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Official Report

MEETING OF THE PARLIAMENT

Tuesday 4 March 2014

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Scottish Parliament

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

Time for Reflection

The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick): Good afternoon. The first item of business this afternoon is time for reflection. Our leader today is Mary McDevitt, the leader of the Edinburgh signing choir. She is accompanied by Louise Holden, who will be signing.

Mary McDevitt (Edinburgh Signing Choir): Presiding Officer, members of Parliament, thank you for your invitation to address you today. It is an honour to be here to reflect on the work of the Edinburgh signing choir.

Some of you may be unaware that there actually exists a world within a world. There is the deaf world and the hearing world. Working as a British Sign Language interpreter, I am often a bridge between those two worlds. The choir also acts as a bridge, connecting the wonderful world of language through music with the beautiful world of language through sign.

For many, the concept of a deaf choir seems strange and they wonder how deaf people can “sing”. I am often asked how it is done, so let me explain. We have around a dozen deaf choir members and we get together and discuss the lyrics of the music, delving into the meaning of the words and deciding on the sign vocabulary best suited. The movement of the sign is then matched to the tone and mood of the music.

For example, a well-known piece that we often perform is “How Great Thou Art”. We looked at the word “great” in English, discussed its meaning, then chose the sign that I am showing you. The sign also indicates “amazing”, “awesome”, and “wonderful” in English. Therefore a deaf audience seeing the sign would get far more meaning from it than a hearing audience would by simply hearing the word “great”. The choir compensates for that by doing what I have just done with you today and explaining the meaning of some signs ahead of time, so that the audience can look out for them. In that way, everyone, whether deaf or hearing, can share the experience.

People have often commented that it has been very emotional to experience music not only with their ears but with their eyes, too; a bombardment of those senses gives them a fresh understanding of often familiar pieces of music.

We have been invited to many places, and I will name a few. We performed on stage with a hearing choir at the Paralympic Flame festival at Meadowbank, and we performed at the Glasgow Royal concert hall, where 2,500 audience members joined in after we taught them a short piece. There was also HM Prison Cornton Vale, where we were humbled to see some women wipe away tears from their eyes. Those are unforgettable experiences of bridges built. Perhaps one day we will be invited here—you never know—but addressing you today has been an absolute pleasure and a privilege. Thank you.

The Presiding Officer: Members will be pleased to know that that brazen attempt to elicit an invitation has been successful and I have invited the choir to join us at the Christmas carol concert in December. [*Applause.*]

Topical Question Time

Glasgow Airport Strategic Transport Network Study

14:05

1. Mark Griffin (Central Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government when the Glasgow airport strategic transport network study will be published. (S4T-00612)

The Minister for Transport and Veterans (Keith Brown): We expect the report, which was commissioned by Glasgow Airport Ltd, to be available after 12 March this year.

Mark Griffin: It is a number of months since several press outlets reported on the initial proposals from the study, but we still await the outcome, despite the minister selectively briefing the press last week. Can the minister confirm whether any of the options in the Glasgow airport strategic transport network study will require the purchase of any land to allow it to go ahead?

Keith Brown: First, there was no selective briefing. A statement was issued, which in part responded to calls from the Labour Party to have sight of the proposals as soon as possible. The consistent accusation that we have delayed the report does not seem to take account of the fact that the report was led by Glasgow Airport and not by the Scottish Government.

Among the options that are offered, improvements to bus services would not require any land take. It is perfectly possible that the option of a tram-train link would require land but, from the initial report, it seems that it is not likely to be the land associated with the previous Glasgow airport rail link project. That is exactly why I have asked officials to look into the matter further and come back with more detail on that proposal.

Mark Griffin: The minister makes the point for me, which is that he is not sure which land—if any—is needed and where it is located. It seems bizarre that while a report, which was part-funded by the Scottish Government, was being done, the Scottish Government decided to sell off land at a massive loss of more than £8 million to the public purse, although the land could be needed to implement some of the report's recommendations. Why was the sale carried out when, as the minister has stated, the requirement for land in the future was uncertain?

Keith Brown: We made it clear during the course of the study that we did not intend to support a heavy rail option and we made it clear to all the partners that we would not fund a heavy rail option. Obviously, it was open to the partners

involved to bring forward an option that they wanted to fund or that the private sector could fund. That is why we proceeded with the disposal of land. In the process, we saved £179 million, which would have been the cost of GARL. It is quite right that we asked the partners involved and, in particular, the consultants, to look at the other possibilities.

The member said that I should really know which land it is proposed to take for the link. That is exactly the point of the study: to come up with proposals that it will be possible to take forward.

We are saying that we should look at the issue in more detail. That is exactly what Glasgow Airport, which led the study, asked of the consultants. We have been supportive of that approach and supportive of Glasgow Airport, just as Glasgow Airport has been supportive of our subsequent statements.

By working together with the consultants we can come forward with a conclusion on how viable a tram-train link would be. Of course, there are issues with that; this is not to say that we would support such a link. However, let us look at the possibilities and consider the one thing that the Labour Party seems to have forgotten about, which is what will benefit the people who want to get to and from Glasgow airport.

James Kelly (Rutherglen) (Lab): I find it extraordinary that while one section of Transport Scotland has been selling off land around Glasgow airport in relation to an airport link, another section is involved in discussions with a group that is considering rail links. It must be asked whether the minister is in control of his department or whether power has been passed to the Sir Humphrey Appleby unit at Transport Scotland.

Keith Brown: I think that we have heard all this before from James Kelly. I am not sure whether he regards the situation as extraordinary or astonishing—whatever word he wants to use from the range of adjectives.

We are moving forward from the position to which James Kelly referred. The Scottish Government has said, quite openly, "Let us listen to what the partners involved say." Let us listen to Renfrewshire Council, Glasgow City Council and, most important, the airport. Let us take an objective way forward, which everyone has agreed on, by using consultants to produce a report, led by Glasgow Airport, that genuinely seeks to find the best way forward. If members consider the recommendations of the report when it is published—it will be available on request from Glasgow Airport, which commissioned it—they will see that, notwithstanding that there is still a lot of detail to be gone into, the benefit-cost ratio for a

tram-train link is substantially better, indeed, something like three times better, than it would have been for a heavy rail link.

Let us open our minds to the possibilities rather than live in the past and make accusations that are nonsensical and not well founded. Let us genuinely try to consider what will benefit people who want to get to and from Glasgow airport, and what will help modal shift away from the private car and taxis, where possible. Let us try to go ahead together on that and see what we can achieve.

Local Government Finance Settlement 2015-16

2. Cameron Buchanan (Lothian) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government whether it has had any further discussion with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities on the local government finance settlement allocations for 2015-16. (S4T-00619)

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Employment and Sustainable Growth (John Swinney): I meet the COSLA leadership on a regular basis, and we discuss a range of matters. On 21 February, I wrote to all COSLA leaders setting out that I was minded to approve the proposal from the convention not to update the relevant indicators but considered that, in the interests of transparency, council leaders should be aware of the implications of such a course of action. Yesterday, I received the COSLA president's reply, in which he informed me that COSLA leaders have agreed collectively to reconsider their position at their meeting on 25 April, once they have had the opportunity to scrutinise the detailed calculations behind the two sets of figures. My officials are working with COSLA to provide all the relevant information that is required to enable that consideration to take place.

Cameron Buchanan: I thank the maestro for his reply. He is no doubt aware that Glasgow City Council is widely expected to quit COSLA later this week. Should that happen, fully a quarter of Scotland's population will potentially be represented by a local authority that is no longer affiliated to that organisation next year, as councils have to give a year's notice. On that basis, does the cabinet secretary believe that COSLA continues to legitimately negotiate on behalf of councils?

John Swinney: Membership of COSLA is a matter for individual councils to resolve. The Scottish Government remains committed to working in partnership with local government.

I understand that, under COSLA's rules, a local authority must give at least one year's notice of its intention to leave the organisation and that

membership is for each financial year, so the earliest that a council's departure can take effect is 1 April 2015.

I stress that these are matters for individual councils and that the Government's interest is in ensuring that we maintain a strong partnership relationship working with local government in Scotland.

Cameron Buchanan: Friday's votes at COSLA, when, I understand, its position was reaffirmed, seem to show a pretty farcical situation. Labour councils are being whipped to vote for a settlement that will see many lose money while the single biggest benefactor, Glasgow City Council, is preparing to leave. That is truly a triumph of politburo politics. Surely COSLA is losing its credibility, never mind its members. Can the cabinet secretary confirm what contingency plans are in place for negotiating future financial settlements with local authorities should COSLA fail? Can we have a detailed formal statement from the minister in the near future?

John Swinney: I stress that I consider these to be matters for local authorities to consider individually and collectively with other local authorities in COSLA. It is not for me to write COSLA's rules or be involved in its internal processes. What I am crystal clear about is that, since 2007, the Scottish Government has attached the strongest importance to working in partnership with local government in Scotland, and we intend to continue to do so.

Kevin Stewart (Aberdeen Central) (SNP): Can the cabinet secretary confirm that, by failing to vote for an update to the distribution formula, Aberdeen City Council's Labour leaders will cost the city an extra £7.5 million and that, instead of trying to pick nonsensical fights with Scottish Government ministers—whether there have been slips of the tongue or not—they should get on with getting the best deal to improve the delivery of front-line services for Aberdeen citizens?

John Swinney: Mr Stewart is absolutely correct to say that the difference between the flat-cash proposition that COSLA leaders supported several months ago and the application of the needs-based formula is around £7.5 million for the City of Aberdeen Council. Obviously, it is up to Aberdeen City Council to determine how it exercises its responsibilities in relation to those questions. However, I point out that it is not backwards in setting out to me its demands for increased money, so turning its back on resources is a rather strange conclusion to arrive at.

Mr Stewart referred to the news that has been percolating around in the past 24 hours that Aberdeen City Council somehow intended to exercise a ban on ministers. I understand, from

information that was shared with me as I came into the chamber, that that has now been described as a “slip of the tongue”—whatever that means. I do not think that that is a particularly mature and sensible way to go about exercising the business of a local authority. The Government intends to continue its open and forthcoming dialogue with all local authorities in Scotland such as I will have later today with certain local authorities to pursue the issues that matter to the people of our country.

Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab): I thank the cabinet secretary for that detailed reply. Does he accept that the heart of the challenge that COSLA and its members face is the underfunding of our council services through cuts to the resources budget and the underfunding of the council tax freeze? Does he share their view that, if councils had received the same percentage of the budget this year as they received in 2010-11, there would be an extra £600 million for that budget allocation? Does he think that it is acceptable to pit council against council rather than address the yawning gap between the costs of council services and the underfunded settlement that he proposes this year?

John Swinney: I would be grateful if, in the interests of cross-party understanding, Sarah Boyack would write to me to explain the calculation behind the figure of £600 million that she has just lodged in the parliamentary record. I am unable to work out how on earth that point can in any way be valid. Local authorities' share of the budget in 2010-11 was 31.3 per cent. On a like-for-like basis, its share is now 32.2 per cent. I am afraid that I cannot, for the life of me, understand how Sarah Boyack's proposition is valid. If she would do me the courtesy of explaining it to me, I would be interested to know its basis. *[John Swinney has corrected this contribution. See end of report.]*

I will give Sarah Boyack some other statistics. Between 2007-08 and 2012-13, the resources under the control of the Scottish Government increased by 6.4 per cent. Over the same period, local government's budget increased by 8.9 per cent. I ask Sarah Boyack and her colleagues, who voted for my budget for 2014-15, what the big claim was for local government because it was not a proposition that they advanced to me during the budget negotiations for 2014-15.

Sarah Boyack: We sorted out the bedroom tax.

The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick): Ms Boyack!

John Swinney: Nor has the Labour Party ever come to me, as the finance minister, in the parliamentary process to ask me to give more money to local government. If Sarah Boyack

would do me the courtesy of sending me an explanation of that figure of £600 million, I would be grateful.

Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD): As Cameron Buchanan made clear, Orkney Islands Council may be part of a dwindling band of councils that are not threatening to leave COSLA at this stage. However, as the cabinet secretary will be aware, there has been long-standing dissatisfaction with how the funding formula funds Orkney compared with how it funds the other island groups. I recognise the challenges in addressing that, but can he update the chamber on ways in which, perhaps working alongside his colleague the transport minister, he might find ways to inject funding into the likes of our internal ferry services in order to address our underfunding in comparison with the funding for Shetland and the Western Isles?

John Swinney: I am familiar with the issues that Mr McArthur raises, which have been advanced to the Government by Orkney Islands Council in a comparative assessment with Shetland and the Western Isles. As he knows, the funding formula takes into account a variety of indicators that assess such things as population, rurality and island status to produce the outcome with which we are all familiar. There is always space to consider the composition of those indicators, and we will respond constructively to any suggestions that are made to us in that respect.

I am familiar with the issues relating to the internal ferry services for Orkney. Over the term of this Administration, we have taken various steps to resolve some of the genuine challenges that Orkney Islands Council faces and I know that the transport minister will continue that dialogue with the council.

Linda Fabiani (East Kilbride) (SNP): Is the cabinet secretary aware that the Labour-Tory coalition in South Lanarkshire Council is also considering leaving COSLA, despite the fact that the COSLA position agreed by the cabinet secretary would allocate £3 million more than would be available on needs-based indicators? Does he agree that, in some cases, the discussion is about politicking on behalf of councils rather than about the needs and wellbeing of their areas?

John Swinney: The issue that has always been made clear to me by local government in Scotland during my term in office as finance minister is the necessity of ensuring that the relevant indicators of various assessment points of need were updated annually to ensure that we could reflect as closely as possible the needs of individuals within the resources available through local government funding. A different position was taken by the leaders of local government this year, and I

felt that, in the interests of ensuring that there was transparency around the decision making—as I was going to undertake the assessment and Parliament would have been surprised if I did not, and as the information could have been made public on any occasion—I should make that information available to inform the deliberations of local government. I await local government's determination on the issues that I have raised as part of that process.

Alex Rowley (Cowdenbeath) (Lab): Can the cabinet secretary confirm that, among the winners and losers from the distribution formula, Fife Council will be a loser? More important, can he confirm that, regardless of the formula, councils across Scotland face difficult times and will have to cut budgets if they are to balance their books and continue to meet the demands placed on them over the next number of years?

John Swinney: I can confirm Mr Rowley's factual point. If the needs-based formula is applied rather than the roll-forward of the 2014-15 budget settlement, Fife Council's revenue funding budget will be £2.453 million lower than if the formula had been rolled forward.

Mr Rowley's second point relates to the funding position of local government in Scotland. I cannot agree with his view of the nature of the settlement that the Scottish Government has put forward. If local government's budget has been rising at a faster rate than the resources under the control of the Scottish Government, that tells me that, in a tight financial environment—which we are all living in, given the public finance constraints that are being applied by the United Kingdom Government—local government has been treated sympathetically compared with authorities in other parts of these islands. Indeed, the week before last, I met the president of the Local Government Association of England, who spoke in complimentary terms about how financially supportive the Scottish Government had been to local government in Scotland compared with the swingeing reductions in budgets that have been experienced south of the border.

Of course there are public spending constraints. Mr Rowley wrestled with them during his term in office as leader of Fife Council. I have been wrestling with them, but the decisions of this Administration have given much greater preference to local government in Scotland than has been given to local government in other parts of the country, and I can see that reflected in some of the approaches and decisions that have been taken in the design of public services.

The last point that I would make in answer to Mr Rowley is that there is a need for us to reconfigure and restructure the services that are delivered by local authorities in partnership with other public

bodies—principally the health service—and that is why integration of health and social care is so important a priority for the Government. I look forward to constructive discussions to ensure that we use the resources at our disposal in the most effective way to deliver the best outcomes for the people of our country.

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

Now that it seems as if he might be welcome back in Aberdeen, will the minister take the opportunity to review his previous commitment to meet the funding floor of 85 per cent of the average funding for local authorities in Scotland, which is worth £20 million to Aberdeen?

John Swinney: The Government has fulfilled its commitment to provide the 85 per cent floor to local authorities in Scotland. That was put into the settlement, and I remind Mr Rennie that that provision was put in place by this Scottish National Party Administration and was never put in place by any Administration of which he was a supporter.

Responding to Welfare Reform

14:24

The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick): The next item of business is a debate on motion S4M-09209, in the name of Margaret Burgess, on responding to welfare reform. I call Margaret Burgess to speak to and move the motion. Minister—you have 14 minutes.

14:25

The Minister for Housing and Welfare (Margaret Burgess): I welcome the opportunity to open the debate and to put on the record the actions that the Scottish Government is taking to mitigate the impacts of welfare reform in Scotland. The reforms were introduced by the United Kingdom Government through—*[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: One moment, minister.

Thank you, Mr MacKay.

Margaret Burgess: The reforms were introduced by the UK Government through the Welfare Reform Act 2012 and through successive budget and spending review announcements. The fallout from the cuts and changes are becoming more evident and ever more worrying, and the sheer scale of the cuts is staggering. It is estimated that the reduction in welfare expenditure in Scotland could reach as much as £4.5 billion by 2015.

Although the roll-out of universal credit and personal independence payment has slowed down, a number of changes are affecting people right now. Analysis by the Scottish Government has shown that the reforms, including the toughening of the Westminster sanctions regime, will have a significant impact on women as well as on some of the most disadvantaged individuals, including lone parents, young people and people who have disabilities.

Willie Rennie (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD): Will the minister give way?

Margaret Burgess: I will give way shortly, but I want to make some progress.

I have on more than one occasion made our concerns about the reforms clear to UK ministers, and my colleague Angela Constance has made clear this Government's concerns about sanctions and has asked for an urgent review of practices. It is crystal clear that the current UK sanctions regime is neither ethical nor proportionate and that it has the potential to leave already vulnerable people at risk of poverty, which I raised with Lord Freud when I met him in January.

Willie Rennie: The minister mentioned the £4.5 billion reduction that she says has impacted on Scotland, but can she point to where in the independence white paper it says that that £4.5 billion will be restored upon independence?

Margaret Burgess: The white paper makes it very clear how we will deal with welfare in an independent Scotland. We will certainly not take any lessons from Willie Rennie and his party, which is in coalition with the Tories and has brought the welfare changes on the people of Scotland.

On sanctions, West Dunbartonshire Citizens Advice Bureau's recently published report gave testimonies from clients, including a person with type 1 diabetes who was sanctioned for four weeks and left with no food or hardship payment, with a severe risk of deteriorating health. More and more food banks have been set up to help the people who are most in need. Figures from the Trussell Trust show that more than 56,000 people in Scotland have used a food bank in the past 10 months.

However, even with all that, the United Kingdom Tory-Liberal Government talks about the moral case for welfare reform. What is evident is that more and more people are struggling to cope. The Welfare Reform Committee heard from people this morning about food banks. Denis Curran from Loaves & Fishes, speaking from the front line, told the committee that we do not need meetings to decide whether benefit cuts are the cause of the rise in the use of food banks, and that his seven-year-old grandson knows that to be the case. Such is the evidence that we are getting from the Trussell Trust and the evidence that was produced in the report "Overview of Food Aid Provision in Scotland", which we commissioned from Heriot-Watt University. I personally handed Lord Freud a copy of that report when last I met him.

More and more people are struggling to cope. Where is the morality in that? It is shameful that in 21st century Scotland there are people in desperate straits because of the UK's relentlessly vindictive and unfair policies.

The Scottish Government recognises that reform is needed, that the system needs to be simplified and that work needs to pay, but a welfare system must provide the necessary support and security for those who are unable to work. I cannot repeat too often that the UK's welfare changes and cuts are not the answer, and neither are food banks, which must never become part of the welfare system.

The Westminster cuts are undermining Scotland's efforts to tackle poverty, reduce inequalities and deal with homelessness. I believe that there is a better way. With independence, we

can take control of the welfare system and reshape it to suit Scotland's needs and circumstances. In the meantime, this Scottish Government is taking direct action and is delivering real support to help people to deal with the cuts and changes to welfare provision. That includes investment of at least £258 million over the period 2013-14 to 2015-16 to mitigate the worst impacts of the reforms.

However, let us be clear: those resources are taken away from other areas. The money could have been used for other priorities. We could have invested more in health and education for our people, and in growing Scotland's economy. Instead, we are dealing with changes including the abolition of council tax benefit by the UK Government on 1 April last year. The UK Government also cut the budget for successor schemes by 10 per cent, and responsibility for assisting vulnerable individuals to meet their council tax liabilities was localised to Scotland.

Working with local government, we are providing an extra £40 million for 2013-14 to fill the funding gap and to create Scotland's national council tax reduction scheme to protect more than half a million vulnerable people. We will roll our commitment forward into next year; that joint commitment with local government will enable us to maintain that support for our most vulnerable households.

I ask members to contrast that national partnership approach to protecting the vulnerable with what is happening in England, where more than 300 local council tax support schemes are now in place. Some people have been protected in areas where the local authority has chosen to absorb the funding cut within its own budgets, but others, many of whom had not previously paid council tax, now have to pay up to 30 per cent of their council tax liability. In Scotland, for the average band D household, that would equate to £344 a year.

In April last year, we also put in place the Scottish welfare fund. We topped up the money that the Department for Work and Pensions passed on to us for local welfare provision by more than £9 million, and we have committed to maintain the fund at £33 million for 2014-2015 and 2015-2016. The Scottish welfare fund is based on the social fund, but is markedly different from it. Loans that people had to repay from their benefits are gone and have been replaced by grants that are provided locally.

The scheme that we have in place benefits from local delivery and offers the potential to address applicants' underlying needs by providing access to a broader range of services. It is a Scottish scheme that serves to demonstrate how the Scottish Government can deliver welfare to meet

Scotland's needs. The official statistics on the fund that were released on 11 February show just that. They confirm that, as well as local authorities making awards to more than 35,000 families in the fund's first six months, a third of applicants have been signposted, or referred, to other sources of help. That support is a key aim of the Scottish welfare fund, and one that will provide much-needed help in the longer term for the vulnerable people who have been hardest hit by the welfare reforms.

We are also providing £7 million in each of the three years from 2013-14 to support a range of mitigation activity, including information and advice. We have heard from a number of agencies about the increased demand for services and advice since the welfare reforms were introduced. We have been listening and helping. That includes our investment in a major advice services programme that is run by the Scottish Legal Aid Board, and funding for social landlords to help those who are affected by the iniquitous bedroom tax and other changes to housing benefit, along with further support to citizens advice bureaux.

Just a couple of weeks ago, John Swinney announced more help for people who are affected by the bedroom tax. Our 2014-15 budget will make available a total of £35 million to social landlords towards the estimated £50 million that is needed to mitigate the tax's effects. As a result, no one need face eviction because of that disgraceful UK measure.

However, it is worth being clear about what that means. We have not abolished the bedroom tax in Scotland, because the Scottish Parliament cannot abolish it. We must make it clear that people are still liable for payment of the bedroom tax. All that we are doing is mitigating its worst impacts and helping local authorities to deal with that.

It is clear that more and more people are experiencing financial hardship. I am sure that members across the chamber see that in their surgeries daily. We read about it in reports from front-line agencies that tell us about the struggle of many people to keep their heads above water, the struggle to pay rent or mortgages and, in an increasing number of cases, the struggle to pay for heating and to put food on the table.

That is why tackling poverty is a key priority for the Government. Our focus is on maximising household resources and improving children's wellbeing and life chances, as part of our preventative approach to tackling the long-term drivers of poverty. We are making progress, which can be seen in the report that the Joseph Rowntree Foundation published last month. It showed that the child poverty rate fell by 10 percentage points in the 10 years to 2011-12. However, much more needs to be done. We

cannot ignore the estimate from the Institute for Fiscal Studies that 50,000 more children in Scotland could be forced into poverty by 2020.

We know, too, from the evidence that the welfare reforms are likely to have a negative impact on the health of many people who are affected. Stress, anxiety and depression are likely consequences for people who are hammered by the bedroom tax or other welfare reforms. Such people are often forced to move away from friends, family and social networks.

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP): Does the minister agree that the sanctions are particularly harsh and are stressful—she mentioned stress—for families? Their income is not just reduced slightly; it is taken away from them completely, often for no very good reason.

Margaret Burgess: I agree absolutely. The sanctions regime is incredibly severe and little thought is given to its impact not just on the individual but on their family. Sanctions affect not only the person who is sanctioned but their family. That is not right. The evidence is that many people who are sanctioned are not deliberately not complying with a DWP instruction; they often cannot comply or do not understand what they are being asked to do. I raised those issues with Lord Freud when I met him and I will follow them up with him. Stress and anxiety are outcomes from what is happening.

Mary Scanlon (Highlands and Islands) (Con): Does the minister accept that 43 per cent of people who are on benefits have an underlying mental health condition? If they were given support through our national health service, they might not need to be on benefits.

Margaret Burgess: I accept that many people who are on benefits have mental health conditions, but many have been forced into that by not getting the appropriate support from the DWP or work programmes to help them through that. It is not simply a case of blaming the NHS.

Flawed systems such as the work capability assessment—despite a number of reviews to improve it—place a great many people in difficult circumstances by telling sick and infirm people that they are fit to work, of which we have seen examples. Now we hear that Atos, which carries out the assessments for the DWP, is looking to end its contract.

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): The minister refers to Atos ending its contract with the DWP. Does she regret that the Scottish Government, in the guise of NHS Lanarkshire, entered into a contract with Atos to deliver work capability assessments?

Margaret Burgess: We should remember that the DWP sets the criteria for the assessments and decides whether a person can get benefits.

It is the UK Government that is failing to provide a system that properly supports people who cannot work or who need help to do it. It is the UK Government's policies and processes that are not working. They have been reviewed time after time, but they are not working.

Michael McMahon (Uddingston and Bellshill) (Lab): Will the minister give way?

Margaret Burgess: I am sorry, but I am in my last minute.

As I have outlined, the Scottish Government is taking positive action to help those who are affected, but we cannot mitigate every aspect of the UK Government's unfair and unjust reforms. With full control of our welfare system, we can take decisions that will ensure fair and decent support for people in Scotland. I believe that only a vote for independence can protect our citizens from the totality of the unfair UK Government reforms.

I move,

That the Parliament is concerned that the welfare cuts of the UK Government are a direct attack on the living standards of sick and disabled people, women, children and unemployed people; considers that far from being part of a "moral crusade", these cuts seek to punish vulnerable people in society; is concerned that the rollout of universal credit and personal independence payments has become a chaotic shambles and a waste of money and considers that the UK Government should call a halt to the rollout now, and recognises that the way to have a properly functioning and fair social security system in Scotland is to have social security run by the Scottish Parliament for the people of Scotland.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (John Scott): I call Jackie Baillie to speak to and move amendment S4M-09209.3.

14:40

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): I welcome the opportunity to participate in the debate and to highlight the impact of welfare reform in Scotland. At the outset, I say that I have no problem with reforming the welfare system, which was overly complicated and bureaucratic. I recall forms the size of a telephone book—or the size of the independence white paper—that had to be completed. However, the Conservative and Liberal Democrat Government's measures are not deserving of the name "reform" and are nothing more than a smokescreen for cuts.

I welcome the Scotland's outlook campaign, which was launched today, and which aims to raise awareness of the scale and impact of poverty in Scotland, which will be helpful. I hope

that it will expose the fact that, in 2010, the coalition Government announced public sector cuts of the order of £81 billion, including £18 billion of cuts to benefits, and that more cuts have followed.

Jamie Hepburn (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP): Will Jackie Baillie give way?

Jackie Baillie: I will not, so soon, thank you.

While all that has been happening, the richest people in our society continue to avoid paying £120 billion of taxes, and bankers continue to award themselves huge bonuses. In fact, the last time I looked, the Tories were running to Europe to protect bankers' bonuses. Talk about the wrong priorities. That demonstrates to anyone who is in any doubt that the burden of austerity has been placed squarely on the shoulders of those who are on the lowest incomes, and on the sick and the vulnerable.

The attack on the poorest people is coupled with a breathtaking level of incompetence. Implementation of universal credit has been delayed again and again, and the move from disability living allowance to personal independence payments has been roundly criticised by the National Audit Office, advice agencies and disabled people. The National Audit Office has also pointed to an increase in administration costs. The assessment fails to consider properly any disability other than physical disability—a fact that the High Court recognised in May last year. The waiting lists for assessment are growing exponentially. The backlog is so bad that tens of thousands of people have been waiting more than six months for assessment; consequently, there is now a delay in wider roll-out of the programme.

Jamie Hepburn: Will Jackie Baillie give way now?

Jackie Baillie: So discredited has the process become that even Atos is pulling out of carrying out the assessments for the UK Government and has indicated clearly that it is because of attacks on staff and the reputational damage that it has suffered. The helpful briefing from Inclusion Scotland states:

"the Work Capability Assessment is unfit for purpose regardless of who is contracted to carry it out."

I point out as gently as I can to the Scottish National Party the hypocrisy of its back benchers lodging motion after motion heaping condemnation on Atos, when we heard not a word when NHS Lanarkshire and Salus made a profit by helping Atos to deliver the very assessments that are so abhorred. That is another case of people saying one thing in public and another in private.

Jamie Hepburn: Will Jackie Baillie give way?

James Dornan (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP): Will the member give way?

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

Jackie Baillie: Oh! There are two more of them now.

I echo the cabinet secretary's comments. I am sorry. I have just promoted her. I mean, I echo the minister's comments about West Dunbartonshire Citizens Advice Bureau, which does a tremendous job in my constituency and has published a report on the effect of sanctions. We are witnessing increasing conditionality and an increasing level of sanctions. In fact, sanctions for jobseekers allowance are at the highest-ever recorded level, at twice the rate per month than was the case under the previous Labour Government.

A staggering 45 per cent of the people who receive sanctions in relation to employment support allowance have mental health problems or learning difficulties, despite the fact that such people make up only 30 per cent of ESA recipients. Tens of thousands of people have had sanctions wrongly applied and have been left destitute for a minimum of four weeks, although it could be as long as three years. Therefore, it is no wonder that the queues at food banks are getting even longer. The Tories are seeking to dismantle the safety net that is our welfare system, and to abandon those who are struggling most.

Jamie Hepburn: Will the member give way on that point?

Jackie Baillie: I regret the fact that the SNP motion is a missed opportunity to send a strong signal to the Tories about welfare. Had the SNP not tagged on its usual line about independence, we would have supported its motion. However, of course the SNP's central proposition these days is that constitutional change will somehow cure all ills. It is not the constitution that tackles poverty, that provides affordable warmth for pensioners or that will provide the best possible start in life for our children; it is political will and an absolute focus on what matters that deliver for our communities and our people. We demonstrated that in the early days of the Parliament. Because of our actions and determination, levels of absolute child poverty were slashed by more than 200,000.

Kevin Stewart: Will Jackie Baillie give way on that point?

Jackie Baillie: The level of reduction in Scotland was the greatest in the UK, which demonstrated that it is not about powers. I am happy to give way if Kevin Stewart can explain exactly why child poverty under the SNP has stagnated.

Kevin Stewart: In no part of the motion in the name of the minister is independence mentioned. It says that we should have

“a ... social security system ... run by the Scottish Parliament for the people of Scotland.”

Ms Baillie has given away what Labour's devolution commission will do.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you. That was not an intervention; it was a speech.

Jackie Baillie: I asked Kevin Stewart a question. The record will show that he failed to answer on why the SNP has made no improvements in the level of child poverty.

Kevin Stewart: I will answer that question if Ms Baillie will give way.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That is enough for the time being.

Jackie Baillie: I turn to the welfare system more generally.

I know that the First Minister is fond of quoting me, but I can say with all honesty that I rarely quote him. However, I will say that the question is not whether Scotland could run its own welfare system but whether it should, precisely because we currently share the risks and rewards among 60 million people throughout the UK rather than among 5 million in Scotland. [*Interruption.*] It might serve the SNP members well to listen, because Professor David Bell's report on social protection in Scotland made it clear that spending per head on social protection in 2010-11 was £3,972 compared with £3,658 for the UK as a whole. That is a difference of 8.6 per cent.

Scotland currently spends more per head on welfare. It has a higher share of pensioners and people on disability living allowance than the rest of the UK. We are no clearer about how the SNP would pay for any of that. It keeps telling us that it wants a Scandinavian-style welfare state, but with cuts to corporation tax. It only wants the taxation levels of Monaco.

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): Rubbish!

Jackie Baillie: The SNP cannot have it both ways. I agree that it is rubbish, because the SNP is not telling people the truth.

Christine Grahame: Rubbish!

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I advise members that we will have fewer—in fact, no—interventions from a sedentary position.

Jackie Baillie: Thank you, Presiding Officer. [*Interruption.*] I think that they failed to hear you.

I will touch first on pensions. They are a key part of the social security system and they account for

more than one third of our welfare spending. Scotland has proportionately more pensioners than the rest of the UK, and the number of Scots pensioners will increase by 80 per cent between 2010 and 2060, with the greatest increase coming in the next 25 years. That represents a welcome improvement in healthy life expectancy, but it poses a particular challenge when we think about the state pension.

In his report, David Bell said that if Scotland were to gain control over welfare benefits, it would need to raise its taxes to meet the costs of state pensions. John Swinney, in a leaked Cabinet paper, admitted as much. I ask the minister how much extra will be needed to fund state pensions and by how much taxes will need to rise to fund them? Those are basic questions that deserve answers. The SNP's series of largely uncostered promises in the white paper will not wash. Promises without any idea of how they will be paid for is nothing short of a wish list.

While we are on the subject, the SNP set up its own expert group on welfare to advise on the future shape of any welfare system. Its interim report was awaited with bated breath. What did it say? It said that we should continue to share benefits services with the rest of the UK and then agree, at some indeterminate date in the future, a set of shared services. Forgive me for asking, but is that not what we already have? Would it not be extremely difficult to share delivery if there were two very different systems north and south of the border? Does that signal that there would be no real change despite the SNP's rhetoric? All that is clouded in mystery. There is nothing of any real import in the white paper, and Nicola Sturgeon says that we would not get information on the welfare system until the 2016 Holyrood elections.

Kevin Stewart: Will Jackie Baillie give way?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: She is in her last minute.

Jackie Baillie: On the bedroom tax, there was quite clearly a year of Labour calling for the SNP to mitigate the impact of the bedroom tax. It took two petitions and a Labour member's bill to focus minds. We kept being told that there were no powers to do this, that we should not let Westminster off the hook and that only with separation would we get rid of the bedroom tax. So much for the empty rhetoric. It is just a pity that John Swinney's back benchers were not aware of the move, and kept arguing about obscure points of secondary legislation that, apparently, prevented the Government from taking any action.

We have the Scottish welfare fund. The Scottish Government controls the powers in relation to it and has the money to pay to people. By the minister's admission, it is going to be underspent.

What a scandal that is when the scale of need in our communities is self-evident.

People are struggling—

Stewart Maxwell (West Scotland) (SNP): They are struggling under the union. You are happy to keep it.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Order, Mr Maxwell.

Jackie Baillie: The attack on the welfare system by the Tories is unfair and unjust.

This is not about the constitution; it is about political will and concern for some of the poorest members of our society. The SNP could demonstrate both by using less rhetoric and taking more action.

I move amendment S4M-09209.3, to leave out from second “considers” to end and insert:

“notes that the number of children in poverty, which, under the last UK Labour administration, fell in Scotland by over 200,000, is forecast to rise by the end of the current parliamentary session, and further notes the findings of the Scottish Government’s Expert Working Group on Welfare, which concluded that the best way for benefits to be delivered in Scotland is through a system jointly administered with the rest of the UK.”

14:51

Alex Johnstone (North East Scotland) (Con): It is always nice to get my tin hat on and have a look over the welfare reform battlefield. In Scotland, there is a range of views on the matter, but some of those views are more frequently put than others. For that reason, I intend to take the opportunity to put my point of view in the six minutes that are available to me.

Welfare reform is vital for Scotland. There is a need for welfare reform in Scotland that is probably more pressing than it is in the rest of the United Kingdom. Scotland’s mistake of fostering dependency in many areas has not been good for the people who have been left dependent. As a result, a programme of welfare reform is essential. However, we have a difference of opinion about how that might be taken forward. I have an opinion that is different from that of Jackie Baillie. However, the problem in Scotland is that we have an SNP Government that seems to suggest that there should be no welfare reform at all.

The Scottish Government talks of cuts, yet anyone who looks at the budget will see quite clearly that there is no cut to the budget. In fact, in 2008, the welfare budget in Scotland was just over £12 billion and, in the financial year that is just coming to an end, the welfare budget was £14.5 billion. Further, in the two and a bit years that are to come, that figure will rise to £17 billion a year. At a meeting of the Welfare Reform Committee, I

put those figures to the minister and her officials and they were unable to deny them. Therefore, we are not talking about cuts in terms of money. The talk about cuts is simply a device to attack a Government that the Scottish Government does not like.

In Scotland, at the moment, there is a debate about independence, which has been mentioned by the two previous speakers. There is a desperate need in that debate for the SNP to outflank the Labour Party in its heartlands. The SNP seeks to achieve that by promising that, in an independent Scotland, there will be no welfare cuts—better still, there will be a vast increase in welfare, although when we ask what that increase will be, the SNP does not tell us. In fact, when it comes to the tax and budget implications of the promises that are being made to some of the most deprived people in Scotland, we hear no explanation of how any of them will ever be achieved. I challenge the Government at Holyrood to be more honest about the promises that it makes.

Of course, we must give some credit to the Scottish Government for what it has done. It has used the powers that have been devolved to it under the constitutional settlement that we have today to mitigate what it sees as some of the worst problems that are associated with welfare reform. That is what devolution is about. However, unless the Scottish Government answers the other questions it will not achieve the respectability that it might wish for.

Let us look at some of the key issues. We have had the whole hysteria about the bedroom tax—I use that phrase for the first time in this chamber. The problem with the bedroom tax hysteria is that we saw no effort to deal with the tens of thousands of people in Scotland today who are assessed as living in overcrowded conditions and are in need of rehousing. It seems that one priority was popular and the other was swept under the carpet.

While we are on the subject of underoccupancy, we must remember that it was a previous Labour Government that introduced that burden to those who rent and claim housing benefit in the private rented sector. There is no proposal to relieve that particular pressure.

Michael McMahon: Will the member take an intervention?

Alex Johnstone: I am afraid that I must go on. I am nearly out of time.

The last thing that I want to talk about is food banks. I express my respect for those who work hard to provide the service that food banks provide. I particularly enjoyed the opportunity to hear this morning, at the Welfare Reform

Committee, from those who are working to keep food banks active throughout Scotland.

The interesting thing that we heard in the dialogue today was a clear indication that when we get down to the nitty-gritty, it is not welfare reform that is fundamentally responsible for the need for food banks. When the witnesses were asked why people have less money and need to rely on food banks, we were told that it has got to do with the higher cost of food, fuel and transport.

We also heard at some length that the issue is about poor administration within the Department for Work and Pensions and the benefits system. It is about the introduction of sanctions—a programme that was introduced as early as 2008 and has simply been increased over recent times. By the way, I admit that there is a problem with sanctions and that we need to look at that.

However, the real message that we heard today is the very important one that the Scottish welfare fund—a fund that is devolved to the Scottish Government and run by our local authorities—is one of the most frequent referrers to food banks. That indicates that there are problems to be solved that this Government could address right now.

The committee heard the chairman of Loaves & Fishes, Denis Curran, who was mentioned by the minister, speak passionately about his situation and his experience. While he was very critical of the Conservative Government south of the border, he reserved his most vicious criticism for Scottish local government and the way in which it is maladministering the Scottish welfare fund; that fund is referring people to food banks, while at the same time it is often underspent. There is a lot more to be said in that area, but that opportunity will perhaps come next week.

I move amendment S4M-09209.2, to leave out from first “is concerned” to end and insert:

“recognises the vital importance of welfare reform and its particular relevance in Scotland; notes that welfare budgets continue to rise in response to need; deplores the actions of the Scottish Government in appearing to promise a radically more generous welfare system in a separate Scotland without setting out any detail of the tax and budgetary implications; further recognises the difficulties being experienced by the tens of thousands of Scottish households that have been assessed as overcrowded and in need of rehousing but have had their needs ignored in hysteria over housing benefit changes; draws attention to the fact that it was the previous Labour administration that implemented the policy whereby tens of thousands of housing benefit claimants in the private rented sector have to make up shortfalls in rent when their properties do not meet the housing benefit size criteria; praises the vital work of Scotland’s foodbanks, but deplores those who seek to turn them into a political tool at the expense of those who are in receipt of their invaluable support.”

14:58

Annabelle Ewing (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP): I am pleased to be called to speak in this important debate. As a member of the Parliament’s Welfare Reform Committee, I have had particular opportunity over the past few years to hear at first hand about the dreadful impact of the UK Government’s welfare reforms on, in particular, the sick and the disabled.

I will get to this morning’s meeting of the committee, which Mr Johnstone has not exactly represented in the way that I recall it happening. During a committee meeting on 18 February, we heard from witnesses who suffer from long-term conditions, being, in the instant case, one who had multiple sclerosis and one who had post-polio syndrome. Their description of their experience of the benefits system from start to finish and, in particular, the assessment process, was truly shocking.

The witnesses suggested, quite reasonably, that if a person has a chronic and progressive condition that will not get better, and that person cannot work again, common sense should prevail and they should not be put through the considerable stress and anxiety of the constant assessments and reassessments that the UK system entails. However, that is what is happening day and daily, with universally accepted medical orthodoxies being turned on their head in the Kafkaesque world that the DWP and the UK Government inhabit.

The work capability assessment tests somebody’s ability to move empty boxes around a room—who on earth knows for what purpose or for what job that would equip someone. The existence of mental health issues is to be determined in an interview simply through the assessment of someone’s physical demeanour. How on earth does that work? We have heard about people with motor neurone disease being told to take in a lodger to avoid the bedroom tax. What a disgrace and what an affront to common decency!

How lamentable and indeed risible it is that, according to a report in *The Daily Telegraph* on 23 January, the UK Tory welfare secretary, Iain Duncan Smith, sees himself as being on some kind of “historic mission” akin to that of William Wilberforce, no less, in helping people on benefits to “break free.” When I put that to Audrey Barnett, who suffers from MS, who appeared at the committee a couple of weeks ago, she replied:

“It would be nice if our health would let us be set free, but that is not going to happen. As I said, I would love for my illness to be cured so I could have my life back and not depend on benefits, but until my health sets me free Iain Duncan Smith certainly cannot.”

The other witness, Rosena McKeown, replied:

"What I want to say is unprintable."—[*Official Report, Welfare Reform Committee*, 18 February 2014; c 1271.]

This morning, the Welfare Reform Committee had a round-table evidence session with organisations that are involved in food bank provision. The evidence that clearly emerged is that there has been a more than 300 per cent increase in food bank provision in the past year alone. The Trussell Trust records that of the 56,000 folk who have been through its doors so far in the year 2013-14—which is not even up yet—some 17,000 were children. Notwithstanding what Mr Johnstone said, it was clear from the evidence from a number of witnesses, including the academics who wrote the report, "Overview of Food Aid Provision in Scotland", that welfare reform is indeed a major factor in the vastly increased recourse to emergency food aid. That is in 21st century, oil-rich, energy-rich, resource-rich Scotland, which is an absolute scandal.

Willie Rennie: Will the member give way?

Annabelle Ewing: I am afraid that I do not have time.

It does not have to be this way for our citizens. We have the opportunity in September to ensure that the safety net embodied in our welfare system is not dismantled wholesale by the Westminster Government. We have the opportunity to ensure that we do not sit back while anything from 50,000 to 100,000 children are pushed into poverty by planned Westminster cuts—whatever party is in power at the time. We also have the opportunity to ensure that we do not continue with such a dysfunctional social security system as we have seen administered by successive Westminster Governments.

The minister mentioned that the Scottish Government is spending some £258 million on measures to try to mitigate the most corrosive impacts of the Westminster Government's policies. Of course, as has been said, that money is coming from other budgets. In any event, mitigating all of the impact of Westminster welfare cuts is simply not sustainable. Surely mitigation is a second-best approach. An increasing number of people in Scotland are not content with Labour's limited ambition of mitigation of the policies adopted by the Westminster Government. They want power and control to ensure that we have the right policies in the first place, which respect the needs of our citizens and protect them.

I listened carefully to what Jackie Baillie said and all that I can conclude from her remarks is that Labour prefers Tory rule to home rule on welfare, which is simply not good enough. It does a disservice to the people of our country, whom we are here to represent—the most vulnerable members of our society. Labour is resigning itself

to mitigating the policies of a Tory Government in Westminster. Shame on the Labour Party. It is not good enough.

15:04

Alex Rowley (Cowdenbeath) (Lab): I hope that there can be some kind of unity in the Parliament today in our condemnation of the impact of the UK Government's welfare reform on individuals and communities here in Scotland. I also hope that we can recognise the devastation that the reforms are having on people not just in Scotland, but across the UK.

William Beveridge, himself a Liberal, brought forward a report in December 1942 that set out to tackle the five giant evils in our society: squalor, ignorance, want, idleness and disease. The report proposed to tackle those evils through reforms to the system of social welfare, and the 1945 Labour Government progressed that through the introduction of the welfare state.

Although not always perfect, the principles of pooling and sharing resources across the UK and supporting people in financial hardship have meant that for the best part of the last century we eradicated absolute poverty in Britain. Absolute poverty is when people do not have the money to pay for even their most basic needs. It is therefore tragic that today, the UK Government's reforms are driving thousands of men, women and children into absolute poverty.

The evidence for that is all around us. We have seen food banks come out of necessity and their numbers grow week by week across Scotland. For those on benefits, the absolute shambles that welfare reform has become—the sanctions and the delays—is resulting in deeper and deeper poverty. Oxfam has pointed out:

"People on benefits usually have the lowest incomes with no savings to cover unforeseen circumstances, and even a slight delay in receiving benefit can mean they have no money to buy food for themselves or their children."

What Beveridge identified as want in the 1940s, we can relate to a basic need for food and fuel in 2014. I hope that we can unite in this Parliament in saying that that situation, which is of the UK Government's making, is unacceptable. It is an ideologically driven attack on the weakest in our society, driven by the same ideology that, while attacking the sick, the disabled and the poorest, gives a 5 per cent tax cut to the richest 1 per cent of people. That is why I support raising the top rate of income tax. Although that will not solve all the financial issues, it is right that those who have the most pay a fairer share to meet the burden. I hope that all in this chamber can agree with that principle.

We need to see a more robust approach to tackling tax evasion, including the promotion of international action; Oxfam argued for that in its “Walking the Breadline” report. That will reduce the need for further cuts in benefits. Our message must be to attack the tax cheats, not the poor.

The UK Government must think again. It needs to consider the evidence from the National Audit Office, the evidence from national charities that have provided briefings today and indeed the evidence from its own Government departments. The savings that were forecasted have not been made, the system is chaotic and sanctions are being used disproportionately against people with mental health issues, people who are sick and people who are disabled. This shambolic mess is a blight on our society and one against which we must all speak up.

Looking to the future, I believe that the best insurance policy for the people of Scotland is to be in a position to pool and share resources across the United Kingdom with government at every level: the UK Government, the Scottish Government and, crucially, local government working together. We must build support for that vision, which is for a union of social justice in which every citizen, man, woman and child—Scots, English, Welsh or Northern Irish—who lives in these islands has equal social, economic and political rights: the same rights everywhere and anywhere to free healthcare, social security, employment opportunity and dignity in work and in retirement.

Look at the history of the Labour movement. When the Jarrow marchers set off from the north-east of England and marched on London in 1936, they did not march for benefits; they marched for jobs. When the Upper Clyde Shipbuilders organised the work-in on the Clyde and also marched on Glasgow, they did not march for benefits; they marched for jobs. Our vision for the future of Scotland must be built on social justice: a future in which the sick, the disabled and the unemployed are able to live without fear of poverty and in which our growing elderly population can live with dignity in the knowledge that their pension is guaranteed and that the services that they need will be available at the point of need.

Going back to the Beveridge report, Scotland's future must also be free of ignorance and idleness, and our aim must be to give access to the highest skills and full employment for everyone. Every individual who can work should be able to work: full employment must be our goal, for it is by achieving that goal that we will drive poverty out of every community in Scotland.

15:10

Christian Allard (North East Scotland) (SNP): Members might have worked out by now that I was not born in Scotland, which is why they will often see me in Parliament speaking to journalists with a strong French accent not dissimilar to my own.

A few weeks ago, a French television crew came to see me to report on the historic referendum campaign for independence. They wanted to watch a re-enactment at Bannockburn to see what the battle is between the English and the Scots. I tried to tell them that if there is a battle, it is not that sort of battle. As Alex Johnstone mentioned, the battle that is taking place is on welfare reform. Indeed, that battle has been fought over the past 30 years, during which successive Westminster Governments have introduced policies from the poll tax to the bedroom tax.

I took the French TV crew to Aberdeen to see what a modern Scotland would look like and to see how rich and prosperous a nation we are. I was asked why, if we are so prosperous, there is a need to change. To show them why, I took the TV crew to a food bank in Aberdeen. Members might be surprised to learn that, in and around the oil capital of Europe, welfare cuts are hitting hard the most vulnerable people in the north-east.

I visited the charity Instant Neighbour Aberdeen. The chief executive, Sophy Green, has an office at 5 St Machar Drive in Aberdeen. She took us on a visit to the food bank. She told us that, in 2012, the organisation gave 1,343 food parcels to people in Aberdeen. The following year, that number had increased by 127 per cent to 3,051 food parcels. What explanation does Alex Johnstone have for such an increase if it is not the implementation of Westminster's welfare cuts?

Many people in Aberdeen are struggling on benefit or low incomes and may not have enough money to buy basic food items because of late benefit payments, because they are waiting for the first payment under the new benefit claims system or because their benefits have been stopped—sometimes unfairly, as John Mason mentioned—due to sanctions imposed by the Westminster Government. Imagine how it must feel to be destitute in one of Europe's richest cities. Imagine the shame that those people must feel in having to ask for food in the 21st century; the effect that lack of food has on their health, as Annabelle Ewing said in her excellent speech; and the injustice of the system, as the minister mentioned. That is the situation in Scotland's third city—David Cameron described Aberdeen as the powerhouse of the UK—and the oil capital of Europe.

I saw people coming to the food bank run by Instant Neighbour Aberdeen, including young people, mothers and elderly couples. Why are they coming to ask for food like never before? What explanation is there for such levels of destitution if they are not a result of the implementation of Westminster's welfare cuts?

While we were listening to Sophy Green, people who were in need of food kept on arriving. Some had come from far away—a couple came from Moray, for example—but they all left empty-handed because, not for the first time, the food bank's shelves were empty. Despite the £250 million from the Scottish Government to mitigate the worst effects of Westminster's welfare cuts and the efforts of many volunteers, offshore workers and the backing of their employers, local and international energy companies, the food banks in Aberdeen are not coping with the 127 per cent increase in demand for food parcels.

If the rich city of Aberdeen, which is surrounded by north-east communities that produce the best food that can be found in any European region, is not coping with Westminster's welfare cuts, which area can cope? What explanation is there for empty shelves in food banks operating in Aberdeen if it is not the implementation of welfare cuts from Westminster?

I want the Parliament, the Scottish Government, employers and employees across Scotland to concentrate their efforts on creating a prosperous society, and not to spend their time, money and effort on mitigating the worst actions of the coalition Government at Westminster. Help is needed, and I urge volunteers to give up some time to help run food banks. Across the north-east, the Aberdeenshire north food bank in Inverurie and the Aberdeenshire south food bank in Banchory, in Aberdeen and in Dundee, people need our support and I encourage anyone who is able to donate food to do so, because their contributions are important. After a 127 per cent increase in the number of food parcels in Aberdeen last year, I dread to think what the increase will be this year.

What explanation is there for the number of food banks operating in the prosperous north-east if it is not the implementation of Westminster's welfare cuts? I am glad that that French TV crew came to Scotland to report on the absurdity of food banks running out of food in the oil capital of Europe. That should be a wake-up call to our media to report why people like me think that only independence can give us the powers to ensure that families and individuals will always have food to eat.

Let me repeat the astonishing figures from a food bank in Aberdeen. In 2012, Instant Neighbour gave 1,343 food parcels to people in Aberdeen. In

the following year, that figure increased by 127 per cent to 3,051. What explanation is there for such an increase if not the implementation of the welfare cuts from Westminster?

15:16

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

The last time I spoke in a welfare reform debate, I invited members from across the chamber to intervene with suggestions for how welfare could be reformed in a way that would save money rather than cost money.

I admit that reforming the welfare system is not easy. Alex Rowley gave a fine and passionate speech about the roots of the welfare system. However, I remember when Labour was reforming welfare when it was in charge at Westminster, and it was not that easy then, either. I remember people coming to my surgeries about it, and it was not that easy.

It is challenging to build a safety net that makes work pay, especially with a multimillion pound budget. Hard choices have been made, some of which I disagree with and am working to change. However, during that debate last year, not one constructive suggestion was forthcoming.

Jamie Hepburn: Will the member give way?

Willie Rennie: Jamie Hepburn had his chance last year, but he did not come up with an idea. Every single speaker stood up to promise a reform that would cost more money and not less. That is despite the stated intention of every party in the Parliament to reform welfare.

I looked to the white paper in hope rather than expectation—perhaps it would set out how the welfare system would be reformed in an independent Scotland. Instead, we are treated to the usual rhetoric rather than costed proposals. The white paper includes a ritual repetition of the £4.5 billion cut to which Margaret Burgess referred today, and she stuck by the commitment to reverse it. However, the white paper contains no explanation about how that would be done.

Despite Scotland receiving the fourth highest rate of benefits in the nations and regions of the UK, the Scottish Government asserts that welfare in an independent Scotland would be “more affordable”. However, when I read the report of the expert working group on welfare that was set up by the Scottish Government, I discovered that that affordability is not based on the reversal of UK Government policy but the implementation of that very policy. Paragraph 3.2 of the working group's report reads:

“The forecasts prepared by the Scottish Government presented in this Chapter are consistent with stated UK Government welfare policy and growth assumptions at the

time of writing, and do not reflect any options available to future independent Scottish Governments."

Therefore, when the Scottish Government tells us that welfare is affordable, it is basing that on implementation of the policies that the SNP has described as "brutal", "disgraceful", "vindictive" and "a direct attack" on the living standards of sick and disabled people. The reality is that, far from reversing Iain Duncan Smith's so-called brutal policies, the SNP will implement 98 per cent of his plan.

To cover its blushes, the Scottish Government has established yet another commission, to take even longer to come up with the answers. I hope that the report will come clean on all the promises that the Scottish Government has made to everyone who receives support. The Government has locked in Iain Duncan Smith's changes, so I trust that it will declare that it no longer intends to restore all the benefits that it promised to restore.

One such benefit is universal child benefit, which has been absent from the debate. In a debate only a year ago, SNP members were furious about the UK Government's changes. The Deputy First Minister, who is not in the chamber, said that the move was "fundamentally wrong". However, reversal is not in the white paper. The promise has been quietly ditched. It is no longer a priority.

Until the SNP can tell us how it will cover the increase of £4.5 billion to an independent Scotland's welfare budget, every single promise that it has made means nothing.

John Mason: Will the member give way?

Willie Rennie: Not now.

Perhaps the SNP's desperation has forced it to consider more extreme measures, such as banking on lower life expectancy so that Scotland can diverge from the UK on pension reform. I find it astonishing that the Scottish Government accepts depressingly unambitious projections. Surely if we believe in the effectiveness of the Government's health policies, we must project for a dramatic increase in life expectancy, at least up to the UK average. I would have thought that Scandinavian levels of life expectancy should be our ambition.

It is Scottish Government policy that is a shambles. The SNP shouts about changes to child benefit but quietly ditches its promise on the issue. It condemns the UK welfare reforms but plans to implement 98 per cent of Iain Duncan Smith's policies. It is outraged by the £4.5 billion cut in spending but has no plans to reverse it.

The SNP told us that everything would change under independence, but now we know that

nothing will change. So much promised, so many people let down.

15:22

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): I heard a slight trickle of applause from Willie Rennie's Tory colleagues. It is astonishing to hear a Liberal Democrat defend Tory cuts. Beveridge must be reeling in his grave.

I want to address the unintended—I hope that they were not intended—consequences for my constituents of Westminster's benefits cuts. Let me start with the bedroom tax.

In one case, a constituent with mental health issues came into my office having not long relocated to a pretty housing association flat with two bedrooms. Immediately, she found out that she must either move or take someone in to share the flat. Her sense of security was whipped from under her feet right away, because her mental health condition is such that she would not be able to share her flat and keep her sanity and keep well. She does not have a wheelchair in the room; her disability is not visible. Oh my goodness, she is not spared the bedroom tax.

Children's panels are now having to consider whether children can have parental contact because parents who do not have residency might not be able to keep a spare room for their child's periodic visits. How can that help the welfare of children, which Willie Rennie is so fond of talking about?

Christian Allard spoke eloquently about the food banks in the wealth capital of Europe, Aberdeen. In Gala they ran out of food. Young men who are inadequate are the main clients there. Why? Because they have not got their benefits. They are queuing for food.

I visited Borders voluntary community care forum recently and heard about the dreadful impact on its clients of being assessed and reassessed. Sometimes there are gaps when clients receive no benefit whatsoever. We are talking about very vulnerable people.

I met the local criminal justice team recently. I had never thought about how welfare reform would impact on justice issues, but the team is most concerned about benefits cuts and it gave me an example to show why that is.

I heard about a 27-year-old single man who has an extensive criminal history. From 2004 to 2013, he was in and out of custody and prison, but he has turned his life around and has not reoffended. During his last sentence, he engaged with the voluntary throughcare service and Phoenix Futures and he turned himself around. He

obtained homeless accommodation and to date has remained sober and is not offending. That is a significant achievement for him and the workers who mentor him.

Since that man's release, however, finance has been the major issue. Prior to his last sentence, when his lifestyle was far more chaotic, he took out various social fund loans, which are repaid from his benefit. The social fund differs from crisis grants—which are now not repayable—as the amount has to be paid back to the DWP, and the amount that is deducted is not restricted. Consequently, his deductions amount to £97.40, which leaves him £46 a fortnight to live on. I would like to see Willie Rennie or Alex Johnstone try to do that.

In addition, as a homeless single man, he has been placed in private rented accommodation.

Willie Rennie *rose—*

Christine Grahame: Could Willie Rennie live on that?

Willie Rennie: I have heard the member speak about these matters before and I understand that she is angry about them, but the reality is that her party will not change a single jot. It will not reverse the £4.5 billion cut that it talks about.

Christine Grahame: I notice that Willie Rennie did not say whether he could live on £46 a fortnight. I thought that he was going to answer that question. I could not live on that.

As I was saying, the man has been placed in private rented accommodation. As we all know, much of that housing stock is not fuel efficient. He therefore has huge heating bills. That compounds everything.

Where will that person, who is trying to turn his life around, eventually be driven? We hope that he does not turn back to crime, but if he does it will cost the state £36,000 a year and another wasted life.

There is a human cost: the young woman coping with mental health issues; the children who might not get contact with their parents; and the young man who is trying to turn his life around. On top of that, there is a financial cost.

For me, Scotland cannot wait. That is where I differ from Alex Rowley, who is a fellow socialist—I am glad to hear that there is one back in the chamber; that is a bit of a change on the Labour benches. We cannot go on pause—we are often told about that in the Parliament—because Scotland is measured by how it looks after the vulnerable. It is measured by how it looks after the people who need care.

We do that through creating jobs, which Alex Rowley talked about in relation to the Jarrow

marches, and through creating a vibrant economy and a socially just society. That can be done only with independence. That is not esoteric; it gives power, and Mr Rowley should recognise that that power is to the people.

15:27

Siobhan McMahon (Central Scotland) (Lab):

It will come as no surprise to anyone in the chamber that I will start my speech by saying that I deplore the so-called welfare reform that is happening across the UK as a result of the Tory-led coalition Government.

I have spoken in many debates on the issue, and I have always stated that view. I have not changed that view since we previously discussed the matter in the chamber, but that does not mean that I can let the Scottish Government off the hook on the subject.

In 2011, I said:

“There are some policy areas that should transcend the political divide and unite us in a common purpose.”—*[Official Report, 6 October 2011; c 2563.]*

Welfare reform is one of them. I still believe that that is true.

I fully understand that the Scottish Government cannot mitigate all the UK Government's so-called welfare reforms, and I make it perfectly clear that I am not asking it to do so, but I ask it to use the powers that it currently has to help people in our communities who are suffering the worst kind of hardship that any of us could imagine. It is our duty not as parliamentarians but as human beings to do everything that we can to help those who find themselves in the most horrendous situations.

I am pleased that the Scottish Government has finally listened to the labour movement and found the money to mitigate the bedroom tax, but that is not job done. We need far more than that, and we can and should do more.

James Dornan: Does Siobhan McMahon recognise that the Scottish Government is investing more than £250 million in the 2013 to 2016 period to mitigate the welfare reforms, and that the only way that we can do what I accept she wants to be done is through having the powers to do that in the Scottish Parliament?

Siobhan McMahon: Presiding Officer, you must forgive me. I totally forgot that all we need is independence. I am really sorry that my speech is not based on that. My apologies for that.

At the moment, the Scottish welfare fund—a fund of £33 million—looks to have an underspend. If that turns out to be the case, the Scottish ministers should hang their heads in shame. The minister will know that I have spoken about the

Scottish welfare fund on numerous occasions and that I have spoken about the positive opportunities that the fund could provide if the Scottish Government were bold in its ambition for the fund. I have specifically asked the minister and two cabinet secretaries to look at the application process for the fund, as I believe that the process could be reformed to prevent applications being rejected unnecessarily. I ask that the rules and criteria be clear and applied consistently across Scotland. I have also asked that grant awards be of a sufficient level to allow applicants to furnish a home properly.

On several occasions, the Government has told me that it would seriously consider my requests, but we now know that those were just warm words. This example shows the real response from the Scottish Government to welfare reform—it could do something but will not do something because the constitution always comes first.

The Child Poverty Action Group has urged the Scottish Government to ensure that the forthcoming welfare funds bill and subsequent regulations give local authorities adequate scope to meet the needs of families who are experiencing financial hardship as a result of welfare reform. CPAG has stated that the

“Scottish Government’s guidance on the interim Scottish welfare fund currently states that, ‘A grant can be awarded in support of independent living ... to help families facing exceptional pressures.’”

However, it has drawn attention to the fact that no such provision is included in the current draft bill, which it fears could limit access to community care grants for those who are at risk of homelessness or those who are entering or leaving a residential institution.

CPAG has urged the Scottish Government to address the issue before the bill is introduced to the Scottish Parliament. I hope that the minister will address that important matter, and I would welcome reassurance of that in her closing speech.

Welfare reform is a major cause of the poverty that many people are experiencing across Scotland today, but it is not the only cause of that poverty and we should not be complacent about that. As Graeme Brown, the director of Shelter Scotland, said today:

“People across Scotland are being battered by welfare reforms, stagnant wages, rising utility bills, higher living costs and job insecurity ... it is clear that much more needs to be done to combat the root causes of poverty if we are to improve the prospects for everyone living in Scotland ... We see and hear the misery poverty causes every day. Not only does it have a devastating impact on home life, it has long-term detrimental effects on people’s health, wellbeing and life chances—especially children.”

I believe that the Scottish Government can and should be doing more to tackle the example that Graeme Brown has set out. That would mean fulfilling its promises on tackling homelessness and backing pledges for the living wage for all public sector workers across Scotland. It could also do more to promote credit unions in our communities and to back my colleague Kezia Dugdale’s campaign against payday loans.

We know that many people rely on food banks to feed themselves and their families. That is a disgrace in 21st century Scotland, and it is something that we should all be ashamed of. The Trussell Trust helped more than 7,700 people in Scotland in January, which is half the number who were helped in the entire year last year. More worrying is the fact that just 5 per cent of the people who were being helped were homeless. The minister has indicated that she does not want anyone to have to use a food bank in Scotland. What practical measures are currently being taken by the Government to address the issue of food poverty in Scotland?

Yesterday, at my weekly surgery, I met a man in his 40s who has been a hospital porter for the past 22 years. Unfortunately, the man had a period of ill health last year and, as a result, has found himself in a state of financial hardship. That has been compounded by his NHS bosses cutting his contracted hours without his consent. The consequence is that he has only enough money to pay his rent, meaning that he goes to his elderly parents every night for his evening meal. That is just one example of the poverty that ordinary working Scots are experiencing on a day-to-day basis, and it is examples like that that the Government should be addressing.

I do not believe that the motion, which calls for a social security system that is run by the Scottish Parliament, is anything other than another supermarket policy with which the Government is trying to secure votes for its ultimate ambition, which is separation. We can and should be doing more.

15:33

Kevin Stewart (Aberdeen Central) (SNP): The ultimate thing that I want is a just and fair society, and we certainly do not have that at the moment. I will come back to some of the comments that have been made by folks in the chamber, but I am mainly going to talk about people and how they are being affected by the cuts to welfare. Willie Rennie wants us to point out where savings could be made. During my discussions about people, he may find that there are ways and means of making those savings.

First, I turn to the case of a constituent who has been diagnosed with ankylosing spondylitis, as a result of which he cannot work. His wife works full time, but he does not qualify for a number of benefits, so the couple has to struggle along. He has highlighted to me the fact that they would be better off apart. I wrote to the then minister, Esther McVey, who replied that she would not comment on hypothetical situations, although she noted that my constituent's situation

"highlights the urgent need for reform of the current benefit system."

I do not disagree with Esther McVey on that—such reform is necessary, because it is absolutely disgusting that we are driving families apart because they cannot afford to live together. If Mr Rennie or Mr Johnstone does not think that that is happening, I will be more than happy to let them speak to the folk concerned. If we are to have welfare reform, let us have real welfare reform that keeps people together and helps everyone.

I will move on to the case of a constituent who receives chemotherapy, not for cancer but for another condition. That lady has faced the work capability assessment again and again, as have the folk with chronic and progressive conditions such as multiple sclerosis and post-polio syndrome who have appeared before the Welfare Reform Committee. Why is it, when we know fine that those folk will never get better, that we waste huge sums of money putting them through the torture of being assessed again and again? Stopping such assessments is one way to save money. I hope that Willie Rennie takes that back to his ministers.

In addition, there is the situation whereby folk are sanctioned on an almost daily basis. I have a constituent who has chronic asthma and who often struggles to speak to folk on the phone. Although the benefits agency knows that she has that chronic illness, when she phones up and says that she cannot make the appointment that has been made for her that day because she is suffering a severe attack, she is sanctioned. She has been sanctioned repeatedly because of her illness. She has done without fuel—without electricity and gas—over a period of time because she has been sanctioned by what I think is a completely and utterly unfair system. In my book, that is not acceptable in the 21st century.

Mr Allard talked about the existence of food banks in energy-rich, wealthy Aberdeen, where we have poverty amid plenty because of the welfare system that people in Scotland have to tole. He rightly pointed out that there has been a 127 per cent rise in the number of folk who receive food parcels from the Instant Neighbour food bank in my constituency. When I was there the other week, a dozen folk came in over the course of an

hour. I believe that that is unacceptable in 21st century Scotland.

The situation in Aberdeen is bad but, earlier today, Jo Roberts of Community Food Moray told the Welfare Reform Committee that, pre-April 2013, it had 13 referrals a month for food aid whereas last month it had 301 referrals, mainly because of sanctions and the welfare reform changes.

I find it laughable what Alex Johnstone and Iain Duncan Smith say about the link between welfare cuts and the increased use of food banks. Iain Duncan Smith said:

"I strongly refute this claim and would politely ask you to stop scaremongering in this way."

I find that absolutely nonsensical.

Today, the committee heard that seven-year-olds recognise the impact that the welfare changes have had on people's lives. That impact is unacceptable in 21st century Scotland.

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

Kevin Stewart: I am doing so.

I realise that there are many in the chamber who, for various reasons, do not want the devolution of welfare. Jackie Baillie said earlier that she was saying not that we cannot develop our own welfare system but that we should not. I think that that is unacceptable in 21st century Scotland.

15:40

Jamie Hepburn (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP): I welcome this debate, for which I hope to draw on the extensive evidence that the Welfare Reform Committee has gathered in the course of its work and on some of what was sent to us in advance of the debate today.

I thought that a useful place to start would be the briefing from Oxfam, which states:

"Oxfam believes social protection should be seen in a wider context, which reflects the fact that people will contribute to, and require support from, the state at different points in their life."

That is exactly what people expect of the social security system. Certainly, that is what people who have spoken to us at the Welfare Reform Committee expected. They paid into the system and expected to be able to draw on it when they needed to do so. Now that they do need it, they are finding that it is not there to support them.

Oxfam also said in its briefing:

"Cuts to social protection have gone too far with the holes in the so called 'safety net' getting bigger and more people falling through."

I want to quantify the scale of the holes in the safety net that the Tories and Liberals are cutting. The Scottish Government has published an analysis that shows that people in Scotland could be hit with a cut of £4.5 billion in the five years to 2014-15 and that child benefit freezes and below-inflation rises will see household income for a family with two children cut by more than £1,100 and that of a family with one child by more than £650.

Of course, we also know that 82,500 households across Scotland are affected by the bedroom tax and that 80 per cent of them contain a disabled adult. As much as I welcome the commitment from the Scottish Government to divert resources to mitigate the bedroom tax, it is important to remember that it is still here and alive in Scotland. The Scottish Government has invested more than £250 million over a three-year period to mitigate the worst effects of the changes, which is very welcome and a real help to people on the ground. However, it can only ever mitigate a little the scale of the changes.

I turn to some more evidence that has been presented to us in advance of the debate, because it is important to place it on the record. Citizens Advice Scotland said that in 2012-13 it had to advise on

"203,813 new issues related to welfare and benefits ... 40% of all new issues ... by far the largest area of advice for CAB across Scotland."

That trend has continued into this year. The Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations spoke in its briefing of

"increasing numbers of people presenting in desperate need as result of benefit sanctions. Impact of sanctions and people with disabilities and health issues is worse than anticipated."

It continued by saying that the third sector is

"Increasingly ... seeing people presenting with absolutely nothing to live off - no money for food, heat or rent."

In its briefing, the Child Poverty Action Group in Scotland, which has already been mentioned in the debate, said:

"CPAG Scotland's advice line has received calls including: A mother with five children fleeing domestic abuse having her housing benefit entitlement limited to just £0.50 a week".

Crisis contacted me to say that it was

"working with clients who have been in B&Bs for over a year due to the barriers placed by welfare reform to single under 35s."

That refers to the shared accommodation rate. Crisis states that it is

"increasingly coming across male clients with children who are unable to have them visit as they only have a room in a shared house. We also have clients who are going without

food and fuel to make up the rent shortfall on a larger property than LHA will pay for so their children have a room to stay in when they visit. (or their children aren't in a house with strangers)".

That is the reality of welfare reform as reported to us—this Parliament—by organisations on the ground.

I turn to the issue of food banks and the increased demand that they are experiencing. The Welfare Reform Committee took evidence on that at its meeting this morning. Dr Filip Sosenko, who is a research associate at the institute for housing, urban and real estate research at Heriot-Watt University, said that there is enough evidence to say that from April 2013 welfare reform has become a major factor fuelling demand for food aid. That contrasts with the position of Lord Freud, who told the House of Lords that there was

"no evidence of a causal link."—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 2 July 2013; c1072]

Dr Sosenko's response was that he believes that Lord Freud's statement is factually incorrect.

Kevin Stewart earlier highlighted the comment by Iain Duncan Smith, who suggested that the Trussell Trust was scaremongering when it talked of a link between welfare cuts and food banks. Indeed, even though Alex Johnstone was at the Welfare Reform Committee this morning and heard Dr Sosenko, in his comments earlier in the debate he seemed to ape Iain Duncan Smith's remarks.

Do those individuals refute the evidence of Jo Roberts of Community Food Moray, who told the Welfare Reform Committee earlier today that it had 13 referrals a month for food aid before April 2013 but saw 301 referrals last month, with sanctions having the biggest impact? Do they refute the evidence of Barnardo's Scotland, which says that it has

"identified particular demand for crisis support from families where parents have benefits withdrawal sanctions applied by the Jobcentre"?

Do they refute the evidence of Citizen's Advice Scotland, which I cited earlier? In addition, the Trussell Trust told us that it has seen an increase of almost 300 per cent in the number of people coming to food banks this year compared with last year. That is the reality on the ground.

Alex Johnstone spoke of welfare reform being about removing people from dependency and social security. Far from removing people from dependency, welfare reform is making people dependent on food banks. Kevin Stewart talked of seven-year-olds recognising that fact. To be frank, a dog in the street could recognise it. That only serves to underline the fact that we have a class of UK Government ministers who are totally divorced from the reality of their changes' impact. That is

why I believe that this Parliament should have control over the matter.

It was interesting to hear Jackie Baillie talk about hypocrisy from the SNP benches. I do not know whether this is hypocrisy, but we have seen the Labour Party at Westminster talk about being tougher on benefits than the Tories. Maybe that does not count as hypocrisy, but I certainly think that it qualifies as a brass neck. Welfare and social security would be far better dealt with here, in the Scottish Parliament.

15:46

Ken Macintosh (Eastwood) (Lab): The past five years have been tough for many people. They have been tough on those who have lost their job or their business, tough on those who are still in work but are facing higher prices and lower wages, and arguably toughest of all on those who need to rely on others—on those who struggle to support themselves even in the best of times. I am sure that I am not alone in saying that I doubt that a week goes by when, as an MSP, I do not meet or hear from someone who is struggling to cope, is anxious and worried about their benefits and the roof over their head and is wondering—goodness knows—about what the future might hold. It is a pretty poor reflection on all of us and the society in which we live that our response to the recession and these tough times has been austerity economics and welfare cuts.

I do not doubt that there are those in the Conservative and Liberal parties who care for people's welfare. I have said before that none of us in this Parliament can claim a monopoly on compassion. However, to be quite frank, the recession has revealed the Tories at their worst. It has allowed them to pursue an agenda that they have long held to—to reduce the size and role of the state—and they have done so despite the clear and hurtful consequences for so many fellow citizens.

In my more understanding moments, I imagine that the Tories believe that their welfare reforms are a form of tough love. They cast themselves in the role of strict but caring parents: "If only all those slackers on the dole would just shape up, we would soon have this country back on its feet." However, that is to ignore the evidence. They introduce a bedroom tax—a charge on the homes of the less well off—arguing that market forces will operate and the only logical response will be for people to downsize. When it becomes clear that the tax is having no such effect, that few people even have such an option and that 80 per cent of the households that are affected have a disabled resident—in other words, when all the evidence suggests that their policy is not working—their response is to press on regardless.

Despite the fact that there are clearly not enough jobs in the economy, at the heart of their reforms is a belief that unemployment is the individual's fault and that too many people are clearly lounging around on benefits when they are more than capable of working. The long-term unemployed are branded as shirkers and the work capability assessment is introduced to prove the point. Most of us will have heard at first hand about the impact that that can have.

Mary Scanlon: Can Ken Macintosh tell me why the former Labour ministers Frank Field and John Hutton, who was the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, fully supported welfare reform and helping people to get back to work?

Ken Macintosh: There is a world of difference between the welfare reform agenda of the Labour Party and the welfare cuts agenda of the Tory party, in which people are blamed for their own misfortune. I ask Mrs Scanlon to listen to the evidence that the Welfare Reform Committee took this morning.

My colleague Jamie Hepburn and I had a chance to visit Deafblind Scotland just last week, and we heard there that people who are deaf and blind and who are not going to get better are being told that they must be reassessed. They are not going to get better. Why on earth should we put them through this torture?

People are sent letters that they cannot read, which ask them to attend interviews at which no one understands their communication difficulties, let alone their care needs. One person who spoke to us, Frankie Thompson, highlighted that he has eight hours of support each week—eight hours in which to go shopping, get out of the house and meet other people. However, he has to use that time—a scarce resource—to fill in forms in order to retain any allowance that he already qualifies for. It is no wonder that people describe their experience of welfare reforms as one of being stressed and bullied.

A recurring theme from constituency casework is the number of people who are rejected through work capability assessments because they are too proud to admit that they need help. When people are asked questions such as, "Can you reach into your kitchen cupboards?" or "Can you put on your own socks?", they exaggerate their ability, because they do not want to appear useless. As a result, they lose their benefits.

It took us a while to get there, but I am proud that the Scottish Parliament has come together to oppose the welfare reforms. This is a time of heightened political sensitivity, but this year's budget showed that, sometimes at least, fighting the Tories is more important than fighting among ourselves. Our agreement to reject the bedroom

tax for Scotland is exactly why devolution exists and works.

We are not alone in opposing the welfare reforms; the whole country has responded. As the Tories have cut welfare, so food banks have sprung up everywhere. No one pretends that they are the whole answer, but they demonstrate that people care. In Scotland, we can do more—we have the power to go beyond charitable and personal intervention to take collective political decisions.

We always have a choice about how to respond to the difficulties that we face as a country. Our response to the welfare reforms cannot solely be to mitigate the worst effects, important though that may be. We need to build a more ethical economy and a gentler, kinder and more caring society that reflects the values that really matter. There is a place for market forces, but that is not how we live our lives. We care for and rely on each other, and those values should be apparent in all the political decisions that we take.

The Procurement Reform (Scotland) Bill is before the Parliament. Is this not the time to demonstrate our convictions—our support for tax transparency, trade union recognition, the living wage and an end to zero-hours contracts? Would that not be a fitting way to reject the welfare reform agenda?

As members heard from Jackie Baillie, a new campaign—Scotland's outlook—was launched today. It brings together many voluntary organisations that deal at first hand with those who are suffering from the welfare cuts. One of its first actions has been to highlight the more than 150,000 households on council house waiting lists and the 40,000 homelessness applications. I am sure that I do not have to point out that housing is a devolved responsibility and that we have it in our own hands to make a radical difference to the housing crisis.

If we want to help people to get back on their own two feet rather than punish them, we should give them the tools—the skills and the education—that they need. That means not just university for some but college for everyone who wants a place.

Welfare is not about them and us or about rich and poor; it is about our common good and our shared interest. Welfare is for everyone and that should be our response.

15:53

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP): I am pleased to take part in the debate, although it is disappointing that we need to keep returning to the subject. A fundamental question is at the heart of welfare reform. Is welfare just another item of

expenditure, like rail or roads, on which we can spend a bit more in the good times and a bit less in the bad times, or is it a fundamental minimum that we must be committed to, even if expenditure on it must go up in the difficult times?

Many Conservatives in England seem to take the former view. They seem to see no problem with squeezing welfare expenditure while—even this week—calling for tax cuts for the better off. However, most of us who are here today and—to be fair—a reasonable number of people down south disagree with that assessment. Even if people are disabled and cannot work or people want to work but cannot find a job, they must be able to live decently. We as a society have a responsibility to enable them to live in that way.

We accept that we have a responsibility to accommodate, feed and clothe prisoners, who are alleged to be the worst citizens in our society. If that is the case, how much more do we have a responsibility to ensure that those with disabilities who cannot work are properly housed, fed and kept warm?

We must move towards a system in which everyone is entitled to a minimum income or standard of living that is guaranteed no matter what. If extra is paid on top of that, the extra can be made conditional on the person seeking work and fulfilling other obligations, but there should surely be a minimum level of income under which no one should be able to fall. At the moment, a single guy or woman gets £71.70 per week in jobseekers allowance. From that, they are meant to clothe themselves, eat, pay for gas and electricity, keep a phone working and so on. By contrast, how many members can spend £71 in one visit to one clothes shop? I just booked a hotel for one night for the party conference in Aberdeen, which cost me £70. We live in a very uneven society. If it is reckoned that somebody needs £71.70 to live on, how can we even consider cutting that amount further?

On disability, we have had briefings from, among others, Citizens Advice Scotland and Inclusion Scotland, from which it is clear that people with obvious physical disabilities are being assessed as being capable for work. Equally concerning, or perhaps even more so, is the DWP's treatment of people with mental health issues, learning difficulties and cognitive impairments such as autism. Housing is the most common issue that constituents come into my office about, but my staff and I often pick up that people might have mental health issues, too. I commend the excellent work of the Glasgow Association for Mental Health and the Scottish Association for Mental Health in supporting individuals and in campaigning on mental health issues. Mental health is a factor for a sizeable

percentage of our prison population and for many of those who are having their benefits cut, as members have mentioned.

An increasing number of the folk who come into my office have had their whole income suddenly cut off because of sanctions, which I raised earlier with the minister. I accept that not all of those people are totally innocent, as some of them have missed a job interview or failed to meet another condition of the benefits system. However, if somebody who is in employment does something wrong in that employment, there is a whole process to go through before they are disciplined. There are verbal and written warnings before it gets as far as dismissal, and the person has the opportunity to appeal and to representation by trade unions or others during interviews. By contrast, the income of some of the most vulnerable people in our society, who are on benefits and who are already living on a lower income than many people in employment are, can be stopped with little if any notice and apparently for the slimmest of reasons.

Of course, many of us agree that the welfare system requires reform, as one or two members have mentioned. One area in which I would like reform is in the DWP's apparent willingness to pay huge sums of money to private landlords, no matter the state of the accommodation. As members will know, in recent weeks, there has been media coverage of the Bellgrove hotel in my constituency. Of course, the term "hotel" is questionable, because it is in effect the last big hostel in Glasgow, although it is called a hotel and is privately run. That hotel or hostel houses about 150 vulnerable men in pretty basic accommodation, to put it mildly. Perhaps the DWP should put a little more effort into seeing how its money—perhaps £1 million or so per annum, or however much it is—is being spent there, rather than focus on people who are struggling to get by.

I find it particularly disappointing that Iain Duncan Smith, as the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, is presiding over the process. He is an intelligent man who was clearly impacted by his visit to Easterhouse in 2002, and he has had continuing contact with people and activists from the area. I know that he understands that a key factor of welfare reform is the need to ensure that people are better off in work than on benefits. However, rather than ensure that the statutory minimum wage is increased to make that happen, he is presiding over a system that is designed to cut benefits. I am not sure whether he is unable or unwilling to change that, but I find it deeply disappointing that he is responsible for all this.

One of the arguments for independence is that it will free up resources to have a better tax and benefits system. However, I am convinced that we

could have a better system even with the current resources. Therefore, my main ask this afternoon is that the Parliament be given full control over welfare, which would allow us to have a much more joined-up system that used public money wisely but which actually cared for those who are in need.

15:59

James Dornan (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP): I listened carefully to Jackie Baillie's speech and was delighted to find that I agreed with something in it. I lodged a motion on the launch of the Scotland's outlook campaign today and I ask everybody to support and sign it. I also ask people to go on the website, watch the video and answer the questions; when they do, the facts about what many people in Scotland are living with will horrify them. To have 870,000 people living in poverty in a rich country such as Scotland should shame us all.

I agreed with almost everything that Ken Macintosh said but had a wry smile when he talked about the Tories' tough-love approach to welfare, given that Rachel Reeves, the shadow minister whom my colleague Jamie Hepburn discussed, said:

"We would be tougher [than the Conservatives] ... under our compulsory jobs guarantee if you refuse that job you forgo your benefits, and that is really important."

That is what Ken Macintosh was talking about.

We have to be careful about how we deal with such matters because there is not always an easy way to put somebody into employment, yet the Labour Party suggests that we do exactly what I just read out. Let us not pretend that, when 2015 comes, there will be a change of Government down in Westminster and everything will change.

Like many other members, I have stories to tell of the resilience and community spirit throughout communities in my constituency in dealing with the welfare reforms, specifically the bedroom tax.

In autumn last year, I invited the Scottish Affairs Select Committee to visit Castlemilk to hear first hand from the people who are on the front line of dealing with the effects that the bedroom tax is having on the most vulnerable in our communities.

We heard from Clair Malpas, regeneration officer at Cassiltoun Housing Association, about the impact that welfare reforms are having on housing associations and their ability to plan for the future.

From Angus McIntosh, solicitor at Castlemilk Law Centre, we heard about how impossible it is for the aim of the bedroom tax—if we accept the UK Government's claim that the aim is to get people to downsize—ever to be achieved. In

Glasgow alone, between 12,000 and 13,000 people are affected by the bedroom tax but there are nothing like 12,000 or 13,000 houses for them to move to. For example, Cassiltoun Housing Association has 1,000 tenants, 230 plus of whom are affected by the bedroom tax, but has only 83 one-bedroom houses.

We then heard from Billy McFadyen, director of the local credit union, about the rise in illegal moneylenders in Castlemilk and the toll that that inevitably takes on the local community.

We also heard harrowing testimony from Jean Devlin, from the anti-bedroom tax coalition, about people coming to its public meetings and speaking about the toll that the bedroom tax has taken on their mental health. In one meeting, the coalition heard from a woman who had attempted to take her own life because of the impact that the bedroom tax was having.

Alex Johnstone would call it bedroom tax hysteria.

We also heard of a 14-year-old boy who had had his own room but is now having to share with his five-year-old brother. He wanted to sign Castlemilk's 3,000-plus-signature petition against the bedroom tax.

Jean Devlin hit the nail on the head when she said:

"People do not want to leave their home, and I think that you need to bear in mind that these are people's homes. They're not just units. The UK Government tend to think that this is just like Lego bricks and they can play about with them, but people live in their homes, people invest in their homes, they take pride in their homes."

The Westminster Government has been told of the countless examples of destitution and despair that have come from its welfare reforms. It has been told of the impact that they are having on disabled people and their carers in particular. It has been told of the impact that they are having on children and young people. It has been told of the dramatic increase in the number of people using food banks and of the appalling state of affairs in energy, resource and income-rich Scotland, where people are having to hand food back to food banks because they cannot afford to heat it.

The Westminster Government is constantly being told about the devastating impact that the current welfare reforms have had, and are having, but it refuses to listen. On the contrary, it continues to implement universal credit and personal independence payments even though the people who warned it what a disaster the bedroom tax would be—and were right—are now telling it how much greater a disaster universal credit and PIPs will be.

Seventy per cent of tenants at Cassiltoun Housing Association do not have access to a transactional bank account, which they will need for the direct payments, and 60 per cent do not have access to the internet, which they will need to apply for universal credit online. In those communities, the infrastructure to introduce such sweeping reforms simply does not exist, but that appears to make little difference to such an ideologically driven Westminster Government.

Westminster used to call the welfare state "social security". There was a belief that the state had a responsibility to protect those who, for any number of reasons, needed assistance. There was also an appreciation that people paid in and took out and that, for most, that would balance out over the course of their lives. When it did not balance out for some people, that was what society was all about.

That belief has been replaced with the rhetoric of scroungers and skivers who are out to diddle the system, despite the fact that more money goes unclaimed in benefits than is claimed fraudulently. Nevertheless, we continue to have to put up with Westminster parties putting in place policies that are based on MPs' belief that everyone is on the take—ironic or what?

The most disappointing aspect of the situation is that the Labour Party—the apparent party of the working class—is completely complicit in the race to the right and the demonisation of the least well off. I have already quoted Rachel Reeves, and we have heard Jackie Baillie saying that it is not that we cannot develop our own welfare system but that we should not develop our own welfare system. I wonder how she feels about the fact that, according to reports in today's media, even Jim Murphy is suggesting that welfare should be devolved. I bet she never thought that she would be seen as being to the right of Jim Murphy.

I, and most people in Scotland, do not agree with Jackie Baillie. It is imperative that we have the powers to abolish the bedroom tax, halt any further roll-out of universal credits and ensure that benefits, tax credits and the minimum wage increase in line with inflation. However, we also need the powers to grow our economy in order to ensure that fewer people require the safety net of welfare in the first place.

As Oxfam knows, and as was mentioned by my colleague, Jamie Hepburn, these cuts have gone too far, with the holes in the so-called safety net getting bigger, allowing more people to fall through. In 198 days, the people of Scotland will have the opportunity to vote to take the power to make decisions over welfare into our own hands and to ensure that we tighten up those holes in the safety net. The only way in which we can do that is to vote yes.

16:06

Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): Last week, at a school debate on independence, I, not for the first time, almost but not quite agreed with the Labour speaker when discussing the subject of welfare reform. She argued that the creation of the welfare state was the finest legacy of the way in which the UK can pool its resources and work together. I agreed, but said that we cannot still say that that great legacy exists. We discussed with the young people in the audience that moment when a country that could have felt that it was defeated and broken instead said, "We fought together and we will survive together, and we will rebuild a society in which we care for one another together," and went on to lay the foundations of a welfare state to be proud of. However, a welfare state must be fundamentally about people caring for one another and giving the state a role in exercising that duty of care.

Welfare reform is misnamed—it has been for a long time; it is not only the current UK Government that is using the words wrongly. What is under way is a wholesale attack on the principles of the welfare state, and the replacement of the welfare state with provision that is intended to merely ameliorate the effects of poverty and inequality. The system is no longer redistributive; it is concerned only with amelioration.

That is not to say that change is not needed in the way in which the welfare system works. The system can be bureaucratic, it can be stressful for the people who work in it and for the people who are in need, and it can be humiliating—not always by accident; sometimes by design. However, I am sorry to say that human welfare is no longer the driving force behind the way in which the welfare state operates in the UK.

What is strange is that corporate welfare is alive and well. I am not only talking about tax breaks for wealthy people and companies and the fact that far greater resources are spent by the UK Government on targeting so-called benefit fraud than are spent on targeting the much greater sum that is stolen by the wealthy through tax avoidance; I am also talking about corporate welfare in the form of subsidy for poverty pay. We are using taxpayers' money, through the welfare system, to subsidise poverty pay by allowing employers to pay less than people need to live a decent, dignified life.

Corporate welfare is alive and well. Why is human welfare not? How has it come to pass that the political possibility has opened up whereby the great legacy that I spoke of can be attacked? Why have people not been fighting to defend it? Why have people not been taking to the streets?

I believe that a great deal of the answer lies in the language that has successfully been used for years to undermine and break the empathy that a welfare state depends on. James Dornan mentioned the talk of "strivers and skivers". It is easy to turn the pages of a newspaper and learn about benefit cheats, benefit migrants and benefits spongers, and to see that well-worn phrase "hard-working families", which is just a wee nod and a wink to people that says, "You are the right kind of people—not like them on the other side of the street," and which is used to break the empathy that people in work have for people who are out of work.

Kevin Stewart: Does Mr Harvie agree that many of the folks who are reliant on food banks and benefit are hard-working people who are not getting the wage that they deserve and need to live?

Patrick Harvie: I absolutely agree with that.

Another aspect of the lack of empathy is the increasing tendency to assume that to make the wealthy work harder or achieve more, they must be paid even more, and to make the poorest people work harder, they must be paid even less and kept ever more desperate.

In short, if we were expressing the right values about the welfare state, the phrase "We're all in it together" would not sound like a sick joke. How long can anybody honestly say it has been since they heard that phrase without it sounding like a sick joke?

Jackie Baillie argued that the benefit of being in the UK and operating a welfare system throughout the UK is that we share the risks and rewards. I say in all honesty to her that if that was what I saw happening around me—if that was the country that I saw when I went out the door—I would sincerely be open to that argument. But really? As we look around us at the structure of the UK economy, I defy anyone to suggest that the risks and rewards of the UK economy are being fairly shared. The briefing from Oxfam tells us that—even in Scotland—the richest 100 people are worth more than £21 billion, yet 870,000 live in poverty. That is not an economy where the risks and rewards are shared.

Jackie Baillie: Does the member accept that a recent survey showed that 65 per cent of all pensioners wanted their pensions to continue to be paid across the UK, for the very reason that they wanted to share the risks and rewards?

Patrick Harvie: I understand the desire to share the risks and rewards, but I would challenge anyone who states that that is the way that the UK economy works. At the moment, the welfare system can only tinker at the edges, ameliorating the worst of the problem and firefighting poverty

and inequality. It is not structurally changing the situation.

I welcome many of the principles for the future of welfare that are set out in the Scottish Government's white paper. However, some of it could be clearer. For example, the language of protecting people from poverty could be interpreted as protecting them from the effects of poverty rather than ensuring that there is a welfare system that allows no one to live in poverty.

There are other examples that we could look to in building a welfare state for the 21st century. Our welfare state in the 21st century must be based on rebuilding values and the empathy that human beings have for one another—values that have been successfully attacked for many, many years by the centre and the centre right.

16:13

Stuart McMillan (West Scotland) (SNP): Just last month, I had a members' business debate on food banks. Some of the information that was available then is particularly relevant to today's debate. In that debate, there were no speakers from the Conservatives or the Liberal Democrats, although, unlike the Liberal Democrats, the Conservatives at least had the decency to apologise for not turning up.

As the motion states, there is an attack on the most vulnerable in our society by the UK Government, via its welfare reforms. Irrespective of which party is in power, Westminster is out of touch when it comes to the welfare of the vulnerable. When Labour was in power, we saw disabled people chaining their wheelchairs to the gates of Downing Street. We have seen similar protests during the Tory coalition years. Westminster politicians are simply too remote from the people they are meant to represent.

I suspect that Labour members in the chamber will tell us that everything will be different if Ed Miliband is elected Prime Minister. James Dornan commented on that. However, when we look at the evidence, it is a bit hard to believe. Labour's shadow spokesperson on welfare has repeatedly stated that Labour will be tougher on benefits than the Tories. If that is not bad enough, Labour has committed to sticking to the Tories' spending commitments for at least its first year in office—if it gets in.

Reports from Inclusion Scotland and Citizens Advice Scotland highlight the problems that face those who are reliant on benefits. Inclusion Scotland is concerned that tens of thousands of disabled people have been waiting more than six months even to be assessed for entitlement to the personal independence payment. It is also extremely concerned that the interaction between

the work capability assessment regime and conditionality sanctions is having a disproportionate impact on disabled people, particularly those with mental health issues, learning difficulties and cognitive impairments such as autism.

As we know, people on benefits usually have the lowest incomes, with no savings to cover unforeseen circumstances. Even a slight delay in receiving benefits can mean that they have no money to buy food for themselves or their children. Food banks have become an essential element of many people's lives as UK austerity measures focus the cuts on the vulnerable.

In its submission to the Welfare Reform Committee, the Trussell Trust states that in the 11 months between 1 April last year and 24 February this year, more than 56,000 people have used one of its food banks. That is up almost 300 per cent from the number of people who needed assistance over the whole of 2012-13. Benefit delays and changes are highlighted as the reason behind 50 per cent of referrals to food banks, and the trust points out that many of the people seeking help are already in work.

Yesterday, with Alyn Smith MEP and Councillor Math Campbell-Sturgess, I visited the Inverclyde food bank, which is run by the Elim Church and the Trussell Trust. Once again, we were told of the scale of the operation. The food bank has now fed more than 4,000 people, of whom 1,200 are children. I invite the Minister for Housing and Welfare to visit the food bank to learn about some of the ways in which it is responding to its increased workload, such as the use of online referrals to enable it to cut down on paperwork and devote more time and energy to helping those in need. The online referral system that it is trialling is a first in the UK.

That food bank is working in tandem with Inverclyde Council. Schoolchildren are brought in to be taught about what is going on. A few months ago, one of the children in a class that was visiting the food bank indicated that she had been fed from it. That was such a brave thing for that young child to say in front of her classmates—it certainly threw the folk at the food bank, who had never encountered that before. That poignant lesson makes the situation real. These are real people—adults and children—and we need to do whatever we can to help them.

We know that families are experiencing pressure on their finances to cut back on food spending, as it is one of the few discretionary areas of their household budget. To contradict totally the claims made by former Tory minister Edwina Currie, Oxfam has stated:

"No one turns up at Foodbanks because there is an opportunity for free food. They are driven there in sheer desperation."

Surely that must prove that the Westminster system of government is completely out of touch.

The Scottish Government has certainly done what it can to alleviate the worst of the hardships imposed by Westminster, including the investment of more than £250 million to mitigate the worst effects of Westminster's cuts. For example, there has been additional funding for advice services such as Citizens Advice Scotland, which is helping some citizens advice bureaux deal with an increased case load.

However, that is not a long-term, sustainable solution. To really tackle the issue, we need to have full powers over welfare. Alex Johnstone and Ken Macintosh talked about devolution and this Parliament. I suggest that the Parliament is not meant to be about Scottish mitigation of Westminster's welfare reforms; it is meant to be about Scottish solutions to Scottish problems. If we really want Scottish solutions to Scottish problems, that can happen only if this Parliament has the powers to deal with those problems.

As part of the UK, Scotland has become the fourth most unequal nation in the developed world. The increase in food banks is a consequence of that. In September of this year, we have a real chance to do something about that.

16:19

Elaine Murray (Dumfriesshire) (Lab): The debate comes on a day on which the Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations reports that 17 per cent of children in Dumfries and Galloway—nearly one child in five—live in poverty, which is a shocking statistic. The briefing that we received yesterday from Citizens Advice Scotland informed us that 40 per cent of all new issues brought to the organisation in 2012-13 related to welfare and benefits. The most recent statistics for the six months thereafter show that welfare and benefits continue to be the biggest area of concern for its clients.

That comes as no surprise to me or, I am sure, to many others. Despite the fact that welfare and benefits are not devolved to the Scottish Parliament, they are among the most frequent issues that appear in my casework, aside from email campaigns about specific issues. At one time the issue was housing; now it is welfare and benefits.

Like other speakers, I want to illustrate the situation through discussing constituency cases that have particularly shocked and appalled me. A severely disabled woman, who was disabled from birth but who worked prior to an accident that

badly exacerbated her disability, was wrongly assessed for ESA as being work capable, although there was absolutely no way that she was. In fact, that poor lady could barely walk into my surgery in Gretna to come to speak to me. That wrong assessment was rectified after I was in touch with Jobcentre Plus, but it should never have happened.

A Sanquhar woman who suffers from physical disabilities and mental health problems was sanctioned for not having done enough to find employment, with no consideration given to the fact that she suffers from severe depression or to the paucity of employment opportunities in Upper Nithsdale.

A gentleman who suffers from heart problems was assessed by Atos six months ago and was called in for another work capability assessment. He had to travel from Gretna to Dumfries—a distance of some 21 miles—to attend. He arrived and waited for about 10 minutes to be told that the doctor was too busy to see him and that he would be given another appointment. He got another appointment and received a call the day before to ensure that he would attend the following morning. However, as he was getting ready to leave for the appointment, he was phoned and told that it had been cancelled because the doctor had not turned up.

Another constituent from Lockerbie travelled to Dumfries—a distance of 13 miles—for an Atos assessment. As she is a wheelchair user she inquired whether the venue was wheelchair accessible and was told that it was. However, when she arrived she was told that health and safety regulations prevented her from using the lift unless she could exit by the stairs in the event of a fire, so she missed her assessment.

The UK Government has insisted that its reforms are necessary to make work pay. I am sure that everybody agrees that work should pay, and I am sure that we have all occasionally dealt with people who perhaps are less keen on work than we would like them to be. I also agree that the welfare system was overcomplicated and created difficulty for claimants and additional expense for the state. However, the reform process so far has been little short of a disaster. It has been highly stressful for both claimants and the front-line staff who have to impose the sanctions, summon claimants to appear for assessments and so on. It is not UK ministers but the front-line staff who work in those offices who have to face grief day after day, and it is hardly surprising that many of them suffer greatly from stress.

There is worse to come. When universal credit is eventually rolled out across the country, with its monthly retrospective payments, things are going

to get a great deal worse for many claimants. For example, I have been advised that drugs gangs targeted vulnerable people in parts of Dumfries, offering them extended credit in anticipation of universal credit, which was to be piloted in Dumfries last year. As we know, universal benefit includes the payment—to the tenant, monthly in arrears—of the housing benefit element. If the drug dealer turns up on the doorstep to claim what they want on the day that the monthly payment is received, what is the chance of the registered social landlord receiving rental payments?

If there is a positive side to the mess that is welfare reform, it is the way that different organisations in both the third sector and the public sector have worked together to mitigate its effects. For example, Dumfries & Galloway Citizens Advice Service, First Base, local churches and Dumfries and Galloway Council have been working together on the provision of food parcels that are now delivered to several locations throughout the region.

First Base has issued emergency food parcels for the past nine years. In the past, they were issued mainly to people in crisis, homeless people, people with drug and alcohol problems and veterans coming out of the services with various issues, but the number of people requiring emergency food parcels jumped 4.5-fold last year, and now 60 per cent of the people who require that assistance are actually in work. First Base puts that down to the cost of heating and petrol and the slashing of tax credits—so much for making work pay.

I was pleased when the Labour-SNP Dumfries and Galloway Council administration stepped up to the plate with a pledge last October that no one in the region should lose out as a result of the bedroom tax or the benefit cap. Any person who has this year suffered a cut in housing benefit due to those measures will be fully compensated by Dumfries and Galloway Council with discretionary housing payments that, if necessary, are backdated to April 2013. I am pleased that the Labour-SNP administration eventually managed to work together on the matter.

Christine Grahame mentioned that Alex Rowley describes himself as a socialist. Many of us on the Labour benches are proud to describe ourselves as socialists. I know that people in England, Wales and Northern Ireland are suffering because of welfare reform and the bedroom tax and are living in poverty. As a socialist, I am duty-bound not to turn my back on those people by voting for Scotland to leave the United Kingdom. We must stand in solidarity across the United Kingdom and in opposition to the bedroom tax, welfare reform and poverty.

16:26

Mark McDonald (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): A recent article in the *Aberdeen Evening Express* cited that 33 per cent of children in Northfield in my constituency are living in poverty. It is a great pity that, against that backdrop, the council's priority appears to be to try and ban the Scottish ministers from entering the city instead of discussing the issues that affect the people of the city that I care about so deeply.

On 19 February, a number of disability rights campaigners were involved in a protest about work capability assessments outside the Atos headquarters on Aberdeen's Union Street. For those who are not familiar with the Atos headquarters' location, it is just across the road from the better together campaign offices, which is a rather apt juxtaposition.

A number of my constituents have highlighted to me the impact of the work capability assessment on those who have what could be described as invisible disabilities. A number of members have cited such disabilities, including autism, mental health problems and brain injury. Superficially, people suffering from such conditions do not appear to have a disability. In many cases and on many occasions they present themselves as fully functioning—perhaps when they are being assessed, for example—but the nature of their disability means that they experience peaks and troughs and they require workplace adaptations that are not always readily identifiable at a work capability assessment.

Many of those people have to go through the humiliation of the work capability assessment, followed by the subsequent humiliation of appealing that assessment when it wrongly finds them to be fit for work. It is not the case that if people are successful in their appeal the matter simply goes away; rather, as others have mentioned, people are expected to return for further assessments as if the condition—autism or a brain injury—will somehow go away. I find it particularly galling to listen to Mary Scanlon saying, "Well, if only the NHS looked after people with mental health problems better, we wouldn't have to hit them with sticks as part of the welfare reform agenda." That is an abrogation of responsibility for the impact of her welfare reform agenda—she is a fully paid-up member of that agenda—on people with mental health problems.

Alex Rowley made a measured speech. He held up the 1945 welfare state as an example of the pooling and sharing of resources across these islands. Since 1999, however, the control of the national health service, which has been held up by many as the shining example of the 1945 reforms, has been entirely in the gift of this Parliament. I listened to Alex Rowley's party leader in a Radio 4

debate from Bearsden talking about the fact that it is good, when looking at what is happening to the national health service south of the border, to know that we have control of the NHS in Scotland, because we can protect against such an approach being taken here. The same argument applies to social protection in the form of the welfare system, however, because what is happening is a result of reforms that are being imposed by a Government that Scotland did not elect.

I say to the Labour Party that I understand its desire that we take a leap of faith and say to the electorate that, if they vote Labour, everything will be all right. The difficulty is that we tried that experiment in 2010 when Scotland voted Labour and we ended up with the coalition in power. Saying that Scotland just needs to vote no and then vote Labour is no guarantee that a Labour Government will get in. Even if it did, the lesson of the 1997 Labour Government retaining Tory benefit cuts, which was one of the things that caused Malcolm Chisholm to resign as a minister, ought to teach us to be cautious about looking to Labour as a potential solution.

Even if we were to take Labour's argument that the Parliament should be mitigating welfare reforms, we should know that when we walk into a room that has a leaking roof, the solution is not to say, "Well I'd better just chuck down some buckets." That is the approach that the Labour Party appears to take. It is entirely about mitigating what is decided elsewhere, rather than having the power and control to tackle it here.

Kevin Stewart and Christian Allard spoke about Aberdeen and poverty amidst plenty, and I touched on that when I talked about Northfield. Crisis UK, which Jamie Hepburn mentioned, sent me information that, as a result of the local housing allowance in Aberdeen being increased by only 1 per cent in 2014-15 and 2015-16 as against a rise in private rents of 8.2 per cent—and an increase for one-bed flats of 11 per cent—there could be a real homelessness challenge ahead for that city.

I listened to Alex Johnstone lecturing us about overcrowding as if he was somehow oblivious to the fact that his Tory Government of the 70s and 80s was entirely responsible for the shortfall in social housing because of the right to buy, which saw family-sized houses sold off at a discount that did not provide enough money to allow local authorities to replenish their housing stock. He should share and shoulder his party's responsibility for that.

I agree with Patrick Harvie about the narrative that we hear. The powerful convince the powerless that they are to blame: those who have never had to want for anything in their lives lecture those who are living hand-to-mouth. That is

particularly galling to watch, as is watching those who are in in-work poverty being told that the people to blame are those who are in abject poverty.

I do not believe that independence is a magic wand—I never have—but it supplies us with powers, resources and control over our future. We can take the opportunity to shape that future. We can use our powers to grow our working age population by cultivating an immigration policy that works for Scotland, not against it. We can shape a taxation policy that will collect more tax and allow less tax avoidance, giving us more money to be used. It is not the zero-sum game that the Tories and Liberal Democrats would have everyone believe. The future is ours to shape. All that we have to do is vote yes.

16:32

Mary Scanlon (Highlands and Islands) (Con):

I suppose that I should declare an interest because I speak in this debate with some experience. As a single parent with two pre-school children, I was on welfare benefits at times in my life. Like many others, I did not seek to be in that situation and did not expect to be in it. Given my experience, I welcome the universal benefit that brings six benefits into one, because during those times, when I compared my income with that of others, it was those who knew the system best who tended to gain the most.

Most of the discussion around welfare reform, including today's, seems to focus on adults and benefits, and rightly so. However, I remind the members of the Welfare Reform Committee that there are many adults who would pass their work capability assessment and who would love to work, but cannot, because of children receiving disability living allowance and being on long-term treatment plans. As a regular visitor at Aberdeen sick children's hospital, I know that more than my family are affected by that.

Many members have spoken about Oxfam. I thought that its briefing was very good, and I will take one quote from it. Oxfam believes that:

"it is reasonable for the state to expect people claiming out of work benefits to undertake activities which help them find decent quality, secure work which pays an income that keeps them out of poverty."

I found another welcome briefing, on an issue that is fairly close to my heart just now. Macmillan Cancer Support—another charity that works closely with the Westminster Government, not through megaphone diplomacy but by doing what is right for its clients—said that it was pleased when the DWP redesigned the ESA50 form so that it could fast-track cancer patients. Macmillan had asked for that and got it, and rightly so.

Macmillan is also pleased that waiting times for PIP claims for terminally ill people are down to nine days. I commend the DWP for doing what is right for the people whom Macmillan represents.

Welfare reform is helping to make things simpler. It is cutting bureaucracy—of course there are problems; I accept that—preparing people for work and ensuring that work pays. Universal credit, with full migration in 2017—I take Jackie Baillie's point—will combine jobseekers allowance, housing benefit, child tax credit, working tax credit, income support and employment and support allowance. Why would anyone not want to simplify the welfare system?

I welcome the fact that the minister is meeting Lord Freud. People talk about a system that is set in concrete, but there has now been a fourth review of work capability assessments. I particularly welcomed Malcolm Harrington's review, which considered fluctuating conditions such as mental health, ME and MS.

Kevin Stewart: Will the member give way?

Mary Scanlon: No, definitely not.

Conservatives believe that people should be better off in work than they would be on benefits. That is why we support a benefit cap of £26,000, which is equivalent to a gross salary of £35,000. Given that the average wage in Scotland is around £23,000—in the Highlands and Islands it is £21,000—the benefit cap level is still considerably more than many people earn in work. However, I am still waiting to find out whether the SNP is in favour of a benefit cap. I keep asking my colleague Alex Johnstone about that. I trust that the minister will mention that when she sums up.

Margaret Burgess and Mark McDonald dismissed issues to do with mental health, but I welcome what John Mason said and I welcome his work with the Scottish Association for Mental Health. He brought an understanding of mental health issues to the debate. Some 43 per cent of people on benefits have a mental health problem. Early diagnosis and support—we have a target of 26 weeks in relation to children—along with respect and dignity in relation to treatment would go a long way towards helping people to stay in work after their condition has been diagnosed.

Christian Allard: Will the member give way?

Mary Scanlon: I would rather have Kevin, if I had a choice. *[Laughter.]*

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Elaine Smith): Kevin Stewart.

Kevin Stewart: Mrs Scanlon talked about cutting down on bureaucracy. Does she not think that one of the wisest things would be to stop having work capability assessments again and

again and again for people who have chronic, progressive illnesses?

Mary Scanlon: That is a reason for the four reviews. The issue is being taken on board, which is a positive point.

I am running out of time. I very much welcomed Alex Rowley's speech, because it was about jobs and support for people to get into work.

Kenneth Macintosh said that food banks are springing up everywhere. The Trussell Trust does wonderful work, but it was set up in 2000; it did not suddenly come into being after welfare reform.

Ken Macintosh: Will Mrs Scanlon give way?

Mary Scanlon: I have less than a minute left.

Blythswood Care, a Christian charity in the Highlands, opened its Inverness centre in 2005, and FareShare was set up in 1994. It is worth mentioning FareShare, because it focuses not only on fighting hunger but on tackling food waste and providing training and education on essential skills for life.

I would welcome the minister telling us whether the Scottish Government supports a benefit cap and answering Willie Rennie's questions about the increase in welfare. Will she say what the Scottish Government will do for pensioners? Will she say whether there is a programme in Scotland that is similar to the troubled families programme in England, which is getting hundreds of millions of pounds from the Westminster Government?

16:39

Michael McMahon (Uddingston and Bellshill) (Lab): We waited for some time for a welfare debate to come along, and then two emerged on the business programme in the space of a week. I am closing this debate on behalf of the Labour Party and I look forward to opening a similar debate next week on behalf of the Welfare Reform Committee. That debate has been scheduled for some time and we will have a motion then that will possibly be a bit more consensual than today's motion.

It is absolutely right that the minister should include in her motion concerns about welfare cuts, sanctions and cuts that are punishing vulnerable people, and the Government is right to have concerns about the roll-out of the universal credit and fears about the effect of the change from the DLA to personal independence payments, but why is there no mention of job creation and the role that the Scottish Government has to play in helping people out of welfare dependency and poverty by creating jobs—and, more important, properly paid jobs?

This morning in the Welfare Reform Committee, we heard FareShare's spokesperson explaining that many people in low-income jobs, who have a family that they cannot provide food for, depend on its work. They have to turn to such organisations. There is a huge amount of work to do in relation to families in which people are in work.

The Scottish Government has some responsibilities that relate to that, and it would be useful to hear from the minister in her closing speech any examples that she can provide of the Scottish Government's recognition that complaining about changing the benefits system is not necessarily the only thing that we can do in discussing welfare. We must also discuss, as Alex Rowley did, the need for jobs—not jobs that tick a box, but jobs that pay a salary on which people can live. I agree with Ken Macintosh on the need to use instruments such as the Procurement Reform (Scotland) Bill to raise income and protect people who are in work.

Tory reform has laudable goals. Members across the chamber have indicated that we would not disapprove of improving incentives to work and simplifying the benefits system in themselves. I broadly support a system that would be easier for people to understand and offer better rewards to work. However, the Conservative contention is that the central problem is a failure of the benefits system to reward work. By contrast, the central and most pressing problem for Labour is the inadequate provision of work. To put it simply, welfare to work requires work.

I therefore believe that the balance of Iain Duncan Smith's efforts is wrong. A welcome but exclusive focus on the promise of a simpler benefits system marginalises the most pressing priority, which is work today.

The long-term reforms are already being overwhelmed by short-term cuts. My fear is that the Government, like previous Conservative Governments, has put too much emphasis on cutting benefits rather than on getting people into work.

A contradiction that should worry us all is at the root of the Government's deficit reduction strategy. It wants borrowing brought down, but its strategy puts all its eggs in the basket of reducing the welfare bill and at the same time risks increasing the dole queue. If it is not increasing the dole queue, it is certainly increasing underemployment, and we must address that.

Willie Rennie: Does the member not recognise that, since 2010, 130,000 jobs have been created in Scotland and 1.4 million across the UK? Does he not recognise that the Government's economic strategy is showing early signs of working?

Michael McMahon: I recognise that it is introducing far too much dependence on zero-hours contracts, putting too much emphasis on part-time work and not doing enough to create full-time, meaningful and properly paid jobs.

We have been here before. Failing to understand the relationship between the length of the dole queue and the size of the welfare bill contributed to a threefold rise in the number of people who were reliant on out-of-work benefits, which in turn led to a doubling of social security expenditure as a share of gross domestic product, between 1979 and the mid-1990s. How unfortunate, then, that we have apparently not learned lessons from the past.

I congratulate the Scottish Government on its efforts to mitigate some of the impacts of welfare reform, but it should resist the temptation to be too self-congratulatory. Although it has absorbed the £40 million for the council tax reduction scheme, it has done so by depending on the support of local authorities to find around 40 per cent of the shortfall from their already-stretched budgets. The Labour Administration in the Welsh Assembly found 100 per cent of the devolved reduction and, according to the Sheffield Hallam University studies, a number of Labour-led councils in England found the reduction that had been passed to them from their own resources.

The minister is correct that Atos has been administering the assessment regime and that we have been right to criticise the way in which it has conducted its affairs in relation to delivering on behalf of the Department for Work and Pensions. However, we must also recognise—members across the chamber have failed to do this—that Salus will administer the new PIP assessments and, just as Atos did, will make a profit from that process that will then be returned to the NHS in Scotland. If the Scottish Government was at least honest about that, that would provide us with more ground for agreement on how we can tackle the impact of the change that it is now helping to implement.

The Scottish Government also has a role in relation to general practitioners, who have a central responsibility in delivering further medical evidence. That is part of their GP contract; yet, the Welfare Reform Committee has heard evidence that only around 50 per cent of GPs are complying with their contract. That is a Scottish Government responsibility.

We can congratulate the Scottish Government on setting up the Scottish welfare fund but, as Jackie Baillie and Siobhan McMahon pointed out, problems are emerging that must be addressed. Yes, there has been an increase in demand and in the receipts for people when their claims are processed, but payment awards are reducing and

the increase in the number of referrals from the Scottish welfare fund to food banks is increasing. The committee was told this morning that we must not allow food banks to become part of the system and an aspect of the Government's solution to the problem of food poverty. Food banks are not and can never be an extension of the welfare system. The Scottish Government must, therefore, be careful to ensure that the operation of the Scottish welfare fund does not draw food banks into the system.

Alex Johnstone referred to the impact of reform as we heard about it at the committee this morning. However, as Annabel Ewing said, he must have been at a different meeting from the rest of us. Contrary to what Alex Johnstone said, the food bank organisers and others who spoke to us provided irrefutable evidence that there is a link between the Conservatives' welfare reforms and the increases in food poverty and food bank usage. For Mary Scanlon's information, I point out that it was made clear to us just by the Trussell Trust—not by FareShare and all the other people who are contributing to food aid—that 56,000 people are using its food banks, a number that has increased over two years from 7,000. To say that there is no link between food bank usage and the welfare reforms defies logic.

The Presiding Officer: Can you wind up, please, Mr McMahon?

Michael McMahon: We have huge issues to address and there are lots of things for us to do. I have suggested a couple of areas in which the minister could respond positively. There is much work to be done and we will support the Government when it gets it right, but it should not expect us not to be critical of what it is doing to mitigate the welfare reforms.

16:49

Margaret Burgess: It has been an interesting debate and I thank everybody who has spoken in it. All the stories that we have heard from members' constituencies and those that were recounted to the Welfare Reform Committee show clearly that there is something very wrong with the current welfare state. They are not isolated cases; we have heard about the same problems arising from Aberdeen to Dumfries and Galloway.

There is a real problem with reform of the welfare state. As Michael McMahon said, there is clearly a connection between the benefit reforms, the tough sanctions regime and the increase in the number of people in Scotland who use food banks.

I will try to address some of the wide-ranging points that have been made, one of which was about work. As I said in my opening speech, of course work should pay. We need to provide

meaningful work for people in order to get them out of the poverty trap, but we also need a welfare system that supports those who cannot work.

Alongside our commitment to helping people to remain in work, through the Children and Young People (Scotland) Bill we are adding 125 hours of early learning and childcare, which will mean that there will be a minimum of 600 hours provision a year, which will improve outcomes for children and support parents to gain employment, education or training. We are taking action to expand provision of childcare to the most vulnerable two-year-olds. Coupled with our other activities, the expansion of our childcare offer will help to tackle child poverty, which Jackie Baillie mentioned.

Child poverty is a big concern for me. Since devolution, it has come down from 28 per cent to its current level of 15 per cent. *[Interruption.]* I hear Ms Baillie say that that happened during her party's time in government; child poverty has reduced in our time in government, as well. However, we cannot ignore the view of the Institute for Fiscal Studies and the Child Poverty Action Group that the number of children in Scotland in poverty will increase by 50,000 to 100,000 under the current welfare reforms. That is simply not acceptable.

Willie Rennie: The minister knows that I welcome the expansion in provision of nursery education for two-year-olds, which we pushed for for some time, but can she explain why the commitment on universal child benefit that was given in last January's debate on child poverty is not included in the white paper?

Margaret Burgess: As I have explained, the white paper clearly indicates how we will take forward welfare reform and what we intend to do with the welfare state. Under our proposals, the welfare state will look after all our citizens and we will all have a stake in it, which is the way things should be. I think that it was Patrick Harvie who talked about working together. A welfare state is not just for other people—it is for all of us. We put in to it when we can, and we get money back out when we need it. That is Government's contract with the people, and that is what a welfare state should be.

There has been a lot of criticism of the Scottish welfare fund. I have several things to say about that. The Scottish welfare fund is a new fund that was considered by the Welfare Reform Committee. We consulted widely with our stakeholders on what should be included in the fund and what should be in the guidance. The fund was new for local authorities, which deliver it on behalf of the Scottish Government; it is localised. Since we amended the fund and listened to suggestions, take-up is increasing. It is clear that,

had we not added £9.2 million to the fund, it would have been exhausted by the end of this year.

The Scottish welfare fund has been criticised for sending people to food banks. It is not the case that that happens. People are referred to food banks only if they do not meet the criteria to get anything from the fund. They might be sent to food banks for other reasons, but there is no presumption that anyone who makes an application to the Scottish welfare fund will be sent to a food bank. That has been made very clear to local authorities, and the guidance has been firmed up in order to make the position absolutely crystal clear.

As far as sanctions are concerned, the Scottish welfare fund cannot make regular payments to everyone who has suffered a benefits sanction. It is not possible because there is simply not enough money in the fund for that. However, the fund can pay out at crisis times. We have looked at the guidance and have made the position on that clear in order to ensure that a consistent approach is adopted. The fund cannot pay out weekly to everyone who suffers a benefits sanction, because such money is simply not available.

Michael McMahon: A few weeks ago I, as convener of the Welfare Reform Committee, attended a conference at which money advice workers and welfare rights officers were questioning officials from the Scottish welfare fund about why people are receiving funds but are also being directed to food banks for what is almost a top-up. Why have briefings been given that suggest that that is an instruction that has been given to Scottish welfare fund officers?

Margaret Burgess: I will be absolutely clear and say it again: there is absolutely no instruction from the Scottish Government, or in the guidance, that people who apply to the Scottish welfare fund should be referred to food banks. That, too, will come up at the practitioners' meeting. However, I want to make it absolutely clear that there is no such instruction.

The last thing that I will say on the welfare fund is in response to the point that was made by Siobhan McMahon, who said that CPAG is concerned about the exceptional pressure on families. Last October, we appointed Heriot-Watt University to undertake an independent review of operation of the new fund. We expect to publish that evaluation in the spring. That, along with the consultation on the draft welfare funds (Scotland) bill, which closed on 7 February, will help us to identify any changes that we need to make. I make it clear that the consultation was on a draft bill.

I am running out of time. We have heard George Osborne say that a future Conservative

Government would implement further cuts of up to £25 billion. We have also heard that a Labour Government would implement cuts as well, and that it would in its first year carry on with the existing cuts. That is simply not acceptable to me or to people in Scotland. The UK's cuts and changes are creating more problems than they are solving; they are just not working. [*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Excuse me, minister.

Can people who are coming into the chamber please leave your conversations outside and let us hear the minister?

Margaret Burgess: Thank you, Presiding Officer.

As I said, the UK's cuts and changes are creating more problems than they are solving and they are simply not working. This is not just about the Tory Government; the situation has been continuing for as long as I can remember. We have tried it under Labour Governments as well. People do not get better off under the welfare state, nor did the number of jobs increase.

However, the Scottish Government is taking direct action to help the people who are most affected by the UK's cuts and changes. We have put in place new arrangements including the council tax reduction scheme and we have established the Scottish welfare fund. I have said what we are doing in childcare to ensure that more parents can get into work. As I said, if we had not topped up the welfare fund, it would have been exhausted.

We are not complacent about the welfare fund, however, and have just rolled out more information about it. The fund is not just about mitigation, though, because we will never be able to mitigate all the damaging effects of welfare reform. However, we will continue to do what we can, in the meantime. We will help people in communities in Scotland through the changes and ensure that the most vulnerable people in our society are protected.

In the white paper on independence—this will answer points that were made by Willie Rennie, who said that we have not said what we would do—we said that we would abolish the bedroom tax within the first year of an independent Scotland, halt roll-out of universal credit and the personal independence payment, and separate housing benefit from universal credit and pay it to landlords, if that is what the individual wants.

Independence would allow the Scottish Parliament to make decisions on welfare to ensure that Scotland's people have a social security system that best meets the needs of Scotland's circumstances. Key principles that will underpin the Scottish Government's approach to welfare in

an independent Scotland will be that we should contribute to the welfare system when we can and be able to access it when we need to; that the system is fair, transparent and sympathetic to the challenges that are faced by people who receive benefits; that it respects personal dignity, equality and human rights; and that for those who cannot undertake paid work, benefits should not relegate them to a life of financial uncertainty and poverty. Benefits must support a standard of living that ensures dignity and enables participation in society.

However, to turn those principles into reality we need all the powers and resources here in Scotland. Only with independence will we have that platform. I want to make it clear that the UK reforms are not of our making, but are causing upset and distress across Scotland. They have no place in the type of country that Scotland aspires to be.

Let me also make it clear that no one in the chamber or outside it should ever imagine that it is enough for this Parliament to get permission from Westminster to handle welfare—to be left to divvy up Westminster's slashed budget for welfare provision. In this year of all years, such an offer would fall well short of what Scotland needs and what Scotland demands. Only with full powers over Scotland's finances and the rebuilding of our economy will Scotland's Government and the Scottish Parliament be able to deliver the fair and effective welfare provision that this country needs. That can be delivered only with a yes vote.

Deep Sea Mining Bill

17:00

The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick): The next item of business is consideration of motion S4M-09210, in the name of John Swinney, on the Deep Sea Mining Bill, which is United Kingdom legislation.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees that the relevant provisions of the Deep Sea Mining Private Members' Bill introduced in the House of Commons on 19 June 2013 relating to the amendment of the Deep Sea Mining (Temporary Provisions) Act 1981, so far as these matters fall within the legislative competence of the Scottish Parliament or alter the executive competence of the Scottish Ministers, should be considered by the UK Parliament.—[*John Swinney.*]

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

Decision Time

17:00

The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick): There are four questions to be put as a result of today's business. The first question is, that amendment S4M-09209.3, in the name of Jackie Baillie, which seeks to amend motion S4M-09209, in the name of Margaret Burgess, on responding to welfare reform, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Baker, Richard (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Baxter, Jayne (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Beamish, Claudia (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Chisholm, Malcolm (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (Lab)
 Dugdale, Kezia (Lothian) (Lab)
 Fee, Mary (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Ferguson, Patricia (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (Lab)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Henry, Hugh (Renfrewshire South) (Lab)
 Hilton, Cara (Dunfermline) (Lab)
 Kelly, James (Rutherglen) (Lab)
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab)
 Macdonald, Lewis (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Macintosh, Ken (Eastwood) (Lab)
 Martin, Paul (Glasgow Provan) (Lab)
 McCulloch, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 McDougall, Margaret (West Scotland) (Lab)
 McMahon, Michael (Uddingston and Bellshill) (Lab)
 McMahon, Siobhan (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 McNeil, Duncan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab)
 McTaggart, Anne (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Murray, Elaine (Dumfriesshire) (Lab)
 Pentland, John (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)
 Rowley, Alex (Cowdenbeath) (Lab)
 Simpson, Dr Richard (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Smith, Drew (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Smith, Elaine (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab)
 Stewart, David (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)

Against

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Allan, Dr Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Allard, Christian (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Biagi, Marco (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Brodie, Chic (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Buchanan, Cameron (Lothian) (Con)
 Burgess, Margaret (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Campbell, Aileen (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 Campbell, Roderick (North East Fife) (SNP)
 Carlaw, Jackson (West Scotland) (Con)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Crawford, Bruce (Stirling) (SNP)
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)

Davidson, Ruth (Glasgow) (Con)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don, Nigel (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Eadie, Jim (Edinburgh Southern) (SNP)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
 Fabiani, Linda (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Fergusson, Alex (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Finnie, John (Highlands and Islands) (Ind)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hume, Jim (South Scotland) (LD)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Ingram, Adam (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
 Johnstone, Alex (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Johnstone, Alison (Lothian) (Green)
 Keir, Colin (Edinburgh Western) (SNP)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lamont, John (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 Lyle, Richard (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 MacAskill, Kenny (Edinburgh Eastern) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Angus (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 Mackay, Derek (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 MacKenzie, Mike (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
 Maxwell, Stewart (West Scotland) (SNP)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McDonald, Mark (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 McGrigor, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 McInnes, Alison (North East Scotland) (LD)
 McKelvie, Christina (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)
 McLeod, Aileen (South Scotland) (SNP)
 McLeod, Fiona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (West Scotland) (SNP)
 Milne, Nanette (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Neil, Alex (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Paterson, Gil (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Rennie, Willie (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Russell, Michael (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Scanlon, Mary (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Urquhart, Jean (Highlands and Islands) (Ind)
 Watt, Maureen (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Wheelhouse, Paul (South Scotland) (SNP)
 White, Sandra (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Wilson, John (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow) (SNP)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 33, Against 79, Abstentions 0.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S4M-09209.2, in the name of Alex Johnstone, which seeks to amend motion S4M-09209, in the name of Margaret Burgess, on responding to welfare reform, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Buchanan, Cameron (Lothian) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (West Scotland) (Con)
 Davidson, Ruth (Glasgow) (Con)
 Fergusson, Alex (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Johnstone, Alex (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Lamont, John (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 McGrigor, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Milne, Nanette (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Scanlon, Mary (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)

Against

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Allan, Dr Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Allard, Christian (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Baker, Richard (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Baxter, Jayne (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Beamish, Claudia (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Biagi, Marco (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Brodie, Chic (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Burgess, Margaret (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Campbell, Aileen (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 Campbell, Roderick (North East Fife) (SNP)
 Chisholm, Malcolm (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (Lab)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Crawford, Bruce (Stirling) (SNP)
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don, Nigel (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Dugdale, Kezia (Lothian) (Lab)
 Eadie, Jim (Edinburgh Southern) (SNP)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
 Fabiani, Linda (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Fee, Mary (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Ferguson, Patricia (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (Lab)
 Finnie, John (Highlands and Islands) (Ind)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Henry, Hugh (Renfrewshire South) (Lab)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hilton, Cara (Dunfermline) (Lab)

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

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 12, Against 100, Abstentions 0.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S4M-09209, in the name of Margaret Burgess, on responding to welfare reform, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.
[Interruption.] Members should switch off their phones while they are at it.

For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Allan, Dr Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Allard, Christian (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Biagi, Marco (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Brodie, Chic (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Burgess, Margaret (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Campbell, Aileen (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 Campbell, Roderick (North East Fife) (SNP)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Crawford, Bruce (Stirling) (SNP)
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don, Nigel (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Eadie, Jim (Edinburgh Southern) (SNP)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
 Fabiani, Linda (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Finnie, John (Highlands and Islands) (Ind)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Ingram, Adam (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
 Johnstone, Alison (Lothian) (Green)
 Keir, Colin (Edinburgh Western) (SNP)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 Lyle, Richard (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 MacAskill, Kenny (Edinburgh Eastern) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Angus (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 Mackay, Derek (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 MacKenzie, Mike (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
 Maxwell, Stewart (West Scotland) (SNP)
 McDonald, Mark (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)
 McLeod, Aileen (South Scotland) (SNP)
 McLeod, Fiona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (West Scotland) (SNP)
 Neil, Alex (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Paterson, Gil (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Russell, Michael (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Urquhart, Jean (Highlands and Islands) (Ind)
 Watt, Maureen (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Wheelhouse, Paul (South Scotland) (SNP)
 White, Sandra (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Wilson, John (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow) (SNP)

Against

Buchanan, Cameron (Lothian) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (West Scotland) (Con)
 Davidson, Ruth (Glasgow) (Con)
 Fergusson, Alex (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Hume, Jim (South Scotland) (LD)
 Johnstone, Alex (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Lamont, John (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McGregor, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 McInnes, Alison (North East Scotland) (LD)
 Milne, Nanette (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Rennie, Willie (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD)
 Scanlon, Mary (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)

Abstentions

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Baker, Richard (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Baxter, Jayne (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Beamish, Claudia (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Chisholm, Malcolm (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (Lab)
 Dugdale, Kezia (Lothian) (Lab)
 Fee, Mary (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Ferguson, Patricia (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (Lab)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Henry, Hugh (Renfrewshire South) (Lab)
 Hilton, Cara (Dunfermline) (Lab)
 Kelly, James (Rutherglen) (Lab)
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab)
 Macdonald, Lewis (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Macintosh, Ken (Eastwood) (Lab)
 Martin, Paul (Glasgow Provan) (Lab)
 McCulloch, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 McDougall, Margaret (West Scotland) (Lab)
 McMahon, Michael (Uddingston and Bellshill) (Lab)
 McMahon, Siobhan (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 McNeil, Duncan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab)
 McTaggart, Anne (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Murray, Elaine (Dumfriesshire) (Lab)
 Pentland, John (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)
 Rowley, Alex (Cowdenbeath) (Lab)
 Simpson, Dr Richard (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Smith, Drew (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Smith, Elaine (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab)
 Stewart, David (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 63, Against 16, Abstentions 33.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament is concerned that the welfare cuts of the UK Government are a direct attack on the living standards of sick and disabled people, women, children and unemployed people; considers that far from being part of a "moral crusade", these cuts seek to punish vulnerable people in society; is concerned that the rollout of universal credit and personal independence payments has become a chaotic shambles and a waste of money and considers that the UK Government should call a halt to the rollout now, and recognises that the way to have a properly functioning and fair social security system in Scotland is to have social security run by the Scottish Parliament for the people of Scotland.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S4M-09210, in the name of John Swinney, on the Deep Sea Mining Bill, which is United Kingdom legislation, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that the relevant provisions of the Deep Sea Mining Private Members' Bill introduced in the House of Commons on 19 June 2013 relating to the amendment of the Deep Sea Mining (Temporary Provisions) Act 1981, so far as these matters fall within the legislative competence of the Scottish Parliament or alter the executive competence of the Scottish Ministers, should be considered by the UK Parliament.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes decision time.

Thirsting for Justice

The Deputy Presiding Officer (John Scott): The final item of business is a members' business debate on motion S4M-08835, in the name of Claudia Beamish, on thirsting for justice. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament understands that the average daily consumption of water of Palestinian people to cover domestic and public service needs is around 70 litres per person; believes that this is well below the 100 litre limit recommended by the World Health Organization; understands that Israeli policies and practices limit access to water for people in Palestine to less than they are entitled to under international law; believes that only 31% of West Bank residents have access to the sewage network and that there is only one waste water treatment plant operating in the area; considers that there are significant barriers to access to water for agricultural use; condemns what it sees as Israel's refusal to grant the necessary permits or military security clearance for the construction and operation of sanitation and waste water treatment facilities; understands that the situation is far worse in the Gaza Strip where, it believes, over 30 kilometres of waterworks and 11 wells operated by the water authorities were damaged or destroyed by the Israeli military during its mission, Operation Cast Lead; understands that the *Report of the United Nations Fact-Finding Mission on the Gaza Conflict*, which is known as the Goldstone report, deemed that the Israeli actions were "deliberate and systematic"; applauds the Thirsting for Justice Campaign, which, it understands, works directly with communities in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, and notes the campaign's aim to encourage European citizens, including those in the south of Scotland, to demand that governments put pressure on Israel to comply with international law and for human rights to be respected in Palestine.

17:05

Claudia Beamish (South Scotland) (Lab): As I open the thirsting for justice debate to highlight water challenges for the Palestinian people, I am acutely aware of the stark fact that many people will not have had enough clean water to drink, wash in or water their crops today.

I welcome to the public gallery many members of the Scottish Parliament's cross-party group on Palestine, who are here to witness the debate. Afterwards, they will attend a meeting to input their humanitarian and political perspectives. Many of them are actively working for the desired outcomes. They are people such as Jim Malone of the Fire Brigades Union, who took fire engines to Nablus and is about to welcome Palestinian firefighters to another training course in Glasgow to develop skills in water rescue, and the volunteers at the Hadeel shop in Edinburgh, where we can all buy fairly traded Palestinian goods and crafts.

I know that the Minister for External Relations and International Development is eager to hear the debate. Only procedure prevents it from being a joint members' business debate with my colleague John Finnie.

John Finnie and I went to Gaza during the ceasefire after the pillar of defence operation in November 2012. We were part of a Europe-wide delegation of parliamentarians who were taken by the Council for European Palestinian Relations on a fact-finding visit. Our choice of water justice for Palestine as the subject for this debate is a symbol and proxy for all the other injustices that make Palestinians' lives pretty impossible, despite all their resilience. The debate is timely, as Martin Schulz, president of the European Parliament, recently raised water issues in the Knesset.

On our Gaza visit, when we came in across the Sinai desert by bus, we were hit from the start by the stark realities at the Rafah crossing. Anxious people were milling about and others were just waiting, waiting and waiting. Amnesty International's 2009 report "Troubled Waters: Palestinians denied fair access to water" tells us that Israel restricts the import of equipment that relates to water supplies. When we came into Gaza city, we saw people walking with small bottles of water. The "Troubled Waters" report says that many families in the occupied Palestinian territories

"have to spend as much as a quarter ... of their income on water"

that is of questionable quality and from dubious sources. However, the 450,000 Israeli settlers who live in the west bank, in violation of international law, use as much water as or more water than the Palestinian population of 2.3 million.

During our visit, one of the presentations by non-governmental organisations came from the Emergency Water and Sanitation/Hygiene group—EWASH. In an EWASH report, a local resident, Um Helmi, says:

"We see that the nearby settlement is green and has grass growing all year and we feel pain that we are being robbed of water. All we want is justice".

When we left Gaza by bus, John Finnie and I were told that we would have to make a major detour, as a bridge on one of the main tarmacked roads out of Gaza city had been bombed the week before. That targeted destruction not only caused long-term traffic chaos and hampered city access but destroyed a sewage pipeline going out to the sea, so there was polluted water in the river mouth.

During operation cast lead in 2009, more than 30km of water infrastructure was damaged or destroyed by the Israeli military. The United Nations fact-finding mission on the Gaza conflict—

the Goldstone report—deemed that destruction "deliberate and systematic". Most of the infrastructure has not yet been repaired because of a lack of access to spare parts, which is partly due to the blockade.

Our reason for heading out a different way was to visit a newly planted date plantation run by a co-operative, which was irrigated by a fragile water system. It was a symbol of hope and optimism against all the odds. EWASH says:

"The Israeli blockade on the Gaza Strip and Israel's military operation ... have exacerbated existing water quality and supply problems and caused increased damage to water resources essential for agriculture.

In the past, agriculture production in Gaza ensured food security. Currently, agriculture in the Gaza Strip is barely viable."

When John Finnie and I returned, we made a commitment to regularly do something practical for Palestine, if possible. We are in dialogue with the minister, unions, water companies and the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East—UNWRA—about support for possible partnership water projects, and with academia about a possible Palestinian scholarship on international water law.

The minister's encouragement and support is much valued. We have also asked him to consider active Scottish Government support through the climate justice fund, when it is reviewed. Water resource management in Malawi has already been funded through the fund, so there is a precedent. As Friends of the Earth International stressed in its report "Environmental Nakba: Environmental injustice and violations of the Israeli occupation of Palestine", there should be eco justice for Palestine.

Further, we ask the minister about active Scottish Government support through the international development fund, which as he will know, has

"a focus on working in partnership and achieving real and tangible outcomes on the ground".

I ask the minister to consider providing support in the next review. Such targeted commitments would send a clear message from Scotland globally about our commitment to a just solution for the Palestinian people.

I have known about the plight of Palestine since I was a teenager, when I visited Lebanon with my father, who was then a member of Parliament. There, I met exiles and saw the refugee camps. How can it be that, so many years later, there is still no solution?

Working for better immediate conditions in no way diminishes the urgency of the present diplomatic negotiations. Thirsting for justice on

water issues is of course symbolic of a political thirsting for justice. The visit to Gaza that John Finnie and I were part of had representation from many European Union countries. The clear message from our delegation leader, Northern Ireland Assembly member Pat Sheehan, to the world media was that all parties must be represented in the peace process. That resonated strongly with me, and I am clear that it must be the way forward. I hope that the minister agrees and that the Scottish Government will consider making that point in its representations to the United Kingdom Government on taking forward a just solution in the middle east.

Responsibility for the failure so far to resolve the on-going Palestinian crisis lies in many places and countries. I believe that, in the complex puzzle of middle eastern politics, we must send a clear message today that adds to the voices of many across the world—in America, Russia, Europe and Israel itself—that the time has come for a just solution for the people in the occupied territories and for the exiles across the world.

John Kerry's framework agreement deadline of 28 April focuses minds yet again. Of course, a lasting solution will involve compromise, and it must be grounded in justice. I look forward to hearing the perspectives of other members on what I hope is not an intractable problem.

17:13

John Finnie (Highlands and Islands) (Ind): I congratulate my colleague and friend Claudia Beamish on securing the debate and on the content of her speech, which was much appreciated. Many people will be astonished that, in the 21st century, we are having this debate. Claudia Beamish has covered much of what took place during our visit. I found the visit humbling.

What the Israeli defence people call operation pillar of defence, the Palestinians call the eight-day war, which was a war that took a significant toll. Language is terribly important, and the Israeli defence people use words such as precision. Just a short while ago, I rechecked online and found that the website proudly shows the precision attack on a military leader, as they call him, in a street. Most certainly, something struck a vehicle and it exploded but, of course, the website does not share the fact that one of the victims was a nine-year-old child.

One of the first places that Claudia Beamish and I visited was the Al Dula family house, which had also been the target of a precision air strike. That precision strike had killed a large family, including women and children, who were gathering for wedding celebrations. Precision is important, and the Israeli authorities know precisely what they are

doing. That is not just my view; it is the view of others.

I commend to members the Friends of the Earth report "Environmental Nakba: Environmental injustice and violations of the Israeli occupation of Palestine", which talks, first of all, about the world's apparent indifference to the plight of the Palestinian people, particularly those in Gaza. It goes on to say:

"Even more ignored has been the wholesale grabbing of fertile land and water resources and the environmental pollution and destruction due to industrial and nuclear waste dumping."

Friends of the Earth talks about how

"environmental justice is intrinsically linked to social justice"—

we would all agree with that—

"human dignity, respect for human rights and the self-determination of peoples."

Those are all clearly absent in that population. It is a population of 1.5 million in one of the most densely populated places on earth, and 1.1 million of them are refugees.

During the assault, the Israeli defence force attacked a police station that was beside one of the food distribution points. It is a damning indictment on the world that 80 per cent of the population relies on aid.

In its report, Friends of the Earth goes on to talk about "Land grabs and water apartheid":

"Land can be arbitrarily designated as required for security purposes or as closed military areas".

It also mentions:

"The expansion of areas that are off limits to Palestinians".

That was sadly apparent on Friday or Saturday, when a mentally ill woman who had wandered into such an area was shot repeatedly.

We are talking about basic things. What is more important than food, shelter and water? The water resources are being exploited, and they are extremely limited. In the short time that I have, I certainly cannot go into the detail that I would like to.

The blockade on Gaza is having a terrible toll. The Egyptian situation has not helped because of the closure of the tunnels. The sewage, which is dumped raw into the Mediterranean Sea, takes a toll more widely: the sea surrounds not only Gaza or Israel; many countries are affected by that pollution.

I would like the rule of law and basic humanity to be recognised. Climate change will affect us all, and the demands on water around the globe will be an issue, not least for countries that are

upstream of other countries. Israel is in a position to do something. Claudia Beamish talked about deliberate and systematic destruction—that was referred to in one of the official reports—but I would call it mindless and brutal vandalism.

I am grateful to the Minister for External Affairs and International Development for his support and interest in the matter and for the all-party support that exists. I commend Claudia Beamish again for her work on it, and I look forward to hearing the other speeches.

17:17

Elaine Smith (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab): I am a member of the cross-party group on Palestine and of Scottish Friends of Palestine. The latter organisation states:

“The occupation continues, as does the humiliation, the hardship & the violence suffered at the hands of the settlers & occupation forces alike. Millions of refugees, decades on, are still denied their rights.

With Israel trying to blame the victims for their plight, with the International community largely deferring to the wishes of Israel & her supporters & taking no effective action to protect the Palestinian people, they need your support more than ever.”

Therefore, I am pleased to speak in support of Claudia Beamish’s motion on thirsting for justice, but I apologise to members, because I have to leave shortly after my speech.

Access to clean water and sanitation is a basic human right. It is worth repeating that article 25 of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights states:

“Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family”.

I also reiterate that the Amnesty International report “Troubled Waters: Palestinians denied fair access to water” states that consumption levels in the occupied Palestinian territories fall well below the World Health Organization daily per capita consumption of 100 litres.

I also highlight the fact that, as the motion states and Claudia Beamish mentioned, the UN Goldstone report deemed that the Israeli actions in the Gaza strip were “deliberate and systematic”. There, the Israeli military damaged or destroyed more than 30km of water works and 11 wells operated by the water authorities.

It was predicted in 2012 that the water crisis would make the Gaza strip unliveable in. Some 113,000 Palestinians in the west bank are still not connected to the water network and are dependent on water that is transported in tanker trucks, which raises the price significantly. In many of those communities, which are extremely poor, the families are forced to spend up to 40 per cent

of their income on that basic commodity. In 2009, a World Bank study found that Israelis had access to 4.42 times more water than the Palestinians in the west bank did. That is simply unacceptable.

One of the problems in and outside the Parliament is that, when we try to discuss human rights abuses in Palestine, there can be a charge of anti-Semitism. That is an unfair accusation, and it may well be levelled to try to stop the plight of the Palestinians being debated and highlighted. Indeed, only last week, as Claudia Beamish noted, the President of the European Parliament faced criticism merely for making remarks about difficulties that are faced by Palestinians in the west bank, including difficulties around access to water.

I often receive emails from Jewish Voice for Peace, which is based in the US. It states:

“As Jews, we can make the distinction between real anti-Semitism and the cynical manipulation of that issue to shield Israel from legitimate criticism.”

Jews for Justice for Palestinians, which is based in the UK, recognises that peace in the middle east will come about only

“with mutual recognition and respect and must be seen as just by both sides.”

That is something that Claudia Beamish pointed out. The group also recognises that peace requires the end of the illegal occupation and settlement. It states that

“Violence against civilians is unacceptable”

and that

“Israel’s policies in the West Bank and Gaza are breeding hatred and resentment.”

Endless conflict and occupation creates the conditions for human rights abuses, including the killing of children and the denial of water and sanitation to thousands. Condemnation of violence against civilians in the conflict, no matter by whom it is carried out, goes without saying, as does the fact that lasting peace must be seen as just by both sides. We all have a part to play in helping to bring that about. Britain, the EU, Russia and the UN must be persuaded to implement UN resolutions on Palestine.

As we approach world water day, it is important to highlight the plight of Palestinians, since that might not be as well known as the lack of water and sanitation in other parts of the world, such as Africa. Israel must stop denying Palestinians the right to access adequate water, give up its total control of shared water resources and stop pursuing discriminatory policies. Even my four-year-old niece recognises the right to have clean water. When she saw an advert for WaterAid on television, she said, “There’s lots of water. Why don’t they have any? Can we post them some?”

People in Palestine, including children, are dying for want of water and sanitation, and I hope that our voices tonight can contribute to raising awareness, changing conditions and delivering justice in Palestine.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Due to the number of members who wish to speak in the debate, I am minded to accept a motion without notice to extend the debate by up to 30 minutes.

Motion moved,

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

Motion agreed to.

17:22

Sandra White (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP): I thank Claudia Beamish and John Finnie—I know that it was a joint effort—for securing the debate and for the informative blogging. I think that the work that they did in Gaza was commendable, and I got a lot of information from reading what they wrote.

I want to concentrate on what is, for me, the most important part of the motion: the situation in Gaza. As Claudia Beamish and John Finnie have, I—along with Jim Hume and others—have visited Gaza. One thing that sticks in my mind is our being taken on a tour to see the sewers that had been broken and destroyed by Israeli military action. I remember standing on a bank of mud, along with families and young children, looking at raw sewage running past us. The 1.5 million people there—who live in what I would call a jail or a prison and are among the poorest people in the world—have to buy water. Even though they are surrounded by water, they cannot get clean water, because of the situation with the sewage pipes.

I want to thank the thirsting for justice campaign, which has brought the issue to the attention of many people, including the people in the gallery who will be at a meeting later tonight. I also thank the minister for his interest in the subject; it is an important issue that has been raised before by others.

Gaza is one of the most densely populated areas on Earth, and the Israeli blockade of the area has prevented development of essential infrastructure, including for water. The restrictions on importing into Gaza materials and equipment that are necessary for the development and repair of infrastructure have led to the water and sanitation situation reaching crisis point.

Poor maintenance of the sewage treatment plant is another issue. Sewage is left untreated and has been allowed to flow daily not just through the streets of Gaza and other areas, but into the sea, where it has contaminated the underground aquifer. Recent flooding in Gaza has exacerbated

the situation beyond comprehension for the people who are trapped there.

Under the terms of the Oslo accords, the west bank and Gaza constitute a single territorial entity. However, no provisions were made to allow for transfer of water from the west bank to Gaza, which leaves Gaza's water needs to be met from local resources. Hence, we might say that we have double trouble.

According to the UN environment programme:

"The state of the environment in the Gaza Strip is bleak from any perspective."

It goes on to say that

"The aquifer is severely damaged and collapsing quickly. Unless the trend is reversed now, damage could take centuries to reverse."

The people of Gaza are suffering tremendously from years and years of Israeli blockade. Claudia Beamish touched on the fact that it is time to do something. As I mentioned in the debate on Syria, we need to look at ways of ensuring peace in the middle east. Claudia Beamish mentioned John Kerry. I refer to President Obama and John Kerry's dialogue with the Israelis on peace. Mr Obama said that if the peace talks failed and there was "continued aggressive settlement construction" in the occupied west bank, Washington would have limited ability to protect Israel from "international fallout".

I ask the people of Israel to listen to the pleas of the rest of the world and to do something to alleviate the suffering of the Palestinian people.

17:27

Malcolm Chisholm (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (Lab): I congratulate Claudia Beamish on securing a debate on Palestine. It should be the business of this Parliament to support improvements in human rights around the globe, and the motion certainly seeks to do that. The international community has strongly condemned the restrictions that have been placed on Gaza and the west bank, but little has been said about water there, so the debate is particularly welcome.

The Goldstone report in 2009 highlighted much of the largely unjustified immediate damage to water pipes and sewage ducts, but there has been a great deal of further analysis—particularly by the United Nations—of the longer-term humanitarian crisis that has ensued. What I want to say is drawn largely from a report that was published by the United Nations in 2013, which addresses the situation in respect of the occupation-induced water and sanitation crisis in the Gaza strip and the west bank.

With regard to Gaza, the report states that

"90 per cent of water in the underlying coastal aquifer beneath the Gaza Strip is unfit for human consumption as a result of pollution caused by raw sewage and rising seawater infiltration."

That area of Palestine is almost completely reliant on one water source and, as the UN reported, to counteract dangerous consumptions, citizens are sometimes forced to purchase expensive alternatives from external vendors.

In contrast—the report states—Israel

"extracts a disproportionate share of the water from the coastal aquifer"

and prevents access to

"water from the Wadi Gaza, a natural stream that originates in the Hebron Mountains".

Finally, in relation to Gaza's water situation, the extreme negative impact of the on-going blockade and military action cannot be overlooked, because it constantly undermines any chance of rebuilding. On that point, the report comes to what I believe is, in relation to the motion, an important conclusion. It says:

"Israel has destroyed at least 306 wells in the Access Restricted Areas of Gaza since 2005. In this context, the Special Rapporteur strongly condemns the targeting of water and sanitation facilities during Israeli military operations, which cannot be justified as a military necessity, and cannot be explained as a consequence of accidents."

The west bank faces many similar problems. It was estimated in the UN report that

"500,000 Israeli settlers in the West Bank and East Jerusalem enjoy approximately six times the amount of water used by the Palestinian population of 2.6 million."

As Claudia Beamish reminded us, that water is vital for advancing the agricultural interests of the region, but the crops cannot grow in Palestinian land, which suffers in arid temperatures. It is disappointing that diplomatic efforts to address this inequality through a joint water committee have failed because Israel has the power to veto any development that it deems to be inappropriate. It is, in effect, allowed to perpetuate the situation.

The special rapporteur recommended that Israel immediately end its

"discriminatory policies and practices that serve to deny Palestinians their rightful share of water resources",

and that it

"cease the demolition of water collection facilities, including wells and water tanks."

In particular, the report concluded that Israel must cease its demolishing of water collection facilities—including wells and water tanks—

"on the pretext that they operate without valid permits."

Israel must act on the recommendations in that UN report. I thank Claudia Beamish once again for highlighting this very serious problem.

17:30

John Lamont (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): I, too, congratulate Claudia Beamish on securing the debate. However, I have not signed the motion and I do not support the calls that the motion advocates. I intend to give a different perspective on the debate, if I may.

In the United Kingdom, we take access to clean water for granted. Unfortunately not everyone can say the same. In the occupied Palestinian territories there are complex issues with water resources that are in part due to the challenging natural environment, but are also due to mismanagement of water resources.

Israel provides more fresh water to the Palestinians than was agreed under the Oslo accords. That amount is set to rise by another 50 per cent in the light of the deal that was struck in December between Israel, Palestine and Jordan.

The proportion of households in the west bank and the Palestinian Authority area that are not connected to the water network and which do not have access to clean drinking water is less than 5 per cent. I suggest that the real issue is Palestinian mismanagement. Even the Palestinian Water Authority estimates that at least 33 per cent of its water is wasted due to leakage, mismanagement, defective maintenance and old infrastructure.

John Finnie: Will John Lamont take an intervention?

Sandra White: Will the member take an intervention?

John Lamont: I think that I am the only member who is going to be putting this perspective in the debate, so I would like to use my time to cover the points that I want to make.

According to the water agreement of 1995, the Palestinian Authority should be preventing and repairing leaks in domestic pipelines and recycling treated waste water for agricultural irrigation, but it repeatedly refuses international funding packages to do so.

The problems in Gaza are more complicated. Since the Israeli and Egyptian blockade, Gaza has not had sufficient fuel to sustain its electricity supply and to keep its water and sewage facilities running. The Hamas Government refuses to buy alternative fuels, because the taxes would go to the rival Fatah-controlled Palestinian Authority. It also refuses to pay the Israel Electric Corporation, to the tune of \$175 million.

As a result of the power shortage, pumping stations ceased operation in November and in southern Gaza city many streets are now akin to sewers. With the pumping stations out of action, fresh water will soon cease to reach taps at all. The infrastructure is there and the water is there; the issue is electricity, and the blame for that lies entirely on the shoulders of Hamas.

In the water agreement of 1995, both parties agreed to prevent any harm to, or pollution or deterioration of, the quality of all water resources, yet the Palestinians constantly breach the agreement by drilling unauthorised wells in the west bank and Gaza, by not treating their sewage, by contaminating the streams, and by not developing any new sewage treatment or desalination plants. The problem is not so much access to water but the willingness and ability to treat and distribute it effectively.

The anti-Israeli movement states that Israel's refusal to grant the necessary permits or military security clearance is behind the lack of sanitation and waste-water treatment facilities. However, Israel has publicly supported the construction of desalination plants in Gaza and is willing to provide its skills for the project, but Hamas rejects Israeli offers of assistance. The Palestinians have not made any effort to develop any new water resources. Only one sewage treatment plant has been built in the west bank in the past 15 years, despite there being \$500 million-worth of international donor funding available for that sole purpose.

Israel has more water because it developed desalination technology and it recycles household waste water for agricultural use. Israel has stated clearly that it is happy to share expertise and is actually now providing training in both recycling and desalination to the Palestinians.

Although water shortages in the west bank and Gaza are part of a much bigger problem, water will be a key aspect in any two-state solution for the region. As the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs has made clear, there is no more urgent global priority than the search for middle east peace. We see a two-state solution as being the best way to meet the national aspirations of both Israelis and Palestinians, but without knowing the whole story it is irresponsible and unjust for members in this chamber to simply place the blame at the feet of the Israelis.

Sandra White: On a point of order, Presiding Officer. None of us who has made a speech said that we are against Israel. Surely it was disingenuous of the member to make that statement without first finding out exactly how members here feel. Such an opinion has not been given by any of us.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I thank you for your point of order, although it is not a point of order. You have made your point. Nonetheless, the words that John Lamont used are a matter for him.

17:36

Alison Johnstone (Lothian) (Green): Clean water is essential to life. We need it every day to drink, grow food and produce energy. We each use about 150 litres of water a day, but if we include the water that is used to produce the food that we eat and the products that we use, it is estimated that we consume more than 4,000 litres a day.

In 2010, the United Nations Human Rights Council adopted the right to water and sanitation as a legally binding obligation on states. That step forward made it crystal clear that fair access to clean water was a right under international law.

In Palestine, water consumption is estimated at 70 litres per capita. I thank Claudia Beamish and John Finnie for bringing to the chamber the motion, which recognises that that figure is well below the recommended safe minimum set by the World Health Organization. An Amnesty International briefing from 2009 estimates that Israeli daily consumption per capita is four times as much. The briefing said:

"The inequality is even more pronounced between Palestinian communities and unlawful Israeli settlements, established in the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT) in violation of international law. Swimming pools, well-watered lawns and large irrigated farms in Israeli settlements in the OPT stand in stark contrast next to Palestinian villages whose inhabitants struggle even to meet their essential domestic water needs. In parts of the West Bank, Israeli settlers use up to 20 times more water per capita than neighbouring Palestinian communities, who survive on barely 20 litres of water per capita a day—the minimum amount recommended by the WHO for emergency situations response."

As the statistics in the motion clearly set out, access to sanitation, too, is well below what is fair and acceptable.

Dr Abdel Rahman Tamimi, director of the Palestinian hydrology group, is clear that history teaches us that access to and control over water resources in the Palestinian-Israeli region have always been key. After world war one, both Britain and France

"tried to include the most important water sources of the Basin inside the borders of their respective 'Mandates'."

The same is happening today, as deliberate Israeli Government policies increase Israel's control over water. For example, the Israeli state has complete control over abstraction from the major aquifers and from the Jordan river.

The 1.6 million people who are boxed into the Gaza strip are facing multiple crises, one of which is access to water and sanitation. The World Bank describes the situation as critical and, according to the UN, the aquifer on which people are entirely reliant for fresh water may become unusable by 2016 and irreversibly damaged by 2020.

Without action, a humanitarian and environmental catastrophe will unfold before us. As colleagues have mentioned, climate change is expected to increase average temperatures and reduce rainfall in the region, which will add to water stress. A 2012 World Bank study predicts that the gap between water need and renewable water resource availability in the Arab world will go from 16 to 51 per cent by 2040 to 2050. It concludes:

"Countries that are wealthier and more economically diverse are generally expected to be more resilient."

Real security is not delivered by weapons of mass destruction but by having guaranteed access to clean water and sufficient food. Let us use all the means at our disposal, such as the climate justice fund. Let us, under the Procurement Reform (Scotland) Bill, attach conditions to those who secure contracts that are paid for by public money. The Eden Springs UK contract was very controversial when I was a member of the City of Edinburgh Council. Our procurement must be ethical.

It is vital that Palestinians are given the means and the freedoms to deal with the problems that they face. Some problems are hard to solve, but in this case the first steps are easy. The unjust policies that prevent access to water and the blockade that hampers the development of a sustainable water and sanitation system must end before Palestinians can stop thirsting for justice.

While we work to convince local and national Government to take action and to boycott, divest and impose sanctions where appropriate and necessary, we, whether as individual citizens or as part of concerned organisations, can make choices that support the Palestinian people and highlight their dreadful plight.

I finish by saying that I do not agree with much of John Lamont's speech.

17:40

Jim Hume (South Scotland) (LD): I, too, congratulate Claudia Beamish on securing this important debate. I also congratulate John Finnie for his hard work on the issue.

In 2011, I visited Gaza as part of the largest delegation of parliamentarians from across the world, which included members of Parliaments from Venezuela, the United States of America,

Malaysia and many European countries—and a Scot. I was struck by the resilience of the people who live in Gaza. They cannot move freely in or out, import goods or seek employment outside the strip. The necessities of life are impossible in a sieged land.

At the time of that visit, it was estimated that 70 per cent of the people living in the Gaza strip were refugees, and the number of people living there was forecast to double in 10 to 15 years. Gaza had 190 water wells, and 1800km of pipework. The motion recognises that 30km of that pipework, along with 11 wells, have been deliberately damaged. There was wastewater coverage of between only 60 to 70 per cent, and the salination of freshwater was an increasing problem due to the ingress of seawater. The freshwater problem was exacerbated by the setting of water traps for the natural water that should flow into the Gaza strip. Two thirds of that water was diverted away from Gaza at the time of the visit, and the situation is no better today. Natural water alone cannot be relied on and the extraction of water from wells below sea level is leading to more and more salination of underground sources of natural water.

There is a serious drying up of resource in what could be a very fertile strip of land. The Rafah zone is particularly badly affected by seawater intrusion. Since the period 2007 to 2009, nitrate levels in the water have also risen dramatically. The World Health Organization states that the amount of water needed for survival is 100 litres per capita. During my visit, the figure that was cited for Gaza was only 89 litres. That is down to 70, so the situation is getting worse.

Our presenter from the municipal water organisation mentioned plans for desalination plants and provision for stormwater collection. The plans for desalination plants were developed over seven years, but unfortunately foreign funding was withdrawn. The Rafah gate closure has made it near impossible to get the materials for that much-needed work in the Gaza strip.

Further problems for water provision were the common electricity cuts, which stops the water pumps, and a shortage of spare parts and general supplies. Chemical supplies—even supplies of water purification chemicals—are not allowed in as it is claimed that they can be used as weapons. The Palestinians are indeed a people under siege.

Young deaths are high, with most deaths occurring in the first week of life. Still births have increased by 40 per cent while the figure decreases in the rest of the world. Deaths due to trauma are at 20 per cent, which is a chilling thought.

I will end with by quoting a young woman—a writer, blogger and mother—whom we met. Her name is Rana Shubair—I hope that I pronounced that correctly—and she wrote a long piece on how children are affected by the conflict.

When an old man dies of old age, the grandchild asks, “Who shelled him?” When people are choosing a school, they pick the one nearest to the house because the shelling risk is lower. At age five or under, the kids can name the type of plane that is flying above them or say whether the sound made by a rocket comes from one that is falling towards them or one that has been launched away from them. Time that we mark as Christmas—or holidays such as shrove Tuesday, perhaps—in Gaza is marked by traumatic events such as shellings, deaths and phosphorus attacks.

The quotation is:

“But life still goes on. Moreover, this lack of everything almost including our basic necessities does not include our morale and optimism. It does not include our resolve or faith. The people of Gaza have seen their small cities tumbling down before their eyes during the war. They have seen their loved ones shot or burned to death in the most brutal way. These scars may be very hard to heal, but we Palestinians have also learned that sixty three years of struggle are too precious to waste.”

They are still thirsting for justice.

17:45

Cara Hilton (Dunfermline) (Lab): I begin by thanking Claudia Beamish for securing this very important debate and for her first-hand account of the realities on the ground in Gaza.

In Scotland, we take water for granted. We think nothing of having a shower every day, flushing the toilet or pouring a glass of water. Yet for millions of Palestinians living in Gaza and the occupied territories, clean water and sanitation are a distant dream.

It is six years since Israel imposed a blockade on Gaza because Palestinians elected a Government that Israel did not approve of. Life for the 1.7 million Palestinians in Gaza is becoming more desperate by the day. A staggering 50 per cent of the population is aged under 18. They are not even old enough to vote, and yet every single day they are collectively punished by the Israeli Government.

While the average Israeli consumes 300 litres of water a day, a Palestinian in Gaza gets by on between 20 and 70 litres a day—and sometimes even less during the summer when the Israeli national water company reduces water supplies to Palestinian areas. It is now estimated that 90 to 95 per cent of Gaza’s water is unfit for human consumption and too dangerous to drink because

of a combination of overextraction and contamination by fertilizers and human waste.

We rightly dedicate a lot of time in this Parliament to discussing early years and our plans to make Scotland a better place to grow up in. That is a stark contrast to Gaza, where the Israeli Government has condemned a whole generation of children to a future that is bleak at best. Children who should have everything to look forward to are being denied the basic essentials of life, being punished simply for being a Palestinian and being denied the basic human rights of every child under international law.

The UN estimates that as many as 80 per cent of Gazans now have no option but to buy their drinking water. Shockingly, some families are now forced to spend as much as one third of their household income on water alone. Things are getting worse: Gaza’s sole aquifer is in serious danger of collapse, and it is likely to be too polluted for use by 2016 and redundant by 2020.

Before Christmas, we all saw the pictures of children in Gaza wading through sewage to get to school when a failure of the main sewage pumping station led to 35,000m³ of raw sewage flooding into the streets. Yet, as colleagues have highlighted already, that was no accident or natural disaster, and it was certainly not the result of mismanagement by the Palestinians. It was the result of deliberate actions and policies from the Israeli Government that have diminished existing water sources, diverted rivers, refused Palestinians permission for infrastructure projects and deliberately restricted the availability of water to the Palestinian communities, regardless of the human cost, regardless of how it affects a whole generation of children, and regardless of international law.

We all know that the water shortages are just the tip of the iceberg. The Israeli Government continues to ignore the fact that the world is condemning its actions. Countless UN resolutions have been passed, and yet Israel continues to defy international law. As Alison Johnstone pointed out, we all have the power as consumers to send a message to Israel. It is simply not acceptable for the international community to turn a blind eye to the atrocities that happen every day, to turn a blind eye when the life chances of Palestinian children are being undermined and destroyed by the Israeli Government’s actions, to turn a blind eye when family homes are bulldozed to make way for settlers, and to turn a blind eye when families are faced with a blockade that cuts them off from their families, communities and the wider world and denies them access to a basic essential of life—water.

I fully support the thirsting for justice campaign for Israel to respect Palestinian rights to water.

The time has come for Governments to take effective political and economic action to demand that Israel respect Palestinian rights to water, to ensure that the Palestinian people can develop the infrastructure they so vitally need, and to hold Israel to account for its continuous violations of international law and human rights and its shocking treatment of the Palestinian people.

17:50

Jean Urquhart (Highlands and Islands) (Ind):

I thank Claudia Beamish and John Finnie for bringing this topic for debate in the Scottish Parliament. I do not know how else we can raise awareness of the appalling situation in Palestine. How do we in Scotland effect change?

I have not been privileged to visit Palestine, but I listened to members who have had that privilege and who have been in the Gaza strip, and it seems to me that, as Alison Johnstone said, water is a basic human right that is being denied. The issue is being raised around the world by the United Nations, and yet the situation persists.

This might be slightly irrational of me, but when John Lamont suggested that the situation, in which people must live in appalling conditions, is the fault of the Government in Gaza, I wondered whether Palestinians would say that people in Scotland deserve the welfare situation that we have here because it is our Government's fault. The issue has nothing to do with that. I feel in my heart that real injustice is being done to the Palestinian people. It might be the case that the political situation needs to be resolved, and I know that the problem in the middle east is complicated, but we are concerned with a situation that is causing people to die and families to be driven apart.

There are many visual images of the hardship that people are suffering. Books have been written and films have been made that show us the arid lands and the results of a deliberate withdrawal of resources, including water for arable lands—to feed the olive trees, for example. Water is needed to give life to the Palestinians. It is the source of life, and to deny the Palestinian people their right to clean water and sanitation is despicable.

We can contrast those images with images of the lush growth in the settlements, where there is plenty of water. Members cited the facts and figures. We heard about people having access to 70 litres as opposed to 340 litres, and we heard that in the west some of us have the luxury of access to 4,000 litres per day.

I hope that the thirsting for justice campaign has huge success and that we can reach the hearts and minds of people who care about the Palestinian people. There are Jewish organisations and Israeli people who feel that the

situation should not be allowed to continue. Not everyone in Israel thinks that the situation is somehow justified or okay.

If the Scottish Parliament can do anything, I hope that we will try to unite with such people to effect change. Change for the Palestinian people might have to come as a result of Israelis talking to Israelis. However, let no one be uncertain about the feeling in this Parliament. The situation is untenable and cannot be allowed to continue.

I thank Claudia Beamish and John Finnie again for bringing this timely debate about a desperate situation that we must all try to alleviate.

17:54

The Minister for External Affairs and International Development (Humza Yousaf):

Anybody who thinks that the Parliament is too inward looking—that accusation can often be thrown—has only to watch this debate to realise that many members across the chamber are interested in the basic human rights of people across the world, not just in Scotland. Incredibly powerful speeches have been made in a debate enabled by Claudia Beamish; my thanks go to her for lodging the motion and securing the debate. I also thank John Finnie and many members of the Scottish Parliament who have campaigned over the years. They have been elected for many a term and have often spoken on the issue. Cara Hilton, who is one of the newest entrants, made an extraordinarily passionate speech.

As every member has said, it is vital that Palestinians have equitable access to dwindling water resources. I can count three glasses of water on my desk and the desk next to me. As Cara Hilton and many other members said, we do not give water a second thought; drinking it is second nature to us. We know that, when we need it, we will have that resource.

The shortage of water has been caused by a number of factors. I may touch on what John Lamont said. There has been a lack of rainfall in recent years, the population in that part of the world has grown, and the management of water resources could be improved, but it would be blinkered, incredible and an insult to ignore the fact that the main reasons why the Palestinians have inadequate access to water are political. The inequitable distribution of water resources is severely compounded by the main factor of Israeli restrictions on building and movement.

Difficulties often begin if we look at the matter through the prism of one side or the other in approaching the debate, although I understand why many people do that. I do not see myself as pro-Palestinian or anti-Israeli; rather, I see myself as very much pro-human rights and anti-injustice,

as other members—including, I am sure, John Lamont—see themselves. It would be ridiculous, however, to suggest that mismanagement is the main cause of the shortage, and not the sewers that have been destroyed, the blockade that UN officials have described as illegal, or the illegal settlements. It would be absolutely incorrect to blame it all on mismanagement.

It is because all of us in the chamber, I am sure, are anti-injustice and pro-human rights that we are so shocked and disgusted that Palestinians have access to only 20 per cent of the west bank's water resources, and why we are so shocked that, as many members have said, Israeli settlers—the foreign secretary, William Hague, describes the settlements as illegal, of course—enjoy at least 280 litres of water per person per day, whereas Palestinians have access to only 20 to 60 litres, as has been said.

As we have heard, in Gaza, as much as 90 per cent of water from the aquifer is not fit for human consumption. The Israeli blockade of Gaza is severely inhibiting the development of major water-related projects. John Lamont talked about how it is really for the Hamas Government to accept the offer from the Israeli Government, but water and sanitation projects worth over \$70 million are awaiting Israeli approval to access materials—that material is not being allowed to come in because it is waiting for Israeli approval.

The access to water issue highlights how the settlements and other Israeli policies have a real and immediate impact on the most basic rights of the Palestinian people. As we have heard, residents of Israeli settlements on Palestinian land draw a disproportionately high amount of water relative to the Palestinians, and the demolition of Palestinian property continues, including the destruction of cisterns and water wells. Many members, such as Jim Hume, John Finnie and Sandra White, have talked about seeing that first hand.

Much of that activity is unnecessary, unjust and illegal, but, more than that, it is completely counterproductive, as there can be no lasting peace between the Israelis and the Palestinians so long as so many of the Palestinian people live in such conditions of inequitable hardship. That is why the Scottish ministers have firmly and repeatedly stated their support for international consensus that the construction of Israeli settlements in the Palestinian territories must stop. It is why we support the statement of the EU's foreign affairs council that calls on Israel to meet its obligations regarding the living conditions of the Palestinian population and why we continue to call for the restoration of full access—it is currently being restricted—to Gaza.

Israel is concerned. We know about the threat to its security from violent groups within the Palestinian territories, and I have not yet met a member of the Scottish Parliament who would not condemn the rocket and mortar attacks and other acts of violence that have been directed at the innocent Israeli people in many outlying towns. Of course, Israel has a right to defend itself. However, as we continue to say in this Parliament and within the Government, its response must be proportionate and legal. So much of the international concern is about the lack of proportionality. As Cara Hilton said—the point has also been made by UN officials—the blockade on Gaza is viewed as a collective punishment, which can only be seen as illegal under international law.

In my final minute, I will address some specific issues and concerns that have been raised. The provision of support through the climate justice fund and the international development fund was mentioned by Claudia Beamish and Alison Johnstone. I spoke about that to the Minister for Environment and Climate Change, who has had to leave the chamber, and we would be happy to speak to members further on the matter. We would also take a submission from the cross-party group on Palestine on the issue of when the next review will take place. Any review must be open minded, and I give a guarantee that we will be as open minded as possible on the issue. Claudia Beamish will appreciate that I cannot give a set of guarantees because the review has not taken place yet, but I am sure that we will be happy to give her the details if and when it does. I would be happy to speak about it at the cross-party group on Palestine, and the group might also extend an invitation to the Minister for Environment and Climate Change.

We continue to believe that long-term peace in the middle east between Israel and Palestine is best secured by a two-state solution. However, William Hague and his previous deputy in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, Alistair Burt, to whom I spoke many times on the issue, have made the point that the next few months are critical, so we will watch with interest.

The Scottish Parliament has a role to play in this. We must continue to work with the UK Government to put pressure on both Governments to come to the table and to provide adequate access to resources. I encourage Israel to take immediate practical measures to ensure the fair distribution of water across the Palestinian territories.

I commend John Finnie and Claudia Beamish for bringing the subject to the chamber.

Meeting closed at 18:03.

Correction

John Swinney has identified an error in his contribution and provided the following correction.

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Employment and Sustainable Growth (John Swinney):

At column 28397, paragraph 3—

Original text—

I would be grateful if, in the interests of cross-party understanding, Sarah Boyack would write to me to explain the calculation behind the figure of £600 million that she has just lodged in the parliamentary record. I am unable to work out how on earth that point can in any way be valid. Local authorities' share of the budget in 2010-11 was 31.3 per cent. On a like-for-like basis, its share is now 32.2 per cent. I am afraid that I cannot, for the life of me, understand how Sarah Boyack's proposition is valid. If she would do me the courtesy of explaining it to me, I would be interested to know its basis.

Corrected text—

I would be grateful if, in the interests of cross-party understanding, Sarah Boyack would write to me to explain the calculation behind the figure of £600 million that she has just lodged in the parliamentary record. I am unable to work out how on earth that point can in any way be valid. Local authorities' share of the budget excluding Health in 2010-11 was 57.9 per cent. On a like-for-like basis, its share is now 58.1 per cent. I am afraid that I cannot, for the life of me, understand how Sarah Boyack's proposition is valid. If she would do me the courtesy of explaining it to me, I would be interested to know its basis.

[Hyperlink to members' corrections page.](#)

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