



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Official Report

MEETING OF THE PARLIAMENT

Wednesday 4 September 2013

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Scottish Parliament

Wednesday 4 September 2013

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

Oath

The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick): Good afternoon. The first item of business is a member's oath. I invite our new member, Cameron Buchanan, to take the oath.

The following member took the oath:

Cameron Buchanan (Lothian) (Con)

Portfolio Question Time

Finance, Employment and Sustainable Growth

14:02

The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick): In order to get in as many people as possible, I would prefer short and succinct questions, and answers to match.

Scottish Budget (Reductions)

1. Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what reductions it anticipates there will be to the Scottish budget in the years to 2017-18 if Scotland remains part of the United Kingdom. (S4O-02322)

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Employment and Sustainable Growth (John Swinney): The UK Government set out forecasts of further public spending in the UK spending round announcement on 26 June 2013. The precise implications for Scotland would depend on decisions that a future UK Government would take about departmental budgets and the application of the Barnett formula. However, it is estimated that, on top of the real-terms cut of around 10 per cent to Scotland's departmental expenditure limit budget that has already been made between 2010-11 and 2015-16, the budget could be subject to a further real-terms cut of between 6 and 8 per cent in the years to 2017-18.

Kenneth Gibson: The cabinet secretary will be aware of the comments of Professor Jo Armstrong of the Centre for Public Policy for Regions on 7 August, when she said:

"The £2.7 billion real-terms projected cut in day-to-day spending still to come will be increasingly hard to accommodate, especially given the £1.8 billion already experienced since 2009-10."

Will the cabinet secretary please say what impact such a draconian cut would have on jobs, growth and services in Scotland? Is this not another argument for Scotland to vote yes in next year's referendum?

John Swinney: The Scottish Government has had to manage the significant reductions in the public finances that have been applied since the spending review of 2010. As a consequence, we have had to take a range of difficult decisions to ensure that our budgets have remained in balance. Had the UK Government exercised the type of financial responsibility that we have delivered, the UK might not be in the financial mess that it is in. We have a strong record of managing public finances and of affording the

priorities that we believe are important to the people of Scotland, but that should not in any way disguise the degree of financial pressure and strain that we are managing.

On Mr Gibson's final point, I agree that if Scotland had control of all the resources that are available to us, we could make a great deal more of a success of the Scottish economy, the Scottish public finances and the quality of life of the people in this country.

Underemployment

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

To ask the Scottish Government what its position is on the issues associated with underemployment. (S4O-02323)

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Employment and Sustainable Growth (John Swinney): The Scottish Government is taking steps to address underemployment in Scotland. Our long-term ambition is to ensure that learners are able to make more successful transitions from school into post-16 education or training and then into work. Through our reform of post-16 education, colleges are being asked to ensure that training opportunities align well with future labour markets.

Claudia Beamish: As the cabinet secretary will know, statistics from 2011-12 have shown that more women are underemployed than men. What is the Scottish Government doing to tackle underemployment in the whole population, and to ensure that the gender gap is not further widened in terms of pay and education?

John Swinney: As Claudia Beamish will be aware, last year the Government convened a summit involving a number of key players in the economy, not least of which was the Scottish Trades Union Congress. We sought to address some of the fundamental issues about women's participation in the labour market. Some of the arguments have been discussed with the Equal Opportunities Committee as part of its general budget scrutiny, and they were also discussed with the Economy, Energy and Tourism Committee during its assessment of material for its inquiry.

Those arguments relate to two fundamental points. The first is the imbalance in gender participation in the labour market, much of which is about long-term and deep-seated differences in the participation of the different genders in the labour market. The second is about the steps that we can take through the education system and some of the measures that the Government is taking on the expansion of childcare provision, for example, to make it possible for more women to enter the labour market. Those are some of the

significant issues that the Government is pursuing as part of its approach to improving employability within the Scottish economy. We will continue to do so.

As Claudia Beamish will be aware from her wider interests in Parliament in relation to the national performance framework, the Government attaches significant importance to ensuring the correct balance is achieved in relation to economic development within the Scottish economy, and we will continue to do so in the years to come.

Tourism Industry (VAT Rate)

3. Graeme Dey (Angus South) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what impact it considers a reduction in VAT would have on the Scottish tourism industry. (S4O-02324)

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Employment and Sustainable Growth (John Swinney): The Scottish tourism industry remains very concerned about the high level of VAT levied on its businesses, especially given that 24 of the 28 European Union member states charge lower VAT rates on hotel accommodation than the UK currently does.

I understand that the industry-led Scottish Tourism Alliance fully supports the campaign for reduced tourism VAT led by the British Hospitality Association and other key tourism bodies that are leading industry pressure on this matter. The Scottish Government has, on a number of occasions, made detailed representation to the United Kingdom Government on the effect of VAT on our tourism industry, and we continue to press the UK Government on the question.

Graeme Dey: Does the cabinet secretary agree that, if the UK Government requires evidence of the positive impact that a VAT cut can have on the tourism sector, it need only look at Ireland? A recently published report on the effect of the Irish Government's reduction of VAT on tourism-related goods and services to 9 per cent in 2011 reveals that the move led to the creation of around 10,000 jobs, and a €40 million boost to the exchequer in 2012 alone from increased numbers of visitors from overseas. Ireland, of course, has achieved that because it has control of all the financial levers. Is what has happened there yet another example of the benefits that Scotland could enjoy from independence?

John Swinney: Mr Dey raises a significant issue because, as I cited in my original answer, clear evidence has been marshalled by the Scottish Tourism Alliance and other parties on the differential effect that elements of the VAT regime in the United Kingdom can have on the tourism industry. Of course, VAT is an issue that is beyond the responsibility of the Scottish Government and

is outwith the powers of the Scottish Parliament, but it is clear that, if the Parliament had a wider range of financial powers under independence, the Scottish Government would have the choice and the ability to address such issues to ensure that tourism, which is a very successful and important industry for the growth of the Scottish economy, could make an even greater contribution to economic growth within Scotland.

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con):

The cabinet secretary is clearly enthusiastic about cutting taxes when the responsibility for them lies elsewhere. Can he confirm that the rumours are true that, in the budget next week, he will announce a major cut in business rates for businesses in the tourism sector, or is it the case that he would rather grandstand on the constitutional issue than take responsibility for taxes that are within his own remit?

John Swinney: I am very surprised by Mr Fraser's question, because he should be aware that the Scottish Government presides over the most competitive business rates regime in the United Kingdom. If we already have the most competitive business rates regime, Mr Fraser should welcome that position. Of course, Mr Fraser is unlikely to welcome that, because he voted against the provisions in voting against my last budget. *[Interruption.]*

Presiding Officer, I am simply reminding Parliament that Mr Fraser and his Conservative colleagues, in pressing their buttons to vote against the Scottish Government's budget, voted against the most competitive business rates regime in the United Kingdom. I am sure that Mr Gavin Brown, who is sitting next to Mr Fraser, could remind him of that, as Mr Brown was the author of the Conservatives' budget strategy last year. If Mr Fraser needs some reminding of what he voted for, I am sure that Mr Brown will be only too happy to fill in the details and to reinforce what I have just said to Parliament.

Pensions (Triple Lock Guarantee)

4. Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government how much its pledge to maintain the so-called triple lock for pensions will cost. (S4O-02325)

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Employment and Sustainable Growth (John Swinney): The Scottish Government has made a commitment to uprate state pensions by the triple lock in an independent Scotland. The triple lock protects the value of pensions over time, ensuring that they keep pace with average earnings and inflation, with a minimum increase of 2.5 per cent each year. The triple lock is current United Kingdom policy for the basic state pension up to 2015, but the UK Government has not committed

to continue the triple lock beyond that—not for current pensioners and not for future pensioners who retire under the new single-tier pension.

Social protection, which includes pensions, is consistently more affordable in Scotland than in the UK, both as a proportion of gross domestic product and as a proportion of tax revenues. A paper on pensions in an independent Scotland will be published in due course and will address those issues in detail.

Sarah Boyack: Given that the Scottish Government does not envisage personal tax rises if Scotland becomes independent, will the state pension age increase to help to pay for the policy?

John Swinney: As Sarah Boyack well knows, current proposals—if we remain part of the United Kingdom—will involve an increase in the state pension age. I have not seen anything in Sarah Boyack's side of the argument that suggests that the Labour Party in any way takes a different position from the current proposals of the United Kingdom Government on increasing the state pension age; indeed, I have not heard from Sarah Boyack about any aspect of the Labour Party's commitment on the triple lock. As I understand it, Labour takes exactly the same position on it as the current United Kingdom Government.

As I said to Sarah Boyack in my original answer, the Government will set out in detail in a forthcoming paper the commitments that it intends to make on pensions. I look forward to discussing those issues with Parliament in due course.

Gavin Brown (Lothian) (Con): Sarah Boyack asked not what the triple lock is but how much it would cost. Given that the policy was published by Mr Swinney several months ago on 18 June, can he please tell the Parliament what the cost of the policy will be? Surely to goodness the Government costed it before he announced it.

John Swinney: As I have made clear to Parliament already and as I have just made clear to Sarah Boyack, the proportion of Scotland's gross domestic product and tax revenues that is allocated to deal with social protection is lower than the proportion that is allocated to deal with such matters for the United Kingdom. In our pensions paper, the Scottish Government will set out the detail of how we will take the issue forward, in recognition of the fact that pensioners need in their income security and reliability, which they do not have from the United Kingdom.

Dennis Robertson (Aberdeenshire West) (SNP): With Scotland having higher tax raising over the past 30 years than the UK, and given that we have 9.9 per cent of the tax raising in the UK and only 9.3 per cent of the tax spend, with 8.4 per cent of the population, does the cabinet secretary

agree that we are in a better position to afford our pensions than the UK is?

John Swinney: The point that Mr Robertson makes is absolutely correct. Scotland contributes more to the UK than it receives in return. Some 9.9 per cent of UK taxes were contributed by Scotland and 9.3 per cent of spending was accounted for in Scotland. As I indicated in my earlier answers, the proportion of GDP and tax revenues that is required to support social protection in Scotland is lower than it is in the rest of the UK, which demonstrates the affordability of pension provision in Scotland and the commitments that the Government is making.

Oil Fund

5. Drew Smith (Glasgow) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government in what year it anticipates an oil fund could be set up in an independent Scotland. (S4O-02326)

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Employment and Sustainable Growth (John Swinney): The fiscal commission working group is developing a fiscal framework to ensure that, from the outset, an independent Scotland will have in place a mechanism to manage year-on-year changes in oil and gas revenues and to ensure that, when appropriate, a proportion of those receipts is invested for the long-term benefit of the people of Scotland. The fiscal commission working group will in the coming weeks publish a report on the operation of an oil stabilisation and savings fund.

Drew Smith: I thank the cabinet secretary for that answer—although he did not provide us with a better answer than the Deputy First Minister managed on Radio Scotland yesterday.

Does the cabinet secretary at least accept that tax revenues from the North Sea cannot be spent twice in an independent Scotland, any more than they can be in any other country? Given the conflicting views that have so far been expressed by Scottish ministers on the matter, will he tell us now whether he plans to take money from public services to pay into an oil fund while Scotland remains in deficit?

John Swinney: The Scottish Government's position on an oil fund has been absolutely consistent, and it is that we can contribute to an oil fund only when the circumstances and opportunities enable us to do so.

The illustration that I give to Mr Smith is about the last year for which information is available. That information shows that, in 2011-12, Scotland had a relative financial surplus of £4.4 billion. To translate that into other language—for the benefit of Mr Smith—that means that Scotland was in a stronger position, in terms of our public finances,

than the rest of the UK. That opens up choices for Scotland to spend more of that differential advantage, to invest more in an oil fund or to reduce the level to which we borrow. However, those opportunities will arise only if we are able to exercise the control that would enable Scotland to take those decisions and to have the responsibility for doing so. Of course, we cannot do that under the current constitutional settlement and will not, if Mr Smith has his way, be able to do it in the foreseeable future.

Scotland has experienced a wasted opportunity because of the way in which our oil revenues have been mismanaged since the 1970s by UK Governments. This is the opportunity for Scotland to take control of those issues and to ensure that we have the ability to invest the wealth of Scotland to create the most secure possible future for the people of Scotland. That will arise only out of independence.

Stewart Stevenson (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): Does the cabinet secretary agree that Alistair Darling was being honest when he was interviewed on the BBC's "Hardtalk" on 19 August and conceded that UK Governments have wasted oil revenues by not investing in an oil fund? Will the cabinet secretary note that, in that interview, Alistair Darling admitted that there was no question but that Scotland can be successfully independent?

John Swinney: Alistair Darling's comments are an interesting departure from all that he presided over when he was a minister in the United Kingdom Government. His admission that Scotland has the ability, the capability and the resources to be independent is a welcome concession at such a late date. Given the fact that he has been part of the regime that has so wasted Scotland's oil resources, his admission that he now sees the advantages of an oil fund is also welcome. Of course, he is not alone—many other commentators have recognised exactly the point that Mr Darling has now made—but it is welcome when we have some conversions in the arguments that our political opponents put forward.

Philips Lighting (Hamilton Plant)

6. Siobhan McMahon (Central Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what assistance it is providing to staff at the Philips Lighting plant in Hamilton following the company's announcement that it will phase out the production of luminaires at the plant. (S4O-02327)

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Employment and Sustainable Growth (John Swinney): Ministers were concerned to learn of the situation at Philips Lighting, which will be of major concern to the individuals affected, their families and the surrounding area. Mr Ewing

spoke with the Hamilton operations manager to offer Scottish Government support, and we have agreed that officials from Scottish Enterprise and Scottish Development International will meet the company to discuss the situation.

Support has also been offered through our partnership action for continuing employment—PACE—initiative for any employees who may face redundancy. PACE support will be tailored to meet the needs of the individuals involved, in the event that redundancies go ahead.

I hope that that provides reassurance that we will do everything that we possibly can to maximise the effectiveness of those interventions, to minimise the impact of the job losses on the individuals who will be affected, and to ensure that the company and the surrounding area are able to continue to rely on employment in the factory.

Siobhan McMahon: As the cabinet secretary said, the recent announcement came as a massive blow to the loyal and long-standing workforce in Hamilton. It was disappointing to learn that the jobs have been outsourced to other countries, including France and Poland. It appears that the loyal workforce at Hamilton has been totally disregarded in the decision that Philips took.

I am also extremely concerned about the implications of the redundancies for the remaining workforce at the Hamilton plant. What assurances can the Scottish Government provide to the remaining workforce that it will do everything it can to guarantee their long-term future at the plant?

John Swinney: I unreservedly accept the concern that Siobhan McMahon has raised. Such a substantive possible loss from the workforce—more than half the workforce—is clearly a matter of real concern.

I assure Siobhan McMahon that, in many circumstances in which there is employment loss, the assistance that Scottish Enterprise and Scottish Development International are able to provide can lead to improvement in the performance and operation of companies and that, over time, employment can be restored and grow again in individual factories.

We have had a number of examples of that, and I assure her that Scottish Enterprise will take that approach to providing whatever support we can in the short term in order to try to avoid redundancies in the first place and, secondly, to ensure that in the long term, whatever the consequences of employment loss at Philips Lighting, we are able to support the company to grow and develop again. That will be at the heart of the Government's interventions.

Christina McKelvie (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP): I bring thanks from the

workers to whom I have spoken in the Hamilton plant, which is in my constituency, for the action that the Scottish Government took within hours of the announcement last week. Will the minister give us an update on Scottish Development International's work and what it is thinking about? Across the whole company globally, 7,000 workers have been affected by the announcement, and it seems that the Hamilton numbers are disproportionate to the rest of the global market.

John Swinney: Scottish Development International and Scottish Enterprise will be involved in a number of practical steps. Tomorrow, Scottish Enterprise will meet members of a working party that includes the local management, workforce representatives and representatives from the trade union Unite to discuss the situation. Through Scottish Development International, we will also have discussions with the Dutch management of Philips to try to ascertain what other steps can be taken at that level.

Those are some of the interventions that we will undertake in relation to the company's business development functions. As I said to Siobhan McMahon a second ago, the local PACE team will be ready to offer particular support in order to assist individuals. As members will appreciate, the PACE team has developed significant expertise in trying to ensure that individuals are able to find alternative employment, should they face redundancy. That will be the case in this circumstance.

Consumer Protection

7. Mike MacKenzie (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what opportunities it considers independence would bring for increased consumer protection. (S4O-02328)

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Employment and Sustainable Growth (John Swinney): In "Consumer Protection and Representation in an Independent Scotland: Options", which we published on 13 August, we outlined our vision for consumer protection and representation in an independent Scotland. The paper suggests the creation of a less complex system of consumer protection that better reflects Scotland's needs and puts consumers, small businesses and communities at the heart of its work.

Mike MacKenzie: The cabinet secretary will be aware that unfair and disproportionate delivery charges are a particular concern in many parts of the Highlands and Islands. Does he agree that we could tackle that issue if we had the appropriate powers?

John Swinney: Mr MacKenzie raises a practical issue that is significant and important principally to people in the Highlands and Islands, although it also affects people in other areas that are rural and more isolated. The responsibility for exercising powers over the matter rests with the United Kingdom Government. An opportunity would arise for an independent Scotland to take steps to ensure that no areas of Scotland were put at a disadvantage as a consequence of delivery charges. That is a good example of putting the consumer at the heart of the arrangements that we would put in place to best meet their needs and expectations, and to create a further competitive advantage for the Scottish economy.

Employment Figures

8. Fiona McLeod (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what assessment it has made of the latest employment figures. (S4O-02329)

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Employment and Sustainable Growth (John Swinney): The latest labour market data, which cover April to June 2013, showed that employment in Scotland increased by 13,000 over the quarter. That was the seventh consecutive monthly release to show a rise in the employment rate. At 72.1 per cent, the employment rate in Scotland continues to be higher than the United Kingdom rate.

Those figures, coupled with other recent positive developments in the Scottish economy, show an improving picture. However, much more still needs to be done and key challenges remain. That is why the Government's priority is to continue to focus on securing the recovery and delivering faster sustainable economic growth.

Fiona McLeod: I am sure that all members across the chamber welcome the good employment figures. However, as the cabinet secretary has said and as I am sure he agrees, we could do even better if we had the full economic powers that only independence can bring us.

John Swinney: The Government is exercising its responsibilities to the full in taking forward the work to support economic recovery. That has been implicit in the steps that we have taken in our budget interventions since the downturn in 2008, and it will remain uppermost in my thinking, on publication of the Government's budget next week.

We will do all that we can within our existing responsibilities, but I have highlighted to Parliament before the Government's frustration about a number of matters, such as the substantial reductions in capital expenditure that we in Scotland have experienced. That is one area for which the UK Government is currently responsible which we believe we could, if we had the

responsibility in the Scottish Parliament, exercise more in Scotland's interests.

Waste Plants (Pyrolysis Energy)

9. Michael McMahon (Uddingston and Bellshill) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government whether it considers that pyrolysis energy-from-waste plants have a role to play in achieving its zero waste target and what its position is on the comment of Pete Wishart MP that they should not be given planning permission as they are a "pollutant belching monstrosity". (S4O-02330)

The Minister for Local Government and Planning (Derek Mackay): Minimising the need to treat residual waste is at the heart of our zero waste plan. That is why we introduced regulations last year to transform recycling services and why we have set a 70 per cent recycling target for Scotland.

Recovering value, including energy, from materials that cannot currently be recycled is preferable to sending them to landfill, where they create harmful greenhouse gases. That is in line with the waste hierarchy, which underpins the zero waste strategy. Applications for waste treatment facilities are determined solely on their individual planning merits.

Michael McMahon: Is the minister aware that confusion has been caused in the industry and communities by the Scottish ministers' refusal to support a planning appeal to site an energy-from-waste plant in Perth? In my initial question, I quoted the local Scottish National Party MP, but is the minister aware that John Swinney also backed opponents of the incinerator, while Roseanna Cunningham expressed her health fears about pollutant fumes?

In a letter to campaigners, Richard Lochhead said:

"treating ... waste in thermal treatment plants where the heat can be captured and electricity generated is undoubtedly more preferable than sending to landfill."

So, can the minister tell us which it is? Are incinerators "pollutant belching" monstrosities that pose a risk to health? Is it only in Perth that there are legitimate health concerns, while at Dovesdale, Carnbroe and Hamilton in Lanarkshire they are safe? Are pyrolysis plants vital components in the zero waste strategy or are they not? Are they safe or are they not?

The Presiding Officer: I call the cabinet secretary—I mean the minister.

Derek Mackay: Mr McMahon listed a number of formidable representatives for their communities in terms of the views that they represent. Scottish Government policy is clear, but we have to be very careful when considering planning matters. In

planning matters, each case is taken on its merits, with all material considerations being taken into account. The planning system has that independence, where the local determining authority will consider a case in the first instance.

As regards regulations, there is a role for the Scottish Environment Protection Agency. The advice that we would give is that energy from waste has a role to play within a zero waste policy, albeit that it is a limited role. For those reasons, I think that it is important that we continue to ensure that the planning system stays above party politics, which is where I think Mr McMahon would rather take us.

Elaine Smith (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab): Given Scottish ministers' decision to refuse the pyrolysis plant in Perth, can the minister explain why a Perthshire businessman has been given the go-ahead by the Scottish Government to build one of these monstrosities in my constituency at Carnbroe in Coatbridge, and could the merit of that particular plant now be reconsidered?

Derek Mackay: I am very aware of Elaine Smith's concerns about the application in her constituency and I am conscious of an outstanding commitment to meet the representatives of that campaign. She will recall that it was inappropriate to meet those representatives while the issue was live and then potentially challengeable by judicial review. Now that those considerations have taken their full course, I can meet the representatives and cover the issues that the member has raised in her question, but I repeat again that the planning system will consider each case on its merits, in line with Government policy.

Employment (Zero-hours Contracts)

10. Paul Martin (Glasgow Provan) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what the impact is on employment of the reported increase in the use of zero-hours contracts. (S4O-02331)

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Employment and Sustainable Growth (John Swinney): Employment policy is currently reserved to Westminster. However, the Scottish Government is actively considering whether issues around the use of zero-hours contracts can form a legitimate consideration for a public body as part of the public procurement process.

The Scottish Government and its agencies do not directly employ people on zero-hours contracts.

Paul Martin: Would the cabinet secretary consider writing to every non-departmental public body in Scotland to request that they take steps to ensure that they do not employ anyone directly on a zero-hours contract?

John Swinney: I am certainly happy to consider Mr Martin's suggestion. If he has particular issues or concerns about zero-hours contracts, I will be very happy to consider them if he draws them to my attention, as well as to consider the suggestion that he has made today.

Small Businesses (Assistance)

11. Linda Fabiani (East Kilbride) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what assistance it gives to small businesses. (S4O-02332)

The Minister for Local Government and Planning (Derek Mackay): The Scottish Government recognises the valuable contribution that small businesses make to our economy and is committed to maintaining a supportive environment to assist them to grow and thrive. For example, on 12 June we announced an £88 million investment in helping Scotland's young people into work and supporting small business growth. The investment package includes a £37.85 million small and medium-sized enterprises growth programme to assist small businesses to grow and create an expected 3,000 jobs across Scotland.

Earlier today, I outlined a range of reforms to the rates system to better support businesses, including the 89,000 recipients of the small business bonus scheme, who will be delighted, I am sure, that the scheme will continue.

Linda Fabiani: The minister's announcement was indeed welcome. In my constituency, and indeed throughout South Lanarkshire, SMEs have benefited from young people being placed with them through the youth jobs fund wage subsidy programme. That programme is currently producing sustainment rates of 96 per cent of young people still in work after one year. It is a credit to South Lanarkshire Council and its partners. Would the minister consider extending that success and using funding from the youth employment Scotland initiative to support that programme in delivering what could be a short, uncomplicated subsidised wage programme such as the youth jobs fund for small employers right across the country?

The Presiding Officer: I call the cabinet secretary—sorry, the minister. I have promoted him again.

Derek Mackay: Thank you, Presiding Officer.

I am keen to hear more of the scheme in South Lanarkshire, and Linda Fabiani is correct to highlight the success that it and many other schemes have had. We have an on-going dialogue with local authorities to ensure that the various strands of our youth employment strategy are supported and can develop and are based on good evidence from areas where success is being

achieved. We hope that such success can be repeated throughout the country. The strategy, with its range of packages, is led by the excellent work of the Minister for Youth Employment, Angela Constance, and is giving young people hope in these very difficult times.

John Scott (Ayr) (Con): The cabinet secretary will be aware that it is some time since he raised the threshold for the small business bonus scheme. Many businesses in my constituency and throughout Scotland are just above the current threshold for support, and raising the bar would stimulate them. Will the cabinet secretary—or indeed the minister—tell us whether he has any plans to raise the threshold in the near future?

The Presiding Officer: I see that such mistakes are catching among the Presiding Officers. I call the minister.

Derek Mackay: I am glad that the First Minister is in the chamber to hear the recommendations from other members.

The outcome of the consultation on business rates and the Government's response were published today. The thresholds for rates, exemptions and so on would be a matter for the budget process. The SBBS has been particularly successful, and the number of recipients has increased. I am sure that John Scott will be delighted to hear that we are bound to consult on a proposal that will give further powers to local authorities to create local relief schemes that can further support economic recovery and regeneration in communities throughout Scotland, not least in our town centres. Small businesses will welcome that move, in addition to the most generous rates relief package that the Government has delivered.

Employment

12. Christina McKelvie (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to help people into employment. (S4O-02333)

The Presiding Officer: I call the real cabinet secretary this time.

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Employment and Sustainable Growth (John Swinney): At 72.1 per cent, the employment rate in Scotland is higher than the rate in the rest of the United Kingdom. At 19.1 per cent, youth unemployment remains lower in Scotland than in the rest of the UK. The Scottish Government is determined to reduce unemployment further and, through commitments such as the youth employment Scotland fund and the community jobs Scotland partnership, we are tackling unemployment while supporting growth in

Scotland's third sector and among small and medium-sized enterprises.

Christina McKelvie: I thank the real cabinet secretary for that answer. To come back to the Philips situation, the team there is facing challenges right now because Westminster has imposed on us a 45-day consultation period. The workers to whom I have spoken have said, "That's my next month's mortgage payment," and they are very worried about having only 45 days in which to go through the process and about the dangers that that poses for the workforce.

John Swinney: Christina McKelvie raises a valid issue regarding the process. The Scottish Government must operate within the framework that is established by law, so we must take steps as promptly as possible to find a different way for those companies to proceed. In that way, we can ensure that any actions that can be taken to improve the prospects and opportunities for avoiding loss of employment—or, should there be unemployment, to encourage a growth in activity within companies—are taken as quickly and effectively as possible, first to protect employment, or, alternatively, to recover opportunities for the members of staff who are involved. I assure Christina McKelvie that the Government is focusing entirely on how we can best do that.

Sustainable Economic Growth

13. Clare Adamson (Central Scotland) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government how planning and regeneration can help achieve sustainable economic growth. (S4O-02334)

The Minister for Local Government and Planning (Derek Mackay): Planning and regeneration can help to achieve sustainable economic growth by proactively supporting development that contributes to such growth and high-quality sustainable places. The planning system enables development of growth-enhancing activities by providing a supportive business environment while protecting and enhancing the quality of the natural and built environment. The current review of the Scottish planning policy will strengthen those principles.

Clare Adamson: Will the minister set out the timescales in which national planning framework 3 and the new Scottish planning policy will come into effect?

Derek Mackay: The original timescale was that NPF3, because of the statutory requirements, would be concluded and adopted in June 2014, and that the Scottish planning policy, which does not require a statutory process, could be adopted by the very end of this year or the start of next year.

However, I am convinced of the benefits of carrying out the consultation in tandem and giving the Parliament the opportunity to discuss the Scottish planning policy and national planning framework 3, so I propose a new timescale for the Scottish planning policy to be considered, so that we give the Parliament its say, with both documents being approved and adopted in June 2014.

North Sea Oil and Gas Resources

14. Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government how much it estimates the difference is between the wholesale value of and taxation generated from remaining North Sea oil and gas resources. (S4O-02335)

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Employment and Sustainable Growth (John Swinney): Up to 24 billion barrels of oil equivalent could still be recovered from the North Sea, with a potential wholesale value of up to £1.5 trillion. The value of future North Sea tax receipts will depend on a range of factors, including prices, production levels, investment and, which is important, a stable tax regime. However, it is clear that future tax receipts from the sector will be substantial and represent a significant resource for the people of Scotland. Over the six years to 2017-18, Scottish Government analysis suggests that North Sea production could generate between £41 billion and £57 billion in tax revenue.

Neil Bibby: It is clear to everyone that there is a big difference between the two figures. Why therefore did the First Minister deliberately attempt to conflate wholesale value and tax revenue when he claimed that the remaining value of North Sea oil and gas was worth

“£300,000 for every man, woman and child in Scotland”?

The First Minister is sitting next to Mr Swinney, so perhaps the cabinet secretary will ask him.

John Swinney: Mr Bibby has plenty of opportunities to ask the First Minister questions. Maybe I could give him a tutorial on how to lodge a question, although he seems to have managed to do that in this case. Perhaps he needs—*[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Order.

John Swinney: Maybe all Labour members need a wee tutorial to help them to work out how to submit a question to the First Minister.

The position is crystal clear—*[Interruption.]* Well, there is a wholesale value for North Sea oil and gas and there is a tax receipt that comes to the United Kingdom Government as a consequence of the tax regime that is put in place.

The big question is why on earth Scotland is not getting access to the proceeds of the North Sea oil and gas tax regime, which Mr Bibby seems to be quite happy to leave to be squandered, just as they have been squandered over the previous 40 years, by the same bunch in Westminster that has made such a mess of the public finances.

Members will forgive me for deciding that in Scotland we would make a much better job of determining the future of our country and how to use our resources. We have made a success of that in relation to the control of other areas of policy in Scotland and we can do that on oil and gas, the public finances and the macro-economic situation much better than Westminster will ever manage to do.

European Pension Regulations

15. Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government how an independent Scotland would deal with the impact of European pension regulations. (S4O-02336)

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Employment and Sustainable Growth (John Swinney): The Scottish Government intends that detailed negotiations to secure the transition to Scotland's independent European Union membership will begin immediately after the referendum and include negotiations to determine the specific terms and, where necessary, any transitional arrangements under which an independent Scotland will take its place as a full EU member state.

Jackie Baillie: I thank the cabinet secretary for a long response, which did not shed much light on the issue. He will of course be aware that Mr Salmond's comment in the Scottish Parliament on 2 May, that

“We are not seeking an opt-out from the EU regulations”,—*[Official Report, 2 May 2013; c 19313.]*

is entirely incompatible with his comment on the matter in the *Sunday Post* on 4 August, when he said:

“The way to deal with it is to get a derogation”.

Which is it to be? Is this indicative of the mess that the nationalists have got themselves into on such an important issue in just three months, or was the First Minister perhaps just confused?

John Swinney: On 2 May, the First Minister referenced the report from the Institute of Chartered Accountants of Scotland, which set out three approaches that could be taken to resolve the issue. Those involve an exemption from existing schemes, a longer grace period and the opportunity to construct schemes in Scotland and in the rest of the United Kingdom. That is what the First Minister said to Parliament on 2 May. The

other point that the First Minister made was that it is essential that we have dialogue and discussion with the relevant authorities, including the United Kingdom Government, as to how we proceed on the issue.

On the subject of a mess, let me talk about pensions in the United Kingdom. All the issues relating to pension funds that we wrestle with in this country are a direct product of the decision that was made by Gordon Brown to raid the pension funds. That is where the mess has come from. The series of problems that we must try to resolve came about because Gordon Brown was intent on raiding pension funds. In 1997, when I was in the House of Commons, the Conservative Party was outraged at the steps that Gordon Brown took to raid pension funds. Labour members should be a great deal more concerned about that than their better together friends in this parliamentary debate.

Helicopter Incident

The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick): The next item of business is a statement by John Swinney on the helicopter incident. The cabinet secretary will take questions at the end of his statement. There should, therefore, be no interruptions or interventions.

14:46

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Employment and Sustainable Growth (John Swinney): I am grateful to Parliament for the opportunity to make a statement concerning the recent tragic events in the North Sea. On 23 August, a CHC Super Puma AS332 L2 crashed 2 miles west of Sumburgh airport on a flight from the Total E&P UK-operated Borgsten Dolphin drilling rig.

A search and rescue operation was launched immediately and included a Coastguard Rescue Service helicopter; a Royal Air Force rescue helicopter and a BP jigsaw rescue helicopter; Aith and Lerwick RNLI lifeboats; Sumburgh, No Ness, Lerwick and West Burra coastguard rescue teams; and a Sumburgh airport fire and rescue vessel. Additional helicopters from the RAF and BP jigsaw were also brought in to assist.

I pay tribute to the brave men and women of our emergency services who assisted in the rescue. On Friday, I visited Police Scotland's Aberdeen division headquarters, where the gold and silver command centres for the operation were based, and I spoke with representatives from Police Scotland, the Maritime and Coastguard Agency and the strategic co-ordinating group. I thanked them personally for their dedication and professionalism during the emergency response and for their continuing work in terms of investigation and supporting the families of those who were involved in the incident.

We should also acknowledge the role of the voluntary sector—the British Red Cross, the Royal Voluntary Service and others—as well as that of members of the public who assisted in searching the coastline of Shetland. Those are the people who, in a selfless way, step up to the mark when tragedy strikes and make our communities resilient, and they deserve our thanks into the bargain. A number of merchant vessels also responded to the emergency. Parliament should recognise the efforts of those who are not part of the emergency services—for example, people working on commercial ferries—who responded as seafarers to assist in providing additional capacity to deal with the emergency.

Eighteen people—16 passengers and two pilots—were on board the helicopter. Fourteen

people, including both pilots, were rescued but, tragically, four people—Duncan Munro from Bishop Auckland, Sarah Darnley from Elgin, Gary McCrossan from Inverness and George Allison from Winchester—lost their lives in the accident. I know that our country and the entire chamber will join me in expressing our deepest sympathy and condolences to their families, friends, colleagues and loved ones at a profoundly difficult time.

The UK oil and gas chaplaincy has opened a book of condolence for those who wish to pay tribute to the four workers, which is available to sign at the oil chapel in the kirk of St Nicholas or online. The First Minister signed the book on behalf of the Scottish Government on Monday 26 August.

A humanitarian assistance centre for relatives was established last Thursday under the auspices of the Grampian strategic co-ordinating group and led by Aberdeen City Council, working in partnership with oil and gas industry members. It is providing practical and emotional support to those affected by the incident.

The oil and gas chaplain, the Rev Gordon Craig, is providing direct support to the families and friends of those involved in the accident. Mr Craig is also working in partnership with the operating companies, the police and the local authorities to provide wider support as and when appropriate. If the families feel it appropriate, that may involve arranging a memorial service at a later date.

As the search and rescue phase of the incident is over, the police and the Air Accidents Investigation Branch are focused on carrying out their investigations into the accident. Considerable police resources have been deployed, together with a significant investigation team from the AAIB, which immediately dispatched a team of investigators and support staff to Aberdeen and the Shetland Islands. The investigation is well under way.

In early advice on the circumstances of the incident, the AAIB stated last Thursday that the helicopter landed intact and upright in the water. Later that day, the AAIB confirmed that it had recovered the flight recorder. The investigation continues at pace, but so far no conclusive findings have been released about the cause of the accident. The Scottish Government and its agencies will liaise with the AAIB as the investigation progresses, and we will provide any assistance that we can to the investigation.

The AAIB is aware of the urgency required in determining the cause of the accident, in particular in relation to reassuring the men and women who are asked to fly today, tomorrow and next week. They must have confidence that the helicopters are safe. As the aviation industry regulator, it

would be for the Civil Aviation Authority to take, if necessary, appropriate action in the event of any safety recommendations made by the AAIB following its investigation.

It is entirely understandable that concerns about helicopter safety have been heightened because of the close proximity of incidents in the North Sea—this is the fifth incident since 2009 and the second involving fatalities. On Saturday 24 August, the helicopter safety steering group took the precautionary measure of recommending the temporary suspension of all Super Puma commercial passenger flights to and from offshore oil and gas installations in the UK. That suspension did not apply to the use of search and rescue helicopters for emergency response.

On Thursday 29 August, the helicopter safety steering group reviewed its earlier decision in the light of the new information from the AAIB and agreed to lift the voluntary temporary suspension of flights on the L1 and EC225 Super Puma helicopters. That decision was arrived at unanimously. The L2 will remain temporarily suspended from passenger revenue flights only. That means that only 16 of the total 75 helicopters in the North Sea sector remain affected. The matter will be subject to on-going review as new information comes to light.

We know that the five incidents since 2009 involved only two specific types of aircraft: the L2 and the EC225. The EC225 has been subjected to stringent tests and analysis since it was grounded following the October 2012 incident. The helicopter safety steering group regards the EC225 as the safest helicopter available for offshore operations anywhere in the world. The steering group will need to work hard in the coming weeks and months in order to get that message across to the workforce and to help rebuild the confidence of the offshore community.

In addition to releasing the suspension on the L1 and EC225s, the helicopter safety steering group has also launched a far-reaching communications campaign across the industry to engage with the workforce in an effort to rebuild confidence. The boots on campaign has the unanimous support of all industry stakeholders, including the trade unions, the operators and the three helicopter companies in the north-east. Rebuilding the confidence of the men and women who travel to and from our offshore installations must be the key priority.

I pay tribute to all the parties involved in the oil and gas industry in Aberdeen who have been working tirelessly together since the incident to address its consequences. It has been a strong process of co-operative and respectful working between the three helicopter companies, the operating companies, the trade unions—Unite and

the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers—and the emergency services in the north-east to respond appropriately to the incident and to take steps to address the genuine concerns about helicopter safety.

To make further progress in addressing concerns about safety, we need to understand the cause of the accident. I have spoken to the United Kingdom minister of state, Greg Barker, and he shares our desire to arrive at an early explanation for the tragic events so that we can learn the lessons and take whatever action is required. Once we know the cause of the incident, we can determine what further inquiry is required to do all that we can to assure all interested parties about the safety of helicopter transport. Law officers and ministers will consider those matters once the findings of the AAIB investigation are known.

In the meantime, the helicopter safety steering group has stated that it will commission a far-reaching independent and strategic review of helicopter safety in the North Sea. That is the right and proper thing to do, and we will support the HSSG as it seeks to establish that initiative. An important foundation of that work must be ensuring that the thinking that is implicit in the step change initiative, which was a product of Lord Cullen's comprehensive and compelling inquiry into Piper Alpha, is applied to helicopter safety just as it is applied to the production of safety cases, installation by installation.

The oil and gas industry will work collectively to learn lessons from the accident and to ensure that any safety recommendations are implemented quickly to enhance the safety of those who work offshore. It is vital that the safety and security of employees are assured at all times. In the past 35 years, more than 60 million passengers have been carried to and from the platforms. Tens of thousands of flights take place every year. It is the industry and the Government's duty to work with the trade unions and the offshore community to learn lessons from the latest accident and to take every possible step to ensure that safety is enhanced and remains the first priority for those who service the oil and gas industry in the North Sea sector.

The Presiding Officer: I intend to allow around 20 minutes for questions.

Iain Gray (East Lothian) (Lab): I thank the cabinet secretary for his statement and for early sight of it. I add our condolences to those who lost loved ones in the accident and our thanks to those who were involved in the rescue.

We agree with the cabinet secretary that it is vital to restore confidence in helicopter transport for the sake of the industry but, above all, for the sake of the workforce and their families. However,

as he said, the incident on 23 August was the fifth occasion in recent times on which a helicopter has ditched, with 20 lives being lost in two of those accidents.

Whatever the conclusions of the Air Accidents Investigation Branch regarding the cause of the ditching on 23 August, the truth is that wider questions are being asked, to which the workforce will need answers to their strongest satisfaction if confidence is to be regained. Confidence is now so low that an industry review is not likely to be able to restore it. Only a wide-ranging and comprehensive independent inquiry like the one that Lord Cullen carried out will be able to do that, whatever the cause of the latest incident turns out to be.

In our view, the process of beginning to rebuild confidence needs an early commitment, so will the cabinet secretary reconsider his position on the issue and send that important signal by supporting such an independent inquiry now?

John Swinney: I thank Iain Gray for his remarks and welcome him to his post.

A set of steps must be taken if we are to properly and fully address the circumstances of the incident in question, and I think that the position that I set out to Parliament yesterday, on which I have provided more detail today, is the right way to proceed. The incident has to be investigated properly and fully by the AAIB, which must report on its investigation, as a consequence of which it is incumbent on the Civil Aviation Authority—because that is what the law says—to consider and apply any relevant changes to the safety regime. From that will flow issues that will have to be considered by the Lord Advocate, who is in the chamber this afternoon to hear members' views about further inquiries that might take their course.

The Government maintains that the correct approach is to wait for the sequence of investigation to be undertaken before we come to any conclusion about the need for a wider inquiry. I also point out that although some issues in such an inquiry are devolved, many are reserved and we would have to reach an agreement with the United Kingdom about the nature of an inquiry of the type suggested by Mr Gray, as it would have to be undertaken under the Inquiries Act 2005, which is a piece of reserved legislation.

On Mr Gray's final point about the helicopter safety steering group review, I encourage him to consider whether in the short term it might possibly assist in starting—and I stress the word "starting"—to rebuild confidence. What the review managed to achieve over the seven days following the incident were unanimity about the correctness of voluntarily suspending the flights of Super

Pumas on the Saturday afternoon, which ministers considered to be entirely the correct decision and—based on early communication from the AAIB and agreed unanimously with the trade unions and operators—an agreement to relax that temporary suspension across some classes of Super Puma. The fact that that was able to be agreed unanimously is an encouraging sign that those who operate the helicopter safety steering group respect the workforce's genuine and substantial concerns about safety, and it has to be followed.

For its part, the Government will do anything that it can to help the steering group to establish and take forward its inquiry and I will certainly report to Parliament on any steps that the Government is able to take to assist in the process. I also assure Iain Gray that we will consider any further inquiries that are required once the conclusions of the AAIB investigation are to hand.

Alex Johnstone (North East Scotland) (Con):

I thank the cabinet secretary for advance sight of his statement and associate myself and the Conservative group with his remarks about those who lost their lives and their families who are at this moment suffering that loss. I also echo the cabinet secretary's praise of those who engaged in what was a very successful rescue operation and ask that at some point he takes some lessons from that operation to ensure that we are equally successful should such incidents happen in future.

In reassuring the cabinet secretary that I believe that he is correct to say that calls for a public inquiry are premature and that the AAIB is the correct facility for the initial inquiry, I wonder whether he agrees that the key issues in this matter are safety and confidence and that any politician who does anything to unnecessarily undermine the confidence of those who have no alternative but to travel daily by helicopter to their work in the North Sea is being irresponsible.

In that respect, I invite the cabinet secretary to repeat his remarks about the helicopter safety steering group, whose swift and decisive decisions to suspend and reinstate helicopter flights to the North Sea have been extremely important in guaranteeing safety and confidence. Does he also agree that the group's far-reaching and independent review of helicopter safety in the North Sea is a vital first step towards building that confidence in the future?

John Swinney: I thank Mr Johnstone for his remarks. He made a valid point in his opening remarks about our need to be alert to preparedness in other parts of the country. The fact that the incident took place very close to the coastline of the Shetland Islands, where substantial resources were available in relation to

the role of the Maritime and Coastguard Agency, the Royal National Lifeboat Institution and other players, was vital in ensuring that the correct resources were able to be deployed swiftly to secure the survival of 14 of the 18 individuals who were involved in the incident. It is clear that time is of the essence in all such circumstances, given the water temperatures that people would endure. Mr Johnstone therefore made a valid point about ensuring preparedness.

Obviously, the Government presides over an emergency response regime, which is regularly tested in all sorts of scenarios. After every incident, we review preparedness under the direction of the Cabinet Secretary for Justice, and it is important that we test the preparations in other scenarios in other parts of the country.

I agree with Mr Johnstone that safety and confidence are utterly fundamental to the debate. We must take care about how we consider, express and pursue those issues because, ultimately, individuals must feel confident when they get on a helicopter. It is very easy for people other than the folk who get on those helicopters to think that it is easy or should be straightforward. Those individuals must be confident about that, so we must be respectful of that process.

One factor that the trade unions told me weighed on their mind about agreeing to resume Super Puma flights was the workforce's concern about trying to get off oil rigs and on to vessels, including ships. That is not a risk-free process.

We have to allow the helicopter safety steering group to carefully consider the issue. As I said in response to Mr Gray and in my statement, the Government will do everything that we can to ensure that the helicopter safety steering group review gets off on the right footing and is well supported, and we will, of course, advise Parliament of any assistance that the Government is able to make.

Kevin Stewart (Aberdeen Central) (SNP): I, too, pass on my condolences to the families and friends of those who were lost. Like the vast bulk of folk in the north-east of Scotland, I have family and friends who are regular helicopter passengers. Obviously, the situation is concerning. What support can the Scottish Government give to an industry review on helicopter safety?

John Swinney: We will discuss that actively with the helicopter safety steering group. We have had a great deal of discussion with it since the incident happened, and that dialogue is on-going. We will discuss how the group intends to take forward the inquiry, and we will bring to that discussion determination to ensure that the process is as strong and robust as it possibly can

be to ensure that the group contributes towards building confidence within the sector. If there are particular ways in which the Government can provide resources or support to assist that, we will endeavour to do so. We will discuss the subject actively with the group, and I will advise Parliament accordingly.

Richard Baker (North East Scotland) (Lab): I, too, thank the cabinet secretary for his statement.

Is the cabinet secretary aware of the concerns that the trade union Unite has raised that, four years after the 2009 Super Puma crash, a fatal accident inquiry into that incident has still not taken place and that has not helped to allay the anxieties of workers about helicopter safety after the most recent tragedy? Will ministers therefore support the work of my colleague Patricia Ferguson as she consults on legislative proposals to speed up the FAI process and do all that they can to ensure that an FAI into the most recent tragedy takes place as soon as it can?

John Swinney: I am aware of the concerns that Richard Baker has raised and I have discussed them directly with the trade union. I am quite happy to make available to Parliament a timeline that perhaps explains all the circumstances since the Super Puma helicopter incident on 1 April 2009. I have in front of me the timeline information, which goes through all the component parts of how the time has elapsed. A lot of it has to do with the very real thoroughness of trying to understand the issues that were addressed by the Air Accidents Investigation Branch. It took the best part of two and a half years to get to the bottom of that inquiry. I appreciate the concerns, but when one looks at the timeline, I think that it is clear that there are reasons why that has been the case.

On the second point that Mr Baker raised—about the approach to fatal accident inquiries—the Government has been considering that subject already and it is under active discussion by ministers. I am quite sure that the Cabinet Secretary for Justice or the Lord Advocate—or perhaps both—would be happy to meet Patricia Ferguson to discuss the provisions that I know she is advancing, because those issues have been part of the consideration that the Government has been taking forward. Our desire is to have fatal accident inquiries as quickly as they can reasonably take place, but there is a sequence of events and parts of a process that have to be undertaken, not least of which is establishing whether there are any issues that the Crown needs to address in relation to criminal proceedings that must be exhausted before we can embark on a fatal accident inquiry.

The Presiding Officer: We are very tight for time, but I am prepared to let questions on the statement run on until 20 minutes past 3.

However, I ask for the questions to be as succinct as possible, please.

Mark McDonald (Aberdeen Donside): I attended school with one of the victims of the 2009 Super Puma accident and I, too, have family and friends working offshore and using helicopters regularly, so I understand the concerns that exist in the workforce and their families. Today's edition of *The Press and Journal* leads with the news that the seating configuration on helicopters is to be examined. There are wider concerns among the workforce that the efficiency of crew turnaround and getting helicopters back into the air may have led to some of the safety and maintenance agenda slipping. Does the cabinet secretary agree that, whatever the ultimate causes of the tragedy off the coast of Shetland, we must ensure that the wider safety regime is the primary focus of any review and that operators must examine carefully whether they have struck the appropriate balance between safety and maintenance, and the efficiency of crew turnaround?

John Swinney: The last part of Mark McDonald's question encapsulates the challenges and issues that have to be addressed. Ultimately, however, the primary consideration has to be the safety of the workforce. That was in essence the key point of Lord Cullen's inquiry into the Piper Alpha incident. Lord Cullen set out a regime that was based on evaluating, installation by installation, the safety approach that was to be undertaken. Some of the lessons of Lord Cullen's inquiry could well be applied in this circumstance to recognise that there will be challenges in managing all the issues around productivity, maintenance schedules and a whole sequence of events but that ultimately over all that must be the attention to the safety of the workforce involved. That issue will be at the heart of the helicopter safety steering group's work, which can proceed to start to build confidence again within the North Sea sector.

Nanette Milne (North East Scotland) (Con): I, too, have a close family member who works in the North Sea and is currently considering onshore work in the light of events in the past few years. However, given that the Norwegian sector, too, uses helicopter transport and appears to have a better safety record than Scotland's, will the Government support cross-industry discussions with the Scandinavian authorities to see whether any lessons can be learned from their safety and maintenance regime?

John Swinney: That is a very practical and positive suggestion, and certainly we would support such an approach being taken.

Christian Allard (North East Scotland) (SNP): I thank the cabinet secretary for his heartfelt statement, which will be appreciated in the north-

east. Will he consider whether relatives of helicopter pilots and offshore workers should be represented at a senior level in the work of the helicopter safety steering group to give relatives a voice on the way forward for the industry?

John Swinney: Over the days after the incident, the trade unions were actively involved in the work of the helicopter safety steering group. Agreements were also reached about ensuring access for representatives of trade unions to be on the rigs and installations. It is a matter for the helicopter safety steering group to determine, but I think that wide workforce participation would be helpful, and it has been helpful here in ensuring that we have been able to take steps that have commanded unanimous support among all the interested parties and players.

Lewis Macdonald (North East Scotland) (Lab): Given the vital input of the trade unions to the work of the helicopter safety steering group in reaching the correct decisions that it has reached over the past few days, and given that it will conduct an inquiry, as the cabinet secretary said, will he agree to talk to the trade unions specifically about what further steps are required to restore confidence among the offshore workforce? In particular, will he do so before discussing further the remit of any future inquiry with law officers and UK ministers?

John Swinney: Since the incident, I have had a number of discussions with trade unionists about the issues. I will be happy to continue those discussions and to feed them in to any decision making that we arrive at for our purposes in relation to inquiries. I simply say that the helicopter safety steering group has demonstrated very good practice in the degree to which it has involved the workforce in the process that has been undertaken to date.

Dennis Robertson (Aberdeenshire West) (SNP): One of my constituents was on the flight that ditched in the North Sea with the tragic loss of life. Can the cabinet secretary assure those who want to continue to work offshore that alternatives to flying with Super Puma might be put in place?

John Swinney: It is a rather difficult issue for me to determine here. As I said in my response to Mr Johnstone, transfer from an oil rig to a boat is not without its risks, and I know that that will weigh heavily on the minds of offshore workers. I entirely understand the concern and unease that Dennis Robertson highlights on behalf of offshore workers. That simply makes the case for us to ensure that we use every approach that we can possibly use to build confidence, and that is the approach that the Government will take.

Alison McInnes (North East Scotland) (LD): I would like to develop Nanette Milne's point.

Eurocopter, the manufacturer of the Super Puma fleet, has told me that its global safety record is excellent. However, it recognises that, with five incidents in as many years with flights between Scottish heliports and oil and gas installations, questions surely arise about whether something exceptional is going on in the area.

Has the Scottish Government considered comparative research about the safety record of similar aircraft travelling to and from oil and gas installations and how that compares with those of other countries? Will he work with his partners to establish whether this is indicative of any wider trend and, if so, seek to establish why?

John Swinney: Some of the answers to that question will perhaps lie in the issue that Mark McDonald raised about some of the considerations that are being made about the utilisation and the maintenance regimes of the Super Pumas, but that is me entering the realm of speculation about some of the issues that may be involved. We can encourage the helicopter safety steering group to take as broad a view as possible about the issues that are involved. The Government will be only too happy to support comparative research that may assist in shedding light on these issues.

Graeme Dey (Angus South) (SNP): Given the importance of the coastguard to offshore safety, which was highlighted by its involvement in the immediate response to this tragic event, can the cabinet secretary provide an update on staffing shortages in the coastguard service around Scotland?

John Swinney: In my discussions on the incident, I had a discussion on Friday, as I said, with the coastguard in Aberdeen. It was abundantly clear to me that the coastguard had sufficient resources to address this particular issue.

We have to be confident that the coastguard is in place at all times. My colleague, the Minister for Transport and Veterans, has been in communication with the United Kingdom Government about reports of understaffing at Scottish coastguard stations. Some vacancies have been advertised and the agency is involved in a recruitment process. This incident highlights the importance of ensuring that all the resources that need to be in place to reassure us about the effectiveness of any rescue operation are in place, and that will be part of the review that will be undertaken.

Programme for Government 2013-14

The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick): The next item of business is the continuation of the debate on the Scottish Government's programme for government for 2013-14.

15:20

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning (Michael Russell): In opening yesterday's debate, the First Minister not only set out our programme for government; he reminded Parliament how, in the months ahead, while we might debate our particular views on education, health, employment and welfare reform, we should never lose sight of the kind of nation that we are and, more importantly, the kind of nation that we can become. Scotland must always play its part as a responsible global citizen.

In recent weeks, the world has seen harrowing images of men, women and children in Syria injured and dying as a result of an illegal, unprecedented and abhorrent chemical weapons attack, which must result in the trial of those responsible before the International Criminal Court. The United Nations has warned that, as a result of the conflict, 10 million Syrians—half the population—will need humanitarian aid by the end of the year. Yesterday it highlighted that more than 2 million people have become refugees fleeing that event. That marks the biggest humanitarian crisis of the century.

We cannot stand idly by. Every country in the world must help. That is why the Scottish Government is announcing today a new donation of £100,000 to help those who are struggling to survive in a country that has been ravaged by civil war. That comes on top of the £100,000 that was provided to the Disasters Emergency Committee earlier this year. The new funding will again be allocated to the Disasters Emergency Committee to support vital humanitarian relief through the provision of food, clean water, emergency shelter and medical care within Syria and to the displaced Syrian population.

We must also respond as individuals, as members of Oxfam Glasgow have done today by setting up a makeshift refugee camp in Buchanan Street in Glasgow to highlight for a few moments the months, days and hours of suffering of those in such camps in Syria, and to mark Oxfam's 50th anniversary of helping in such circumstances. I am sure that the whole Parliament will welcome my announcement today and will continue to support such efforts.

In his opening speech yesterday, the First Minister unveiled a strong programme of action that will support economic recovery and the creation of more jobs. Those measures will create a fairer Scotland and empower communities, as well as mitigating the impact of Westminster's austerity measures on the people of Scotland.

In contrast, the leader of the Labour Party came to the chamber devoid of ideas and calling for things to happen that are already happening. For example, she challenged the Government to act now on childcare, but we are already acting. The new Children and Young People (Scotland) Bill will increase free and more flexible provision of early learning in childcare from 475 hours to a minimum of 600 hours per year for three and four-year-olds and for looked-after two-year-olds. The bottom line is that that is an increase of 45 per cent from 2007 when Labour and the Liberals were last in power. We are fully funding the initiative, which will benefit around 120,000 Scottish children.

Willie Rennie was similarly behind the times when he mentioned the importance of focusing on our youngest children. I agree, and we all agree, which is why we are doing it. We are doing more than any Scottish Administration before us in investing in early years. Through our world-leading early years collaborative, we will also make progress in the coming year towards stretching aims to reduce stillbirth and infant mortality and to improve child development.

We are making progress in other areas, too. In our schools, we are continuing to work closely with teachers to provide the support that they need to deliver the curriculum for excellence with confidence. We will continue to protect the principle that educational opportunity should always—always—be based on the ability to learn, not the ability to pay. That is a foundation stone that supports one of the highest-achieving university systems in the world.

Of course, we heard yesterday, as no doubt we will hear today, Labour voices calling for action on colleges. We have acted on colleges; it was Labour and its little helpers—it was Mr Findlay and his little helpers—who tried to scupper that by voting against widening access, against national pay bargaining, against better gender balance in governance and against college courses that lead to jobs. That was Labour's action on colleges, which was against the colleges that help young people.

Neil Findlay (Lothian) (Lab): Would the cabinet secretary care to refer to the Audit Scotland report, which said that there are 40,000 fewer students in our colleges?

Michael Russell: Mr Findlay is as accurate as ever—I will really miss him, though I am sure that

Alex Neil will not, now that he is Labour's spokesperson on health—in that his accuracy is as questionable as ever. The Audit Scotland report indicated the progress that was being made. Every young person in Scotland knows that progress is being made. Unfortunately, Mr Findlay and his party do not keep up with progress.

Throughout this period of essential change in the colleges sector, we have maintained our manifesto commitment to maintain college numbers. Indeed, a record number of young people are now studying full time in our colleges and the number of hours of learning per student has increased by 36 per cent since the Labour Party was last in power. That investment in colleges has helped Europe's only dedicated minister for youth employment to reduce youth employment from a peak of 113,000 to 77,000. That is still far too high, but it is progress and we will continue to make progress.

Yesterday, the Labour leader referred to a speech that I gave in Glasgow in March. Her account of that was of course a little different from the press account of it the next day, but then, for Labour, living in a fact-free universe is nothing new. In that speech, I outlined the actions that the Government is taking to bear down on educational inequity in Scotland—something that, to be fair, our predecessors tried to tackle.

There is much that we can do—I will outline more when I speak at the Scottish learning festival later this month—but there are things that we cannot do without completing the powers of this Parliament. With control of taxation, welfare and labour market regulation, we could bring to bear on educational attainment those things that will accelerate and expand the progress that Scotland must make to eradicate poverty as a determinant of educational destiny.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Elaine Smith): Cabinet secretary, you must begin to wind up.

Michael Russell: I believe in change for the better in Scotland; that is why I came into politics. The record of this Parliament demonstrates that decisions made in Scotland about Scotland are best for Scotland. That applies to all decisions—they need to be made here. Ultimately, in my portfolio as in all others, that can be achieved only by securing independence on 18 September 2014. As the clock ticks towards that date, let us approach it as, I hope, we will approach the debate this afternoon: with passion, with vision and with courage in our abilities as a nation.

In that spirit, I am pleased to open this second day of debate on the programme for government.

15:28

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): We on these benches welcome the cabinet secretary's announcement of additional funding to help refugees in Syria, and we commend the activities of the many charitable organisations across Scotland that are working on that.

There were few surprises in the First Minister's speech yesterday, nor was it surprising that he spent most of his time talking about independence. In fact, we are getting used to that now. Independence is about the only thing that SNP ministers and SNP back benchers talk about—it is in every speech, in every press release and in every question. *[Interruption.]*

Wringing their hands, SNP ministers—who should pipe down a little—parrot the line that, if only we had independence and if only we had the power, they could then do whatever it is that they want. That covers everything from making the sun shine to Scotland winning the world cup. However, the majority of Scots have rumbled the SNP. They know that that is simply an excuse for doing nothing. It is entirely about putting Scotland on pause.

Doing nothing when you have the power to make a difference to people's lives is, frankly, shameless. Doing nothing because you want to feed off people's misery to deliver a yes vote for independence is beyond cynical.

Yesterday, Margo MacDonald said that the legislative programme is thin, and she is right. However, she also challenged all of us in here to work together. I say to the SNP that, if it wants to work on social justice, tackling poverty and creating a fairer society, Scottish Labour will work with it. We should pool our ideas and make a difference to people's lives now. Let us not wait but act to alleviate poverty and suffering now.

I will deal with the Scottish welfare fund first, because it is, frankly, extraordinary that some SNP back benchers chose to misrepresent my concern about the substantial underspend in the fund as somehow being an attack on it. Instead, they trumpet of the success of the fund, pointing out that it has helped 20,000 people. However, by the end of this month, it should have helped nearer five times that figure: 100,000 people.

How can crisis grants be underspent at a time when we all know that families are struggling, the cost of living is rising and incomes are declining in real terms? There is no doubt in any of our minds that there are many people who are in increasing financial difficulty. It is simply not good enough to say, "We have a fund, let's marvel at it" and stick our heads in the sand when it is not spent. That should be a concern for all of us across this chamber.

Let us be clear: it is not the fault of local authorities, as some in the SNP would claim. Are they really suggesting that SNP-controlled councils such as Dundee City Council, which spent just 31 per cent of its allocation for one month, are somehow at fault? I do not think so.

Where in the legislative programme is the ambition? Where is the hope? Where is the focus on tackling poverty and need?

On child poverty, there was huge progress under Labour, but that progress has now stalled and the level is likely to start heading the wrong way. On fuel poverty, we have heard a pledge that no one in Scotland will live in fuel poverty by 2016, so that older people, in particular, do not have to choose between eating and heating. However, fuel poverty is rising—the estimate is that it affects almost 900,000 households in Scotland in 2013. Fuel poverty is not going down, and the SNP will not say whether it will meet its pledge or what further action it will take.

On rough sleeping, the most extreme form of homelessness, the numbers are also rising. The fact that there are people sleeping rough on our streets because they do not have a roof over their heads is a disgrace, and it is our collective responsibility to do something about that. However, the Scottish Government does not do street counts any more. It does not know whether there are enough hostel places. We need that information so that we can do better because, frankly, we must do better.

It is at times like these that people expect support from the Government. They expect leadership from the Government. They expect everyone in Parliament to work together and strain every sinew to help them. However, what some people say is that they see a Government that cares more about nationality than need, a Government that puts geography and the constitution before the needs of its people. We really must do better than that, by working together and focusing on the needs of people here and now, not on the needs of people at some time in the future.

Nowhere is that more important than with the bedroom tax. We have all seen real-life examples of the distress and misery that has been caused by the bedroom tax in communities across Scotland. Of course we all want the Tories to scrap the bedroom tax—

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

Jackie Baillie: In a minute.

We all want the Tories to scrap the bedroom tax, but there is something that the SNP can do now to protect tenants and help councils and

housing associations. The Scottish Government has the power and the resources to do so. It was for times such as these that the Scottish Parliament was created. It was for times like these that the Scottish people voted for a Scottish Parliament.

Today, therefore, we have proposed a package of measures that we hope that the SNP will support: a member's bill to stop evictions as a result of the bedroom tax, giving effect to the Govan Law Centre petition; £50 million that was originally called for by Shelter to help councils and housing associations; practical support to deal with the spike in early years; and no evictions by Labour councils.

It should not be down to individual councils. We need consistency across all of Scotland, not a postcode lottery. We need this SNP Government to act for all of Scotland and to actually show some leadership on the issue. We need it to show leadership for tenants, to remove the fear of eviction. We need it to offer practical help to councils and housing associations.

Let us join together to work in the interests of people who are struggling. Let us use the powers of this Parliament—powers that we already have—to truly make a difference to the lives of people in Scotland.

15:35

Annabelle Ewing (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP): I am pleased to speak in the debate on the Scottish Government's programme for 2013-14.

As we have heard during this two-day debate, a number of important measures have been proposed in the legislative programme for the coming year—measures that will make a real difference to people's lives. That is what the people of Scotland trust the Parliament to do—to focus on measures that improve the lives of our citizens.

In the six minutes that are available to me, it would be impossible to do justice to each of the 13 new bills that are proposed, but I will make some comments about at least a few of them. Starting off from my trade as a lawyer, I will make a few comments about the weighty changes that are proposed to Scots law. In particular, I highlight the proposed courts reform bill, which is intended to bring the system of civil justice into the 21st century, thereby improving access to justice for our citizens and making it speedier, which will be welcome to all those who practise in the civil courts.

Another weighty bill in that area is the proposed damages bill, which will make long-overdue changes to damages for personal injury, inter alia

by extending the time limit within which an action can be brought and by consolidating and updating existing legislation, as recommended by the Scottish Law Commission.

Both those bills are to be welcomed. As a former MP in the House of Commons, I can say without any hesitation that, if our Parliament in Edinburgh had not been reconvened, no such important modernisations of our legal system would have received such a focus. For Westminster Governments, Scots law reform was never top of the agenda or, for the most part, even on the agenda. There was neither the time nor the inclination to proceed with it. However, with our Parliament in Edinburgh, we can bring our procedural laws up to date to ensure that our legal system is fair and robust and, crucially, meets the needs of our citizens.

That is one of the many examples of the opportunities that flow from being able to take decisions about our country in our Parliament. As a member of the Welfare Reform Committee, I also mention the important Scottish welfare fund bill. It will provide a statutory footing for the Scottish welfare fund, which was set up in April this year.

I very much welcome the fact that, in setting up the fund, the Scottish Government recognised the importance of there being a safety net in our society for those who face hardship. That is a fundamental principle that, surely, must underpin any welfare system in a civilised country. However, again, the contrast must be made with the Westminster Government. It retains power over all other key aspects of the welfare system that affect people in Scotland, but it has removed the safety net for the most vulnerable citizens.

As we heard yesterday in the eloquent speech from my colleague Christina McKelvie MSP, the Westminster Government has reached a new nadir in its treatment of our most vulnerable citizens: people who are terminally ill, such as those with motor neurone disease, have been told by the United Kingdom Tory Government minister Lord Freud—who, I understand, previously acted as an adviser to the Blair-Brown Labour Government in Westminster—that the answer to being evicted under the bedroom tax would be to take in a lodger. Words fail me, but I am sure that people throughout Scotland will feel sick at heart—indeed, sick to their stomachs—about such inhumane treatment.

There is another future for Scotland. We do not need to put up with such appalling and obscene treatment of sick and vulnerable people by a Westminster Government for which we did not vote and that, according to most polls, most Scots do not trust. We can complete the powers of this Parliament by taking to ourselves power over

welfare. We have shown that, with the limited power that we have with respect to the Scottish welfare fund, we can create a fair system based on civilised principles.

Surely it is a better future for the people who care most about Scotland—the people who live and work here—to take decisions about the welfare system that they would wish to operate in Scotland. Having heard Ms Baillie's speech—her usual negative contribution to such debates—I say that I for one do not see why people in Scotland, and particularly our most vulnerable people, should accept the second-best approach and the limited ambition of mitigating the measures that have been taken by Governments that we have not voted for. Why do we not seek to have the power to take such decisions for ourselves?

It should be pointed out for the record that the SNP has said unequivocally that we would abolish the bedroom tax within one year of an independent Scotland taking its rightful place in the world. The Labour leader, Ed Miliband, failed yet again today to commit to abolishing the bedroom tax. Ms Baillie should reflect on machinations in her political party before she comes to the chamber.

I mention as a member of the Referendum (Scotland) Bill Committee that, in addition to the 13 new bills that the First Minister set out yesterday, a number of bills are undergoing legislative scrutiny. They include the Scottish Independence Referendum Bill, which provides the framework for the vote in 2014. A yes vote is a vote for Scotland to get the tools that it needs to secure a prosperous and fair society. A yes vote means that decisions about Scotland are taken by those who care most about Scotland—the people who live and work here. Scotland's future in Scotland's hands—that sounds very good to me.

15:41

Mary Fee (West Scotland) (Lab): The next year is without doubt an important year for Scotland but, if yesterday is anything to go by, it will not be about what really matters to the people of Scotland—jobs, security, shelter and hope. Instead, the year will be plagued by the on-going fight about the constitution.

Like many Labour members, I became involved in politics through trade union activism, to help people in our communities and workplaces—not to debate the constitution. Yet here we are with Scotland on hold to hear how the legislation that the First Minister and his Government propose will boost the agenda to separate from the UK.

Scotland stands still and suffers under the SNP's separation agenda. We heard yesterday that Scottish Labour MSPs plan to bring forward a

wide range of bills in the coming year. Each will tackle issues in the real world—they are about better buses to benefit communities and people, not the Brian Souters of Scotland; greater and improved services for deaf children and families; and changes to the organ donor system that would save lives.

Scotland faces a housing crisis—the biggest in more than 60 years and since the end of world war two. New housing supply is down by 14 per cent, the new completed housing rate is down by 13 per cent, and the number of affordable houses is down by 13 per cent. Perhaps SNP members can inform the chamber, people waiting on housing lists and those who need an affordable home why their clear manifesto pledge from 2011, which was to build 6,000 socially rented homes each year, was abandoned and replaced with references to affordable homes.

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

Mary Fee: No, I am sorry. Yesterday, I listened to speech after speech from SNP members that were about their jam tomorrow plans for separation. To be honest, it got a bit like groundhog day. We should have been talking about the real issues, which I want to talk about, so I will not take an intervention.

Housing lists across the country remain unacceptably long, while Audit Scotland reports that we need another 500,000 houses over the next 25 years. A PhD is not required to assess that, as house-building rates are falling and demand is increasing, housing will continue to be in crisis until the Scottish Government accepts that it needs a vision that is deserving of those whom it aims to help.

The Minister for Parliamentary Business (Joe FitzPatrick): Will the member take an intervention?

Mary Fee: No, I am sorry. The housing—

The Minister for Housing and Welfare (Margaret Burgess): Will the member give way?

Mary Fee: No, I am sorry.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Order, please. The member has indicated that she is not giving way.

Mary Fee: The housing bill that is due over the coming months will be closely scrutinised and the true detail revealed. Although the First Minister promised to strengthen protection for tenants in the private rented sector, security of tenure must be a priority for the Government.

Yesterday we also heard the First Minister offer us a glimpse into statistics that clearly get him excited. Perhaps he could act on the statistics

already offered to him and to his housing minister by Audit Scotland. Since coming into office in 2007, the First Minister and his Government have slashed the housing budget by more than half.

We also heard yesterday about the groundbreaking legislation brought in by Scottish Labour to tackle homelessness. The 2012 target set out to rehouse only those who became unintentionally homeless, but we need to move towards tackling the issues of so-called intentional homelessness. Let us be clear—no one aims to be intentionally homeless, but more has to be done. Without any fixed abode, what hope is there for anyone to access employment, improve their health and wellbeing and tackle the cause that leaves them homeless?

As a country, we are failing those individuals. As a Parliament, we need to have a cohesive and comprehensive strategy to help those individuals who are sleeping rough across Scotland.

Many this coming winter will face the choice between fuelling themselves and fuelling their homes. At least 28 per cent of all Scottish households are currently living in fuel poverty, and we need to go further and invest more to ensure that the Scottish Government's target of abolishing fuel poverty "as far as practicable" by November 2016 can be achieved. That means further investment, as Energy Action Scotland called for in October 2011. It argued to the Economy, Energy and Tourism Committee that there needed to be greater investment to reach that target—a message that the Scottish Government has failed to heed.

Sandra White asked yesterday what Labour members were doing in their constituencies during the recess. I am happy to inform Mrs White and the rest of the members on the SNP benches that I was out across my area carrying out street surgeries—

Joe FitzPatrick: So was I.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Order, please—especially on the front benches.

Mary Fee: The single biggest issue that was brought to my attention was housing. I visited housing associations and heard how cuts to the housing association grant have damaged new-build programmes, reduced the reserves and contributed to such a poor record in house building.

New builds and starts have dramatically reduced over the past year, leading to Shelter Scotland commenting that

"even with recent additional cash injections Scotland simply isn't building enough new homes"

and that the Scottish Government could use its budget to make housing a priority. Philip Hogg from Homes for Scotland said that the 25 per cent reductions

“reinforce the fact that Scotland is mired in a housing crisis.”

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You should come to a conclusion, please.

Mary Fee: Finally, I paraphrase Clement Attlee. When Nye Bevan asked him, “Where are all the people I need for my programme?”, Attlee responded, “Looking for houses, Nye.” Perhaps the First Minister, when not conducting his own polls, should ask, “Where are all the people I need for my independence?” The answer would be similar to Clement Attlee’s—“Looking for houses.”

15:48

Stewart Stevenson (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): Members may recall that, just before recess, the Subordinate Legislation Committee, of which I was the deputy convener, was translated to a higher purpose, and it is now the Delegated Powers and Law Reform Committee. Therefore I am particularly pleased that among the bills that the Government is bringing forward is a bill that has come from the Scottish Law Commission report “Review Of Contract Law: Report On Formation Of Contract: Execution In Counterpart”, because that appears to be precisely the sort of bill that it is thought might now come to the DPLR committee.

It is a little, modest bill, one might imagine, but it steps right back into some of the history of Scotland—and I will come to that later in my jamming session about this exciting piece of legislation. Essentially, the bill is about providing three things to businesses: security, privacy and certainty when they are conducting contract completion by other than the traditional means of bits of paper and everybody having to get to the same place. Essentially, it creates a legal framework for us to send documents across the ether with security, privacy and certainty, and thereby complete contracts. That will save effort and speed things up in business, which I am sure will be very welcome.

The bill is part of a larger agenda to use the electronic world to speed up processes in business and in government. Much more of our life is now online, and businesses want the legal certainty to be able to use the online world to a greater extent.

To make this work, we must rely on a piece of software called RSA, which was developed by and named after three eminent gentlemen called Rivest, Shamir and Adleman—incidentally, a Hindu, a Muslim and a Jew working together,

which is quite interesting. That is due entirely to the UK Government. A brilliant scientist called Clifford Cocks, working for Government Communications Headquarters, developed that technology in 1973, but the UK Government decided that it was so powerful and so secret that it was bound by the Official Secrets Act until 1997. As a result, the United States, which had no such material inhibitions on the technology, grasped the commercial opportunity. The US now owns the rights to the encryption software that protects our financial and other transactions on the internet. It did not do us much of a good turn in that regard.

In the past week, President Obama described his country as

“the world’s oldest constitutional democracy.”

We have seen some abuses of power in this area by the US National Security Agency, but at least there are constitutional remedies. I would like to see, in an independent Scotland, a constitution that enables us to provide in law safeguards for the citizen and for businesses that guarantee the protection of data. At present, of course, the Scotland Act 1998 prevents us from doing so, in particular at section B8 of part 2 of schedule 5, which designates the interception of communications as a reserved matter.

There is a limit to what we can do. However, we have the intellectual horsepower in Scotland to build on the bill that I have mentioned, which creates a framework for one small part of the electronic communications world and gives us an opportunity to move into other areas. We can genuinely be a world leader if we can look further at what we are doing through the bill, and if we can get the powers that are currently reserved to Westminster.

The technology is new, but it is not new. Mary, Queen of Scots used exactly the same technology as we now use through RSA to communicate with her lovers. She did not use a mathematical origin, but she had a special box with two locks on it. The trick in protecting communications is not to share your key with anyone. She had the key to one lock and her lover had the key to the other lock, and there were no duplicates. The message was put in the box, and she locked her lock. The box was sent to her lover and he locked his lock, and it was sent back to her, and so on. In an insecure world, that box could travel around and nobody could open it. That is the technology that will be at the heart of a particular piece of our legislation. Well done, Mary, Queen of Scots. The First Minister, who comes from Linlithgow, where Mary was born, will be particularly pleased.

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

Stewart Stevenson: I no longer have time—Margo MacDonald must forgive me.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The member is concluding now.

Stewart Stevenson: Yes.

That story illustrates perfectly a fundamental truth about where we are. I can speak of many of the things that we have to do only in the following terms. We are limiting ourselves, when we use devolved powers, to using a teaspoon to bail us out of the consequences of the substantial problems that we face, such as the financial tsunami and the cuts from Westminster. Let us get to where we can use the bulldozer of full powers, so that we can do so much more.

15:54

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I put on record our welcome for the new funding that is to be made available to refugees. None of us who has seen the harrowing pictures on television could think anything other than that we bear some responsibility to take action.

Besides the 13 new bills that were announced yesterday, a core plank of the Scottish Government's programme for business this year is the Children and Young People (Scotland) Bill. It is a substantial bill, which has implications for several policy areas and other pieces of legislation.

Scottish Conservatives agree with some of the bill's stated intentions and with some of its actual proposals. In particular, we agree that we should do much more to increase a collaborative approach and ensure that children's services are delivered more effectively, with better qualitative measures. We whole-heartedly agree with the plans to extend childcare, which will make it easier for parents to get back into work and will ease the financial pressures on hard-working families. We also whole-heartedly agree with the plans to provide greater backing for young carers and kinship carers, many of whom do tremendous work, at times with very little support.

The Parliament has made clear many times, on a cross-party basis, that it recognises the focus that needs to be put on such key areas, and compelling evidence on the need for additional focus on the early years has been submitted to several committees of the Parliament.

That said, there is much in the bill about which we have fundamental concerns. We are concerned about substantive as well as procedural and drafting matters. Most notable, we are against the unmistakeable statist and centralising philosophy that permeates so much of the bill.

As Professor Kenneth Norrie said during yesterday's meeting of the Education and Culture Committee, the bill in its current state gives the Scottish minister powers that are open ended and not well defined. As we know from submissions to the committee, there are concerns about the proposed extent of data sharing, the extension to the powers of Scotland's Commissioner for Children and Young People and ministers' ability to meddle in family life.

If we consider the bill in its entirety, we can see that, although it contains welcome provisions on childcare and kinship care, it is designed to take an unacceptable degree of responsibility away from many parents and professionals and hand over that responsibility to ministers and bureaucrats. That is something with which we fundamentally disagree, as do some very powerful voices, who expressed concern during the summer recess and who have submitted responses to the committee.

We therefore want the Scottish Government to review its approach to the bill and specifically to ensure that limited resources are targeted at the most vulnerable children and that responsibility is placed in the right hands, in families and among professionals, and not in the hands of Government.

In particular, we want the Scottish Government to review its policy on named persons, which has aroused the greatest controversy and concern. For some people it is a matter of detail; for others it is a matter of basic philosophy—the Scottish Conservatives are concerned about both.

Aileen Campbell: Will the member give way?

Michael Russell: Will the member give way?

Liz Smith: A rich choice. I will give way to the cabinet secretary.

Michael Russell: I hear what the member is saying. It is worth discussing the issues to do with named persons, but I urge her not just to discuss the matter in the chamber. Yesterday I visited a primary school in Forfar, where I met a young man in primary 7. I do not think that he will mind my saying that he is a looked-after child and that, because of the availability of a named person—his teacher—he had been able to get through some very difficult experiences. It is important that we talk to the people who are affected rather than organisations and politicians.

Liz Smith: The cabinet secretary makes a good point in relation to some children. However, I have read most of the evidence in recent weeks, and I think that we must pay great heed to the concerns that organisations are expressing, in particular about the universality of the named person approach, which is many people's fundamental

concern. For example, at yesterday's meeting of the Education and Culture Committee, Unison representative John Stevenson told us that because of the universal approach, far more children will by definition be involved in the named person issue. That will create pressure on local authorities' costs; it also raises a fundamental question about whether it is the right thing to do for all families, even when there are no specific problems in a family.

Aileen Campbell: I take on board Liz Smith's real and passionate concerns over the policies that we have in ensuring that we get it right for children. In the same spirit as the cabinet secretary, I point her to some of the work of the getting it right for every child pathfinder in Highland, which shows that there have been savings, a cutting of bureaucracy and a real benefit to the end user, the child, in having a named person. She is painting a picture that is wholly negative when, in fact, there are many positives about the named person. However, I appreciate her views and offer to talk the matter through with her as the bill progresses through Parliament.

Liz Smith: I thank the minister for her intervention. We are meeting next week to discuss these issues.

I do not deny that there are huge benefits to be gained from the GIRFEC principles. All parties in the Parliament support that. My point is that the universality of having a named person for every child between birth and 18 is a major change of focus. In my view, and in the view of the Conservative Party in the Parliament, that is something that we cannot accept because of its statism and its transgression of many of the rights and responsibilities that are held by families and parents.

I ask the Government to take careful recognition of the strong feelings about the bill that have emanated, as the cabinet secretary knows, from the wealth of evidence that has been submitted. There are some really important points that we must think about not just because of their substantive nature but also partly because of the drafting of the bill and the implications that it will have on so many other aspects of legislation.

16:01

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): I will pick up two strands in the current debate. The first is that, somehow, we are marking time and the Government is neglecting its duty to govern Scotland by focusing entirely on the referendum while we are legislation light. Let me take members through a little bit of the Justice

Committee's forward programme for dealing with legislation.

On 3 and 10 September, we consider the Tribunals (Scotland) Bill. We will then move on to the Criminal Justice (Scotland) Bill, which has police powers in it. Next, we will have budget scrutiny and consideration of the Victims and Witnesses (Scotland) Bill before returning to the Criminal Justice (Scotland) Bill, which is a substantial piece of legislation on which we will have many evidence sessions. That takes us up to January. On top of that, we are looking to go back to our inquiry into purposeful activity in prisons and we have a sub-committee on police and fire service reform. We will also conduct a review of defamation law and the community justice system. The list goes on and on. We even have an overspill committee, which Stewart Stevenson referred to, because the Justice Committee—as in previous years—does not have time to deal with all the legislation. I do not see any foot being taken off the legislative accelerator, certainly for the Justice Committee. As far as I am concerned, the Cabinet Secretary for Justice could slow down.

Roderick Campbell (North East Fife) (SNP): Can the convener of the Justice Committee remind me how much time the SNP members of the committee have devoted to discussing the referendum in any form?

Christine Grahame: To the best of my knowledge, nowt. We are too busy dealing with law that has to be passed for the benefit of the people of Scotland under the restrictions of devolution. It is a nonsense to say that we are not working as we have before.

I turn to the second strand. As someone who has been a socialist all her life, when we debate things such as punitive payday loans, the bedroom tax and food banks I share exactly the same concerns as Labour members. However, we cannot do anything substantive about those things in here. Yesterday, Johann Lamont commented:

"Today, Wonga has announced profits of £62.5 million. Where are the funds for a loan guarantee fund to stop people falling into the hands of the extortionate legal money lenders?"—[*Official Report*, 3 September 2013; c 21883.]

I support credit unions. I am a member of a credit union and contribute to a credit union. However, that does not deal with reserved legislation on punitive rates of interest and does not deal with legislation on advertising and the regulation of broadcasting, which is at the heart of the problem. Beyond that, it does not deal with the poverty that has driven people into those positions, including people in work—because nearly 50 per cent of the people who are in poverty are in work. There are not the deserving and the undeserving poor; they are all in it together, to use that abused term.

Margo MacDonald: If I may presume on my friendship with Christine Grahame and hope that we will still be pals afterwards, I suggested some time ago that we should reconsider the idea of introducing a law against making too big a profit. Has the Justice Committee—or anyone else—considered that idea?

Christine Grahame: I have just gone through the Justice Committee's timetable and I regret to say that we have little time to pause, let alone look at other matters. However, I heard what Margo MacDonald said about the law of usury. The Government must look at that significant issue, but we do not have all the powers that are needed to deal with everything else that goes with that matter, such as the macro-economic climate that is driving Scots down further into poverty and making a bigger gap between the haves and have-nots.

I want what Labour members want, but we will not get that fiddling around the edges in here. I am tired after 14 years of pretending that we can do something real in this Parliament about the matter. Malcolm Chisholm had it in a oner when he said:

"Finally, where is there anything about the bedroom tax, except rhetoric against laws from London? It is the classic example—the best example of all—that emphasises what we cannot do and forgets what we can do.—[*Official Report*, 3 September 2013; c 21919.]

He is absolutely right. We cannot do anything about matters such as the bedroom tax, but we get the fall-out, the illnesses, the bankruptcies, the homelessness, the despair and the pressures on the NHS, the justice system, our councils, individuals, communities and the whole nation. Why are we pretending that we can do anything about the matter? Without independence, we do not have the ability to get the Governments that we vote for. There is not one Labour MP in the UK Government—it is a Tory Government with a few Liberal Democrats. We must have a Government that Scotland votes for and which puts forward her priorities. We may share what those priorities are in the chamber, but they will never be delivered until we have independence.

16:06

Bob Doris (Glasgow) (SNP): I welcome the announcement of additional cash from the Scottish Government to mitigate some of the terrible refugee problems in Syria. A couple of weeks ago, I spoke to some refugees in a Kurdistan refugee camp. From that experience, I am aware of the dire need they have and how much they appreciate any support and any amount of money from anywhere in the world. I am proud to be part of a Parliament that does what it can, with limited resources, to make international humanitarian contributions.

Unfortunately, I must contrast the Government's approach with Jackie Baillie's tasteless comments on nationality. I want to give her comments no further credence, so I make the point only for the record. This Government bases its policies and position not only on what is best for all the people of Scotland, no matter where they come from, but in the interests of all humanitarian interventions across the world in order to meet our international obligations. The approach is not about nationality; it is about the human condition and helping everyone.

Many Labour speakers chose to ignore the legislative programme. Instead, they sought to indulge in negative speeches that did little to comment on or scrutinise the programme. Not for the first time in the chamber, it will take an SNP MSP to scrutinise the Government's legislative programme. The Labour Party needs to be mindful of being fit for opposition, never mind being fit for government.

In doing my bit for scrutiny, I will talk about the bankruptcy consolidation bill. I ask colleagues to look closely at the bill. The bill could be vital in improving debt solutions for some of the most vulnerable people. The bill will build on the good legislation in the previous session—the Home Owner and Debtor Protection (Scotland) Act 2010—that I helped to scrutinise at committee stage.

I want to comment in detail on a problem that still exists, and I ask for the chamber's indulgence in doing so. There are three core debt solutions for those who have no realistic hope of finding a way out of their personal debt. Those solutions are bankruptcy via a sequestration or the low-income low-asset route; the debt arrangement scheme; and protected trust deeds. There may be others, but those are the three core routes that I will focus on.

Which debt solution is appropriate will, of course, depend on individual circumstances. For example, home owners with substantial debt might benefit from a protected trust deed, which could protect their family home from repossession and enable them to achieve a workable debt solution. This Government brought in the relevant legislation. Other people—non-home owners with a certain level of debt—might be best served by the low-income, low-assets route to bankruptcy. It is evident that it would be wholly inappropriate to offer a protected trust deed to someone who would clearly benefit from the LILA route.

I believe that protected trust deeds are being offered irresponsibly to vulnerable tenants in Scotland. Protected trust deeds can lead to debt repayment schemes that cost tenants many thousands of pounds and take them several years to pay, and which leave them struggling

financially. I put it on record that there will be many good advisers in the marketplace, but some of those who provide advice on protected trust deeds might not give the best, or clear, advice. Such advisers get finders' fees of more than £1,500 to put people through the protected trust deed process, which they may do inappropriately. I hope that the Scottish Government will use the proposed bankruptcy consolidation bill to regulate debt advice in that area and to ensure that any debt advisers who offer such flawed advice are driven out of the sector. Such inappropriate advice might be offered as a result of incompetence, but it might also be offered by cowboys in the marketplace, whom we should drive out. The Parliament has the regulatory powers to do that.

Debt advisers who offer other debt solutions have to be registered with the Scottish Government's Accountant in Bankruptcy. We could stipulate that those who offer advice on protected trust deeds also have to be registered with the Accountant in Bankruptcy and that, if they did not fulfil their functions properly, they would no longer be registered with the AIB. That is just one way of improving people's situation.

In the time that I have left—with the Presiding Officer's indulgence—I would like to refer briefly to two other aspects of the legislative programme. I had hoped that people would come forward with ideas for measures to improve the quality of housing that could be included in the proposed housing bill instead of sniping from the sidelines. I would like to offer one thought on how we can improve the quality of housing in Scotland. We must go a lot further in the private housing sector. We must find ways of rewarding good registered private landlords—we should incentivise them to improve their stock, where we can—and of clamping down further on the cowboys. I also think that we must do more to put an obligation on landlords in the private rented sector as far as electrical safety is concerned.

Finally—do I have time, Presiding Officer?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Your time is really up.

Bob Doris: I will leave it at that and sum up by saying that there is a lot in the legislative programme, about which members—if they took the time to read it and think constructively about it—could say something meaningful. That is what MSPs should be doing, rather than letting themselves down, as members of the Labour Party have done over the past two days.

16:13

Graeme Pearson (South Scotland) (Lab): Unusually, I begin by thanking Mike Russell, who introduced the notion of a “fact-free universe”.

That is a useful context in which to consider some of the comments that I will make on the justice proposals.

Today, Mr MacAskill took to the radio to announce, yet again, that we had

“a record number of police officers”,

and insisted that the Scottish Government is “making Scotland safer”. On the second point, I have yet to hear anyone on the streets of Scotland shout, “I need help! Get me the Government!” More important, on the first point, is that police numbers fell by 172 in the previous quarter and are now at their lowest level for almost two years, and the chief constable of Police Scotland is warning of possible cuts to come.

In addition, Mr MacAskill failed to acknowledge the almost 1,000 police staff who have been let go by police authorities, with the prospect of more going in the coming months, and he failed to recognise that police officers have been forced off front-line duties to cover the support-staff deficit. Many officers now spend their time in offices, dealing with recruitment issues and administration in order to ensure that Mr MacAskill can get back his record number.

Nevertheless, some of the Scottish Government's proposals have been described as populist and have been welcomed by elements of the media. They might be easily pleased; I think that the proposals look tired and lack bite. What do we have here? As Annabelle Ewing has acknowledged, much in the programme is long overdue. For instance, although I very much welcome the airgun legislation, the fact is that families have been waiting for it for six years.

Annabelle Ewing: My point was that in the long years in which we have had the Westminster Government dealing with such matters, particularly in the period before this Parliament was reconvened, there were very few opportunities for Scots law to be progressed. As for airgun licences, it would be fair for Graeme Pearson to recognise that we have only just got the power to deal with that issue.

Graeme Pearson: It is also fair to acknowledge that the Government opposed changes to those powers. What we have had is six years of promises. At last we are seeing some action.

Scrapping early release would also be a good move, but Mr MacAskill's bill is aimed at a very tiny proportion of offenders and is simply not enough. I have a letter from the Scottish Prison Service to a victim's family, indicating that the family is not entitled to be informed on every occasion on which a prisoner is released into the community and that the Prison Service has—rightly—a duty to treat prisoners humanely. It is

time that this Government faced up to its duty to treat victims and witnesses with the same sense of duty. Unfortunately, I do not believe that the current proposals meet that criterion.

In the scrap metal licensing proposals, there is no mention of the need to ensure that cash transactions are banned, which would remove the profit motive for thieves and vandals. In their current state, the proposals are half a solution, even though both the cabinet secretary and the Lord Advocate have spoken warmly of the need to deal with the problem. The fact is that it took three days of commuter disruption in Aberdeen to finally produce from Mr MacAskill a half-baked response that just does not cut it.

What could Mr MacAskill have done? I have some suggestions. We could have had better asset recovery legislation and legislation on human trafficking. Regulation of the security industry, which is important ahead of the Commonwealth games, has been delayed since 2007. There could have been new lobbying legislation to prevent corruption in politics, efforts to tackle alcohol abuse, reform of criminal verdicts, and the criminalisation of the purchase of sex. Tackling those issues will help to protect those in our society who are most at risk, but they have all been ignored as the Government fails to provide real substance. Where is the vision for today's Scotland among the First Minister's promises of mañana tomorrow?

I have said that the proposals look tired. In fact, the cabinet secretary's bag of promises looks empty and it seems the seven-year itch is just around the corner. The proposed licensing bill might improve and extend some local authority powers with regard to taxis and private hire cars and lap-dancing clubs, but the false assertion that the First Minister's Government has stabilised the prison population and is on course to reduce it flies in the face of reality. As we speak, the prison population is up to 8,100 and the Government's own forecasts indicate that it will rise further to 9,500 by 2020. The Government is not taking action to deal with the real problems of reoffending and meaningful activity in prison; Audit Scotland has identified that very problem, saying that reoffending, which is stuck at around 30 per cent, should be dealt with. We know what improvements are necessary. A strategy was set out in 2006, and it needs to be delivered.

What about major improvements that have been implemented in the justice system? There has been a significant backlog of cases in our dedicated domestic abuse courts, a rise in the number of sex crimes, a risk of further court delays through closures, and growing demand for better protection for witnesses.

A tired Government is running out of time and, evidently, out of ideas. Scottish Labour will provide the evidence in support of our union of nations, but we will also continue to challenge this myopic Government and force it to address people's real needs.

16:20

Chic Brodie (South Scotland) (SNP): I, of course, support the Government's programme of bills for 2013-14, but I would like to make a very small point before I get into the meat of that. As my good friend Mike MacKenzie rightly keeps telling me, we should all remember that, in this year, we have the privilege of being in the front-row seats in the theatre of history.

However our fellow Scots, as the main audience, react in 379 days' time, we have collectively—all of us—an obligation to them and to the millions across the globe who are watching this momentous period of our history. We have an obligation to maintain some elements of dignity, courtesy and integrity when we review the elements of the bills in the programme, and to eschew the tribalism—facile and cosmetic tribalism, in many cases—and personalisation that were inherent in, and which characterised, major contributions in Parliament yesterday. That diminishes us all, and it diminishes the Parliament above all.

Whether or not we move inexorably to independence—as I believe we will—let us at least scrutinise the programme and others with substantiated evidence, and not with some of the stuff that we have heard this afternoon, in order to support the honestly held but differing political and economic journeys that we each, in our own ways and collectively, wish to travel.

In that context and in the context of the programme, we ask the following questions. With or without the constitutional issue, does the programme add value to economic recovery and job planning in Scotland? Does it provide a foundation for a more equitable Scotland? Does it embrace in a meaningful way a plan to empower our communities and small businesses? Will it create a fairer Scotland? That is what the journey should be about for all of us. It is about the kind of country that we wish to see and it is about encompassing and embracing the natural characteristics that the Scottish people display.

Any nation that seeks economic success and all that flows from it—health and wealth aspirations and improvements in social infrastructure, for example—seeks something that can be predicated only on a nation that has at its heart the capability to apply and gather its own taxes. That is why I welcome the proposed revenue Scotland and tax

powers bill as an historic first step in our accepting responsibility for the setting and collection of taxes in Scotland. That power will set us off on our journey to develop a tax regime that will eventually determine a fairer and more equitable tax system that eschews the current disproportionate Westminster system, in which the income gap between the richest and the poorest in the country is the second worst in the world.

Richard Baker (North East Scotland) (Lab): Will that tax system include substantial cuts to corporation tax?

Chic Brodie: I am not sure what Richard Baker's point is. I believe that sometimes it is better to sit still and say nothing, in case one is thought to be foolish, than it is to stand and confirm that.

When talking about fairness, we can look at the banks' bonuses this year. They were delayed for a month at a cost of £3.2 billion, but their total was £75.1 billion, which is two and a half times the budget of Scotland. However, a fairer and more equitable distribution of wealth in a high-wage and high-productivity economy can be achieved only by creating the right support mechanisms to generate that wealth: the finance, skills and markets, and support for economic development in all our growth sectors. One route to that development and investment, which is in the programme and which I welcome, is to work with our enterprise agencies and others to consider the business case for the creation of a Scottish business development bank, which I hope will sit alongside a social enterprise bank, in the future.

In the programme lies the personal and social wealth of the nation: small businesses, properly risk assessed; the transfer of technologies from the research and development capabilities of our colleges and universities, and others; and an opportunity through the forthcoming procurement reform bill and our continued review of public services to see how we can unlock the competitiveness and ingenuity of the third sector to provide a more inclusive, competitive and supportive structure for the public sector.

Many economic features in the programme this year are commendable—not least the continued recognition that the multiplier effect best comes from a capital programme that enriches our infrastructure and in so doing enriches our economy.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (John Scott): Can you draw to a close, please?

Chic Brodie: I commend the proposed community empowerment bill, which will strengthen community planning partnerships and community management, and the ownership of very local public sector assets.

I believe that the programme, with or without consideration of the I word, takes Scotland a bit further along the journey to the kind of society that we all wish to see.

16:27

Neil Findlay (Lothian) (Lab): I am afraid that I have to repeat much of what my colleagues on this side of the chamber have been saying since the debate began yesterday, and suggest to the Government that the legislative programme really does show a crushing lack of ambition from the SNP Scottish Government. Rather than use existing powers to tackle the problems and issues that are facing our people today, and rather than look to use the powers that we have to tackle poverty, to improve education and health inequality, and to invest in our public services and people, the Government has put on hold any effort to address the day-to-day struggles of ordinary Scots.

Instead, of course, the Government chooses to use legislative inaction as a referendum tactic. It is very clear that the desperate attempt to portray this Parliament as impotent has trumped the plight of our young people, providing jobs for the unemployed, the situation with food banks and the bedroom tax as the Government's real agenda.

Jamie Hepburn: Neil Findlay, in common with other Labour members, has mentioned his concern about the bedroom tax. I do not doubt his concern about the bedroom tax, but his party is presently engaged in a campaign to ensure that power over welfare, including the bedroom tax, remains at Westminster. Can he point to one statement from Ed Balls, Liam Byrne or Ed Miliband in which they have committed to getting rid of the bedroom tax?

Neil Findlay: Mr Hepburn is well aware that we have devolved Government in Scotland and that the relevant spokesperson for Labour in Scotland has today announced Labour's plans to bring in a member's bill on the bedroom tax. I fully expect a radical like Mr Hepburn to sign up to that bill.

Last week, I met people from across the UK who work in the national health service, and I heard of the disastrous privatisation of the NHS in England. I am glad that there is a largely public, if not wholly political, consensus in Scotland whereby we reject the marketisation of our most cherished and respected public service. However, it would be a complete dereliction of our duty as members of the Scottish Parliament were we not to highlight the multitude of very real issues that are rapidly piling up in our NHS, which are being brought to members at surgeries week in and week out by staff and patients alike.

It has been a long hot summer for the NHS in Scotland and I suspect that the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing has been getting a little hotter under his starched collar over the past few months. We have had reports from the General Medical Council concerning staff shortages; indeed, it was so concerned about NHS Lothian in particular that it described the staff shortages as “dangerous”.

We have had reports from the College of Emergency Medicine, which reported that 21 out of 24 accident and emergency departments are regularly unsafe—a fact that it informed the Scottish Government of in April last year, but which the Government apparently did not admit until the following January, a whole nine months later.

We have heard of bed shortages, inappropriate boarding out of patients and consultants warning that hospitals are regularly at crisis point, at full capacity and

“sailing ... close to the wind.”

All the while, fewer staff are expected to deliver more for less as wages stagnate, pension contributions increase and pressures rise and rise.

I would like there to have been more in the programme—or, at least, in the First Minister’s statement—to address how fit for purpose our NHS is and what the Government will do to tackle some of the social ills that shame our country today. The failure of anyone on the Government benches to mention those matters is, quite frankly, astonishing.

Early in the summer, I called for the Health and Sport Committee to hold an inquiry into the state of the NHS in Scotland in 2013. I repeat that call today and hope that the cabinet secretary will join in with that. As one consultant said to me recently, we cannot go into the winter in the current climate of crisis management.

Scottish Labour wants integration of health and social care to succeed, and for it to improve care of our older people in particular. Labour-led councils are doing some fantastic work in that field, and we will closely scrutinise the passage of the Public Bodies (Joint Working) (Scotland) Bill. Where proposals are good, we will support them, but we will also seek to amend the bill to make it better and fit for purpose.

The same applies to the proposed mental health and adults with incapacity bill. I hope that the Government will support Richard Baker and Graeme Pearson’s proposed member’s bill on alcohol, Drew Smith’s proposed member’s bill on organ donations and Labour’s proposals for a new health inspection regime. Those are all positive health and wellbeing proposals.

I hope that all sides will support my colleague Kezia Dugdale’s proposed bill on the living wage. Here is a clear example of how the Government can use the powers that it has to put cash directly into the pockets of the low paid. Alternatively, it can choose not to do that. Time will tell.

As we have already mentioned in talking about the hated and obscene bedroom tax, there is no proposed bill to amend housing legislation to protect tenants from eviction. The powers exist, but the Government chooses not to do it, so Labour will introduce a member’s bill on that.

I regret that Christine Grahame has left the chamber, because her speech of despair was not about the socialism that I recognise. A socialist has to be an optimist, and I am one of those optimistic people, as members well know.

Gil Paterson (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP): Will Neil Findlay take an intervention?

Neil Findlay: On you go.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The member is in his last minute, so there should be no interventions. Mr Findlay, you should be drawing to a close.

Neil Findlay: I ask Mr Paterson to join the Labour Party. We will instil some optimism in him.

Finally, prior to the summer recess, the Government came and told me that it would take over my proposed bill on lobbying transparency. The proposal has cross-party support, the consultation has been done and the bill could have been drafted over the summer, but there is no bill. Why? Will someone from the Government front bench tell me that?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You should draw to a close, please.

Neil Findlay: I would very much like to continue, but if I have no more time, I will give up there. Thank you, Presiding Officer.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Many thanks. I appreciate that.

I call John Mason, after which we will move to the closing speeches, when all members who have taken part in the debate—yesterday and today—should be present.

16:33

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP): I realise that I am one of the last speakers in the debate—in fact, I am the last back-bench speaker—so perhaps there are not many items to mention that have not already been touched on at some stage. However, I will start by mentioning three of the bills that I am particularly enthusiastic about.

The first is the proposed revenue Scotland and tax powers bill. It seems to me that one of the key features of a real country is that it has its own taxes and its own tax system. Therefore, I am glad not only that we are getting the land and buildings transaction tax and the landfill tax, but that we will get revenue Scotland to oversee them. Although they are relatively small taxes to start off with, every journey starts with one small step, and once Scotland has a taste of operating its own taxation, it will be difficult to put the genie back in the bottle. We should not forget that it is estimated that revenue Scotland will cost 25 per cent less than would Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs doing the work.

Second is the proposed housing bill. There are many aspects to that, and we will see more in due course. However, I particularly welcome the fact that there will be movement on the private rented sector. In parts of my constituency—I suspect that other members have seen the same thing—the private rented sector has grown in recent years in places where there was very little of it before. With that growth has come a number of problems, including tenants who have no commitment to the area, landlords who care nothing for communal maintenance, and letting agencies that take no responsibility. Of course, there are good tenants, landlords and letting agents, but I welcome the fact that there will be action on the sector.

Third is the proposed licensing bill, which again covers issues that affect my constituency. Ever since I became a councillor about 15 years ago, the issues of taxis and private hire licences, the competition and tensions between the two, and the picking up of people in the centre of Glasgow to which the council has largely turned a blind eye, have all caused real problems. I am therefore delighted that there will be some movement in that area as well.

Work on scrap metal dealers will also be very welcome. A church in my constituency has lost the lead off its roof twice within about six months, which is incredibly difficult for a small charity to deal with. We are also all aware of the travel disruption that has been caused by copper theft from the railways.

Other key bills have already been mentioned such as those for welfare, food standards, and community empowerment, so I will not touch on those.

Some bills have already been launched and are already working their way through Parliament, and members will not be surprised if I mention same-sex marriage, or the Marriage and Civil Partnership (Scotland) Bill, to give it its proper title. Tomorrow morning, the bill starts its journey at the Equal Opportunities Committee, and I look forward to giving it a thorough examination.

I have to say that I am not exactly enthusiastic about the whole concept of the bill, but I would be more relaxed about it if it was only about giving extra rights to lesbian, bisexual, gay and transgender people and not about endangering anyone else. We have assurances from the Scottish and Westminster Governments that there will be adequate protection for those who disagree, be they denominations or individual celebrants. We also have assurances about freedom of speech. My question is whether those assurances are deliverable or will be washed away by higher courts. Even then, it seems that there are fewer protections for public sector workers or third sector volunteers who speak out with their own personal views. We will look at all that in committee before we have our first debate on the subject in the chamber.

The next topic that I will mention is the budget bill—a hugely important piece of legislation that is done each year and which dominates much of the work of the Finance Committee, as well as having an impact on all committees. I suppose that, if I was to make one request today to the other committees, it would be for them to make suggestions for the budget, but to please tell us where the money will come from. We had an example today from Mary Fee, for whom I have great respect, who suggested that we spend more money on housing, but did not tell us where she wants that money to come from. Jackie Baillie and Iain Gray also suggested that we could easily find £50 million to cover the bedroom tax: no problem, but where is that money to come from?

During the summer, I met a number of housing associations in my area. The director of one said to me that we should find £50 million to cover the bedroom tax. To give him his due, he was more honest. He said, “Just cut the £50 million out of the culture budget.” Before the culture secretary falls over, I certainly do not agree that chopping money off theatres, music and museums would be a good idea for ordinary people who benefit from those things educationally and in other ways but who could not possibly afford them themselves. However, at least that housing association director was honest and straightforward in that he gave a clear alternative. I hope that we will, during the budget process, get that from Opposition members.

Finally, it has been suggested that we should ignore the constitution and concentrate solely on bread-and-butter issues such as welfare reform and housing. Is that a fair point to make? No, it is not. We all, as individuals, have long-term and short-term plans; it is not about one or the other but about both. I thought that Christine Grahame put it particularly well when she showed how the two are inextricably linked.

Let us not forget why our constituents are struggling with welfare cuts, why they are having to use food banks, why they are seeing college and housing funding being cut, and why we are living in one of the most unequal countries in the world. It is because we are in the United Kingdom that we are seeing those cuts, and that is why we have to leave.

16:39

Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): Like many debates on legislative programmes over the years, this year's have occasionally been needlessly polarised. We have heard many speeches from SNP back benchers portraying this legislative programme as the best that it could possibly be from a Government that is led by the finest First Minister that we could possibly have, whereas many in the Opposition parties have pretended that the case is entirely the opposite—a utopian dream versus a nightmare vision. Alison Johnstone was perhaps the first speaker in yesterday's debate to recognise that the truth lies probably somewhere in between.

I have been in this job for 10 years, and I think that every legislative programme that I have seen has been a bit of a mixed bag. This one really is no different: there are some things to welcome and some things to oppose; there are things that should be welcomed with caution and scrutinised; and, certainly, there are some missed opportunities. It is the same every year, whoever is in government. I do not think that Alex Salmond is a hero or a demon; he is a politician. As politicians, we are often a pretty flawed bunch, although very few of us manage to live down fully to our public reputation.

I want to look at two themes: the Government's argument—in particular, the First Minister's argument—which casts this legislative programme as a further step in articulating the concept of the social wage, and the criticism from the other side that we have a Government on pause or a Government that has become a campaign. Let me quote from the First Minister's statement:

"Far from being a something-for-nothing culture, the social wage is a contract that we have with the people of Scotland. To suggest that that is something for nothing is to mimic the bankrupt ideology that prevails in the Westminster Parliament."—[*Official Report*, 3 September 2013; c 21876.]

I very much welcome those words, but I wish that they showed through in a bit more reality. I lost count of the number of comments about the need for a competitive tax environment. Tax competition has been one of the real flaws in that Westminster ideology. Under that pro-big business agenda, we see bungs continually going not only to big businesses in general but occasionally even

to tax dodgers and those who facilitate tax dodging. If we are serious about moving away from that flawed ideological model of Westminster, we need to make that a reality.

On the other hand, regarding Jackie Baillie's passionate call for action now on the bedroom tax, well—to quote someone—I get that. I have not seen the detail, but I hope to be able to support her bill. I think that we should be straining at the limits of the available powers not only now but in acting for the future. My frustration with that criticism, which has run through both days' debates, is that, while figures on the Labour benches have said that we can act now only with the powers that we have, figures on the SNP benches have said that we can act only once we have all the powers. No—we must do both. I say to colleagues who want the same outcome as I want next year that we must strain every muscle against the limits of the existing powers of devolution in order to articulate those limits, to show people that this Parliament has not enough power and to indicate our intent.

While listening to Jackie Baillie's words about action on the bedroom tax, although I agreed with her I found myself being reminded of the source of so much disappointment during new Labour's 13 years in government at Westminster. Labour threw extra cash at things that it believed in—many of them were things that I believe in—but it did not address the structural causes of the poverty and inequality that it sought remedial action to deal with. We saw the gap between rich and poor continue to widen even as Labour tried to put safety nets in place. That was simply not enough. As I said in my intervention on Christina McKelvie yesterday, following the post-war movement towards greater social justice and equality to close that gap between rich and poor, from the Thatcher Government onwards—including those 13 years of new Labour—we saw the dominance of a market-led, ever more unequal, centre-right consensus, which has always failed the many even though the UK political parties are still clinging to it.

There are three dominant political parties in the UK, but we need not just the chance to change one party for another or to swap one UK Government for another. There is a problem with that Westminster mindset. For too many, economic recovery simply means getting back to business as usual, with all priorities subordinated to the self-defeating pursuit of everlasting economic growth. We saw that centre-right economic model functioning and achieving economic growth, and it did not achieve greater equality, because the social and environmental costs of growth that were generated were heaped on those who were least able to defend themselves and who benefited least from that economic growth. We must not make the same

mistakes here. The debate that we are engaged in about Scotland's future should not paralyse us in the face of the urgent political, social, economic and ecological challenges that we face; it must encompass them.

We have the opportunity to be the generation that faced up to those challenges, not the one that hid from them—to be the generation that took the power to ourselves. Let us not be the generation that wakes up in 20 years' time and regrets the failure to take those opportunities and to vote yes in the referendum next year. Let us be the generation that took the power and took the opportunity and started to make our society the better place that it can be.

16:45

Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD): This debate started with a statement for which the amount of obedient clapping was in inverse proportion to the level of substance. It then spanned two days, allowing many contributions and issues to be raised. However, there was always a sense that, to coin a phrase, "It's the referendum, stupid." The mood was set by the First Minister. His speech boiled down to, "My priority is independence; it's why I'm in politics. Everything else is on the list only to make me look more rounded."

Johann Lamont rightly observed that, rather than a Government, we have a campaign in office. No matter the issue, no matter the concern, the answer from the Government is always picked from the same three options: "It's Westminster's fault," although other legislatures and scapegoats are available; "We need more powers, and do not be distracted by the extensive powers that the Parliament has already"; or "It will all be magically sorted once we are independent." The result, as Jackie Baillie said again today, is that Scotland is on pause. The Parliament is in a holding pattern and the act of not deciding has been raised to an art form, with every hard decision farmed off to an expert panel that is expected to act as a human shield until things calm down a bit—and certainly until after the white paper is published.

Mike MacKenzie (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): Will the member give way?

Liam McArthur: No, I will not.

That would be bad enough in normal circumstances, but when we are struggling to emerge from the biggest economic crisis to face this country in generations, it is inexcusable. That should be the Government's priority. As Willie Rennie pointed out, the number of Scottish companies taking on apprentices is lower than the number elsewhere in the UK. Our two Governments should be working together closely

to address that. The £2,000 national insurance rebate from the UK Government from April could allow businesses here to increase apprenticeships in Scotland, and the enterprise capital fund and the Green Investment Bank offer further opportunities for collaborative action by both of Scotland's Governments in the interest of Scotland's economy.

However, Mr Salmond elevates his place in history above the needs of those whom he was elected—we were all elected—to serve. With no hint of self-irony, he treated us yesterday to devolution's greatest hits. DJ Alex—who, let us not forget, was so impressed with the Scottish Parliament that he could not wait to return to Westminster not so long ago—offered up a mash-up of free personal care, free eye and dental checks, a ban on smoking in public places, concessionary travel and the abolition of tuition fees. Those are examples that, along with others, clearly demonstrate the success of devolution and show how this Parliament has reflected and responded to the needs and aspirations of the people of Scotland. However, the First Minister is not looking to strengthen devolution; he is looking to abandon it.

The logical response to the way in which this Parliament has used its powers over education, health, justice and transport to chart a different course where necessary is not to say that we no longer benefit from being part of the UK but to say, as the majority of people in Scotland do, that we need to strengthen this Parliament within a reformed UK. Indeed, the First Minister himself seems to agree with that. Why else would he be arguing against the advice of his Nobel-laureated advisers, yes Scotland comrades and most economic experts to keep the pound, a move that would see an independent Scotland hand over control of its fiscal and monetary policy to a foreign country?

On further devolution, Alison Johnstone was absolutely correct when she reminded the chamber that devolution should not stop in Edinburgh. Like her, I will be interested to see what emerges in the community empowerment and renewal bill, but the Government's record in this area is not encouraging. Some 18 months ago, Tavish Scott and I responded to both Government consultations on constitutional reform, expressing our support for the right of our island communities to take more control over their own affairs, if they wish. We were denounced by the SNP as troublemakers. That vision did not fit with the nationalist narrative, particularly regarding the use of our oil and renewables resources. However, last month, Mr Salmond's rather grand Lerwick declaration saw a working group set up to examine that specific issue. That is progress, perhaps, but the fact that much of the public

appetite in our islands for more powers stems from anger at the SNP's centralising agenda over recent years suggests that reversing some of that centralisation would be a useful place for the working group to start.

There are, of course, areas of agreement on the programme. Following the lead taken at Westminster, the Marriage and Civil Partnership (Scotland) Bill will help to make Scotland a fairer and more progressive society. So, too, will the proposed increase in childcare and nursery provision although—sadly—it still risks leaving two-year-olds in Scotland behind their counterparts in England, where 130,000 will benefit from 15 hours of free provision as of this week.

I agree with the First Minister's sentiment that this Parliament can, does and should adopt Scottish solutions to address Scottish problems, although I counsel caution on that. I suspect that, on airguns and taxi regulation—both of which Mr Salmond mentioned—he would find a difference in the perception of the problem and, therefore, the solution in our respective constituencies compared with that in the constituency represented by, for example, the Cabinet Secretary for Justice.

Mr MacAskill's plans to abandon corroboration despite serious concerns from the Law Society of Scotland and the Faculty of Advocates may play well with parts of the gallery but, as Ruth Davidson suggested, they also risk leaving Scotland with the lowest level of protection against wrongful conviction.

Ultimately, the legislative programme confirms one thing: the Government's purpose is separation. As a result, Scotland is on pause for the next 12 months, with the nation's ambitions stalled in favour of Mr Salmond's.

16:51

Jackson Carlaw (West Scotland) (Con): As deputy leader of my party, I congratulate the new front-bench spokesmen on the Labour side who were appointed to their positions during the summer and commiserate—if only a very little—with those whose services are, it seems, no longer required.

It is not so difficult to remember the SNP front-bench members bouncing down to their seats in 2007. In those days, they were luxuriously coiffed. They had full heads of hair with hardly a grey one in sight. I ask members to look today at the greying men on the front bench opposite. It is a tired Administration.

As James Kelly, Gavin Brown, Ken Macintosh and Malcolm Chisholm all said, we have the most lacklustre Government programme presented to

the Scottish Parliament since its creation in 1999. The best that could be said of it is that it is inoffensive. It is not a programme for government; it is a programme for a quango.

It took some 20 minutes yesterday for even the most feeble applause to be mustered from the normally Politburo-enthused ranks who sit behind the First Minister. That was after a summer in which the First Minister heroically went around the country with kerfuffle, bilge and balderdash seeking to talk up the independence campaign. How many members saw speeches, tweets or anything from SNP back benchers saying, "We're rushing back to Holyrood to pass the conclusion of contracts bill, the Historic Scotland merger bill or the damages bill"? There was none: all they talked about all summer was independence.

At least last year, the First Minister reshuffled his team between the first and second day of the debate on the Government programme. There was no such excitement for us this year.

Where the programme is not inoffensive, it is a conceit. I will talk first about justice. On pages 64 to 66 of "Empowering Scotland: the Government's Programme for Scotland 2013-2014", there are some justified claims for success on the justice front.

I must deal with Annabelle Ewing, who told us during her speech that, in all her experience as a Westminster MP, Westminster did not discuss Scottish justice issues. I looked it up. She was an MP between 2001 and 2005. Westminster did not discuss those issues because a Scottish Parliament had been established to which they had been devolved. Let us not dwell on the hapless Annabelle Ewing.

Annabelle Ewing: The point that I made, which I made again in an intervention that Mr Graeme Pearson kindly took, was that, for all the years that we have had Westminster government, progressing Scots law reform has not been at the top of the agenda; indeed, it has hardly ever been on the agenda. Perhaps if Mr Carlaw looked a wee bit further back in *Hansard*, he would find that out.

Jackson Carlaw: All of us in the chamber distinctly heard Annabelle Ewing refer to her experience as a Westminster MP.

We get to the principal conceit. Yesterday—extraordinarily—the Government made a virtue of the small change that it will make to early release, which is a U-turn of extraordinary proportions. For the past six years, when Annabel Goldie and Ruth Davidson have raised the issue, the First Minister has not said that he agreed with them and that he would make the change when he could; he has said that they were fundamentally wrong. We have accepted that the legislation that we passed in

1993 was wrong. In 1997, we had proposals to change it.

For those of us in the chamber yesterday afternoon, it was an extraordinary spectacle to see the First Minister having to prompt the Cabinet Secretary for Justice on the scope of the proposed legislation. We have a U-turn that would end automatic early release for just 2 per cent of the people who were convicted last year. That programme does not substantiate the claim that the Government will end automatic early release. It will do the bare minimum and, even in doing that, it owes an apology to the people who have for the past six years campaigned for the policy.

I pay particular attention to Aileen McLeod's speech, if only because I think that the words "I believe" were used in that remarkable contribution more often than in the Bachelors' song. I revisited the lyrics of that song, which I commend to her for a future speech. She could paraphrase them like this:

"I believe for every drop of rain that falls a flower grows"

in an independent Scotland.

"I believe that somewhere in the darkest night our candle glows"

in an independent Scotland.

Aileen McLeod lambasted the Conservative Government—the coalition Government—at Westminster—

Members: Oh.

Jackson Carlaw: I do not understand the drama. Aileen McLeod lambasted the Conservative Secretary of State for Health in the coalition Government at Westminster for not proceeding yet with plain packaging of cigarettes. All summer we heard from the Scottish Government and SNP members that the SNP would introduce legislation on that, yet page 74 of the programme says that the Government

"will consult ... with the intention of introducing legislation in 2014-15."

That is no different from the Westminster Government's position. We can wait and see what happens in Australia and, if that proves to be effective, we will introduce legislation elsewhere, too. That is another example of rhetoric not being matched by the programme.

Nearly 500 days after the minimum unit pricing legislation was passed, the Government has had two debates on its programme, but it has not had another word to say on alcohol. To that extent, I applaud the contribution of Richard Simpson—whom I am pleased to see with us in the chamber—in bringing forward constructive proposals, which we urged on the then Cabinet Secretary for Health, Wellbeing and Cities

Strategy when we supported MUP as the next stage. The Government, not the Opposition, should lead on that.

The debate has been all about independence. I believe that independence would be deeply damaging for communities across Scotland. In my support, I call Dennis Robertson, who commended to us over the summer a motion to congratulate Banchory trampoline club on winning the British championships and to wish Graham Ross every success in the future. Poor Graham would be denied the chance to defend his title; I say to Dennis Robertson that Graham would not be able to compete in the British trampolining championships. I have no doubt that the First Minister will tell us that he would personally see to it that such participation was still allowed.

We are in a five-year parliamentary session—the longest session at Holyrood. Two and a half years into it, we have a lacklustre and uninteresting programme. All that the Government concentrates on is independence in the future. By September next year, we will have spent two and a half years debating independence. That was the Government's judgment. Next year's programme for government speech will need fresh leadership to give this tired Government a way forward. If Scotland rejects independence, the people who were responsible for putting Scotland through the agony of two and a half years of the debate will need to stand down and be replaced by people who can offer the people of Scotland a more imaginative programme.

As Mike Russell said—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: With that you must close, please.

Jackson Carlaw: As Mike Russell said, the clock is ticking. It is ticking for the grey men on the front bench opposite. This is a programme of no bread today for Scotland—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You must close.

Jackson Carlaw: —and the promise of hyperbole and jam tomorrow, which is not good enough.

17:00

Iain Gray (East Lothian) (Lab): Patrick Harvie is right, I think—the debate on the legislative programme takes a traditional form. The Government tries to talk up legislation on such prosaic topics as electronic signatures or the consolidation of bankruptcy—it happens to all Governments—and the Opposition tries to decry the programme. However, the truth is that, this year, the legislative programme is so thin, so insubstantial and so timid that even the First

Minister did not bother trying to talk it up. Instead, he took the time that he had for his statement to talk the Parliament down. *[Interruption.]* Even Mr Chisholm, a paragon of open-mindedness and giving the Government credit where it is due—a bit too much for my liking sometimes—correctly pronounced it a programme for a campaign, not for a Government.

Bereft of material from this year's programme, the First Minister chose to tell the story of the Parliament, but there are two sides to every story. He said that 16 years ago

"the people of this country ... had the confidence and belief to bring this Parliament into existence."—*[Official Report, 3 September 2013; c 21871.]*

He omitted to mention that he fought them tooth and nail. He did not sign the claim of right, he boycotted the constitutional convention and he compared our Parliament to a pizza until the last moment, when the Parliament was imminent—then and only then did he find his confidence and jump on board.

The SNP has never believed in this devolved Parliament and that is why it is a campaign trying to do away with it rather than a Government trying to do its best with it. That showed when the First Minister listed the Parliament's achievements. Liam McArthur is right—almost none of them happened under Mr Salmond's leadership. Land reform and the land fund, free personal care and the best homelessness legislation in the world—that was all us. The bus pass, the smoking ban, adults with incapacity legislation and free eye tests—that was Labour-led legislation. Even university tuition fees were abolished by Labour and the Liberal Democrats in this Parliament. *[Interruption.]* I know. Mr McArthur is right. Mr Salmond might not remember because I think that that was the time when he ran home to Westminster—was it not?—so he was not here.

What did the First Minister come up with for SNP achievements? Minimum unit pricing—

The First Minister (Alex Salmond): Will the member give way?

Iain Gray: Good—in a moment.

The First Minister came up with minimum unit pricing, although that was mired in legal problems that we were told at the time had been resolved, and the abolition of bridge tolls. We abolished 1,000 years of the feudal system with this Parliament. The SNP abolished a pound to cross the Forth road bridge.

The First Minister: To go back to tuition fees, part of my memory of the last election campaign is that I remember Iain Gray using that exact line in the STV debate and the whole audience bursting into laughter—just like today. What is this line that

the Labour Party abolished tuition fees? It had tuition fees—back-door tuition fees. While we are at it, can Iain Gray ask his successor, who is sitting beside him, how she voted in the 1979 devolution referendum campaign?

Iain Gray: The SNP abolished the graduate endowment, which never funded tuition. *[Interruption.]*

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Order.

Iain Gray: Do SNP members know what it funded? It funded support for students from low-income families. That is what the SNP abolished, so it is no wonder that we have heard today and yesterday speech after speech from Government back benchers dripping with despair and angst. Christina McKelvie told us that she sits in the Parliament and looks on "virtually helpless". I think that that is a comment on Ms McKelvie, not on the Parliament.

Christine Grahame wailed, "We cannot do anything real"—what ambition, aspiration and determination! SNP members queued up to tell us how this Parliament—of which some of us are so proud—is too small, poor and powerless to make any difference at all.

Meanwhile, Labour members suggested ways in which we could and should be promoting a living wage, ending zero-hours contracts, improving buses, battling the human traffickers and the legal loan sharks and protecting people from the bedroom tax.

Jamie Hepburn: Will the member give way?

Iain Gray: No—I am sorry.

To be fair, some SNP members found glimmers of light in the darkness. Mark McDonald and Sandra White welcomed the airgun legislation, and Jamie Hepburn, Chic Brodie and John Mason welcomed the revenue Scotland bill and the new landfill and land and buildings transaction taxes. Many SNP members hailed the Scottish welfare fund bill, and rightly so. However, none of them acknowledged that those powers are all newly devolved as a direct result of the Calman commission and the Scotland Act 2012, with much more to flow in the form of powers to borrow and to set income tax.

How did that happen? This chamber had to seize control from the SNP Government, set up the commission and deliver the biggest transfer of powers since 1999 across two Parliaments and four Administrations. Until the last moment, the SNP stood defiant against devolution yet again, because it has always been on the wrong side of the devolution story. It wants not to complete devolution, but to kill it, and it always has done.

Every SNP member who spoke in the debate told us how much fairer the Scottish Government would make Scotland if it had power over benefits. Thank goodness that there is a welfare fund bill, because the Scottish welfare fund is a disaster. Eligibility rules are so botched that Scots in crisis are receiving a fraction of the help that they used to get from that great Satan, the Department for Work and Pensions. In Dundee, the amount of help is down by 70 per cent; in Edinburgh and Glasgow, it is down by 80 per cent; in Highland, it is down by 90 per cent; and in the Western Isles, people are now getting no help at all—voluntary organisations tell us that they are being sent to food banks instead.

Jamie Hepburn: Iain Gray bemoans the fact that SNP members call for power over welfare in this place, but he is presumably presently engaged in a campaign to retain power over welfare at Westminster, as he is campaigning for the Labour Party to be elected. Neil Findlay failed to answer the question earlier. Can Mr Gray tell us of any commitment from Labour front benchers at Westminster to get rid of the bedroom tax?

Iain Gray: I will tell members how valuable the commitments of Mr Hepburn's Government are. Given power—[*Interruption.*]

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Order. Order!

Iain Gray: Given power over a bit of the benefits system—the welfare fund, crisis loans and community care grants—the SNP has managed to create something that looks more like the parish and the poor law than a modern welfare system.

Families are being sent to food banks because the SNP Government has failed to get support out to them, not through malice but through sheer incompetence and inattention to detail. That is what happens when we have a cabinet secretary who is more interested in the priorities of her party than the obligations of her office and the people whom she is supposed to serve. That is what happens when we have a Government that puts Scotland on pause.

In this Parliament, there is only one story for the SNP, and only one bill in the programme that its members care about: the referendum. There are 384 long days to go, and it will seem like 380 years.

With every day, Scotland wants separation a little less—perhaps one in four people at present, we see today—but incredibly, with every day, the SNP also seems to want independence a little less. It now proposes that we keep the British monarch and the British pound, that we let the UK run our fiscal policy, and that we keep our UK passports, the UK energy network and UK research funding. We will be in Europe, but we will be out of the euro, Schengen and the common

fisheries policy, and we will ignore European pension law.

Some SNP members even try to say that we can leave the United Kingdom but still be in the United Kingdom. It is, as one of the SNP's cheerleaders in the press said today, independence

“diluted to the point of meaninglessness”.

The Government's legislative programme accurately reflects the character and circumstances of this SNP Government. This SNP Government is trapped in a devolved Parliament that it has never believed in and never will believe in. It is constrained by a desire to show the Parliament's limitations, rather than push its boundaries to help the people of Scotland. It is blinded by the pursuit of an independence cause that it no longer even believes in itself.

The programme is the measure of the limitations of that Government; it is not a measure of the limitations of this Parliament. This is the dynamic, developing, devolved Parliament that the Scottish people believed in 16 years ago and still believe in. It gives us powerful, wide-ranging and growing choices over health, education, justice, jobs and, increasingly, taxation—let us use those powers—while giving us the opportunities that are provided by shared risk and rewards in the bigger social and economic union that our forefathers in the Labour movement built, supported, created and argued for.

Let us make the most of that opportunity. What Scotland needs is a Government and a programme that believe in this Parliament, as we do. This programme is not that programme, and the SNP Government is not that Government.

17:11

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing (Alex Neil): It is clear that, after three months of hibernation, a leadership contest is on in the Labour Party in Scotland. Far from criticising Mr Salmond, Mr Gray wants to do what he did and come back to leadership after a period out of it.

Iain Gray *rose*—

Alex Neil: Aha! I will give way to Mr Gray

Iain Gray: For the avoidance of doubt, I am, along with Mr Swinney, a member of the life-after-leadership school. Leadership is not something that I aspire to any more. Of course, I cannot speak for Mr Neil; let us hear his leadership speech.

Alex Neil: Well, I must say that that is the first time we have seen life from Iain Gray in about 14 years.

There is something that I do not understand about Iain Gray. Given that he is so proud of what Labour achieved during its eight years in power here—free personal care, concessionary fares and his claim about abolition of tuition fees—why is he supporting the cuts commission that Johann Lamont has set up to get rid of all those things? We know that behind the scenes Johann Lamont's previous finance spokesman, Ken Macintosh, did not agree with her. I wonder whether Iain Gray agrees with the cuts commission. Is Iain Gray to be the fall guy who must come forward with the cuts commission's recommendation that we abolish all the great achievements of not just the Labour Administration but the entire Parliament?

Aspects of the debate have been very interesting, but there is something that I particularly want to pick out. Mary Fee, who is not a lady whom I often quote, complained about our dealing with the constitution. She spoke almost as if "constitution" were a dirty word. Let me say to Mary Fee that, in any country, the constitution matters.

Mary Fee should look at the honourable history of the labour movement and the example of the Attlee Government in the 1940s. The constitution of India mattered to India, and by changing the constitution and passing the Indian Independence Bill, in the face of opposition from Winston Churchill, that Labour Government freed the Indian people from colonial rule. In South Africa, it was the constitution that mattered. To see the constitution as some paper exercise is nonsense. The constitution is about power and where that power lies.

Iain Gray: Will the cabinet secretary give way?

Alex Neil: No. [*Interruption.*]

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Neil is not giving way at the moment.

Alex Neil: The fundamental issue about independence is this: where will power lie in relation to Scotland in the 21st century—economic power, political power and legislative power?

Let us take the example of the bedroom tax. The fact is that it was the Labour Government that introduced the bedroom tax in the private rented sector. Jackie Baillie tells us that she wants to see the abolition of the bedroom tax, but her problem is that the power to abolish the bedroom tax lies not with Jackie Baillie or even this Parliament. The power to abolish the bedroom tax lies with Westminster and, unless we gain control of the power, that will continue to be the case.

Ed Miliband, the alternative Prime Minister at Westminster, has today again ruled out any prospect of a Labour Government abolishing the bedroom tax. [*Interruption.*] The excitement is

getting to Jackie Baillie—it is the first time that she has broken a glass for me. The only way that we can abolish the bedroom tax is by voting yes next year.

Jackie Baillie: Is it not the case that the cabinet secretary is arguing for people in Scotland to be put on pause—for people who are threatened with eviction because of the bedroom tax to be abandoned—and that the SNP Government will do nothing for at least three years? The Scottish Government has the power to do something now to protect tenants and to help landlords. Why will it not use the powers that it has now to help people in Scotland?

Alex Neil: After last week's events in North Lanarkshire—this was in the *Daily Record*, so it must be true—where Jim McCabe, the Labour leader of the council, was evicting a disabled woman because she could not pay the bedroom tax, we will not take any lessons from the Labour Party in relation to the bedroom tax.

Iain Gray: Will the cabinet secretary give way?

Alex Neil: No.

The reality is that there is only one way to abolish the bedroom tax, and that is by voting yes next year. The incredible position of the Labour Party in Scotland is that its aspiration on the bedroom tax is that, in the future, it will be able to lobby a Labour Government at Westminster to abolish it. It would be far better to have the legislative power in this assembly. Had we had that power, the bedroom tax would never have been introduced in the first place.

Jackson Carlaw *rose—*

Ruth Davidson (Glasgow) (Con) *rose—*

Alex Neil: There is obviously another leadership competition going on. Is it going to be Jackson Carlaw or Ruth Davidson?

Before I let one of them in, I do not want to be rude so I should congratulate Jackie Baillie on her reshuffled appointment just before the recess. I knew that, with all the nonsense that she was talking, she would not last as my shadow for much longer. Having listened to Neil Findlay, my prediction is that by Christmas Helen Eadie will replace him as the shadow health spokesperson.

Jackson Carlaw *rose—*

Ruth Davidson *rose—*

Alex Neil: I will give way. I ask the members to decide among themselves.

Jackson Carlaw: I have been following the cabinet secretary's argument closely. The inescapable logic of it, which he will probably find uncomfortable, is that if the people of Scotland

vote no next year they must support the bedroom tax. He is making the bedroom tax the cornerstone of the SNP's campaign on independence.

Alex Neil: All I can say in response to that comment is that Jackson Carlaw must not have done first year methodology at university. If I were him, I would stick to being a used car salesman.

Let us look at where power resides because that is what this constitutional debate is about.

Iain Gray: Will the cabinet secretary give way?

Alex Neil: No.

I want to refer to the ridiculous speech that Gordon Brown made yesterday during one of his rare visits to Scotland. His argument is that the only way to abolish child poverty is by sticking with the United Kingdom and Scotland remaining within it. Has Gordon Brown not read last week's report from the National Children's Bureau? It reported that, over the past 40 years, the number of children in poverty in the UK has risen by 1.5 million. That destroys Gordon Brown's argument in a oner, particularly because he was the Chancellor of the Exchequer and then the Prime Minister for 13 years and still the number of children in poverty has risen by 1.5 million. Those were 13 wasted years by Gordon Brown.

If the great Gordon Brown cannot deliver the abolition of child poverty in 13 years when in Downing Street, what chance do George Osborne and David Cameron have of ever delivering the abolition of child poverty? The reality is that the UK has been tested and tried, and it has failed.

Yesterday, we heard Ruth Davidson describing the UK as one of the most successful unions ever. Let us look at the state of the UK. Leaving aside the fact that we have 1.5 million more children in poverty than we had 40 years ago, the last time that the UK had a trade surplus was 1997. That is not a measure of success. The UK's debt figure is up to £1.4 trillion. Does Ruth Davidson regard that as success? The UK's level of unemployment and underemployment is one of the worst in Europe, particularly compared with the small Scandinavian countries in northern Europe. The Conservatives cannot say that the UK has been or is a successful country—they must stick to the facts.

Neil Findlay: Will the minister take an intervention?

Alex Neil: Of course I will take an intervention from Neil Findlay. Neil Findlay—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: When will you take the intervention, Mr Neil?

Alex Neil: I will give way but, as always, it will be in my own time, Presiding Officer.

Each year, Neil Findlay organises and chairs a fringe meeting at the Labour Party conference, the theme of which is to get rid of Trident and invest the money in health and education. I say to Neil Findlay that, given the Labour Party and its Tory and Liberal Democrat friends' commitment on Trident, there is only one way to achieve that: vote yes next year.

Neil Findlay: I thank the failed leadership contender for that. *[Interruption.]*

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Go on, Mr Findlay.

Neil Findlay: Given the mince that Mr Neil has just said about me, it is no surprise that he has talked mince about everything else. I bring Mr Neil back to his portfolio. He has a torrid time over the summer. Will he mention health at all in his speech?

Alex Neil: I am just coming to health.

I want to compare the health service in Scotland—where we have independent control of health under this Parliament—with the health service in England. Fact number 1: in England they are privatising the health service, but we are keeping it in the public sector. Who started the privatisation? The Labour Party.

Fact number 2: we have free prescriptions, while the poor folk in England have to pay nearly £8 for theirs. Fact number 3: we have more nurses per head of population than any other part of the United Kingdom. Fact number 4: we have more GPs per head of population than any other part of the UK. Fact number 5: according to Professor Don Berwick, Obama's adviser and Cameron's adviser on the health service in England, we have the safest health service in the world.

I have been listening to the nonsense from Neil Findlay and his predecessor Jackie Baillie, to the point that I am looking forward to Helen Eadie taking up the post—I think that she will be a big improvement. Last week, we were criticised by Neil Findlay because we went public and transparent with the hospital standardised mortality rates in the two Lanarkshire hospitals. The standardised mortality rate has improved by 12 per cent over the past five years. Labour cannot say that, because it did not measure the hospital standardised mortality rate. Labour did not bother about patient safety: it did not measure what the reality was in its hospitals and it had no definition of an adverse event. The reality is that, under Nicola Sturgeon and now under me, the NHS in Scotland has grown and prospered, and we will continue to make it a service that the Scottish people can be proud of.

Power is about what we can achieve. I have been listening very carefully to Labour. Over the

summer, I was waiting for some speeches by Johann Lamont, but there were none—she was clearly hibernating along with Ed Miliband. I have been listening to the speeches by Labour members over the past two days and they have been a constant stream of moaning and groaning and criticism. The one thing that we have not heard from them is one new policy idea—in fact, we have not even heard any of their old policy ideas—and that is why Labour is languishing so much in the polls.

A classic example of Labour's real problem is the party's campaign on the independence referendum. People who believe in the fundamentals of the labour movement—people who believe in a more equal society, in getting rid of poverty and in full employment—cannot achieve any of those things as long as we remain part of the UK. There is only one hope for Scotland to realise the dreams of our people. It is not true to say that we do not believe in devolution—we are proud of the Parliament's achievements. Our criticism is that the Parliament's powers are far, far too limited, which means that we cannot implement the far-reaching agenda that we need to put in place for a 21st century Scotland.

Gavin Brown (Lothian) (Con): Will the cabinet secretary give way?

Alex Neil: Yes.

The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick): Very briefly, Mr Brown.

Gavin Brown: I thank the cabinet secretary for making the Opposition's point in the debate. He has had almost 17 minutes on the Government's programme for Scotland, yet he has not mentioned a single bill in that programme. Is that not unusual?

The Presiding Officer: You have one minute, minister.

Alex Neil: That was an extremely worthwhile intervention—not.

What we are talking about is policy, aspiration, what we have achieved in the Parliament and, more important, what we will achieve in the future. We will not be taking any lessons on policy from Mr George Osborne or Mr David Cameron because, as long as they have any control over affairs in Scotland, we will continue to languish in terms of our potential as a nation. Last year, Jackson Carlaw told me that he was thinking about voting for independence. I say to Jackson, "Come and join us—we take all types."

Jackson Carlaw: On a point of order, Presiding Officer.

Alex Neil: We are proud of the achievements of this Parliament but what we want to do—

The Presiding Officer: We have a point of order, cabinet secretary.

Jackson Carlaw: I know that you are going to tell me that this is not a point of order, Presiding Officer—

The Presiding Officer: In that case, sit down.

Alex Neil: The car trade must have flourished enormously in your day, Jackson.

We are proud of the Parliament's achievements, but we want a yes vote so that we can use the powers of sovereignty to transform the economy and social justice in Scotland.

Decision Time

17:30

The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick): We now move to decision time. Members will be pleased to know that there are no questions to be put as a result of today's business.

Oxfam's "Our Economy" Report

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Elaine Smith):

The final item of business is a members' business debate on motion S4M-07111, in the name of John Wilson, on welcoming Oxfam's "Our Economy" report. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament welcomes the report by Oxfam, *Our Economy*, which sets out Oxfam's vision for the economy in Scotland; notes that this report calls on policymakers, politicians and people in business to look toward the poorer sections of society who still do not benefit from economic growth in Scotland; recognises the report's recommendation for greater control to be given to communities over how regeneration happens in local areas, such as Central Scotland; applauds Oxfam's commitment in encouraging employers to pay a living wage, and praises Oxfam's ongoing work on reducing what it considers the ever-widening salary gap between those at the top and those at the bottom.

17:32

John Wilson (Central Scotland) (SNP): First, I draw members' attention to my declaration in the register of members' interests. I should also point out that, at the beginning of the year, I had the opportunity to meet at the Pearce Institute in Glasgow representatives of certain organisations—Tea in the Pot and GalGael—that are mentioned in Oxfam's "Our Economy" report. I found the discussion enlightening and the report reflects a number of issues that were raised with the Local Government and Regeneration Committee.

I welcome those in the public gallery who are listening to this debate and thank all members from all political parties who signed my motion and allowed the debate to take place. Although my interest in tackling poverty is of long standing, it has been strengthened by Oxfam's work in this area, especially its "Our Economy" report. In many ways, this debate is important in that it not only examines the economy in a traditional sense with reference to economic growth but highlights the vital point that growth and trickle-down economics are not reaching everyone in society, particularly those on the lowest incomes and suffering from poverty's most debilitating effects.

For example, the report refers to the fact that, over the past 25 years, the top 1 per cent of United Kingdom earners have had real-terms income increases of up to 117 per cent while the incomes of the poorest 10 per cent have increased by only 47 per cent. The report highlights the need for a new vision of prosperity, underlining its arguments with approaches taken by various Governments and Oxfam partners around the

globe and recognising the requirement to look beyond gross domestic product.

We must also ensure that community empowerment is not just a slogan that is utilised when we want to impose top-down community engagement. The fact is that society has evolved over the years. However, like the report, we need to recognise that the economic orthodoxy is failing many of our people and communities.

The gaps in equality are not just the result of people not working hard. As the report highlights, more than 40 per cent of those who live in poverty are in work. As I have stated in the chamber on numerous occasions, a step change is required in tackling the blight of in-work poverty. As the report highlights, in-work poverty as a proportion of all poverty in Scotland is on the increase. The number of people in in-work poverty has grown from around 255,000 to 280,000.

I come to the debate from a background of involvement in the voluntary sector, but I have also witnessed at first hand the work of various agencies that have operated in Central Scotland to try to alleviate poverty. Some of those organisations have been very successful in creating opportunities for communities, but it is clear that others have failed to deliver. Where there have been issues about the success or otherwise of those organisations, we must allow communities the space and opportunity to learn from the mistakes and move forward.

It is significant that the idea of a living wage, which I have previously debated in the chamber, is gaining traction. Recent research by the Jimmy Reid Foundation quite rightly sums up the difficulty when it says that the issue is

“not a problem of high taxes but of low pay”.

As the “Our Economy” report details, businesses in the United Kingdom that pay below the living wage cost society between £5.9 billion and £6.3 billion a year in extra benefits and lost taxation. One need only look at the role of Barclays Bank, which is not normally a financial institution that I would rush to praise, in implementing the living wage in London.

On financial institutions, the financial crisis that developed over five years ago has meant a need to develop real alternatives, such as credit unions, to provide an alternative to payday loans. The work that credit unions do in Central Scotland demonstrates the difference that they can make in many communities. They help to get people, especially in deprived areas, to develop their own solutions rather than fall prey to doorstep lenders or payday loan companies. People talk about community empowerment. That is real action.

The difficulty is that some communities or interest groups can lobby better than others. There needs to be better monitoring of how public moneys are spent and where they deliver the desired outputs for the communities that they are supposed to serve.

The co-operative sector is small in Scotland compared with other European countries, but that was not always the case. Strong mutual businesses such as building societies had a sturdy community ethos but were lost to many communities because of financial greed. As businesses, co-operatives and social enterprises can and should take a more long-term view rather than be short term in their approach, and they should not try to mirror the private sector.

As has been stated previously, it is vital that we as a society do not repeat the same mistakes and that we start to learn from the past. Regeneration should not involve just looking at the physical built environment. There may well be a point in building new houses, but the basic community structure needs to be in place. A relevant focus should be placed on community or localism, as some people in another place would put it. However, that may well lead us into another and more substantial debate about what we actually mean by “community”.

I recognise the good work that Oxfam is doing throughout various communities in Scotland and throughout the world. In particular, I welcome its contribution in stimulating the debate on the future direction of Scotland and addressing the issues of deprivation and poverty that many thousands of individuals and families face. “Our Economy: Towards a new prosperity” is the starting point for many of us to re-examine what we want to achieve in a prosperous independent Scotland.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I am afraid that the debate is oversubscribed, but if members limit their speeches to around three minutes, I may be able to call everyone.

17:39

Iain Gray (East Lothian) (Lab): I congratulate John Wilson on getting this debate. I was keen to take part in it for the fairly obvious reason that, prior to being elected to the Scottish Parliament, I spent 12 years working for Oxfam and so have some experience of where the ideas in the “Our Economy” report have come from. In that time, the thing that I was always proudest of and which I thought was most unique about Oxfam as an organisation was just how wide and deep its reach was at both ends of the spectrum.

For example, it was certainly possible to visit Oxfam programmes in many countries around the world where reaching the community involved

might require travelling by small plane, then by truck and then by dugout canoe and then by walking for sometimes many hours. The community might seem remote and beyond the reach of an organisation that started in Oxford, but the truth was that, on every occasion, at the end of the trip there would be a community where Oxfam was not only known and understood but welcomed and respected.

Equally, at the other end of the spectrum, Oxfam was always an organisation that could knock on doors at the highest levels of society, be that in London, Geneva or Washington and be it Government doors, those of the International Monetary Fund or the World Bank, or those of academia and the offices of the most respected economists in the world. Oxfam remains an organisation that is listened to and understood.

I make that point to show that behind the “Our Economy” report is an enormous experience of community engagement and economic understanding, and a great deal of experience of using powerful tools to engage with communities and to get from them their experience and turn that into a policy agenda that can make a real difference to their lives. It is exactly that kind of approach that Oxfam has taken in Scotland in order to produce its report.

Another point about that kind of work undertaken by Oxfam is that it is successful. I think that many people see agencies such as Oxfam as living in a world of permanent despair in which nothing ever gets better and it responds to ever-worsening crises, but that is not true. Over time, many of the communities with which organisations such as Oxfam work do find ways to strengthen themselves and create sustainability. I remember almost 25 years ago visiting communities facing problems in Chile, which was just emerging from the Pinochet years and the austerity programme that had been imposed on it. Those communities used the tools and possibilities presented to them and succeeded in moving forward.

The Oxfam report is one that we should listen to. It has come at the right time because we have seen in recent weeks many supposed signs of recovery—for example, slightly better employment figures and some economic growth—but those of us who are prepared to look behind the headlines see that many of the jobs that have been created have zero-hours contracts and are part time and temporary; they do not provide the kind of security and confidence that people need to be able to go on and build a stable family life. Many of those jobs pay poverty wages that are less than the living wage. Today, we have seen a report from the Resolution Foundation that shows that the proportion of the workforce in Scotland being paid less than the living wage is increasing, not falling.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I am afraid that you must conclude.

Iain Gray: There are many challenges in the Oxfam report for many sectors of society, but the challenge for us is not tonight but next week when our budget comes forward; the challenge is to take on board the report’s lessons and challenges and respond to them as the budget works its way through the Parliament.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you. Before I call Mary Scanlon, can I make another plea? If members’ speeches take four minutes or more, I will not be able to call everybody who wants to speak in the debate.

17:44

Mary Scanlon (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I, too, thank John Wilson for securing the debate. The Oxfam report is indeed wide ranging and it is difficult to do justice to it in a short speech. I congratulate Oxfam on its 50th anniversary in Scotland.

As an economist, I would like to see more research and robust data on the recommendation that communities be given greater control over how regeneration happens in local areas. On page 7 of the report, it is recommended that more land and assets be community owned and managed. We need all the information that we can get on how communities could benefit in terms of addressing poverty and reducing inequalities. My party and I are very much in favour of community-owned land and assets. They exist widely across the Highlands and I am very aware of them, but I am not aware of the research. Highlands and Islands Enterprise’s brief includes the pursuit of social benefit as well as economic regeneration, and it would be helpful to have information on that as well.

The recommendations on page 29 of the report include:

“Tax havens, offshore earnings and loopholes which allow avoidance should be pursued and closed.”

I am pleased to say that the United Kingdom Government has called for tax loopholes to be closed and for companies to pay their fair share. In July, David Cameron called on world leaders to get behind a global crackdown on tax avoidance and

“break down the walls of corporate secrecy”.

The United Kingdom Government has also branded aggressive tax avoidance, which is mentioned in the report, unacceptable, and in June it brokered an agreement with the UK’s overseas territories and Crown dependencies to sign up to a tax evasion clampdown. I am sure that that is welcomed throughout the chamber.

The increase in the personal allowance to £10,000, which will also take thousands more Scots out of taxation, is welcome. Personally, I hope that the threshold of earnings before liability for tax will continue to rise in future years to ensure that there is higher disposable income, particularly for the lower paid.

The first paragraph of the report states:

“the reality for many Scots is a cocktail of high mortality, economic inactivity, mental and physical ill-health, poor educational attainment, and exclusion from the decisions that affect them.”

I am particularly drawn to mental health issues. I remind colleagues that, in Scotland, 43 per cent of people who are on benefits have a mental health problem. Although we can debate—and we do—the rights and wrongs of welfare benefits, we should not lose sight of the thousands of people who live in poverty, and many in isolation, who need and deserve better diagnosis, care, support and treatment.

Finally, I have been pleased to participate in the national performance framework discussion forum, chaired by John Swinney, which is looking at the issue. It does indeed have cross-party support.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Jean Urquhart, who has to leave—

Ken Macintosh (Eastwood) (Lab): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. Would it be in order for me to move a motion to amend standing orders to allow all members who wish to participate in the debate the time to do so?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: There is provision for that and I will come to it later but, even so, we are quite short of time.

I call Jean Urquhart, who has indicated that she has to leave the chamber for pressing business.

17:47

Jean Urquhart (Highlands and Islands) (Ind): Thank you for your consideration, Presiding Officer.

I, too, congratulate John Wilson on securing this important debate. I am pleased to have the opportunity to speak in favour of the motion and to speak on Oxfam's important efforts to explore the means by which we can remove the economic barriers to social justice in Scotland. I wish in particular to add my support for the humankind index, which is detailed in Oxfam's "Our Economy" report, and for the community-led approach that is designed to empower poorer communities with the means to transform their local economies for the better.

For too many people in Scotland, work is no longer a route to a better life; some 40 per cent of

those who live in poverty are in work. Put simply, that is because there is an emphasis in the UK economy on wealth creation over the development of adequate mechanisms to distribute wealth fairly. The work of non-governmental organisations such as Oxfam is critical in providing research on how we can address the issue.

As members know, Oxfam's humankind index is designed to move away from gross domestic product as a measure of human wellbeing. In the 30 years preceding the financial crash in 2008, Scotland averaged GDP growth of 2 per cent a year, but a quarter to a third of Scots continued to live in poverty. That indicates that an alternative is not only required, but is urgently required. Oxfam's humankind index, which is based on widespread consultation, offers that alternative. It measures human wellbeing on issues that matter to people—health, housing, a good local environment and reasonably satisfying work. From the economy, people want suitable quality employment and security of income. All those issues are important to people because they allow us all to live happier and more secure lives.

We must endeavour to ensure that we pay great attention to the issues that have been highlighted by the humankind index and that we do all that we can to foster the new prosperity that is detailed in "Our Economy". It is really important to note that the extensive research shows that having money is not a priority; therefore it makes no sense to base all our economic policies on GDP.

I also lend my support to the report's assertion that state agencies such as Scottish Enterprise must be governed by a socioeconomic duty and should replicate the Highlands and Islands Enterprise brief in order to pursue social and community development in every region.

Across Scotland, only 22 per cent of people feel that they can influence decisions in their areas, therefore regeneration needs to be genuinely community-led and we must not rely simply on public and private sector partnerships. That means that, as policy makers, we have a key role in helping communities to shape their local economies and environments, and we have to have the activities and policies that are needed to fulfil the demand for good jobs and a living wage, thus ensuring stable communities in which folk can take pride.

Additionally, we must empower communities with the mechanisms to challenge Government policies and private sector actions that fail to take into account their socioeconomic and equality requirements. Although I support Oxfam's assertion that delivery of the Scottish National Party's manifesto pledge to recreate the Scottish land fund would benefit from a focus on providing adequate support to ensure that poorer

communities can benefit, I encourage Oxfam to conduct a similarly informed study of all aspects of land reform, which I believe is so relevant to the wealth and wellbeing of the nation.

The recommendations in “Our Economy” appeal to the social democratic nature of Scottish politics and society. We must not only support those recommendations, but act on them to give our communities the mechanisms that they need in order to design local economies that are based on the needs of local industry and people, as well as on the principles of economic and social equality.

For me, the most interesting thing about Oxfam’s report is the list of priorities that came from the people whom we talk about as being somehow “other” because they are in poverty. Surely we can listen to those priorities now and take heed of the report.

17:52

James Dornan (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP): I thank John Wilson for securing the debate on Oxfam Scotland’s “Our Economy” report, and I wish a happy 50th birthday to Oxfam Scotland. As this important report says,

“Poverty is unjust and unacceptable”

and

“there is nothing inevitable about Scotland’s level of poverty”

particularly in the west of Scotland where, as has been noted by the World Health Organization, there is a 28-year gap in life expectancy around the Glasgow area. That is a frank manifestation of the poverty that blights areas of my home city.

Oxfam’s report is clear in its belief that the quest for economic growth above all else is the main reason why the rich are vastly richer than the poor. Oxfam suggests that the theory of trickle-down economics has proved to be useless, and that creating wealth without adequate ways of redistributing it leaves the rich to get richer with no positive impact on the poor.

In looking to combat that, Oxfam has developed the humankind index to assess Scotland’s prosperity in better terms than just GDP. The report recommends that the Scottish Government embed the humankind index in impact assessments and policy discussions so that the social worth of a project is considered alongside its economic benefits. In many ways, that is already happening in Scotland. Internationally acclaimed Nobel prize winning economist Joseph Stiglitz has commended the Scottish Government’s efforts to develop better performance measures, and notes that Scotland is a world leader in having wellbeing as a policy

consideration. I have no doubt that there is a long way to go, but we have made a good start.

That was echoed in the Carnegie UK Trust’s report, “Shifting the Dial: From wellbeing measures to policy practice”, which also notes Scotland’s leading international role in considering wellbeing at policy level. It is therefore clear that the Scottish Government is committed to ensuring that people are at the heart of its policy decisions.

The report also raises justified concerns about the amount of in-work poverty, which has skyrocketed during the past decade. Of the 700,000 people in Scotland who are living in poverty, 120,000 are pensioners, 300,000 are out of work, and 280,000 are in work but do not make enough to pay for life’s essentials. Just yesterday, we heard about the soaring number of people who are having to use food banks. That is, in 21st century energy, people and resource-rich Scotland, a scandal.

In part, that occurs because the minimum wage is too low and does not pay even for a bare minimum standard of living. As Oxfam notes, that situation is being exacerbated by issues such as the bedroom tax and welfare reform, which it is clear have been pushed through by politicians who have little grasp of the challenges that are associated with their policies. That point was illustrated yesterday by my colleague Christina McKelvie, who quoted a response from Lord Freud saying that people with motor neurone disease could either take in a lodger or just work more hours in order to pay the rent shortfall that is due to money being taken off their housing benefit. It beggars belief, but it highlights the disconnect between some Westminster politicians and ordinary lives.

Oxfam Scotland recommends moving to the living wage as a replacement for the UK minimum wage, which is £2 per hour lower. The Scottish Government has done all that it can, within its powers, to address the issue of low pay. In 2012, the minimum Scottish Government wage was a living wage of £7.23 per hour, which compares with a minimum of £5.63 when it came to power in 2007. However, we must ensure that we do all that we can to continue to exert pressure for the minimum wage to be raised to a living wage. That would lift thousands of people out of poverty, cut the benefits bill and help to kick-start the economy.

At its heart, Oxfam Scotland’s call is for a transformative structural change that would embed Scotland’s economy as a servant of the people instead of its being the other way round. Clearly, key elements of that are that we have a truly progressive redistributive taxation system and that we actively challenge tax avoidance and evasion, which the report says cost Westminster

£120 billion a year—or 40 times the cost of benefit fraud.

Where the Scottish Government has had the power to introduce progressive taxes, such as the land and buildings transaction tax, it has been progressive. However, without proper tax varying and raising powers of our own, Scotland's ability to transform remains curtailed by Westminster. Oxfam says that its vision is not limited by the delineation between devolved and reserved powers, and that is how it should be—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Can you draw to a close, please?

James Dornan: Oxfam's blueprint is its aspiration for Scotland, period. I share that aspiration, but to me it is clear that only one Parliament will be able to use the blueprint to make a fairer, more just and more equal Scotland, and that is this Parliament, elected by the people of Scotland.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Due to the number of members who still wish to speak, I am minded to accept a motion under rule 8.14.3 to extend the debate.

Motion moved,

That, under Rule 8.14.3, the debate be extended by up to 30 minutes.—[*John Wilson.*]

Motion agreed to.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you. I still appeal for brevity in members' speeches.

17:57

Ken Macintosh (Eastwood) (Lab): I begin by extending not just the customary congratulations to John Wilson on securing today's debate, but my genuine thanks to him for his consistent and thoughtful contributions on tackling poverty and developing an alternative economic agenda here in Scotland.

Oxfam's "Our Economy" report makes a powerful case for challenging the existing economic model. Oxfam is just one of several organisations that are helping to shape a new and more socially just approach in this country. From the Scottish Trades Union Congress to the Church of Scotland, and from the New Economics Foundation to Joseph Stiglitz and the authors of "The Spirit Level", there is recognition—a plea even—that surely we should not and cannot, following a banking collapse and five years of recession, allow ourselves to return to the old ways.

Members may have heard me say it before, but little irks me more than thinking that our fiscal and economic policy is more influenced by the opinion of the credit-rating agencies, such as Standard &

Poor's or Moody's, than it is by the level of unemployment in this country. The very people who gave AAA status to the derivatives and the sub-prime mortgages that sparked off the whole catastrophe now have the nerve to tell us whether we are spending or borrowing too much. I am not looking for retribution, but Will Hutton has highlighted the irony that not one of the bankers or financiers who have cost the people of this country billions of pounds has gone to prison for the offences, whereas tens, if not hundreds, of people who chose to voice their protest through the "occupy" movement have ended up spending time in the cells.

The Oxfam report lays out some of the political choices that lie before us if we truly want to tackle poverty and inequality, and to promote genuine opportunity and fairness for all, but none of us should underestimate the difficulty of the challenge that is before us. Unaccountable, unregulated and untrammelled capitalism may have failed this country and may have cost many people their jobs and others their pensions, but to challenge not so much the economic orthodoxy as the hugely powerful vested financial interests that hold sway in this country and across global financial markets is very difficult indeed.

As Jean Urquhart mentioned, if we just think about moving away from our common use of GDP as a measure of economic success, we can see the extent of the challenge. John Swinney has made progress in establishing the national performance framework as a set of indicators that come far closer to genuine prosperity and to focusing on our sense of wellbeing, but how many budget decisions are actually influenced by the NPF?

I am proud of Labour's achievements in office, and I am particularly proud of our efforts in tackling poverty and reducing child poverty. However, although we grew the economy, reduced unemployment and made people wealthier, perhaps—as Mr Harvie said in the earlier debate—that economic prosperity did not make as much of a difference in tackling inequality as we thought and hoped that it would. Now, as we live through the economic crisis, we need to rethink how we do things and create a new way that will enable the benefits of growth to be felt by the many, and not just by the few at the top.

There is a great deal in the Oxfam report that I would like to echo, but I will restrict myself to a couple of points. I have already referred to the Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Employment and Sustainable Growth's national performance framework, which is a definite step in the right direction. John Wilson's motion refers to wage differentials, and I particularly welcome that section of the report. Through its procurement bill,

the Scottish Government could target support for companies that make a conscious effort to narrow pay differentials between the boardroom and the shop floor.

If a lack of accountability is one of the key weaknesses in our economy—if we believe that decisions around financial investment, for example, are driven more by the needs of shareholders than by those of stakeholders—different forms of ownership surely offer one way of addressing that problem. Community ownership is singled out by Oxfam, and it is an area in relation to which the Scottish Government has extensive powers. I urge the minister to use those powers, and I commend the motion in the name of John Wilson.

18:01

Chic Brodie (South Scotland) (SNP): I, too, commend Oxfam on its report and thank John Wilson for affording us the opportunity to have this debate.

“Alienation ... is the cry of men who feel themselves victims of blind economic forces beyond their control ... The feeling of despair and hopelessness that pervades people who feel, with justification, that they have no real say in shaping or determining their own destinies ... Society and its pervading sense of values leads to another form of alienation. It alienates some from humanity.”

That is a quote from Jimmy Reid's rat-race speech. I fought Jimmy Reid in an election and spent some time with him, and I know that those are not just words—he actually believed and felt them.

Mention was made of Joseph Stiglitz, who recently gave evidence to the Economy, Energy and Tourism Committee. He warned strongly that the gap between rich and poor in the UK was not sustainable and that the UK was in a particularly parlous position, which will ultimately lead to social tensions that we could only ever have imagined in our worst nightmares.

The point has been made about what happened with the banks. Earlier today, I highlighted the fact that this year's bank bonuses—which were delayed for a month for tax purposes—come to £75.1 billion, which is two and a half times what the Scottish Government gets to run the country each year. Some 5 per cent of the UK population owns more than 85 per cent of the wealth. Oxfam has pointed out that the better-off are 273 times better off than the most deprived. Of course, a fundamental change to the structure is needed in terms of Westminster's relationship with the banks. I commend the recommendations in the Oxfam report.

It is a nonsense that an income-rich country such as Scotland has the level of poverty that it

does. We have tremendous assets, not just in oil and gas and renewables but in food and drink and tourism and in the inherent capabilities of our people. It is a nonsense that unemployment is as high as it is and that we have underemployment and zero-hours contracts. The living wage is a palliative. We need to get to a high-wage, high-productivity economy—against a background in which the economic position of the banks to support a new housing bubble makes one deeply concerned.

The cabinet secretary has said that the Government will consider Oxfam's recommendations, including its proposal for a poverty commission or tsar. I understand the rationale behind that call, but I am not sure that I agree with having a poverty tsar—I think that we should all be poverty tsars and highlight what that means. In my case, because of my interests, that will involve social enterprise, which will unleash economic opportunity and draw on social contribution. I would contrast the contribution of social enterprises and of communities to that of the banks. The standards of social behaviour and the level of added value are clearly miles apart. In the same way, I contrast carers with payday lenders—the sharks who lie just underneath the surface of lending. Attention must be drawn to the social behaviour of carers and to the care that they provide.

I will also mention the issue of communities. Never mind the macroeconomic powers, how do we give power to the communities? I am a great believer in the principle that the land belongs to the people. That principle will allow us not only to manage local economies but to eradicate social evils such as the poverty that we currently experience.

18:05

Claudia Beamish (South Scotland) (Lab): I thank John Wilson for bringing to the chamber this members' debate on Oxfam's report “Our Economy: Towards a new prosperity” and for his analysis.

Leading to the report, Oxfam ran a series of seminars asking the question, “Whose economy?” Whose economy is it indeed, and whose Scotland? It certainly does not belong to those who work for less than the living wage, those who look out on an urban wasteland to which they have no access and that they cannot change or those who grapple with depression, which is often exacerbated by a lack of hope.

Oxfam also asks the question, “Whose regeneration?” and reminds us:

“Scotland's post-industrial decline has led to large pockets of deprivation. Yet often the response to this—a

consumerist model of regeneration premised on the trickle-down economics—hasn't worked."

Yesterday, I was delighted to attend part of an inspiring Nourish (Scotland) conference, which continues today, focusing on community involvement in the growing of, and access to, affordable, local, safe, organic food and the changes and infrastructure that are needed to help that to happen. That model stands in stark contrast to the dreadful present necessity of food banks in many of our communities.

Oxfam tells us:

"Across Scotland, only 22% of people feel they can influence decisions made in their local areas."

As a long-term community activist and, now, a member of the Co-operative group of MSPs, my contention is that one of the most important conclusions of the report is the need for our economy to move towards a more community-based, co-operative model.

I recently visited the Mull of Galloway on the southernmost tip of Scotland, which stands as an example of what a community can achieve. There are many more examples of collective action and community ownership, but there are also many examples of communities, families and individuals that are excluded, are left behind and justifiably feel abandoned. That must change, and I suggest that we must be the catalyst for that change.

The change must be measured in a way that the people of Scotland understand. The national performance framework is becoming recognised as a valuable tool to identify key indicators to allow us to measure how well we are doing on issues that really matter to the people of Scotland. John Swinney has hosted a series of round-table meetings with MSPs from across the parties, of whom I am one, and a range of stakeholders. However, the NPF will not become a mainstream means of judging how we are doing unless it involves communities and is seen to drive policy.

Scotland's Futures Forum should be congratulated on hosting a series of seminars on rethinking wellbeing. We must have a Scotland-wide measure of wellbeing that is reported in parallel with GDP. The complexities of how that measure should be modelled are a challenge that must not allow any more prevarication. It is significant that the Scottish Universities Insight Institute, in partnership with the forum, the Carnegie UK Trust, Scottish Enterprise and the Scottish Government, is

"inviting expressions of interest to take part in a multidisciplinary, knowledge sharing enquiry to better understand, measure and promote the well being of individuals and society as a whole."

The debate highlights the existence of a critical mass of determination to act. It comes from

communities, a wide range of NGOs, economists, academics and across the political parties in the Parliament. There is determination to work towards a Scotland that is prosperous and flourishing for all.

In this context, Scotland can perhaps be seen as a plant. Every gardener knows that, for a plant to flourish, it is not possible to nurture part of it and ignore the rest.

18:08

Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): I add my thanks and congratulations to John Wilson for bringing the motion to the Parliament.

Although it is not a registrable interest, I make it clear that I was a member of the steering group for Oxfam's humankind index. I was very happy to have the opportunity to get involved in that work because, for the Green movement, replacing GDP and developing alternatives that make a more holistic measurement of economic success is not only a key argument but, in many ways, a founding one. I am very glad to see both interest in that concept growing and the contribution that Oxfam has made.

Everlasting economic growth on a single planet with finite resources is not possible. The faster we come up against the limits to growth and the harder we strain against them, the more the pursuit of everlasting economic growth will harm not just people but the ecological systems that we depend on for our very survival. Throughout all the years of economic growth that the UK experienced before the current recession, inequality increased, ecological harm increased and the proportion of wealth generated in the economy that was hoarded by a tiny minority of very rich individuals and businesses increased year after year.

In the limited time that is available to me, the one argument that I will highlight from the report concerns closing the labour market divide. The inequality between rich and poor cannot be addressed simply by the living wage, although I believe strongly in providing a living wage. That inequality cannot be addressed through generous welfare provision for those who are out of work, although I believe strongly in that. The gap between rich and poor cannot be addressed by looking at only one side of the equation; it must also be addressed by looking at the hoarding of vast amounts of our country's wealth by a tiny handful of corporate and individual hoarders.

We should act right now on the argument about linking earnings equality to state support—the fourth bullet point in the labour market divide section of the report's executive summary. We could do that in the public sector. Our water company is publicly owned, yet its chief executive

is one of the highest-paid people in the public sector. Nobody needs to be paid a third of a million pounds a year, and certainly not from taxpayers' money. The same is true of our railway. It is not a publicly owned company, but we pay for it. We should not expect such a level of wage inequality in the delivery of public services.

We could go further and attach conditions on wage inequalities to the support—the corporate welfare—that we provide through Government grants and support services for the business community. We should not just argue for a living wage at the bottom but give a lead on closing the gap and on lower wage ratios throughout our economy. We could act on that with the full powers of independence, but we could begin now with the powers that the Scottish Parliament has today.

18:12

Adam Ingram (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP): I congratulate my colleague John Wilson on securing this debate on Oxfam's report "Our Economy: Towards a new prosperity". The subject is fundamental to understanding the current state of our economy and society and what we as policy makers need to do to create the sustainable and socially just Scotland that most of us seek. It is clear from the report that maintaining the status quo and continuing to accept the dominant political and economic orthodoxy that has been promulgated and promoted by the City of London and successive Westminster Governments will lead us in the opposite direction, on a rising tide of inequality and poverty amid plenty.

The prevalence of food banks, payday loan shops and zero-hours contracts is all a symptom of a sick and dysfunctional society and economy. The financialisation of our economy and the credit-fuelled consumerism that it encourages have yet to be tackled effectively. Financial austerity seems to be focused entirely in the wrong areas—on the low paid and the disabled—while the rich get richer and while the bankers with their bonuses and the global companies that pay their workers bonuses manage to avoid paying their taxes.

We need to restore finance to its proper role as a way of sustaining industry and prioritising financial security for individuals, and not as a speculative means of profit maximisation. Of course, we need to develop a wider industrial base that provides good-quality and rewarding jobs. We are far too dependent on industries that offer only low-paid, unskilled and unrewarding jobs. Our people deserve better.

That commonweal-type vision for economic and social development dovetails neatly with the

conclusions and recommendations of the Oxfam report. Of course, policies such as regenerating the local area by developing the community's asset base could be delivered under current constitutional arrangements, but to my mind the likelihood of that happening is vanishingly small. Independence is much more likely to liberate us from the London-dominated political orthodoxy that has led us to the current miserable pass. Next year's vote will be vital if we are to make progress in the area.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Margaret Burgess to respond to the debate.

18:15

The Minister for Housing and Welfare (Margaret Burgess): I congratulate John Wilson on securing the debate, because I welcome every opportunity that the Parliament has to make its voice heard on tackling poverty and inequality in Scotland. The Oxfam report outlines how crucial tackling poverty and inequality is to achieving our vision of a successful Scotland

"with opportunities for all ... to flourish",

as set out in the Scottish Government's purpose. I absolutely agree with the report's focus on helping the poorest in society. That is why tackling poverty and inequality is a central priority for the Scottish Government.

We are taking a long-term, preventative approach to tackling the key drivers of poverty. That includes the actions that are set out in our child poverty strategy on maximising household resources and improving children's wellbeing and life chances. At a time when the UK Government's austerity programme is placing households under increasing financial pressure, as we have heard from many speakers today, we remain committed to greater equality and social justice. I think that everyone who has taken part in the debate absolutely agrees with that, and I recognise the real cross-party support for John Swinney's round-table meetings, which will reconvene to discuss the matter again.

As part of the contract between the people of Scotland and their Government, we are protecting household incomes through the social wage, free personal care, the abolition of tuition fees, the abolition of charges for prescriptions and eye examinations, and the council tax freeze. Those things all matter to families on low incomes and to those who are working and struggling to make ends meet. All the measures that we have taken are assisting those families.

I support the report's comments on the living wage. The Scottish Government is leading by example in protecting the pay of the lowest

earners for whom we have direct responsibility and in ensuring that all staff covered by public sector pay policy are paid the Scottish living wage. We are actively encouraging all public, private and third sector organisations to do likewise. We are doing that not just because we believe that it is the right thing to do for the benefit of everyone in Scotland, but because international evidence shows that countries that achieve greater equality also perform better in economic terms. Social justice leads to social cohesion, which is a building block of economic success.

As a Government, we care about the wellbeing of the people of Scotland, how people live their lives, how they want to live their lives, and their aspirations and hopes. That is why our economic strategy and national performance framework include cohesion and solidarity targets that are designed to increase equality and reduce the disparities between different sections of our society.

I also think that our approach to regeneration reflects the report's recommendations. We recognise the significance of local people identifying for themselves the issues and opportunities in their areas, deciding what to do about them and being responsible for delivering the economic, social and environmental actions that will make a real difference. We recognise that the changes required to make all communities sustainable will be achieved only when communities themselves play an active part in delivering change.

We have started from a strong position in Scotland, as there is already an impressive range of activity taking place throughout urban and rural communities, led by hundreds of committed local anchor organisations. They drive change across a broad spectrum that includes addressing environmental issues; promoting local economic growth; tackling unemployment; supporting vulnerable people; challenging health inequalities; and enabling arts and cultural activity. Crucially, they deliver things that local people know will make a difference.

During the recess, I visited a number of community anchor organisations throughout Scotland and saw what they were doing for the people and how they worked together to make a real difference for their communities. That is the kind of work that we all want to see.

Recently, the Scottish Government set up its people and communities fund, which aims to help a wide range of community anchor organisations to deliver outcomes that meet and respond to the needs and aspirations of local communities. It is important that we have organisations that focus on up-skilling, because people's capability to move things forward varies among communities. We

need to ensure that everyone gets those opportunities and chances.

Mary Scanlon: I, along with Claudia Beamish, sit on the national performance framework group, which is chaired by John Swinney. I thank the minister for recognising the cross-party support for that.

Will the minister welcome the fact that, in 2010, the Westminster Government launched the measuring national wellbeing programme; increased the personal tax allowance so that people can earn £10,000 before paying tax; and introduced measures to address tax avoidance? Does she agree that we could do more by making mental health a bigger priority in our health service?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Minister, I will give you your time back.

Margaret Burgess: Okay.

We could do a lot more if we had more powers to do it. Mary Scanlon mentioned the tax uplift, but unfortunately the UK Government has, by its other actions, taken that away from people.

Mary Scanlon: Health is devolved.

Margaret Burgess: I am sorry—I did not answer Mary Scanlon's point about health. Yes, health is devolved, and the Scottish Government has a mental health strategy. It takes mental health very seriously and recognises the challenges that many people with mental health issues face, which is why we have that strategy in place.

This Government is ambitious for Scotland's communities, which is why we are introducing a community empowerment and renewal bill that will strengthen community planning, simplify the operation of the community right to buy and make it easier for communities to buy public sector land and buildings.

However, despite our efforts, our social policies continue to be undermined by the UK Government's welfare reforms, which have been discussed a great deal today. Over the five years to 2015, Scotland will see £4.5 billion taken from hard workers on low incomes, families, those with a disability, social housing tenants and people in the most vulnerable circumstances. Those are precisely the people whom society should be helping, not harming, and protecting, not pillaging.

For our part, we are doing what we can to mitigate some of the worst impacts. Through the council tax benefit successor funding arrangement, we are providing, with our partners in local government, an extra £40 million to protect people from the UK Government's 10 per cent cut. If we had not done that, the most vulnerable

people in Scotland would pay an increased amount of council tax when others did not, which is simply not acceptable.

Meeting closed at 18:24.

Members will not be surprised to hear me say that extending the achievements of this Parliament around fairness and equality would be best served by independence. Independence would give us the powers that we need to build a fairer and more prosperous Scotland and ensure that the key decisions about what we want from our society and about Scotland's future are made by the people who live and work in Scotland.

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