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Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Official Report

MEETING OF THE PARLIAMENT

Thursday 15 May 2014

Session 4

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Scottish Parliament

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

General Question Time

Roads (Highlands and Islands)

1. Jamie McGrigor (Highlands and Islands) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to improve the condition of the road network in the Highlands and Islands. (S4O-03226)

The Minister for Transport and Veterans (Keith Brown): Since 2007, the Scottish Government has spent in excess of £336 million to maintain and improve trunk roads in the Highlands and Islands. Local roads are a matter for local authorities.

Jamie McGrigor: Does the minister share my constituents' concerns about the poor condition and potholed state of many local roads throughout the Highlands and Islands, which is damaging to cars and dangerous to motorcyclists and can give tourists a bad impression? What discussions has the minister had with local authorities in my region on this subject recently? Does he believe that enough is being done to address concerns that have been highlighted repeatedly by Audit Scotland?

Keith Brown: The member is right to say that we can always do more. That is true for both the trunk road network and local roads. The Scottish Government is in charge of the trunk road network, which accounts for around 6 per cent of the roads in Scotland, and the other roads are the responsibility of local authorities. With regard to local road maintenance programmes, I point out that local authorities are under financial pressure. For example, there has been a 26 per cent cut to the Scottish Government's capital budget, and there is pressure on public finances, which is bound to work through to the issue that the member raises.

The discussions that the member asks about include, for example, those that we have had with Argyll and Bute Council about trunking the A83 road from Kennacraig to Campeltown. Those discussions are going well, and we expect responsibility for that road to transfer from the local authority to the Scottish Government around July.

On the issue of resources, which is at the root of this issue, the pressure on public finances was not helped by voting for around £776 million to be

spent on trams in Edinburgh rather than on road works around the country.

National Health Service Boards (Private Finance Initiative Contract)

2. Jim Eadie (Edinburgh Southern) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what recent discussions the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing has had with national health service boards regarding the operation of private finance initiative contracts. (S4O-03227)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing (Alex Neil): The Scottish Government is committed to the non-profit-distributing model as its preferred procurement option for revenue-financed projects. Unlike under PFI, the level of private sector returns is capped under NPD. In addition, services that are provided as part of NPD contracts are limited to those that relate to the maintenance and fabric of the buildings.

However, 28 historical PFI agreements remain in NHS Scotland. The NHS in Scotland pays £215 million in unitary charges under PFI contracts. Of that, £86 million relates to service charges. An NHS Scotland group, including all boards with PFI contracts, the Scottish Government and the Scottish Futures Trust, has been working to improve contract management and deliver savings on those contracts. That work has already achieved £1.3 million-worth of annual savings, which will save £20 million over the remaining life of the contracts. By the end of 2014-15, savings over the remaining life of the contracts will rise to £26 million. Those savings will be reinvested in NHS services.

Jim Eadie: Is the cabinet secretary aware that, notwithstanding the savings that the Government is negotiating, the PFI contract at the Royal infirmary of Edinburgh stipulates that, if the health board does not walk away after 25 years of the 30-year contract, it is bound to pay Consort Healthcare an annual management fee for the next 25-year period? Can he confirm the net value of the management fee that would apply in that circumstance? Does he agree that those golden handcuffs shackle the NHS to a land deal and a contract that are against the public interest?

Alex Neil: I am aware that an on-going payment made during the secondary period is for facilities services to be provided by the contractor, rather than a management fee, if the board does not walk away. The precise cost of those services cannot be precisely defined at this point but is determined by provisions in the contract that base the calculation on all expenditure on the facilities over the previous five-year period. Of course, that was approved by the then Labour Government. Clearly, those on-going obligations are not helpful, which is why contracts that have been signed

since around 2000 either use leases that end with the contract or, more recently, including the NPD and hub projects, grant only licence to service provider, and therefore do not face the same issues.

Opencast Coal Sites (East Ayrshire)

3. Adam Ingram (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what progress is being made to resolve the environmental issues arising from the abandonment of opencast coal sites in East Ayrshire. (S4O-03228)

The Minister for Energy, Enterprise and Tourism (Fergus Ewing): The Scottish Government's "Consultation on Opencast Coal Restoration: Effective Regulation" closed in February this year and sub-groups on financial instruments and compliance monitoring will report back in due course. The restoration of sites is a long process. However, active restoration is now under way on sites in Dumfries and Galloway, in Fife, in South Lanarkshire and in East Ayrshire. My officials and the Scottish Mines Restorations Trust continue to work closely with relevant councils to assist them in their restoration planning.

Adam Ingram: Can the minister also provide an update on discussions with the United Kingdom Government about the return of Scotland's share of the coal levy to assist with the restoration of opencast coal sites?

Fergus Ewing: I wrote to the UK Government on 17 September and 20 November, requesting that the royalties that are collected by the UK Coal Authority for coal that is produced in Scotland, which amount to more than £15 million, be made available to fund the restoration of legacy opencast sites in Scotland. A holding response from Michael Fallon, the UK energy minister, was received on 8 January, which said that that request is being actively pursued with the UK Treasury. We have received no further written communication.

I raised the matter again with the Department of Energy and Climate Change at the cross-party Scottish coal industry task force, which I chair, on 7 April. I also spoke with Michael Fallon on the issue when we met in Houston, Texas, last week, and we continue to pursue that line of inquiry with the UK Government. I recognise Adam Ingram's continued campaigning efforts to ensure the return to Scotland of that money, which is much needed to deal with the urgent task of restoration.

Hearing Loop Equipment (Local Authority Provision)

4. Mark Griffin (Central Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government how many local authorities have adapted the loop equipment that they provide to people with hearing loss since the introduction of digital televisions and radios. (S4O-03229)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing (Alex Neil): That information is not held centrally by the Scottish Government. It is a matter for individual local authorities to assess which hearing loop equipment they will provide to people with a hearing impairment.

Mark Griffin: Hard-of-hearing people rely on loop equipment to get any enjoyment from their television or radio, but some local authorities have not adapted the equipment since the switchover from analogue to digital. Is the cabinet secretary willing to write to local authorities to get an understanding of the situation nationally? Will he issue guidance to local authorities, encouraging them to switch over to the modernised equipment as soon as possible?

Alex Neil: We have been encouraging local authorities to make the switchover, but I am more than happy to write to them again, encouraging them to do so. As the member rightly says, that would be of huge material benefit to the recipients of the equipment.

Blood Glucose Test Strips

5. Roderick Campbell (North East Fife) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what guidance it provides to national health service boards on prescribing blood glucose test strips. (S4O-03230)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing (Alex Neil): We expect clinicians to refer to Scottish intercollegiate guidelines network guideline 116 on the management of diabetes, which makes it clear who would benefit the most from self-monitoring of blood glucose.

Roderick Campbell: According to Diabetes UK, many members of the public are concerned that the provision of test strips is patchy and inconsistent. Can the cabinet secretary assure me that the Scottish Government is taking steps to avoid that situation in Scotland and to ensure parity of access across all health boards?

Alex Neil: It is for clinicians to determine the treatment regime that is best for each individual patient, taking into account the relevant local and national clinical guidelines, to which I referred in my previous reply. National clinical guidelines make it clear that people with diabetes who are treated with insulin should be provided with blood

glucose test strips. However, current guidance suggests that, for people with diabetes who do not use insulin, self-monitoring of blood glucose may lack significant benefit, with little or no effect on glycaemic control, and is unlikely to be clinically effective or cost effective in addition to the usual care.

Ophthalmology Services (Shetland)

6. Tavish Scott (Shetland Islands) (LD): To ask the Scottish Government what assistance is being provided to deliver ophthalmology services in Shetland. (S4O-03231)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing (Alex Neil): It is a matter for NHS Shetland to utilise its funding in the most appropriate way to meet local health needs and priorities, including the provision of ophthalmology services. The payments made by NHS Shetland for general ophthalmic services for the years for which data is available have risen from £342,000 in 2008-09 to £360,000 in 2012-13.

Tavish Scott: Is the cabinet secretary aware that the eye scans that many Shetland patients need can be carried out on a machine in an optician's in Lerwick? Does he understand that that would save the national health service money, because patients would then not have to travel to Aberdeen royal infirmary? Will he undertake to cut through any NHS red tape that is stopping that process beginning in Shetland, so that the service is available at much greater convenience to patients and at a great saving to the NHS?

Alex Neil: I would absolutely like to take up that suggestion and I will do everything that I can to facilitate that change. If the member writes to me with more detail, I will make sure that we cover every possible angle, because that is a commonsense approach to dealing with this issue.

Dr Richard Simpson (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): Will the cabinet secretary update us on the progress of the provision of information technology links between optometrists and ophthalmic departments in Shetland and in other parts of the country?

Alex Neil: We are making significant progress, but I will write to the member to give him a detailed update.

Accident and Emergency (Waiting Times)

7. Mary Scanlon (Highlands and Islands) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what progress has been made toward meeting accident and emergency waiting times targets. (S4O-03232)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing (Alex Neil): It is almost like portfolio question time for me today.

The Scottish Government is making good progress towards meeting accident and emergency waiting times targets. Since the February 2013 launch of the £50 million, three-year, national unscheduled care programme, there has been a measured improvement in the overall four-hour performance target from 90.3 per cent in December 2012 to 93.5 per cent in December 2013. There has also been a significant improvement in the number of patients waiting more than 12 hours. A comparison between December 2012 and December 2013 shows an 87 per cent reduction in patients waiting more than 12 hours, which is very welcome.

Each health board has a local unscheduled care action plan, which supports improvement in A and E waiting times. Additionally, boards are implementing lessons and best practice from across the country in order to bring about improved performance.

The Scottish Government works closely with the health boards to ensure that A and E performance reaches a sustained level of performance by not only reaching the interim target of 95 per cent but striving continually towards the 98 per cent standard.

Mary Scanlon: I thank the cabinet secretary for that most extensive and thorough response. Last week's Audit Scotland report states that 19 out of 31 A and E departments receive no referrals for admission from general practitioners. Is it the case that many patients are bypassing their GP, putting additional pressure on A and E departments? Is the Government doing any work to understand the issue?

Alex Neil: In many cases, the GPs bypass the A and E procedure, rather than the patients bypassing the GPs, and the figures reflect that. That is all part and parcel of getting improvements rolled out in A and E across the country. Essentially, the key issue is patient flow. Therefore, rather than clogging up A and E, many health boards have an arrangement whereby, if the GP wants to make an admission, they can do so directly into the ward, rather than the patient needing to go through the A and E department.

Aileen McLeod (South Scotland) (SNP): What progress has the Scottish Government made in increasing the number of A and E consultants since taking office? What further progress is being made through the £50 million unscheduled care action plan?

Alex Neil: Since taking office, we have increased the number of A and E consultants by 86.5 full-time equivalents from 75.8 to 162.3 full-

time equivalents. That is a 114 per cent increase. The unscheduled care action plan has supported recruitment of an additional 18 of those A and E consultants. In year 2 of the three-year action plan, we will maintain a focus on achieving the A and E target, sustaining improvements and on whole-system approaches, creating local community partnerships where hospitals and primary community care services are aligned and focused on patients getting seen by the right member of the multidisciplinary team at the right time.

John Scott (Ayr) (Con): Does the cabinet secretary share my concerns about A and E waiting times in NHS Ayrshire and Arran and targets that have not been met? As he knows, that problem is exacerbated by a lack of available beds. What can the Scottish Government do to help resolve it?

Alex Neil: Although NHS Ayrshire and Arran has not consistently met the 95 per cent target, it is much better than it used to be and is averaging just over 93 per cent.

The issue is not lack of bed capacity in Ayrshire; it is the flow of patients. Too low a percentage of the daily discharges are made in the morning or early afternoon, which means that beds in the wards are not being freed up to receive incoming patients from A and E and, indeed, normal admissions. That flow is at the core of many of the issues. We are doing many things, but that is why we are, for example, rolling out the use of electronic whiteboards across the country, because it improves the management of beds, patients and staffing throughout a hospital.

Cataract Operations

8. John Wilson (Central Scotland) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government how many cataract operations the national health service performs each year. (S4O-03233)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing (Alex Neil): The latest available information shows that activity has risen from 31,892 cataract procedures being carried out in NHS Scotland in 2008-09 to a provisional figure of 36,340 during 2012-13, which is an increase of 13.9 per cent.

John Wilson: Will the cabinet secretary outline to me what additional procedures are in place in patient treatment plans after cataract operations that lead to complications and how elderly patients can be reassured about the procedures, particularly if they are waiting for a second operation and did not have a good experience the first time round?

Alex Neil: I will give a two-pronged reply to that. First, a standard follow-up procedure for every

patient who gets a cataract operation is laid out in clinical guidelines and protocols. Under that, the consultants and related services follow up with the patient to check progress, to check, in particular, that the operation has been successful and to deal with any side effects that may arise.

Secondly, if a patient has had an unsatisfactory experience, they should use the complaints procedure in the health board to register their complaint or concern and ensure that it is dealt with. One of the changes that we are making across the national health service in Scotland is that complaints will be used not only to deal with the specific complaint but to provide management intelligence on where things are not running as smoothly as they could and should. In a number of health boards, every complaint is already treated as an adverse event. That is why I encourage every patient to use the complaints procedure.

Independent Scotland (State Pension)

9. Annabelle Ewing (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what assessment it has made of the payment of the state pension in an independent Scotland. (S4O-03234)

The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick): It is time for a different cabinet secretary.

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Employment and Sustainable Growth (John Swinney): This week, the Scottish Government published updated research on the state pension and its impact in Scotland. It showed that men and women will get less in Scotland than those in the United Kingdom as a whole who have the same pension entitlement if we stay tied to the Westminster pension and welfare system. Our assessment of the payment of the state pension in Scotland is that we are well placed to afford a decent social security system, with welfare, including pensions, being consistently more affordable than in the United Kingdom. We are also well served in having much of the infrastructure in place to deliver a strong social security system.

Annabelle Ewing: Given the less than inspiring comments that we have heard from Labour over the past couple of days, does the cabinet secretary agree that it is a disgrace that Labour Party politicians are more interested in toeing the Tory line on the state pension age than in standing up for their constituents?

John Swinney: Annabelle Ewing highlights an issue of fairness. It cannot be fair that a 65-year-old can expect the lifetime value of their state pension to be about £11,000 less for women or £10,000 less for men in Scotland than in the UK as a whole based on the same entitlement. It is

worth remembering that previous UK Governments do not have a strong record when it comes to protecting the state pension. They reduced its long-term value when they abolished the link between the state pension and earnings, and that was not restored by the Labour Government. We have already said that it is right and proper that, in an independent Scotland, we look again at raising the state pension age. We will do what we always do—act in the best interests of the people of Scotland.

First Minister's Question Time

12:00

Engagements

1. Johann Lamont (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab): To ask the First Minister what engagements he has planned for the rest of the day. (S4F-02087)

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

Johann Lamont: In 2012, the then health secretary, Nicola Sturgeon, proposed changes to mental health services in Lanarkshire. They were opposed by her Cabinet colleague and local MSP Alex Neil. She addressed his concerns and the professional medical advice was that the changes should go ahead. When Alex Neil became health secretary in September 2012, he ordered that the changes be reversed, against medical and patient opinion. He then deceived this Parliament and deceived the people of Scotland by saying—

The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick): Order. Ms Lamont.

Johann Lamont: —that he would take no part in the decision he had already made. If Alex Neil will not resign for deceiving Parliament, will the First Minister sack him?

The Presiding Officer: We will not have members accusing each other of deceiving across the chamber.

The First Minister: The answer is no.

Johann Lamont: Perhaps the First Minister should look at the documents that my colleague John Pentland obtained through freedom of information, because we now know that, on 26 September 2012, Alex Neil's office emailed this instruction to officials. I quote:

"Mr Neil is clear in his view that acute mental health facilities should be retained in both Wishaw and Monklands. The Cabinet Secretary has asked that you seek agreement from NHS Lanarkshire to reconfigure their plans accordingly."

With that order, he reversed Nicola Sturgeon's policy, which was made on the advice of medical professionals and backed by patients. He then told the Parliament, the head of the national health service and the head of the civil service that he would absent himself from a decision on those services, even though he had already made the decision.

If Alex Neil will not resign because of this behaviour, will the First Minister sack him?

The First Minister: That is the same question that she asked before, and I gave her the answer in answer to the first question. Just because she says deceiving instead of misleading, it does not remove the responsibility to try to give some substance to the charges that she is making.

I looked at this issue on 14 February 2013. I gave a substantial reply to Ms McMahon, the MSP who raised it with me, in terms of her question as to whether Alex Neil was in breach of the ministerial code. I pointed out the following—I will read it to Johann Lamont:

“In the light of questions in the Scottish Parliament on 26 September 2012”—

that is the date that Johann Lamont mentioned, but she forgot to say about the questions in the Parliament—

“about these proposed changes and the narrowing parliamentary focus on the impact of proposals for Monklands Hospital, Mr Neil became concerned that there could be a perception of a conflict of interest.” [*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Order.

The First Minister: I will continue:

“Accordingly, he agreed, that day, with the Director General of Health and Social Care, Derek Feeley, that all matters relating to mental health services at Monklands Hospital should be dealt with by the Minister for Public Health. Mr Feeley informed the Permanent Secretary on 27 September.”

That is exactly how ministers should behave under these circumstances. [*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Order.

The First Minister: I can say to the Labour Party that there is another aspect to this that it should bear in mind. The question of mental health services in Lanarkshire affects the whole area of the health board. It has a constituency aspect, as it has an aspect to all constituencies in that health board area. To define it purely as a constituency issue ignores the fact that the health service affects and serves all of the population. I looked at the issue carefully last year and I came to the conclusion that Mr Neil had acted perfectly properly. I replied in those terms to the member concerned, and if Johann Lamont would like to look at that reply and acknowledge the sequence of events, she will see that that reply is validated by the evidence.

Johann Lamont: The First Minister needs to look at the sequence of events, because it is all about the timing. Let me help him.

At 9.43 am on 26 September 2012, Alex Neil's office issued the order to reverse Nicola Sturgeon's decision. At 2 pm, which is after 9.43 am, Alex Neil told this chamber that NHS Lanarkshire was reviewing its decision—but he had already ordered the board to change its

position. On 19 December 2012, when asked about that decision, he told this Parliament:

“I decided early on in my tenure to give responsibility for that matter to my deputy Michael Matheson, as I did not want any perception of any potential conflict of interest between my role as the MSP for Airdrie and Shotts—where Monklands hospital resides—and my role as cabinet secretary.”—[*Official Report*, 19 December 2012; c 14922.]

The fact is that there was no perception of potential; there was the reality of the decision that Alex Neil had already taken and then tried to cover up. I ask the First Minister again: if Alex Neil will not resign, will the First Minister sack him?

The First Minister: Asking the question for the third time elicits the same answer: no, I will not, because I reviewed the evidence and came to the conclusion that Mr Neil acted perfectly properly.

All that Johann Lamont has done is cite exactly what I said to her colleague all those months ago. At that time, I detailed the sequence of events on 26 September 2012, and that sequence of events has been validated. The great revelation that Johann Lamont brings to the chamber is merely a confirmation of the sequence of events that was detailed to her colleague last year. [*Interruption.*] Of course that was the sequence of events. As said in the letter, after question time on 26 September, Mr Neil asked for advice and took the requisite action.

The ministerial code makes it quite clear how ministers should act. It also makes quite clear the First Minister's role in judging that. Unlike the Labour Party, we are the only Administration that has put in independent oversight of the ministerial code. On six occasions, people such as Johann Lamont have come to this chamber and said that there has been an enormous scandal. Because that affected me, and because I have been under question, I have referred those things to independent oversight. On six occasions, I have been cleared by that commission, and—do you know what?—hardly ever after I have been cleared have the people who made allegations in this chamber of dreadful doings been prepared to acknowledge the independent oversight.

I looked at Mr Neil's conduct and gave an explanation to Johann Lamont's colleague that said exactly what happened. In reasonableness, unless she has some dramatic revelation to bring—which she has not—she should accept that Mr Neil not just acted to the benefit of his constituents but discharged his responsibilities as health secretary. That is why he took the action that he did and that is why the answer to Johann Lamont's question is no—for the third time.

Johann Lamont: That was just noise; it did not answer the question. Alex Neil made a decision and then extracted himself and said that if there

were further decisions, somebody else would make them, but he had already made the decision in the morning.

We have established that Alex Neil has not been clear on what he did in relation to services in NHS Lanarkshire, but we wonder how far up the Government the process went. Peter Housden wrote to Siobhan McMahon and said:

"I would reiterate that should a ministerial decision be required ... this will be taken by the Minister for Public Health."

Clearing Alex Neil, the First Minister, as we heard, wrote to Siobhan McMahon, saying the same thing. However, there was no need for a ministerial decision to be made by Michael Matheson, because Alex Neil had already made his ministerial decision. Were Peter Housden and the First Minister in on this—[*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Order.

Johann Lamont: —or did Alex Neil play them for fools? I ask again: if Alex Neil will not resign for this behaviour, will the First Minister sack him?

The First Minister: I suppose that in the sense that I am the First Minister of Scotland, I am in on everything that happens in the Government. All that Johann Lamont is doing by asking something for the fourth time is making herself and her party look ridiculous.

Alex Neil has a long record of campaigning for the health service in Lanarkshire. If Alex Neil had not campaigned as a candidate, there would not be an accident and emergency department in Monklands. It is quite clear that the Labour Party's interest in mental health services in Lanarkshire is not to do with facilities for patients; it is just an argument to try to get at a Scottish National Party minister.

Having heard a detailed explanation of events from the permanent secretary and the First Minister all that time ago, will Johann Lamont not accept that the answer to her question is no? Perhaps the next time that she comes to the chamber, she will talk about the substantive issues that affect the people of Scotland.

Secretary of State for Scotland (Meetings)

2. Ruth Davidson (Glasgow) (Con): To ask the First Minister when he will next meet the Secretary of State for Scotland. (S4F-02084)

The First Minister (Alex Salmond): No plans in the near future, as far as I know.

Ruth Davidson: I am sure that the whole chamber is delighted to hear that Mo Farah will compete in the Commonwealth games in Glasgow. We want the world's elite to compete in Scotland. Glasgow's organising committee has

worked hard to ensure that venues such as the SSE Hydro, the velodrome and the Emirates arena were completed on time and on budget, and it should be given all due credit. However, its hard work has been undermined this week by the shambolic ticketing fiasco that has seen tens of thousands of families spend hours on hold, and still they have no prospect of tickets. Does the First Minister agree that it is outrageous that a hired-in company, paid handsomely for its work, is now damaging the reputation of our games, and what does he plan to do about it?

The First Minister: The organising committee has apologised for the delay and frustration that people experienced in trying to get the last of the tickets when they were made available for sale, and it was right to do so. Along with our partners in Glasgow City Council, the Cabinet Secretary for Commonwealth Games, Sport, Equalities and Pensioners' Rights is meeting the organising committee this afternoon, and we hope that out of that meeting will come a resolution of the situation in terms of practical action.

Recognising the organising committee's apology and recognising the frustration that many people feel, let us get matters into some sort of context. We are dealing with a games that, almost uniquely among the games of the past generation, is on time and on budget, where every facility is complete and where the transformation of the east end of Glasgow is absolutely amazing, and for which over 1 million tickets have already been sold. The last 100,000 or so tickets are tickets that the organising committee tried to get back from sponsors and international federations, in order to give the public more chance of getting to the games.

Of course, the organising committee will be able to sort out the situation that has caused frustration, but even the people who have been frustrated will recognise that there is an overwhelming demand for tickets and that the organising committee is doing absolutely everything that it can to ensure that every venue is full for the Commonwealth games. It will sort out the problems and people will get another opportunity to buy tickets, but let us put the issue in the context of Glasgow and Scotland enjoying and experiencing the most superb sporting and cultural event that we have ever seen.

Ruth Davidson: I have acknowledged the great work that Dave Grevemberg and his team have done in preparing for the games, both in physical infrastructure and in the way in which we have projected both my city of Glasgow and Scotland to the world.

I welcome the First Minister's announcement that Shona Robison will meet officials at the organising committee. I trust that, as a newly

promoted Cabinet-level minister, she will bring the problem to a speedy conclusion, because it is not about patching up the system and hoping for the best. We need to find out what went wrong, fix it and reassure the families who are still waiting for tickets that the system is back on track. Can the First Minister assure us that his cabinet secretary will have the issue fixed by the weekend so that the ticketing site will open on Monday morning? If it does not, will she take responsibility?

The First Minister: My goodness—I thank Ruth Davidson for her entirely supportive and collegiate remarks on the Commonwealth games. The cabinet secretary and our partners in Glasgow City Council have, for the last seven years, worked together on a cross-party basis to try to bring about the games. Many decisions have had to be made in order to arrive at the excellent position that we are now in. Ruth Davidson asks why the situation arose. It arose because there was an overwhelming demand for the last 10 per cent of tickets as a result of the fact that the games will be a sell-out in every event.

The organising committee has of course apologised for the breakdown in Ticketmaster's systems, which is a matter of great regret and frustration, and of course the cabinet secretary and our partners in Glasgow City Council are working with the organising committee to sort out the issue. However, given all the success that the organising committee has had in delivering the venues and the games and in taking the big decisions, and recognising that we are in the current situation because of that committee's attempts to get more tickets to satisfy the overwhelming demand, can Ruth Davidson and her party not find it in their hearts right now to try to get behind the organising committee to help it sort out the difficulty, as opposed to making the most party-political petty points about it?

The Presiding Officer: We have two constituency questions.

Alison McInnes (North East Scotland) (LD): The First Minister will be aware of the very serious disturbance at HMP Grampian that involved 39 inmates in a 14-hour siege overnight on Tuesday and into yesterday morning. Although no one was injured, I understand that significant damage has been caused to the Ellon wing of the new prison. What steps will the First Minister's Government take to ensure that good order is maintained in the future?

The First Minister: Substantial steps have already been taken. As the member correctly says, the issue was brought to a conclusion, and the Scottish Prison Service has made the decision to relocate prisoners. It is of course not unknown for new prisons to have such incidents—it has happened a number of times in the past—but that

does not make the actions acceptable or permissible. The member can be reassured that the appropriate action has been taken to ensure that our newest prison in Scotland shall perform efficiently and properly.

We should deprecate such behaviour in prisons. While recognising the action that the Scottish Prison Service is taking to sort things out, let us be under no illusion as to who is responsible for the unacceptable behaviour—that is, the perpetrators of that behaviour.

John Scott (Ayr) (Con): The First Minister will be aware that, last week, GE Caledonian announced 170 redundancies at its plant at Prestwick, which will reduce the staff number there to around 450. Although specialist servicing of the CF6 engines is a highly skilled job in a competitive marketplace, what help can the Scottish Government, through Scottish Enterprise and other agencies, give to that high-quality company and its employees at this difficult time?

The First Minister: As the member will know, GE Caledonian has already been offered and received a regional selective assistance grant to try to safeguard the jobs. He will also know that we are dealing with the opening of a new facility in Taiwan that is extremely competitive in terms of some of the functions and work that is done at Prestwick. The Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Employment and Sustainable Growth met the company yesterday to discuss exactly those matters. The local partnership action for continuing employment—PACE—chair and team are available to provide support for the affected employees, and the member can be absolutely assured that we will do everything in our power to maintain, and I hope in future increase, maximum employment in the Prestwick facility.

Tax Avoidance

3. Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): To ask the First Minister what steps revenue Scotland would take to prevent tax avoidance practices in the event that Scotland had greater responsibility for taxation. (S4F-02102)

The First Minister (Alex Salmond): The Scottish Government intends to take the toughest possible line on aggressive tax avoidance. We are determined to act decisively on avoidance, for example, of devolved taxation. The Revenue Scotland and Tax Powers Bill, which is currently before the Parliament, contains powers that will enable revenue Scotland to take robust action to counteract tax avoidance, including the introduction of a wide-ranging general anti-avoidance rule for devolved taxes, as Patrick Harvie knows.

The Scottish Government will seek to replicate that approach in developing the Scottish tax system following independence.

Patrick Harvie: In recent days there have been further revelations about the scale of the scandal of tax avoidance in the United Kingdom, from the members of Take That and other wealthy individuals in the Icebreaker scam to Amazon's corporate tax bill of £4.2 million after sales of £4.3 billion, while HM Revenue and Customs seems most concerned with selling citizens' tax data to the highest bidder.

Will the First Minister join in the many and growing calls for a boycott of Amazon until it starts paying its fair share? Does he agree that only Europe-wide co-operation between countries on corporate tax levels can stop the loopholes that disreputable companies such as Amazon are so determined to wriggle through?

The First Minister: I will not join a call for a boycott. That would have an impact on Scottish workers and Scottish jobs, as Patrick Harvie should know. However, what I will say is that I deprecate aggressive tax avoidance. Tax evasion, of course, is illegal.

While deprecating such behaviour, we should look for the solution in the tax system itself. A simple, transparent tax system reduces the opportunity for aggressive tax avoidance. On page 121 of "Scotland's Future: Your Guide to an Independent Scotland", Patrick Harvie will find the actions that the Scottish Government in an independent Parliament would seek to take.

I draw Patrick Harvie's attention to what we are already doing, in this Parliament, with the new tax powers that are being introduced. We have chosen not to ask HMRC to administer the new taxes but to set up revenue Scotland. Michael Clancy, the director of law reform at the Law Society of Scotland said in evidence to the Economy, Energy and Tourism Committee:

"In the evidence that we are giving on the Revenue Scotland and Tax Powers Bill, we are looking at its provisions on the Scottish general anti-avoidance rule. We have compared those provisions with the current general anti-abuse provisions in the Finance Act 2013 and we think that the Scottish GAAR provisions are much better. They are less complex and should prove to be more effective."—*[Official Report, Economy, Energy and Tourism Committee, 19 March 2014; c 4205.]*

I think that we have reason for hope and demonstration that what we are introducing with the new responsibilities that we are getting will provide a template for a tax system in an independent Scotland that will secure and protect us against the sort of unacceptable, aggressive tax avoidance that is widespread in the UK tax system.

Retirement Age

4. Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): To ask the First Minister what the impact on Scotland will be of United Kingdom Government plans to raise the retirement age. (S4F-02090)

The First Minister (Alex Salmond): Analysis published this week shows that a 65-year-old can expect the lifetime value of their state pension to be around £11,000 less for women and £10,000 less for men in Scotland than the average for the UK as a whole. What is more, the UK has based its plans to increase the state pension age on increasing life expectancy, but the reality is that Scottish life expectancy is currently the lowest of all the UK countries. That looks to us like a policy that is made in London without consideration of fairness in Scotland.

Kenneth Gibson: The First Minister will have welcomed the admission by UK pensions minister Steve Webb MP that state pensions will be secure regardless of the outcome of September's referendum, contrary to propaganda from the no campaign.

Does the First Minister agree that pensions will be guaranteed following independence and that, given that Labour's shadow secretary of state for work and pensions, Rachel Reeves MP, announced that Labour would support the Tory-Lib Dem UK Government pension reforms, the only way to develop a pension regime that is appropriate to Scotland's circumstances is to vote yes in September's referendum?

The First Minister: I do agree with that. In drawing attention to the comments of Steve Webb before a Westminster committee, Kenneth Gibson draws attention to an important point, which is that the no campaign has spent a good amount of time trying to tell people in Scotland that their pensions would not be safe in an independent Scotland. Now the UK pensions secretary, Steve Webb MP, has admitted, in front of a Westminster committee, that that is not the case.

We are entitled to ask when the better together, Labour-Tory, Tory-Labour leaflets that allege something that is clearly not true are going to be withdrawn, and whether the Liberal Democrats—Steve Webb is a Liberal Democrat member of Parliament—will insist that their better together colleagues stop trying to peddle myths and scaremonger to the people of Scotland.

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): It is not myth and scaremongering. Independent experts tell us that pensions and pension-related benefits are £100 higher per head of population in Scotland than they are in the rest of the UK, which is a good example of pooling and sharing our resources. Indeed, John Swinney even set up a working

group because of his concerns about the affordability of pensions in an independent Scotland.

The Presiding Officer: Can we get a question, Ms Baillie?

Jackie Baillie: At the start of the week, the Deputy First Minister told us that pensions are affordable because we die younger. What an appalling lack of ambition. Surely the First Minister should come to the chamber and tell us how to improve the health and wellbeing of pensioners now, instead of basing his pensions policy on people dying earlier.

The First Minister: That is what we have been doing by freezing the council tax for pensioners, and by protecting the bus pass for pensioners. All those things would be at risk if Jackie Baillie and Johann Lamont had their way. [*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Order.

The First Minister: Steve Webb said to the Westminster committee that state pensions would be “secure”—I am quoting exactly—in an independent Scotland. How can we reconcile that comment, which was made in Parliament, with the sort of material that Jackie Baillie comes up with day and daily? She chunters away, but that will not alter the fact that her scaremongering has been confounded by her own side.

Courts Reform (Scotland) Bill

5. Elaine Murray (Dumfriesshire) (Lab): To ask the First Minister whether the Scottish Government plans to introduce a lower threshold than £150,000 for claims heard in the sheriff courts, following the recommendation in the Justice Committee’s report on the Courts Reform (Scotland) Bill. (S4F-02096)

The First Minister (Alex Salmond): In 2007, the previous Administration appointed Lord Gill to undertake a wide-ranging review of the civil court system in Scotland. In 2009, the Scottish civil courts review published its report and recommendations, which included raising the exclusive competence of the sheriff court to £150,000. Lord Gill continued to strongly support that limit in his recent appearance at the Justice Committee.

We consider that £150,000 is the appropriate limit. We are, of course, aware that although almost all stakeholders agree that the current £5,000 limit is too low, there is a range of views on what the new increased limit should be, and we are happy to consider those views, including those that are expressed in the Justice Committee’s report.

Elaine Murray: Does the First Minister accept that the proposed threshold for the exclusive

competence of the sheriff court is more than five times the average full-time annual wage, and that, to an employee who loses income because of an injury at work, for example, a settlement of £10,000 or £20,000 can make the difference between penury and maintaining their standard of living? Will the Government support amendments to the Courts Reform (Scotland) Bill to ensure that people who are on low and average incomes are not disadvantaged by their case no longer being taken to the Court of Session and the loss of their automatic right to representation by an advocate?

The First Minister: I am not certain that the member fully appreciates the fact that Lord Gill’s aim in proposing the reform is to make justice more accessible to more people and to lower the cost of getting justice, and not to disadvantage people. The member seems to be looking at it from the opposite point of view.

The member quoted the Justice Committee, so I point out that paragraph 8 of the committee’s report says:

“The Committee supports the proposal to increase the limit of privative jurisdiction of the sheriff court in order to free up the Court of Session to deal with the most complex and serious cases and to ensure that the civil court system works more efficiently and economically.”

The Justice Committee acknowledged the purpose of the reform. We are now considering what the Justice Committee said and its suggestion that increasing the limit from £5,000 to £150,000 might be too big a leap. We are looking at what other people have recommended. We will take that into account in coming to a final conclusion on the proposal.

However, can the member just accept that Lord Gill’s purpose is to make the administration of justice in Scotland more efficient, to make it more accessible to ordinary people, to cut the prohibitive costs of the Court of Session, and to make justice accessible to more people in the sheriff courts around Scotland?

Scottish Business Development Bank

6. Gavin Brown (Lothian) (Con): To ask the First Minister who took the decision not to proceed with the Scottish business development bank and when. (S4F-02089)

The First Minister (Alex Salmond): The banking strategy, which was published on 10 May 2013, set out plans to examine the creation of a Scottish business development bank to provide additional borrowing to small and medium-sized businesses.

The finance secretary, John Swinney, gave the proposal careful consideration, and what emerged from that analysis was that without the powers of independence the bank’s borrowing would not be

additional to the Scottish Government's borrowing limit. In other words, if borrowing were extended to companies, it would have to come off capital investment in Scotland. Mr Swinney therefore decided on 17 March that it would not be feasible to proceed until we had exactly those powers.

I know that Gavin Brown is a reasonable man and that he will recognise that, to get the additionality we were looking for from the business bank proposal, we would need exactly the powers that have been stated. I know, therefore, that he will join his colleague Murdo Fraser in recognising that these powers are essential if we are to take some of the exciting initiatives that we want to take in an independent Scotland.

Gavin Brown: The First Minister said earlier that he is

“in on everything that happens”,

so he should know that his banking strategy document says that

“this strategy should apply to Scotland's approach to banking regardless of Scotland's constitutional future.”

It also says that the money was going to come from

“accessing new opportunities through European funding streams”.

It was a good idea. Will the First Minister look at it again today and consider reopening the case as published in his document?

The First Minister: The member is quoting from the entire banking strategy, of which the business bank was one proposal. As for detail of the proposal, I point out that any additional borrowing would have to be deducted from other purposes. [*Interruption.*] I know that Gavin Brown does not want to address that point because it comes down to the financial straitjacket that his Government and unionist politicians have been satisfied to put the people of Scotland in.

As for the point about accessing European funding, Mr Brown might remember that in 2009 I launched the Scottish Investment Bank. It would be fair to say that at the time some colleagues in the Parliament—not, I think, Gavin Brown himself—were less than enthusiastic about the potential success of that bank. I can tell Mr Brown that in 2012-13 the Scottish Investment Bank equity and debt scheme invested £32.4 million in 106 companies, which leveraged £60.4 million from private sector partners.

The Scottish Investment Bank now has a portfolio of 237 investee companies employing 4,000 people. Because the Conservative Party does not seem to acknowledge that this might be important, given Ruth Davidson's call to Tories to not say anything unless they know what they are

talking about—which I think is very pertinent—I point out that the companies that have benefited include Touch Bionics in Livingston, Spark Energy in the Borders, Allthings in Dundee and many others across Scotland. All of them think that the work of the Scottish Investment Bank is important, and many of them think that, with the additional borrowing powers of an independent Scotland, we can bring about even more business development across the country.

The Presiding Officer: That ends First Minister's questions.

Point of Order

12:33

Ken Macintosh (Eastwood) (Lab): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. Standing orders clearly state that the purpose of the Public Audit Committee is:

“to consider and report on ... any ... document laid before the Parliament, or referred to it by the Parliamentary Bureau or by the Auditor General for Scotland, concerning financial control, accounting and auditing in relation to public expenditure.”

Furthermore, the guidance on committees states:

“It is quite common for committee reports to achieve a high level of consensus between members and for findings and recommendations to be agreed without the need for divisions. This has the advantage of adding weight to the conclusions, and the likelihood of their being accepted more widely.”

This Parliament has, for more than a decade, proudly pointed to the work of its committees as an example of how we do things differently here in the Scottish Parliament. For all that time, they have been a place for rigorous debate, but never until the current session have they been a place for sheer Government obsequiousness—

Stewart Maxwell (West Scotland) (SNP): Rubbish!

The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick): Order! Mr Gibson.

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): You have named the wrong member.

The Presiding Officer: We have a point of order. Keep quiet.

Kenneth Gibson: You named the wrong member.

The Presiding Officer: Mr Gibson.

Kenneth Gibson: I never spoke.

The Presiding Officer: Mr Gibson, I am not arguing with you over the chamber. I will see you in my office after First Minister's question time.

Mr Macintosh, please continue.

Ken Macintosh: All members are expected to show loyalty to their political parties, but each of us has a parliamentary duty and a responsibility to the public to hold the Government to account. In deliberately trying to downplay, obscure or simply whitewash evidence to any of our parliamentary committees, members are in danger of putting the interests of the Government and their own party first. That does no one any favours.

The expectation is that all parliamentary committees—but perhaps most of all the Public Audit Committee—will be robust but fair and objective in their deliberations. Presiding Officer, I would appreciate your guidance on how we can ensure that the trust that has been hard won over several successive parliamentary sessions is not lost. Will you advise us whether the matter should be investigated by the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee?

The Presiding Officer: I thank the member for the advance notice of his point of order. Conduct in committees and how each committee approaches any given issue are a matter for those committees and their conveners. When any member considers that there is a failing in parliamentary procedures, it is open to them to write to the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee to request an investigation. Members may also write to the Conveners Group to ask it to consider the issue.

Stewart Maxwell: On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I wish to clarify the position on a remark that was just made, so that there is no misunderstanding or mistaken identity. It was not Mr Gibson who called out during the previous point of order; it was me. I would be happy to go and see you to discuss the matter, Presiding Officer. I do not want Mr Gibson to be blamed for something that I was responsible for.

The Presiding Officer: Mr Maxwell, I thank you as always for your honesty and integrity. I will see you afterwards.

Animal Rights and Human Responsibilities

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Elaine Smith):

I ask Parliament's guests who are leaving the gallery to note that Parliament is in session and to leave as quickly and quietly as possible, please.

The next item of business is a members' business debate on motion S4M-09418, in the name of Christine Grahame, on animal rights and human responsibilities. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament considers that companion animals, farmed animals and wild creatures are sentient beings whose contribution to communities and the environment should be recognised and celebrated; acknowledges, in particular, the positive role of pets in the lives of children and adults throughout Scotland, including in Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale, and the comfort and assistance that they provide for many people who have difficulty with vision, hearing, mobility or socialising, and affirms that animals need and deserve the best possible welfare standards appropriate for their species whenever they are bred, reared, traded or kept.

12:38

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): After all the hubris of a few minutes ago, I am delighted to say that the debate will—I hope—be consensual and friendly across the chamber. There will be no biting, clawing or scratching.

I thank all the members who have signed my motion, stayed for the debate, visited the displays in Parliament this week to celebrate animals, and signed the pledge in support of Scotland's animals. I particularly thank those who sent in photos, including our magnificent Jackie Baillie and Smudge, and Paul Martin, who has a lovely, cuddly white dog, which was not at all what I expected. The line that owners look like their dogs or that dugs look like their owners does not always pertain.

I thank all the members of the cross-party group on animal welfare, some of whom are in the gallery—they are just managing to get in. Last but not least, I mention the working dogs that are joining us in the gallery. Sometimes, I speak to one man and his dug. Today, I might, with others, speak to four dugs. Indeed, I have it on the authority of the other Deputy Presiding Officer, Mr Scott, that Mr Q is my number 1 fan and stands to attention when I speak. That could be misread, but I am taking it as respect.

My motion is first and foremost a recognition that all animals are sentient beings. We are just a wee bit higher up the evolutionary scale than

them; sometimes, we even act as though we are. Over the years, we have tamed animals, brought them to our fire for companionship and as guardians, and eaten and abused them. We can still do all three.

Those of us who have pets know that our commitment reaches way beyond the notion of a cuddly puppy or cute kitten. For me, the bird should not be caged, and the rabbit needs a life beyond a hutch. When we acquire or buy a pet, we must do so with informed responsibility and commitment at the forefront of our minds. A pet should be bought not just because it is doe-eyed and cutesy, but for the right reasons and by the right person, who will give it the right environment. It should not be a status symbol or a frivolous buy.

We must accept that we cannot just swan off on holiday for the weekend, as we have to make provision for the care of our companion. There are inevitably vet bills—ching, ching—that run into hundreds of pounds, or insurance costs. A dog needs and will appreciate proper training and exercise, and a cat flap—it is practical for me, although not for my own use, of course—is mandatory.

I cannot have a dog because of my lifestyle, so I have had a sequence of cats: life in the wild of the garden, with the battle scars from territorial scraps with the black feline next door, and the odd pile of bird and mouse remains on the rug. Does Ms Baillie recognise that?

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): Yes, I do.

Christine Grahame: That is all part of animals living the life that is intended for them. People must learn to live with animals' lifestyle—they need to get a lot of carpet cleaner, and to learn to rescue terrified birds from window ledges and to capture the odd terrified mouse and release it into the garden. That is a technique that I have mastered, and which I am happy to teach colleagues, if they require a lesson.

It is all to do with quality of life. The better the animals' quality of life, the better we will feel, and we learn as we go. I know, as the saying goes, that while dogs have masters, cats have staff. No does not mean no, and any competent cat will be on your knee being absentmindedly stroked before you know it.

Good quality of life must extend to the animals that we breed to eat. Factories are for making things; they are not, and never will be, farms. If and when we kill to eat, it must be done as humanely as possible. As for circuses, all acrobatics and clowning should be from the human species.

People should never, ever buy their pet from the back of a car, even if their heartstrings are being

tugged to breaking point. They should report that to the Scottish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals or some other welfare organisation. It is simply wrong, and if they buy a pet in that way they may inadvertently be supporting the hideous practice of puppy farming.

People should not buy pets online. It is not the same as ordering next week's groceries or accessories for a new outfit. Animals are not things.

We need to update the legislation on sale of pets. The Pet Animals Act dates back to 1951. Crumbs! It is almost as old as me and definitely needs a facelift: the act, that is—not me.

We can enjoy our pets and our animal world, but we must do them the justice that they deserve. When we see injustice and ignorance in relation to animals, we should say or do something, even if only because we have more in common with them than we know.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We come to the open debate. I call Alex Fergusson, and note that he has to leave the chamber early.

12:44

Alex Fergusson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): Thank you, Presiding Officer, for your indulgence in allowing me to leave the chamber early. I mean no offence in doing so.

I congratulate Christine Grahame on bringing the debate to the chamber. I like the fact that the motion begins by recognising and celebrating the contribution that animals bring to our world, whether they are pets or farmed or wild animals. If members think that the motion is a little overstated, they should try to imagine a world without animals. It is not a pleasant thought, is it?

The animal kingdom has every bit as much a right to inhabit this planet as we do. We share the planet. We have an added responsibility, which, as the motion points out, is to ensure that our animals enjoy the "best possible welfare standards" that we can provide.

I will highlight two aspects of animal rights and human responsibilities. The first was brought to my attention by a constituent who is profoundly deaf and whose quality of life has for many years been immeasurably improved by the companionship and expertise of a hearing dog. The issue that he raised with me is quite simply one of discrimination. We all know about guide dogs for the blind. How could we not, with the wonderful and aforementioned Mr Q in our midst these days? We all know that exceptions are rightly made for guide dogs in all areas of life from which pet dogs are normally excluded.

Sadly, nothing like the same awareness appears to exist when it comes to hearing dogs, although the same legislation and regulations apply to them, I understand. My constituent has been refused entry to a number of establishments over the years, and he now knows of many other people who have had similar experiences. He has waged a lengthy and commendable letter-writing campaign to have the legislation strengthened, although I cannot help but feel that it is we who need education about using the existing legislation properly before we resort to producing new legislation. It cannot be too difficult to ensure that our hotels, restaurants, cafes and other similar establishments are made aware of the need to treat hearing dogs with the same degree of respect as is shown to guide dogs. I hope that debates such as this will help to initiate and kick-start that educative process.

The second issue has been raised with us by the NFU Scotland, and is highly relevant to the human responsibilities part of the motion. As the NFUS briefing succinctly puts it, it is essential that we ensure that companion animals and farm animals can co-exist in the same environment without fear, distress or danger to each other. To achieve that aim, which is surely an entirely reasonable one, the human responsibilities part of the equation needs to be exercised to the full.

We read too often about incidents of sheep worrying and cattle worrying, but that can be addressed by owners exercising proper control over their dogs—if only they could be persuaded to exercise that control.

The second aspect of the NFUS's concern is even more serious. We now live in a world where it is almost universally accepted that dog owners and walkers pick up after their dogs in our towns, cities and villages. I, for one, have been hugely impressed by the degree to which most people accept that as normal and sensible practice. That makes it all the more extraordinary that people seem to be reluctant to take that same commitment with them when they take their animals into the countryside. In an urban setting, dog mess is antisocial and unpleasant. In a farm environment, it is also antisocial and unpleasant, but it is dangerous, too. Dog mess can and does lead to disease in livestock, and can result in abortion in cattle and death in sheep. I commend the NFUS for its plans for a national campaign to promote an increased sense of responsibility among dog owners in respect of farm animals. I hope that Parliament will give that campaign its full support.

It is a wonderful thing that people are able to explore our countryside at will, but the right that Parliament conferred on them was not a right to roam; it was purposefully called a "right of

responsible access". All we need is people taking a little more responsibility.

12:48

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP): I thought that the heading for the motion was particularly good, as it includes both rights and responsibilities. Both human beings and animals have rights but, when it comes to responsibilities, it has to be the human beings who shoulder most of them.

I am very fond of animals, especially dogs. However, our first household pet was a budgie. I still remember when, as a youngster at primary school, I came downstairs one morning, took the cover off and found him sadly deceased on the floor of his cage.

We then had a couple of beagles in succession, which were highly disobedient. Most recently, my mother had a superb collie cross, which was amazingly obedient. Sadly, it died a week past Monday, aged 15. I used to walk the dog after lunch over at my mother's every Sunday, so it was a bit strange going there last Sunday, as there was no dog to walk.

It is clear that many of us care very much for our pets, but sometimes that can seem to go just a little bit too far. When a pet gets medical treatment faster than a human being does, or when people leave their large estates entirely to animal charities and leave nothing at all to people, I get a little bit uneasy. We need to strike a balance in all that.

There are many forms of cruelty to dogs and other animals. I thought it would be worth my while to mention some of them today. There are the obvious forms, such as setting snares, chasing deer around fields with cars and badger baiting. As Alex Fergusson said, the NFUS briefing makes many valid points about irresponsible dog owners and about livestock being distressed, hurt or killed by dogs.

Air guns are also an issue, especially with regard to the shooting of cats. If this Parliament is to control licensing of air guns, I hope that that is something that we can clamp down on, as has been suggested by the League Against Cruel Sports.

There is also unnecessary testing of products on animals. I encourage colleagues to check the cleaning products that they use in their offices. The British Union for the Abolition of Vivisection does good work in that regard; the leaping bunny symbol indicates when products are cruelty free. Co-op stores are particularly good at stocking such products, which are often its own-brand products.

My brother is a vet in Wales and he tells me that one very common problem that he faces is animals being overfed and overweight. Of course, that can be difficult to tell the owners if they are also overfed and overweight. As with children, sometimes saying no is the most caring response.

The Dogs Trust has one of its two Scottish centres in my constituency, which are well worth visiting if members have not already done so. Last time I visited, the staff told me about the young offender rehabilitation programme in which they are involved. One young guy whom they worked with always had his hood up over his head, which I guess illustrated some of his personal issues. They worked with him and explained that the dogs were frightened by the hood. At first he agreed that he would put the hood down for dogs, but not for people. However, later on he came round to being much more relaxed in general. Perhaps that is just a small indication of the positive impact that animals can have—even on some of the most difficult people.

I do not argue that we should care for animals because we are related to them. I believe that we were created separately and are distinct from each other. However, I do believe that we were given responsibility to look after all the animals of this world, which certainly includes wild animals, as well as domesticated ones.

People are more important than animals, but that does not excuse cruelty. I lived in Nepal for some years, where it was not unusual to see people throwing stones at dogs. One time when I was walking down the street a dog itself was thrown out of a window.

I hope that we, as a society, are moving on from that. Evidence shows that people who are cruel to animals are also cruel to their fellow human beings, so human rights and animal rights are very much connected and I very much support them both.

12:53

Elaine Murray (Dumfriesshire) (Lab): I congratulate Christine Grahame on bringing this motion to the chamber and on her organisation, with the Dogs Trust and OneKind, of the displays in Parliament celebrating the contribution of pets to human wellbeing. The rolling exhibition of photographs of staff's and MSPs' companion animals has attracted much interest from the users of the building, and it reminds us of all the things that we have in common, despite the fact that we spend so much time in here fighting with each other.

I have had the pleasure of the company of companion animals—a lot of the time it has been more than one—all my life. The first Murray family

dog preceded me into the world and was later joined by a succession of hamsters, fish, tortoises—I still feel guilty about the tortoises—stick insects, guinea pigs and rabbits, as my animal-loving parents presented very little resistance to enlarging the pet population of the house. I am, however, sorry to say that my mother drew the line at rats and snakes.

The few short months that I spent without a pet when I started my post-doctoral degree made it clear to me that there was a hole in my life that only an animal could fill. We were joined by my first feline—a tortoiseshell and white kitten called Top Cat who brought home a whole load of mice. She hid corpses under my bed and put them in my sports kit, but eventually walked out on me because I got a new boyfriend whom she did not like. She never came back—I never found out where she went.

My eldest child was named after a delightful little cat who had, sadly, been killed on the road a couple of weeks before my son was born. I must say that the cat's name was not Tiddles, but Alex. It might have been embarrassing for my son otherwise.

At 18 months, my son advanced my campaign to add a dog to the household by plaintively repeating, "I want a doggy," until his father gave in. From then on we, too, had a succession of creatures: dogs, cats, gerbils, hamsters, rabbits, guinea pigs, fish, degus and a horse.

Pets contribute to our mental and physical wellbeing. However, other than a feral tom kitten who, when we first lived in Ayr, rightly decided that it might be a smart move to get himself adopted by us, we chose to bring pets into our lives. As Christine Grahame said, we therefore have responsibilities to ensure that the animals have the appropriate environment, exercise, diet and, in many cases, the companionship of others of their own species, as many animals are unhappy otherwise.

Regardless of my fractured pelvis, my daughter's broken finger and my friend's fractured vertebra—all attributable to Twix the horse—I am convinced that pets have made, and continue to make, a positive contribution to my family's health. My children were resilient to viruses and bacteria and lost little time from school. I attribute that to three factors: genetics, breastfeeding and pets. I am sure that exposure to pets' hair—and worse—helped to prime their immune systems. After all, a little dirt does no harm.

Pets also helped to introduce our children to difficult issues such as death. Somewhere at home I still have a jotter in which, when he was about seven, my son had to write little illustrated stories about what he had done at the weekend.

One entry contains a detailed illustration of the death-bed scene of the little feral kitten who had adopted us a few years earlier.

My mother will celebrate her 90th birthday next month and my father is in his late 80s. They insist on looking after our little dogs—Sylvie and Annie, which we bought to celebrate our silver wedding anniversary, which is why they are so named—while we are out at work or away in locations that are not pet-friendly. People at their time of life sometimes feel that they have ceased to have a positive role in their families' lives, but my parents know that they continue to make an important contribution to our and our dogs' lives, long after their grandchildren have grown up.

In addition to that, both my parents had serious health issues in their 60s—indeed, my mother was not expected to live after an operation went seriously wrong—but both pulled through. I am certain that that was in part due to a lifetime of taking regular exercise, including daily dog walking. My mother's consultant actually commented on that. I am sure that dogs helped to save my mother's life when she was 65.

Despite the vet fees, the broken bones, the hairs on the carpets and the grief that we feel when they finally leave us, pets contribute so much to the lives of their owners that they are indeed well worth today's motion of celebration. We must take our responsibility for them seriously.

12:57

Stewart Stevenson (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): I congratulate Christine Grahame on securing the debate and on arranging the spectacularly interesting and engaging display that we have in two locations in Holyrood. I am slightly worried that my two cats, Malcolm and Donald, will hold me to account for submitting their photograph without their permission, but I guess that I will just need to live with that.

As he did on many subjects, Winston Churchill had something to say on the subject of animals. He said:

"Dogs look up to us. Cats look down on us. Pigs treat us as equals."

He was a great fan of pigs. Like millions of others, I am a lower form of being, and am at the bottom of the pecking order—certainly in our house.

When Christine Grahame said that we are a wee bit higher up the evolutionary scale, I am not sure that she is correct. The fruit fly has eight chromosomes and man has 46. However, hermit crabs have 254 and the *Ophioglossum* fern has 768. More fundamentally, the *Oxytricha trifallax* has 15,600 chromosomes—2,000 copies of each of them in a single cell. Perhaps that animal does

not engage with us because it is so intelligent. We will never know—it is not interested in the lower form of being that we are.

The motion talks about farmed animals and wild creatures, but I do not think that anyone has said much about wild creatures so far. Where I live, we have badgers about 400m away. We have roe deer—we once had 20 of them in the garden. We have foxes and weasels—I have seen a weasel drag off a young rabbit about 10 times its size. Of course, we also have those interlopers that the Normans brought about 1,000 years ago: rabbits.

In the country, we also have lots of farmed animals of one sort or another. All those farmed, wild and companion animals occupy important ecological niches and interact with each other.

Alex Fergusson rightly referred to hearing dogs, and we have dogs that help people without sight. We also have dogs that look after people with failing mental faculties and keep them from danger. Animals are a very important part of many people's lives. The widowed or deserted can have long conversations with their companions, maintaining mental alertness, and the daily walk with a dog maintains physical fitness in many of our older people.

A well-cared-for, well-regarded animal companion who has been trained to understand proper relations with humans—it may be boisterous but may not bite—can gain, just as we do. We protect such animals from hunger, disease, debility and danger. We also have duties to them. We must keep the sheep from the goats—Ezekiel 34:17, in the Bible, makes reference to that practice from many years ago. Specifically, we have a duty to neuter our cats, as our failure to neuter an adequately high proportion of our cats is diluting the stock of Scottish wildcats to the point that there are now fewer pure-bred wildcats left than even the threatened Bengal tiger.

I will close by illustrating one businesslady's attitude to her animals. Halfway between here and my home in Banffshire is Peggy Scott's restaurant on the A90. Unless they have talked to the owner, few people will realise that Dawn Scott always names her businesses after her pets. Peggy Scott is actually a wee dug, and she has her own restaurant.

13:02

Malcolm Chisholm (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (Lab): I congratulate Christine Grahame on lodging the motion. I feel slightly uneasy following a farmer and four members who have massive experience of pets and other animals, as I have never owned a pet and have no background in relation to animals. Nevertheless, I was struck by two phrases in the motion. The first of those is

“the positive role of pets in the lives of children and adults”.

I have seen that in recent years with my grandchildren. The second phrase is

“the best possible welfare standards”.

I have always been concerned about the prevention of animal suffering, and many constituents have written to me about such matters. I will turn to that issue before I talk briefly about the positive role of pets in the lives of adults and children.

The cabinet secretary will know of my constituents' concerns, as I have written to him about most of those matters. Just in the past few months, they have approached me about puppy farming, the sale of cats online, snares, the use of wild animals in circuses and the use of closed-circuit television cameras in slaughterhouses. That last issue reminds us that, for most people, animals cannot be seen as equivalent to human beings. I respect those who are vegetarians and who do not want to kill animals in any circumstances; nevertheless, most of us accept that we can eat animals. However, cruelty to animals must always be avoided, and we must always ensure that the best possible welfare standards are enforced.

Within the past few days, I have received a letter from the cabinet secretary about puppy farming. The briefing that we received from OneKind asks for a review of pet vending legislation, which seems to be required. OneKind states:

“without a change in legislation this kind of farming, which contradicts all of the guiding principles of good animal welfare, would perhaps continue as a profitable enterprise at the expense of animals' lives”.

I hope that that will be taken on board.

Other issues are perhaps trickier for the Government to address. The Government cannot make up its mind about the use of wild animals in circuses, but some of my constituents have made up their minds about that and say that a stop should be put to it. Snaring is also controversial. We are one of the few European countries to allow it and I support my constituents who want an end to it. We should also have 24-hour security cameras in abattoirs—I cannot see any argument against that.

The Government has taken action. As we will recall from last week's members' business debate on responsible dog ownership, it is proposed that dogs be microchipped. I imagine that that important animal welfare measure for dogs will go ahead. As that debate reminded us, another issue is animals who behave antisocially. We do not need to repeat the arguments, but we must take action where animals are behaving in that way,

just as we do with human beings who are behaving similarly.

I have only one minute left in which to mention the positive role of pets in the lives of children and adults. That issue could have been mentioned in yesterday's members' business debate on loneliness because, for that debate, I read fairly extensive research showing that adults living alone without a pet were significantly lonelier than those living with one.

I will close by focusing on the impact of pets on children. That has had a profound effect on my attitude towards animals in general and pets in particular because I have seen how my oldest granddaughter loves, cares for and empathises with cats in general and her own cat in particular. That has made me think about the very positive role that animals play in the lives of children. In the main, I am talking about real animals, but there are also animal toys and one cannot avoid the fact that animals are massively important in children's literature.

Although it is possible to love animals and not human beings, in general, a positive and caring attitude towards animals will correlate with and encourage a positive and caring attitude towards human beings. That is a very important dimension, but we must always remember that animals are different from human beings and we must respect animals for what they are.

13:06

The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and the Environment (Richard Lochhead): I thank my colleague Christine Grahame for proposing the motion and the other colleagues who have contributed so ably to the debate. I also welcome to the Parliament many members of the cross-party group on animal welfare and, indeed, our four-legged friends Royal, Briar and Keira, who I understand are also in the gallery. Perhaps they will get a personal tour of the Parliament from Mr Q and they can catch up over a bowl of water later on.

Like Christine Grahame, I congratulate everyone who has contributed to the celebrating Scotland's animals week stalls that are in Parliament this week. If anyone has not yet had a chance to go along, I urge them to do so. Unfortunately, I never got round to submitting a photograph for the stall, but I will certainly update my cats back home that we were paying tribute to them. For the first time in many decades, I remembered Timothy the tortoise, who was my first pet as a child, which brought back memories for me. All the anecdotes and stories that we have heard from various members remind us that it is important, and sometimes humbling, to remember

the many benefits that we obtain from our relationship with animals.

Christine Grahame and the cross-party group on animal welfare do sterling work to promote discussion, share information and raise awareness about animal welfare issues, ably supported by OneKind and others.

Although this week's event is upbeat, as we have heard from members' speeches, most of the issues that the cross-party group deals with are anything but. Animals are hugely important to Scotland for a range of reasons, and the cross-party group has a critical role in reminding Parliament of our responsibility to ensure that they are properly looked after. For example, Scotland's animals help to maintain and enhance our world-famous landscape, to which Stewart Stevenson and others referred. Carefully managed grazing by cattle and sheep helps to maintain the vast upland environment and to ensure a rich diversity of plants and wildlife.

Wild animals also play a part in shaping the landscape. For example, beavers, recently the subject of a successful reintroduction trial, can have beneficial effects by creating wetlands, increasing biodiversity and even minimising floods.

When managed responsibly, Scotland's animals contribute to a healthy tourism industry, a world-renowned livestock industry, and a beautiful country for the people of Scotland to live and work in, too.

As we have heard, many people benefit from animals on a much more personal level, not least the many pet owners that derive companionship and, in some cases, purpose from their animals. There is growing evidence that animals have a therapeutic benefit for people's physical and mental wellbeing, even helping people with psychiatric illnesses. The benefits that companionship can bring to wellbeing were reflected in Elaine Murray's and many other members' speeches. More work is needed to improve our knowledge of that effect. However, from studies to date, it appears that, when employed in the correct manner and targeted at the appropriate user group, animals can contribute significantly to our wellbeing and quality of life.

The national charity Pets As Therapy already provides therapeutic visits from volunteers with their pet dogs and cats to places such as hospitals, hospices, nursing and care homes and special needs schools. We should also pay tribute to the thousands of volunteers who help animal welfare charities.

Christine Grahame: It would be helpful to add to the catalogue of helpful animals those in prisons. The Dogs Trust has rescued Staffordshire terriers, which get an undeserved bad reputation,

and young men in Polmont prison write diaries— young men who would not bother to write about anything else—and care for them until they have found new homes.

Richard Lochhead: That is a good example. In the UK, there are more than 5,000 active Pets As Therapy dogs and a smaller number of cats working to bring the opportunity to stroke, hold and talk to a calm and friendly animal to thousands of people who are in need of the emotional lift that sometimes only animal companionship can bring.

There is, of course, no doubt of the huge benefit of guide dogs to their 520 blind or partially sighted owners in Scotland or, indeed, of hearing dogs for the deaf. I think that Alex Fergusson mentioned hearing dogs. The service that those dogs provide is impressive and crucial to many people's lives. However, perhaps even more remarkable is a recent small trial in Scotland of dogs as helpers to dementia patients that Alzheimer Scotland and others ran. The dogs helped with daily routine, reminded people to take medicines, improved owners' confidence, helped them to socialise and offered reassurance in unfamiliar environments.

The pilot was particularly successful and a national programme of matching of dogs to people with dementia is being rolled out across the country, which is good news indeed.

Individual responsibility is important in the debate. It is important for the welfare of all the animals that provide all those benefits to us. Animal welfare is immensely important to the people of Scotland and the Scottish Government takes it very seriously.

The main legal provision for animal welfare in Scotland lies in the Animal Health and Welfare (Scotland) Act 2006, which covers the welfare of all protected animals kept by people. As well as making the ill treatment of animals an offence, the act places a clear duty of care on anyone who is responsible for an animal.

There is also, of course, more specific legislation on a range of areas: the breeding of dogs, the sale of pets, animal boarding, performing animals, zoo animals, and farm animals and their humane slaughter. Some of that legislation is relatively new. For example, the Welfare of Animals at Time of Killing (Scotland) Regulations 2012 are the first, and currently only, legislation in the UK that implements the European Union rules on welfare at killing that came into force on 1 January 2013.

We are taking that issue, which members mentioned, seriously. It is an emotive topic that many would rather not think about. However, it is important and, indeed, inevitable that, with an outstanding reputation for producing high-quality meat from livestock with an excellent reputation for

high health and welfare, Scotland takes such debates seriously. That legislation also maintains Scotland's pre-existing higher welfare at slaughter standards. We should bear in mind the fact that that we benefit from those higher standards, which help Scotland to be at the forefront of animal welfare.

However, I recognise that, as some members mentioned, animal welfare legislation needs updated in some areas. I am acutely aware that the Pet Animals Act 1951, to which Christine Grahame and other members referred, does not include provisions for modern welfare issues such as internet sales or exotic pets. I am also aware that we currently have welfare legislation for the breeding of dogs only, which leaves the breeding of other pet animals unregulated.

My officials met representatives of the pet industry in recent months to gather initial views on those welfare issues and how they can be tackled. I urge OneKind and parliamentary colleagues to note that we are already working on an initial review of the issues and options relating to pet animals. We will be discussing the matter further in the weeks and months ahead.

Of course, other issues have just been consulted on, such as responsible dog ownership—to which Malcolm Chisholm and others referred—and microchipping. There have been 2,500 responses to that consultation. That is a huge number and it illustrates the strength of feeling over animal welfare issues and responsible dog ownership in this country.

There are a whole lot of issues to take forward. We must also recognise the role that animal welfare charities play in education. For example, the Scottish SPCA provides an excellent free prevention through education programme to Scotland's children, encouraging them to treat animals with compassion and respect.

In Scotland, we are fortunate that we have so many people who are willing to donate time and money to help to improve animal welfare. We should all be proud to live in such a caring country. Animals are of course sentient beings, as was discussed, and they should be given respect, care and compassion. We cannot ignore their huge contribution to people and the environment and it is right for that to be celebrated.

I congratulate Christine Grahame again on lodging her motion and I congratulate everyone who has put in efforts to ensure that we do that in the Parliament this week. I urge everyone to continue to work together to ensure that we have the best possible animal welfare standards in Scotland.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes Christine Grahame's debate on animal rights and human responsibilities.

13:15

Meeting suspended.

14:30

On resuming—

Presiding Officer's Ruling

The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick): I wish to say something before we begin the afternoon's business. Further to today's point of order after First Minister's questions, I inform the chamber that I acknowledge that Mr Gibson did not make the initial remark that I found unacceptable. That remark was made by Mr Maxwell, who has made a full apology.

I have apologised to Mr Gibson for my misidentification. However, I have made it clear to him that he could have dealt with the issue in other ways than having a dialogue with me across the floor of the chamber. I now consider the matter closed.

Homecoming Scotland 2014

The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick): The first item of business this afternoon is a debate on motion S4M-10051, in the name of Fergus Ewing, on homecoming Scotland 2014. I advise members that the Presiding Officers will be generous with time allowances.

14:31

The Minister for Energy, Enterprise and Tourism (Fergus Ewing): The debate provides an opportunity to highlight how homecoming Scotland 2014 will extend the benefits and opportunities offered by the Commonwealth games, the Ryder cup, the MTV Europe music awards and the armed forces national day event; to promote the year-long co-ordinated programme of events that are designed to welcome visitors in a celebration of the very best of Scotland's food and drink, of our assets as a country of natural beauty and of our rich creativity and cultural and ancestral heritage; and to celebrate the significant successes that have been achieved to date.

Scotland competes for every visitor in a global market that continues to grow. The number of overseas visitors to Scotland is forecast to rise at a faster rate than the United Kingdom average. The recent independent Barclays study predicted that spending will rise by 40 per cent by 2017, which will contribute £2.5 billion to our economy. The predictions about our overseas visitors are welcome, but the industry recognises that we must keep refreshing the offering. We cannot afford to be complacent.

We need to recognise the value of not only our biggest market but our oldest friend, England. The latest figures for 2013 show that residents of England took 10 per cent more short breaks in Scotland than they did in 2012 and that the number of residents of England who took longer holidays in Scotland increased by 4 per cent between 2012 and 2013. Each and every one of them is welcome.

In 2013, the media giant CNN named Scotland as its top travel choice for 2014. That view is endorsed by Lonely Planet and *Wanderlust* magazine, which identified Scotland as a top world tourist destination to visit in 2014. That is a tribute to the successful work of VisitScotland and its team.

Jenny Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): I might have misread them, but my reading of the figures for quarter 4 in 2013, from October to December, is that domestic visits decreased by more than 22 per cent from the same quarter in the previous year.

Fergus Ewing: The most recent figures, which have just been released, show a positive position for tourism and particularly for overseas visitors. From time to time, domestic tourism has reduced. It is important to make the point that that has happened on both sides of the border—in Scotland and in England.

I will return to the topic of the day. Homecoming 2014 is the glue that binds together the unique opportunities of 2014. It builds on the successes of homecoming 2009, which influenced more than 95,000 visitors to travel to Scotland and generated net additional expenditure of £53.7 million.

A key feature in 2009 was the strong partnerships that were developed to unite behind a common theme. The Scottish Government committed to maintaining that approach by delivering a series of themed years to run from 2010 to 2013. That activity put the spotlight on some of our greatest assets; brought a focus to the promotion of domestic and international tourism; and supported the development of the events industry in Scotland.

It has been a great success. More than half a million people attended events and activities celebrating the year of food and drink; there was a 6 per cent increase in levels of participation in the events that were supported throughout the year of active Scotland; and messaging for the year of creative Scotland reached almost 70 million people. The year of natural Scotland achieved a 12 per cent increase in the number of visitors to rural and coastal locations in Scotland.

The year 2014 is unique in terms of raising Scotland's national and international profile as a world-class tourism destination. At its heart is the homecoming programme, the delivery of which is being led by VisitScotland along with private, public and third sector partners. VisitScotland, supported by a £5.5 million core budget from Scottish Government, is targeting a return on investment of £44 million of additional tourism revenue for Scotland.

There are now 837 events included in the programme, which is more than double the number that took place in 2009. Activities are taking place across every local authority area in Scotland throughout the year. I am sure that many members in the chamber will wish to extol and promote the events that are occurring in their areas and constituencies.

Homecoming-themed hogmanay and Burns celebrations have already taken place. The legacy of John Muir was recently marked with the John Muir festival and the opening of the John Muir way, and the launch of the iconic Kelpies sculptures.

Looking ahead, key events such as Bannockburn live, the Edinburgh festivals, the Forth bridges festival, the Ryder cup opening concert, the Highland homecoming and the MTV Europe music awards are still to come. In addition, there are community-led events taking place the length and breadth of the country. My ministerial colleagues—including Fiona Hyslop, who is sitting beside me—and I are fully committed to actively supporting a range of events throughout the year. The efforts of the officials involved have been unparalleled, and I pay tribute to their unstinting support and determination to ensure that Scotland succeeds as never before on the world stage.

With its partners, VisitScotland is leading the effort to ensure that Scotland's welcome to the world is promoted throughout the whole year. It has developed the brilliant moments campaign and the "Doorsteps" advert to promote the 2014 events that are programmed for a UK-wide audience. Media and public relations events in VisitScotland's key markets have already secured an estimated reach of 6.5 million from international press advertising, and substantial news and travel coverage is contributing to the global PR reach.

Results are already being achieved. Celtic Connections celebrated its most successful year to date with more than 110,000 tickets sold and gross sales topping £1.5 million, which is a 10 per cent increase on previous years. Electric Glen, the winter lighting festival in East Renfrewshire's Rouken Glen park, sold all its 24,000 tickets this year, more than doubling last year's attendances. The Glasgow film festival was another fantastic success, with record-breaking ticket sales in excess of 41,000: the highest in its history and up by 6 per cent on last year. In addition, 9,000 people attended the spectacular international opening of the Kelpies, which indicates a positive benefit that is likely to be realised for the local area.

In addition, VisitScotland and the enterprise companies are working with their account-managed businesses to harness the potential of homecoming. Some notable successes already include Royal Mail, which has created a homecoming postmark; Thomas Tunnock and Walkers Shortbread, which will feature the homecoming logo on product packaging; and Mackie's of Scotland, which is running homecoming Scotland on-pack promotions with its crisps.

Homecoming offers the opportunity to maintain the momentum and good will that was generated in 2009 among the millions of ancestral Scots, and this year a significant number of clan-focused events are being supported by the Scottish Government. I am delighted to have the following message of support for homecoming from Sir

Malcolm MacGregor, convener of the Standing Council of Scottish Chiefs, who is watching the debate in the public gallery today.

Sir Malcolm said this:

"The clans and their leaders play a significant role in attracting thousands of Scots living in other parts of the UK and abroad back to Scotland every year. Therefore the Standing Council of Scottish Chiefs wholeheartedly support initiatives like Homecoming. A Homecoming year is particularly important because it gives the worldwide clan network a sense of focus and purpose. Combined with a significant anniversary like the battle of Bannockburn increases the resonance. Homecoming is about bringing people home – to Scotland. Many of those who answer the call, have strong clan and family roots from the Outer Hebrides to the Borders. They take part in, and contribute financially to clan based conservation projects and communal activities. This in turn helps to develop a sense of belonging and affection towards local communities within Scotland."

I am sure that we would all welcome that strong message from Sir Malcolm.

I have been working closely with our Highland clans in supporting the formation of the Highland clans partnership group. That work led to the launch of the Scottish clan event fund, which has been providing legally constituted clans and societies with financial support for clan events held across Scotland.

I am delighted that John Mackenzie, the Earl of Cromartie and chair of the Highland clans partnership group, is also in the public gallery today to offer his support for the homecoming celebrations. He has provided this message of support:

"On behalf of the Highland Clans Partnership Group I would like to offer my support to Mr Ewing and the Homecoming Scotland 2014 initiative. With its focus on our ancestry, heritage and culture Homecoming Scotland 2014 has helped to promote and assist our Clan Societies to hold their own Gatherings with an emphasis on attracting and enabling overseas clan members to come to Scotland in the years to come."

It is undoubtedly the case that the enormous amount of work, effort and commitment that is made by the clans in arranging and delivering their gatherings, often on a quinquennial basis, brings people to Scotland for the purposes of friendship and amity. It is difficult to overestimate the contribution that they make to Scotland and to tourism.

Homecoming provides an opportunity to celebrate Scotland's diversity, and it is helping to ensure that all of Scotland's communities are encouraged to join in the celebrations. Education Scotland, as part of its cross-curricular approach to education, has developed a homecoming 2014 learning resource. Using homecoming events as a context for learning, this helps teachers to draw on the available resources aligned to the themes of the year.

More than 570 homecoming events are still to take place between now and the end of the year. We are halfway through the month-long celebration of whisky, with events focusing on one of Scotland's biggest cultural exports as well as on the very best of Scotland's food and drink. Bannockburn live will be an inclusive event, representing the best that contemporary Scotland has to offer, as well as marking the 700th anniversary of the battle at Bannockburn. Over the summer, there will be a full range of homecoming activities complementary to the Commonwealth games. The Ryder cup will be a key focus of activity in the autumn, along with the Forth bridges festival, the Highland homecoming and the MTV Europe music awards 2014.

Homecoming will be the springboard for a further series of themed years, celebrating our world-renowned food and drink, our reputation for innovation, architecture and design, our unique history, heritage and archaeology and the exceptional potential of our young people.

Homecoming is already proving to be a great success. I hope that we can all use the debate to welcome the year; that we can explore what the celebrations will mean at a national and local level; and, working across all parties represented in the chamber in a bipartisan fashion, that we can agree to work together to support Scotland's events industry and harness the current and emerging tourism and economic opportunities as we progress through this very exciting year and beyond.

I move,

That the Parliament notes the contribution made by each of the themed years in the lead up to Homecoming Scotland 2014; welcomes the role that the Homecoming year is playing in extending the economic and cultural benefits and opportunities offered by the Commonwealth Games, the Ryder Cup, the MTV Europe Music Awards and the Armed Forces Day national event through its year-long, co-ordinated programme of events that are designed to celebrate the very best of Scotland's food and drink, its assets as a country of natural beauty as well as its rich creativity and cultural and ancestral heritage; supports the Homecoming Scotland 2014 programme, which comprises a series of high-profile signature events, including Whisky Month, Bannockburn Live, the Forth Bridges Festival and the Highland Homecoming, which frame a programme of over 800 funded and partner events taking place throughout the year across every local authority area in Scotland, and acknowledges the successes already achieved through the Homecoming year in raising the profile of Scotland both nationally and internationally as a world class tourism destination.

14:44

Jenny Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): The 2014 year of homecoming is an opportunity to showcase Scotland to the world, but it is also an opportunity to create lasting change for Scotland's

communities and our economy. Labour's amendment to the Government motion highlights that opportunity, and I will explore some ideas for how we can go about achieving such lasting change.

The Commonwealth games, which we are all looking forward to—especially since Mo Farah announced that he will come and join us in Glasgow—is one of the thousands of events that are taking place across Scotland to mark the year of homecoming in 2014. I pay tribute to the sterling work of Glasgow City Council and its Labour administrations, which have worked tirelessly over the years and are now working hand in hand with the Scottish Government to make the Commonwealth games a big success.

The Commonwealth games, together with the Ryder cup and events in every local authority area, mean that Scotland will receive a significant economic boost, not only in the short term but in the long term, from the number of people who will visit our country in the latter half of the year.

Barclays Bank has estimated that spending from overseas visitors in Scotland will rise by 40 per cent by 2017. Similarly, Deloitte has estimated that the tourism industry, which was worth almost £12 billion in 2013, will grow to be worth £23 billion by 2025, which would be a rise of more than 40 per cent. In that sense, the year of homecoming will help to secure long-term growth in Scotland's tourism, hospitality and service sectors. When that is coupled with infrastructure investment in the likes of the Victoria and Albert design museum, which will open in my home city over the next few years, it is clear that we have the opportunity to boost long-term growth in every part of Scotland. That is extremely important. The estimates from Barclays and Deloitte on the plans and figures are hugely optimistic, and well they should be. As the minister and I have discussed previously, tourism has got to be one of the industries of growth in our country.

The plans and figures are also instructive for the Government as they highlight opportunity that we have to make the most of that potential for all our communities. We should ask at every turn how we create lasting change in our economy and in our communities, particularly the communities most in need from the predicted boost for the tourism industry from events such as the 2014 homecoming.

Let us take the provision of modern apprenticeships as an example. In March last year, Skills Development Scotland produced an investment strategy for tourism. In the strategy, it worked with tourism employers, stakeholders and partners to identify skills gaps in the sector and made a number of recommendations about how the gaps could be addressed. Chief among the

comments from employers was that there is a need to improve young people's awareness of the career opportunities in tourism, a need to create clear and well-publicised routes into the tourism industry and a need to promote a skilled workforce, particularly in the management and professional categories.

I have experienced that gap at first hand on recent visits to employment projects in Dundee. On one visit, I was a little surprised, but really heartened, by the number of young people—especially young men—in the room who said that they wanted to work in the hospitality industry. There is obviously an appetite for that. The predicted growth is very good for those young people. We must find ways of getting them into the industry and getting them skilled up both so that they can be very good employees in the industry and so that they can create businesses of their own and therefore create work for other people.

The same report goes on to cite modern apprenticeships as a key lever in achieving those aims. At the time of the report's publication, the minister, Fergus Ewing, said:

"As we prepare the nation to welcome the world to Scotland in 2014, ensuring employers can access the training they need is more important than ever."

I agree with that, yet I have been contacted recently by one training provider of modern apprenticeships in the areas relating to tourism, such as hospitality, retail logistics and customer service, who has been told by Skills Development Scotland that funding in those sectors is set to be cut in the coming year, and cut again in the years to follow.

Naturally, that has caused alarm in the company, which has asked a valid question: why, in this year of homecoming, are we pulling investment out of the very sectors that are critical to its success, against the advice of Skills Development Scotland's investment strategy? The minister might shed some light on that in his closing remarks, or perhaps we could talk about it after the debate. I would like him to give me an assurance that Skills Development Scotland funding for modern apprenticeships in those areas will not be cut, in light of the huge potential that he and I have outlined today.

The Government motion mentions attracting overseas visitors to Scotland. That is hugely important, not just because of the tourism that it brings in but because of the potential to build business links in emerging markets and the social good that comes from having a diverse and culturally rich society. However, one of our biggest tourist markets is on our doorstep, in the form of the rest of the United Kingdom. If we look at VisitScotland's tourism figures for the last quarter of 2013, which were published just the other day,

we find something quite surprising. Although the number of overseas visitors has increased by 20 per cent, domestic tourism within the United Kingdom to Scotland has dropped by 22 per cent, and spending in that sector has gone down by 10 per cent, too.

There are certain intangibles that contribute to a successful tourism sector—factors that are hard to measure but which influence a person's decision to visit a particular country. One of those intangibles is good will between countries. It is a well-known fact among tourism experts, and a sensible assertion, that when countries foster good will towards one another it helps to boost tourism between those countries. I wonder whether the Scottish Government's position to break away from the rest of the United Kingdom, and the message that that sends out to the people of England, Wales and Northern Ireland—

Annabelle Ewing (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP): How does what Jenny Marra says—which is really quite extraordinary, among all the extraordinary things that one hears in this place—square with, for example, the fact that the Lonely Planet travel guide named Scotland the third best place to visit in 2014, behind Brazil and Antarctica? How does that work to form the view in the member's mind that, just because we are having a political debate, people do not want to come to Scotland? Lots of people are coming to Scotland and want to continue to come to Scotland, and they are all most welcome.

Jenny Marra: Like Annabelle Ewing, I always promote Scotland as the best place in the world to visit. However, I always know that, when the Scottish National Party starts to read from pre-prepared briefs, it is to counter the facts that have been published by their agencies. VisitScotland published these figures on 8 May 2014, at 9.30. *[Interruption.]*

The Deputy Presiding Officer (John Scott): Can we let the member make her point?

Jenny Marra: VisitScotland's figures make it clear that the number of overseas visitors to Scotland has increased, as has overseas spend. However, domestic visits from the rest of the UK to Scotland have decreased for the full year and for the quarters. For quarter 4, which goes from October to December 2013, they have decreased by 22.5 per cent.

Dennis Robertson (Aberdeenshire West) (SNP): Does the member accept that, in this time of austerity, people are perhaps looking at how they spend their money and that that has nothing to do with good will? We send our good will and good wishes to all our neighbours, not just in the UK but in Europe and across the globe.

Jenny Marra: I ask Dennis Robertson to study the VisitScotland figures carefully and see whether he does not come to the same conclusion as I do. I would be interested to hear, in his closing speech, the minister's explanation of that quarterly drop.

The year of homecoming Scotland is an opportunity for us to celebrate all that is great about our nation. It also presents us with a chance to create lasting economic and social change in communities throughout the country. We must seize that opportunity wherever we can. I hope that we see long-term economic benefits and a positive social legacy from the events that take place this year.

I move amendment S4M-10051.1, to insert at end:

“, and agrees on the need to ensure that the events associated with Homecoming Scotland are used to secure a lasting economic and social legacy, particularly for the poorest and most deprived areas, as well as delivery of opportunities for sustainable economic growth and employment in communities across Scotland”.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Alex Johnstone. You have a generous six minutes.

14:55

Alex Johnstone (North East Scotland) (Con): Thank you for your generosity, Presiding Officer. We support the motion in the name of Fergus Ewing and will support the amendment in the name of Jenny Marra.

During the debate, we have heard at length about the importance of the tourism industry in Scotland. For areas such as Edinburgh, tourism is an extremely important industry and has been for many years.

Marco Biagi (Edinburgh Central) (SNP): Hear, hear.

Alex Johnstone: One of the members who represent Edinburgh has taken it on himself to give me some encouragement on that. However, it can be difficult to get tourists who come to Scotland to move around the country and visit other areas. Those who are familiar with the nature of the rural economy will know that tourism is—perhaps surprisingly—right up there as one of the most significant contributors to the rural economy, and there is much more that we could do if we could get people to visit rural parts of Scotland and the more far-flung areas such as the Highlands and Islands.

We realise that it is important—as the minister said—to encourage and foster good relations with our United Kingdom partners. The subject was also raised, somewhat controversially, by Jenny Marra. I believe that good-natured friendship is

important in driving those relations forward. Some interesting figures show the number of German tourists who have visited southern Europe in the past two to three years. At the height of the crisis over the euro, when there was a view in certain southern European countries that Germany was reeling in some of the loans and putting financial pressure on them, many Germans found it difficult to visit those countries because they believed that they would be unwelcome. It is important that we all have that clearly in mind. Whether we are for or against the arguments that have been put during the debate so far, I am glad to have heard Fergus Ewing raise the matter as a priority at the start of the debate.

Scotland is a popular tourist destination. We have heard about the CNN, Lonely Planet and *Wanderlust* assessment of Scotland as one of the best places to visit, and I could not agree more. Scotland is a wonderful place to live and a hospitable place that attracts visitors from all over the world. It is important that we concentrate on ensuring that our North American and international tourism trade continues to thrive. American visitors, above all, have a very high spend rate when they come to Scotland and can be very important to many of our tourist businesses. Homecoming Scotland 2014 is a significant part of the effort that is going on all over the country to ensure that we deliver that tourism.

Scotland has been courageous in taking up the opportunities to stage some of the events that are taking place this year. Events such as world cups and Olympic games almost drive quite large countries with large economies to the verge of bankruptcy, so it is significant for Scotland that the Commonwealth games and the Ryder cup will be staged here in the same year. It is a demonstration of Scotland's ability that it can successfully organise such events in a practical and effective manner, and we should be proud of our achievements. The Commonwealth games facilities are ready, and I am sure that the Ryder cup will be a success although it will be difficult for it to outperform the way in which it has promoted the sale of tartan troosers in previous years.

The MTV Europe music awards will pass without making any dent in my diary, I am sure. However, armed forces day, which commemorates the extremely effective military history of Scottish regiments and their role in the British Army, is a key event that all of us should support.

On looking at the homecoming Scotland programme, there are one or two issues that I must take up with the minister. Whisky month in particular gives me serious cause for concern—it is impossible to do justice to our whisky industry in a single month and consideration should be given

to extending that event, if not officially then in an unofficial capacity. I am willing to join the minister in doing all that I can to that end.

Bannockburn live, which is built around an event that happens annually, will be interesting. I noticed that significant changes have been made to the financing of the event. Perhaps that has been learned from previous experience.

I have publicly expressed my concern that the Forth bridges festival will happen rather too close to the referendum and I worry that that may be lost in the publicity surrounding other matters at the time.

The Highland homecoming will be significant. The Government motion says that a total of 800 events will take place around Scotland, which we should all be proud of. However, we should learn past lessons. The issues surrounding the gathering in 2009 are still with us. That flagship event ran into problems. The company running the event lost £516,000 and went into liquidation, with £382,000 owed to six bodies and a further £344,000 owed to 103 private organisations. Scottish ministers had to help rescue the 2009 event with a £180,000 interest-free loan, which was not disclosed at the time, if I remember correctly.

Audit Scotland reviewed the event and had some scathing recommendations on improving communication, better financial reporting and greater accountability. The Public Audit Committee reviewed the procedures around the event, concluding that poor communication at key points throughout the planning, delivery and aftermath of the gathering 2009 event meant that, sometimes, decisions were taken without access to all the available information. The Scottish Government should have told the steering group about the £180,000 loan to the private sector company delivering the event. The committee also recommended that the Government reconsider its approach to joining any such steering groups in future. I hope that those lessons will be learned for the purpose of the event that is coming up.

Bruce Crawford (Stirling) (SNP): Does Alex Johnstone not accept that the Bannockburn live event is structured and being run completely differently? It is an entirely different type of event.

Alex Johnstone: That may be partially due to the understanding that was accrued after the 2009 event. Lessons have been learned.

Bruce Crawford: That is a yes then.

Alex Johnstone: This year, 2014, is a landmark year of cultural and sporting events for Scotland. It presents us with an opportunity not only to showcase the many positive aspects of Scotland to the world, but to reach out to the diaspora and

our trading partners, both old and new, to maximise the cultural and economic benefits of this eclectic programme.

There is something for everyone this year, and I very much welcome the fact that the events are occurring not only in the restricted geographical area of the central belt; other areas, such as the Highlands and Islands and the north-east, will get some benefit too.

It is regrettable that the perception of the homecoming has been somewhat tainted by previous issues, although I am confident that public opinion will get behind the event. However, with those concerns in mind, I hope that the minister is not only providing all the assistance required, but keeping a close eye on the event planning, although it is heartening that premium tickets for the Bannockburn event and clan pitches are sold out.

Delivering a successful event and a positive experience for our visitors is vital if we want them to return to further explore our magnificent landscapes, our enviable history or the culinary excellence, which can be found across the country, most often using the world-leading produce that we have in Scotland.

Presiding Officer, 2014 is an opportunity. I support it and I hope that, the lessons of the past having been learned, it will lead to a successful event.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We have quite a bit of time in hand at the moment. Members may welcome interventions and develop their points, within reason.

15:05

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): There is always extra time when I do not need to use it. That is the story of my life.

I thought that this was a debate about homecoming, not the wearisome, tedious scaremongering that Jenny Marra introduced. It was not even in her amendment. Its place is not this debate.

I do not know who came up with the title "homecoming" as a marketing brand. I usually find that marketing titles miss the mark, but I like that one because it means that someone is coming home. It is evocative, warm and a good title. It encapsulates the journey that people will make from far-flung shores and from parts of Scotland—or, indeed, England—to the community that they have left behind. Those communities are still deep within people's hearts, so the title touches on something that we all have within us.

The Scottish population is around 5.2 million, but we can multiply that tenfold at least for those with Scottish ancestry and connections. We all know the importance of tourism—domestic and otherwise—to the Scottish economy. It was illustrated by the statistics in the minister's speech.

Stewart Stevenson (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): Christine Grahame is, of course, correct to talk about the importance of domestic tourism. Will she note that VisitEngland reports a 21 per cent drop in domestic tourism in England, with a continuous decline there? Whatever patterns may prevail in domestic tourism, Scotland is doing neither better nor worse than anywhere else.

Christine Grahame: I am obliged to Stewart Stevenson for that. Jenny Marra was busy writing it down and amending her closing speech.

I found the VisitScotland website and, indeed, the Scottish Borders Council website regarding homecoming events easy to access. I am a technophobe, so if I can understand it, anybody can. However, Midlothian Council has missed a bit of a trick. I tried to use its website to see what was going on in the region but it was not good, except when it mentioned the Midlothian science festival in October, which is part of the homecoming events. Midlothian Council should sort out its website. There is still time.

No doubt some members will refer to events in our constituencies, as I will. We all know that there is a lot going on beyond the conurbations. The difficulty was making sure that homecoming Scotland went beyond the big cities and the official so-called homecoming events to include small events that could piggyback on the official stuff.

My political patch straddles parts of the Borders and the south of Midlothian. It goes from Melrose right across to the Pentland Hills and I love it to bits. However, those two bits are not as different from each other as some might think. They both had a history of industry in textiles and mining, which is now gone, and what they have left are historic events and museums. Those are particularly accessible to English visitors, who enjoy them very much—just as Scottish people enjoyed travelling 1 mile over the border into Berwick-upon-Tweed.

Dennis Robertson: Does Christine Grahame acknowledge that it is open not only to people but, often, to people and their pets to enjoy the events that are taking place?

Christine Grahame: It is indeed. I am obliged to Mr Q's owner for bringing that into the debate. He seems to be a bit of a star of this week.

The Borders is renowned—rightly so—for its ridings, which form part of the official events as the

return to the ridings celebration. My diary is already filling up with Galashiels's braw lad and lass celebrations, the whipman play of West Linton and Beltane at Peebles. Those are extremely important to the communities.

Melrose has not only the Melrose sevens, which is part of homecoming, but its book festival. Melrose abbey is an extraordinary place because it is said to hold the heart of Robert the Bruce and, quite differently, it has a sculpture of a pig playing a bagpipe. Why, nobody knows.

Melrose also has what we have lost in so many of our wee places—little idiosyncratic shops. It is a wonderful place to go. Abbotsford house, which was the home of Sir Walter Scott, has just been refurbished, and there is a spanking new visitors centre that is a real lesson in how to do a visitors centre: it is interactive and interesting, and children from the Borders can be heard reciting Walter Scott's poems in their Borders accents. It is excellent.

In Midlothian, there is the Penicuik hunter and lass. What happens at the ridings and galas across the south of Scotland is that all the main players wear the colours of their community and their rosettes and go round in support of one another. They are great community events that bring together communities across the south of Scotland. In Newtongrange, there is the giant flywheel on Main Street that used to haul the miners' cages up from and down to the pits, and the walkway that goes across the A7, which the miners used to cross from the pits to the bath houses to scrub off the pit grime.

There are many things to see and do in Scotland. People from outside Scotland and from across the country travel back to their home community for events such as the ridings, which allow them to touch a part of their past. Each of those people has their own homecoming. They bring with them their wallets and their purses and they spend locally. In doing so, they support local business.

I am pleased that the minister advised us that there has been an increase in the number of rural visits, which is where we need to make our mark. We have heard enough about places such as Edinburgh and Glasgow. My teeny whinge is that the Borders railway—the Waverley line—will not open until early 2015. It will link all the communities that I have mentioned, so it would have been a wonderful tourism asset for the year of homecoming.

One link that we have is the passing through of the baton for the Commonwealth games. On 16 June, it will pass through Penicuik, Newtongrange and Gorebridge and, on 18 June, it will pass through Earlston, Melrose and Tweedbank before

moving on to John Lamont's constituency, but I do not care about that. My point is that that is uniting people who might not be able to go to the Commonwealth games or who cannot get tickets and involving them in the good spirit. The passing through of the baton is good for local communities, and I congratulate the baton bearers and local businesses. It is also good for the soul.

I wholly subscribe to the tenor of the motion, but I wish that the minister had put a wee word in it about the south of Scotland. There is not a phrase that mentions the Borders or Dumfries and Galloway; we could have done with that.

Finally, I return to what Jenny Marra said. I am half English. Half my relatives live in the midlands. My son is to marry a Londoner in September. They will not fall out with Scotland if we become independent. In fact, they are on our side. My mother—who was English born and bred, as I was—was the biggest fighter for Scottish independence you ever met. We should never forget that lots of English people are on the side of independence for Scotland, which will be good for England.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Many thanks. Answers on a postcard to Ms Grahame as to why a pig might be playing the bagpipes in Melrose.

15:13

Hanzala Malik (Glasgow) (Lab): Good afternoon, Presiding Officer.

What is the homecoming? Who is it for and is it fit for purpose? When the homecoming was launched, I thought that it was a great idea. Labour successfully launched homecoming Scotland 2009, which created jobs and added to our economy. In some areas, Scotland is doing well to build on that success. We are making a lot of effort to market Scotland's image overseas, but it feels as though, at home, we are not really bothering. When I asked constituents how they felt about homecoming 2014, the answer was, "What's that?" which speaks volumes. I feel that not enough is being done here at home.

The motion has a bit of a cheek to say that "over 800 funded and partner events"

are taking place when less than 15 per cent of this year's homecoming events are brand new. That means that around 700 of the events that are taking place this year would have taken place anyway and been promoted by the likes of Glasgow City Marketing Bureau. That has left me unimpressed, as it tells me that much more can be done. This is supposed to be a year for Scotland to reinforce its position on the international stage as a dynamic and creative nation. In 2014, Scotland will be on the world stage as never

before, yet Scotland is being unoriginal and is not fully capitalising on opportunities that this year brings.

Individual events in Scotland have had a good level of success already this year. Celtic Connections, the Ryder cup, the Edinburgh festival and the Commonwealth games are only a few of the already successful brands that are included in homecoming 2014. I find little evidence that homecoming 2014 is adding more value to many of those events, which is why I feel it should pay attention to newer events.

Homecoming 2014 cannot have a brass neck and take credit for all the Scottish events of 2014; it can only take credit for the events that it has a role in.

Mike MacKenzie (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): I am sure that Mr Malik will recall that he was on the Economy, Energy and Tourism Committee at the time VisitScotland outlined its plans for homecoming Scotland and told us about its robust methodology to determine whether or not it makes a difference. It indicated that there is a 7:1 leverage—£7 is won for Scotland with every £1 of public money that VisitScotland spends. Does Mr Malik not agree that that is a terrific result?

Hanzala Malik: At best, that evidence was a little shady. At worst, it is unfair and unreasonable to take credit from others for work that it has not done, or has contributed little towards. That is why I do not agree with Mike MacKenzie.

One of the events that homecoming 2014 has had a role in is the exhibition for the battle of Bannockburn. Sales for Bannockburn live currently stand at a quarter of their allocation, according to EventScotland. Is that okay? Members will be the judge of that. Once again, more needs to be done to fully capitalise on the purpose of homecoming 2014.

According to its website, a purpose of homecoming 2014 is to welcome international visitors. Thirty-three per cent of ticket sales for Bannockburn live have been to overseas visitors and 18 per cent of total sales have been to the US, which is reasonable. I do not want to come across as against homecoming 2014; I just believe that more can and should be done. Credit can only be claimed where it is earned.

I also believe that homecoming 2014 has failed to engage with minority communities. A big opportunity has been missed: homecoming could have engaged people from those communities in employment and, even more important, it could have brought communities together. Homecoming 2014 has lacked vision and flair. That charge is fair, because I see no evidence of the work of minority communities in homecoming 2014.

15:19

Bruce Crawford (Stirling) (SNP): As the constituency MSP for Stirling, I am delighted to contribute to the debate on homecoming 2014. Frankly, I cannot stand any more miserableness this afternoon. The debate should be about celebrating what we are trying to achieve in Scotland. We should be talking up these events and trying get more people involved, get a lot more tourists into our country and get this economy moving, not trying to talk everything down.

One thing that I am pleased about is that Stirling is at the heart of the homecoming for 2014, just as it is at the very heart of Scotland. This year sees the 700th anniversary of the battle of Bannockburn and King Robert the Bruce's victory over King Edward II. In recognising this special year in Scottish history, the Scottish Government has invested, along with others, in a new and exciting National Trust for Scotland Bannockburn visitor centre, which is already becoming legendary in its own right. With its state-of-the-art digital technology and incredible three-dimensional effects, it brings to life the characters involved in the battle of Bannockburn—nobles and commoners alike from both sides of the battle.

I have been involved in a couple of the battle plans that visitors can take part in. Once one sees the scale of what Robert the Bruce was trying to deal with in 1314, one can begin to understand the true genius of the guy as a commander of forces, whichever side of the argument one is on. I fought on King Edward's side and won, and that made me understand how difficult things must have been for Robert the Bruce.

The renovation work on the rotunda and on the magnificent equestrian statue of King Robert the Bruce on the field of Bannockburn is truly remarkable. Anyone who gets a chance to see it will find that some of the detail on that equestrian statue is absolutely stunning, and I was delighted to be there on the day, earlier this year, when Lord Elgin came along to unveil the statue of his ancestor. It has done the city of Stirling and all those involved proud.

Christine Grahame: Bruce Crawford has sold his visitor centre to me, so I will come and see his if he will come and see mine.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Answer calmly, Mr Crawford.

Bruce Crawford: I cannot remember the number of times I have been made that promise by Christine Grahame, but we will talk about that later.

The investment in the visitor centre is already paying off, with reports in last week's media that

there have already been 12,000 people through its doors since it opened only a few short weeks ago, and we have not yet had the official opening. I congratulate the National Trust for Scotland. I know that it has not been the easiest of times for the trust in bringing everything together, and it has faced big challenges, but it has done a fantastic job of producing that new visitor centre.

It goes without saying that there will be significant economic benefits to Stirling from the wider programme of homecoming events in and around the city this year. The 2014 homecoming year was kicked off early and in style by Stirling's Hogmanay party at Stirling castle, headlined by Deacon Blue. It was watched by more than 1.3 million live television viewers; money cannot buy that type of exposure, either for Stirling or for Scotland. The economic benefit calculations that were done both for Stirling city and for the wider Scottish economy were quite significant.

Other outstanding events add to the superbly diverse offer in Stirling in 2014. I must apologise to Christine Grahame for going on about Stirling all the time. I have not yet mentioned the Borders—but now I have, so I am probably off the leash.

Alex Johnstone: So back to Stirling!

Bruce Crawford: I will get back to Stirling, as Alex Johnstone quite rightly said. One event that I bitterly regret not being able to attend last weekend, because I had a heavy cold, was the Spirit of Stirling whisky festival. The festival has grown in strength year in, year out and has had to move to accommodate its growth, and it is always a sell-out production. I congratulate the people involved in organising it.

Dennis Robertson: I appreciate that Mr Crawford may have had a heavy cold, but is he not aware of the great Scottish toddy, which could have assisted with his cold?

Bruce Crawford: Mr Robertson is teasing me now, because I am going to have to admit something about how I sort my colds out. Not only do I have a Lemsip, but I have a large glass of uisge-beatha on top of that to help me get through the worst of it. That is probably why I am here today.

Over the weekend of 27 to 29 June, we will see Stirling as the centrepiece of national events on an unprecedented scale. Pipefest, national armed forces day and Bannockburn live are three phenomenal events in their own right and could easily stand alone, but they will combine in Stirling to create a truly remarkable weekend. We will have the skirl of the pipes and the boom of the drums.

Stuart McMillan (West Scotland) (SNP): Will the member take an intervention?

Bruce Crawford: Talking of pipes, we have a piper now wanting to make an intervention.

Stuart McMillan: I hope that my colleague Bruce Crawford will retract that comment about the pipes, because a skirl is a bad note, not a good note.

Bruce Crawford: All I can say is that I have heard you playing. [*Laughter.*]

At Pipefest, 1,600 pipers and drummers, accompanied by Highland dancers and clan representatives, will march through the city on the Friday evening. That will ensure beyond any shadow of a doubt that the weekend will begin in spectacular fashion and no one will be in any doubt that an extraordinary weekend has begun.

The same weekend, we will have the national armed forces day event, which will take place beneath Stirling's towering castle rock. Stirling has a long and distinguished relationship with the armed forces, so I am delighted that the city will host the national armed forces day event, which will continue that proud tradition.

The Bannockburn live event, which will take place on 28 and 29 June, will be a unique opportunity to celebrate Scotland's history and culture. What is on offer? There is a stellar line-up of the best Scottish folk and contemporary musicians, with talented people who will keep the crowds entertained in the music arena of the Bannockburn live celebrations. It will be headlined by singer-songwriter Dougie MacLean and the Gaelic singing sensation Julie Fowlis. There will be three electrifying performances of the battle of Bannockburn involving hundreds of re-enactors from across Europe who will join forces and collide, all choreographed by the Clanranald Trust for Scotland, which is famous for its work on the Hollywood blockbusters "Gladiator", "Robin Hood" and the second "Thor" film. Three hundred living historians are preparing for the battle.

At the interactive medieval encampments, people will be able to experience life in 14th century Scotland and relive the sights and sounds of the time, from the clang of the hammer to the aromas of fresh kiln-fired bread. People will be able to hear about Scotland's culture and history, as interpreted and retold by a range of prolific Scottish voices. Scotland is a land of food and drink, with one of the best natural larders in the world, and at Bannockburn live there will be many outlets through which people will be able to sample and savour delicious Scottish produce, whisky—so I hope that Alex Johnstone has bought his ticket—real ales and much more, and meet the passionate producers behind them.

I thank Dr Mike Cantlay, Unique Events and the National Trust for Scotland for bringing together the event. I understand that well over 4,000 tickets

have been sold and that things are progressing properly, with a good plan in place to ensure that the rest are sold. As Alex Johnstone said, all the king's tickets have been sold. Thankfully, I have my king's ticket for the Sunday, because on the Saturday I will be at the armed forces event.

Stirling and the surrounding area will also host an amazing array of other events, from Stirling's big night out and an international angling festival to the wonderful events at the Smith art gallery and museum. There will be lots of other local events going on. Given the world-class events that Scotland will host in 2014, including the Glasgow Commonwealth games and the Ryder cup, this truly is a magnificent year of culture for Scotland, with Stirling rightly at its heart. Let us for goodness' sake start talking up events in Scotland from now on. Let us talk up our country, not talk it down, and ensure that we get tourists coming here and enjoying our product. Let us get on and get the job done.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Many thanks for that spirited contribution.

15:28

Mike MacKenzie (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): I congratulate Bruce Crawford on a speech that actually managed to cheer up Mr Malik—I know that, because I saw him smiling.

One issue that was mentioned during the Economy, Energy and Tourism Committee's scrutiny of homecoming was that there could be a displacement effect resulting from the large and higher-profile events in the central belt drawing people away from other parts of the country. Those concerns were given some credence because of the evidence suggesting that the Olympic games had that effect. I was therefore delighted to hear that VisitScotland is aware of the potential problem and has planned a comprehensive programme of events covering every part of Scotland. I am particularly pleased that even the far-flung communities of Orkney and Shetland have not been left out.

As Liam McArthur would no doubt tell members, if he was here, Orkney's St Magnus international festival and international science festival are well established, hugely stimulating and exciting events that will be given a welcome boost by homecoming.

More intriguing perhaps is the Orkney nature festival, which is billed as an outdoor festival that presents "Orkney whisky's wild side". Mr Johnstone might care to travel to Orkney for that. I take the opportunity to commend Highland Park to members, as well as the less well-known Scapa. Both whiskies are best savoured in the convivial settings of Orkney, but like all whiskies they travel

extremely well, reaching every corner of the globe in perfect condition.

I urge members to visit Orkney. They can take in some of the events that I have mentioned and take home some Orkney whisky and some wonderful memories.

There is always friendly rivalry between our islands, which is why I am glad to see that Shetland has not been outdone by Orkney and has its fair share of homecoming events. As Tavish Scott would no doubt tell members, if he was here, the Shetland nature festival, which is in its seventh year, is an established event that highlights Shetland's marvellous natural heritage.

Even an islander like me is astonished at the array of wildlife that can be seen at close quarters on Shetland. Shetland's geopark status highlights and helps us to understand the profound influence that geology has had and continues to have on our communities. Striations of limestone that run through the Shetland strata produce fertile soils in an otherwise inhospitable and infertile landscape, greatly enhancing farming. The numerous narrow sea lochs, or voes, historically provided an accessible and relatively sheltered winter fishery, and now provide locations for fish farms. Shetland provides a wonderful showcase for geology.

The Shetland fiddle frenzy focuses on Shetland's well-known traditional musical culture, which has been taken to the world by Aly Bain, Catriona Macdonald, and others too numerous to mention. Shetland wool week celebrates another great Shetland strength—its world-renowned traditional knitwear, lace and other textile crafts, all of which have experienced a revival in recent years and have significant growth opportunities.

Shetland and its oil fund provide a lesson on how the rest of Scotland can be after independence. Over the years, Shetland has invested its wealth in excellent infrastructure and world-class community facilities. More recently, as the need to diversify the economy has become apparent, Shetland is becoming a must-see destination, and investment is being put into tourism and other growth sectors. I urge members to visit this windy island paradise, which will surprise and energise them with its raw vitality, its creativity and its sense of purpose and possibility.

I have time only to give a flavour of the homecoming events on Orkney and Shetland. Both communities not only respect and value their past, environment and heritage but embrace the future. They actively demonstrate that those aims, in knowledgeable and caring hands, are not incompatible but complementary and can empower local economies.

I congratulate VisitScotland on its excellent execution of a vast programme of events. In

recent years, the agency has achieved a 7:1 multiplier for every public pound that it has spent. For homecoming, it has set a target of 8:1. I am sure that VisitScotland will meet its target. I am pleased to note that its economic cost-benefit methodology is robust, so we can be sure of its figures.

In conclusion, though, I would say that even with that robust methodology, the economic benefit is not fully captured in the figures. The effects last for years afterwards in repeat business, in broadcasting the merits of Scotland worldwide, and in winning business for Scotland's businesses at home and abroad. I look forward to a successful homecoming year and to many more such years in future.

15:35

Siobhan McMahon (Central Scotland) (Lab): I am pleased to be able to take part in this afternoon's debate on homecoming Scotland 2014. This will be a unique year for many reasons, and it will live long in all our memories for one reason or another. I am very much looking forward to the many celebrations that will take place during the next few months to recognise this unique year, not least of which is my 30th birthday celebrations. However, I understand that they will not be paramount in all members' minds and that the Commonwealth games and the Ryder cup will be just two of the main events that will receive more attention.

It is a real shame that the Commonwealth games ticket fiasco has dominated the headlines this week. I have been thoroughly impressed by the way in which the organising committee has engaged with the public throughout the year in the lead-up to the games and I would hate for what has happened in recent days to overshadow that. However, there are still questions to be answered.

Like many people, I joined the queue for tickets on Monday morning. As members will know, it was one lengthy queue. The website informed me that I would be served on a first-come-first-served basis, but after more than 24 hours in the queue, with very little movement, I was informed by other people that they had received tickets despite only being in the queue for three hours. I and others who were in the same position would like to know why that was the case. Many questions remain unanswered and I hope that the responses will be forthcoming. However, as I have said, the situation should not overshadow the event itself, and I look forward to the games in Glasgow and Motherwell later in the summer.

As other members have reflected, homecoming Scotland 2014 will host 837 events over the year. I understand that 265 events have already taken

place, including the opening of the Kelpies at the Helix park in Falkirk. Whatever view we take of the Kelpies, it is certainly true that they provide a talking point.

That was only one of the many events that will take place across central Scotland with the help of VisitScotland in the coming months. This weekend, your adventure starts here, a festival of museums, will run at Callendar house and park in Falkirk. On 7 June, Shotts will again host its highland games. That event started in 1950. It attracts more than 2,000 people and it includes events such as tossing the caber. If members have not had the chance to experience it yet, I recommend that they do. It is always enjoyable, no matter what the weather conditions.

Those are some of the enjoyable social events that homecoming Scotland brings with it, but a year-long event such as this should bring economic benefits to all communities across Scotland. I wonder how we will measure the success or otherwise of this year-long event. Will the measure be the numbers of people who are attracted to each individual event from home and abroad, the number of successful events held, or the long-term job opportunities that individuals are afforded as part of the legacy?

Many will say that its success will be down to all those things, and more, and I agree with that to a certain extent. However, we will miss a great opportunity if we do not use homecoming Scotland to bring economic benefit to individuals who are trying to secure employment in the current economic climate. As members might be aware, homecoming Scotland 2009 gave us 1,500 full-time equivalent employment opportunities. That was a substantial number, but I hope that we can see an increase on that five years later, and that employment opportunities will be sustainable.

I am sure that we all agree that tourism has a large role to play in job opportunities. We know that the food and drink industry is seen as a key economic growth area and is vital to the success of homecoming Scotland 2014. However, it might surprise members to know that, according to the Audit Scotland report on modern apprenticeships of March 2014, just over 1,000 apprenticeships were granted in that sector, which is fewer than were granted in the automotive and administration and related sectors, which have not been identified as key sectors. From that report, I also understand that those people who secure a hospitality or tourism apprenticeship are more likely to do so at level 2 than at level 3. The reason that has been given for that is that employers consider that to be more appropriate for the job role. I understand that 60 per cent of apprentices in the hospitality sector are doing a level 2 apprenticeship.

Given that, historically, the hospitality sector has been dominated by the female population, we need to do more to encourage employers to see the value in awarding higher level apprenticeships. We need to challenge the gender stereotypes that exist in certain sectors of employment, and I believe that we can do that through the apprenticeship programme. Given that, as the Audit Scotland report makes clear,

“females accounted for 43 per cent of apprenticeship starts but only a third of apprenticeship spending”

of £25.6 million, and given the facts that I have outlined in relation to the hospitality and tourism sector, which according to the Scottish Government is a key growth sector for the Scottish economy, it is imperative that we use homecoming Scotland 2014 as the driving force to challenge that anomaly and to give us a legacy that we can all be proud of.

Mike MacKenzie: I respect the member's concerns about the economy, jobs and so on. Will she join me in welcoming the outstanding employment figures that were published earlier this week, which showed that Scotland is doing better than any other part of the UK?

Siobhan McMahon: I do not know whether I would use the word “outstanding”. I appreciate that the situation is better than it was—I always appreciate improvements—but the figures for female employment opportunities were not as good as the others and it is clear that more needs to be done in that respect. I am sure that the member will agree.

As the minister has mentioned, the Barclays report that was published earlier this month shows that Scotland is in line for a tourism boom, with the number of overseas visitors rising faster than in the rest of the UK. We must capitalise on that. The study predicted that spending by overseas visitors will rise by 40 per cent by 2017 and that Scotland could earn a total of £2.3 billion a year from overseas tourism alone. However, I am deeply concerned by the 22.5 per cent fall in domestic tourism last quarter. We need to address that issue, because we should be attracting people from within our own borders, as Ireland managed to do with its successful homecoming.

To achieve the figures mentioned in the Barclays report, we must begin to remove some of the barriers to tourism in Scotland. I have spoken about the issue before in the chamber, but the problem remains. We cannot begin to take tourism seriously until we have an industry that is open for business when we need and want it to be open. Many of the attractions that people might wish to visit in Scotland, particularly those in Lanarkshire, are not open beyond 5 pm, which means that many people who work during the day will not get

to enjoy some of the events that will be showcased this year. I hope that that issue can be challenged and addressed for future events.

As I said at the start, I welcome the opportunity to participate in this afternoon's debate and I look forward to the many events that are still to come to celebrate homecoming Scotland 2014.

15:42

Stewart Stevenson (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): I congratulate VisitScotland on the very impressive and wide-ranging 64-page brochure that it has produced for homecoming 2014. As we have heard, it lists 837 events, not all of which—again as we have heard—have been organised by VisitScotland itself. Of course, we should not be surprised by that, given that VisitScotland is a marketing organisation that markets other people's activities, hotels, restaurants, bed and breakfasts and events. My view is that, by drawing this wide offering into one package, it is simply multiplying the effect.

As a tourist who has visited more than a quarter of the world's countries on various occasions over the past 50 years, I can think of similar examples. People who visit Edinburgh go down Rose Street if they want to find something to eat, because it has lots and lots of restaurants. People are attracted by density. When I go to Amsterdam, I always go to Korte Leidesdwarstraat, which has even more restaurants than Rose Street has; in fact, there are 40 different kinds of restaurants off Leidseplein. Drawing things together, which VisitScotland does very successfully, creates the attraction for our many visitors.

Like, I am sure, many others in the chamber, I have relatives all around the world. My great-great-grandfather Archibald Stewart, who was born in Bannockburn in 1778, emigrated to Canada in 1853 after he was widowed, taking most of his family with him. Thanks to an act of breathtakingly successful fecundity, I now have 500 living relatives in Canada and the United States who stem from that migration of my great-great-grandfather and his offspring. They come back to Scotland and I encourage them so to do. Every one of us has similar opportunities that have been created by the wanderlust and fecundity of the Scots and I encourage people to use them.

In the modern world, things have moved on a little. In 1870, my great-great-grandfather received a letter from one of his offspring, who was still in Bannockburn, to tell him of the death of a family member; now, we have the electronic world. This week alone, using Facebook, I have communicated with relatives who live in Australia, South Africa, England and Denmark. The way in

which we connect and the immediacy of connection are different.

Because of such communication, I can tell members that Emma, who is the sister-in-law of one of my nieces, drove with four of her pals all the way up from the south of England to be there when the Kelpies were opened. That is a bit of domestic tourism; the Kelpies are already successful in my family. That hardly illustrates the overall general point—I cannot and will not attempt to do that—but it shows that there is an associated draw.

Jenny Marra: Does the member agree that Emma has perhaps bucked the trend? Perhaps the number of domestic visits would have decreased by 25 per cent if it had not been for her visit.

Stewart Stevenson: Let us have a little talk about international and domestic tourism. International tourism is generally based on relatively long lead times for booking, so variations in it are comparatively modest and are more in the long run. The average number of nights that a domestic tourist stays for is less than four. Such visits are opportunistic and are booked at short notice. They are highly influenced by the weather—if the weather is not good, ye dinnae book. They are also influenced by a wide range of issues.

I encourage members to visit the VisitEngland website, where they will find that the graph for domestic tourism in England is pretty similar to that for Scotland. Something is going on, which I cannot and do not pretend to be able to get to the bottom of, that is not unique to Scotland. It probably relates to the fact that the weather wisnae very good in November and December, although I could be entirely wrong and I am happy to be corrected later.

I am encouraged by something that has not been mentioned. I have an interest in genealogy; I have studied the subject for more than 50 years and I have identified 4,365 relatives in my family tree. We are to get the "Who Do You Think You Are? Live" show, which is coming to Glasgow in August. That will draw not just domestic tourists from other parts of the UK but international tourists to meet experts in genealogy, which is one of the great links. Last year, an unknown cousin of my wife appeared from New Zealand, carrying an outline family tree, and spent two months going round Scotland to research graveyards. Even things such as graveyards are tourist attractions.

I have other connections to Bannockburn. My great-grandfather on the Stevenson side was born there. There are no records of that—he managed to escape the parish registration system, so he was difficult for me to track down. In 1841, 308

Stevensons were living in Bannockburn, and I do not think that they were all my relatives. There were also more than 100 Stewarts; that is the name of the other side of my family.

One of my great-grandfather's offspring was responsible for the Bruce and Wallace statues that are at either side of the entrance to Edinburgh castle. He unveiled them in 1929 and they are tourist attractions to this day.

I will give a local example—the Scottish traditional boat festival in Portsoy in my constituency. Perhaps 20,000 people go to that town of not much more than 1,000 people. The 21st run will take place this year, and I know from previous visits that people come from Australia, South Africa and America to the event. I am deeply disappointed that the minister's motion makes no reference to the Portsoy traditional boat festival, which is a hugely important economic event for the north of Scotland that also exhibits food and drink. Glenglassaugh distillery is just next door, so Bruce Crawford would be pleased. It is a wonderful event, as members will see from the television coverage that will be broadcast around the world. It is but one of the many examples that we can all come up with.

Picking up on what Jenny Marra said earlier about the relationship between Scotland and England, I will quote from Ludovic Kennedy's autobiography. He said that, on independence,

"England would lose a surly lodger and gain a good neighbour".

I am absolutely certain that that is the case.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Many thanks—a vintage performance.

15:50

Stuart McMillan (West Scotland) (SNP): This year, 2014, is the most exciting in our history. As well as the political events that are taking place, many other events will be happening, as we have heard. They include the Commonwealth games, the Ryder cup, the MTV Europe awards, the John Muir festival and armed forces day. There are also a huge amount of other events that take place annually, which certainly helps our tourism offering to the external and internal markets.

One thing is for certain: the eyes of the world are on Scotland this year. Homecoming Scotland 2014 and its offering add even more to the opportunities that are available for Scotland. For me, homecoming 2014 is yet another excellent initiative. It will help the Scottish economy and our confidence and self-esteem. I offer my congratulations to everyone who is involved in it.

I am a glass-half-full type of person, and I know that many other members in the chamber are of

the same ilk. I am sure that if any of them had the misfortune, as I did, to listen to the radio this morning when the Commonwealth games ticketing situation was being discussed, their glass would not have been half full; it would have been totally empty. It was dreadful—it was so negative, and the issue was blown so far out of proportion. It is clear that there is an issue, but what an issue to have: a huge demand for tickets. There are extra tickets, and they are so popular that the system cannot cope. I dare say that, if the system did not break down and tickets were left, there would have been complaints that they were too expensive or inaccessible, and that the whole thing was a waste of time, energy and money.

We must get the ticketing issue into perspective. We are talking about buying tickets, not a life or death situation. When we consider events that are happening elsewhere in Europe and worldwide, it is clear that this is only a ticketing situation. A wise man in the lift as I came into the Parliament this morning told me all about putting events into perspective, and I agree with him.

The Commonwealth games will be a huge success. The games are attracting people from across the globe, and many of them will be coming back to their ancestral home, so in effect the games are going to be their homecoming. Let us support the games, and not talk them down before they have even started.

There are a few homecoming events that I am particularly looking forward to. Some of them are taking place on the River Clyde. One of them is the homecoming muster and Commonwealth flotilla. As members will be aware, I chair the Parliament's cross-party group on recreational boating and marine tourism, and we discussed the event more than a year ago. We certainly put our support behind it, and work has started in earnest to make it happen. I put on record today my thanks and congratulations to all those, including all the organisations, who have been involved in taking the event forward. I am sure that it will be a huge success and one of the iconic events of the year. It will be, if members will pardon the pun, a sea of colour, and it is one of the many offerings that will show off the Clyde.

I invite members to get down to the banks of the Clyde on Saturday 26 July to witness a once-in-a-lifetime experience. The event starts at the James Watt dock in Greenock, and the flotilla then heads up to Glasgow. The Royal Yachting Association Scotland's website says:

"The largest flotilla in the Clyde's history. 250 boats. One mission. Many journeys of adventure and exploration. You can be part of it and make history."

I am delighted that the event is part of homecoming Scotland 2014. It will certainly bring

another water-based activity to the Commonwealth games.

A further event is the race to the games. Once again, it is based on the River Clyde, and it starts at the James Watt dock in Greenock. It is a sailing challenge for people with additional support needs, and it takes place on 2 July.

Later in the year is the annual Scotland's boat show. It will take place at the Kip marina from 10 to 12 October. I have been told about some of the new events that will be introduced at the boat show this year, and I am sure that it will be bigger and better than before. I have been to it, and I would encourage everyone to go along to it.

There is a further event that I am looking forward to that is not water based. It will take place at Finlaystone, the home of clan MacMillan, so perhaps I should declare an interest. It is the Braveheart v Robin Hood event. It is aimed at children up to 12 years of age. I am sure that those of us who are over 12 will also enjoy it and get involved in it. That takes place on 6 July.

Those are just some of the events that are taking place in the west of Scotland. Some of them are water-based events. Many more water-based activities are taking place across Scotland, and certainly in the west. Anyone who goes to Loch Lomond on any given day will take pleasure from it.

We have already heard about the hugely positive comments about Scotland from CNN, Lonely Planet, Rough Guides and Trip Advisor. I will quote just part of the comments by Lonely Planet:

"To coincide with Glasgow hosting the XX Commonwealth Games in the summer of 2014, the city has had a multi-million-pound facelift: new sports venues, improved transport links and a regeneration of Glasgow Harbour. It is also the Year of Homecoming, a government initiative to welcome the Scottish diaspora back to the mother country by celebrating Scotland's heritage, food and drink. The phrase 'there's something for everyone' applies".

I think that that is hugely positive. It is a great opportunity.

I encourage Hanzala Malik to speak to his colleagues in Glasgow City Council. Judging from his speech, he needs to talk to them about what has actually happened in Glasgow to ensure that the Commonwealth games will be a huge success.

I turn now to Jenny Marra's comments. I, too, was born in England—in Barrow-in-Furness. I have family and friends who still stay down south. I genuinely do not recognise the negativity about our friends south of the border. The interest from folk south of the border suggests the exact opposite. Any time I speak to my family and friends, they want to know about what is going on in Scotland, not just in relation to the political

debate but also about other things that are going on.

On Sunday, I was at the Gourock highland games. I spoke to two ladies from Lancashire. They have lived in Scotland for some time now, and they mentioned that their family are looking forward to coming up over the summer. They said that they are looking forward to voting yes in the referendum. For them, it will make England that bit better, and it will hopefully make the people of Lancashire a bit better off, because it will force the politicians in that area to do a bit more for their constituents.

I hope that this year, 2014, is a huge year for Scotland. As I said earlier, the eyes of the world are upon us. Homecoming will deliver hugely for Scotland. With more than 800 events across the country, large and small, in urban locations and in rural locations, including the Borders, homecoming has something for everyone. It has something for the whole nation. I am convinced that it will help to promote Scotland well beyond our shores and long after 2014.

15:58

Marco Biagi (Edinburgh Central) (SNP): This great year of homecoming in fact began in October 2013, when Lonely Planet came out with those comments that have already been mentioned. Lonely Planet called us the third best country in the world to visit. Interestingly, alongside that article, it also had a list of the regions and areas within countries that were best to visit. Perhaps Lonely Planet has continued its reputation of always being ahead of the times and knowing what the next big thing is going to be. I, for one, was grateful for that little inclusion, alongside other independent countries and, indeed, Antarctica.

This homecoming has been a broad exercise in bringing together some things that had already been scheduled and that were already happening or always happening and putting them together with a brand that can be marketed both domestically and internationally.

Back in the run-up to the 2009 homecoming, the criticism was that we were focusing too much on the domestic market and not bringing enough people from abroad. It seems like we cannot win, but sometimes that is the feeling that we get in the chamber. The 2009 homecoming had 411 events. I was taken aback when Mike Cantlay came to the Economy, Energy and Tourism Committee and said, in a way that summed up his attitude, that we were at 827 and "about to stop counting." The impression that was given was that we could have kept on going, but at some point VisitScotland had to draw the line and say, "This is homecoming." It

is no wonder that funding opportunities have been massively oversubscribed and that there has been reach throughout the Scottish Enterprise network.

The homecoming idea is such a neat way of packaging a country for the international market that we got the highest form of flattery—imitation—from Ireland, which in 2011 announced that 2013 was going to be its year of the gathering. Ireland took our idea and ran with it—as it so often does in tourism—and got 250,000 extra international visitors. We should all listen to the words that the junior minister for tourism said at the launch of that event. He pointed to his green tie and stated:

“We all need to wear the green jersey now.”

Everybody in this chamber should be wearing the blue jersey on behalf of Scotland in relation to homecoming, so that we can promote ourselves as a nation and as a destination.

I accidentally found myself in Ireland in October 2013—well, I did not accidentally find myself there; I had planned to go to Ireland in 2013 and was there in October. When I was there, somebody came up to me with a survey. Having myself knocked on a few doors and tried to get people to speak, I made sure that I did my duty to these people, so I did the survey. However, I also did my duty to Scotland as a competitor nation by ticking the box next to the statement that the gathering had no impact on my decision to go to Ireland, so I am not one of the 250,000.

To bring us back from Dublin to here, the spatial dimensions have been mentioned. Events are happening in Edinburgh and around Scotland—including the Borders. The homecoming search on the VisitScotland website finds 56 events within 2 miles of here. I point out that the one thing that Edinburgh is not doing terribly well on is that, of all the clan gatherings that are taking place this year, only two are in Edinburgh: Strachan and Marjoribanks. The last time that I checked, clan Biagi was not gathering anywhere, but I think that that may be for another reason.

Alex Johnstone: I have seen their tartan. [Laughter.]

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Order, please.

Marco Biagi: The member who is making a contribution from a sedentary position should note that my tartan is pink through and through. [Laughter.]

The gathering 2009 is something that has produced some cringing memories that echo back to the footage of the people coming down the royal mile and everybody watching it and thinking, “Oooh”.

Stewart Stevenson: The member might be interested to know that in the 1841 census there were no Biagis in Scotland whatsoever.

Marco Biagi: Indeed, because my first ancestor showed up in the 1891 census. Mr Stevenson is not the only one who has researched his family history.

The gathering brought 47,000 visitors and £8.8 million in contribution to Edinburgh, 38 per cent of which came from overseas. For all that we might look at some of the more enthusiastic pronouncements of some of the Americans who came here, I do not think that there is a constituency anywhere in the country—whether in the Borders or Inverclyde or Stirling—that would say no to such an event if it could be repeated.

Edinburgh has a great series of events. I recommend to Bruce Crawford, who was ill for his own whisky event, world whisky day, which is being held in Edinburgh. There is Previously, Scotland’s history festival, which I have participated in; the Edinburgh fringe, the largest of its kind in the world bar none, which I have participated in three times; the Edinburgh marathon, which I have participated in but will not be participating in this year—

Christine Grahame: I am intrigued. What was your participation in the fringe? What were you doing?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Through the chair, please.

Marco Biagi: I believe that the member should consult the assistant to Jean Urquhart, who will be able to tell her all. It involved a satirical news programme.

The last thing that I want to highlight is the MTV awards. That takes me slightly outside Edinburgh, although there is an Edinburgh connection because, in 2003, the awards were held in the city. At that time, I looked at them and wondered whether they would be a sign that I was getting old, and whether I would be completely dated by them. However, that was not the case, as the winners were Justin Timberlake, Beyoncé and Christina Aguilera—people who are not only still around but who I have heard of and even have some songs by. That is an additional angle of homecoming for me—it has reassured me that I am not getting old.

That brings me to Siobhan McMahon, who has told the chamber that she will be turning 30 this year. She tried to say that her birthday was a date that none of us would be marking. However, a quick Google search found that her birthday is on 4 July, which many people in Scotland—mainly Americans—will be celebrating. I find it wonderfully ironic that that is independence day.

16:06

Margaret McCulloch (Central Scotland) (Lab): I begin my remarks today by paying tribute to all those who will be working to make sure that this homecoming year is a successful one for Scotland. The tourism, hospitality and cultural sectors all contribute to the growth of the Scottish economy and, this year, with the Commonwealth games, the Ryder cup and the MTV Europe music awards all coming to Scotland, those workers will play a crucial role in shaping the experience of our country that foreign visitors have. In fact, everyone a foreign visitor meets will mould and form that experience of Scotland, whether they realise it or not—from cab drivers and cashiers to police constables and passers-by.

However, I want to draw Parliament's attention to the people at the front line in those growth industries. The customer service, language and management skills of the people who work in our visitor attractions and the hospitality sector are key to the success of Scottish tourism, especially if we are to enjoy the benefits of repeat tourism. However, despite their importance to the economy, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation has found that the majority of employees in the hotel and restaurant sector and the retail sector earn less than £7 an hour. Together, those sectors account for almost half of all those earning less than £7 per hour, and many of those low-paid workers will be women.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Elaine Smith): Mr Johnstone, I would be grateful if you could return to your seat.

Margaret McCulloch: Of course, it is important to stress that there is also mobility in those sectors. My background is in training, and I trained people in retail and hospitality for years. I can tell you from experience that an entry-level job in those sectors can and often does lead to further training, skills enhancement and career progression. However, we cannot ignore the concentration of low pay in the service sector and in rural communities that are dependent on seasonal tourism and agricultural work.

The year of homecoming will be good for Scotland, but the Government has a duty to ensure that the benefits are shared across the workforce and spread across the country. The Scottish Government has to lead by example.

It has not escaped my notice that a deal between the Public and Commercial Services Union and the business arm of National Museums Scotland was reached only a few weeks ago, which at last ensured a living wage for those workers; nor has it escaped the notice of the Labour Party or the trade union movement that the SNP has twice blocked Labour's progressive

amendments to the Procurement Reform (Scotland) Bill, including, crucially, our living wage amendments.

VisitScotland has helpfully provided members with an overview of the activities that are taking place in our constituencies and regions this year. Tomorrow, in Blantyre, the David Livingstone centre will host a fair trade fair, highlighting Dr Livingstone's legacy and his enduring links to Africa. This weekend, there will be a celebration of our nature trails and our natural environment at the wild woods festival. On Saturday, we have flash art photography events in museums across North Lanarkshire. Later this year, we will see the Shotts highland games and the rugby league Commonwealth championships. Further, central Scotland has also welcomed the completion of the Kelpies at the Helix park in Falkirk.

Stewart Stevenson: I wonder whether the member will agree with me—I suspect that she can and will—that, although all the points that she has made are fine, we are now talking about events that are driven by and run by volunteers, who play a very important part in energising communities and creating some of the events that will create commercial opportunities for others. Volunteers have a big role in this as well.

Margaret McCulloch: Volunteers do play a part, but the hospitality and retail sectors work with and welcome the visitors to Scotland as well, and it is those people who are working in a low-pay environment.

There is a rich programme of events taking place this year. However, VisitScotland explains in its briefing to members that many of those events are "partner events" and are not directly supported by the £3 million homecoming fund. We are only halfway through the year of homecoming, but I wonder whether the Scottish Government is yet in a position to outline the value that is being added to the Scottish economy through the projects that it has funded directly.

There has been a great deal of consensus in today's debate. We are all looking forward to Glasgow 2014, and we all want to make sure that the year of homecoming is good for Scotland and good for Scottish tourism. If I have challenged that consensus this afternoon, it has been simply because I think that it is worth reminding the Government that growth in our economy is asymmetrical. Whatever our constitutional future, the challenge for Scotland is not just to develop those key sectors, but to build a stronger, fairer economy that is better skilled, better paid and better equipped to make Scotland a world-leading destination.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We still have a little time in hand, so the next two speakers can have longer than six minutes each.

16:11

Annabelle Ewing (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP): I, too, am pleased to have been called to speak in the debate, which has been a game of two halves. There have been some highly entertaining moments. When you first came into the chamber, Presiding Officer, you may have been a bit surprised at the moment of levity that we were having, but that was nothing compared to what you have missed. I recommend that you read the *Official Report*.

I have been surprised at the Rev I M Jolly theme that seems to be going on on the part of certain Labour members, who seem to be in competition with each other to be the most negative about our important tourism industry. In contrast, SNP members are full-square behind the homecoming initiative, as are all those who are involved in staging the events.

Jenny Marra: I am quite appalled and shocked by that characterisation of my question. I asked a serious question that was based on figures that were issued by a Government agency in relation to the current political debate. That is a necessary function of parliamentary democracy. Does the member really want to characterise opposition and legitimate questioning as talking down Scotland? That seems quite preposterous.

Annabelle Ewing: In a strange day of strange remarks, I find that remark as strange as Jenny Marra's first remark. If she reflects on the tone of her comments when we get the *Official Report*, she will see what we are all getting at. Of course matters of parliamentary democracy are fundamentally important, as is the democratic debate that we are all engaged in throughout this country of Scotland. That debate will be respected by all people across the world, including our fantastic friends and neighbours south of the border, one of whom is coming up to help me to campaign for a yes vote in the week of the poll. I will pass on to her Ms Marra's concerns that perhaps she should reconsider her decision to come to help the people of Scotland to secure a yes vote in the independence referendum.

The SNP is full-square behind the excellent homecoming initiative, and we take a positive approach in talking up our tourism industry and being supportive of it. That is what the people who elected us to the Parliament want their elected representatives to do.

I am a member for Mid Scotland and Fife, and the importance of tourism to the economy of the area is clear for all to see. I take the opportunity to

welcome the excellent news that there was a 10 per cent increase in the number of overseas tourists last year and a 20 per cent increase in spend on the previous year.

Those figures are particularly encouraging as we look to this year's homecoming initiative. The figures also reflect the very hard work put in by agencies such as VisitScotland and other public bodies, the Scottish Tourism Alliance, which has an important role to play, and the wider tourism industry.

On the activities that are happening in Mid Scotland and Fife, it is perhaps expected of me to mention first the Ryder cup. As a resident of Strathearn, with my home in Comrie, I am pleased to report that excitement is mounting locally. The event offers our local tourism and wider hospitality providers across the Strath and beyond a tremendous opportunity. I know that they are planning to maximise, to the extent that they can, the benefits to be derived from that fantastic event.

When I spoke in the debate on the Ryder cup that we held in the chamber last September, I mentioned the need to ensure that local access is facilitated not only for those seeking to enjoy the events at Gleneagles but for those travelling around Strathearn generally. I understand that the transport issues have been kept under regular review and that the provision of local shuttle buses has been agreed, which is welcome. Local dialogue on transport and other issues is on-going and that, too, is to be welcomed.

A key aspect of the fantastic opportunity presented by the hosting of the Ryder cup concerns the legacy that can be secured, and the decision to nominate two local charities in that regard was also welcomed locally. The other key legacy is the education resource that is to be made available to all pupils and teachers in Scotland, which is to be linked with the excellent clubgolf initiative.

We have the fantastic Ryder cup event later this year, but of course the homecoming 2014 programme seeks to ensure that the benefits of hosting that and other fantastic events, such as the Commonwealth games, are extended, experienced and secured throughout Scotland. A huge array of projects are taking place in Mid Scotland and Fife—I think that the programme runs to 26 pages of events—and I have time to mention a few.

The first that I will mention is the signature event—the Forth bridges festival, which will celebrate the iconic Forth bridges, mark the 50th anniversary of the Forth road bridge's opening, recognise the upcoming 125th anniversary of the Forth rail bridge and look to the future and the new Forth crossing. The festival will be held in early

September, with a 10-day programme of events, including a birthday boat flotilla. Therefore, what can be done on the west coast, as my colleague Stuart McMillan mentioned, can also be done on the east coast. A torchlight procession is planned as well as a light and firework show. It all sounds very exciting.

In Mid Scotland and Fife, we, too, are participating in whisky month. The establishment of the highland Perthshire whisky festival has brought together Birnam arts, the Birks cinema and the Pitlochry Festival Theatre to put on a series of events around the theme of whisky month, including a new production of the musical, "Whisky Kisses".

The Ochils festival in June includes walks, tours of historic kirkyards, as referenced by Stewart Stevenson, family fun days and the revival of the tartan ball, which was first held in the 1840s, when the intention was to inject some life into the local textile industry.

We will see a diverse range of activities across Mid Scotland and Fife. We must pay tribute to the tremendous hard work that goes on behind the scenes for each and every one of the interesting, dynamic, creative, inclusive and attractive events that will take place.

We could perhaps do better with regard to overseas visitor numbers if we had control over air passenger duty, for example. With control in this Parliament, the rate of air passenger duty would not be sky high, as it was under the previous Labour Government—before it was ratcheted up by the Tory Government, supported by its Liberal helpers, who have not bothered to turn up to this important tourism debate.

It is clear that that power and all the other usual economic levers of power that we would have in an independent Scotland would help to boost our tourism industry and secure the full potential of that and other industries across the piece. I also suggest that the referendum process, together with the yes vote that I believe will be the result, will in and of themselves generate substantial interest in Scotland and increase the tourism spend and dividend here.

16:19

Dennis Robertson (Aberdeenshire West) (SNP): I am grateful to the Presiding Officer for bringing to my attention the fact that my request-to-speak button had switched off. That was probably due to my earlier intervention.

In his opening few sentences, the minister mentioned the words "opportunity" and "glue". The opportunities of homecoming provide the glue for many events that happen annually. I say gently to

Hanzala Malik, for whom I have a great deal of respect, that if we can give something that happens annually in a local area some oomph this year, we should. If homecoming Scotland wants to take credit for some of the events and VisitScotland wants to be the vehicle for that, we should applaud that, not criticise it.

My area has not been mentioned, although the Borders have probably been mentioned at least 12 times. I am surprised that Alex Johnstone, who lives in Stonehaven, did not take the opportunity to mention aspects of what is going on in Aberdeenshire West. The fireball ceremony has been an amazing success for hogmanay parties in Stonehaven. Many things are going on in the constituency, which is the home of 12 castles and a royal palace. In some respects, royal Deeside sells itself, but does it need VisitScotland or homecoming? Yes it does: although it can sell itself, it benefits from the year of homecoming.

When I was at the Ballater highland games last year, I spoke to the chief of clan Farquharson and met people from New Zealand, South Africa, Canada and East Kilbride. *[Laughter.]* I met people from all parts of the UK and Europe. It intrigued me that there was a clan gathering—a gathering of people; a homecoming—in the small community of Ballater in royal Deeside. I am sure that, in 2014, the Farquharson clan will come back again in greater numbers.

Of course, the Farquharsons are not the only clan who have an association with my constituency—we also have the Irvines at Drum castle, which was gifted by Robert the Bruce to the Irvines of the time. The tower at Drum will be reopened in August this year. That is another fantastic event that will bring together our communities in a celebration of our heritage and culture. Indeed, we have an opportunity to celebrate heritage and culture with peoples coming together from all over. The invitation will not only bring people from the UK, Europe and all over the globe but excite people about what is happening.

I hope that the sun will shine on Siobhan McMahon's 30th birthday. A black cloud seems to be looming over the Labour Party at the moment and I sincerely hope that it does not burst and rain on her parade on the day.

There are three distilleries in my constituency and although I have been to all three, I hope to celebrate again by revisiting them this year. The Royal Lochnagar distillery at Braemar is perhaps the best known. It is a favourite of Prince Charles, who likes his Royal Lochnagar whisky and who has visited the distillery on more than one occasion.

I sincerely hope that the royals will continue to come to royal Deeside and will remain part of the culture and heritage of that great area. It was in 1850, I believe, that Queen Victoria gifted Balmoral castle to Prince Albert, having come to her first highland games in 1848.

What else is going on in my constituency? In late August up in our small market town of Huntly, there will be a fantastic massing of the pipes and drums to celebrate the clan Gordon, one of the wonderful traditional clans of Scotland. The Gordons are probably known globally not just for their name, but for their fighting spirit. We will enjoy that event. I sincerely hope that the Pipefest that will be held just prior to the celebrations at Bannockburn goes extremely well, but I say to my friend and colleague Bruce Crawford that, if he wants to hear the real pipes and drums of Scotland and the tunes of our nation, he should come to Huntly. That is the place to come to.

The minister has been to my constituency many times and has visited many of the traditional attractions. My area has a wealth of food and drink. The fishing industry on royal Deeside, which last year brought about £15 million to the local community, provides jobs for about 500 people. Our estates provide employment and sustainability. They also offer an open door, and that is what we should be celebrating in our homecoming: an open door to everyone who wishes to come to Scotland.

I am proud of Scotland, I am proud to be an Aberdonian and I am proud that I have had the opportunity to travel to and work in many areas of this great nation. As I listened to Stuart McMillan talking about the events on the Clyde, I was taken back to my many sailing days on the Clyde, which is a wonderful place to be. In my scouting days, I spent many a day camping and going to hostels in Melrose and Jedburgh in the Borders. There was an open door.

The homecoming is not just about the big events such as the Commonwealth games and the Ryder cup. This year, the Scottish open is to be held at Royal Aberdeen, which will generate income for Aberdeen and the surrounding areas. Aberdeen airport is being refurbished. Why is that happening? It is happening because people are coming to Scotland. We have had to invest in and expand our provision. That is what Scotland's open door is about.

Christine Grahame: Delightful though the member's speech is, I would like to ask a serious question: has he ever had trouble accessing any of the places that he has mentioned? I am really asking that on behalf of Mr Q.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Could you begin to draw to a close please, Mr Robertson?

Dennis Robertson: Thank you, Presiding Officer.

I have had absolutely no difficulty accessing many of our wonderful hostels and heritage sites, although I know that there are some places where that can be a problem. Through the work of organisations such as VisitScotland and the NTS, everything has been done to try to make venues accessible. The Commonwealth games will be a wonderful example of full accessibility for everyone, regardless of whether they are able or disabled.

Scotland is the place to come in 2014.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We come to the closing speeches.

16:29

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Perhaps not surprisingly, several members have cited 2014 as the most important year in Scotland's history, and that is not just because of the constitutional issue. The debate is not about whether people will vote no or yes; for me, it is a real privilege to be Scottish in this year and we can all rejoice in the fact that the Commonwealth games and the Ryder cup are coming to Scotland, regardless of how we vote when it comes to party politics. The fact that they can mix with our long-standing fixtures across the calendar is very special.

Dennis Robertson has encouraged us all to say something about our local communities. I will add the Perth show to the list, because it has done something very special for a very long time, and I know that it looks forward to the second year of homecoming.

Homecoming presents an opportunity to highlight the many diverse events that take place across the nation annually, which add to our very considerable privilege in our culture, sport, arts, agriculture, environment and hospitality, which is so special. The fact that we have added value this year is something that we should celebrate. There is no problem in being positive about this year.

I welcome Dennis Robertson's comments about the royal family, because again that is something that transcends party-political differences.

The potential benefits to the Scottish economy are significant in the ways that many members have described. Annabelle Ewing mentioned the excitement building about the Ryder cup, which is due to bring in somewhere in the region of £100 million, as visitors flock from all parts of the globe to experience golf on one of the best courses in the world. It is estimated that the competition will be viewed on television by hundreds of millions of potential visitors worldwide, so it cannot but be

one of the best advertising opportunities for Scotland. Let us hope that the Scottish weather presents Scotland at its best—not like it did at the 38th Ryder cup, which was held at Celtic Manor.

Stewart Stevenson: Is Liz Smith aware that, paradoxically, there are tourists who come from the middle east precisely because of the lush, damp climate that we have in Scotland?

Liz Smith: Dare I ask Mr Stevenson if their surname is the same as his own?

Homecoming has presented a very welcome umbrella for showcasing a vast programme of events, with more than 800 taking place the length and breadth of Scotland. Two members made important remarks about the welcome profile for more rural and local economies, as well as the nation. We must not forget those things, as they are the heart and soul of many of our local communities, as are the volunteers—Stewart Stevenson, I think, mentioned volunteers—with the imagination and creativity that they provide.

Let us be clear: the criterion by which many people will probably judge the year of homecoming is how many people it attracts from outwith the United Kingdom—whether or not they share the name Stevenson. That, I am sure, will be of great interest to the people who decide whether homecoming has been a success or not.

Bruce Crawford mentioned, quite rightly, the new facilities at Bannockburn, which are on a par with anything around the world: they are absolutely outstanding. I am sure that the Bannockburn live event, which will incorporate the re-enactment of the battle, will bring in large numbers. They may not be quite the numbers that were originally anticipated, but let us be sure that we can celebrate everything that is so very special about the new centre.

Both the minister and Siobhan McMahon talked about tourism in general, which is extremely important. I have just one little criticism—and I do not want to be shouted down for being party political, because this is not a party-political point—about tourist information centres. I know that the minister has an interest in this issue, because he has kindly replied to me on it on two occasions. We are in danger of losing tourist information centres in quite a number of places. I know that there are technological reasons for that, and the minister has quite rightly said that consumer demand is changing in that respect. I accept that, but I worry—and I am sure that Annabelle Ewing will share my view—that areas such as Crieff are losing their tourist information centres at the very time that the Scottish Government's business improvement district policy is coming into place. Many businesses and people who run hotels and bed and breakfasts in

Crieff are concerned about the long-term implications.

We have lessons to learn from Switzerland and Austria, which could not be more modern when it comes to technology but which have also been able to retain their tourist information offices. The human touch is so much part of the Scottish welcome and we must be careful not to lose too many tourist information centres.

I fully appreciate that economies of scale can result from tourist hubs in more urban areas, but we must listen to the many people who are talking about business development outside the central belt and who welcome the input of tourist information centres. I hope that the minister can say something about that in his closing remarks, because we need to look carefully at it in future.

To conclude, I return to my original remarks about the positivity that we need to show this year. It is a special year for Scotland. Politics aside, we can all be positive about that message and we all have a role to play in helping our local communities and the national profile to develop. I hope that politics does not get in the way of that, because that would diminish Scotland. We should celebrate what we have to offer as a nation.

The Conservatives are happy to support the Government motion and also the Labour amendment.

16:36

Jenny Marra: This has largely been a good debate, and there is a lot of good will and optimism around 2014, the year of homecoming, with the homecoming events, the Ryder cup and the Commonwealth games. We all want to see Scotland flourish on the international stage, and we all know how wonderful our country is as a place to visit and to live and work in.

I believe that the homecoming and the events of this year can be about much more than simply putting on a show. Our investment can draw dividends in our communities, and that is why Labour has lodged an amendment to the motion. I thank the Conservatives for indicating that they are happy to support the amendment.

Investment can help our economy to recover, with a long-term boost to a sector that has the potential to boom exponentially, but in order to achieve that we must be smart about the policies that we pursue. My only disappointment in this afternoon's debate is that we have not been a bit more focused on strategic investment, on growing our tourism economy and on the policies that we pursue to do that. I understand that the debate celebrates the homecoming events, but we have a responsibility to take every opportunity to look at

the potential of those events to create growth for the future and to share ideas about how we can increase employment, grow our economy and grow business.

We need to be smart about the policies that we pursue, and we have to ensure that all events taking place, especially major events such as the Commonwealth games, are delivered successfully. That is in everyone's interests.

Annabelle Ewing: Jenny Marra has talked about being smart, taking responsibility, boosting tourism and using everything that we have at our disposal. Does she therefore share my disappointment that in the recent Labour offer for the referendum and for increased powers for this Parliament the devolution of air passenger duty was not one of the things that Labour felt that we should have power over?

Jenny Marra: It was not in the devolution commission document because we think that it is one of the things on which it is better to share risk and responsibility with the rest of the United Kingdom. I take the opportunity to say to Annabelle Ewing and other members that I may be small but I am one of the biggest patriots in the chamber, and I have always—

Christine Grahame: Here ye go again, hen.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Order, please.

Jenny Marra: If Christine Grahame would let me finish my point, I would like to tell her that I have always felt that our place as a nation within a larger political and social union is a mature and constructive one. I am happy to celebrate and shout for Scotland at every opportunity, within that sensible political and economic structure. That is the position from which I approach the debate. *[Interruption.]* If Annabelle Ewing will allow me, I will turn to some of the systemic issues that can grow our industry, although I am happy to take another intervention from her, if she wishes.

Annabelle Ewing: I am most grateful, because I hear what the member says, but none of it really related to my question, which was: why, if the member is so in favour of boosting the Scottish tourism industry, is she not in favour of the Parliament controlling air passenger duty? Obviously, we would seek to reduce the skyrocketing rates that are stymieing our tourism industry.

Jenny Marra: It is simply because I believe that it is better if we share the policy with the rest of the United Kingdom and there is parity across these islands. I hope that that is clear enough for the member.

Stewart Maxwell (West Scotland) (SNP): Will the member take an intervention?

Jenny Marra: I will take one last intervention on that point.

Stewart Maxwell: The member says that, in her view, APD should not be devolved to the Parliament because there should be a single unified policy across the UK. Why is it the case, then, that APD is devolved to Northern Ireland?

Jenny Marra: Annabelle Ewing asked about the devolution commission proposals, and I clarified that for her. We can discuss air passenger duty and other proposals another time—perhaps after the result on 18 September.

If I may, I would like to return to the strategic issues for the tourism industry and homecoming. We know that the rate of youth unemployment in Scotland is persistently around 22 per cent, which is a problem that is shared with England and other economies in the European Union. I think that all members would agree that the figure is far too high. Tackling youth unemployment should be at the heart of every economic policy and event that the Government pursues, and the Commonwealth games are no different. We have heard about the surge in visitors to Scotland for the games and the potential boost for our services, hospitality and logistics sectors, yet I am concerned that we have not done enough to secure an advantage for our young people through employment and apprenticeships.

The skills investment plan details key levers such as modern apprenticeships that can be used to link young people into the tourism sector and to help fill the skills gap that some employers perceive there to be. However, I hear from providers that Skills Development Scotland is reducing funding in those areas, in a move that seems to directly undermine its ambition and what appears to be a good opportunity to get young people into jobs. I reiterate the call that I made in my opening speech for the minister to address that specific point in his closing remarks.

I turn to some of the points that have been made in the debate. My colleagues Siobhan McMahon and Margaret McCulloch echoed my priorities on the topic in talking about higher levels of modern apprenticeships and addressing the challenges for female employment, which is predominant in the hospitality sector. Those challenges include low wages—many female workers in the sector would welcome the living wage—and zero-hours contracts. I hope that those issues are live in the debate.

Our hospitality sector in Scotland must aspire to excellence across the board. We have wonderful examples in Scotland of outstanding hotels and service, but I would like the Scottish tourism industry to aspire to those standards right across the board, including in budget and mid-sector

accommodation. In a recent meeting with Highlands and Islands Enterprise, I put it to the chief executive that, although the Highlands has many good five-star and high-end accommodation and hospitality offers, there are not so many budget and mid-sector options. That might be one of the reasons why internal UK tourism figures are not quite as good as we would like them to be.

Stewart Stevenson: I wonder whether the member is doing down some of our entry-level attractions. When I go to the west coast I always stop at the Green Welly Stop in Tyndrum. It is a bus-party cafe, which aspires to the highest standards and has excellent staff.

Jenny Marra: It absolutely does. I am a frequent visitor to the Green Welly Stop shop and cafe on my hillwalking expeditions up north. I am not doing down anyone or anything; I am merely suggesting that if we are to boost tourism so that it grows in the way that Deloitte and Barclays have predicted—Barclays predicted 40 per cent growth—we must aspire to the highest standards of service and good accommodation across the sector for all budgets. That will attract more and more tourists. That is a perfectly plain point, and I hope that the member understands that I am not doing down anyone.

We must look at transport links in our country. I recently pursued a campaign on fares to Dundee, where the V and A will open in the next few years, because rail fares to the city were very high. Alex Salmond managed to sort out a bit of that, but not all of it. We need to look at integrating our fares structure and we should carefully consider the price of travel within Scotland, because there is internal tourism in Scotland. Members who have been lucky enough to visit Italy, as I have been, will know that it is far cheaper to get round that country on buses and trains than it is to get round Scotland. If we are serious about domestic tourism, we need to address the issue.

The homecoming events and the gathering are valuable events. In my experience, the participatory sporting events that are put on in Scotland are some of the most simple and effective ways of boosting our economy. I was at the etape Loch Ness a couple of weekends ago—I was not participating—and the event's drive to bring people and spending into the community and the hotels and restaurants of Inverness was plain to see. If we encourage a sporting ethos throughout the country, it will be good for the health of our nation as well as for tourism.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I would be grateful if you could draw to a conclusion.

Jenny Marra: Okay. Thank you, Presiding Officer.

This has been a constructive debate. We need to think more about some of the strategic issues to do with employment and excellence in our hospitality industry. I commend the amendment in my name.

16:48

Fergus Ewing: This debate has not been without revelations. We were all pleased to be able to congratulate Siobhan McMahon on her impending 30th birthday. We heard Christine Grahame and Bruce Crawford agree to some sort of impromptu double date, which I hope that they both enjoy—it will certainly not be boring.

We learned that Stewart Stevenson has no fewer than 500 relatives, who are spread across Canada and the USA, and that there are 3,465 Stevensons across the world, which made me wonder whether I should ask VisitScotland to concentrate a specific marketing effort on a world gathering of Stevensons. We were sad, however, to hear that there is an alarming insufficiency of Biagis. A few more Biagis might act as a counterweight to a surfeit of Stevensons.

I was pleased to learn that Jenny Marra went to the etape Loch Ness. I hope that she had a sighting of the Loch Ness monster. I will refer only once to the referendum in this speech, to say that I know all about Nessie's voting intentions in the referendum. Nessie is, of course, a floating voter.

Members: Oh dear.

Fergus Ewing: With that controversial moment past, I would like to address some of the serious comments that have been made. Most of our remarks have been designed to address, celebrate and promote the homecoming, but a number of important issues have been raised and I want to address them all briefly. If I fail to do so comprehensively, I am happy to write to members, as is my universal practice.

Mr Malik asked what efforts we have made to ensure that, during this homecoming year, we reach out to minority communities in Scotland. Fiona Hyslop has come to listen to the closing speeches; she has made sterling efforts in working with the black and ethnic minority communities to develop a whole series of events. We have had the Edinburgh mela as part of homecoming Scotland, as well as the Glasgow mela. Culture and cocktails was a pop-up event that celebrated African and black communities in Aberdeen. Next month, refugee week Scotland, a week-long festival of arts, culture, sport and heritage will celebrate the contributions that refugees make to Scotland. I am proud that my colleague Fiona Hyslop and others have been arranging these events. I think that we all are; how can we

welcome others if we do not welcome those from other countries who take refuge in Scotland?

Hanzala Malik: I remarked in my speech that so many of these activities would have taken place anyway. *[Interruption.]* I need members to bear with me; I have obviously failed to make my point. When we engage with the visible minority communities, I do not want us just to do it at the mela or other local functions when people get together, have a dance, have pakoras, and then go home. I also want us to engage with our cousins overseas in New Zealand and Canada and various other places. That is not happening; it is missing. Getting together with people from visible minority communities is one goal, but mixing with host indigenous communities and our cousins from overseas is another field altogether.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I must hurry you along, Mr Malik.

Hanzala Malik: The other point that I was making was that these communities have aspirations for employment and other opportunities, but they are missing. That is not happening.

Fergus Ewing: I was seeking to address the slightly negative flavour of some of the remarks that Mr Malik made in his opening speech, because a lot of effort has been made. We all recognise that we want to do more. Which of us MSPs does not think that we should do more for Scotland? Of course we think that, but a lot has been done. I do not have time to read out all the additional events because there are too many, but I want to say that Fiona Hyslop recently launched the multicultural homecoming programme at the University of Glasgow. We have sought to do good things and, of course, we want to do more.

Mr Malik made a point about claiming credit for others' efforts. Part of homecoming is about putting a brand on Scotland and making it exciting and appealing to other countries in the world. It is about making us a go-to place. That is precisely why CNN voted Scotland as the top country in the world to visit. When I heard that at the beginning of last year, I wondered why, and what CNN's reasoning was. That interested me particularly, apart from the accolade itself, which was marvellous. I got hold of CNN's article, which said that in deciding that Scotland is the best country in the world to visit, it took into account VisitScotland's excellent marketing, particularly the themed years, and that the branding of events with that imprimatur adds to the attraction.

Alex Johnstone: Will the minister give way?

Fergus Ewing: I will give way when I have dealt with this point. The credit for existing events of course goes to those who run those events, but I agree with Ronald Reagan who said that it is

amazing what one can achieve if one does not mind who gets the credit.

Alex Johnstone: Given CNN's decision to promote Scotland in that way, could it have Stevensons on the staff?

Fergus Ewing: It is unlikely that there is an absence of Stevensons.

Jenny Marra made a point about the slight reduction in the number of domestic visitors to Scotland from south of the border. The position is complex and I do not have time to go into all the aspects but, as Ms Marra will recall, I said in my opening speech that the latest figures for 2013 show that residents of England took 10 per cent more short breaks in Scotland than they did in 2012 and that the number of residents of England who took longer holidays in Scotland increased by 4 per cent between 2012 and 2013.

Those comparisons are over a whole year and it is reasonable to say that if someone picks one particular quarter, they are perhaps likely to get a less complete picture than if they measure things over a longer period. However, Mr Stevenson's point was also correct—namely, that where there has been a reduction in domestic tourists in Scotland, it appears that there has been a counterpart reduction south of the border, broadly speaking, if we take everything into account. To ascribe a political motivation to the visitor figures is unfortunate because there does not seem to be any evidential basis for that.

I was struck by the contrasting tone of Elizabeth Smith's closing remarks, which—to be fair to her—really caught the mood of the debate. We all want homecoming to succeed, as it surely will. We do not see it as being in any way a political event or a matter of politics. We all have different views and we can respect the views of those with whom we disagree, so we can all work towards making homecoming 2014 a great success. Therefore, I entirely endorse Elizabeth Smith's remarks regarding the tourist information centres.

Of course I have engaged closely with Elizabeth Smith and with other members with regard to those centres, which play an enormously useful role for the public. The way in which they offer their service is changing. I have opened centres in Peebles and in St Andrews, for example—as well as in other places—that have combined with local authorities or with commercial players in order to improve their offering. It is an important matter and I stress to Elizabeth Smith that I am interested in getting every decision right. They are not easy decisions to make, as the member will know. I did not want to neglect that point, as it was a fair point for the member to raise.

The skills issue is extremely important. Of course we must use the funding that we have to

best effect. That is why I am delighted that the Scottish Further and Higher Education Funding Council is now enabling the East Lothian tourism and hospitality academy initiative—which was highlighted in this Parliament at a reception and which has been enormously successful—to be rolled out throughout Scotland. Of course, organisations such as the Springboard charity, competitions such as junior chef and training at a different level in respect of the Strathclyde University's globally prestigious hotel course—also offered at Lausanne in Switzerland—also make an enormous contribution to the common weal.

We have heard much about the contribution of the clans. I mentioned earlier that I was delighted that Sir Malcolm MacGregor and John Mackenzie are in the public gallery. Sometimes Governments should say that we need to do things better. One such occasion was some time ago, when I realised that the relationship that we enjoyed with the clans was not as good as it should be. I realised that when enjoying John Mackenzie's hospitality at Castle Leod and I set about improving that relationship.

With respect, I think that we have achieved a measure of success. We have set up a clan fund, with financial support of up to £5,000, and 10 events are receiving support from that fund. Perhaps more important than those particular, relatively small, financial contributions is the fact that we have a clan forum, which was established to ensure close working between the Scottish Government, VisitScotland and Scotland's clans and families.

I will make particular reference to the contribution that the clans make to the common weal in Scotland, to tourism and to bringing back people from all over the world—not just in one year but regularly, in every year. It is something that I am proud to be associated with. I am proud because the essence of the celebration of the clan history of Scotland is the fact that we are celebrating friendship and connection with people from other countries.

As Marco Biagi said, let 2014 be the year when we all pull on the blue jersey for Scotland. As Dennis Robertson said, let 2014 be the year when Scotland has an open door to welcome everybody from the world. Let 2014—the year of homecoming—be the year when, at Scotland's ceilidh, everyone is welcome.

Decision Time

17:00

The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick): There are two questions to be put as a result of today's business. The first question is, that amendment S4M-10051.1, in the name of Jenny Marra, which seeks to amend motion S4M-10051, in the name of Fergus Ewing, on homecoming Scotland 2014, be agreed to.

Amendment agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S4M-10051, in the name of Fergus Ewing, on homecoming Scotland 2014, as amended, be agreed to.

Motion, as amended, agreed to,

That the Parliament notes the contribution made by each of the themed years in the lead up to Homecoming Scotland 2014; welcomes the role that the Homecoming year is playing in extending the economic and cultural benefits and opportunities offered by the Commonwealth Games, the Ryder Cup, the MTV Europe Music Awards and the Armed Forces Day national event through its year-long, co-ordinated programme of events that are designed to celebrate the very best of Scotland's food and drink, its assets as a country of natural beauty as well as its rich creativity and cultural and ancestral heritage; supports the Homecoming Scotland 2014 programme, which comprises a series of high-profile signature events, including Whisky Month, Bannockburn Live, the Forth Bridges Festival and the Highland Homecoming, which frame a programme of over 800 funded and partner events taking place throughout the year across every local authority area in Scotland; acknowledges the successes already achieved through the Homecoming year in raising the profile of Scotland both nationally and internationally as a world class tourism destination, and agrees on the need to ensure that the events associated with Homecoming Scotland are used to secure a lasting economic and social legacy, particularly for the poorest and most deprived areas, as well as delivery of opportunities for sustainable economic growth and employment in communities across Scotland.

Meeting closed at 17:01.

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