Westminster cuts. What happened—and I hope that the record shows it—was that Mr Findlay and the Labour front benches found it immensely amusing, almost as amusing as the Tories found it. So we know that Labour's attitude to Westminster cuts is to laugh at them with the Tories. That tells us so much. [*Laughter.*] Go on and laugh at it.

The Presiding Officer: Order.

Michael Russell: Go on and laugh at it—
[*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Order.

Michael Russell: Something else happened in today's debate that was significant in respect of the Labour Party: today gave the absolute lie to Labour being a party of honest reform. This was its chance to step up to the plate, to say, "Yes, as the independent budget review said, it is right to look at the issue of colleges. Let's work together to make the necessary change." That would have been the honest thing to do. However, Labour is without courage and without honesty.

Today's debate also gave the lie to the Tory passion for colleges, because there are cuts south of the border and there are fees south of the border. I admire Liz Smith—I have worked well with her on a whole range of education issues—and I was disappointed by the personal nature of her speech, which put politics before education.

Inevitably, I was also disappointed by the Lib Dem speeches—particularly by the tone of Liam McArthur's speech. If he reads my opening speech, he will realise that I accepted issues that he had raised. He did not seem to accept a single issue that I raised. People say that he is a reasonable man; we did not see much sign of that reasonableness today. I hope that on reflection he will realise that the way forward is to work as a chamber to make sure that we get this right, rather than to score points.

I want to deal with one or two substantive points as I conclude. In-year revisions have added £67.5 million, and that is real help for the sector. There was no acknowledgement at all from Opposition members that that is money that is helping the sector. There are benefits for staff from the reorganisations: representation is being guaranteed for the first time as well as a single set of terms and conditions. I indicated in my opening speech a willingness to continue to discuss that and I want to do so. Mr Findlay never even mentioned it.

There is a focus on student support and I am disappointed that the Tories have criticised it, because the NUS has argued strongly and cogently for exactly the system that we are putting in place.

On the issue of learning disability, at least I have met the group. Mr Findlay made a whole series of assertions and I hope that he feels foolish after the intervention of Joan McAlpine, who spoke from real experience of the subject.

I want to thank Alison Johnstone, who made a sensible suggestion and is passionate about the issue of women's education. I am happy to work with her and I think that she is a reasonable person who will want to work with me to make sure that this takes place, because her speech was one of the more reasonable ones.

The debate was about young people and about progress for young people, yet the word cloud for today's debate—particularly from Labour members—will tell you something. Mentions of me or of “cabinet secretary” or of who I am that were made: by Neil Bibby, 17; Patricia Ferguson, 15; James Kelly, 10; John Pentland, 11; and Jenny Marra, 6. That tells you what Labour is about: Labour is not about young people; it is about the politics of this and trying to score political points.

As I said at the beginning, people watching the debate at home will have said to themselves—quite justifiably, given the nature of the debate—“What on earth is going on?” [*Laughter.*] Yes—[*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Order.

Michael Russell: “What on earth is going on?” they will have said, and they will have watched what just happened and said it again.

I will tell you what is going on. First of all, I am going on. This Government is going on. The process of reform is going on. The work to increase opportunity in Scotland is going on. The fight against Westminster cuts is going on and I believe that the more the Opposition behaves as it has done this afternoon, the more the cause of independence goes on.

Decision Time

17:00

The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick): There are two questions to be put as a result of today's business. The first question is, that amendment S4M-04914.1, in the name of Liam McArthur, which seeks to amend motion S4M-04914, in the name of Michael Russell, on further education, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Baker, Richard (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Beamish, Claudia (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Brown, Gavin (Lothian) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (West Scotland) (Con)
 Chisholm, Malcolm (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (Lab)
 Davidson, Ruth (Glasgow) (Con)
 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)
 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)
 Hume, Jim (South Scotland) (LD)
 Johnstone, Alex (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Johnstone, Alison (Lothian) (Green)
 Kelly, James (Rutherglen) (Lab)
 Lamont, John (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Macdonald, Lewis (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Malik, Hanzala (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Marra, Jenny (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Martin, Paul (Glasgow Provan) (Lab)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McDougall, Margaret (West Scotland) (Lab)
 McGrigor, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 McInnes, Alison (North East Scotland) (LD)
 McMahan, Siobhan (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 McNeil, Duncan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab)
 McTaggart, Anne (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Milne, Nanette (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Murray, Elaine (Dumfriesshire) (Lab)
 Park, John (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Pearson, Graeme (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Pentland, John (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)
 Rennie, Willie (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD)
 Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)
 Simpson, Dr Richard (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Smith, Drew (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Smith, Elaine (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Stewart, David (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)

Against

Adam, Brian (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Allan, Dr Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Biagi, Marco (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Brodie, Chic (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Burgess, Margaret (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Campbell, Aileen (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 Campbell, Roderick (North East Fife) (SNP)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Crawford, Bruce (Stirling) (SNP)
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don, Nigel (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Eadie, Jim (Edinburgh Southern) (SNP)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 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)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Ingram, Adam (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
 Keir, Colin (Edinburgh Western) (SNP)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 Lyle, Richard (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 MacAskill, Kenny (Edinburgh Eastern) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Angus (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 Mackay, Derek (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 MacKenzie, Mike (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAlpine, Joan (South Scotland) (SNP)
 McCulloch, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 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)
 Salmond, Alex (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Urquhart, Jean (Highlands and Islands) (Ind)
 Walker, Bill (Dunfermline) (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 50, Against 64, Abstentions 0.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S4M-04914, in the name of Michael Russell, on further education, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Adam, Brian (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Allan, Dr Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Biagi, Marco (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Brodie, Chic (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Burgess, Margaret (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Campbell, Aileen (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 Campbell, Roderick (North East Fife) (SNP)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Crawford, Bruce (Stirling) (SNP)
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don, Nigel (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Eadie, Jim (Edinburgh Southern) (SNP)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 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)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Ingram, Adam (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
 Keir, Colin (Edinburgh Western) (SNP)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 Lyle, Richard (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 MacAskill, Kenny (Edinburgh Eastern) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Angus (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 Mackay, Derek (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 MacKenzie, Mike (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 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)
 Russell, Michael (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Salmond, Alex (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Urquhart, Jean (Highlands and Islands) (Ind)
 Walker, Bill (Dunfermline) (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)
 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)
 Hume, Jim (South Scotland) (LD)
 Johnstone, Alex (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Johnstone, Alison (Lothian) (Green)
 Kelly, James (Rutherglen) (Lab)
 Lamont, John (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Macdonald, Lewis (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Malik, Hanzala (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Marra, Jenny (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Martin, Paul (Glasgow Provan) (Lab)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McCulloch, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 McDougall, Margaret (West Scotland) (Lab)
 McGrigor, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 McInnes, Alison (North East Scotland) (LD)
 McMahan, Siobhan (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 McNeil, Duncan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab)
 McTaggart, Anne (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Milne, Nanette (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Murray, Elaine (Dumfriesshire) (Lab)
 Park, John (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Pearson, Graeme (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Pentland, John (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)
 Rennie, Willie (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)
 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)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)

commitment of the Scottish Government to maintaining both the volume of teaching and full-time equivalent student numbers, including through in-year additional budget support; further welcomes the continuing renewal of the college estate, demonstrated in new facilities delivered or planned at Stirling, Dundee, Alloa, Fraserburgh, Inverness, Kilmarnock and Glasgow, and supports the protection of the college student support budget in 2012-13.

Meeting closed at 17:02.

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 62, Against 53, Abstentions 0.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament recognises the key role that colleges and their staff play in supporting Scotland's young people, communities and the economy; further recognises their substantial commitment to regionalisation, including the mergers in Edinburgh and Lothians and Scotland's rural colleges; further recognises that college provision is being prioritised to better address economic needs and support young people at risk of unemployment; welcomes the

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