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Official Report

MEETING OF THE PARLIAMENT

Tuesday 7 January 2014

Session 4

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CONTENTS

	Col.
TIME FOR REFLECTION	26111
TOPICAL QUESTION TIME	26113
Flooding	26113
Wildlife Crime	26116
SCOTLAND'S FUTURE	26120
<i>Motion moved—[First Minister].</i>	
<i>Amendment moved—[Johann Lamont].</i>	
<i>Amendment moved—[Ruth Davidson].</i>	
<i>Amendment moved—[Willie Rennie].</i>	
The First Minister (Alex Salmond)	26120
Johann Lamont (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab)	26126
Ruth Davidson (Glasgow) (Con)	26130
Willie Rennie (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD)	26132
George Adam (Paisley) (SNP)	26135
Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab)	26138
Christina McKelvie (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)	26141
Malcolm Chisholm (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (Lab)	26143
Gordon MacDonald (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)	26145
Annabelle Ewing (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)	26148
Alex Johnstone (North East Scotland) (Con)	26150
Stewart Maxwell (West Scotland) (SNP)	26152
Lewis Macdonald (North East Scotland) (Lab)	26155
Clare Adamson (Central Scotland) (SNP)	26157
Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green)	26160
Neil Findlay (Lothian) (Lab)	26162
Mark McDonald (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)	26164
Drew Smith (Glasgow) (Lab)	26167
Willie Rennie	26170
Annabel Goldie (West Scotland) (Con)	26172
Kezia Dugdale (Lothian) (Lab)	26174
The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning (Michael Russell)	26177
OFFENDER REHABILITATION BILL	26183
<i>Motion moved—[Kenny MacAskill].</i>	
BUSINESS MOTION	26184
<i>Motion moved—[Joe FitzPatrick]—and agreed to.</i>	
DECISION TIME	26185
FIFE GINGERBREAD	26194
<i>Motion debated—[David Torrance].</i>	
David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)	26194
Mary Fee (West Scotland) (Lab)	26197
Annabelle Ewing (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)	26198
Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)	26200
Roderick Campbell (North East Fife) (SNP)	26201
Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)	26203
The Minister for Children and Young People (Aileen Campbell)	26204

Scottish Parliament

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

Time for Reflection

The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick): Good afternoon and happy new year. The first item of business this afternoon is time for reflection. Our time for reflection leader today is Father Joe Mills, who is the parish priest of St Mary's Church in Duntocher.

Father Joe Mills (St Mary's Church, Duntocher): Presiding Officer and members of the Scottish Parliament, thank you for the opportunity to address you this afternoon.

Some years ago, Cardinal Winning invited me to address my brother priests at a day of recollection and study. We were preparing to launch his pastoral plan for the archdiocese of Glasgow. On my way to the meeting, I paid an early visit to my cousin and her husband for a wee cup of tea. My cousin, who is a general practitioner and mum, was on an early shift and had left dad to get the baby dressed. As I arrived, the little girl, who was aged about three, was in tears. She demanded that her dad find her favourite socks—the ones with the Snow White design. Poor dad ransacked the drawer; there were socks with every other fairy-tale character imaginable. Finally, he found one sock with the Snow White logo but could not find its neighbour. The child was now in a tantrum. The next thing we noticed was that she had clasped her two feet together and was attempting to squeeze them into the one Snow White sock.

This experience gave me food for thought on my way to the seminar with the clergy. I wondered whether I had often found myself behaving like that child. How often had I created problems for myself? How often had I been stubbornly determined to pursue a course of action that I knew deep down would never work? I could apply this to my own personal life and to how I exercise my public ministry as a priest.

When I stood before the clergy later that day, I decided to share the incident of "Snow White and the One Sock" with the cardinal and my colleagues. I suggested to the priests that we may have to revise our approach to pastoral planning by asking ourselves whether we are attempting to force policies on the people, and not being open to other options and other ideas. Being open would, I suggested, demand the kind of patience that comes with maturity. I added that Jesus himself did not force his disciples to follow his way; he

invited them to share his belief that what he was preaching was the will of God.

Today I am sure that you—the members of our Scottish Parliament—will manage to dissuade both adults and children from squeezing two feet into the one Snow White sock.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, Father Joe. After the parable of the Snow White socks, we will move on to topical questions.

Topical Question Time

14:03

Flooding

1. Elaine Murray (Dumfriesshire) (Lab): Happy new year, Presiding Officer and all colleagues.

To ask the Scottish Government how it will respond to recent flooding in Dumfriesshire and across the country. (S4T-00555)

The Minister for Environment and Climate Change (Paul Wheelhouse): Happy new year, Presiding Officer, Dr Murray and colleagues.

I visited Whitesands in Dumfries last week to see first hand the effects of the flooding event at its peak, when Whitesands, Friars Vennel and a number of other side streets were badly flooded.

On Friday I visited Govan communication centre to see the heart of the resilience response operations that cover local authorities in the west regional resilience partnership area. I very much sympathise with Elaine Murray, whose office was damaged, and with others in the area who were affected.

I reiterate my gratitude to the local authorities and emergency services, which reacted swiftly to minimise the impact of rising water levels and to establish welfare centres for those who were affected.

In events of that nature—which, sadly, impact on Dumfries regularly—preparation is key. I was extremely impressed by how well prepared all the authorities were, aided by the timely and accurate flood forecasts from the Scottish flood forecasting service, which is run by the Scottish Environment Protection Agency and the Met Office.

Flood risk management is a priority for the Scottish Government. We have maintained and protected funding for SEPA and, in partnership with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, we have maintained the levels of funding that were identified for flood protection in the local authority settlement, at £42 million per annum.

On 31 December, the Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Employment and Sustainable Growth announced that the Bellwin scheme is open for applications for financial support.

Next week, as was planned prior to the recent weather, I will host a summit with local authorities to look at the work that is currently under way to produce the first-ever round of flood risk management plans, which will make a significant contribution to our collective work in Scotland to reduce flood risk, and will help to target future

investment. I know from my conversation with local responders in Dumfries that those maps will add value to their work.

Elaine Murray: The minister will be aware that Dumfries is the largest town in Scotland that suffers from regular flooding but has in place no flood prevention scheme. Dumfries and Galloway Council is, at long last, considering the details of a flood prevention scheme for the Whitesands area and is likely to require an estimated £9 million of additional funding for its implementation. Can the minister advise whether and when any central funding will be available?

Paul Wheelhouse: That issue was raised when I met the leader and chief executive of Dumfries and Galloway Council at Whitesands. I am aware that the council is preparing its flood protection scheme for the Whitesands area and is looking perhaps not to eliminate all flood risk, but to try to reduce to a reasonable level the flood risk to the town centre, which is important for the regeneration of Dumfries. I certainly acknowledge that Dumfries is a major population centre and that it currently does not have protection of the type that Elaine Murray described.

As Elaine Murray may be aware, the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and the Scottish Government have an agreement to distribute £42 million per year through the capital grant to local authorities. An application process for funding is open; it closes on 21 January. I am not sure at what stage Dumfries and Galloway Council will be at that point; I know that a number of local authorities plan to bid for that funding. A pot of money is therefore available that is allocated jointly by local government and the Scottish Government. That is the funding that local authorities such as Dumfries and Galloway Council will need to apply for.

Elaine Murray: I thank the minister for that information.

The minister referred to the flooding in my office. At least I had several hours to prepare my constituency office for the flooding on 30 December, courtesy of the SEPA flood warning system, which covers Dumfries town. Constituents in other parts of my constituency, such as those in the 21 households that were flooded in Kirkconnel, were not so lucky, because their areas are not covered by the warning scheme. Given the increased incidence of flooding events in Scotland, will the Scottish Government consider funding the Scottish Environment Protection Agency to extend its full flood warning scheme?

Paul Wheelhouse: I certainly acknowledge the importance of flood warning schemes. The experience in Whitesands was that the authority

was able to get the response in place in time, which demonstrates the value of such investment.

We have had a steady programme to extend the parts of the country that are covered, and we most recently launched the scheme at the River Carron at Stonehaven. The scheme covers that town, which has also suffered a number of flooding events, as I am sure Elaine Murray is aware.

In my discussions with the leader and chief executive of Dumfries and Galloway Council, I have asked them to come to me with suggestions about where they think flood warning enhancement in Dumfries and Galloway would have most impact. I look forward to receiving information from them.

In particular catchments, it is very challenging to put in place a flood warning scheme, but we will see what we can do to help the local authority in question, and others across Scotland.

Aileen McLeod (South Scotland) (SNP): I, too, wish the Presiding Officer and all my colleagues a very happy new year.

I thank the minister for his efforts across the country over the festive period and for visiting the Whitesands area in Dumfries, in particular.

Dumfries and Galloway Council's strategic flood risk assessment ranked Newton Stewart and Minnigaff highly in respect of flood risk on all factors. Will the minister consider those areas and any other high-risk areas in the region being designated as SEPA target areas for specific early flood warnings?

Paul Wheelhouse: Indeed. I recognise that places such as Newton Stewart have been very badly affected in previous flooding incidents. Thankfully, this time round we knew the circumstances that had previously affected Newton Stewart, which helped to inform responders' actions. However, we still lacked a warning system for the River Cree. That lack affects a number of communities along that river.

SEPA has published its flood warning strategy to 2016, which, I am pleased to say, sets out a programme of work to enhance its network across Scotland. It includes a coastal flood warning scheme for the Solway Firth, which is planned for 2015. As I say, I am happy to ask SEPA to consider what more can be done across Scotland. I also recognise Aileen McLeod's direction to look at the River Cree and the importance of providing as much information as we can to residents of Newton Stewart and other communities in the area.

I suggest that anyone who is affected by flooding in the region, for example in Newton Stewart, will benefit from signing up to the flood line because they will at least get a flood alert on

general risks to the local authority area. We are doing as much as we can to enhance the network of warning systems in order to give as detailed and timely information as possible to residents in Dumfries and Galloway, and in other regions.

Wildlife Crime

2. Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): I declare an interest as chair of the cross-party group on animal welfare.

To ask the Scottish Government, in light of the recent discovery of six badger carcasses near Peebles, whether it is content with Police Scotland's resource allocation for detecting and preventing wildlife crimes. (S4T-00552)

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice (Kenny MacAskill): The allocation of police resources in line with national and local priorities is a matter for Police Scotland. However, Police Scotland has demonstrated its commitment to tackling wildlife crime at a national level. Wildlife crime co-ordination sits within the specialist crime division of Police Scotland. There is a national portfolio lead at superintendent level, supported by a lead senior officer and a wildlife crime liaison officer in each of the 14 divisions and a network of wildlife crime officers who operate across the country. That approach ensures better co-ordination, greater consistency and improved communication with partner agencies to tackle wildlife crime and to make links between wildlife crime and other serious and organised crime.

In addition, the Scottish Government provides dedicated funding for the national wildlife crime unit based in Livingston. The wildlife crime unit operates with partners across the United Kingdom to assist in the prevention and detection of crime by obtaining and disseminating intelligence, as well as supporting law enforcement with specialist advice.

Christine Grahame: I am sure that the cabinet secretary shares my and my constituents' shock and disgust at the horrendous discovery on their doorstep. Notwithstanding the additional resources allocated by Police Scotland, recent evidence shows that badger baiting is on the increase, with 40 incidents in 2013. However, in 2012, there were only two prosecutions—one was a fine; the other was then an on-going prosecution.

When badgers are slowly savaged to death, the dogs also sustain horrific injuries. Given that and the partnerships that the cabinet secretary mentioned, is he aware of any liaison between Police Scotland and the veterinary community to assist in tracing the criminals if dogs are taken there?

Kenny MacAskill: Detecting and prosecuting wildlife crime is always difficult: the crimes usually take place in remote parts of the country where there are few if any witnesses; crimes may not be discovered until days or often weeks after they have taken place; and the evidence is usually exposed to the elements and deteriorates fast. That is not to say that prosecutions are impossible. For example, badger baiting has seen a number of successful prosecutions in recent years. Indeed, for the five-year period from 2007-08 to 2011-12, 15 offences under the Protection of Badgers Act 1992 were proceeded against, with 13 guilty outcomes. The Scottish Government's "Wildlife Crime in Scotland - 2012 Annual Report" published in September 2013 contains details of other court proceedings.

There is a desire and intention to ensure that criminals are brought to account. As announced by the Minister for Environment and Climate Change in July 2013, the police are looking to bring in all the modern investigative techniques at their disposal to bear down on such crimes. It is a matter of partnership, working with those who operate in rural areas. There is also a recognition that the crimes are not simply rural but tie into criminals and serious crime gangs who operate out of urban areas, which is why it is important to realise that the matter is not simply for police officers who operate in rural Scotland but for all police officers wherever they operate. Partnering and working with other agencies, whether the Scottish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals or others, is important and my cabinet colleagues and I are intent on maintaining that.

Christine Grahame: I fully accept that serious and organised gangs are involved. To return to the difficulty of tracking them, I understand that bull lurchers, which are big, muscular, powerful dogs, are being bred to make the baiting even more savage. Are there any resources—the cabinet secretary may not know but Police Scotland may be able to tell us in due course—for a whistleblowing capacity within the Scottish wildlife crime unit, so that people can report sightings of this new dog specifically bred for the purpose of badger baiting?

Kenny MacAskill: I am not aware of the specifics, but I am happy to inquire and come back to the member on that issue. However, I can say that the specialist unit provides and maintains the sharing of information across the police and the constabulary, ensuring that information is disseminated downwards, so that it is not simply officers in some of the rural areas who will be viewed as taking this as an important and serious matter but all officers in all 14 divisions.

That is necessary, given the comments that Ms Grahame made. The likelihood is that the dogs will

be kept in areas that are not necessarily the ones in which they are used. I have no doubt that there will be capacity, whether through Crimestoppers or other means, to ensure that information in that regard can be not only received but acted on. I will be glad to get back to the member with additional information.

Claudia Beamish (South Scotland) (Lab): I wish everyone a happy new year. I, too, declare an interest: I work with Christine Grahame as deputy convener of the cross-party group on animal welfare.

The cabinet secretary referred to modern techniques. Will he say what arrangements are in place to monitor the use of the internet by groups who are involved in wildlife crime such as badger baiting? For instance, what happens if people set up a Facebook page devoted to organising fox baiting or dog fighting? As the cabinet secretary said, what we are talking about can be an urban crime as well as a rural one.

Kenny MacAskill: These are challenges that the police face across the spectrum, whether we are talking about fraud or other criminality where movement is frequent or about the use of social media in the context of offensive behaviour in relation to football. The member can rest assured that the police monitor social media, to ensure that they keep abreast of what is happening and deal with unacceptable and criminal actions. I have no doubt that Police Scotland will be happy to brief the member or her group if she wants further information. She can rest assured that the police monitor social media and internet use, because that is essential if the police are to be able to deal with criminality in the modern age in which we live.

Nigel Don (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP): The cabinet secretary will, sadly, be well aware of the recent poisoning of a golden eagle in the Angus glens, in my constituency. Will he update me on whether the introduction of vicarious liability, whereby managers and owners of estates are made responsible for their employees' criminal actions, has made a difference to the incidence of poisoning in the rural community?

Kenny MacAskill: The poisoning of the young golden eagle was a disgraceful and barbaric act, especially given that it happened at the end of the year of natural Scotland, during which the golden eagle was voted as the favourite of Scotland's big five species.

I must be constrained in what I say about the incident, because there is a live police investigation—members would expect no less, especially given recent comments. I can say that there has been progress in reducing the number of raptor poisonings to three in 2012, although it appears that 2013 saw an increase in confirmed

poisonings—the final number is yet to be confirmed, due to on-going police investigations. There were also a number of illegal shooting and trapping incidents that involved raptors.

Those incidents reinforce the need for the measures that the Minister for Environment and Climate Change announced in July, which include reviewing the penalties for wildlife crime, looking at ways to restrict the use of general licences in areas where there are good reasons to believe that wildlife crime is taking place and, most important, supporting the Lord Advocate in encouraging the police to use all the investigative tools that are at their disposal to identify and bring to book the criminals who are behind attacks on Scotland's precious wildlife. Whether such crime is committed by people in the rural environment who should know better or by serious organised crime gangs, it is entirely unacceptable, and the full weight of the law and law enforcement will be brought to bear on those responsible.

It will perhaps be for others to comment on vicarious liability in the context of developments in recent years. Progress has been made, but we require to be ever-vigilant, because the recent incident reminds us that such crime is still going on, with tragic consequences.

Scotland's Future

The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick): The next item of business is a debate on motion S4M-08707, in the name of Alex Salmond, on Scotland's future.

14:19

The First Minister (Alex Salmond): I wish everyone, and particularly you, Presiding Officer, a very happy new year. We look forward to the debates and the excitement to come in 2014.

It gives me great pleasure to speak to the motion. It is a motion about Scotland's future, and the future of Scotland's children is central to that. Last year, as members know, the Child Poverty Action Group estimated that as a direct result of Westminster's welfare cuts, up to 100,000 more children could be living in poverty in Scotland by 2020.

That is an important and memorable statistic. It is one that could reverse the substantial progress that has been made on relative child poverty in Scotland in the years since devolution, during which time the percentage of children in families with child poverty was reduced from 27 per cent to the latest figure of 15 per cent. If 100,000 more children move into poverty as a result of welfare cuts, that will reverse the greater part of the progress that has been made over that period.

I would say that it is impossible to hear and appreciate that figure of 100,000 children without feeling a profound sense of shock. It is certainly a figure that it is impossible to forget. However, the Scottish secretary, Alistair Carmichael, did not even recognise that number when Nicola Sturgeon challenged him on it about six weeks ago, in a very memorable debate. Even more remarkably, he did not remember it when he appeared in front of this Parliament's Health and Sport Committee a few weeks later. That is an extraordinary thing. Alistair Carmichael was quoted in the press this weekend as saying that he might withdraw from politics after the next election. Perhaps we should assume that he is already withdrawing from the consequences of his Government's policies as they affect people in Scotland.

The Scottish Government's fiscal departmental expenditure limit budget will reduce by around 11 per cent in real terms between 2010-11 and the end of this spending review period in 2015-16. Those cuts amount to more than £3,000 million annually. However, last month, the United Kingdom Government announced that Scotland would receive more than £300 million over two years as though we were the lucky beneficiaries of this spending decision and munificence.

Gavin Brown (Lothian) (Con): Has total Government spend ever been higher?

The First Minister: The figure that I gave Gavin Brown relates to the real impact, after allowing for inflation, which I am sure that Gavin Brown understands, since inflation affecting families has been rising steadily under his Government. That amounts to a real spending cut of £3,000 million a year in the Scottish budget. However, the £300 million in consequential over two years was announced as if we were the lucky beneficiaries of munificence from Westminster. That increase represents one 20th of the budget reduction. I say to Gavin Brown that that is in real terms, not nominal terms. Further, even within that funding increase, a quarter is restricted to loans and equity investment. Not only must that be repaid in future years to the Treasury but, of course, it is limited to the private sector and cannot be used to fund public sector spending decisions.

The greater part of those consequential came from the UK Government's help for business scheme. Luckily, under this Government, Scotland has already established the most competitive business taxation system anywhere in the UK. Therefore, last month, John Swinney was able to announce that we would allocate an additional £77 million over two years to maintain business rate parity with the rest of the UK—our key commitment—and to extend the small business bonus scheme to a further 4,000 properties. Those measures will ensure that Scotland continues to be the most competitive place in the UK to do business. That leaves £60 million in revenue in 2014-15 and a further £74 million in revenue in 2015-16.

It is worth considering the competing claims that have been made for that money. On 6 December, Danny Alexander, the Chief Secretary to the Treasury, asked for it to be used to fund free school meals, expanded childcare and the dualling of the A9. Now, we might expect the Chief Secretary to the Treasury to realise that tens of millions of pounds of resource spending could not finance a £3 billion capital project. Further, we might also expect him also to understand that £300 million of new money over two years is dwarfed by a £3 billion cut in every single year.

In February last year, Ruth Davidson called for a commitment to free nursery places for all two-year-olds, starting with the most disadvantaged families. I do not know how that combines with the parallel commitment to lose billions of pounds in revenue by a cut in income tax or, for that matter, the news of a further £25 billion cut in public resources that we heard of from the chancellor yesterday.

The Labour Party has asked—previously and in its amendment today—for an immediate

expansion of childcare to cover 50 per cent of two-year-olds. That would cost £100 million each year, which is greater than the resource that is available in either year—remember, it is £60 million in revenue one year and £74 million the next year. Although Labour's amendment talks of

"recognising the value of free school meals",

I take that phrase to mean that it does not support the extension of the provision of free school meals. No doubt, Johann Lamont will confirm in her speech that that phrase means that none of the consequential should be spent on extending the school meals programme.

Malcolm Chisholm (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (Lab): I may have nodded off by that page, but can the First Minister tell me what page of the white paper commits the Scottish Government to free school meals?

The First Minister: The Scottish Government has been committed in its manifestos to the extension of the provision of free school meals. I am delighted that Malcolm Chisholm has reminded me that a number of Labour MSPs last year supported a motion in the name of Elaine Smith that supported the Unison campaign for free school meals. I assume that those members may be interested in what I am about to say about that policy. On his website, Ed Balls tells us:

"in Bradford, Nottingham, Islington, Cumbria and Medway we were going to test out the benefits of having free school lunches for every child ... But now the Tories and Liberals have pulled the plug. ... So sign up today to my campaign to defend free school meals from Tory and Liberal cuts".

Mind you, that is not Labour—to use the famous words, that is just Balls in terms of the debate.

The policies that we are announcing today—unlike those of the other parties in this chamber, who, until they tell us how they are going to fund their proposals, will remain incredible in budgetary terms—will have the greatest possible effect with the resources that are available to us.

Under this Government, Scotland has made free meals available in every primary school to families that receive child and working tax credits. That step has not been taken in England and Wales and it has contributed to 10,000 more pupils registering for free school meals. However, I am delighted to tell the chamber that we can now go further. I can announce today that, after discussions with our partners in local government, we will fund free school meals for all schoolchildren in primaries 1 to 3 from next January. *[Applause.]*

That measure will build on and learn from the pilots that we established in five local authority areas in 2007-08. It will remove any possibility of free meals being a source of stigma during the first

years of a child's schooling, it will improve health and wellbeing and, crucially, it will be worth £330 a year for each child to families throughout the country. The measure has been supported by a powerful alliance of campaigners against child poverty, including Child Poverty Action Group Scotland, Children in Scotland, One Parent Families Scotland, the Church of Scotland and the trade unions the Educational Institute of Scotland and Unison.

Unlike other parties in this chamber, we also have a determination to transform childcare in this country. The transformational change in childcare that we propose in the first session of Parliament of an independent Scotland will improve care and learning for young people, boost economic growth and remove a major barrier for many parents, particularly women.

Gavin Brown: Will the First Minister give way?

The First Minister: I have given way to the member already, and I am afraid that I do not have the time.

In 2012, female participation in the Scottish labour market was around 4 percentage points below the comparable figure in Norway and 6 percentage points below the figure for Sweden. Even an increase of 1 percentage point in the female labour participation rate will increase the tax revenues in Scotland by around £100 million in the long run. Under devolution, even following the passing of the Scotland Act 2012, the vast part of those revenues goes to Westminster; with independence, it will stay in Scotland.

I was extraordinarily puzzled by what Johann Lamont said at First Minister's question time last month when she said that people moving out of unemployment would collectively have to pay £830 million in income tax to pay for our childcare proposals. I could not understand why she was making that argument until I read the back-up publication—a single sheet—from the Labour Party and all was revealed. Labour in Scotland seems to believe that people pay only income tax; it does not seem to realise that people pay many different types of taxes and that increased employment boosts revenues from all those taxes. For example, somebody on average earnings pays over £2,000 in employee's national insurance contributions.

Furthermore, Johann Lamont's argument on that day has now been undermined by her own side.

"Enabling women to go back to work who want to go back to work ... will increase revenues to the exchequer significantly, such that over time it pays for itself."

That is what Lucy Powell, who is the UK Labour Party's shadow minister for childcare, said on 30 December. We have the extraordinary position in

which the UK Labour spokesperson understands the point, but the Scottish Labour leader claims not to understand it. A transformation in childcare can be funded only when we use all the revenues that arise from it.

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

The First Minister: I cannot give way, because of time.

Let us look at the context. Yesterday, George Osborne made another of his austerity forever speeches. In making that speech, did he think that if there was a huge increase in participation in the labour market by the female workforce in Scotland, the first priority that he would have with that revenue flooding into the Treasury would be to return it to Scotland, or would he think—as John Redwood and David Willetts did 30 years ago, as was revealed under the 30-year rule—of ways to cut Scotland's budget even further, as long as no one noticed that it was being done? I think that the latter is the case rather than the former.

The Scottish Government's ambition for childcare transformation, for the structure of our economy and for the nature of our society cannot be sustainably funded through a fixed budget that is set at Westminster. However, with these announcements we are going to make a start. Over the past 17 months, the public, private and third sectors have taken concerted action on the employment of women in Scotland. The number of women in work in Scotland is the highest on record. The female participation rate is higher than it is in any other country in the UK. In the last year to October alone, 60,000 more women were in work in Scotland. That is a record level. I put it to members that if it is possible to get 60,000 women in work over a year, getting 100,000 women into the labour market over five years is distinctly achievable.

We want to build on that success and to give more of our young people the best possible start in life. The Scottish Government is already increasing the level of free care and learning that is available to three and four-year-olds and the most vulnerable two-year-olds to 600 hours each year by August 2014. That contrasts with the provision of 412 hours, which was the position that we inherited when we came into office in 2007. That policy is worth £700 a year to families in that position.

Today, I can announce that we will increase the number of two-year-olds who will benefit from free learning and care—currently, 3 per cent of the total do so. We will begin by focusing on those families who are most in need. From this August, the entitlement will cover two-year-olds in families that are seeking work, who comprise

approximately 15 per cent of the total. That will give parents additional support when they are looking for employment, which will be maintained when they are successful. In August 2015, we will expand the provision further to all children who meet the current criteria for free school meals. That will mean that around 27 per cent of two-year-olds will be covered, which is more than 15,000 children in Scotland.

The Liberal amendment expresses concern that the Scottish Government is not matching the action of the UK Government on childcare, but in fact—I know that this will be of great interest to Mr Rennie in this new year—by August 2015, the overall level of free learning and care for two, three and four-year-olds in Scotland will exceed what has been promised elsewhere in the UK. I say “promised” because, as we know from recent revelations by the UK Government, almost a third of the childcare that has been promised in England is not being delivered as a result of lack of preparation and lack of capacity. I assure Mr Rennie that we will prepare and will deliver our commitments to the expansion of childcare.

These are important and immediate announcements, but I readily admit that they fall short of the transformation that is required in Scottish society. We need to create a tax, welfare and childcare system that does not plunge children into poverty as the UK Government is doing and that puts us on a par with the best childcare systems in the world. That is why the future of Scotland’s children is the future of Scotland and why Scotland’s future is an independent one.

I move,

That the Parliament deplores the welfare austerity cuts imposed by the UK Government on the most vulnerable; notes the estimate of the Child Poverty Action Group that, as a direct result of these, by 2020 child poverty will increase by up to 100,000; recognises that free school meals help tackle child poverty and promote child welfare and educational attainment; further recognises that free school meals save families at least £330 per child per year; confirms its commitment to increasing the number of primary school pupils eligible for free school meals; further confirms its commitment to continue to increase the provision of high-quality early learning and childcare, which, as well as being of benefit to children, will be of great assistance to family finances and help to boost female participation in the labour market; believes that, with independence, Scotland can match countries such as Sweden and increase the number of women in the labour market by more than 100,000, increase Scottish output by £2.2 billion and government revenues by £700 million; acknowledges that the powers of independence are necessary to ensure that the full ambitions for early years education and childcare in Scotland are delivered as only with the powers of independence will these additional revenues stay in Scotland to fund such a policy for the long term; believes that having full control over both taxation and welfare is vital to achieve the transformation in childcare that Scotland needs and for child poverty to be finally

eradicated, and further believes that only with independence can Scotland truly become the best place in the world for a child to grow up.

14:34

Johann Lamont (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab): I, too, wish everyone a happy and very peaceful new year as we look forward to all the excitement of 2014.

The First Minister talks about the importance of Scotland’s future, but we should also be talking about the importance of Scotland’s present. The First Minister fails to talk about not just what will happen for young people in the future, but what we could do right now to help families across Scotland; that help is far more limited than it could be.

Over the past few months we have seen a different side to the First Minister, which many of us did not know existed. We know that Alex Salmond has been arguing for 40 years to break up the United Kingdom, whether as a young radical in his party, a Royal Bank of Scotland economist, a back-bench MP or Scotland’s First Minister. However, it is only in recent months that we have found out exactly why that passion for independence burns so bright in him: it turns out that all along it was about child poverty, getting women back into work and a fairer welfare system for the most vulnerable. For 40 years he has been making the case, but only now has he chosen to share with us the profound reasons that converted him to the nationalist cause all those years ago: child poverty, childcare and welfare. It turns out that he is less “Braveheart”, more “Soccer Mom”.

Some of us might be a little suspicious of the First Minister’s motives.

The First Minister: Will the member take an intervention?

Johann Lamont: Let me make some progress first.

We have been struggling to recall his famous child poverty speech; his tireless campaigning for improved childcare has sneaked under the radar; and his passion for a better welfare system has escaped most of us. The reason why we are suspicious is this: Alex Salmond and his Scottish National Party colleagues believed in independence while Labour was lifting hundreds of thousands of children out of poverty. He talks about the success of lifting children out of poverty since 1999, but that happened because of choices by a Labour Government in this place and at UK level, not simply because of devolution.

The First Minister: I note that the Labour amendment claims that the reduction in child poverty has paused under this Administration. I

wonder whether Johann Lamont can explain that statement, since the latest official statistics show that the figures for child poverty declined from 27 to 21 per cent between 2001 and 2007; and from 2007 to 2012 to 15 per cent. That is a 6 per cent decline in six years under Labour and a 6 per cent decline in five years under the SNP. Can she reconcile that with her amendment? Yes, of course, there is a big threat from the Tories, but what on earth is she talking about in claiming that there has been a pause, given those stats on child poverty?

Johann Lamont: I can never reconcile the reality of what is happening in our communities with the figures that the First Minister puts forward. The reality is that it has stalled over a period. He is incapable of even acknowledging Labour's record levels of employment among women through improved childcare, working tax credits and a range of other measures. While we were doing that, the SNP still campaigned for a separate Scotland.

Who can forget that when Alex Salmond was asked in 2010 whether people should vote for a Labour Government with a record for compassion on welfare or a Tory Government that would attack the poor—as it always has—he said “Vote for Nick Clegg”? We know how that worked out. We must always judge people by their actions and not their rhetoric. We are supposed to believe that the leader of the SNP has been on a political journey from being a man who said that he did not mind Margaret Thatcher's economic policies to one who has been transformed into a child poverty campaigner, albeit one who believes in cutting taxes to big business by 3p more than anything that a Tory chancellor could produce.

The truth is, yet again, that the motion before us today is just the latest justification for a failed and unpopular ideology. Whether children are poor or rich, whether women work or stay at home, whether welfare is fair or unfair, the SNP would still believe in independence, and it should at least have the honesty to accept that. The SNP believes in independence because it is nationalist. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Order.

Johann Lamont: That is not an unreasonable position, but I just wish that the SNP would be honest about it rather than try to package it as something that it is not.

Today the First Minister set out a plan to deliver free school meals that was first promised in 2007. What a journey it has been; it was pledged seven years ago but never delivered because, perhaps understandably, other priorities were pursued. Now it has been reprised because the UK Government has acted on it and provided the

money. This is the same UK Government that the motion states is driving thousands of children into poverty. The Scottish Government challenges that by copying that Government, and we are supposed to believe the SNP Government that could not provide free school meals in the previous session of Parliament when it says that with a smaller budget it can deliver the policy now. That is the logic that Alex Salmond expects Scotland to buy into, but the people of Scotland are not stupid.

There is an argument for free school meals on health grounds, perhaps on educational grounds and even on societal grounds. However, is it, as the motion suggests, the most compelling approach to tackling child poverty in these tough times? At the moment, the poorest children already get free school meals. By extending the policy to all other children, the First Minister has chosen to spend the money that he has received on everyone else but the poorest children.

Mark McDonald (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): The member questions whether this is an appropriate way of tackling child poverty. However, does she not accept that the Child Poverty Action Group Scotland's backing for universal free school meals suggests that the policy will go some way towards tackling child poverty in Scotland?

Johann Lamont: First of all, the SNP has been able to resist that argument since 2007 but, secondly, the child poverty organisations are also committed to addressing the question of childcare and believe that that is every bit as much of a priority.

The reality is that the First Minister has done what Governments do: he has made a choice. At one level, it is an unenviable choice, because it is between good things. I would love to have a debate on the pluses and minuses of spending money on free school meals instead of childcare, but we are not allowed to have that in here. All of a sudden, the test of one's commitment to child poverty is about free school meals, but I would argue that the debate is much richer and more substantial than that.

For example, the First Minister could have chosen to reinvest some of the £1 billion that he has cut from anti-poverty measures that provided free breakfasts for some of the poorest children in our communities. That would have been a good thing. He could have chosen to invest in childcare and the early years to give those young people a better start. That would also have been a good thing. Instead, he chooses school meals. That choice, too, is a good thing, but it comes at the expense of the other choices he could have made. He should at least have the bravery to be honest about that decision and make an argument for it

against other options. Again, instead of doing that, he hides behind the referendum. When asked about the white paper, he said that the thing he was most proud of—remember this?—was his commitment to childcare. He had an opportunity to show that his new-found commitment to childcare was more than a referendum ploy—

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning (Michael Russell): Will the member give way?

Johann Lamont: Sit down.

Members: Oh! [*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Order!

Johann Lamont: What a shame—bless him.

The First Minister had an opportunity to show that his new-found commitment to childcare was more than a referendum ploy and to start delivering for working families and children now. However, instead of making that start now, he says, “I can’t deliver childcare until after independence.”

As a mother and someone who for 20 years taught some of the poorest children in our communities, I have to be honest and say that school meals would not be my priority in addressing child poverty. We have said—as the First Minister said before the holidays—that we would make our priority the 10,000 vulnerable children who would benefit from better childcare. Six weeks ago, it was the First Minister’s priority and, for all the noise from his front bench, it is not his priority now. Rather than help families now, he chooses to make it a false offer for the referendum. He has the power to do this now, but he makes these people wait so he can engineer a false argument for changing the constitution.

We know that this Government will stop at nothing to achieve a yes vote. It appears that it is so desperate that it would even vote against achieving what it claims is its flagship policy of childcare. The truth is that it has only one policy— independence, for better or worse. Everything else is a means to an end. I listened to the First Minister’s speech and what I heard was this: “Although I tell you childcare is my priority, it is not enough of a priority for me to find the resources right now to make it happen.”

Families who are juggling jobs and childcare deserve better from a Government that cynically decides that although it has the money, it will not spend it on the things that were its priorities.

I move amendment S4M-08707.3, to leave out from “deplores” to end and insert:

“believes that the UK Government’s economic and social strategies have failed and threaten the progress made by the previous Labour administration in tackling child poverty;

agrees that devolution allows the Scottish Parliament to take a different approach; notes that progress in tackling child poverty has stalled in Scotland under the current administration, and, while recognising the value of free school meals, calls on the Scottish Government to take action to deliver for children now, including providing 50% of two-year-olds with 600 hours of free early learning and care in 2014.”

14:45

Ruth Davidson (Glasgow) (Con): I, too, add my new year’s wishes to the whole chamber.

When I saw the motion for the debate, I was immediately transported to the heady days of April 2007, when Alex Salmond was still in self-imposed exile at Westminster, having tried the Scottish Parliament but found a return to the green benches in London impossible to resist; and when Wales enacted a smoking ban, Kent had an earthquake and BBC Scotland still lived at Queen Margaret Drive.

It was a time when the First Minister’s favourite celebrity dieter, Beyoncé, topped the charts with a song called “Beautiful Liar”. That was the backdrop for the launch of the SNP’s 2007 manifesto. It was a manifesto brimming with ideas for the young people of this country—ideas on class sizes, physical education provision and school-college partnerships; a promise to pay off student debt; and, crucially, a pledge to develop Scandinavian-style childcare, the first stage of which would be free provision of 600 hours. There was also a promise of free school meals for pupils in primary 1 to 3, starting with a pilot and being rolled out to 40,000 youngsters across the country.

Nearly seven years in government and let us look at the record. Class sizes are going up not down, PE promises have been broken and school-college partnerships are still in the in-tray, while the student debt write-off has landed firmly in the bin.

What about the policies that we have heard reheated today? On free school meals, the pilot happened and our then education secretary, Fiona Hyslop, declared:

“The pilot was a success with pupils, parents and schools and I have therefore introduced an Order to the Scottish Parliament today which will allow all local authorities to provide free school meals for P1 to P3 pupils.”

That was back in 2008 and, somehow, there has been no roll-out of that policy. Mike Russell made sure that it was quietly dropped when it came to the manifesto of 2011.

The First Minister: Will the member give way?

Ruth Davidson: I want to make some progress.

A cynic might say that the SNP, having promised the earth and failed to deliver for years,

has only now rediscovered its commitment to free school meals because the coalition Government is delivering it. Today, we have a Westminster policy delivered with Westminster money and the SNP playing catch-up but trying to claim the credit. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Order.

The First Minister *rose—*

Ruth Davidson: Now that the First Minister is on his feet, perhaps he can tell me why, while the Scottish Government will receive consequential for free school meals from April, he is introducing them only from next January?

The First Minister: I think that it is Scottish taxpayers' money, not George Osborne's money.

On the issue of how we were judged on our 2007 manifesto—where, if I remember, we fulfilled 84 out of 94 commitments—surely that was the 2011 election, when this Government ended up as the first majority Government in the history of this Parliament and the Tory party ended up with however many members Ruth Davidson has behind her.

Ruth Davidson: We have seen broken promises on PE; broken promises on class sizes; broken promises on student debt; and broken promises on free school meals.

Let us get to the childcare element of this and return to page 49 of the 2007 manifesto, which said:

"Our ... goal is to deliver universal integrated early education and care services, similar to the Scandinavian model, giving every family access to affordable, high quality childcare".

On page 51, it said:

"We will increase the provision of free nursery education for 3 and 4 year olds by 50 per cent. That means increasing the entitlement from 400 hours a year to 600 hours a year."

It has taken the SNP almost seven years, and that 600 hours of free childcare has still not been implemented. Furthermore, the SNP promised in 2007 that the revolutionary Scandinavian model was achievable under devolution, but now—suddenly and with September looming and a referendum on its way—the Government white paper is telling parents that they will get that Scandinavian model only if they vote yes. Two thirds of the women of this country believe that the SNP should get on and deliver improvements now, and the same YouGov poll shows that the SNP's own voters do not believe that the Government needs to wait for independence to deliver better childcare.

Moving the goalposts is nothing new. The front bench launched the campaign to break up Britain with a pledge to gather a million signatures, which

was quietly shelved. Then ministers parroted the battle cry that the more people hear about independence, the more they will vote yes. With the polls flatlining at under one third, that line was also ditched.

Mark McDonald: Will the member give way?

Ruth Davidson: Not in my final minute.

Then there was the promise that everything would be in the white paper, except for any figures, any costings, any projections, or any sums. There is not so much as a dead cat bounce in support.

With every approach that has been tried failing to cut through to a sceptical Scotland, what do we have now? We have a Government that is failing to govern. It is resorting to as much Britain-bashing as it can get away with, demonising Westminster at every turn, and it is using Government time and taxpayers' money to do it. The SNP is telling voters that they have to back independence for policies that it knows can be implemented now, and we know that because it is written in the SNP's own hand in its own manifesto.

Nationalism is the politics of division and that is what is being tried today. The Scottish Government is taking difficult and responsible UK Government decisions that have cut the deficit, created jobs, held interest rates low, and taken low-paid workers out of paying tax altogether, and dressing them up as another sack of Rome.

Meanwhile, the Scottish Government has been embarrassed into delivering coalition policies on school meals that the SNP abandoned years ago, and it is placing front and centre a pledge to revolutionise childcare that it could have implemented in any one of the almost seven years that it has been in power—but it chose not to because separation is more important than Scotland's working parents.

The Government's independence offer is a pig in a poke and the Scottish public will not be fooled.

I move amendment S4M-08707.1, to leave out from "deplores" to end and insert:

"welcomes the Scottish Government's late conversion to the cause of enhancing childcare; remains concerned that the Scottish Government refuses to use the existing powers of the parliament to address policy objectives; considers that the most effective way of reducing poverty is by getting more people into work, and commends the rise in employment and the fall in unemployment resulting from the policies of the UK Government."

14:52

Willie Rennie (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD): The speech that I had prepared for today has been slightly overtaken by events, and I am

delighted about that. I used to get a groan every time I stood up to ask the First Minister a question about nursery education, but there will be no groaning today when I raise the issue. Bob Doris and I have ploughed a lonely furrow for some time to persuade the First Minister of the benefits of nursery education for two-year-olds, and we have been proved right today.

I am pleased that the First Minister has listened to the pleas that we have made during that time because we know that the best educational investment that we can make is in two-year-olds. It can change their lives. We have heard from experts such as James Heckman about the impact that can be made. We can have a big impact on a child's development if we invest in them at that age.

The main issue that we are discussing today is poverty. If we are going to break the intergenerational cycle of poverty, we can make an effort to do something for people at later stages, such as work on youth unemployment, or we can try to improve people's life chances through working with schools, but the best impact that we can make is on people at the age of two. I am therefore pleased that the First Minister has listened. We have not quite achieved the 20 per cent entitlement that I wanted, but I do not want to be too begrudging about it. It is a step in the right direction and children will welcome it.

The First Minister: That entitlement figure for two-year-olds moves to 27 per cent next year, but in light of Mr Rennie's comments I will make a similar point—I am glad that he revised his speech, unlike his two counterparts—which is that the lesson from south of the border is also about implementation. It is about making sure that the capacity is there. I make the offer, given Mr Rennie's commitment to this policy, that we will work with him, because we have to make absolutely sure that these commitments—this year and next year—are delivered in the reality on the ground and not just in speeches in this chamber.

Willie Rennie: I am grateful for that generous offer, and I certainly will take the First Minister up on it because it is important to ensure that the policy is implemented effectively. I think that he slightly exaggerates what is happening down south, because I know that tens of thousands of two-year-olds are walking through the doors of nurseries and quite effectively receiving good-quality education.

I also welcome the commitment on free school meals because significant numbers of young children get caught out—they do not benefit from free school meals because, even though they are poor, they do not qualify for them. Therefore, the rounded policy that extends free school meals to all young children so that they get a good meal in

their stomach every single day that they are at school is a welcome development. Despite what some of the critics say, it will also help to change the life chances of young children. If we can ensure that children are properly fed when they are at school, that will make a significant difference.

Bob Doris (Glasgow) (SNP): Will the member give way?

Willie Rennie: I will give way to the very generous Bob Doris.

Bob Doris: I am afraid that I do not have a question about childcare—it is about free school meals. I am glad that the member welcomes that commitment. Does he agree that having universal free school meals is vital in order to remove the stigma of access to free school meals, as well as means testing?

Willie Rennie: It is important, but it is not the most important issue. Making sure, during difficult times, that we are putting money back in families' pockets is probably the priority, and making sure that kids have a good meal at school is an issue too.

I have to say that none of this stuff would be happening if Nick Clegg had not taken the step that he did last autumn, because the Scottish Government was not moving very fast on free school meals up to that point. However, as I am trying to be generous today, I do not want to labour that point.

What is at the centre of the Scottish Government's decisions is that they prove that this Parliament can deliver on poverty. They prove that devolution can work, which has not been the script from the SNP in recent weeks and certainly not post the white paper. The SNP said that none of this would be possible without independence, but today's announcements have shown that we can deliver things that can change people's lives and tackle poverty using the powers that this Parliament has. I hope that the SNP does not try to use the barrier of independence again on significant policies such as this in order to try to win votes in the referendum. It would be a retrograde step if the SNP were to do so.

I welcome today's announcement; I think that it is a step in the right direction. I will be pressing the First Minister to go further. I know that he wants to go further and I think that it is important to go further, but it is a welcome step on free school meals and on nursery education. I think that children across the country today will be welcoming this step. When they look back in 20 years' time, they will be glad that they had the chance of nursery education at an early stage, because it might just change their life chances—it

might remove them from poverty and it might make Scotland a better place.

I move amendment S4M-08707.2, to leave out from “deplores” to end and insert:

“recognises that free school meals help tackle child poverty and promote child welfare and educational attainment; further recognises that free school meals save families at least £330 per child per year; notes that free meals will be available to all reception and infant pupils in England from September 2014 and that the Scottish Government has received a Barnett consequential from this policy; further notes that, from September 2014, 40% of two-year-olds in England will be entitled to early education provision for 15 hours per week; notes that the Scottish Government has also received a Barnett consequential from this policy; is concerned that the Scottish Government has refused to match these early steps on childcare and has stated that it will not do so until it achieves a Yes vote in the independence referendum; believes that this position is neither sustainable nor in the interests of young people in Scotland and that the Scottish Government should embrace change, and looks forward to a positive future in Scotland where children growing up are not treated as political pawns and receive early education equipping them for a lifetime of achievement, where their parents benefit from the resulting increased flexibility allowing them to take up more employment, adding to the record numbers of people in Scotland currently in work, and all are supported by further income tax cuts for workers to add to the £700 already saved per person because of the action taken by the UK Government since 2010 with the combination of such policies lifting families out of hardship and poverty.”

14:58

George Adam (Paisley) (SNP): This is our first debate this year, this historic year, and it is our first debate about Scotland's future and the two futures that we might have.

When we talk about the future, we have to talk about our children and young people—they are our future; they make the difference. We do everything in our country to make it better for them. On that choice of two futures, the SNP is able to do some of that within the limited powers of devolution, but to go further—to make that big difference, to make that big leap to change their lives entirely—we have to have independence.

In my opinion, the UK status quo has the originality and relevance of the ageing rock band of the same name. It keeps playing the same 12-bar blues: the tune never changes and the words just change slightly, but nothing really changes in the UK.

Talking about ageing rockers, I was going to mention two of the Opposition leaders at this stage. I would like to say to the Conservative leader that, in 2007, there was a minority Government and, after 2007, a Tory Government devastated and cut this Parliament's budget. Things changed dramatically over that period. Ms Davidson looks confused, but that is her normal look.

The Labour Party says that we will stop at nothing to get what we want. That is true; we will stop at nothing. We will stop at nothing to build a better future for the young people of Scotland, to give them hope and the vision that they can be everything that they can be. We will stop at nothing to ensure that we do that. An independent Scotland will give us the opportunity to create that and build the type of dynamic country that we want.

With a yes vote, the Scottish Government's childcare plans will benefit 240,000 children. With a no vote, there will be welfare cuts from Westminster that will push 100,000 into poverty. That is the dividend of the union; that is what the union offers the young people of Scotland.

Ruth Davidson: Does the member recognise, in the same way that the Joseph Rowntree Foundation recognises, that currently we are experiencing the lowest level of children living in poverty since the mid-1980s? In fact, 1.1 million fewer children are in poverty, several years after the coalition Government came to power.

George Adam: That is part of the problem in this debate. The Tory leader is talking about facts and figures and we are talking about young people's lives—our young people's future. *[Laughter.]* The Tories are playing politics with the actual situation. They will not look towards the future and try to build the type of Scotland that we want here. That is a typical example of what they do. One hundred thousand children will end up in poverty because of their party's cuts.

The Child Poverty Action Group has estimated that the number of children in poverty in Scotland will increase by between 50,000 and 100,000 by 2020. That is with a no vote. A yes vote will make a difference and ensure that we move in the right direction. The only certainty of a no vote is that there will be more cuts.

We are talking about free school meals, which will make a major difference in a lot of the communities and families throughout the whole of Scotland, but yet again we have Opposition parties that seem to want to vote against it. They talk about one thing: they talk about how they want to help people and move things forward, but they will not deal with the issues. Free school meals will help to tackle child poverty and promote child welfare. Why would Opposition parties play politics with that, like they do with everything else? This is not some student debate in a university debating society; this is real people and real lives.

We can talk about Labour Party members and their idea of reality. As I keep saying, their reality is like an alternate universe. They do not seem to live in the real world; they just want to talk

constantly about the negativities and they do not want to work with us to build.

On spending commitments, Labour members have offered to spend on and purchase just about everything from the Glasgow airport rail link in Renfrewshire to bringing in childcare now—which we have done. They have asked us to do more, but they do not look at the costs. They do not look at how they would balance the books. That is the problem here: there is no point in being Opposition for Opposition's sake; they have to stand there and do something and take up the responsibility.

This Scottish Government has done that through the limited powers of devolution, and we have moved away from the Labour Party's fantasy politics. Its members constantly talk about how they are going to be able to do everything, but they never give us a costing. They never show us how they would pay for any of these situations.

Johann Lamont: We made the simple point that the Scottish Government could use the consequentials to deliver its commitment on childcare now. What is wrong with that? [*Interruption.*] It is your commitment.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (John Scott): Order.

George Adam: If we look at the numbers, we see that we need independence to move that forward. In order to move forward, we have to have the vision. What would the Opposition parties cut to do it now? What would they change that would be different? They seem to be offering everything and giving us the value of absolutely nothing. That is the problem with the Labour Party as well.

When Monday morning came around, I listened to "Good Morning Scotland" on the radio. At one point I turned round to my wife. I did not say, "I love you"; I said, "Why would anyone vote no? Why, in this historic year, would anyone possibly vote no?" I am not saying that the romance has gone out of our marriage; it is just that the two of us are very politically committed.

We need to be ambitious about our future. We need to enable people to get the type of life that they want. Give us the powers and we can debate Scotland's future and make a difference. Why would we tinker—

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

George Adam: I close by saying that Nelson Mandela said:

"There can be no keener revelation of a society's soul than the way in which it treats its children."

That is good enough for Nelson Mandela and it is good enough for Scotland's future.

15:05

Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab): The First Minister has announced more childcare, using the devolved powers and devolved resources that he has to pledge childcare for 15 per cent and then 27 per cent of two-year-olds. He has proved that we do not need independence to improve childcare.

The obvious question, therefore, is why the First Minister has not pledged and committed to childcare for 50 per cent of two-year-olds. Why has he not done that, if childcare is the big priority for him? Thousands of families across Scotland will be confused and perplexed by the SNP's motion today, and confused about what Alex Salmond's priorities really are. It is as if the white paper pledges and the childcare pledges did not happen.

Just six weeks ago, Alex Salmond and Nicola Sturgeon launched the SNP's white paper for separation. Childcare was the big idea and the number 1 priority, yet today—just six weeks and £300 million of Barnett consequentials later—it is decided that help for business and free school meals are more of a priority than childcare.

The First Minister has accepted that he can act on childcare, but he is not going far enough. I have said before, in calling for the Scottish Government to spend more money on childcare, that politics is about priorities. There are always lots of good policies that money can be spent on. When I said that, it seemed that we were in agreement that childcare is a priority because of the importance of the early years and the economic benefits that childcare brings as it helps people back into work.

Today, however, it is clear that childcare is no longer Alex Salmond's top priority. The Scottish Government is now opposing its own policy, which it could deliver now, from its white paper pledge six weeks ago. Then, the Scottish Government promised as the first stage of the plans in the white paper that 50 per cent of two-year-olds would get childcare in the first year of an independent Scotland—not 15 per cent and not 27 per cent, but 50 per cent. I have lodged amendments to the Children and Young People (Scotland) Bill that would ensure that exactly that happens—and not in 2016, but now.

The First Minister: Will the member give way?

Neil Bibby: I expect that the First Minister will support my amendments to the Children and Young People (Scotland) Bill. I would welcome it if he could confirm that he will do so.

The First Minister: Let me see if I can put this as simply as possible. It would cost £100 million a year to deliver that commitment. We have available in resource consequentials £60 million

this year and £74 million next year. Can the member tell me how he can get £60 million into £100 million and what he would cut, apart from the free school meals policy, which we now know Labour would cut first?

Neil Bibby: There is no need to cut anything. The First Minister was given £300 million in Barnett consequentials, so he has the money to spend. *[Interruption.]*

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Can we have order, please?

Neil Bibby: The Government should extend childcare now to 50 per cent—not 15 per cent—of two-year-olds and pay for it from the Barnett consequentials of £300 million that we will receive over the next two years. That is what we called for when the announcement was first made, and it is what we are calling for again this afternoon in Johann Lamont's amendment.

The question will be put at decision time. Is the SNP going to vote against the first stage of its own childcare policy of six weeks ago? I know that the SNP does not like the Labour Party much, so I am never optimistic about receiving its support, but to vote against its own childcare policy will surely show how determined the First Minister is to put his referendum before supporting families with childcare.

The reality is that the Scottish Government and the Scottish Parliament have the powers and resources to increase childcare now. The one thing that they do not have is excuses. Parents have been badly let down by the SNP's inaction time and again over the past six and a half years. The Scottish Government has chosen to spend money on things other than childcare in the most recent budget and every other budget since 2007.

It is simple: if we want more childcare, we need to spend more money on it. The truth is, though, that the SNP will not deliver the first stage of its white paper plans now because it does not want to prove the point that is obvious to everyone—that it does not need to break up the UK to increase childcare and support for families. To suggest that it does is cynical politics at its worst, and it just goes to show that the SNP will say anything to get a vote for separation in the referendum.

Despite the recent hype, the truth is that families have received little help with childcare since the SNP came to power. Members should compare that with Labour's record in office of supporting families. Labour in Scotland delivered a childcare strategy within months of coming to power; child tax credits to supplement child benefit; and universal early-years education for three and four-year-olds—the very system that the SNP now wants to bolt hours on to. Labour raised the standard of and invested in out-of-school care,

and piloted nursery programmes for vulnerable two-year-olds, which the SNP scrapped when it first came to power.

In May last year it was Labour that brought to the chamber a debate and reached across party lines to call for a cross-party childcare commission to examine ways of improving childcare using existing powers. That idea was supported by all parties, but rejected by the SNP.

Among my constituents there is a family in the west of Scotland who have two children: one aged two and the other aged one. The dad works full time, but the mum cannot work during the week because of the cost of childcare. The SNP's plans for two-year-olds are needed now.

That family is just one of the many families that have been let down since 2007, and continue to be let down. During a cost-of-living crisis we should do everything possible with the resources that we have to save families money and to help people where possible to get back to work, and investment in childcare should be a priority. There are 60,000 two-year-olds in Scotland, and by rejecting our amendment the SNP Government will be costing more than 15,000 families £2,000 a year in childcare.

One other thing—

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

Neil Bibby: I will say one other thing to the First Minister. The family that I just mentioned are not voting to separate from the rest of the UK, because they simply do not believe that he is serious about improving childcare. It is no wonder that 64 per cent of parents believe that Alex Salmond should get on with implementing childcare proposals now and that only 22 per cent agree with him that the referendum should be put before families.

Affordable, quality and flexible childcare has always been a priority for Labour—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I am afraid that the member must close, please.

Neil Bibby: It seems that—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The member must close.

Neil Bibby: It seems that the SNP's priority during six years of inaction and six weeks of hype—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Close now, please, Mr Bibby.

Neil Bibby: It is time that the SNP Government stopped putting the referendum before Scottish families.

15:11

Christina McKelvie (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP): The Scottish Government recognises that Scotland's future lies ultimately in the children of today and future generations still to come. That is not rocket science, and yet I sometimes sense that some of my colleagues on the opposite side of the chamber do not quite believe the truth of that statement. Our independence is not some kind of end in itself, but the opening of a door to a better future for forthcoming generations.

Although I thank Willie Rennie for a thoughtful speech, I tell him that independence is not a barrier but a gateway. As we make the journey towards that gateway and the referendum, we are presenting to Scotland's voters a choice of two futures and the concrete realities of an independent Scotland. We have learned from our experiences of being subjected to laws that we did not support by Governments that we did not elect. I remind Johann Lamont who it was who employed Lord Freud to bring about his welfare reforms.

The new Scotland will be accountable to the people who elect its Government. Whatever that Government's colour or political persuasion, it will need to do something that Westminster can never do: create policies that respond to the needs of the people of Scotland. That is not rocket science.

The Scottish Government operates on that premise already, as far as it can given the current constraints on budgets and decision making. Really good provision of early learning and childcare is a hallmark of some of the most advanced and successful countries in the world. The announcements today on childcare and school meals take us ever closer to the dream of the common weal. Those policies not only benefit the children themselves, but provide a key support to participation in the labour market, particularly for women.

Denmark has excellent childcare provision, and 79 per cent of mothers with children under six are working, whereas in the UK the comparable figure is approximately 59 per cent. Of mothers who cite childcare as a barrier to working full time, more than 70 per cent say that it is because of the costs.

It is small wonder, then, that, as the Deputy First Minister recently noted, parents in Scotland spend approximately 27 per cent of household income on childcare, in comparison with the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development average of 12 per cent.

The Scottish women's budget working group is led by Ailsa McKay, professor of economics at Glasgow Caledonian University. Professor McKay is acutely aware that our current place and time is

opening new and exciting doors—I point out to Willie Rennie that it is a gateway.

The group has grasped the relationship between economic growth and equality of opportunity, and its submissions have made a real impact on budget planning and policy. Professor McKay knows that there is significant inequality in Scotland in spite of the efforts that we have already made. Choices in higher and modern apprenticeships, and various types of occupational stereotypes, have worked against women. In the same way, welfare changes such as the bedroom tax work disproportionately against women because they are more likely than men to make use of public services of every kind.

Gendered occupational segregation continues, as we know. It is long past time we bust the myth—very few occupations need to be gender specific. Our changes to childcare will allow more women to recognise and fulfil their ambitions. That in turn means that they will contribute more to the overall Scottish economy and help to create new jobs in the process.

Cuts in welfare benefits impact disproportionately on women. Why? Because tradition dictates that they tend to be the carers, whether for elderly parents, children, including those with special needs, or a spouse who needs 24-hour care. Of course men take up those challenging roles as well, but not as frequently as women.

The Scottish Government has invested £68 million to try to mitigate the impact of these so-called reforms—brought in by Lord Freud, employed by the Labour Party—and to provide support and protection for the most vulnerable in our communities, including through a £33 million Scottish welfare fund, a council tax reduction scheme, support in relation to housing benefit reform and third sector investment to build the capacity of communities and voluntary organisations to respond to the impact of these reforms.

There is a great deal more to be done. In an independent Scotland, we can do it; under Westminster rule, we cannot. It is as simple as that. If we want to see a gender-friendly, balanced economy that encourages everyone's talents outside fixed stereotypes, we must vote yes.

Let me make a wee comment on universalism. I believe that Johann Lamont does believe in supporting universalism: universal Tory rule at Westminster; universal austerity; and, under a future Labour Government, as detailed by the shadow Cabinet, universal welfare reform—but maybe that is only an excuse to get Tory votes.

If we want to see a fundamental fairness underlying everything that we do, not only

economically but socially and in education and career structures, this is our chance to change the assumptions that have governed us for so long.

Let us be that shining light towards a new enlightenment. Let us show the world that Scotland can and will again lead the way—the way of the common weal.

15:17

Malcolm Chisholm (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (Lab): I am genuinely puzzled by the Scottish Government's approach to free school meals, as I indicated in my intervention on the First Minister. Progress on this since 2007 has been slower than glacial. Looking to the future, the 600 pages of the white paper contain not one mention of free school meals, although everything else is promised in an independent Scotland.

Our view is that free school meals are a valuable policy but not the top priority. Maybe that was the SNP's position until today.

The First Minister: Will the member give way?

Malcolm Chisholm: In a moment.

It seems that the Scottish Government does not want to be outdone by the UK Government. I had better give way to the First Minister as he may have found a reference in the white paper.

The First Minister: I was puzzled by the comment when Malcolm Chisholm first made it, because the mention of free school meals that he is looking for is on page 159 of the white paper.

Malcolm Chisholm: I will check that afterwards. I did actually get past page 159 over Christmas, but I obviously missed the reference, so I apologise to the First Minister.

As I indicated, perhaps the SNP does not want to be outdone by the UK Government. On that basis, it should also be worried about childcare—and not just what the UK Government is doing on childcare for two-year-olds, but what the Labour Party promised at its conference in September, which we should remember because it bears a very strong resemblance to what appeared in the SNP's white paper more than two months later. Labour made commitments in September on two to five-year-olds and, crucially, also on after-school care, which is not an issue that the SNP has prioritised in its white paper.

With a Labour victory in 2015 those childcare policies will be delivered. We would also deliver them if we took over here in 2016, so those advances can be made without independence.

I regret the overpoliticisation of childcare as part of the referendum debate. I have been a member of the early years task force. I pay tribute to the

commitment of Aileen Campbell and her predecessor Angela Constance to early years and childcare and I pay tribute to Harry Burns, the best chief medical officer Scotland has ever had.

However, to be honest, the task force has been beset by two problems. One is that there has never been the prioritisation of resources to enable the early years to really get to the top of the political agenda. Secondly, childcare for two-year-olds has been a particular problem.

I welcome what has been announced today. Clearly the very heavy pressure that we have applied for a number of weeks has had some effect. That is the way that politics works; I do not complain about it. If we had not pushed on two-year-olds, we would not have had the announcement today, which I welcome. However, the reality is that we must still have the suspicion that, for the First Minister, childcare is primarily of interest for political reasons.

Why do I say that? When have we heard the First Minister making a speech about childcare in 27 years in politics? That is why Johann Lamont and I get not just a little bit suspicious but a little bit annoyed. Johann Lamont has talked about and prioritised childcare for more than 27 years, and I have certainly done so for 22 years, since it was the main topic of my maiden speech in Parliament in 1992. I emphasised the economic and anti-poverty importance of comprehensive childcare policies.

That is why we object to the way in which childcare is being used to score referendum political points—and not very good political points at that. Why do I say that? The fundamental argument in the white paper, and up until today the fundamental reason why we could not really have the progress that we want on childcare, is that the money to pay for it will have to come from tax receipts staying here.

The Minister for Children and Young People (Aileen Campbell): I wonder whether the member has read the article that Bronwen Cohen wrote for *The Scotsman*. Considering the ambition that we set out in the white paper for 1,140 hours of childcare from age one to five, she said:

"So could more be done now? And if Scotland's votes No next year could it happen?"

My examination this year of Scotland's post-devolution experience in ECEC suggests it would be hard. Problems arise from split responsibilities and policies. So it is pertinent to ask Better Together how these issues might be overcome, short of independence".

She understands the difficulties in expanding childcare that we have under devolution. Will the member take on board what she says?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I will give Mr Chisholm a little extra time.

Malcolm Chisholm: I have read what Bronwen Cohen said on the matter, but I have, of course, already referred to what the Labour Government is committed to in 2015 and what we would be committed to in 2016, so I have already answered that point.

I see four problems with the approach in the white paper. First, even although tax receipts would, of course, be beneficial, up-front money is still needed to start the policy off. The white paper famously says that, in the first budget after independence, 600 hours of childcare would be provided to around half of Scotland's two-year-olds. That is exactly what we are proposing now. That exactly mirrors the first budget promise of the SNP.

Secondly, contrary to what the motion says, the Scottish Government is not proposing the Swedish model. I cannot make a long speech about that now, but the approach will not produce the employment benefits that the Swedish model would produce, although it would produce some employment benefits. *[Interruption.]* I do not have time to give way as I am in my final minute.

The Government's approach is mainly, I think, a child development policy, which I support, but it would not produce the employment benefits of the Swedish model, in which far more comprehensive childcare is provided.

Thirdly, the attitude towards tax receipts makes a nonsense of what is called the purpose of the Scottish Government: economic growth. If we are saying, "Well, we can't do things because the tax receipts go to London," how can economic growth be the primary purpose of the Scottish Government?

The last point that I want to make is the most important. The argument in the white paper is an argument for more fiscal devolution, not independence. If we have more fiscal devolution, even if it is just all income tax staying in Scotland, the benefits of increased employment will come to the Scottish Parliament and we will have those economic advantages without the economic disadvantages of independence, which would, of course, make the implementation of the up-front childcare costs in 2016 difficult, if not impossible.

So do this now. It can be done with the money that the Government has. Show that you are really committed to childcare rather than just using it for political posturing and referendum point scoring.

15:23

Gordon MacDonald (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP): The austerity cuts that are being imposed by Westminster threaten much of the progress that has been made in Scotland over recent years in

tackling social mobility and child poverty. The UK Government's social mobility and child poverty commission, which is chaired by the Labour MP Alan Milburn, highlights the progress that has been made in Scotland in its "State of the Nation 2013: social mobility and child poverty in Great Britain" report, which was published in October 2013. An appendix to chapter 3 on "The child poverty strategy for Scotland" opens with the words:

"Scotland has the lowest levels of child poverty of any country in the United Kingdom ... This is a significant achievement. Child poverty in Scotland has halved in the last 15 years. Progress in Scotland has been more rapid than in any other area of the UK".

It highlights that, against the measures that are contained in the Child Poverty Act 2010, child poverty has fallen over the past five years and says:

"Relative child poverty"

in Scotland

"has decreased from 21 per cent in 2006/07 to ...15 per cent in 2011/12"

and that

"Absolute child poverty has decreased from 21 per cent in 2006/07 to ...16 per cent in 2011/12."

The report concludes:

"The Commission welcomes much of Scotland's approach to child poverty, and especially the emphasis on early years."

Ruth Davidson: Will the member give way?

Gordon MacDonald: No, thanks.

Despite the commission identifying

"several areas where other countries in the United Kingdom could learn from Scotland's experience",

we find that George Osborne is planning to continue the austerity measures by imposing further cuts of £25 billion across the UK, of which £12 billion relate to welfare.

Scotland's share of the welfare cut will be around £1 billion, hitting the poorest in our society, many of whom are hard-working families on low wages. The Child Poverty Action Group has estimated that Scotland's child poverty rate will increase by up to 100,000 by 2020 as a result of the UK Government's tax and benefit policies.

As the fiscal commission working group's report on Scotland's macroeconomic framework acknowledges,

"Under the current constitutional arrangements ... this is an area of responsibility where the opportunities for the Scottish Parliament and Government to adopt a different approach are particularly limited."

The Scottish Government has no power to mitigate the changes and, left unchallenged, they

will undo most of the progress made in recent years to reduce child poverty.

Since the SNP came to power, we have increased free nursery provision by 20 per cent, and the commitment to a minimum of 600 hours contained in the Children and Young People (Scotland) Bill will increase free nursery provision by 45 per cent compared with 2007, ensuring that children have the best start in life and are more likely to reach their potential at school.

The Scottish Government's spending on school meals has increased by 51 per cent since Labour and the Lib Dems were in power, with thousands more pupils registered for free school meals. Those measures, along with freezing the council tax and introducing free prescriptions, have reduced the pressure on household budgets, helping to tackle child poverty.

The progress achieved in helping the poorest in society is under threat from the UK Government's austerity measures. That is happening in Scotland, a country that has the potential to be the 8th wealthiest OECD country in terms of gross domestic product per head.

A recent YouGov poll carried out in September 2013 found that when asked

"Which Government should be responsible for deciding welfare and benefits policy for Scotland?",

56 per cent of people preferred Holyrood and 36 per cent Westminster. For that to happen, people will need to vote yes this September.

With independence, the Scottish Government can continue the progress that it has achieved so far in reducing child poverty by transforming childcare. The savings from not having to maintain Trident nuclear weapons, along with the extra tax revenues generated by women being free to return to work, would allow a phased increase in childcare to match the best available in Europe.

In Scotland there are 163,000 lone parents with 295,000 children, which equates to a quarter of all families. According to One Parent Families Scotland, the biggest issue affecting lone-parent families is poverty. A Scottish Government in an independent Scotland could provide 30 hours a week of childcare for 38 weeks a year, bringing nursery provision broadly in line with primary school hours. That would help to support many lone-parent families who are struggling in poverty back into work.

The long-term effect of the policy of providing European levels of childcare in an independent Scotland would be better-off families, as a result of increased income from employment; families would also save on childcare costs. The Scottish Government would also benefit as taxation would increase as a result of increased employment;

alongside, there would be a drop in benefit costs. The economy would be stimulated by families' increased spend on goods and services, providing more employment opportunities. However, that can happen only if we are independent and able to retain and reinvest the additional tax revenue in Scotland. George Osborne has indicated his intention to continue to cut Scotland's budget.

Those of us concerned with child poverty face a choice of two futures: the Scottish Government's childcare plans, which will benefit 240,000 children if we vote yes; or a no vote, which will deliver welfare cuts from Westminster, pushing up to 100,000 Scottish children into poverty. For the sake of my children and future generations, I know which one I will choose.

15:29

Annabelle Ewing (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP): I welcome the First Minister's announcements on free meals for schoolchildren from primary 1 to 3 and enhanced childcare provision for two-year-olds. The announcements fit well with the preventative spend agenda and I am sure will be welcomed by families and communities throughout Scotland, even if they are not welcomed by the Labour Party.

Of course, there are so few Labour members in the chamber today—I think that about nine members are here—that it is obvious that they are not interested in discussing how we improve our country. Labour members could not even be bothered to stay in the chamber for the debate.

I am pleased to have been called to speak in this important and revealing debate on Scotland's future. It is always interesting to observe politicians squirming around trying to square a circle. In the context of the Scotland Act, there can be no greater conceit than to suggest that the devolution of power in a particular policy area is the end of the story without considering to what extent the concomitant financial powers are in place to implement any development and enhancement of the policy.

Ruth Davidson: How does the member square the circle whereby a Scandinavian-style revolution in childcare was somehow possible under devolution, according to the 2007 manifesto, but in a referendum year suddenly can be delivered only by independence?

Annabelle Ewing: There is not much point in debating the issue with someone who thinks that Scottish taxpayers' hard-earned money is Westminster's money. It is clear that only if we control our resources can we transform our country and society in the ways that we have outlined.

Drew Smith (Glasgow) (Lab): Will the member give way?

Annabelle Ewing: I am sorry. I want to make a wee bit of progress.

It is clear from the debate that the circle cannot be squared under the current constitutional set-up of devolution. There is a ceiling on what this Parliament can do to build a better Scotland, and today's debate has shown that the no parties are content to live with that restriction on what we can do, whereas members who advocate a yes vote do not accept that such a restriction should be in place and have a vision of the kind of society that we could have if we had the powers of a normal, independent country.

That practical vision of what we could do with independence has at its heart, quite rightly, better opportunities for women to get into the workplace, through our transformational childcare proposals. It is beyond doubt that affordable childcare is the key obstacle for thousands of women who want to get into the workplace. How exciting it is that we can now see a day in Scotland when we can achieve hitherto only dreamed-of levels of childcare, which will be equivalent in hours to primary school provision. What a transformation that will bring to the lives of thousands of women throughout Scotland, to their families and communities and to the Scottish economy.

How do we get there? That is the key question before us. The answer is that only by voting yes in the independence referendum in September can we effect such transformational change to our country and our society. Without the control over all our resources that only a yes vote will bring, we are simply not in a position to secure the long-term sustainability of such a policy, far less ensure that it can be promoted without making massive cuts to spending elsewhere. We have heard nothing today about where those cuts might be made. If Mr Smith wants to intervene to explain where Labour would find some £700 million without cutting Scotland's budget, we will be pleased to hear from him.

Drew Smith: Annabelle Ewing said that there is no point in having policy control or policy agreement on childcare if we do not have the finances available to deliver it. What is her view of the Scottish Government's agreeing with councils in 2008 that they could introduce free school meals and then providing no money for councils to do so, with the consequence that seven years followed without progress on the policy?

Annabelle Ewing: It is a pity that Mr Smith did not take the opportunity to answer the key question, which was about where Labour would find some £700 million to implement a transformational change in childcare, as Labour

members call on the Scottish Government to do. Labour members have no answer to that question and do not want to answer it, and their credibility on the argument must be seen in that light.

In Scotland we must deal with the damnable but inevitable outcome of our having control over only a limited part of our finances, which is the inherent limitation of the devolution settlement. Even when the provisions of the Scotland Act 2012 come into force, we will still have control over only a fraction of our tax revenue—some 15 per cent, which will amount to a princely sum.

Why should we not have control over 100 per cent of our tax revenues? Why do the no parties prefer to thwart the ambitions that the people of Scotland rightly have for their country instead of challenging the limitations on what this Parliament can do? For how long should the people of Scotland—that is, everyone who lives and works in our country—put up with that second-best approach to their interests?

On 18 September, Scotland has a choice of two futures. We can vote yes to taking control of our vast wealth and making it work for the benefit of this country by, for example, empowering tens of thousands of women to get into the workplace through our proposed revolution in childcare provision; or we can vote no and see such a vision wither on the vine under continued Westminster rule, with austerity and billions of pounds-worth of cuts to Scotland's budget and the removal of the safety net that our welfare system embodies. What a nightmare scenario for Scotland. The only way for Scotland to escape that fate is to vote yes on 18 September this year.

15:35

Alex Johnstone (North East Scotland) (Con): I consider it a privilege to be allowed to speak immediately after Annabelle Ewing's outline of a nightmare scenario. Perhaps it is appropriate.

The First Minister opened this debate by doing what he always does and never missing an opportunity to talk down the United Kingdom. None of all that has been achieved in the past three to four years is worthy of comment—unless, of course, the speaker is an SNP backbencher who wants to claim credit for everything that has happened and treat it in a positive sense. Nevertheless, we have had a good, old-fashioned debate: the one that we usually have in Scotland, in which one side argues that we should spend more money on this and the other side argues that we should spend more money on that. The universal truth seems to be that a thing can be properly addressed only if we spend a great deal more money on it. Let me be the first in this

debate to say that that is not necessarily true. I want to talk a bit about why that is the case.

There is an important person at the centre of this debate in the UK. That man is Iain Duncan Smith—ably assisted, it must be said, by former Labour minister Frank Field, who is extremely influential in terms of policy and must be mentioned in the same breath. Some years ago—almost 10 years ago, in the period immediately after he ceased to be the leader of the Conservative Party while in Opposition—Iain Duncan Smith took it upon himself to consider the causes of welfare need in the UK. He found himself making the journey to Easterhouse in Scotland. Many have joked—perhaps only partially—that he underwent a conversion on the road to Easterhouse. What Iain Duncan Smith discovered in Easterhouse was that the problem that we have with poverty in this country is a problem with not only poverty, but dependency.

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP): Will the member give way?

Alex Johnstone: No, thank you.

As a result of successive Governments working hard to promote the welfare state, ever since the second world war, we have made the mistake of thinking that the correct way in which to deal with poverty is to pour more money into the areas in which poverty can be observed. The problem is that we have created a culture and a cycle of dependency.

Joan McAlpine (South Scotland) (SNP): Will the member give way?

Alex Johnstone: No, thank you.

That cycle of dependency is the biggest single challenge in terms of welfare provision that we see in front of us. Unless we are prepared to tackle the cycle of dependency, we will not achieve our objective. That is why I return to what I said about Iain Duncan Smith.

Iain Duncan Smith is a revolutionary. Frank Field is also a revolutionary, with regard to how he thinks about these issues. Iain Duncan Smith has set in place a vision of our welfare state that has the capacity to reverse the cycle of dependency and begin to bring people out of that difficult, depressed situation in which they find themselves.

The review of welfare will benefit children. The key elements that have been placed before us today for discussion are the proposal for improved childcare provision and—in the past few hours—the issue of free school meals for children in P1 to P3. Those are the kinds of measures that the Conservative and Liberal Democrat coalition Government in the south has introduced specifically to begin to reverse that cycle of dependency. Quite wisely, they have been copied

by the Government here in Scotland and they will benefit us significantly. Children will be in the front line of reversing that cycle of dependency and we need to be in a position to provide that support.

Yet, sadly, the Scottish Government has consistently exposed itself as believing that the more money it puts towards those areas and individuals that are in the greatest poverty, the greater the success that it can reap. Concern about what that policy actually achieves seems to be the furthest thing from its mind. The Government has refused to understand the need for welfare reform. Among the other political parties—perhaps not in Scotland, but certainly in other parts of the United Kingdom—Labour understands the need for welfare reform and the actions in government of the coalition parties indicate that they understand the need for welfare reform. Here in Scotland, once upon a time, even the SNP appeared to understand the need for welfare reform. However, in 2014—the year in which we will have the referendum on Scottish independence—the SNP suddenly no longer believes in welfare reform. It believes that a long-term commitment to continue pouring money into the old projects and ideas at an even greater pace is the only way in which it can achieve its objective. If its objective is simply independence, perhaps that is the case.

In this week, more than at any time in the past, we in this chamber need to stop for a moment, think about the objectives that Iain Duncan Smith is trying to pursue and understand that he is correct and has identified the right way forward. We must recognise that, for us in Scotland to pursue that ideal, the only option is to reject Scottish independence.

15:42

Stewart Maxwell (West Scotland) (SNP): The speech that we have just heard was based on the Victorian premise of the undeserving poor and a belief that the only way to motivate the poor in this country is to make them poorer. It was an absolutely shocking speech and that is a shocking ideology that I thought we had got rid of.

Like other members on the SNP benches, I welcome the First Minister's announcement that we will introduce free school meals for all children in P1 to P3—that is a fantastic announcement. I particularly welcome the expansion of childcare for two-year-olds from August 2014 and the further expansion that is planned for August 2015. That is a great step forward that I am sure will be welcomed by families throughout the country.

It is a well-known fact that the first years of a child's life are vital to its overall development and that the ground that is lost in the first five years of

life is never fully made up. Dr Herczog from the National Institute of Family and Social Policy in Hungary, who is also the president of Eurochild, has said:

“Research shows that in the long run, it is beneficial for children to spend time with well-trained professionals and with other children”.

She went on to say that access to childcare facilities is even more important for children from vulnerable and socially excluded households.

“Investing in the first three years of a child’s life has significant long-term benefits in terms of their overall life perspective, engagement in criminal activity, substance abuse and their own parenting skills”.

The effective pre-school and primary education study, which was led by Professor Edward Melhuish at the University of London, found that pre-school attendance improved all children’s cognitive development and aspects of social behaviour such as independence, concentration and co-operation. Childcare is good for children and the more deprived that a child is, the more vital childcare is to their life chances. Childcare is also good for parents, particularly mothers, and for families. With affordable childcare, a mother can go out to work and the extra income can be vital in lifting an entire family out of poverty. The extra taxes that are then paid by the family benefit the economy and the country; therefore, affordable, high-quality childcare is good for us all. There are no losers—everyone benefits from free childcare.

In Norway, every child between the ages of one and six has a statutory right to a kindergarten place up to a maximum cost of £200 a month, and nearly 75 per cent of adult women work. Norway is ranked number 1 in the world for productivity measured by GDP per total hours worked according to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. Dr Krashinsky, an economist at the University of Toronto, has stated that

“Norway’s high productivity flows directly out of their progressive social policies”.

He said:

“What we found was a general pay-off of about two dollars of benefits for every dollar spent on subsidized child care, and those were very conservative numbers.”

Sadly, the UK lags behind some other countries in the number of mothers with children under the age of six who work. In Denmark, as we have heard, the figure is 79 per cent, whereas in the UK only around 59 per cent of mothers work. More than 70 per cent of those mothers who do not have childcare provision say that it is the cost of childcare that is holding them back. When we think that parents in Scotland spend 27 per cent of their household income on childcare, we realise what a barrier that is for many parents. In comparison, the

OECD average spend on childcare is only around 12 per cent of household income.

However, the Scottish Government has made progress. In 2007, three and four-year-olds in Scotland were entitled to 412.5 hours of free nursery education per annum. Today, three and four-year-olds are entitled to 475 hours of provision per annum and, of course, in August of this year, that will rise to 600 hours per annum for three and four-year-olds and the most vulnerable two-year-olds. Today’s announcement will expand that provision to 15 per cent of two-year-olds this year and to 27 per cent in 2015. That represents real progress under an SNP Government.

Johann Lamont: I agree strongly with the member’s view that childcare helps vulnerable families above all others and that it is particularly important from the point of view of employment. Therefore, can he explain why his party’s choice is to spend money on free school meals—which, by definition, will not go to the poorest and most vulnerable children in our communities—rather than on its commitment to free nursery provision for 50 per cent of vulnerable two-year-olds? I would like to get an explanation of why that choice has been made.

Stewart Maxwell: It is important to understand that we are investing not just in childcare. In her speech, Johann Lamont seemed to miss completely the announcement on the expansion of childcare in this country under the devolved settlement, which was made alongside the announcement on the decision to invest in raising children and families out of poverty through the free school meals programme. We are doing both. We are helping to lift young families out of poverty and we are investing in childcare for three and four-year-olds and vulnerable two-year-olds, which is a tremendous thing to do.

I would have some respect for the Labour Party’s position if one Labour member could say where the £700 million that would be required to achieve the policy would come from under devolution. Not one Labour member will answer the question about where that £700 million would come from.

I am delighted that, in the white paper, the Scottish Government has set out very detailed assurances about a better future.

Kezia Dugdale (Lothian) (Lab) rose—

Stewart Maxwell: If Kezia Dugdale is going to explain where the £700 million would come from—

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

Stewart Maxwell: I would have been delighted to hear where the £700 million would come from, but we know that we would not get an answer.

The Scottish Government's positive vision for Scotland's children and families will help us all. Children will get the good start to which every child is entitled, their parents will be freed up to find work and the work will be more financially attractive without crippling childcare costs. The economy will be boosted by the extra spending power and the Government will receive increased tax revenues.

The commitments to childcare in an independent Scotland have been costed at £700 million, but if the number of women in work increased to Swedish levels—a rise of 6 per cent—£700 million of extra tax revenues would be generated, which would be enough to cover the costs of the increase in childcare.

By giving all children in Scotland the benefits of 1,140 hours of childcare, we will reap the benefits, not just immediately but forever, and put Scotland on an upward spiral. Our promises show that an independent Scotland would be optimistic and forward thinking. Our children, our families and our communities need the kind of future that only independence can bring.

15:48

Lewis Macdonald (North East Scotland) (Lab): This debate highlights the choices that are to be made on how best to support children and families and, as we have heard, it reflects the wider political debate on Scotland's future.

The SNP has chosen to argue—today and in launching the white paper six weeks ago—that it is unable to deliver all its ambitions on childcare unless people in Scotland first vote for independence. Of course, the present Scottish Government has had responsibility for this policy area since it was first elected nearly seven years ago. As we have heard, it has taken the SNP all of those seven years to begin to deliver on the promises that it made on childcare while in opposition.

Today, the Government has offered to do a little bit more. As Malcolm Chisholm said, that is great encouragement to all those who have pressed it to do more since it highlighted the issue when it launched its white paper. The Government's defence for not going further is that it does not have the money to do more than make incremental improvements to existing childcare provision and that it cannot reach all those in low-income families without having access to all the tax revenue from Scottish taxpayers. It is just as well that the Labour-led Executive in the first session of this devolved Parliament took a different approach, or there would be no existing childcare provision on which to build.

I served on the Education, Culture and Sport Committee in 2000 when MSPs passed the Standards in Scotland's Schools etc Bill and provided a statutory basis for childcare that is in essence the basis of the system that we have today. There was no question then of failing to act because women returning to work would not pay all their taxes directly to Scotland's devolved Government. The Scottish ministers in that Administration made a choice and found the resources to make it happen. It is open to ministers in this Administration to do the same. SNP ministers have the money to make a start with the Barnett consequential from money spent in England, but they choose to spend those consequential on other things instead.

There is of course a case to be made for extending free school meals. Again, in office, Labour made choices—for example, to fund free fruit in schools and to support breakfast clubs. I know from constituents in Aberdeen and the north-east what a difference access to a healthy breakfast can make to children from disadvantaged homes. I also know that for many families in my area providing a school lunch without charge will make no significant difference either to the household budget or to the nutritional status of the children. The issue here, though, is not whether free school meals or better childcare are good things in themselves—both clearly are—but what choices Governments make in using the resources that they have to hand.

Joan McAlpine: I am puzzled by the comparison between free school meals and breakfasts. The last time that I spoke to John Dickie from the Child Poverty Action Group, he told me that they had done an analysis that showed that the most vulnerable children were far more likely to benefit from free lunches than from breakfasts.

Lewis Macdonald: That is why it is a very good thing that the most vulnerable children have access to free lunches as well as to free breakfasts. It is precisely interventions with children in the poorest families that should be the priority of any Scottish Government, rather than extending benefits to those without the same need for them.

Scottish Governments can really make a difference using the powers and resources that they have, not least in the area of driving down child poverty—that is the issue that Joan McAlpine raised. I recently looked again at a study by the Institute of Fiscal Studies that was funded by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and published only a matter of weeks after the change of Government at Westminster in 2010. They used households below average income data, published after the election by the UK Department for Work and

Pensions, and took the difference in the cost of living among the various nations and regions of the UK into account.

Their findings provided very strong evidence of the success of a Labour-led Administration at Holyrood working in tune and in partnership with Labour Government policy at Westminster. Relative poverty fell almost everywhere over 10 years, but it fell twice as fast in Scotland as it did in the UK as a whole. By 2009, fewer people in Scotland than in London or in seven of the other 10 nations and regions of the UK were living in relative poverty. Scotland had the second-fastest fall in child poverty, and by 2009 the second-lowest level of child poverty in the UK. Scotland also had the second-fastest fall in pensioner poverty to reach the second-lowest level of pensioner poverty in real terms.

Of course, many of those changes have been set back by the austerity policies of the Tory-led UK Government over the past four years. Any Scottish Government would have to work even harder to reduce poverty for children, families or older people in these hard times. However, the issue today is what choices are most likely to produce a new phase of progressive reductions in relative and absolute poverty, and in poverty among children and pensioners. The SNP has chosen to follow the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats at Westminster in what it chooses to put at the top of its agenda—that is its choice. At the same time, the SNP wants voters to believe that its ambition is to transform childcare but that it is somehow held back by Scotland being part of the United Kingdom.

The truth is that serious investment in childcare does not have to wait. Ministers could choose to invest the consequentials today not only to make an immediate difference to many working families living in poverty, but to show that they are serious about their future plans. They could do so within Government spending rules and within the envelope of the consequentials that they have over the next two years. The white paper rehearsed the arguments for making a step change in childcare, arguments which were made by Labour ministers in the first session of this Parliament and which we on this side continue to support.

The challenge to SNP ministers is this: they have the means to make a step change in childcare and if they have the will, they can make it happen, whatever the result of the referendum in September. They should make it happen now.

15:54

Clare Adamson (Central Scotland) (SNP): It has been said this afternoon, but it bears constant

repetition, that Scotland has the opportunity this year to choose between two futures—two very different directions of travel. On the one hand, we are already the fourth most unequal country in the developed world, and the present Westminster Administration promises to take us further down the road of inequality, under Osborne's austerity Britain. On the other hand, independence offers us the powers to develop further our steps towards universalism, greater equality and a better future for our children. That future might look like what is enjoyed by children in Holland, Norway, Sweden and Denmark, as has been highlighted by my colleagues Christina McKelvie and Stewart Maxwell.

Scotland is a rich country and our children should share in that wealth. It is worth reminding ourselves of what the present inequality levels mean. I thought that Labour members might talk about their successes in tackling child poverty and I have not been disappointed. However, UNICEF produced a report in 2007 that put together 40 indicators of child wellbeing in rich countries and concluded that children in Britain fared less well than those in any other country, although those in the United States hardly did better. Improvements in child wellbeing in rich societies depend more on reductions in inequality than on further economic growth.

The 2007 UNICEF report card provided a comprehensive assessment of the lives and wellbeing of children and young people in 21 nations of the industrialised world. It attempted to measure and compare child wellbeing under six headings: material wellbeing, health and safety, education, peer and family relationships, behaviour and risks, and young people's subjective wellbeing. In all, it drew on 40 indicators of children's lives. The United Kingdom found itself in the bottom third of the rankings for five of the six dimensions that were reviewed. That is simply not good enough for Scotland's children.

I was perhaps surprised to hear the claim that the SNP has somehow come late to the debate and that the First Minister has not had a handle on it in the past. Maybe that is said because Labour does not want to remember some of the things that it did when it was in government. In March 2007, Gordon Brown delivered one of the harshest blows to the most vulnerable families and to women on low incomes in part-time work when he scrapped the 10p tax rate, which shifted the tax burden to the lower paid. That caused misery for low-paid workers, many of whom are women in part-time jobs. On the day of that budget, Alex Salmond immediately called that a tax con and highlighted how damaging it would be for women and low-paid workers.

George Adam asked us to remember when we talk about poverty and inequality that the lives of real children are involved. In 2013, Save the Children produced a briefing on the consequences for children in Scotland of growing up in poverty. It highlighted that they missed out on things that many other children take for granted—it said that they had to cut back on food, that 14 per cent of children who live in poverty said that they lacked a warm winter coat and that 19 per cent of them said that they were missing out on going on school trips. Such children are more than twice as likely as their better-off peers to suffer developmental difficulties as they reach school age and they are less likely to reach their potential at school. By three years old, children from deprived backgrounds are already nine months behind the average development and school readiness. By primary 7, the gap in reading attainment levels between pupils who live in poverty and their peers is 22 per cent, and the attainment gap in mathematics is 15 per cent.

Save the Children also talked about health inequalities for children in poor families. Children who live in low-income households are nearly three times more likely to suffer mental health problems, and ill health during childhood has long-term consequences. As we know, a child who is born in Lenzie North, which is a more affluent area of Glasgow, can expect to live 28 years longer than a child who is born in the Calton. Poverty has a lifelong detrimental effect on Scotland's children.

Kezia Dugdale: Will the member give way?

Clare Adamson: Not at the moment, sorry.

That is why I am delighted that the Government has announced today that children in primary 1 to primary 3 will receive free school meals—a saving of, on average, £330 per child for hard-working Scottish families. That will be welcomed by the Scottish free school meals campaign, which includes organisations such as the EIS, Shelter Scotland and Children 1st. In its briefing for this debate, the campaign talked about the importance of universal benefits and services. The Jimmy Reid Foundation makes the case for universalism when it says:

“If all of the available data is pulled together and the conclusions drawn, the historical and contemporary evidence strongly suggests that the appropriate response to austerity is to increase universal provision and so stimulate economic activity, equalise damaging wealth disparity and improve both government and wider economic efficiency”.

I wish that the Labour Party was on the same page as the EIS, Children 1st and the Jimmy Reid Foundation in this debate.

16:01

Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): On poverty and inequality, it is worth saying from the outset that no political party and neither side in the referendum campaign has a monopoly on wisdom and certainly not a monopoly on concern. Although Malcolm Chisholm and I have, so far, reached different conclusions about how we might cast our votes in September, his speech was one of the most substantial and high quality that we have heard today. If we were looking only at poverty, inequality and childcare, I might agree with him about the merits of *devo max*. I hope that, in the end, he agrees that we are discussing the referendum in the context of the issues covered in the debate, as well as others, such as Trident, on which I know his concerns are similar to mine.

Often, it is Governments that appear to claim such monopolies on wisdom or concern. Sadly, today, it was the leader of the main Opposition party who appeared unwilling to accept that her opponents have a shred of genuine concern about issues such as poverty and inequality. I have areas of common ground and areas of disagreement with Johann Lamont, just as I do with the First Minister. Sadly, there is a falsehood in our current political mode: very often, the parties on different sides of the independence campaign find it hard to acknowledge their common ground.

The First Minister and I agree about how we will cast our votes on 18 September, but we do not always agree on the reasons. After dealing with Gavin Brown on real-terms spending versus absolute numbers, the First Minister went on to talk up his ambition for a competitive tax environment in an independent Scotland. One of the principal means by which corporations have forced Governments around the world to accept the level of taxation that those wealthy businesses choose to pay is tax competition. Governments feel that the only alternative is to watch those businesses disappear to lower tax environments.

I will be voting yes in September this year because I want to challenge that, not because I want to comply with it more effectively. Like the First Minister, I, too, want to design tax, welfare and public service policies in a coherent way that meets the needs of Scotland's people. We will be unable to achieve that if we design tax policies to serve corporate interests instead.

Neil Findlay (Lothian) (Lab): Will Mr Harvie confirm that none of the countries used as exemplars of social progress, such as those in Scandinavia, has the tax competition policy that is being pursued by the Scottish Government?

Patrick Harvie: Absolutely. Mr Findlay and I have agreed on such aspects on many occasions and will continue to do so. I believe that

independence opens the door to allow a challenge to the kind of tax competition that successive UK Governments and the current Scottish Government continue to accept. Unless we open that door, we will not have the ability to challenge it—never mind the reality.

On free school meals and the Scottish Government's announcement today, I welcome the steps in that direction. I have one question, however, and I hope that it can be dealt with in the closing speeches. Is the Scottish Government's position now restricted to primary 1 to primary 3 for financial reasons only? Alternatively, is the Government saying that it wishes to see the principle of universal free school meals applied throughout young people's school careers? If it is right for those in primary 3, why is it wrong for those in primary 4? Is it only because of financial constraints that we have gone as far as we can go at the moment, or is the Government seeking a long-term move towards universal free school meals for all children?

Malcolm Chisholm: I thank the member for giving way. I just want to make a clarification. The First Minister referred to page 159 of the white paper and implied an extension of free school meals. However, page 159 says:

"we also plan to maintain access to passported benefits, such as free school meals".

I hope that the First Minister will apologise before the end of the debate.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Elaine Smith): I can give Patrick Harvie a little bit of extra time.

Patrick Harvie: I am sure that Mr Chisholm does not expect me to be held accountable for what the First Minister might or might not apologise for, but I apologise that I have not yet memorised page 159 of the white paper.

Some Opposition voices are right to point out that childcare is a devolved policy area and that any Scottish Government since 1999 could have done more. That is true, but power devolved always meant power retained. At present, and in future if Scotland remains part of the UK, we can increase childcare provision only by cutting something else. Despite Mr Bibby's comments, I do not remember a Labour finance minister during the eight years of the Labour-Liberal coalition taking Barnett consequentialities and using them to make a long-term commitment to new on-going costs as a flagship policy. It would not have been responsible for any Government to do that under devolution. Childcare could be improved as a matter of social policy under devolution, but the coherence of social and economic policy, including tax and welfare, as the First Minister suggested, needs a yes vote.

I have one final comment because there is one question about Scotland's future that I regard as just as important as—and perhaps even more important than—the outcome in September. Can our politics move beyond the tribal hostility that too often characterises our debates? From 19 September onwards, every one of us, winners and losers alike, will have the responsibility of accepting the result with humility and of finding a degree of mutual respect in future that might be hard to find during the heat of the campaign. We will have to find it if we are going to serve the interests of Scotland, whichever result the people of Scotland deliver.

16:08

Neil Findlay (Lothian) (Lab): Presiding Officer,

"It's class warfare. My class is winning, but they shouldn't be."

Those are not my words but the words of Warren Buffett, one of the world's most successful investors. He described how the finance houses, the banks and the powerful elites turned a global financial crisis that they created into a war on the poor and the weak, who played no part in creating the crisis in the first place. His analysis is being made real by the actions of the present UK Government. It sickens me to the pit of my stomach to see Osborne and the braying crew of old Etonians in their all-out attack on the unemployed, the disabled and the poor. As Buffett said, they are inflicting class warfare via brutal and degrading welfare cuts while cutting taxes for the wealthy and the big corporations. That approach should be an affront to all decent human beings.

Annabelle Ewing: Why is the member therefore happy to campaign with people whom he describes as despicable to seek to have the people of Scotland vote no on 18 September?

Neil Findlay: They are despicable because they are Tories, not because they want to keep the United Kingdom together.

Warren Buffet's comments get to the nub of the big issue in politics, which is the divide between those who have power, wealth and influence, and those who do not. That is central to my approach when considering Scotland's future.

I want to see a Scotland that is governed in the interests of ordinary, working Scots; a Scotland that works in solidarity with our friends and relatives across the United Kingdom, developing a collective ethos based on the values of dignity, co-operation, community and social progress; and a Scotland that has democratic and socialist values at its core.

To achieve that, I want further powers that are devolved not just to this building and this set of

politicians but powers that are devolved according to the principles of democracy and subsidiarity, with power brought to the lowest and most appropriate level, where we re-empower local government by repatriating powers to councils. Councillors must be allowed to make decisions on school meals, childcare and the many other issues that they have an interest in.

Mark McDonald: Will the member give way?

Neil Findlay: No, thank you.

Councillors have to be able to lower or increase taxes to meet local needs and spend money how they see fit—they will, after all, be held to account for those decisions by the electorate, whom they represent. We need to trust the people to decide, not grab powers to the centre and dictate to them.

Quality public services also need a progressive taxation system—a policy that is based on the ability to pay so that higher earners pay more. I will pay more to finance good-quality childcare, free school meals and education. However, we cannot finance those things and provide tax cuts—that is simply not credible.

A recent poll suggests that, in relation to local taxes, the public takes a similar view, with 60 per cent prepared to pay more council tax for better services, including childcare. Not for the first time, the people seem to be ahead of the politicians on this. *[Interruption.]* Across the world, as Patrick Harvie mentioned—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Findlay, I am so sorry, but can I stop you for a moment? Could members please stop shouting to one another across the chamber?

Neil Findlay: That is quite all right, Presiding Officer. The noisier they get, the better it is.

Across the world, Laffer curve trickle-down economics has been discredited and rejected. There is no evidence whatsoever that tax competition creates jobs and growth—none whatsoever; if it did, does the finance secretary really think that the Germans, the French and the rest of the European Union would not have caught on to that? Does he think that he has discovered some great wheeze that no one else has caught on to?

Tax competition will be a disaster for working people. It will suck £350 million a year out of public services such as childcare, education and all the rest of it and, inevitably, it will be the low paid, the poor, the weak and the vulnerable who will suffer most. I reject that approach in its entirety. I want to maintain the economic solidarity that sees cash transfers from areas of wealth in the UK to areas of most need. That is a good thing. I want to see the living wage implemented now, across every sector in which the Government has any

influence—and, yes, that includes childcare workers.

Patrick Harvie: I am grateful to the member for giving way. Can he tell us how he intends to achieve those things across the UK? As we know, under Tory, Labour and coalition Governments, we have seen more or less the same corporation tax policy. Does he intend to vote Green, because I think that that is the only option down south?

Neil Findlay: The corporation tax policy, as applied by different Governments, is fine as long as it is consistent across the UK. *[Interruption.]*

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Order, please.

Neil Findlay: It is when we have tax competition that there is a problem, because we end up in a spiral of decline. That is the problem that we have. We should be using the powers that we have now to support the interests of ordinary people by mitigating the bad decisions of others—we could do that today on the bedroom tax. Why will the Government not do it?

I also want action on childcare now to help people get back to work. As Malcolm Chisholm said, the argument that we cannot act because the tax revenue would go to the UK Treasury is so stomach-churningly cynical that it is beyond belief. If that is the justification for not acting now on that, why create any new jobs, and why spend any Government money on anything that will generate any tax revenue for the UK Treasury? That is a scandalously cynical argument, and the Government knows it.

I want Scotland to be a country of community, solidarity, co-operation, equality and justice, and extended devolution will allow us the opportunity to achieve that. I have argued for that for the past 25 years and I am sure that I will be arguing for it up until the referendum.

16:14

Mark McDonald (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): Neil Findlay's response to Patrick Harvie was possibly one of the best examples of logical gymnastics that I have ever seen. At least Patrick Harvie's position on corporation tax policy is consistent, although he and I might disagree on it. Neil Findlay says that it is okay if corporation tax gets cut as long as it is cut across the whole of the United Kingdom by a Labour Government, which is not a very socialist policy for him to take.

Neil Findlay rose—

Mark McDonald: No; Mr Findlay did not let me in, so I will not let him in.

I was interested to hear Mr Findlay say that we need to leave it to councils to decide their own priorities, given that at the same time he is backing

a proposal for a bill by one of his party's members that would take powers away from councils in relation to bedroom tax evictions. It is okay for the Labour Party to take powers away from councils when it suits it, but when the Scottish Government introduces a policy of free school meals, the Labour Party says, "Oh, you can't dictate to councils." I am sorry, but Mr Findlay has no consistency of position on any of those issues.

Patrick Harvie hit the nail on the head when he said that we have descended once again into binary politics. The central conceit of the Labour leader's position and that espoused by her members is that somehow people on the SNP benches cannot possibly be sincere in our commitment to childcare or to addressing child poverty and that only members on the Labour benches can have a sincerely held position on those issues. Unfortunately, that misses the point. There is much social policy on which members on the two sets of benches could agree, were it not for the fact that the Labour Party has chosen its constitutional position as being more important than looking at the social agenda.

The position of the Child Poverty Action Group, Unison and the Scottish Trades Union Congress is that the extension of free school meals will have a positive impact on the poverty agenda.

Kezia Dugdale: Will the member give way?

Mark McDonald: Not just yet.

They make the point that

"The universal approach has not only been shown to increase take up of healthy lunches and relief to family budgets but also to impact positively on children's learning experience."

It has an impact on both the family budget and children's educational attainment.

While it trumpets its position on child poverty and ignores the fact that progress has been made by this Government, the Labour Party cannot ignore the recent report that showed that in 2009—before the Tories came to power—the UK was the fourth most unequal society in the developed world.

After Unison Scotland published a statement urging the universal delivery of free school meals for P1 to P3, Jayne Baxter, the Labour Party spokesperson on children and young people, said on her Facebook page on 26 September 2013:

"I think this is worth some serious consideration."

Unfortunately, it seems that her colleagues did not agree with her—she has been overruled in that regard.

Malcolm Chisholm *rose—*

Mark McDonald: I was just coming to Malcolm Chisholm. I have had great respect for Mr Chisholm ever since he resigned as a UK Government minister over Labour's continuation of Tory welfare cuts. He makes the point that we need fiscal devolution in order to deliver what we are looking at, but even if fiscal devolution was on the table—and it is not—welfare policy would still be left in Westminster Government hands, and we all know where that leads.

I happily give way to Mr Chisholm.

Malcolm Chisholm: I think that we will have more fiscal devolution, but the point that I want to make goes back to free school meals. We think that it is a good thing to have free school meals, but politics is about choices. What genuinely puzzles me is that the SNP now supports free school meals in a devolved context, but the white paper makes no mention of delivering the policy in an independent Scotland. It is an incomprehensible position—absolutely incomprehensible.

Mark McDonald: The difficulty I have with the position of Mr Chisholm and his colleagues is that they have said repeatedly that we need to get on and deliver the childcare proposals that are outlined in the white paper. That point was highlighted very well in Neil Bibby's speech. At least Willie Rennie had the good sense to junk the speech that he was going to give and come to the chamber with a different speech. Even when it was explained to Mr Bibby, both in the First Minister's opening comments and then in an intervention, how the money that is transferred from Westminster actually breaks down and that not all that money can be utilised for the purposes that Mr Bibby outlined, he said, "Oh, but you've got £300 million." Imagine Mr Bibby at the end of the month: he looks at his bank account and says, "Fantastic! I've got all this money. I'll go out and spend it," and then he wonders why direct debits are suddenly coming off. We cannot use all that money for the purposes that Mr Bibby outlined for us. [*Interruption.*]

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Order, please.

Mark McDonald: We then moved on to the Tory mantra from Alex Johnstone, who made an admirable, if nonetheless misguided, attempt to lionise Iain Duncan Smith. If Alex Johnstone looked at the comments in the press of those whom Iain Duncan Smith visited in Easterhouse, he would see that they stated that Iain Duncan Smith has betrayed them in the action that he has taken. If there was some kind of conversion on the road to Easterhouse, unfortunately Iain Duncan Smith forgot about it on the way back to London.

I find the Tories' position on poverty difficult, given that they are cutting income tax for the highest earners in society.

Ruth Davidson *rose*—

Mark McDonald: The Tory mantra appears to be that to make the rich more productive, they must be given more money, but to make the poor more productive, they must be given less. Is that Ms Davidson's position?

Ruth Davidson: The position is that the best way out of poverty is to increase employment, which is what the coalition Government has done. Can the member square what he says with the fact that, after enacting coalition policies for several years, we now have the lowest level of child poverty in this country since the mid-1980s?

Mark McDonald: The member should be aware—although her Scottish secretary is not—of the number of children who will be pushed into poverty as a result of the slash and burn welfare agenda that the Government of which she is a supporter is pursuing.

The key to all this is the transformational childcare proposals that are contained in the white paper. To those members who have outlined their leap of faith in relation to further devolution, I say that the Scottish Government has a comprehensive white paper, whereas all that we have at the moment from the no parties is a blank sheet of white paper.

16:20

Drew Smith (Glasgow) (Lab): As has been said many times, the competition of priorities is the bread and butter of political decision making. However, the issues that we are discussing today are, at their most basic, also intensely practical. How can we help families to make the most of their budgets and how do we do best by our children with the resources that we have? Children, not constitutional settlements, are indeed Scotland's future.

Every day, parents and guardians make decisions about what is best for their children. Parents will know only too well that that often means deciding between two or more things that they would like for their child, such as paying for a home improvement or family holiday versus paying for an opportunity for a child to pursue their talents in sport or to have the chance to learn and play a musical instrument. Each parent will know the process that they go through to rationalise between things when money is tight. That might mean considering whether to agree to another school trip for one child or to spend the money on a brother or sister who would otherwise miss out. Those are the hard but everyday decisions for

many of the mums and dads who should be represented in the debate.

For the poorest families in Scotland, however, the choice can be even starker. It can be whether to buy a new coat or shoes for a child walking to school in the wind and rain or about what food can be put on the table this week. For many parents, the hardest decision of all might be whether and when to return to work, in the hope that the extra income will help their kids, but knowing that it will mean sacrificing time with their child, relying on grandparents or neighbours to help with childcare or, for many, spending the bulk of their wages on simply knowing that their child is looked after while the work is done and the money is earned.

Politicians often refer to our decisions as tough choices between competing good things but, every day, decisions for thousands of families across Scotland are just as hard and, in fact, far more immediate. To an extent, the debate that we have had today has been presented as a choice between free school meals for all our infants and childcare for our most vulnerable two-year-olds, or some extra childcare versus the transformational childcare that the Scottish Government supported a month ago.

The Minister for Local Government and Planning (Derek Mackay): The member is absolutely right that the debate is about choices and that today we are making a choice—the Labour Party is making a choice as well. Are the Child Poverty Action Group and all the signatories to its campaign wrong when they say that free school meals should be a priority?

Drew Smith: No, of course they are not, and they have been arguing that it is a priority for some time, including over the past seven years, in which the Scottish Government has failed to deliver it. The Child Poverty Action Group and others also argue for investment in childcare.

The motion tries to set everyday decision making about priorities and best value for the money that we have in a different context—surprise, surprise, that is a constitutional context. The word “transformation” has been much repeated, and it is a concept that I certainly support. We all want transformation of circumstances and opportunity. However, the word is being coupled with another term, which is “only with independence”. Parents across Scotland will this year need to consider why that caveat is being added to a debate about what will be provided for their children. They are told that we will do what is best for their children, but only with independence. The motion asks the Parliament to make our commitment to a major expansion in childcare—which has long been promised, which was repeated and promoted in the white paper and which is within the gift of the Parliament and its

budgets—conditional on something that has nothing to do with childcare.

We understand that the Scottish Government supports independence. I happen to believe, as I think the majority of Scots do, that partnership, rather than division, and working together with our neighbours on the issues that affect us all is a better constitutional outcome than that promoted by the SNP. We will have that argument this year and, in September, the people of Scotland will decide on it. However, let us not pretend that independence is a solution to the fact that, under this Government, childcare already lags behind what is provided elsewhere in the UK and is today among the most expensive in Europe. The solution to a childcare crisis is not constitutional change; it is more childcare.

Mark McDonald: Will Drew Smith answer two simple questions: does he support the transformational changes envisaged in the white paper but within the devolution context, and, if he does, how does he propose to pay for them within that context?

Drew Smith: We have proposed amendments to deliver the first stage of the Scottish Government's own proposals, but the SNP is failing to support them. The test of whether we care about childcare should not be whether we believe in a separate Scotland or a united Britain but whether we choose to prioritise the resources to help families now.

The First Minister: Will Drew Smith give way?

Drew Smith: No, thank you. I have already taken two interventions.

The First Minister: I think that we know why he won't.

Drew Smith: The reason is that I have taken two interventions and my time will run out if I go on too long.

There are resources available that would make a big difference. We were told that childcare was the Scottish Government's number 1 priority. In its white paper, the SNP identified more childcare as the most important transformation in circumstance and opportunity that we could achieve if we had the will.

Critics could say that that was a belated recognition of inaction since 2007, and cynics could say that it is about votes in the referendum. However, the fact remains that although the SNP said that increasing childcare provision was the single most important thing that we could do to make our country a better place, when faced with the choice and faced with a vote at 5 pm in the chamber, it replies, "Only with independence."

The First Minister is fond of quotations found on the internet, so I will end with one from the online forum gransnet. He might remember it. Grandmothers contributing to that website asked him about independence. They asked whether it was of supreme value, as the founders of his party believed, and whether he would support it

"even if it meant that Scottish people gain no economic advantage from independence".

The First Minister replied:

"Couldn't have said it better myself. I fully agree. A sense of identity".

Is that not the truth? The Scottish National Party would support independence for Scotland whether it meant a transformation in childcare for the better or for the worse. It is the only Government in history that proposes a big game-changing proposal and gets the money to deliver it but, when the Opposition agrees and proposes amendments to achieve it, says, "Hang on a minute. We didn't really mean it." The only opposition for opposition's sake going on in the Parliament this afternoon is the SNP's opposition to its own policy.

16:27

Willie Rennie: This morning, I received an email from the Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Employment and Sustainable Growth's office inviting me to come and discuss the budget letter that I sent him before Christmas. That letter set out our reasonable, costed and constructive proposals. I have to say to the finance secretary that his First Minister has rather circumvented those discussions with his announcements on childcare and free school meals. However, I welcome that circumvention. I do not know whether the First Minister is bidding for the finance secretary's position as well as everything else, but it is a good step in the right direction.

It is striking that the debate has not been about whether we increase childcare and nursery education for two-year-olds but about how we do it and what is the constitutional settlement under which we can best achieve that. As a Liberal, I find it heartening that there is a consensus across the Parliament for early intervention to create a life-changing chance for young children, because that has not always been the case. Not everybody has supported the policy. Some people find it quite odd to send two-year-olds into nursery education. They believe that it is quite a young age to do that. I believe that it is the chance for us, together with families, to make a big difference to their life chances.

As a Liberal, I believe that the way to tackle the ingrained poverty in many parts of Scotland is education. That is why we have supported a pupil

premium down south and have been strong advocates of the college education system. It is also why I am pleased that we have the nursery education commitment. It is not quite as much as I would like—15 per cent in the first year rising to 27 per cent in the second, when I wanted 20 per cent and 40 per cent—but I am not quibbling, because it is a big step in the right direction after 18 months of repeated questions about it. I am delighted.

I think that Stewart Maxwell's contribution to the debate was one of the best. It set out very well the arguments in favour of nursery education—the impact that it can have on offending rates among children who otherwise would be embedded in crime because of the start that they have had in life, on the work chances for those very same people, and on the opportunities that it gives parents to get back to work because of the relief that it provides.

However, it is not just about the extra hours. Many professionals in the sector are anxious that we do not just shove children into nursery education establishments without quality being attached to that education. The early years collaborative and the work that Aileen Campbell is doing on this is excellent. We need to focus on quality as much as quantity. Everybody in the chamber should hear about Suzanne Zeedyk's work and philosophy on attachment, the excellent lectures that Harry Burns gives on brain development and James Heckman's work. Given all that work, I am very pleased that we are taking steps in the right direction.

I was also pleased to hear what was said about free school meals. The Child Poverty Action Group has advocated guaranteeing young kids a good meal in school every day, so we are happy to support that measure. Good steps in the right direction are being taken.

We all want to tackle poverty. I do not think that anybody in the chamber is in favour of poverty—Patrick Harvie is right in that regard—we just disagree on the mechanism to tackle it. The measure that I favour is that we should make work pay, which is why I am particularly pleased about the progress that we are making on cutting tax for people on low and middle incomes. That makes work pay; it incentivises work when otherwise the decision on whether work pays might be marginal. Those are good steps and I wish that the SNP would support them, so I greatly regret that it does not. Perhaps if I work on the SNP for 18 months I might persuade it on that issue, as well.

The offers that SNP members have made today—many of which I agree with—are predicated on the basis that we will automatically become wealthier if we are independent. Not everybody in the nationalist camp agrees with that; some believe that things are a bit more uncertain

and that it is not guaranteed that we will be wealthier, certainly given volatile oil revenues and the fact that our population is ageing faster than that of the rest of the UK—[*Interruption.*] The SNP members like to cheer me on when they agree but not when they do not. Perhaps there should be a bit more consistency.

The important factor is that we cannot simply assume that Scotland will be wealthier, especially when we consider the progress that we are making at UK level—1.3 million extra jobs in the past three years and 110,000 in Scotland. The increase in Scotland is mirrored; it is almost exactly the same increase as in the rest of the UK. Growth is up and business confidence is up. I would rather base my opportunities and the progress that we are going to make on that economic model than on the precarious economic model that is proposed by the SNP.

Mark McDonald said that I had junked my speech. I had junked my speech, but that was only when his party junked his policy. I recognise that things have changed today and that good progress is being made in the right direction. I hope that everybody in the chamber embraces it.

To be serious in conclusion, I am grateful to the First Minister for the announcement that he has made today. I think there is an opportunity for us to work together to ensure that the policy is implemented effectively, because it is important for young children that they are given the best start in life, so that we can say in 20, 30 or 40 years that today in this Parliament we made the right decision.

16:33

Annabel Goldie (West Scotland) (Con): This debate has been redolent of a now-hackneyed refrain from the SNP. In essence, the SNP argument is this: nothing good comes from Westminster and the only hope for Scotland is independence. [*Interruption.*] I was waiting for the cheer, but it did not come. That is the familiar reprise that is repeated in the motion, so there is nothing surprising there.

The detail of the motion bears examination. Suddenly, free school meals—a policy that was dropped from the 2011 SNP manifesto and was mentioned in passing as a five-word post-independence aspiration in the white paper—is produced like a rabbit out of the hat by Alex Salmond this afternoon, as a substantive policy for primaries 1 to 3 from next January. So, why now that belated conversion? Could it be that the much-maligned Westminster Government has pledged free meals from this April and that the SNP was caught napping and red faced, and is playing embarrassed catch-up?

The further irony, of course, is that the policy needs no constitutional change. All that it took was a Tory-led coalition at Westminster to force Alex Salmond's hand. [*Laughter.*] Listen to the raucous laughter. If the policy was such a prominent feature for the SNP, where was it in the massive white paper? Where was the detail and time schedule?

The same is true of the other proposals in the motion. To his credit, Willie Rennie has consistently pushed the issue and contrasted Scotland with the rest of the UK. Again, it does not take constitutional change to deliver those improvements; they can be made within devolution. As Ruth Davidson powerfully pointed out, there is a hypocrisy at the heart of the motion in saying that only independence can deliver those changes. Actually, they could have been delivered by the SNP at any point in the past seven years.

The estimated benefits to Scotland of such childcare measures, which include an increase of more than 100,000 women in the labour market, an increase in Scottish output of £2.2 billion and a boost to Government revenues of £700 million, all of which are possible, probable and laudable if they can be achieved, are of course—in the best traditions of the SNP—not substantiated by one jot of data. They are guesstimates. For all we know, some women might choose not to go back to work. There is no reliable quantification.

The First Minister: Annabel Goldie has taken me on a trip down memory lane. I miss the manner of her questioning.

I want to offer a piece of data. Annabel Goldie may have heard me say that, in the year up to October, there was a 3 per cent increase in female employment in Scotland. That is 60,000 women. If there was an increase in employment of 60,000 in a single year in recovering from recession, is it unreasonable to say that, with the barriers to employment removed, a further 100,000 could be achieved in the course of five years in a parliamentary session?

Annabel Goldie: If the First Minister is such an enthusiast for mental arithmetic, as he seems to be, he will no doubt applaud the coalition policies from Westminster, which are increasing employment and reducing unemployment.

I turn to what the motion is completely silent on. On child poverty, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation has said that, in 2011-12, there were

"1,100,000 children fewer than were in poverty in 1998, and the lowest level of children living in poverty since the mid 1980s."

As I was saying to the First Minister, the motion is also silent on how the best way of eradicating poverty for all is by reducing unemployment and increasing employment, which are both currently

happening under a Tory-led Westminster Government.

Nowhere in the motion—surprisingly—is there reference to the Westminster tax cuts for 25 million people. It has also been said that from April of this year the personal allowance will increase to £10,000, which is a typical tax cut of £705, and 2.7 million people on the lowest incomes will pay no income tax at all.

Also, nowhere in the motion is there reference to keeping mortgage rates low, which is made possible only by controlling borrowing. Nowhere is there reference to cutting income tax by half for people on the minimum wage, and nowhere is there reference to the biggest-ever cash rise in the basic state pension. That is the reality of being in the United Kingdom, and it is a very uncomfortable truth for the SNP.

By contrast, the SNP not only offers a predictable jam-tomorrow vision of separation, but advances a quite extraordinary political proposition. It appears to say that it has the jam now, but we will get it only if we vote for independence. What a bizarre and cynical gesture. I believe that the public will see through that bare-faced hypocrisy and threadbare rhetoric, and I am confident that they will resoundingly reject separation in September.

I support the amendment in the name of Ruth Davidson.

16:39

Kezia Dugdale (Lothian) (Lab): Let me say at the start that Labour will vote against the Government motion at decision time, not because we oppose free school meals—[*Interruption.*]

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Order, please.

Kezia Dugdale: We will do so not because we oppose free school meals or childcare, but because we oppose the idea that independence is needed for them. With the time that I have, I will try to navigate how we got to today's announcements and explain why, if we were sitting where the Government sits, we would have made different choices.

I will start with Labour's record on childcare. In 2002, Labour introduced the right to a pre-education place for all three and four-year-olds. We also committed to 10,000 places for vulnerable two-year-olds and ran a pilot on that. Fiona Hyslop, as then Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning, ended that pilot. She told local authorities that if they wanted to deliver childcare for two-year-olds, they could do it with their own money. In fact, she went as far as to say to Andy Denholm at *The Herald* that

"Some people might say that to take a child away from its mother and into nursery aged two is not necessarily a good thing."

How far the SNP has come.

Let us talk about the substantive issue of school meals. In 2007, the SNP promised to extend free school meals to all primary 1 pupils and two and three-year-olds. Fiona Hyslop ran a pilot to extend the scheme, but it was not rolled out. Interest in free school meals disappeared when Mike Russell became the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning. In fact, he is so uninterested in free school meals that, in answer to Drew Smith, the Scottish Government revealed to us that from 2010 it no longer collated data on school meals.

Radio silence on school meals followed for three years until Nick Clegg stood up at his party conference and announced that the UK Government would introduce free school meals for children in primaries 1 to 3. When the white paper was published, the SNP told us that childcare is its number 1 priority. We took its childcare policy seriously and looked to examine the detail. The detail of how the SNP got to the cost of its policy was not made available and still remains elusive. However, working with the Scottish Parliament information centre, we got to a figure of £100 million a year to implement phase 1 of the white paper's plan. That is not the £700 million figure that Stewart Maxwell cited, but the £100 million that would be needed to introduce childcare to 50 per cent of all two-year-olds.

The First Minister: The figure refers to the 1,100 hours, as Kezia Dugdale well knows. Let us look at the financing of the Labour amendment. It would cost £100 million—incidentally, that is in the white paper as she also well knows. There is £60 million revenue available next year and £74 million the following year. That is less than £200 million. Will the Labour Party tell us what—apart from the schools meals—it would cut?

Kezia Dugdale: The First Minister is quoting the Barnett consequential on free school meals; he is not quoting the total Barnett consequential.*[Interruption.]*

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Order, please.

Kezia Dugdale: When the Autumn statement was delivered we had the full detail of the Barnett consequential in years 1 and 2 and saw that there was £200 million over two years and that was enough to deliver phase 1. That is the detail that we discussed with SPICe and the basis on which we are saying that there is serious credibility behind the amendments that we have lodged to the Children and Young People (Scotland) Bill. We decided to lodge the amendments—they are in Neil Bibby's name—despite our believing that free school meals are a good thing. Why? It was

because there is not enough evidence to demonstrate that free school meals will increase educational attainment, to show that the policy will get women into work or that hundreds of thousands of children will be lifted out of poverty. Increased childcare would do that.

We know that free school meals will not lift children out of poverty, because the Scottish Government's evaluation of its pilot tells us that. That evaluation showed only a 4.4 per cent increase in uptake of free school meals among the poorest children; the vast majority of the uptake was among kids from better-off families. That point was recognised by CPAG and referenced in its briefing paper for the debate. Free school meals would not significantly enhance what the poorest kids in Scotland would get.

I mention all that because Neil Bibby said that politics is about hard choices. He is right. When I read the announcement about free school meals on *The Herald's* front page this morning, the first question that I asked myself was how many of the poorest children in Scotland would benefit. The answer is, sadly, that not that many would. The same poor kids who already have free school meals are losing out on breakfast clubs and after-school care because of the First Minister's cuts to local government.

Free school meals are a good thing, but childcare for 50 per cent of two-year-olds would have been even better.

Stuart McMillan (West Scotland) (SNP): Will Kezia Dugdale taken an intervention?

Kezia Dugdale: I am afraid that I do not have enough time.

We welcome the Government's announcements on childcare, which the First Minister made in the final minutes of his speech. How refreshing it was to have a Government announcement made to Parliament first.

I recognise the move to increase childcare to include 15 per cent of two-year-olds in 2014, but it could have been 50 per cent if the Government had chosen to act in the best interests of the poorest families first.

I also welcome the move to include 27 per cent in 2015, which bases provision on current free school meals entitlement. The First Minister might like to acknowledge that such an approach is provided for in amendment 86 to the Children and Young People (Scotland) Bill, which was lodged by Neil Bibby and will be debated at stage 2. I look forward to the Scottish Government agreeing to the amendment; Neil Bibby did that work before Christmas.

I have no doubt that the Government has moved on childcare because of the pressure that Labour

members have put on it. Malcolm Chisholm made that point well. Why do I think that? As Neil Bibby said, all we have been told since the white paper's launch six weeks ago has been that we need independence if we are to deliver on childcare at all. Incidentally, the First Minister was right. The white paper includes a reference to free school meals; it is just a shame that he did not read out what it says. It says:

"Alongside our priorities for immediate improvements we also plan to maintain access to passported benefits, such as free school meals. This will support 130,000 children in Scotland."

That is a commitment to maintain current levels of free school meals, not a commitment to extend provision. One hundred and thirty thousand is exactly the number of children in Scotland who are currently in receipt of free school meals.

The white paper said that independence is needed if we are to deliver on childcare, but it has been proved that that is not the case. The white paper said that 20 per cent of kids, and no more, will get free school meals, but today the paper's authors go much further. It appears that we can have free school meals under devolution, but not under independence. It looks as if the white paper was just for Christmas, but members should not worry, another historic moment is just around the corner.

Members should forgive me for being cynical about the SNP's change of heart. Why have all these announcements been made today? It's the polls, stupid. The SNP and the yes campaign have a problem with women, so it was decided that childcare must be the number 1 priority—until, of course, the message did not work. At the weekend, a YouGov poll told Alex Salmond that 64 per cent of Scots want him to act on childcare now, so he acted. There is a clear message: if we want the Scottish Government to do something, we should commission a poll to prove that it is needed. If we prove that it is in the Government's interests—not ours—to act, it will happen.

We support free school meals, but in the light of the hard choices and the money that is available, we think that the First Minister could significantly have enhanced women's lives. He could have got women into work, lifted children out of poverty and made our country better by providing childcare for 50 per cent of two-year-olds. That is the biggest opportunity that he has missed today.

16:47

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning (Michael Russell): I welcome the positive contribution that Labour has made to the debate on free school meals. I point out that I am talking about not the Labour Party from which

we heard today but the Labour Party elsewhere—a Labour Party that is not so obsessed with the constitution and the SNP—[*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick): Order.

Michael Russell: The Labour Party whose contribution I welcome is the Labour Party in Islington. Last year, when the free school meals policy was announced south of the border, Richard Watts, the Labour leader of Islington Council, said that the case for free school meals is "compelling". He wrote a piece in which he argued strongly that free school meals must be "a crucial part" of Labour's response to the cost of living crisis, and he concluded:

"Labour has a good story to tell on free school meals ... we have introduced it at local level; the GMB has made the case for the policy and we have had Government-funded pilots and a robust evaluation. Now is the time"—

perhaps the Labour leader in the Scottish Parliament will remember this—

"to tell the electorate that we support free school meals for all and give our activists a policy that will really resonate on the doorstep."

We did not hear a single thing from Johann Lamont today that would resonate, even on her own doorstep. What we heard was a speech from a leader who is incapable of changing the words that are in front of her. She responded to less than half of the First Minister's announcement—as did most Labour speakers.

The speech that Johann Lamont should have made is the one that Willie Rennie made—or at least, the first four minutes of it. Let us leave the final minute unmentioned. Willie Rennie realised that Parliament was hearing good news for the children and young people of Scotland. He realised that progress is being made in difficult times, and he wanted to ensure that his voice was raised in support of and not against Scotland's young people.

I want to dwell for a moment on the educational aspects of the announcements, because they are both vital in terms of education. Larry Flanagan of the Educational Institute of Scotland has welcomed the announcements this afternoon, in a statement that talks about the important and significant step that the Scottish Government is taking. He congratulates the Scottish Government for taking that step and says:

"Poverty is the greatest barrier to educational attainment, and so it is essential that we continue to combat child poverty to ensure that all young people have a fair chance to achieve their potential."

He goes further. He talks about the fact that health and wellbeing are central to the curriculum for excellence and notes the way in which the announcement ties into the curriculum for

excellence. He says that research evidence shows that the initiative

“will bring real benefits for pupils’ health, aid their concentration during the long school day, and will support their ability to reach their full potential as learners.”

He says that the initiative will benefit the whole of education. It will—both of the announcements will. Consider the recent programme for international student assessment—PISA—results. We know that our attainment record in Scotland is getting better. We are closing that attainment gap. However, we still have more to do.

Lewis Macdonald: Will Michael Russell give way?

Michael Russell: I am sorry, but I want to make progress on this point.

We have clear evidence that tells us that investing in both early learning and childcare has an effect, and that free school meals along with early learning does something for a whole cohort of young people. Positive benefits are felt not just at the point at which the intervention takes place but throughout the rest of their educational lives. There is evidence that the announcements that have been made today are significant.

Malcolm Chisholm: I agree with what the cabinet secretary is saying, but I am absolutely bamboozled about why he thought the opposite until today and why he thinks the opposite in the white paper.

Michael Russell: I do not think that I can be accused of thinking the opposite. The 2011 manifesto—on which I stood and was elected, as were all my colleagues—said that we would seek to expand provision when finances permit, which is precisely what we are doing today.

This announcement is of huge educational benefit. In a moment, I will talk about reactions to the announcement. First, however, I want to say something about the speeches that we heard today. We heard a number of strange speeches; I will pick out two. Alex Johnstone’s description of Iain Duncan Smith as a revolutionary was the high point, although I was equally surprised to hear Neil Findlay quoting Warren Buffett. He then went on to pin his colours to the mast regarding the council tax freeze. He described the action of this Government on education as “stomach-churningly cynical.” I do not want to get into a stomach-churning contest—

Alex Johnstone: You would win.

Michael Russell: Thank you for that vote of confidence.

The thing that I have found “stomach-churningly cynical” this afternoon is that Neil Findlay, the man who is against the council tax freeze, is sitting

behind a woman who was elected in Dunfermline on the pledge of a council tax freeze: there is a definition of stomach-churning cynicism. It is also a good example of Labour’s policy disarray, which we have seen in its most stark form this afternoon. We must ask: what is Labour’s position on free school meals? I have counted five positions today—six, actually, if we include Ed Balls’s position. The article from which the First Minister read out a wonderful quotation includes a picture of Ed Balls distributing free school meals. I presume that if the Scottish Labour leader has her way, they will have to be given back.

The first position that I would note is that of Labour backbenchers, as recorded in March 2013, in a motion to celebrate international school meals day—which, by the way, will be an even bigger celebration in Scotland this year. That motion, which was lodged by Elaine Smith, was signed by Anne McTaggart, Mark Griffin, Hanzala Malik and Margaret McDougall, all of whom will, I presume, vote for free school meals this afternoon.

Then there is Labour’s local government position. I am delighted to see that one of the warmest welcomes—

Neil Findlay: Will the cabinet secretary give way?

Michael Russell: No, thank you. Mr Findlay’s conscience has swaggered around the chamber enough this afternoon.

Last year, when the policy was announced, Councillor Gordon Matheson, the leader of Glasgow City Council, was quoted as saying that he wants the cash

“and wants to use it to provide free school meals for P1 to P3 pupils.”

Glasgow City Council wants to do that and has shown its commitment to young people. It already provides free breakfasts and free lunches for thousands of children. Councillor Matheson said:

“We expect Glasgow to get more than £7m as our fair share of the extra money coming to Scotland to implement this policy.”

So, that is Labour’s second position. A group of back benchers are in favour of the policy, and Glasgow City Council and—no doubt—other councils are in favour of it.

Let us look at the trade unions’ position. Just this afternoon, Alex McLuckie, GMB Scotland’s senior organiser for the public sector, said:

“There is so much good in this announcement. It will help tackle poverty and social exclusion and help remove the stigma some attach to free school meals.”

Those are three Labour positions.

Then there is Mr Chisholm’s position. He said that there is not a single mention of free school

meals in the white paper—but there is. I was puzzled by a number of other things that he said. Mr Chisholm was also wrong about Labour policy in the UK. Labour policy in the UK, as announced at the 2013 conference, had two pledges: one was for 24 hours a week of childcare for three and four-year-olds, which it claimed would cost £675 million but which would actually cost over £1 billion; the other was for schools to be open from 8am to 6pm but with no funding attached, so local authorities would have to meet the cost. However, the astonishing thing about Mr Chisholm's speech—I am grateful to him for it—was the commitment that he made on behalf of the Labour front bench to match whatever the SNP does in 2016. Previously, Labour's only policy was a commission. The issue was raised first with the First Minister when the Labour leader met him and again in the debate in this chamber. However, we now know that the Labour commitment is to match whatever takes place.

Malcolm Chisholm: When Ed Balls and Ed Miliband made their announcements in September, Johann Lamont and our front bench said that we would meet the consequences of that policy if we were in government in 2016.

Michael Russell: I am afraid that that is simply not good enough. Labour has not costed the policy or said when it would be delivered, and today Labour is going to vote against it. That is the most astonishing thing of all.

The position of Mr Bibby—who is pointing at me—is also unique. Mr Bibby cannot add 60 and 74.

Neil Findlay: Will the cabinet secretary take an intervention?

Michael Russell: I am sorry, Mr Findlay, but I have said no.

Mr Bibby says that Labour's policy can be afforded within £134 million over two years, but he has also admitted that the cost will be £100 million a year. Those two things do not compute, and neither does Kezia Dugdale's position. She claimed on Radio Forth today that she wants 10,000 two-year-olds to be included in the policy. Our policy, which was announced by the First Minister this afternoon, includes over 15,000 two-year-olds, so I cannot see what would prevent her from supporting that policy this afternoon.

Kezia Dugdale: Will the cabinet secretary give way?

Michael Russell: No. I am sorry, but I want to finish.

The reality is this: Kezia Dugdale says that she supports the provision of free school meals, but she will vote against it. If the Labour Party votes

against the Government's motion, it will vote against free school meals—no ifs or buts.

Kezia Dugdale: Will the cabinet secretary give way?

Michael Russell: No. I am responding to Kezia Dugdale's point. If she votes no this afternoon, she will vote against including a larger number of two-year-olds than was proposed by Labour. That is twice—the Labour Party has form on this. In the vote on the Post-16 Education (Scotland) Bill, the Labour Party voted against widening access and against a single set of terms and conditions. The Labour Party in this Parliament has voted against education that is based on the ability to learn rather than on the ability to pay. We know what Labour is against. It is against young people and education, but we do not know what it is for.

George Adam put it well this afternoon. The SNP is single-mindedly in favour of the people of Scotland, particularly the children of Scotland, and we want this country to be the best country to grow up in. We must achieve real transformation, and that can be done only through independence. The figures make it absolutely clear that independence is not an abstract idea but a way in which we can make Scotland better. It is the key that opens the door to the transformations that we need not just in childcare, but across our society. Step by step, we are getting there. We have made commitments and we are honouring commitments. We are making those commitments for our country and, most of all, for our country's children.

Offender Rehabilitation Bill

17:00

The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick): The next item of business is consideration of motion S4M-08672, in the name of Kenny MacAskill, on the Offender Rehabilitation Bill, which is United Kingdom legislation.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees that the relevant provisions of the Offender Rehabilitation Bill, introduced in the House of Lords on 9 May 2013, which enable persons convicted in England and Wales and who will be subject to the new supervision requirements contained in the Bill to continue to be subject to those requirements in the event that they are subsequently transferred to Scotland under the Crime (Sentences) Act 1997, so far as these matters fall within the legislative competence of the Scottish Parliament, should be considered by the UK Parliament.—[*Kenny MacAskill.*]

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

Business Motion

17:00

The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick): The next item of business is consideration of business motion S4M-08717, in the name of Joe FitzPatrick, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, which sets out a revision to the business programme for Wednesday 8 January. Any member who wishes to speak against the motion should press their request-to-speak button now.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees to the following revision to the programme of business for Wednesday 8 January 2014—

after

2.00 pm Portfolio Questions
Education and Lifelong Learning

insert

followed by Ministerial Statement: Severe winter
weather impacts and Scotland's
response

delete

5.00 pm Decision Time

and insert

5.30 pm Decision Time—[*Joe FitzPatrick.*]

The Presiding Officer: As no member has asked to speak against the motion, I will put the question to the chamber. The question is—

Drew Smith (Glasgow) (Lab): On a point of order, Presiding Officer.

The Presiding Officer: I am speaking, so could you please sit down.

The question is, that motion S4M-08717, in the name of Joe FitzPatrick, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Motion agreed to.

Drew Smith: I apologise for the discourtesy in interrupting you, Presiding Officer. I just wanted to make something clear before we come to the vote on the motion on Scotland's future. I think that the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning was somewhat remiss to suggest that we will be voting on the principle of free school meals. As the motion clearly states, we will be voting on the Scottish Government's belief that independence represents the best future for Scotland. That is what members on this side of the chamber will be voting against, and we hope—

The Presiding Officer: Mr Smith, that is a debating point, not a point of order.

Decision Time

17:01

The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick): There are five questions to be put as a result of today's business. In relation to the debate on Scotland's future, I remind members that if the amendment in the name of Johann Lamont is agreed to, the amendments in the names of Ruth Davidson and Willie Rennie will fall.

The first question is, that amendment S4M-08707.3, in the name of Johann Lamont, which seeks to amend motion S4M-08707, in the name of Alex Salmond, on Scotland's future, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Beamish, Claudia (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Chisholm, Malcolm (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (Lab)
 Dugdale, Kezia (Lothian) (Lab)
 Fee, Mary (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Ferguson, Patricia (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (Lab)
 Findlay, Neil (Lothian) (Lab)
 Gray, Iain (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Hilton, Cara (Dunfermline) (Lab)
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab)
 Macdonald, Lewis (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Macintosh, Ken (Eastwood) (Lab)
 Malik, Hanzala (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Marra, Jenny (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Martin, Paul (Glasgow Provan) (Lab)
 McCulloch, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 McDougall, Margaret (West Scotland) (Lab)
 McMahon, Siobhan (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 McTaggart, Anne (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Murray, Elaine (Dumfriesshire) (Lab)
 Pearson, Graeme (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Pentland, John (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)
 Smith, Drew (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Smith, Elaine (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab)
 Stewart, David (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)

Against

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

Crawford, Bruce (Stirling) (SNP)
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 Davidson, Ruth (Glasgow) (Con)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don, Nigel (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Eadie, Jim (Edinburgh Southern) (SNP)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
 Fabiani, Linda (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Fergusson, Alex (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Finnie, John (Highlands and Islands) (Ind)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gibson, Rob (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Goldie, Annabel (West Scotland) (Con)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Hume, Jim (South Scotland) (LD)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Ingram, Adam (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
 Johnstone, Alex (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Johnstone, Alison (Lothian) (Green)
 Keir, Colin (Edinburgh Western) (SNP)
 Lamont, John (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 Lyle, Richard (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 MacAskill, Kenny (Edinburgh Eastern) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Angus (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 Mackay, Derek (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 MacKenzie, Mike (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 Maxwell, Stewart (West Scotland) (SNP)
 McAlpine, Joan (South Scotland) (SNP)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McDonald, Mark (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 McInnes, Alison (North East Scotland) (LD)
 McKelvie, Christina (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)
 McLeod, Aileen (South Scotland) (SNP)
 McLeod, Fiona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (West Scotland) (SNP)
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Neil, Alex (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Paterson, Gil (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Rennie, Willie (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD)
 Robertson, Dennis (Aberdeenshire West) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Russell, Michael (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Salmond, Alex (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Scanlon, Mary (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)
 Scott, Tavish (Shetland Islands) (LD)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Thompson, Dave (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Urquhart, Jean (Highlands and Islands) (Ind)
 Watt, Maureen (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Wheelhouse, Paul (South Scotland) (SNP)
 White, Sandra (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)

Wilson, John (Central Scotland) (SNP)
Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow) (SNP)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 29, Against 84, Abstentions 0.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is—
[*Interruption.*] I remind members that if the amendment in the name of Ruth Davidson is agreed to, the amendment in the name of Willie Rennie will fall.

The next question is, that amendment S4M-08707.1, in the name of Ruth Davidson, which seeks to amend motion S4M-08707, in the name of Alex Salmond, on Scotland's future, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Brown, Gavin (Lothian) (Con)
Buchanan, Cameron (Lothian) (Con)
Davidson, Ruth (Glasgow) (Con)
Fergusson, Alex (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Goldie, Annabel (West Scotland) (Con)
Hume, Jim (South Scotland) (LD)
Johnstone, Alex (North East Scotland) (Con)
Lamont, John (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
McInnes, Alison (North East Scotland) (LD)
Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)
Rennie, Willie (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD)
Scanlon, Mary (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)
Scott, Tavish (Shetland Islands) (LD)
Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)

Against

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
Adamson, Clare (Central Scotland) (SNP)
Allan, Dr Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
Allard, Christian (North East Scotland) (SNP)
Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
Beamish, Claudia (South Scotland) (Lab)
Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
Biagi, Marco (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
Brodie, Chic (South Scotland) (SNP)
Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
Burgess, Margaret (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
Campbell, Aileen (Clydesdale) (SNP)
Campbell, Roderick (North East Fife) (SNP)
Chisholm, Malcolm (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (Lab)
Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
Crawford, Bruce (Stirling) (SNP)
Cunningham, Roseanna (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
Don, Nigel (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
Doris, Bob (Glasgow) (SNP)
Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
Dugdale, Kezia (Lothian) (Lab)
Eadie, Jim (Edinburgh Southern) (SNP)

Ewing, Annabelle (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
Fabiani, Linda (East Kilbride) (SNP)
Fee, Mary (West Scotland) (Lab)
Ferguson, Patricia (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (Lab)
Findlay, Neil (Lothian) (Lab)
Finnie, John (Highlands and Islands) (Ind)
FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
Gibson, Rob (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
Gray, Iain (East Lothian) (Lab)
Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
Hilton, Cara (Dunfermline) (Lab)
Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
Ingram, Adam (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
Johnstone, Alison (Lothian) (Green)
Keir, Colin (Edinburgh Western) (SNP)
Lamont, Johann (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab)
Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
Lyle, Richard (Central Scotland) (SNP)
MacAskill, Kenny (Edinburgh Eastern) (SNP)
MacDonald, Angus (Falkirk East) (SNP)
MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
Macdonald, Lewis (North East Scotland) (Lab)
Macintosh, Ken (Eastwood) (Lab)
Mackay, Derek (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
MacKenzie, Mike (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
Malik, Hanzala (Glasgow) (Lab)
Marra, Jenny (North East Scotland) (Lab)
Martin, Paul (Glasgow Provan) (Lab)
Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
Maxwell, Stewart (West Scotland) (SNP)
McAlpine, Joan (South Scotland) (SNP)
McCulloch, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Lab)
McDonald, Mark (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
McDougall, Margaret (West Scotland) (Lab)
McKelvie, Christina (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)
McLeod, Aileen (South Scotland) (SNP)
McLeod, Fiona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
McMahon, Siobhan (Central Scotland) (Lab)
McMillan, Stuart (West Scotland) (SNP)
McTaggart, Anne (Glasgow) (Lab)
Murray, Elaine (Dumfriesshire) (Lab)
Neil, Alex (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
Paterson, Gil (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
Pearson, Graeme (South Scotland) (Lab)
Pentland, John (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)
Robertson, Dennis (Aberdeenshire West) (SNP)
Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
Russell, Michael (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
Salmond, Alex (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
Smith, Drew (Glasgow) (Lab)
Smith, Elaine (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab)
Stevenson, Stewart (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
Stewart, David (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
Thompson, Dave (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
Urquhart, Jean (Highlands and Islands) (Ind)
Watt, Maureen (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
Wheelhouse, Paul (South Scotland) (SNP)
White, Sandra (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
Wilson, John (Central Scotland) (SNP)
Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow) (SNP)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 17, Against 96, Abstentions 0.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S4M-08707.2, in the name of Willie Rennie, which seeks to amend motion S4M-08707, in the name of Alex Salmond, on Scotland's future, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

Against

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Allan, Dr Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Allard, Christian (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Beamish, Claudia (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Biagi, Marco (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Brodie, Chic (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Brown, Gavin (Lothian) (Con)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Buchanan, Cameron (Lothian) (Con)
 Burgess, Margaret (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Campbell, Aileen (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 Campbell, Roderick (North East Fife) (SNP)
 Chisholm, Malcolm (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (Lab)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Crawford, Bruce (Stirling) (SNP)
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 Davidson, Ruth (Glasgow) (Con)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don, Nigel (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Dugdale, Kezia (Lothian) (Lab)
 Eadie, Jim (Edinburgh Southern) (SNP)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
 Fabiani, Linda (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Fee, Mary (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Ferguson, Patricia (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (Lab)
 Fergusson, Alex (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Findlay, Neil (Lothian) (Lab)
 Finnie, John (Highlands and Islands) (Ind)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gibson, Rob (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Goldie, Annabel (West Scotland) (Con)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Gray, Iain (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Hilton, Cara (Dunfermline) (Lab)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Ingram, Adam (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
 Johnstone, Alex (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Johnstone, Alison (Lothian) (Green)
 Keir, Colin (Edinburgh Western) (SNP)
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab)

Lamont, John (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 Lyle, Richard (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 MacAskill, Kenny (Edinburgh Eastern) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Angus (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 Macdonald, Lewis (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Macintosh, Ken (Eastwood) (Lab)
 Mackay, Derek (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 MacKenzie, Mike (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Malik, Hanzala (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Marra, Jenny (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Martin, Paul (Glasgow Provan) (Lab)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 Maxwell, Stewart (West Scotland) (SNP)
 McAlpine, Joan (South Scotland) (SNP)
 McCulloch, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 McDonald, Mark (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 McDougall, Margaret (West Scotland) (Lab)
 McKelvie, Christina (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)
 McLeod, Aileen (South Scotland) (SNP)
 McLeod, Fiona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 McMahon, Siobhan (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 McMillan, Stuart (West Scotland) (SNP)
 McTaggart, Anne (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Murray, Elaine (Dumfriesshire) (Lab)
 Neil, Alex (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Paterson, Gil (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Pearson, Graeme (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Pentland, John (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)
 Robertson, Dennis (Aberdeenshire West) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Russell, Michael (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Salmond, Alex (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Scanlon, Mary (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)
 Smith, Drew (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Smith, Elaine (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Stewart, David (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Thompson, Dave (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Urquhart, Jean (Highlands and Islands) (Ind)
 Watt, Maureen (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Wheelhouse, Paul (South Scotland) (SNP)
 White, Sandra (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Wilson, John (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow) (SNP)

Abstentions

Hume, Jim (South Scotland) (LD)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McInnes, Alison (North East Scotland) (LD)
 Rennie, Willie (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD)
 Scott, Tavish (Shetland Islands) (LD)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 0, Against 108, Abstentions 5.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S4M-08707, in the name of Alex

Salmond, on Scotland's future, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

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

Urquhart, Jean (Highlands and Islands) (Ind)
 Watt, Maureen (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Wheelhouse, Paul (South Scotland) (SNP)
 White, Sandra (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Wilson, John (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow) (SNP)

Against

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Beamish, Claudia (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Brown, Gavin (Lothian) (Con)
 Buchanan, Cameron (Lothian) (Con)
 Chisholm, Malcolm (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (Lab)
 Davidson, Ruth (Glasgow) (Con)
 Dugdale, Kezia (Lothian) (Lab)
 Fee, Mary (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Ferguson, Patricia (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (Lab)
 Fergusson, Alex (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Findlay, Neil (Lothian) (Lab)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Goldie, Annabel (West Scotland) (Con)
 Gray, Iain (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Hilton, Cara (Dunfermline) (Lab)
 Hume, Jim (South Scotland) (LD)
 Johnstone, Alex (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab)
 Lamont, John (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Macdonald, Lewis (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Macintosh, Ken (Eastwood) (Lab)
 Malik, Hanzala (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Marra, Jenny (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Martin, Paul (Glasgow Provan) (Lab)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McCulloch, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 McDougall, Margaret (West Scotland) (Lab)
 McInnes, Alison (North East Scotland) (LD)
 McMahon, Siobhan (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 McTaggart, Anne (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Murray, Elaine (Dumfriesshire) (Lab)
 Pearson, Graeme (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Pentland, John (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)
 Rennie, Willie (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD)
 Scanlon, Mary (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)
 Scott, Tavish (Shetland Islands) (LD)
 Smith, Drew (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Smith, Elaine (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Stewart, David (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 67, Against 46, Abstentions 0.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament deplores the welfare austerity cuts imposed by the UK Government on the most vulnerable; notes the estimate of the Child Poverty Action Group that, as a direct result of these, by 2020 child poverty will increase by up to 100,000; recognises that free school meals help tackle child poverty and promote child welfare and educational attainment; further recognises that free school meals save families at least £330 per child per year; confirms its commitment to increasing the number of primary school pupils eligible for free school meals; further confirms its commitment to continue to increase the provision of high-quality early learning and childcare, which,

as well as being of benefit to children, will be of great assistance to family finances and help to boost female participation in the labour market; believes that, with independence, Scotland can match countries such as Sweden and increase the number of women in the labour market by more than 100,000, increase Scottish output by £2.2 billion and government revenues by £700 million; acknowledges that the powers of independence are necessary to ensure that the full ambitions for early years education and childcare in Scotland are delivered as only with the powers of independence will these additional revenues stay in Scotland to fund such a policy for the long term; believes that having full control over both taxation and welfare is vital to achieve the transformation in childcare that Scotland needs and for child poverty to be finally eradicated, and further believes that only with independence can Scotland truly become the best place in the world for a child to grow up.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S4M-08672, in the name of Kenny MacAskill, on the Offender Rehabilitation Bill, United Kingdom legislation, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that the relevant provisions of the Offender Rehabilitation Bill, introduced in the House of Lords on 9 May 2013, which enable persons convicted in England and Wales and who will be subject to the new supervision requirements contained in the Bill to continue to be subject to those requirements in the event that they are subsequently transferred to Scotland under the Crime (Sentences) Act 1997, so far as these matters fall within the legislative competence of the Scottish Parliament, should be considered by the UK Parliament.

Fife Gingerbread

The Deputy Presiding Officer (John Scott):

The final item of business is a members' business debate on motion S4M-08611, in the name of David Torrance, on congratulations to Fife Gingerbread. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament congratulates Fife Gingerbread following its success in securing a grant of £48,770 from the Big Lottery Young Start initiative for the Teen Parent Project in Kirkcaldy; understands that this award will ensure the continuation of its vital work with teenage parents for another year; considers that the project offers an important service for teenage parents between the ages of 16 and 19, providing advice and support where required; acknowledges that the funding will enable the project to expand and develop, and wishes the Teen Parent Project the very best going forward.

17:08

David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP): I welcome to the Parliament today Debbie Duncan, a worker from the teen parent project in Kirkcaldy, Kathryn Miller of Fife Gingerbread, and Susanne Fraser-Kerr of Barnardo's.

As many members may be aware, my constituency has one of the highest teenage pregnancy rates in Europe. I am therefore keen to raise awareness of the issue and to highlight the excellent work that is done by Fife Gingerbread through initiatives such as the teen parent project, which provides support to young lone parents and helps them to cope with many of the problems that they face daily.

Evidence shows that young teenage mothers are less likely to complete their education or to seek further educational opportunities, and that teenage mothers are less likely to be employed and more likely to be in receipt of some form of income-based benefits or employed in low-paid jobs. Consequently, poverty is a major factor in teenage parenting. Indeed, data collected demonstrates that, statistically, there is a relationship between deprivation and teenage pregnancy; it indicates that young women under the age of 16 who live in Scotland's most deprived areas are more likely to experience teenage pregnancy than those who live in the more affluent areas.

According to the 2012 Scottish index of multiple deprivation, the most educationally deprived data zone in Fife is to be found in the intermediate zone of Kirkcaldy and comprises the areas of Hayfield and Smeaton. It is ranked 27th, which places it among the top 5 per cent of the most educationally deprived areas in Scotland. According to the index, the most health-deprived zone in Fife is in

the intermediate zone of Methil East. Both those zones lie in my constituency.

It is clear that, although other factors must be considered when looking at teenage pregnancies, deprivation plays a significant role and often brings with it low self-esteem. Fife Gingerbread is to be congratulated on its co-ordinated initiatives to address the issues that teenage mothers face.

Fife Gingerbread's teen parent project provides one-to-one support to teenage parents in conjunction with group work and peer support. The project was originally developed in response to specific issues that face young parents in the Levenmouth area. Following the success of the initial pilot in Levenmouth, the project was launched in Kirkcaldy in partnership with the YMCA and with support from NHS Fife and other voluntary sector groups.

Operationally, a dedicated teen parent liaison worker works in partnership with health and education agencies and with wider voluntary and statutory partners. The aims are to support teenage parents in establishing good parenting skills and developing support networks and to promote engagement with other services.

Partnership working includes mellow babies, which runs in partnership with Barnardo's; mellow bumps, which works in partnership with James and Harriet from Mellow Parenting; and a project that was introduced specifically for young fathers, in partnership with the Cottage Family Centre. The first mellow bumps programme started in October 2013 with referrals from the family health midwifery team, the family nurse partnership and health visitors. The Mellow Parenting programmes are in line with Scottish Government objectives.

Figures from the teen parent project's progress report of February 2013 show that 264 young mothers have been supported in the Levenmouth and Kirkcaldy areas, that 52 young fathers have been supported and that 292 children have benefited. Many of the clients were also referred to one or more additional services, such as Barnardo's, the Cottage Family Centre, Home-Start and the jobcentre.

Statistics that are based on an evaluation of the Kirkcaldy teen parent project that used the Rosenberg self-esteem scale evidenced an increase in the self-esteem of teen mothers. An evaluation of the Kirkcaldy and Levenmouth teen parent project that used the Warwick-Edinburgh mental wellbeing scale also evidenced an increase in the mental health and wellbeing of teen mothers. An evaluation of the Kirkcaldy teen parent project that used the tool to measure parenting self-efficacy evidenced an increase in the parenting skills and confidence of teen mothers. The excellent work that is carried out in

the Kirkcaldy area was recognised in the UK's biggest parenting competition, in which the Kirkcaldy teen parent project was named as one of the best in the east of Scotland.

The Linktown young parent group—which is based in an area of Kirkcaldy that I know well, having served as a councillor there for many years—was presented with a winner's certificate and a gold listing at the Netmums awards. Local mums and dads praised Kirkcaldy teen parent project and called it the highlight of their week. Parents stated that what makes the group special to them is the caring staff, the great range of activities on offer for kids and the fact that it puts a smile on the face of everyone who attends.

I have been privileged to witness at first hand some of the work that is done by Fife Gingerbread and the teen parent project. I attended a Fife Gingerbread annual general meeting at which single parents highlighted the difficulties that they face daily. One speaker, who was nervous on that day, is now a project worker for Kirkcaldy teen parent project and is in the gallery this evening.

Recently, I was invited to Fife Gingerbread's Hallowe'en party, where I was in my element in participating in the activities, including the singalong at the end, which I thoroughly enjoyed—although I am not sure that everyone else enjoyed my singing. Overall, parents and children alike had a fabulous time.

It was a delight to see how energetic and enthusiastic Debbie Duncan was in organising and participating in all that afternoon's activities. Just before Christmas, when I was doing some last-minute shopping at Asda, I bumped into Debbie. She was shopping, but not for herself—she was looking for vegetables to enable her to make home-made soup for her group in the Linktown area, many of whom were going without in order to get presents for their children. She was ensuring that they would have something to eat on the day. That is just a small example of the commitment and dedication that she and Fife Gingerbread staff give to their projects and it shows their willingness to go the extra mile to provide the best possible services to parents and their children.

The teen parent project will aim to deliver programmes that provide specific support, while simultaneously raising awareness of issues such as welfare reform. The impact of recent welfare reforms has presented challenges to many vulnerable sectors of society, but none more so than single parents. Single parents now find themselves with even greater stress and worry as they are mandatorily transitioned from one benefit to another. They are getting increasingly more anxious and concerned about how reform will impact on their day-to-day living in providing for their children.

Fife Gingerbread is delivering an initiative entitled "Pimp my purse"; I love that title, which makes me smile every time I read it. The initiative involves holding workshops in partnership with Citizens Advice and Rights Fife and credit unions.

The Kirkcaldy project has recently been recognised for its achievements thus far and has received a substantial grant from the Big Lottery Fund's young start initiative, which will enable Kirkcaldy teen parent project to continue to deliver highly valued services in the area.

Rhona and all her staff at Fife Gingerbread are delivering a service in my constituency that is greatly needed. It is tailored and delivered to the needs of teenage parents with an enthusiasm and passion that has had a positive and invaluable impact on all those taking part.

I wish Fife Gingerbread and its teen parent project every success in the future. I know that it will continue to make a huge difference in some of the most deprived areas of my constituency and I sincerely hope that those initiatives will be able to continue to support young teenage mums for many years to come.

17:16

Mary Fee (West Scotland) (Lab): I thank David Torrance for bringing the debate to the chamber. One of the reasons for my support for the debate comes from an event last January, at which I spoke on a research project between Fife Gingerbread and the Poverty Alliance. The resulting report, "Surviving Poverty—The Impact of Lone Parenthood", demonstrated the important work that needs to be carried out in order to fully support single parents in Fife and throughout Scotland. The study showed the experience of lone parenthood in rural areas. In many cases, being a single parent can be an isolating experience, especially in rural areas.

The report highlighted how lone parents in Fife sometimes survive. Some would skip meals to feed their children; some would reduce their usage of gas and electricity, meaning that their homes were cold; and some would miss payments or turn to payday lenders.

Fife Gingerbread fully deserves the award of almost £50,000, which will help many teenage parents in the area. Teenage parents often experience circumstances and challenges that most people who intend to become parents dare not imagine. It is widely recognised that many factors play a part in teenage pregnancy, such as alcohol and inequalities in education and health. However, it must be made clear that being a teenage parent does not alone make someone a bad parent.

The Health and Sport Committee undertook an inquiry into teenage pregnancy last year and its subsequent report makes for some interesting, if not unsurprising, reading.

A major part in reducing teenage pregnancies can be played by education in relation to not just sexual health, but alcohol, drug abuse and taking risks. However, services can reach those young people only when they attend school, which, evidence shows, is often not the case. Alternative sources of education and support, such as Fife Gingerbread's project, are to be encouraged and welcomed.

Modern media can and must play a better role in portraying women. On the subject of drinking and taking drugs, Robert Naylor from Renfrewshire Council rightly pointed to modern media's often poor depiction of women and how some behave in relation to taking risks with substances.

On television these days there are fewer and fewer appropriate role models to demonstrate self-respect and self-esteem to young women. Many depictions of young women show an alarming lack of both of those qualities. The same argument applies in relation to the sexualisation of TV, films and music.

The teen parent project rightly seeks to identify, understand and support the needs of teenage parents and the Big Lottery funding will go a long way towards meeting any challenges ahead for the parents that it helps.

17:19

Annabelle Ewing (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP): I, too, congratulate my colleague David Torrance on securing the debate and I welcome his guests to the gallery. I appreciate the opportunity to not just congratulate Fife Gingerbread on its success but highlight, here in the chamber, some of the really important work that that excellent organisation does.

As a member representing Fife and a member of the Parliament's Welfare Reform Committee, I am well aware of Fife Gingerbread's work and of our increasing need for its services and for those of other voluntary organisations in dealing particularly with the UK Government's welfare cuts and the misery that they have brought to some of the most vulnerable members of our society.

It is just less than a year since we participated in a debate that was secured by David Torrance to congratulate Fife Gingerbread on its 25th anniversary. Mr Torrance and Fife Gingerbread are doing very well indeed and I am very sorry that I missed seeing David Torrance's singing prowess at the Hallowe'en party. I look forward to having the opportunity to get involved in this year's

Hallowe'en party. Perhaps a duet with my colleague beckons; maybe not.

As we have heard, Fife Gingerbread is an excellent voluntary organisation that provides practical help to lone-parent families throughout Fife. One of the key elements is that practical support and information.

It is good to see that Fife Gingerbread, having achieved its 25th anniversary last year, is not resting on its laurels. Indeed, it is forging ahead to pursue new funding avenues and to develop new projects. The Big Lottery young start funding stream provides grants from £10,000 to £50,000 for projects that create opportunities for children and young people, so in securing £48,770 Fife Gingerbread's application did exceptionally well. All credit is due to the organisation because funding applications are not easy to manage. Getting such applications right takes up a lot of the time of workers and volunteers, so well done.

As David Torrance said, Fife Gingerbread's work with the teen parent project in Kirkcaldy has achieved high praise. In the summer, it was named as one of the best projects in the east of Scotland in the UK's biggest parenting competition, run by netmums.com. As a taste of the sort of thing that the project does, there was a get cooking event at which young mums were taught to create tasty and healthy meals and to improvise with their ingredients while sticking to a low budget. The mums were able to relax and enjoy that experience safe in the knowledge that their children were having fun in the crèche that was provided by Fife childcare strategy. Local mums, dads, and childcare workers have praised the Kirkcaldy teen parent project, calling it

"the highlight of our week."

Parents have also told how the group was special to them for its

"caring staff, great range of activities for kids and for putting a smile on the face of everyone who attends."

What an accolade and compliment to all those who are involved in the hard work of providing that service. It is great that the project has secured funding and will see its work continue for another year, as well as expanding and developing that service.

I congratulate everyone who is involved with Fife Gingerbread—whether as a worker, volunteer, fundraiser or service user—on their success with the teen parent project and the other great work that it does. I look forward to watching the organisation go from strength to strength in delivering support to single parents throughout Fife.

17:23

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con):

Annabelle Ewing has just reminded us that it is less than a year since we celebrated the 25th anniversary of Fife Gingerbread. As she said, that speaks volumes about David Torrance in lodging tonight's motion and about what Fife Gingerbread has achieved in the intervening time in successfully securing a grant from the Big Lottery young start initiative to develop further the teen parent project in Kirkcaldy.

As everyone knows from the all too stark statistics, Scotland continues to face up to the fact that it has a higher rate of teenage pregnancy than many other western European countries. Although the Scotland-wide teenage pregnancy rate among the under 20s has shown some kind of decline—that is welcome—among the under 16s there is still a concerning increase. It is therefore a positive step forward to see the very specific work that is being undertaken to look at how carefully directed support can be provided to the most vulnerable mothers and what interventions can take place to support our youngest families.

The teen parent project, as David Torrance set out, has shown its positive value from its pilot days in Levenmouth in 2009 right up to the launch of the much more sizeable project in Kirkcaldy in partnership with the YWCA.

I note from the updated briefing document that Fife Gingerbread provided to MSPs that somewhere in the region of 340 parents have received support through one-to-one work, with targeted work focusing on increasing access to other services as well as on developing parental skills, confidence and self-esteem. Fife Gingerbread estimates that the project has had a very positive impact on well over 300 children.

The project outcomes are to be warmly welcomed and it is good to see that as a result of the projects, 96 per cent of referrals resulted in the family accessing further support for children—as well as the focus on helping to improve levels of physical, intellectual, emotional and social development in children.

Early intervention is something that we have discussed at great length in this place—indeed, the deliberations of this morning's Education and Culture Committee are evidence of the extensive focus on these issues—and although members might come at some of the issues from slightly different angles, there is general agreement around the chamber about just how important that focus is. That is another reason why I would like to add my congratulations to Fife Gingerbread.

Family nurses visit expectant mothers and it is obviously important that those visits are very regular. Family nurses have a great deal to

contribute to not only the child's development and care but many of the preventative measures that we expect, as well as helping with the development of parenting skills and with better diet, education and employment in later years.

That programme aims to enable young, first-time mothers to develop their confidence in all those areas, in particular with regard to the parenting angle, and again, although we have slight differences of opinion across the chamber, I think that everybody accepts that there is general cross-party agreement on the importance of that.

As regards the issue of young mothers, often children themselves, accessing services, I know that Fife Gingerbread has become rather specialist in the facility that it provides. An awful lot of the other groups around the county can not only gain the confidence to do something similar to that facility but see the real and lasting benefits that Fife Gingerbread has managed to achieve.

The minister is, I am sure, very sympathetic to this cause and I hope that in closing she will be able to outline some of the things that the Scottish Government has taken on board from the recent report and how we can push that agenda forward.

I add my very strong congratulations to the group and to David Torrance.

17:28

Roderick Campbell (North East Fife) (SNP): I, too, congratulate David Torrance on bringing the debate to the chamber and on highlighting the continuing work of Fife Gingerbread, which works so hard to provide invaluable support to lone parents across Fife. I welcome representatives of Fife Gingerbread to the public gallery and thank the Big Lottery for its contribution to this little matter.

Fife Gingerbread provides accessible, approachable and non-judgmental support, advice and information to lone parents—parents of all ages and from all backgrounds and all walks of life. There are times when individuals feel that they are alone and that no one else can understand their situation, but Fife Gingerbread is there for them. It is a vital organisation for lone parents in Fife, and the level of support that it offers could not be achieved without the hard work of both its staff and its volunteers.

Fife Gingerbread has long been known for its work with lone parents, but it recognises that some of the difficulties that are faced by teenage parents are unique and that being a young parent is very different from becoming a parent in one's 20s or 30s. Its teen parent project offers support to young parents aged from 16 to 19, whether they are male or female, in a relationship or single. The project

can also be accessed by young pregnant women between the ages of 16 and 19.

The Big Lottery Fund grant will help Fife Gingerbread with that project in central Fife. I hope that the project will build on the excellent work that it has already undertaken in Levenmouth, Kirkcaldy and Glenrothes, which has filled in the gap in support that is often created when young parents leave school.

It is fantastic that, to date, Fife Gingerbread has been able to help 341 parents through one-to-one and group work. That positive work, which focuses on increasing access to other services and developing skills, has also benefited 316 children to date. It operates by working with other organisations in the community to support teenage parents in establishing good parenting skills, developing group and peer support networks and engaging with other services.

Link workers help the young parent through one-to-one support and home visits. They help with advocacy and representation, assist with antenatal and postnatal care, promote health services for the parent and the child and signpost support agencies where relevant. They also assist with debt and housing issues, relationship counselling and parenting and play, through group work and creating peer support. Importantly, they help with confidence building and skills improvement. It is a very big agenda indeed.

It is clear, particularly from the case study of Katie in the briefing provided by Fife Gingerbread, that the project's support is invaluable to those who use it. Katie, who was first referred to the project by her midwife, went from being a young woman who had been taken advantage of by others to becoming a young mother who was able to stand up for both herself and her son.

The teen parent project aims to make a positive difference in the lives of young parents and their children by ensuring that young parents are engaged with other services, which will benefit their own and their children's health and wellbeing, as well as improve levels of physical, intellectual, emotional and social development. The project has already helped young parents to increase their confidence and self-esteem, as well as improve their parenting and self-advocacy skills.

Like others, I wish Fife Gingerbread the very best for the future and commend its staff and volunteers for all their hard work. I hope that the debate helps to raise the profile of its work and helps young parents further. I thank David Torrance once again for bringing to the chamber a debate on a topic that affects many families throughout Scotland.

17:32

Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): I am pleased to speak in this debate on Fife Gingerbread's teen parent project, which is based in Kirkcaldy. I welcome the guests to the gallery and thank David Torrance for securing the time to have the debate.

Fife Gingerbread is a great organisation that runs a number of projects and services for families across Fife. Established as an association for one-parent families, it has worked in Fife since 1987, and during that time it has gone from strength to strength. A positive, down-to-earth group of people work for the organisation and always make people feel welcome if they visit any of their projects.

Fife Gingerbread co-ordinates a number of projects including Dads Rock and the new pimp my purse project, which David Torrance is very keen on, and it is a keen partner in the Levenmouth gateway project, the official launch of which I was delighted to attend last year. Fife has a good record of positive partnership working and Fife Gingerbread is often found at the heart of that.

This evening the focus is on Fife Gingerbread's excellent teen parent project, which is running in Kirkcaldy. I congratulate it on securing almost £50,000 from the Big Lottery young start initiative, which will support the project for a further year. The award of that money is a credit to Fife Gingerbread's hard work and dedication and the positive results that it is getting from that work.

Before I became an MSP I worked for the Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations and I know from the experience of its members how much work and time has to go into funding applications, as well as the level of detail that often is required. Although the one-year funding is very welcome, it will not be long before the teen parent project has to start to look for the money for next year. We need to ensure that funding for the voluntary sector supports the sustainability of projects and that the maximum amount of an organisation's time is spent on delivery and not just on securing its financial future. However, the Big Lottery's support provides stability for another year, which is very much to be welcomed.

We know that Scotland has one of the highest teen pregnancy rates in western Europe and that Fife's rates are higher than those in the rest of Scotland. As Mary Fee and others have described, the reasons for teenage pregnancy are complex and often unique to each individual. Appropriate sexual health education and access to services are important for every generation, not just teenagers, but services can be variable for young people, depending on where they live or which school they go to.

I took part in a schools panel debate in Kirkcaldy last year, and the teenagers in the hall were very positive about the new services that were being offered in their schools. It is important that young people have choices and that their decisions are informed. We should not ignore the fact that some young couples make a positive decision to start a family young. However, like those from any other age group who start a family, they should have access to appropriate support and advice when needed.

Being a teen parent can be challenging. Young parents might face changes in their relationship or finances, and there is the possibility of disruption to their education, whether that is at school, college or university. They might have to review their accommodation options. The younger someone is, the more likely they are to have fewer available resources. Also, there are the additional financial pressures that anybody experiences in starting a family.

Of course, having a new baby is a wonderful thing and teen parents should be supported to be able to enjoy that experience and give the baby a good start in life. The teen parent project provides good advice and support for young parents on a range of issues. It recently supported the open me campaign, on the importance of opening intimidating-looking mail. The teen parent project provides a positive, welcoming and inclusive forum for support.

Before the debate, I looked at Fife Gingerbread's submission to the Health and Sport Committee's inquiry into teenage pregnancy. The comments of young mums on the project sum up why it is so valuable and deserving of support. The young mums said that they would only go to groups that were appropriate for their age and designed for their age group. They said:

"The groups are the best. Just being able to get out the house and away from your partner. Seeing other young parents and getting to talk to them and let the children play."

I give the project all the best wishes for the future and I am pleased to recognise its good work.

17:36

The Minister for Children and Young People (Aileen Campbell): As this is the first debate that I have been involved in this year, I wish everyone a happy new year. I also thank David Torrance for bringing the debate to the chamber and congratulate him on doing so. Like Liz Smith, I remember his celebration debate that welcomed 25 years of Fife Gingerbread. I thank the other members who have shown their support for this excellent organisation. I had the pleasure of meeting some of the families who are supported

by Fife Gingerbread when I launched its gateway project back in May 2013. I am delighted that the organisation is extending its reach even further and is developing its innovative approach. I congratulate the group on its award.

Our aspiration is to make Scotland the best place in the world to grow up in and to make Scotland a fairer country for all children to thrive in. We want a child-friendly country that possesses a culture that is supportive of all parents and carers and that values their crucial and important role. Fife Gingerbread is helping us to achieve that vision. I think that everyone agrees that families need to feel supported, not only by our public services but by their families and communities. Organisations such as Gingerbread play a crucial role in supporting our parents, carers and families right across Scotland.

As I have said, I have heard about and seen at first hand the good work that Fife Gingerbread is doing. I remain impressed by the passion and dedication of Fife Gingerbread's team. David Torrance described how they go above and beyond to help the families they work with. The quotes that Annabelle Ewing gave about the caring staff, the great activities that go on and the teen parent project being the highlight of the week speak volumes about the high regard in which the project and Fife Gingerbread are held.

Liz Smith, Rod Campbell and Claire Baker rightly praised the group. They talked about the help that it has provided to the 340 families who have received the one-to-one service and the important preventative work that the talented Gingerbread staff do. Claire Baker also referred to the fact that the teen project is an age-appropriate group. I know from speaking to many teenage parents that they sometimes feel intimidated about going to groups, so it is great that Gingerbread has an age-appropriate group where people can get the support that they need. The fact that so many Fife politicians have talked passionately about the project shows how important it is right across the region.

I welcome the investment in the teen parent project by the Big Lottery Fund. Claire Baker and others have noted how big an achievement that award has been. Although parenting can be a wonderful life-enhancing experience for many young people, it can be a real struggle for others. As the mother of a very lively wee three-year-old who had his first day at nursery school today, I know that being a parent is a great privilege but can also be a real challenge.

The Government recognises without question the importance of ensuring that parents, whatever their age, feel empowered, valued, supported and confident in their ability to care for their children. That is why, in October 2012, we published the

national parenting strategy, with more than 80 commitments to strengthen, help and support parents throughout Scotland. We want parents, carers and families to know that, whatever their needs and wherever they live, practical support is available.

That parenting strategy was backed up with £18 million-worth of investment to better co-ordinate information and access to advice and support wherever they are needed. Good parenting is every child's right and every parent's responsibility. We want to embed those rights and responsibilities in everyday life.

All parents and carers can feel vulnerable and unsure at times, but our teenage parents, who sometimes lack the confidence to seek support, often feel that vulnerability most. Sometimes, those feelings of uncertainty can be resolved easily by good advice. However, for others, the challenges are more complex and longer term.

Either way, we want to support all parents, families and communities to build better lives for themselves and their children to ensure that every child has the best start in life. That is why our parenting strategy is important, as is investment in family support.

The Fife Gingerbread teen parent project shares the same goals as us. Its work focuses on giving teenage mothers and fathers the support that they need to establish their parenting skills, and it works closely with other services that are already available within communities to complement and promote their use. Such informal but personal support is one of the things that teen parents need most in their lives and it can really help them to adjust to their new roles.

David Torrance spoke about how the project works in collaboration with the other services that I mentioned and across the third sector. That collaborative work is paying dividends for families throughout Fife. However, unfortunately, many young mums and dads face additional stresses and strains in their lives. David Torrance and Mary Fee described poverty, deprivation and the low self-esteem that it is necessary for us to try to tackle. Annabelle Ewing described the impact of welfare reform.

Stigma, isolation and the lack of age-appropriate information have the potential to disenfranchise many teenage parents. Projects such as the Fife Gingerbread teen parent project ensure that they are not left alone to face the challenges of caring for their children and help them to be the best that they can be. I am pleased to hear from David Torrance about the evaluation of the project, which has enhanced the ability of parents to parent well.

The project will also complement the good work of the family nurse partnerships in Fife. I have also

visited those partnerships and heard about the benefits that they are providing for new young parents. I very much welcome the recent announcement from the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing, Alex Neil, that that programme will be rolled out across Scotland to help many more young parents who need a bit of support and advice.

In addition to that support for families, our vision for childcare is ambitious. It includes the expansion of childcare to a minimum of 600 flexible hours a year for all three and four-year-olds and for two-year-olds who are looked after or are under a kinship care order. Those proposals are set out in the Children and Young People (Scotland) Bill that Liz Smith rightly points out is going through stage 2.

I am also delighted that the debate follows the one in which the First Minister announced a further expansion in childcare provision for our most vulnerable two-year-olds. Coupled with the proposals that are already in the Children and Young People (Scotland) Bill, that means that we will provide childcare for around 15 per cent of two-year-olds from 2014 and 27 per cent from 2015.

We are also committed to extending the offer of 600 hours of funded early learning and childcare further in the long term. As we set out in "Scotland's Future: Your Guide to an Independent Scotland", we plan to provide 1,140 hours to all children from age one to starting school. That is our commitment to build a high-quality, universal system for all children.

All those commitments will build on the legacy that we have and the good work to help to support families that our partners throughout Scotland, including Fife Gingerbread, are already doing to help us to move towards making Scotland the best place in the world to grow up in.

I thank David Torrance and others who have contributed to tonight's debate. I am only sorry that he did not manage to sing tonight, although he has the offer of a duet and I look forward to any YouTube evidence that might come from that.

I wish Fife Gingerbread teen parent project all the very best for the future and thank David Torrance again for raising the matter in the Parliament.

Meeting closed at 17:44.

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