



The Scottish Parliament  
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

## Official Report

# MEETING OF THE PARLIAMENT

Thursday 25 September 2014

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# Scottish Parliament

Thursday 25 September 2014

## General Question Time

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

### Poverty (Disabled People)

#### 1. Jamie Hepburn (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth)

**(SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government how it will reduce poverty among disabled people. (S4O-03531)

**The Minister for Housing and Welfare (Margaret Burgess):** We are committed to promoting and protecting equality and human rights for disabled people and we are supporting disabled people's organisations to increase their capacity and effectiveness to engage in the redesign of public services, as well as supporting independent living.

We recognise that households containing a disabled person have a substantially greater risk of poverty. Recently published Scottish Government research shows that a significant number of disabled people in Scotland will lose some or all of their disability benefits by 2018. The research also shows that the cumulative impacts of tax and welfare reforms will mainly affect families containing at least one disabled person, particularly a disabled child. We remain committed to doing all that we can to help those who are affected by welfare changes, including investing £7 million in each year from 2013-14 to 2015-16 on welfare mitigation activity, such as advice and support services.

**Jamie Hepburn:** The minister mentions the welfare reform process. Does she agree with me that the United Kingdom Government's decision to replace the disability living allowance with the personal independence payment puts 100,000 disabled Scots at risk of losing income of £1,120 per annum and that that policy, which seems to be supported across the Westminster parties, including the Labour Party, puts disabled people under real pressure?

**Margaret Burgess:** I certainly agree with Jamie Hepburn that disabled people are being put under significant pressure because of decisions that have been made at Westminster and supported by all the main Westminster parties.

The policy change will have a significant impact on disabled people in Scotland and many disabled people will get no PIP award at all after being reassessed. Others will receive a reduced award. The loss of more than £1,000 per year reflects the

lowest value loss or reduction of any one component of the disability living allowance. We share the concerns of disability organisations that many disabled people will face financial hardship as a result of the move to PIP.

We will do all that we can to help and we will continue to impress on the UK Government that the most vulnerable people in our society must be protected and that any changes to the welfare system must not further reduce their income.

### Local Income Tax

#### 2. Hugh Henry (Renfrewshire South) (Lab):

To ask the Scottish Government what the latest date will be for the introduction of a local income tax. (S4O-03532)

**The Minister for Local Government and Planning (Derek Mackay):** The Scottish Government is committed to consulting others later in this parliamentary session to develop a fairer, more progressive local tax based on the ability to pay.

**Hugh Henry:** A local income tax was promised more than seven years ago—seven years ago, Presiding Officer. The minister says that consultation will take place later in this parliamentary session. Will the minister guarantee that that local income tax will be introduced by the end of the parliamentary session?

**Derek Mackay:** I advise Mr Henry that the commitment that was outlined in the manifesto on which this Government was elected will be delivered. That commitment was that

"Over the period of the next Parliament we will consult with others to produce a fairer system based on ability to pay to replace the Council Tax and we will put this to the people at the next election, by which time Scotland will have more powers over income tax."

We will keep our vow. Will the Labour Party keep its?

### Rail Journey Times

#### 3. Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con):

To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to reduce rail journey times between Perth and other Scottish cities. (S4O-03533)

**The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Infrastructure, Investment and Cities (Nicola Sturgeon):** Improving journey times on the Scottish rail network is a key strategic outcome for the Scottish Government. That is why we are committed to a £5 billion package of investment in our railways until 2019. That will support improvements to infrastructure and services across the network, including substantial improvements to the Highland main line. Our desire for improvement is also reflected in the

procurement for the next ScotRail franchise, in which bidders have been encouraged to reduce journey times, particularly on intercity routes.

**Liz Smith:** I thank the cabinet secretary for that response, but this comes at a time when analysis of journey times between Inverness and Glasgow has shown that trains are taking 10 minutes longer than they were in 2000. Even the so-called express services are three minutes slower. Will the cabinet secretary decide on specific commitments when the Scottish Government is negotiating the new ScotRail franchise, in order to guarantee that the promises are kept and that passenger services are improved?

**Nicola Sturgeon:** I said in my original answer that improvement of the nature that Liz Smith talks about is very much a focus of the process for the next ScotRail franchise. Liz Smith will be aware that the next phase of improvements to the Highland main line will deliver greater capacity and faster journey times to try to improve connectivity for passengers and businesses. We are also committed to a rolling programme of electrification, which includes the routes between Edinburgh and Perth and Dundee, from Dunblane to Aberdeen and from Perth to Inverness. The Aberdeen to central belt improvements project, which is also being developed, will deliver faster services and improved connectivity between our cities.

I hope that Liz Smith will accept that a considerable programme of work is under way, but I will ensure that her comments are conveyed to the Minister for Transport and Veterans, and I know that he would be happy to discuss the details further with her.

**Roderick Campbell (North East Fife) (SNP):** The cabinet secretary might be aware of support for a rail halt at Newburgh on the existing Perth to Edinburgh line and that we await the results of a delayed feasibility study. Can she confirm that the Government retains an interest in this on-going matter and will consider a STAG—Scottish transport appraisal guidance—appraisal if the feasibility study is positive?

**Nicola Sturgeon:** The Scottish Government is of course willing to consider rail-based interventions that receive a positive appraisal under the Scottish transport appraisal guidance, subject to affordability and the potential impact on passengers using the wider rail network. For example, that involves the challenge of balancing reduced journey times against additional stops. I am aware that the south-east of Scotland transport partnership and the Tayside and central Scotland transport partnership are undertaking a joint business case study in conjunction with Fife Council and Perth and Kinross Council regarding proposed rail stations at Newburgh and Bridge of Earn. If those bodies decide that new stations in

those locations fit with their transport strategies, they will of course consider undertaking a STAG appraisal, which will explore all possible transport solutions and not just rail.

## Employment

**4. Fiona McLeod (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what progress it is making in tackling unemployment and increasing employment. (S4O-03534)

**The Cabinet Secretary for Training, Youth and Women's Employment (Angela Constance):** The latest labour market statistics demonstrate that we are making significant progress on reducing unemployment rates and increasing the number of those entering employment in Scotland. The labour market statistics for May to July 2014 show that the total employment level in Scotland rose by 87,000 in a one-year period, to over 2.6 million, which is the highest level since records began in 1992. The female employment level is also at its highest, at over 1.2 million. Our on-going commitment across Government is to sustain economic growth, and that is delivering results for the people of Scotland.

**Fiona McLeod:** I welcome those numbers from the cabinet secretary, but does she agree that any enhanced devolution settlement, as promised at the end of the referendum campaign, must provide genuine job-creating powers for Scotland?

**Angela Constance:** Indeed. There was certainly much discussion during the referendum about job-creating powers, although not everybody could actually name the job-creating powers. There is undoubtedly a mandate for substantial and comprehensive change. We need transformational job-creating powers. I hope that all of us in the Parliament can unite as champions for change.

## High-skilled, High-quality Jobs (West Scotland)

**5. Margaret McDougall (West Scotland) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government what it is doing to promote high-skilled, high-quality jobs in the West Scotland region. (S4O-03535)

**The Cabinet Secretary for Training, Youth and Women's Employment (Angela Constance):** Scotland offers the most competitive business tax regime in the United Kingdom and the Scottish Government is delivering a range of initiatives to create jobs and attract inward investment. For example, the £842 million investment in the new Glasgow Southern hospital is supporting a peak of 1,500 jobs on site, while the recent Glasgow and Clyde valley city deal, which the Scottish Government is supporting with £500 million over 20 years, aims to deliver 29,000 new jobs in the wider city region.

Business gateway and Scottish Enterprise support to start-up and expanding businesses encourages job creation. That includes regional selective assistance awards which, in West Scotland, totalled £29.6 million in 2013-14. Those awards are anticipated to create or safeguard over 4,000 jobs.

**The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick):** Kenneth Gibson. Oh—I am so sorry, Ms McDougall.

**Margaret McDougall:** Thank you, Presiding Officer. Yes, I am still here. I thank the cabinet secretary for her answer, but can she address claims made during the referendum campaign that high-skilled, high-quality jobs would be secured in the west of Scotland through a new oil boom, despite the fact that no company has found west coast oil to be commercially viable? *[Interruption.]*

**The Presiding Officer:** Order.

**Margaret McDougall:** Can the cabinet secretary confirm today what the official Scottish Government position is and what discussions have taken place with the United Kingdom Government regarding this issue?

**The Presiding Officer:** My apologies again, Ms McDougall.

**Angela Constance:** I refer Ms McDougall to the BBC reports of the Heriot-Watt University report.

**Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP):** Can the cabinet secretary confirm that, in the west of Scotland, specifically North Ayrshire, capital projects such as the new Garnock academy, Ayrshire central hospital and Brodick harbour will help to create and sustain employment and that participation by women in modern apprenticeships is above average while youth unemployment is falling faster than anywhere else in Scotland?

**Angela Constance:** I am pleased to be able to confirm that the number of modern apprenticeship starts in Mr Gibson's constituency has increased over the year. There is other substantial investment in North Ayrshire, particularly through the youth employment Scotland fund, whereby the Ayrshire councils work collaboratively and put forward the most ambitious bid. They are taking that forward very successfully.

The annual population survey, which was published just this week, confirms the good news for Mr Gibson's constituency. For example, over the year, the employment level in North Ayrshire has risen by 5 percentage points, which is an increase of 4,700 jobs. There is a similar trend with young people, with 1,000 more young people in work in North Ayrshire.

**John Scott (Ayr) (Con):** The cabinet secretary will be aware that the Romain Py report on the future of Prestwick airport has still not been made publicly available. Will that report be made available soon and when will the Scottish Government produce the corporate vision for the future of Prestwick airport, which it is hoped will secure existing jobs and deliver new ones in the west of Scotland?

**Angela Constance:** Mr Scott is right to highlight the importance of Prestwick airport and this Government's commitment to securing the airport and its role in creating job-creating powers. I am sure that the Deputy First Minister will keep Mr Scott in the loop about progress, as she has done to date.

**Hugh Henry (Renfrewshire South) (Lab):** The cabinet secretary referred to a report from Heriot-Watt University on the BBC website. Can she tell Parliament what that report said?

**Angela Constance:** I refer Mr Henry to the BBC. I am sure that he is a keen watcher of the BBC. *[Interruption.]*

**The Presiding Officer:** Order.

**Angela Constance:** But the important point now that we are on this side of the referendum is that I hope Mr Henry and I will now be on the same side advocating substantial and comprehensive job-creating powers for this Parliament. I extend to Mr Henry the hand of friendship for us to be partners for progress when it comes to creating more jobs in Scotland. I hope that Mr Henry and his colleagues, when it comes to the economy of Scotland, start talking up the talents of this nation as opposed to running it down, and that goes for our oil industry as well.

### Referendum (Turnout)

**6. Alison Johnstone (Lothian) (Green):** To ask the Scottish Government what the turnout was of the referendum. (S4O-03536)

**The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Infrastructure, Investment and Cities (Nicola Sturgeon):** Just under 4.3 million people registered to vote in the referendum. The number of votes cast was 3,623,344. That gives an overall turnout of 84.6 per cent, which is the highest turnout ever recorded in a Scottish election or referendum, which is something that all of us should celebrate.

**Alison Johnstone:** I sincerely hope that we can capture that enthusiasm for our nation. Politics in Scotland needs to open up to become a greater mix of representational and participative democracy. The debate on new powers should not be just between political parties. How does the Scottish Government see people being involved in

this process, particularly given the short timescales involved?

**Nicola Sturgeon:** Alison Johnstone asks a very important question. First, I am sure that the staggering increase in membership for both the Scottish National Party and the Green Party is a clear sign that people want to continue to be involved in politics and in the decisions that shape this country.

On the debate around more powers, when John Swinney and I met Lord Robert Smith earlier this week, as has already been made clear, one of the points that we stressed to him was the importance of public engagement in the process that will now unfold. He certainly responded to that very positively, and I think that it is incumbent on all of us to make sure that, whatever happens around more powers—my views on that are very well known—this is not some kind of backroom deal or Westminster establishment stitch-up. Scotland will not go back to what it was before, because the people of Scotland will demand that those promises are kept.

#### **“Challenges from the frontline”**

**7. Christina McKelvie (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what its position is on the report “Challenges from the frontline”, which suggests that Barnardo’s Scotland is increasingly reporting extreme levels of destitution among the families of the vulnerable children that it works with. (S4O-03537)

**The Minister for Housing and Welfare (Margaret Burgess):** The wellbeing and safety of Scotland’s children and young people are a key priority for the Scottish Government. All children and young people have the right to be cared for and protected from harm, and to grow up in a safe environment in which their rights and needs are respected.

I heard the concerns that are expressed in the report from Barnardo’s and the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children at the ministerial advisory group on child poverty. There are concerns that a combination of the United Kingdom Government’s welfare reforms, low wages and rising living costs are significantly contributing to the number of children and families living in poverty in Scotland. That is unacceptable, and I am concerned that, at a time when we continue to work with the advisory group to improve children’s wellbeing and life chances, it is estimated that UK Government welfare changes will lead to up to 100,000 additional children in Scotland living in poverty by 2020.

**Christina McKelvie:** The minister mentioned the prospect of up to 100,000 more children in

Scotland being pushed into poverty as a result of Westminster welfare reforms. Welfare and benefit caps were proposed this week at the Labour Party conference, which would be applied in the unlikely event that it was elected at the next election. Will the minister outline what steps are being taken to mitigate that impact?

**Margaret Burgess:** I reassure the member that reducing poverty and inequalities is a priority for this Government, and our child poverty strategy sets out our preventative approach to tackling poverty. However, the cumulative impact of the UK welfare reforms over six years to 2015-16 could result in the Scottish welfare bill being reduced by around £6 billion, and more than £1 billion of that reduction relates directly to children in Scotland.

We are doing what we can to mitigate the impact of the reforms, and our current and planned spending will invest at least £260 million over the period 2013-14 to 2015-16 to limit the damage of Westminster welfare policies in Scotland.

#### **Fairer Pay**

**8. Siobhan McMahon (Central Scotland) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it is committed to fairer pay for workers employed by private companies on public contracts. (S4O-03538)

**The Minister for Energy, Enterprise and Tourism (Fergus Ewing):** Yes. Our record on addressing low pay is good. We guarantee our staff at least a living wage, and the Procurement Reform (Scotland) Act 2014 says that public bodies must set out their policy on the payment of a living wage for those working on public contracts. It also allows us to make statutory guidance on how public bodies can consider employment-related issues as part of a public procurement tendering process, and we plan to publish that guidance next year.

**Siobhan McMahon:** Recent Office for National Statistics figures highlight that, in Falkirk, North Lanarkshire and South Lanarkshire, 46,006 workers are being paid less than the Scottish living wage. Scottish Labour backs the proposal to give a £1,000 tax rebate to employers who pay the living wage, and we want to establish a national living wage strategy that reports to, and is accountable to, the Scottish Parliament.

What action will the Scottish Government take to ensure that workers who are employed by private companies on public contracts throughout my region and across Scotland are paid the living wage, which could increase earnings for full-time workers who are paid less than the living wage by up to £2,600 a year?



**Fergus Ewing:** The Deputy First Minister met the Scottish Trades Union Congress and unions on 6 May and they welcomed the approach that the Scottish Government is taking with regard to the implementation of guidance, which will be brought forward next year, after we debated the matter in relation to the Procurement Reform (Scotland) Bill this year.

I respectfully point out to the member the fact that the minimum wage in the UK is currently £6.31 an hour. The living wage in Scotland is £7.65 an hour, which is over a fifth more. It is extremely surprising to me that the Labour Party did not embrace the opportunity of this Parliament being seized with the powers to address the issue of low pay comprehensively. The approach that we have taken shows that we have achieved far more than the Labour Party ever has, not least because Tony Blair promised in 1995 to abolish zero-hours contracts and, 19 years later, we are still waiting.

## First Minister's Question Time

12:00

### Engagements

**1. Johann Lamont (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab):** To ask the First Minister what engagements he has planned for the rest of the day. (S4F-02288)

**The First Minister (Alex Salmond):** I know that the Parliament will allow me to note that today is the funeral of Iain MacCormick, the late member of Parliament for Argyll. Mr Swinney is attending on behalf of the Scottish Government. Iain was the brother of Neil MacCormick and the son of John MacCormick, the greater home ruler. He was a fine member of Parliament for Argyll. He went to vote terminally ill last Thursday, because he wanted to cast his vote in the referendum in person. We will all miss him very much indeed.

**Johann Lamont:** On our side, we of course send our condolences to Iain MacCormick's family at what is a very sad time.

For the past six weeks, the First Minister has warned the people of Scotland—some might even say that he has misled them—that the national health service would be privatised if there was a no vote. Last week, there was a vote and we now know that it is the sovereign will of the people of Scotland to stay strong in the United Kingdom.

Some weeks before that no vote, the First Minister of Scotland privatised the medical records of every Scot in the country. Why did he keep that quiet until after the referendum? Is not it the case that Alex Salmond has done more to privatise the NHS than anyone else in Scottish history?

**The First Minister:** No, that is not the case. The Scottish primary care information resource is an information technology system, which replaces another IT system. To describe a contract for the Scottish primary care information resource as "privatisation" is like saying that this Parliament is being privatised because we use the Windows system in our computers. It is a ridiculous argument to put forward. The SPIRE system gives very substantial advantages in terms of collection and governance of information throughout the national health service. It is right and proper that the Government has sought and received guarantees on the data's security. That is absolutely the right thing to do.

Johann Lamont, who denied this—indeed, I think that Alistair Darling said that no Government would privatise the NHS—should have a look at what Andy Burnham has been saying at the Labour Party conference, confirming the route for privatisation and charging that the Labour Party

believes is going on at Westminster at the present moment. Given that that is now being confirmed by the Labour Party, will there be some acceptance of the knock-on effect that that has in Scotland in terms of finance and the critical importance for Scotland's future of controlling not just the administration, but the finances of our national health service?

**Johann Lamont:** It might be a while since we last had an exchange of questions and answers, but that is no more credible than anything else that the First Minister has said in answers over the past period.

The First Minister, and his anointed successor, Nicola Sturgeon, have increased the number of NHS patients who are treated privately by almost 500 per cent. He spends £100 million of public money on private healthcare. This Government privatised our health records during a campaign in which the First Minister claimed that the health service would be privatised if we did not vote for him and—guess what—he was privatising it anyway. Now that the campaign is over, will the First Minister be honest with the people of Scotland and admit that he is doing more to privatise the NHS than anyone else in Scotland?

**The First Minister:** Less than 1 per cent of health board expenditure goes to the private sector in Scotland. The figure in England is already 6 per cent. According to the Labour Party, it is heading towards 20 per cent. To describe a software or an IT system as an example of privatisation when, incidentally, the company already provides such systems to the health boards in Scotland and has done so since 1998, is—[*Interruption.*]

Well—this is what has happened to the Labour Party. I have said before that *The Telegraph* has become its house journal. If the *Daily Mail* has become the source material for the Labour Party, we can see why its questions get ever more ridiculous. [*Interruption.*]

**The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick):** Order.

**The First Minister:** The position for the Scottish health service is simple: if there is a move to privatisation and the introduction of charging—and therefore a lowering of public spending—south of the border, it impacts on the finances of the Scottish health service. That is why if we are to keep our national health service in public hands we have to control both the finances and the administration. That is what we should do, that is what we intend to do, and that is what is supported by the overwhelming majority of the Scottish people.

**Johann Lamont:** There has been a huge increase in private spending on the First Minister's watch—and he knows it.

Perhaps the First Minister can break the habits of a lifetime and indulge in a little truthmongering. He claimed—and now appears to continue to claim—that the NHS would be privatised if there was a no vote, but as he said that, he was increasing the amount of public money that is being spent on private health providers. Six weeks before the referendum, the First Minister privatised the health records of every person in Scotland. Will he just admit that he has done more to privatise the NHS in Scotland than any other politician in history?

**The First Minister:** Getting an IT system and the use of a computer system from a company that already provides IT systems to general practitioners across Scotland does not constitute privatisation of the national health service. What it constitutes is having a better IT system than we have at present.

Johann Lamont has argued that I should beware of my anointed successor, but I have read in the papers that there seems to be a number of anointed successors for her. [*Laughter.*] However, she can be confident in having the support of the members of Parliament whom she leads at Westminster. *The Herald* quotes one MP, when

“asked if Ms Lamont was under threat”

as saying:

“Yes. People will rally round but the sharks will be circling.”

I say to Johann Lamont that one leadership election in the political parties in Scotland is enough at any one time—[*Interruption.*]

**The Presiding Officer:** Order!

**The First Minister:** —but we can be absolutely confident that whatever happens, a lot more people will vote in the SNP leadership election than will vote in the Labour Party one.

**Johann Lamont:** Do not worry. When the First Minister is long gone, I will still be doing my job on behalf of the people of Scotland. [*Interruption.*]

**The Presiding Officer:** Order!

**Johann Lamont:** As an optimist, I hope that the coronation of Nicola Sturgeon will ensure that she answers a question or two, which is something that her boss is evidently not able to do.

But, to the serious business of this Government. We now know, because of the courage of a whistleblower, about the £450 million-worth of cuts that the First Minister is planning for the NHS, but decided not to tell us about until after the referendum. During the referendum campaign, the First Minister secretly privatised the health records of every Scot while warning—[*Interruption.*] It is astonishing that he was privatising the health

records of every Scot while warning of the dangers of privatisation. The First Minister has increased spending on private healthcare to £100 million. I ask him: why does he say that he is against privatising the health service when that is exactly what he is doing? When was he planning to tell us about the £100 million spend on private health? When was he going to tell us about the privatisation of our health records? When was he going to tell us, in honesty, about the half a billion pounds-worth of cuts to our precious health service?

**The First Minister:** MSD Informatics, the company concerned, has supplied software to the national health service across the United Kingdom since 1998, which means by definition that Tony Blair must have been privatising the health service in 1998. Actually, I think that he started the process of privatisation when the Labour Party pushed through foundation hospitals in the NHS in England.

Scottish health boards were involved in the design and management of existing systems to calculate payments to GP practices across Scotland. An IT system does not represent privatisation of the national health service, nor does a £450 million cost pressure over the next two years—[*Interruption.*]

The cost pressures are caused both by pensions and by the ending of the national insurance rebate, which involve decisions that were taken by the Westminster Government. Does that not exemplify the position of the Scottish Government, which is that cost pressures originating from Westminster have a huge impact on the Scottish national health service? [*Interruption.*]

**The Presiding Officer:** Order.

**The First Minister:** I am delighted to confirm to Parliament that we have increased health service spending on the front line in real terms, and that we will continue to do so. I am delighted to tell Parliament that the vast majority of people in Scotland understand why we have to control the finances of this country and our health service, as well as the administration, if we are to be protected from Tory and Labour attempts to privatise our health service.

Johann Lamont says that she will retain her current position. I hope that she continues to behave as she has done and continues to lead the Opposition in this Parliament for a considerable time. If she does, however, it will not be because of the enthusiastic support of her colleagues. I quote:

"The catastrophic thing would be for her to go and not to have Jim"

Murphy

"as leader. If we end up with an MSP or Anas Sarwar, we might as well all go home in 2016."

I am not as pessimistic about the Labour Party's prospects as the Labour Party is. I am sure that Johann Lamont will put up an excellent fight in the coming election and will end up exactly where she is now, as the Scottish National Party continues to keep the national health service in public hands.

### Secretary of State for Scotland (Meetings)

**2. Ruth Davidson (Glasgow) (Con):** That shows why we need a woman's touch.

To ask the First Minister when he will next meet the Secretary of State for Scotland. (S4F-02284)

**The First Minister (Alex Salmond):** No plans, near future.

**Ruth Davidson:** Following questioning by my colleague Gavin Brown yesterday, it emerged that we will not have a programme for government from this Administration until late November. However, bizarrely, we will have a budget before that. In other words, this Government will draft a budget for a legislative programme that does not exist.

The First Minister spoke at great length about what would happen in the event of a yes vote, and of the team that he was building for the first 100 days. However, he does not appear to have any plan for the first eight weeks, now that he has lost.

The people of Scotland demand that we get back to the real issues. People want to see a Scottish Government working in the interests of all of Scotland. Why should they have to wait two more months for this Government to do its job?

**The First Minister:** As Ruth Davidson correctly says, the Scottish Government will publish its budget. We will bring forward a bill on land reform, following the report of the review group. We will introduce a bill to end automatic early release. We are in the process of delivering the Ryder cup, which I hope will emulate the Commonwealth games as one of the most successful sporting events that Scotland has ever seen. [*Interruption.*]

**The Presiding Officer:** Order.

**The First Minister:** We are bringing forward regulations to allow the first ever same-sex marriages in Scotland. We are introducing, from January, free school meals from primaries 1 to 3—the Labour Party was foolish enough to vote against that when it came to this chamber. We are working with all stakeholders to secure successful on-going operations at Ferguson's shipyards. We will have stage 3 of the Courts Reform (Scotland) Bill, which will streamline civil justice. And, of course, the figures on the economy indicate that

the efforts of the Scottish Government in employment and unemployment, particularly with regard to the huge increase in women's employment, are bearing some fruit.

I have a list of another dozen things that the Scottish Government is employed in at the present moment. I could read out that list as well—I am sure that there would be a lot of enthusiasm for that—

**The Presiding Officer:** I think that we have got the point.

**The First Minister:** I think that I have already made the point that the Scottish Government is getting on with the job of governing Scotland effectively, which is, perhaps, why its opinion poll ratings are at almost 50 per cent, which is about five times those of the Scottish Conservatives.

**Ruth Davidson:** There was a spectacular lack of forthcoming legislation in that list. Can it really be that the First Minister does not get it? We have at least two more months of what the papers are describing as a “zombie government”.

In the meantime, the First Minister will pick up another £20,000 of taxpayers' money in salary and will go on his farewell photo op tour before the inevitable happens and his deputy takes over. We know that the First Minister has plenty of time on his hands, as that is what he told us all in a green-ink letter that he wrote to a national newspaper this week, but we also know that it is not legislation that he is working on—it is his book deal. If the First Minister is in office but not in power, what is the point in his hanging around?

**The First Minister:** One of the reasons why, about half an hour ago, the Scottish National Party had 62,870 members is that our membership expects us to go through a democratic process for, first, the election of a leader and deputy leader and, second, through the Parliament, the election of a First Minister. I have already indicated to Ruth Davidson the substantial work of the Government, including legislation, that is going on as we speak. I know that we will have the enthusiastic support of the Scottish Conservative Party, particularly for the important measures in land reform—[*Laughter.*] I know that that is close to the heart of Jamie McGrigor and other Conservative members. I say to the Scottish Conservative Party that we have no intention whatsoever to not allow the landowners of Scotland to develop renewable energy on their substantial holdings.

Across the range of that legislation, the Conservative Party—as ever, in that total democratic phase for which it is so famous—will give us substantial support on virtually nothing. However, the Scottish people recognise that the Scottish National Party epitomises, in that programme, the wishes of the vast majority of the

people of Scotland; hence, the democratic success of our party and the lack of democratic success of the Conservative Party.

**Neil Findlay (Lothian) (Lab):** The Scottish Fire and Rescue Service proposes to cut whole-time fire provision in West Lothian from 77 to 61—a reduction of 16 firefighters. Local people are rightly up in arms about that and are very concerned about safety issues. Does the First Minister think that such a significant cut is acceptable, and will he meet me to discuss the concerns that are being raised by my constituents about that cut?

**The First Minister:** There will be crewing changes, but there will be no job losses whatsoever involved in those crewing changes. If the member is concerned about the matter, I will arrange for a relevant meeting so that he can express those concerns. Given that I am told that there will be no job losses involved, I find it difficult to understand why the member describes the situation as he has just described it. Nonetheless, let us have that meeting and see whether he can articulate those concerns so that we can get to the bottom of what his question is about.

### Cabinet (Meetings)

**3. Willie Rennie (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD):** To ask the First Minister what issues will be discussed at the next meeting of the Cabinet. (S4F-02286)

**The First Minister (Alex Salmond):** Issues of importance to the people of Scotland.

**Willie Rennie:** Yesterday, I heard John Swinney set out his support for home rule and federalism. He joins illustrious company: Gladstone, Grimond, Gordon Brown and now—of all people—Michael Forsyth. Ming Campbell published our plans for home rule and federalism two years ago. Is the First Minister now a supporter of federalism? If so, in which bits of our plan does he think we can find common cause?

**The First Minister:** Following the referendum, there is an expectation, which carries a wide canvass, that, given the comments not of Gladstone but of Gordon Brown, who was espousing home rule as “close to federalism” as it possibly can be, people will want to see a genuine powerhouse Parliament coming from the steps being taken at Westminster rather than the insipid group of proposals that were published last spring. In terms of the test for a powerhouse Parliament of securing jobs, I shall be standing shoulder to shoulder with William Gladstone, Gordon Brown and Willie Rennie.

**Willie Rennie:** I thank the First Minister for that promise of constructive engagement, but he should remember that the plans that were put to the voters last week were set out by our three

parties. I look forward to his plans coming forward as well, because we will then be able to create a Scottish Parliament with the tax powers to give us the flexibility and the agility to do things differently in Scotland and with the powers to tackle inequality, to invest for the long term and to create a stronger economy and fairer society, driving down power into the communities—which, I am sure, the First Minister is strongly in favour of—and creating a federal UK. So far, he has not commented on our proposals. Can he find common cause, comment on what we have suggested and engage in a proper, constructive discussion?

**The First Minister:** Yes, I think that we will be able to have a very constructive discussion to try and improve Scotland's situation and circumstances.

I must say that I do not follow the position on home rule “as close to federalism” as Willie Rennie espouses given that, as far as I can see, that was not the position that was produced last spring, although that was what was talked about in the referendum campaign.

I was struck during the campaign by someone who tweeted:

“I'm voting ‘no’ then supporting anyone who'll give us Devo Max”.

That was JK Rowling, who was the no campaign's lead donor. That seems to emphasise that there is a considerable expectation among many people who voted no and, indeed, who financed the campaign, of seeing real economic powers.

The one difficulty that I have in this conversation with Willie Rennie is that, when I mentioned on Tuesday that my reading of the Campbell commission report was that it was proposing the ending of the Barnett formula as opposed to the vow that was produced last week, Willie Rennie denied that in the chamber. Therefore, I went back to the Campbell commission report just in case I had misread or was misrepresenting the position. I am puzzled, because recommendation 26, which follows paragraph 131, says:

“The UK should move to an independent, transparent, needs-based formula to serve all parts of the UK well and allow fiscal federalism to be sustained in the long term, recognising that the Barnett Formula was only ever intended to be a temporary measure”.

Willie Rennie, at some stage, must clarify what exactly the Liberal Democrats are proposing. Are they proposing what is in the Campbell report or what is in the vow? He might find that my successor, whoever he or she may be, may be slightly less indulgent with his misremembering of his own policies than I have been over the past few years.

## Voting Franchise

**4. Roderick Campbell (North East Fife) (SNP):** To ask the First Minister whether the Scottish Government plans to discuss with the United Kingdom Government extending the voting franchise to 16 and 17-year-olds. (S4F-02296)

**The First Minister (Alex Salmond):** About 90 per cent of all 16 and 17-year-olds registered to vote in the Scottish independence referendum. As I made clear on Tuesday in the chamber, their thoughtful and passionate engagement in the debate means that there is an overwhelming case—indeed, an unanswerable case—for giving 16 and 17-year-olds a vote in all future elections in Scotland and, indeed, across the UK. I am delighted that that case has the support of all parties across the chamber.

Yesterday, the Deputy First Minister wrote to the Prime Minister urging the UK Government to devolve full responsibility for elections to the Scottish Parliament as a matter of urgency, so that we can ensure that 16 and 17-year-olds will be able to take part in the 2016 election.

**Roderick Campbell:** I welcome the First Minister's comments just as I welcomed his comments on Tuesday. He will surely agree that it would be wrong to remove the vote from 16 and 17-year-olds after having allowed them to help chose the country's future. Will he assure me that the issue will remain a Scottish Government priority and will be discussed the next time that he meets the Prime Minister?

**The First Minister:** I assure Roderick Campbell that that will be the case. As I have indicated, yesterday the Deputy First Minister wrote to the Prime Minister on the issue.

Now that there is consensus on the issue, we must keep faith with the youngsters who voted in the referendum and the next group who are coming forward. It would be a substantial setback in democratic terms if, in our 2016 election, 16 and 17-year-olds were not entitled to vote. Therefore, there must be a sharp focus on securing the ability to make sure that in our elections in 2016 we extend that franchise and keep faith with the young people who demonstrated in such overwhelming numbers that they were well able and willing to take part in democratic discourse.

## Minimum Wage

**5. Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab):** To ask the First Minister what the Scottish Government's position is on raising the minimum wage to £8 per hour. (S4F-02289)

**The First Minister (Alex Salmond):** We welcome any increase in the national minimum wage, which has failed to keep up with inflation in

recent years, leaving workers more than £600 worse off than they would otherwise have been.

I also note that the increase proposed at the Labour conference is phased and will not take place until 2020, meaning that it is an increase of just 82 pence in real terms.

The expert group on welfare suggested that Scotland should explore increasing the minimum wage to the level of the living wage. Those are the proposals that I hope will be considered as part of the package of more powers for this Parliament.

**Jackie Baillie:** The First Minister is, of course, aware that Ed Miliband is proposing a national minimum wage rate of £8 per hour to make sure that work pays. [*Interruption.*]

**The Presiding Officer:** Order.

**Jackie Baillie:** The majority of members support that, as they do the living wage, which is currently set at £7.65 per hour. Although the Scottish National Party Government did not take the opportunity to introduce the living wage for all those who deliver public sector contracts, will the First Minister now work with Labour to ensure that wages in the public sector and for those who deliver public sector contracts are increased to £8 an hour, so that we can help to address the cost-of-living crisis and help working people who are struggling in communities throughout Scotland right now?

**The First Minister:** I point out to Jackie Baillie that if the minimum wage had kept pace with inflation since 2008, it would already be £7.48 an hour. Although the proposal to increase it to £8 is welcome, it is a proposal for 2020 and includes, as I said, a 2 per cent increase year by year—to get there by 2020—which is actually less than the increase that was taking place in the minimum wage before 2008.

People on low wages have been betrayed by successive Westminster Governments, including when Alistair Darling was chancellor, in having been offered increases to the minimum wage that were less than inflation. Therefore, it is hugely important to understand that it is forecast that, by 2020, the living wage would be £8.57 an hour even if it was only to keep pace with inflation.

The Parliament should aspire to that and to raising the minimum wage to the living wage, as recommended in our welfare proposals. I am certain that when the Parliament has control over the minimum wage, the progressive influence of Jackie Baillie and me will ensure that we move towards the living wage in Scotland.

**Gavin Brown (Lothian) (Con):** If the minimum wage were to increase in line with the commitments in the white paper, in which year would it reach £8 an hour?

**The First Minister:** The commitments in the white paper are to a guarantee from the proposed fair work commission that the national minimum wage keep pace at least with inflation. Therefore, we would be in a fundamentally better position than the one in which we have been over the past few years when—[*Interruption.*]

**The Presiding Officer:** Order.

**The First Minister:** —first the Labour Party and then the Conservative Party, going through a recession, decided to penalise the lowest-paid people in the country.

I do not think that Gavin Brown was among the most enthusiastic supporters of the Government's introduction of the living wage across the public sector. However, we have been totally vindicated by the answer from the electorate on the introduction of the living wage, which is at £7.65 an hour now. We look forward to raising the level of the minimum wage to that of the living wage so that all workers in Scotland get a fair day's pay for a fair day's work.

### Ryder Cup (Legacy)

**6. Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con):** To ask the First Minister what the Scottish Government is doing to capitalise on the legacy of the Ryder cup. (S4F-02290)

**The First Minister (Alex Salmond):** Golf tourism is already worth £220 million to Scotland annually and supports 4,400 jobs. The 2014 Ryder cup is the perfect catalyst for further growth in golf tourism and reinforces Scotland's position as the home of golf. VisitScotland estimates that it will benefit our economy by at least £100 million.

One of the most important aspects of the process that has brought the Ryder cup to Scotland is the commitment that Henry McLeish made as First Minister as part of the Ryder cup bid. That commitment has been taken forward and 350,000 youngsters throughout Scotland have been introduced to the game of golf.

Yesterday, I announced that the club golf programme would be continued and, indeed, extended into a family golf approach, under which youngsters will ask their parents to come and play with them. That emphasises that golf should be a game for everyone in Scotland.

I also note that 50 young unemployed people volunteered for the Ryder cup to get the increase in skills and improve their future employment opportunities.

The Commonwealth games was a remarkable success for the city of Glasgow and the nation of Scotland and, all round, we intend to do exactly the same thing with the Ryder cup in Gleneagles.

**Murdo Fraser:** I am sure that we all welcome the work that is going on to capitalise on the Ryder cup's benefits. I was interested to hear from the First Minister earlier that he seems to think that the Ryder cup is part of his legislative programme for the coming year.

With his upcoming retirement from office, is the First Minister looking forward as much as we are to him spending more time with his golf clubs?

**The First Minister:** I am looking forward enormously to playing golf as often as possible but I suspect that the Conservative Party's wish to see me disappear from the Scottish body politic is going to be as disappointing to it as future election results in Scotland almost undoubtedly will be.

## Hydroelectric Dams and Tunnels (Contribution of Building Workers)

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (John Scott):**

The next item of business is a members' business debate on motion S4M-10672, in the name of Annabelle Ewing, on remembering the contribution of those who built the dams and tunnels. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

*Motion debated,*

That the Parliament notes plans by Scottish and Southern Energy to develop a new state-of-the-art visitor centre at Pitlochry Dam and salmon ladder; recognises the contribution that this and other hydroelectric dams and tunnels throughout Scotland can make as tourist attractions as well as their primary function contributing to Scotland's renewable electricity generation; respects the contribution made by the men, of many nationalities, who built the dams and tunnels, such as the Lednock "Tunnel Tigers", who set a world record by tunnelling 557 feet in seven days in 1955 while working on the St Fillans section of the Breadalbane Hydro-Electric scheme; further recognises that this was hard, dangerous work and that a number of men lost their lives and countless others experienced injury or illness that affected them for the rest of their lives; understands that some of the public visitor information boards list several nationalities of workers in the tunnels but make no reference to Irish workers, and looks forward to the new visitor centre properly reflecting the contributions of all of the men who built the dams and tunnels.

12:32

**Annabelle Ewing (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP):** Today's debate is indeed timely, for it is being held against the backdrop of new Department of Energy and Climate Change figures showing that Scotland's renewable energy generation in the first half of 2014 was 30 per cent higher than in the same period in 2013, and that the overall increase is due primarily to a 50 per cent increase in hydro generation.

It is surely a source of great pleasure and pride in the Parliament that Scotland is at the vanguard of the renewables revolution. It is now estimated that more than 46.4 per cent of gross electricity consumption in 2013 was met from renewables, which is up from 39.9 per cent in 2012. It is also worth noting that Scotland contributed 32 per cent of the United Kingdom's renewable energy generation in 2013 and that Scotland continues to be a net exporter of electricity. We are, of course, on track to meet our ambitious interim target of generating 50 per cent of electricity from renewable sources by 2015.

I welcome the opportunity to acknowledge today that our leading position is due in no small part to the extent of generation from hydroelectric schemes, big and small, especially across the

north of Scotland in, for example, the Lednock dam and the Glen Turret dam in Strathearn, which is the area in which I live.

In fact, Scotland has 85 per cent of the UK's hydroelectric energy resource, much of it developed by the North of Scotland Hydro-Electric Board in the 1950s. The hydro board, as it was known, brought "Power from the Glens". It was a nationalised industry at the time, although it was privatised in 1989 and is now part of Scottish and Southern Energy plc.

A great deal of the credit for the development in hydro power must of course go to Tom Johnston, the Secretary of State for Scotland in Churchill's wartime coalition Government, for he had a vision of bringing power from the glens for the benefit of all. At the time, it was estimated that just one farm in six, and one croft in a hundred, had electricity. Today, virtually every home in Scotland has mains electricity.

I think that credit is well deserved, but I submit that the credit must also be shared. In preparation for the debate, I have been reading a booklet that has been produced by SSE entitled "Power from the Glens", which I am pleased to note has been dedicated

"to the memory of the 'Hydro Boys' whose legacy is the largest source of renewable energy in the country."

Whilst the SSE booklet refers to men coming from all over Scotland, and to Czechs and Poles and Germans, it makes no mention of the hundreds of Irishmen who were such an important part of the building of the hydro schemes. Concerns were raised with me about gaps in the recognition of their work, which led me to lodge the motion. I am extremely grateful for the opportunity that the debate affords me to give some well-deserved publicity to, and to bring to wider attention, the contribution of those hardy men and the sacrifices of those who gave their health or even their lives.

I will mention a constituent, John O'Donnell. He has, with others, through a very interesting Facebook group called "Memories of the Hydro Dams and Tunnels", been putting in a power of work to share stories and songs that have, until very recently, been heard only within their own families but are well deserving of a wider audience.

**Mary Scanlon (Highlands and Islands) (Con):** I thank Annabelle Ewing for mentioning the Irishmen, particularly in regard to those who came from Donegal. My mother's two brothers, who were called O'Donnell, worked on the dams in Perthshire and the Highlands throughout the 1950s.

**Annabelle Ewing:** I thank Mary Scanlon. Her own family's contribution to the building of the dams is now on the record, and rightly so.

By the time major hydro development ended in the mid-1960s, Scotland could boast 56 dams, connected by over 600km of rock tunnel, aqueducts and pipelines. At its peak there were more than 12,000 people working on dams and tunnels.

The history of the building of those dams and the tunnels that are associated with them is extremely interesting. There are fascinating stories, like that of the tunnel tigers who worked on the St Fillans section of the Breadalbane hydroelectric scheme and who, back in 1955, set a world record by tunnelling 557 feet in seven days. It was hard, dangerous work; a number of men tragically lost their lives and countless others were injured or carried the effects of the work for the rest of their lives.

I have already alluded to the fact that the men came from all over to work in the tunnels and on the dams: Poles, Czechs, Highlanders and huge numbers of Irishmen—from Donegal and other places, as we have heard—came to live in the camps and work on the hydro schemes. Many of them stayed, and their descendants are at the heart of communities across many parts of Scotland, including Strathearn, which is in my part of the world.

There is little wonder that it is a real bone of contention for those whose fathers and grandfathers worked in the tunnels that, inexplicably, some of the public visitor information boards at SSE sites compound the omission in the booklet that I referred to earlier by listing several nationalities who worked in the tunnels, but make no reference to Irishmen. A decent memorial to all those who worked on the schemes and accurate public information at all the dams is surely not a big ask. I feel confident that SSE will be amenable to what amounts to a bit of tidying up of its corporate history.

There are very welcome signs that we are pushing at an open door. Indeed, not long after I first lodged the motion, Gillian O'Reilly, who is head of heritage and community programmes at SSE, said on the SSE website that

"We are enormously proud of our hydro heritage and have recently undertaken a project to understand and share the amazing stories of people and engineering feats that provided power—often to many remote areas—throughout Scotland. Our plans for a new Visitor Centre in Pitlochry will provide a fitting memorial to those who worked on the projects and we will continue to work with local historians, stakeholders and colleagues to determine the best way to do this."

In the past, official histories and visitor information have tended to focus on the



engineering achievements rather than the contribution that was made—and the human cost that was paid—by the workers. That needs to be addressed. We invite people to marvel at the hollow mountains and the great dams, and many do so. For example, the Pitlochry dam and salmon ladder attracts some 500,000 visitors annually; people from around the world go to see it. Let us also invite them to remember the men who swung the pick and set the charge.

I am extremely pleased to note that SSE appears to be so amenable to ensuring that that is done. It would be helpful if the Scottish Government would confirm its support.

I suggest that anyone who has stories to tell should contact SSE directly to ensure that this living history is not lost. The campaign deserves everyone's support. I am sure that we can all recognise the huge debt of gratitude that we owe to those whose efforts brought us the power from the glens that we take so much for granted today.

12:39

**Dr Richard Simpson (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab):** For personal reasons that I will explain in a moment, I particularly welcome the debate, which Annabelle Ewing has obtained. I concur with her that it was the vision of Tom Johnston as Secretary of State for Scotland during the second world war that led to the creation of the Scottish hydro board, which he then chaired. Among other things, it developed the Pitlochry fish ladder and dam between 1947 and 1951. It dammed the River Tummel to form Loch Faskally, which is some 5km long.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Mr Simpson, will you please pull up your microphone a little?

**Dr Simpson:** Is that better?

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Yes.

**Dr Simpson:** I apologise.

The hydro board introduced the salmon ladder, which was an important innovation that acknowledged the environmental aspects of such creations.

I am particularly pleased about the debate because I want to talk a little about Cruachan power station, where I worked. As a student, I had looked around for employment whose remuneration would make it worth while to undertake it, and that was the best offer that I got. Three of us students were among those who joined many Irishmen—as Annabelle Ewing said—in constructing the station. We worked deep underground and we often had to go back up to the face to drill when the dust was still in our faces.

What that work impressed on me most was the fact that health regulations—they were pretty primitive at the time—were not being observed. Going down to that job daily for many hours converted me, as someone from an extremely conservative family, into a socialist. At that point, I believed that the protection of workers was fundamental, and it has been fundamental to my entire political career.

Every weekend, when we emerged from the underground of Cruachan power station, we had buzzing in our ears, which lasted the whole weekend. I have had tinnitus ever since then.

When I confronted a senior person at the works with the fact that they were not looking after the workers' health in the way that they should, and when I said that the inspectors would not be pleased, I was told, "Don't worry—they have to give us 48 hours' notice. We'll get everything right by the time of an inspection." I will not name the company involved, which is very good now and which has developed well because of health and safety regulations.

Of the three of us students, one jacked in the job—that was what was said in those days—within two weeks, because he could not tolerate it. That was partly because he often worked in the wet well up to mid-calf in water, and because he could not tolerate the noise. Another one of us, who was a theology student from the University of St Andrews, tried to hold prayer meetings. I tried to form a trade union and I got sacked.

Annabelle Ewing's pertinent motion has brought back my memories. I honour the men who were involved.

The driller to whom I was an assistant and whose place I took after four weeks left to go to the Clyde tunnel. It might surprise people to know that he left because working there was safer than working at Cruachan, although it was under pressure and there was a risk of getting the bends. Thirty-six men died in the construction at Cruachan; my parents were terrified that I might be killed. The vertical shaft was extremely dangerous to work in. The Clyde tunnel was also difficult. It was wet and the bends were always a risk. Some people suffered from that, but only two men died.

We owe a great debt to the tunnellers and constructors and I am proud that Annabelle Ewing has lodged the motion. I hope that some of the memories will interest SSE and might be incorporated in revised information at visitor centres, which are important to our tourism.

12:44

**Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con):** I congratulate Annabelle Ewing on securing the debate and on her motion. She referred to the Pitlochry dam and fish ladder, which are an important part of the highland Perthshire economy. I think that she quoted the figure of 500,000 visitors a year. I am not sure that that is quite right; I think that 50,000 visitors a year currently visit the Pitlochry dam and that the hope is that, by spending money to improve the attraction, SSE will double that number to 100,000 visitors a year.

It is interesting that, if somebody goes to Pitlochry and sees what is now Loch Faskally, they would think that it had always been there. In fact, it was created only between 1947 and 1951, when the River Tummel was dammed and flooded an area that was previously the old Pitlochry highland games field. That created the current loch, which is, of course, used by tourists and locals for fishing and boating, and has become an accepted part of the local landscape.

**Annabelle Ewing:** There may be a typo in the SSE booklet, which it might want to address. SSE referred to a figure of 500,000 visitors per annum. Perhaps there will be clarification on that; we will wait and see.

**Murdo Fraser:** Okay. We will no doubt get the resolution to that at some point after the debate.

The impact of the hydroelectric schemes is obvious to all who travel around Perthshire or the Highlands. An important part of them is how they have become an accepted part of the landscape and how they are used to attract visitors. The information boards to which Annabelle Ewing referred are an important part of that.

Hydroelectricity in the Highlands has an interesting history. The very first scheme was built by the monks at Fort Augustus abbey in 1890. That was an 18kW scheme to power the organ and provide street lighting to the village, which then had 800 people. Reputedly, the lights in the village dimmed when the organ was played, because there was not enough power for both.

Throughout the 1930s and in the 1940s and 1950s, there was, of course, a huge expansion in hydroelectric power across the area.

I was very interested to hear Richard Simpson's recounting of his experiences at Cruachan. I visited the Cruachan tunnel some years ago. It is an extremely impressive piece of engineering.

Mary Scanlon mentioned her family connection to the tunnels and dams. I, too, have a connection: my father, in his younger days as a mechanical fitter, worked on the Glascarnoch dam in Ross-shire. I am not quite sure whether he followed quite the same political path that Richard Simpson

followed as a result of his experience working at Glascarnoch, but men from across Scotland and many other parts of the British isles and the world worked with him. It was very hard work. As Richard Simpson said, the conditions were different from conditions today; there was nothing like the level of health and safety that we would see on a modern site. We should celebrate the fact that conditions have improved for workers on such sites.

Annabelle Ewing referred in her motion to the tunnellers at Lednock. Reflecting on the most recent large-scale hydroelectric scheme at Glendoe near Fort Augustus in the Highlands, which was constructed by SSE, perhaps makes how much was achieved more remarkable. That scheme was operational only for a matter of months before there was a large roof cave-in. It was then offline for more than a year, and the tunnel had to be redug as a result. It is remarkable that none of the tunnels that was built in the 1950s and 1960s seems to have gone through the same turmoil that our more recent construction at Glendoe went through just a few years ago.

I agree with the sentiments that have been expressed in the debate. Wherever they came from, the workers who contributed to the development of the industry in Scotland and created not just a legacy of power, but a legacy that is very important to tourism, should be celebrated. I support Annabelle Ewing's ambitions for a proper memorial.

12:48

**Stewart Stevenson (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP):** I congratulate my colleague Annabelle Ewing on lodging the motion and giving us time to debate the important matters that it raises.

Like others, I have connections with the issue, which are various. Among the many jobs that I have had, I have never worked on a hydro scheme or in a tunnel—except when I was around 10 or 11, when we used to build tunnels with a former tunneller from a Stalag Luft prisoner-of-war camp. However, that was a very different thing that is not to be compared at all with what we are talking about.

As a family, we used to camp regularly at Ardgualich farm, which is just below the Queen's view on Loch Tummel. One of the highlights of all our visits there was the salmon ladder. My father, my brother and I were enthusiastic brown-trout fishermen, and to gaze in awe at the big brother—the salmon—was well worth doing. We aspired to catch it, but that would have required us to pay out money for a licence, or to find some other way of

being able to fish for salmon, which we would not have contemplated.

The building of dams and tunnels is a substantial engineering issue. We sometimes forget how much the Victorians achieved in their engineering. For example, we should consider their achievement in building the Union canal—a topical name—which traverses the whole of central Scotland with a rise and fall of no more than 4 inches.

The Victorians, in building their tunnels, bridges and cofferdams, developed an impressive set of technologies. Some of the challenges involved in such work are quite substantial. The adiabatic lapse rate means that, for every 1,000 feet that one goes down, the temperature rises by 1.98° and the barometric pressure rises by 33 millibars. In addition, one is exposed to the release of methane in underground workings. There is a wide range of natural challenges, to which we can add the challenge that Richard Simpson mentioned: the dust from such work is perfectly contained in a closed environment for those who are working to inhale, to the substantial detriment to their health.

When the Lednock tunnel tigers tunnelled 557 feet in a week, it was a huge achievement. They were able to do that perhaps because the rock in the area through which they were tunnelling was comparatively soft, but that would increase the risk of roof fall and people being killed as a result. It is unlikely that the tunnellers were drilling through granite at that rate of knots. However, those are formidable achievements that we can admire from a distance.

Like other members, I have a connection with the benefits of electricity. My wife lived in a council house a mere 6 miles out on the main road down to Fort William from Inverness, and was at secondary school before the household got electricity. It came, of course, from the work of the hydro. To this day, the very large oil lamp that used to illuminate my wife's house and by which she did her early studying when she was at school adorns our living room. It is a very impressive piece of kit, at about two and a half feet tall.

The Irish and other workers—including Dr Simpson, as we now know—achieved much in building our dams and tunnels and contributing to our having one of the most green sources of electricity quite early in the development of the idea that that was a good thing. More fundamentally, getting electricity into the hills and glens is a substantial achievement that I am delighted that we are able to celebrate today. I look forward to visiting the new facilities, which will tell the tale again in a modern context and perhaps redress the omission, in particular, of the Irish navvies and the others who made such a big contribution.

12:53

**The Minister for Energy, Enterprise and Tourism (Fergus Ewing):** I congratulate Annabelle Ewing on bringing this important matter to the chamber, and I thank all members who have contributed to the debate.

Annabelle Ewing and Dr Richard Simpson both mentioned the pivotal role of the great Tom Johnston and the leadership and vision that he demonstrated. As Secretary of State for Scotland, he ran Scotland as though it were a de facto independent country, such was his untrammelled ability to drive things forward. That is an unexpected historical precedent.

Last year, many of us—including Murdo Fraser—celebrated the 70th anniversary of the Hydro Electric Development (Scotland) Act 1943 and the enormous role that Tom Johnston played in that story. We reflected on the fact that delivering on his vision for those civil engineering projects—the dams and hydroelectric schemes—required, as Annabelle Ewing stressed, toil and labour of a severity that I suspect is beyond our imaginings these days.

Therefore, it is absolutely correct that we take the time to recognise the massive contribution of the workers who handed Scotland a legacy of large-scale renewable energy provision that, as was remarked on, continues to generate electricity to this day successfully and effectively.

The legacy was also of enormous benefit to the north of Scotland, where I have the privilege of representing a constituency. In 1945, only half the homes in the Highlands had access to electricity. By 1960, that had increased to 90 per cent due to large-scale hydro developments giving more than 200,000 households access to modern comforts.

The scale of the construction work is indeed impressive. Between 1945 and 1965—in just 20 years—78 dams were built, 2,000 miles of tunnel were excavated and 20,000 miles of electricity network was established. We divide time into before Christ and anno domini, but I suspect that civil engineers, were they to look for a classification of time, would use the initials BR—before regulators existed. Tom Johnston was not unduly hampered by heritage or environment regulators. He got on with the job, and what a magnificent legacy has been left to the country thereby.

At the peak, more than 12,000 people were employed, with the workers coming from a great many countries. People from Ireland and prisoners of war and displaced persons from Germany, Italy, Poland and Czechoslovakia joined squads of native Highlanders—many, including Richard Simpson, had never before been paid such high wages. The workers, known as the hydro boys,

had to work in remote locations and in dangerous conditions.

I should say that, from discussions today with SSE, I know that it is absolutely determined to emphasise and recognise the contribution of all workers, including Irish workers, whose contribution was remarked on by Mary Scanlon and Annabelle Ewing. That will be dealt with in visitor books and on sites. I am happy to clarify that point. I am also happy to pay tribute to SSE for its work in producing the booklet "Power from the Glens", in which I think Gillian O'Reilly of SSE had a role to play, and to Emma Wood for her 2005 book, "The Hydro Boys: Pioneers of Renewable Energy", which certainly merits a read because, through it, we can see the huge dangers of the work.

I am grateful that Dr Simpson contributed to the debate and reminded us of the importance of health and safety. In various roles, I have been involved in health and safety in relation to the oil and gas industry and the coal mining industry. I remember reading social history about the coal mining industry and being struck by the appalling cruelty to workers, including young children, especially in the 19th century. Disaster after disaster happened before legislative reform took place and it was always too little, too late. As I listened to Richard Simpson, it occurred to me that perhaps our understanding and appreciation of social history is, in a sense, the very best compulsion to drive forward our focus on health and safety legislation right now.

When I met Lord Cullen this summer, he remarked vis-à-vis the 25th anniversary of Piper Alpha that, in Macondo, BP perhaps forgot to be afraid. Therefore, the social history that Annabelle Ewing has brought to the chamber plays an important role.

Of course, hydroelectric power has an important role, and we are all, I think, keen for it to continue. At present, however, we are concerned that a defect in the hydro feed-in tariff subsidy, which we have been raising with the United Kingdom Government for more than a year now, is a serious threat to the industry. We hope that, working together, that can be rectified before the year is out.

Murdo Fraser was correct to draw attention to the tourism benefits, which have been mentioned by all speakers. The proposal to upgrade the SSE visitor centre at the Pitlochry dam and salmon ladder is welcome. The dam is a marvellous example of how civil engineering can protect the environment, and the fact that it has half a million visitors a year shows the interest that exists in the matter.

Hydroelectricity is one of the great industrial and economic success stories in Scotland. All too often, while correctly recognising the leadership role that Tom Johnston and others played, we neglect to remember the efforts of the workers who actually delivered the schemes. It is therefore with great pleasure that I say to Annabelle Ewing, who is, if I may say so, my sister—

**Annabelle Ewing:** Younger sister.

**Fergus Ewing:** —that I am very pleased that she has brought forward this opportunity for us to remember, celebrate and recognise the huge benefits that the hydro workers brought in leaving Scotland a wonderful legacy.

13:01

*Meeting suspended.*

14:30

*On resuming—*

## Accessible Tourism

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Elaine Smith):**

Good afternoon. The first item of business this afternoon is a debate on motion S4M-10988, in the name of Fergus Ewing, on accessible tourism.

**The Minister for Energy, Enterprise and Tourism (Fergus Ewing):** Today in the chamber we are particularly grateful that the Scottish Parliament has provided its assistance so that British Sign Language users can follow the debate in their language, a palantypist is providing text content to other visitors and the gallery is fully accessible to visitors who use wheelchairs. We are proud of the continuing efforts that the Parliament makes to be accessible to all, through a range of facilities that are freely available, to enhance visitor experience and engagement. Of course, we are always keen to get feedback from people about the sufficiency and quality of provision.

I am delighted to open this debate on accessible tourism. As I think that this is the first occasion on which we have debated this most important topic, at least on a Government motion, it might be helpful if I set out what we mean by it.

There are 11 million disabled people living in the United Kingdom—about 16 per cent of the population—and only 2 million of them enjoy an annual holiday. Let us bear in mind that only 4 per cent of those people use a wheelchair, 2 million have sight impairments and 9 million are registered deaf and hard of hearing.

Let us consider the issue in the global context. There are 1.3 billion—1,300 million—people with a disability. That is an emerging market the size of China. In 2009-10 the accessible tourism spend in Scotland was £325 million; by 2013 spend had risen to £391 million, which is an increase of £66 million. The most significant aspect of the figures is the proportion of overall spend that they represent: in 2009 it was 6 per cent but by 2013 it had risen to 14 per cent of the overall figure.

When disabled people find accommodation that suits their needs, they can be loyal customers who return year on year. It is estimated that around 70 per cent of disabled people are able to travel but do not do so because of a lack of accessible accommodation and basic facilities. Disabled people tend not to travel alone; they are often accompanied by carers, family and friends, which increases occupancy and brings in extra revenue for accommodation providers.

What does all that signify? I think that we can draw two clear conclusions. First and most important, it is a matter of social responsibility to seek to facilitate the enjoyment of a holiday or break for everyone, including people with a disability. Secondly, by doing that we create business opportunities for the whole sector and the whole country. On the one hand, accessible tourism is a matter of social responsibility, in that disabled people, like everyone else, should have the opportunity and ability to enjoy a holiday; on the other, our ensuring that that happens creates business opportunities.

Those are the two key points on which I hope that we can all agree. I hope that we can take those points away from the debate and build on the excellent progress on accessible tourism that is being made in Scotland. I hope that we can work together to achieve the enormous potential benefits to disabled people—and their families, friends and carers—of adding to their lives the pleasure and enjoyment that holidays bring, and I hope that we can enable the tourism sector to lead the way in grabbing new opportunities in a world in which more and more people are able to enjoy a holiday.

I suspect that most or all of us in the chamber enjoy a holiday each year, whether it is in Scotland, elsewhere in the UK or further afield. Perhaps it is fair to say that most of us here and many throughout the country take it for granted that we will enjoy a holiday—a break from the routine and a chance to get away from it all, relax and recharge the batteries. We are fortunate.

**Stewart Stevenson (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP):** Does the minister extend the consideration of accessible holidays to people who suffer degrees of ill health that mean that they cannot get insurance to travel a distance from home? Another segment of people—not simply disabled people but people who suffer ill health—might equally benefit from the initiatives that he describes.

**Fergus Ewing:** I agree that people with impaired mobility—perhaps people who are of many more years than they would like—have particular difficulties. Mr Stevenson makes a perfectly valid point.

As I have highlighted, the reality is that the majority of disabled people—about four out of five of them—do not enjoy a holiday like the rest of us. That is wrong and I am confident that all of us here want to work together to see what we can do to address that. I am happy to accept the Labour Party's amendment and I look forward to hearing Jenny Marra's speech and those of all members.

The reasons why people with a disability might not choose to have a holiday, although they are

physically able to have a holiday or break of a certain type, are many and varied. We need to understand them in order to tackle them and remove barriers, which will help people who have a disability to have the confidence that they will enjoy a holiday and will be catered for and afforded respect and courtesy.

The barriers are in part about facilities and buildings; they concern physical access, ramps and access for wheelchairs—the physical landscape. That is recognised in planning law and, in the recent Scottish planning policy, adaptability was one of the principles, which is right and proper.

However, perhaps the really significant barriers are not always so much physical as mental. They mean that people with a disability or impaired mobility—Mr Stevenson was right to refer to them—feel that there will be a lack of understanding or appreciation of their needs and that people who serve them in hotels or restaurants, on trains or buses or in other settings might be nervous or embarrassed about dealing with them and might not understand how to assist someone who is hard of hearing, visually impaired, in a wheelchair or who has another form of disability.

**Jenny Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab):** I agree completely with the minister about mental barriers but, on physical barriers, will he join me in applauding the work of PAMIS in Dundee, which supports families who have children and young adults with profound and multiple disabilities? Does he support its groundbreaking campaign for changing places toilet facilities, so that people can enjoy a day out—that does not even go as far as a holiday—to the shopping centre and take their children and young people with them?

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Minister, I can reimburse some of your time.

**Fergus Ewing:** I am not familiar with the organisation, but it sounds excellent, and I endorse the sentiments that Jenny Marra expressed.

Many people with a disability have told VisitScotland that they just want to be treated with respect and consideration. Many people with a disability say that they do not go on holiday because of the hassle and embarrassment that they might face. We can deal with such problems and situations.

**Dennis Robertson (Aberdeenshire West) (SNP):** I congratulate the minister on moving on to talk about people with disabilities rather than disabled people, because that in itself is a very positive step forward.

**Fergus Ewing:** I thank Dennis Robertson for his remarks, and I look forward in particular to hearing what he has to say in the debate, as I am sure other members do.

Customer service that embodies a can-do attitude and a willingness to understand the needs of those who have a disability is at the heart of the approach.

VisitScotland and I have spent a fair amount of time meeting people who have a disability to listen to their views. I have done so at various events recently, including at the botanic gardens and the royal yacht Britannia. I also took the time to do that at a subsequent preparatory meeting for this debate, at which a range of people who have a disability and who care for them or are involved in assisting them put forward their views. A minute that was kept of that meeting should be available for members, I think.

The point is that, in order to address the problem, we need to listen to the people involved most and find out what the problems are, particularly those that deter them from taking a holiday. Even the task of booking a holiday online can be more difficult. In addition to the tasks that we might do to book a hotel or facility online, someone with a disability needs to ensure that, whatever service is being booked—accommodation, travel or other facilities—their needs can be accommodated. That is an additional task that we do not have. Perhaps the online journey can be made simpler to cater for that, with information being available at the start of online booking journeys and not at the end of them. We all know that online booking journeys can be frustratingly long.

What are we doing about that? I praise VisitScotland, which has driven the matter forward with a very practical online training programme, which I launched on 23 June and towards which we provided £45,000. That is not a king's ransom, but the tool is a must for all staff and managers who work in hotels, bed and breakfasts and restaurants and everybody who serves the public. Anyone can access that online training tool and understand what it means. It contains very practical information about what we need to do. For example, if someone who is visually impaired or hard of hearing has a guide dog or hearing assistance dog, the dog will like to have water to drink. Some hotels provide bowls of water for dogs—the basics of life. Such needs are quite simple, but only once we think about them. The online training programme will give many other examples of that sort.

Seen in that light, there are a great many practical things that we can do. I am pleased to say that 625 businesses have registered for the programme and 67 have completed it. I

particularly commend it to those involved in public transport and to managers, to ensure that their staff are familiar with it. If staff have the opportunity to gain such training, they welcome it, of course, as it enables them to provide the service that they will want to provide. The online training programme, at a fairly modest cost, is doing well, and this is a chance to promote it further. I am pleased that Ryder Cup Europe has used the tool to train 80 volunteers, and I am very pleased that there were considerable efforts in the Commonwealth games to provide the best possible facilities to those with a disability.

I see that my time is nearly coming to a close, but I have a further eight pages of text in front of me.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I can give you a bit of time back, minister, but perhaps not that much.

**Fergus Ewing:** Oh, well. I will chance my arm then, Presiding Officer. Thank you.

That allows me to talk about access statements. The phrase sounds rather like those that were described by Kevin Stewart, who is not in the chamber, as “gobbledegook” in the Local Government and Regeneration Committee, but they are not gobbledegook. If a person who has a disability wants to visit the royal yacht Britannia, they can go online and see its access statement, which will tell them exactly what width the doors to the toilets are and exactly what facilities there are for people with a disability. In other words, if someone has a disability, the access statement tells them what they need to know, and that is why the statements are important. That was not actually what it said on that page of my notes, Presiding Officer, but there we are.

To prove that the statements are not gobbledegook, I highlight research that shows that 76 per cent of consumers say that access statements positively influence their decision to travel. If the rest of us want to know that there is a swimming pool or another facility at a hotel, we just look and the information is there, but someone with particular needs has to ensure that those needs are catered for, and an access statement allows them to do so.

I thank you for the extra time, Presiding Officer. In moving to a close, I will just say how pleased I am to have had the opportunity to listen to so many people with a disability who have helped me to learn just a little bit more about their predicament, and to work in particular with VisitScotland, which has led the way. I am engaging with counterparts in Brussels next week—if I get the slip, that is—in discussions with European colleagues on what we are doing in Scotland.

I also work with the Scottish tourism alliance—the STA’s chief executive, Marc Crothall, is witnessing the debate today. I look forward to a constructive, positive and useful discussion this afternoon with members of all parties in the chamber. Together, we can see what more we can do to enable people with a disability to enjoy something that we take for granted as of right.

I move,

That the Parliament recognises the important contribution to the Scottish economy that accessible tourism makes across many sectors; further recognises that disabled people should be able to enjoy a holiday or break in the same way as others do; acknowledges the work underway and notes the progress made by VisitScotland and partners in developing the accessible tourism online training tools for managers and staff in individual enterprises; recognises that the whole tourism sector and wider public and private sectors need to work together closely to make accessible tourism ever more successful, and notes the efforts made to ensure that the tourism industry recognises the mutual benefit to businesses and consumers from the opportunities for accessibility being maximised for all events taking place during the next four themed years.

14:46

**Jenny Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab):** I thank the minister for bringing to the chamber the Scottish Government’s debate on the very important topic of accessible tourism. Like him, I begin by acknowledging the BSL interpretation that is going on in the public gallery this afternoon. I chair the Parliament’s cross-party group on deafness, which had a flurry of activity recently as Dennis Robertson, the Scottish National Party member of the group, and I were campaigning for BSL interpretation to be available during the televised referendum debates. We had a bit of success with that, but we have still to persuade some of our mainstream broadcasters that it is an accessibility issue that needs to be taken seriously. I thank the minister for highlighting the interpretation, and I emphasise that cross-party work on these issues is on-going.

Today’s debate is a timely opportunity to discuss accessible tourism. With the Commonwealth games just behind us and the Ryder cup teeing off tomorrow, tourism has been a real focus for Scotland this year. I have felt keenly that, in the past few weeks especially, the country has become a destination for political tourists.

Tourism in Scotland not only contributes to our economy but reflects the values of our community. Accessible tourism means opening doors to every visitor and treating them as equal no matter what. It is about being inclusive and welcoming, and teaching and learning from others. Such inclusiveness is possible only through exercising equality in our communities.

We saw the glory of equality this summer when, for the first time in Commonwealth games history, para-sports were counted in the main medal table; when venues such as the Chris Hoy velodrome were built from the ground up with accessibility as a primary planning concern from the word go; and when Glasgow, our biggest city in Scotland, opened its arms and welcomed thousands of visitors with equal warmth, care and consideration, making them feel truly part of the Commonwealth games. The way in which a community extends its values of equality to accommodate all visitors speaks volumes about its social and cultural outlook.

What does accessible tourism mean for Scotland? I think that it means the ability for all to visit and enjoy our country freely. For mothers such as Samantha Buck, it means having access to disabled toilet facilities so that she is able to take her son Alfie, who is affected by multiple and profound learning disabilities, on days out in Scotland. Samantha Buck is supported in part by the Dundee-based organisation PAMIS, which I mentioned to the minister during his opening remarks. PAMIS runs campaigns such as changing places, which many MSPs in the chamber will be aware of. That campaign aims to ensure changing facilities in public toilets for more than 230,000 severely disabled people, including those with profound and multiple learning disabilities. That accessible tourism means that those with permanent disabilities, including parents with young children, are able to access the toilet facilities that they need to be able to experience an enjoyable day out or a holiday.

Accessible tourism encapsulates a vision of a community that fights for equality. Alongside that, the sustainable value that accessible tourism adds to our economy is immense—this year, it was valued as being worth more than £370 million to the Scottish economy. That is an increase of £37 million since 2009.

According to recent research carried out by the European Commission, the UK was among the top three contributors to the European economy when it came to accessible tourism, contributing €86 million and 1.7 million jobs to the market—20 per cent of the European Union total.

There is even more room for growth, as the minister said. If European destinations were fully accessible, demand could increase by up to 44 per cent a year, which would result in an additional 3.4 million jobs. The extent of the opportunities is underlined by the fact, which the minister provided, that four out of five disabled people do not yet enjoy a holiday. Accessible tourism is for their benefit, but making such increased accessibility happen would also provide real benefits to the economy.

Better accessibility of course means higher occupancy rates in our hotels and loyal customers who keep returning. Accessible tourism reflects true equality and long-term sustainable trade. Tourism has a fundamental role to play in job creation and economic growth over the next decade.

In our amendment, we applaud those in the accessible tourism project, who are fighting to give disabled people a basic right—to enjoy holidaying like all others; to remove the fear of the unknown for visitors to our cities, towns and villages; and to show that we are ready to give every visitor a welcome as warm as the last. I thank the Government for its indication that it will be supporting the Labour amendment this afternoon.

Efforts must be made to show the mutual benefits that businesses and consumers gain from a strong, accessible tourism industry. That ideal was particularly strong during the Commonwealth games this summer. Disabled sports stars and campaigners have praised the games, pointing to the impressive levels of access and the successful integration of mainstream and para-sports events. Two of the most common barriers facing visitors with access needs—poor customer service and a lack of accurate information—were tackled head on through training, innovative online tools and clear communication between staff and visitors.

Euan MacDonald is a man with motor neurone disease who set up a popular disability access review website called Euan's Guide when he became wheelchair-bound as a result of MND. Euan praised not only the facilities at the Commonwealth games but the communication surrounding the facilities as outstanding. For Euan, accessible tourism means eliminating the element of the unknown—as the minister said—allowing him to enjoy sporting and music venues without fear of being turned away or being unable to enter.

Varying disabilities call for varied solutions and the Commonwealth games paved the way for that, an achievement that many around the globe can undoubtedly learn from for future events. However, it is important to reflect on some of the barriers and challenges that the games highlighted and how we can hope to move past them in future. Although the Hydro was lauded for its wheelchair-accessible options, those with scooters or difficulty walking found additional barriers, limited seating availability in food courts and long additional distances to walk round the venue. The independent living in Scotland project found events to be accessible but that transport around Glasgow was not as good as usual.

Accessible transport has been highlighted specifically in our capital city recently. Members will have witnessed the recent changes to stop taxi



access to the capital's Waverley station, which have a significant impact on accessible tourism. I understand that Network Rail took the decision at short notice and without consultation and that the station has become even more inaccessible for people with a disability. Inclusion Scotland has said that the situation is inexcusable and has pointed out that that is how many disabled visitors to Scotland's capital city are welcomed. I ask the minister to explore the issue with Network Rail. There is a clear signal that accessibility must be central to all planning and management decisions around our transport networks in Scotland.

The spirit of the Commonwealth games came in the form of teamwork and possibility. We need to take that and ensure that businesses and services become even more accessible to visitors. We need to support groups such as PAMIS and Euan's Guide, which are just two excellent examples of the many groups and people out there who are campaigning for more accessible facilities and a boost in tourism. Although the new £45,000 online training programme that the Government set up has helped Scotland's tourism facilities to become more accessible, we need to constantly update our approach. More needs to be done to ensure that we have a better understanding of the requirements, so that we can realise the economic boost, and that understanding needs to translate into long-lasting and sustainable action.

I welcome the debate, which I am sure will be interesting. I look forward to hearing the other speakers.

I move amendment S4M-10988.1, to insert at end:

“; applauds the work of the Accessible Tourism Project in trying to make Scotland the most accessible tourist destination in Europe by identifying the barriers faced by disabled people holidaying in Scotland and promoting the business benefits of accessible tourism to the industry, and recognises the importance of accessible tourism to securing delivery of opportunities for sustainable economic growth and employment in communities across Scotland”.

14:57

**Nanette Milne (North East Scotland) (Con):** I am pleased to take part in this important debate, which comes as a refreshing return to normality after so many weeks of intense focus on constitutional matters. We all know that tourism is a major contributor to Scotland's economy, but I confess that until I began preparing for the debate, I was not aware of the considerable contribution of accessible tourism within that. As far back as 2009, that contribution amounted to more than £325 million, and the amount has the potential to grow significantly through improved infrastructure, services and attitudes to travellers with special access needs, given that the accessible tourism

market encompasses not only people with permanent disabilities, but families with young children, and an increasing number of senior travellers.

The on-going accessible tourism project, in which Capability Scotland is a key partner with VisitScotland and the Scottish Government, is doing important work in identifying the barriers that are faced by holidaymakers with disabilities and in raising awareness within the tourism industry of the business benefits of accessible tourism. There is still a long way to go if Scotland is to become the most accessible tourist destination in Europe, but the recognition of training needs in tourism businesses and the efforts that are being made to ensure that the industry recognises the all-round benefits to businesses and their customers of maximising accessibility are significant steps in the right direction.

I, too, must briefly mention this summer's Commonwealth games, which featured para-sports alongside all the others, and which was the most disabled-friendly games in the movement's history. Glasgow ably rose to the challenge of ensuring accessibility for more than 350 athletes with disabilities and more than 10,000 spectators with specific access needs during the two weeks of the games. That, possibly more than anything else, has helped to raise awareness among the Scottish public of the general need for accessible tourism in Scotland.

The consultation events with people who have disabilities and impairment groups that were carried out as part of the accessible tourism project highlighted a number of common themes, such as the need for accurate and up-to-date information on how accessible venues are, and the often poor customer service and staff attitudes, which are probably due to inadequate training on disability equality and awareness.

We have had an excellent briefing paper from ScotRail highlighting its significant and continuing efforts to improve its customers' experience, and one from Inclusion Scotland drawing our attention to its concerns about Network Rail's recent decision to ban vehicles from Waverley station. I must say that I share its concerns. As someone who is still recovering from hip replacement surgery, I have found the distance of taxi ranks from the central hub of the station to be quite testing, and that must be the case for many people, even though there are accessible lifts for those who need them. I endorse Jenny Marra's plea to the minister to raise the issue with Network Rail.

Ahead of this debate, I was invited along to see an excellent facility in my region, and I want to focus the rest of my speech on my experience there. Crathie Opportunity Holidays was

developed about 10 years ago as a self-catering holiday destination suitable for people with disabilities and their families. Funded entirely as a charity, Crathie Holidays, situated right next to Balmoral castle in the beautiful scenery of upper Deeside, was the brainchild of the wife of the then minister of Crathie kirk. As a trained social worker, she was acutely aware of the lack of suitable accommodation in the area for tourists with access and other problems, and saw the dilapidated stable block next to the manse as being ripe for development into a disabled-friendly venue. A year or so of intensive fundraising resulted in a courtyard development of high-quality units that are equipped to cater for many differing needs; for example, they have state-of-the-art wet rooms, hoists, combined wash basins and mirrors that raise and lower as a unit, wheelchair-accessible kitchen worktops and cookers, and many other living aids for people with various disabilities.

Other specialist equipment can be obtained as required, but there are sometimes difficulties. I was told that equipment that comes from the national health service is readily available, but on occasion that which comes via the council's social work department is withheld for health and safety reasons, even though the client is well versed in the use of such equipment. It is to be hoped that that sort of difficulty will be resolved as we go ahead with integration of health and social care.

Another problem that is faced by staff at Crathie Holidays is the difficulty in accessing carers locally to help with getting clients dressed or ready for bed, for example. I wonder whether that could be solved by training social science or nursing students to do those tasks as work placements during their courses. I intend to explore that suggestion with the University of Aberdeen.

Earlier this year a new lounge where visitors can meet socially, have computer access and play games or whatever was formally opened by the Duchess of Cornwall during one of her frequent visits to her home in nearby Birkhall. I met in the new lounge some of the holidaymakers who were staying in the complex and were full of praise for the accommodation, facilities and equipment, and for the small number of very dedicated staff who run the enterprise and ensure their comfort and make them feel at home throughout their stay. They all stressed that Crathie Holidays are indeed holidays, and are not to be confused with respite care.

One lady comes regularly from the south of England for her holiday at Crathie, and her family stays there, too. There are children's recreational facilities, so that all generations of the family can have a real family holiday together. Another couple from the central belt go frequently. The lady has severe physical disabilities and advanced

dementia, and her husband really appreciates being able to have a holiday with his wife in appropriate accommodation and beautiful surroundings, with helpful and understanding staff around him. His experience of the area beyond Crathie has not been without difficulty, however, particularly in accessing suitable toilet facilities. His wife needs a special hoist, and the only toilets with such equipment are in Aberdeen, which is some 40 miles away. One is in a sports complex and is available only when the complex is open, and the other is in Aberdeen royal infirmary, where he found that there was no receptionist to give directions and that no one else had heard of it.

For disabled visitors without such highly specialised needs, Crathie Holidays has RADAR—Royal Association for Disability Rights—scheme keys that they can give to residents to allow them access to locked facilities when they are out and about. Of course, only a few tourists can be accommodated at any one time at Crathie, but it is an excellent venue that gives people with disabilities and their families a proper holiday, and it is very worthy of replication in other tourism areas.

The debate has opened my eyes to many of the problems that are encountered by tourists who require special and accessible facilities, and I am glad that individual tourism businesses are increasingly becoming aware of the more specific needs of many of their customers and, I hope, training their staff to treat all their clients with respect and understanding. To be the most accessible tourist destination in Europe is a very worthy aspiration and I hope that we can achieve it.

We will support the Labour amendment.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** We come to open debate. Speeches should be of about six minutes, please—although I have a little bit of time in hand, at this stage.

15:04

**Graeme Dey (Angus South) (SNP):** Expenditure by tourists with disabilities in Scotland totalled almost £400 million last year. In financial terms, that makes it an important contributor to the tourism sector and indeed the wider economy. However, I think that we would all agree that this is not a subject to be considered largely in terms of pounds and pence. Regardless of the financial value of accessible tourism, it is, as the minister indicated, incumbent on all of us to render, or at least to try to render, Scotland as accessible as possible not only to visitors to our country but, just as important, to our own people who are seeking to explore what Scotland has to offer, because it is the right thing to do.

While appreciating the practical challenges, some of which simply cannot be overcome, we have to make the experience of visiting our attractions for people with disabilities close to the experience for the able bodied among us. There is no denying that significant progress has been made in that regard. In recent years, many tourism destinations have become more wheelchair friendly, with installations of disabled toilets and ramps and a general attitudinal change.

Unfortunately, however, it appears that the better understanding of the needs of wheelchair users is not being accompanied by tourism destinations being made suitable for people with other disabilities—or, at least, not to the same degree. Although it is welcome that so many organisations and companies are making their attractions, museums and hotels wheelchair accessible, more needs to be done to make those sites accommodating to, say, hearing-impaired people.

Since being elected, I have struck up a good working relationship with Tayside deaf links in Dundee, and through that I have gained an understanding of some of the everyday, avoidable difficulties that deaf people encounter. In preparing for this debate and on a recent visit to the Tayside deaf hub, I raised the subject of accessing tourism facilities with some of the folk there. The general view was that their needs are far less understood than those of others whose disabilities are more obvious. Harsh? Perhaps, but it is worth noting that only 29 per cent of people with a disability have a disability that is immediately visible, and if deaf people feel that they are not being catered for, that must give us food for thought.

Ahead of the debate, I also asked some leading heritage tourism attractions in Tayside how they cater for visitors who have a hearing impairment or are profoundly deaf. Historic Scotland runs Arbroath abbey and proactively advertises a full functional hearing loop there, but that is as far as it goes.

The needs of the deaf community are even less well catered for at Glamis castle. I mention that to highlight the issue, rather than to make a particular criticism. In response to my querying what provision it has for deaf visitors, I was told that deaf people are catered for in the same way as wheelchair users who, of course, could not manage up and down the stairs of an ancient building. They are provided with an excellent visual presentation that is complemented by subtitles, but of course many deaf people cannot read English—sign language is how they communicate. Glamis castle was not switched on to that. It is now. I hope that we will see change, because we absolutely need to better consider the

requirements of all sectors of our community when it comes to tourism.

Is not it bizarre that many leading museum and historic sites provide headsets with an audio tour, which is usually available in multiple languages, yet nothing like as much attention is paid to the needs of the hearing impaired from the domestic or wider English-speaking market? Let us remember that one person in six in our population is reckoned to be suffering from some degree of hearing loss, and that is set to increase to one in five by 2031, as people begin to encounter hearing problems at a younger age.

There are exemplars. The royal yacht Britannia, which the minister mentioned, offers BSL tablet tours, with induction loops installed throughout the ship. Visitor services here in the Scottish Parliament—which, apart from the important work that is done in the building, is a significant tourism attraction—provide BSL signed tours. There is a BSL signer in the public gallery today, and members may have noticed a signer there on Tuesday relaying the entire debate to members of the public. The service can also be made available on request for First Minister's questions.

**Dennis Robertson:** Graeme Dey highlighted that there is a BSL signer here this afternoon. Can I perhaps make a gentle, respectful point? Speed speech is very difficult for someone with BSL to keep up with.

**Graeme Dey:** I am suitably chastised.

Continuing with the positive—and, at a reasonable pace—I should also mention Dundee Contemporary Arts, which provides signed tours of new exhibitions as free events.

I understand that BSL signed tours carry a cost. Qualified signers charge, I think, up to £60 an hour. However, if we are to become a truly inclusive country, we need to bite the bullet, and we also need to recognise that it is not only at the end destination that those with a hearing disability struggle.

Deaf people often find it hard even to make travel and hotel arrangements. If they have no access to the internet or struggle to read English, because BSL is their first language, on-line booking is not possible and making a telephone booking is obviously not possible either. Usually people who are deaf or hard of hearing will turn to someone else to book on their behalf. However, the manager of Tayside deaf links, Alana Trusty, tells me that she recently tried booking train tickets on behalf of a group of deaf ladies and encountered problems using one of their debit cards, owing to data protection and security issues. Obviously we understand the need for safeguards, but we also need to think about flexibility.

Even if a deaf person succeeds in booking travel, other issues arise. As we all know, platform or gate changes and delays are usually announced over a tannoy system, often without accompanying visual indications of such changes, which a deaf person might not be able to understand in any case.

To be fair to First ScotRail, it has been supporting a voluntary staff programme training employees in sign language since 2006, but the experience of deaf or hard-of-hearing travellers suggests that there is still much to be done.

In order for Scotland to boast justifiably that it offers accessible tourism, much more must be done to meet the needs of all of those with disabilities. As I have acknowledged, there are costs involved in that, but those will be met as more and more deaf people from within Scotland and elsewhere become better able to visit our major attractions. In any case, as I noted at the beginning of my speech, this has to be about more than pounds and pence.

15:11

**Mark Griffin (Central Scotland) (Lab):** I welcome the fact that we have BSL translation for the debate today and I look forward to that becoming the norm, rather than the exception. I encourage members to support my British Sign Language (Scotland) bill, which will be on its way to their offices soon.

As the motion states, it is important that we recognise the important contribution that accessible tourism makes to the Scottish economy. Disabled people should be able to enjoy a holiday or a break, and to participate in the general leisure activities that we take for granted, as Jenny Marra pointed out.

We should recognise the importance of respite for family members who have caring roles. We should remember that although caring is not a burden, it can be challenging and there is definitely a need for respite, which makes accessible tourism a must for both sides in such relationships.

In that context, we should acknowledge the work that has been undertaken and the progress that is being made by VisitScotland. We should recognise that a lot of the work that has to be done by Government is about making sure that the private sector is aware of the tremendous opportunities out there, and of the work that it needs to do in adapting infrastructure or making information from the public sector more easily accessible to the public or travel companies. The minister made that point.

It has been said that the accessible tourism sector has the potential to bring in hundreds of millions of pounds per year to the Scottish economy, but what exactly are we doing to bring that business into Scotland? A simple example would be the VisitScotland adverts that go out across the UK and the world. Why is there never an older person in the advert? There is nobody with a walking stick or a wheelchair. What about a person with a guide dog? I know that, in saying that, I am in danger of typecasting and picking out visible disabilities, but does the world know through our high-profile, visible advertising that Scotland is open to accessible tourism?

What can we learn from the countries that really do this well? I am told that the world leaders in the field are Australia and Spain. Is the minister able to tell us about any dialogue that his department has had with the tourism sectors in those high-performing countries? I acknowledge that the minister is perhaps meeting representatives in Brussels in the near future.

Is the minister able to tell us whether there are any plans to dedicate a senior member of VisitScotland staff to the sector, given the high potential for growth and benefits to the economy? I might be wrong, but I understand that there is an individual member of staff who has responsibility for accessible tourism, but also has responsibilities in other areas.

An excellent company in Cumbernauld, Altogether Travel, is a travel agent that deals in supported holidays and travel. Its service is unique to Scotland; it is registered with the Care Inspectorate and can provide a complete package for someone who wants to go on holiday either here or abroad. This month alone, its customers are enjoying holidays in Malta and Spain. I am sure that I am not the only member in the chamber who is jealous of that, given the long referendum campaign we have just been through.

As I have said, Altogether Travel provides a complete package to anyone who wants a supported holiday, and it offers care and support to older adults, individuals with physical and learning disabilities, individuals with dementia and people who are experiencing mental health issues and sensory impairment. Because people have the freedom to choose when and where they can travel, and the level of support that they require, they are able to enjoy a break on their own, or with friends or family. They can even have staff who act as holiday companions to provide support when required, which is why the company is registered with the Care Inspectorate.

However, the service that Altogether Travel offers, its worldwide network of contacts and the planning that it undertakes for anyone who wants to go on holiday outwith Scotland and spend their

money elsewhere represent just one side of Altogether Travel's business. The other side of the business that it wants to develop is all about attracting tourists from everywhere else in the world to Scotland, and providing them with the service that it offers Scottish people. It wants to expand its business and get people from outside Scotland to come here and spend their money and, by doing so, help to realise the £100 million that could come into the Scottish economy.

Altogether Travel is already getting inquiries from people in other parts of the UK, but although it is doing what it can to provide its service, it is finding things difficult. We know that the market is out there and we know how big it is, and businesses in Scotland's tourism sector really need to adapt to it, especially with a population that is living longer and all that that entails. Businesses need to be up front about what they have capacity for and what they need to do to adapt and cater for the market.

If Altogether Travel and other supported or accessible travel agents want to grow capacity to take on clients and customers from outside Scotland and thereby contribute more to the Scottish economy, they will have to be supported by the tourism sector taking action on accessibility, advertising and communication. I think that that process has started with the minister and VisitScotland showing leadership, but I want the minister to address some of the points that have been made about how we take things forward, and which have come directly from businesses in the sector.

15:18

**Nigel Don (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP):**

This is a fascinating debate, particularly given that, as has already been mentioned, it comes after the kerfuffle of the previous few weeks. I am grateful to Jenny Marra, in particular, for referring to PAMIS and to the many colleagues who have mentioned BSL, partly because that means that I do not have to do so myself, and partly because they have been able to highlight the multifaceted nature of the issue.

Tourism is, as the minister has pointed out, a national opportunity, but I agree with him that it is also a social responsibility that we have to meet. There is absolutely no conceivable reason why those in our society who are disadvantaged should not be able to travel around and enjoy simply being out and about—never mind being able to enjoy the holidays that we have. If the facilities are not there, we must ensure that they are.

To those who want to worry about the numbers and money, I point out that such tourism is good not only for the businesses that are visited, but for

our health services and the other facilities that we have to provide for those who are stuck at home. They are, quite simply, costing us money as a result, and the ability to get and about and enjoy life is actually good for the collective bank balance as well as for the individuals concerned.

When one starts to look at accessibility, one finds that it all becomes very local. As, I am sure, other members did, I took the opportunity to look around my constituency to find out what I could learn and where access was good or not so good. I shall deal gently with some of the organisations that I examine, but first I will speak about a couple of things that emerged. The first concerns the Caledonian railway, which runs from my home city of Brechin towards Montrose. It is accessible for wheelchairs, through ramped access, but I found myself wondering whether someone who is on a steam railway needs to be able to use a hearing loop. I have a suspicion that that is one of the experiences in life that you do not need to hear at all—I suspect that you can feel it and know exactly what is going on.

At the other extreme, there is Dunnottar castle, outside Stonehaven—I welcome some youngsters from that part of the world to the public gallery. It strikes me that the castle is where it is precisely because it is inaccessible. I have a sneaking suspicion that, in our discussion about access, we need to be a little bit careful to ensure that we do not go overboard and suggest that everything should be immediately accessible to absolutely everybody. I am not quite sure how we would ever get wheelchair access to Dunnottar castle. It might be wiser not to try.

I want to return to railways; I am grateful to Jenny Marra for speaking about access at Waverley station. I think that there is a suggestion that the issues there might have more to do with security than anything else, but we absolutely need to solve the problem there, so I add my voice to that argument.

I have been pursuing with the railway companies why it is that those who are very blind, and particularly those who are deafblind, should not be able to be accompanied by a companion who travels free. It is undoubtedly the case that, if someone had a guide dog, that dog would travel free. I have checked with our resident guide-dog user, and I am assured that Mr Q travels free. However, if someone required a companion to travel with them, that person would not travel free, unless they had their own reasons for travelling free. They might get a discount, depending on the local authority area that they reside in, and they might also get a substantial discount if they had an appropriate card, by dint of age or other issues. However, I am struck by the fact that the cost of someone occupying a seat on a train that is

travelling outwith commuter times is, for all practical purposes, zero. One of the things that is taught at the Harvard business school is that most business costs are fixed costs. If that seat would otherwise be empty, the cost to the railway of its being occupied is, in fact, zero. It seems to me, therefore, that there is a clear case for saying to the railway operators that someone with severe disabilities who needs a companion to get out should be able to take that companion with them for free.

I asked that question of the train operators and received this response:

"Train Operating Companies are not in a position to allow free travel for companions as there would be a financial cost attached to this that the TOCs would not be in a position to meet. There are a number of off peak services that are particularly busy and there is almost always a value associated with a seat on a train, whether it be the cost of running or cleaning the train or the staff employed to ensure that the train reaches its destination."

I quote that because I want to quote it back to the train operating companies and point out to them that those are all totally fixed costs. I accept that some off-peak trains might be particularly busy and that there is a real cost attached to a seat on them, but it seems to me that they are few and far between. I do not want to argue with the companies about their railways, because they know their systems—they know which ones are busy and they know what is going on. However, I want to make the argument to them that the cost of allowing free travel to the companion of someone who is blind or deafblind is pretty much zero. That is something that they should be able to deal with. I will continue to challenge them on the point. I am doing so in parliamentary time quite deliberately. I am conscious that Fergus Ewing is not the relevant minister, so I am not laying this at his door, but I will be taking it to the Minister for Transport and Veterans.

We need to address that issue. Whether those folk travel far or near, the deaf, the blind and those with severe difficulties in seeing should be able to take a companion with them for free on an off-peak train. We ought to pursue that issue.

15:24

**Patricia Ferguson (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (Lab):** I add my voice to those of other members in welcoming the BSL interpretation that is going on to make this debate about accessible tourism as accessible as it can be.

We know that tourism is one of our biggest and most important industries, and it is a part of our economy that can continue to grow and develop over the coming years. However, the debate should not be about the contribution that tourism—

specifically accessible tourism—can make to the economy, as tourism is about more than money; it is also about that most important and valuable commodity: time. In particular, it is about that memorable weekend or, if we are lucky, those two or more weeks when we join family or friends for some relaxation, doing the things that we enjoy most and recharging our batteries. We all need to have a break now and again, and the 11 million people in this country with a disability are no different—at least, they should not be. However, for many people with a disability, the idea of going on holiday can be daunting because the challenges that they face in everyday life do not go away just because they are on holiday.

I read recently about a project in Fife that I believe Mr Ewing has visited, which is the brainchild of David and Moira Henderson of Cupar. They are building a self-catering facility for disabled holidaymakers where even the most severely disabled can be accommodated and where on-site care can be an option if required. The Hendersons are to be congratulated on their idea, but it was the words of Moira Henderson, as reported in the magazine *PosAbility*, that really struck home. Mrs Henderson referred to the fact that a cousin of the family had developed a life-changing, paralysing condition. As his condition deteriorated, that man paid to go into a hospice so that his family could go on holiday without him. Mrs Henderson rightly said:

"That's not what holidays are all about—they are about relaxing in a comfortable and suitable environment with family or friends."

Mrs Henderson is absolutely right about that, which is why I am pleased that VisitScotland has recognised the issue and is committed to tackling it head-on. It is appropriate that the Scottish Government is investing in the online programme to assist those who work in the tourism industry to understand and, more importantly, to respond to the needs of all those with whom it may come into contact.

Colleagues will know that I have a particular interest in heritage, and I know that adapting ancient buildings or making historic sites accessible to all can be a daunting task. I was interested to hear Graeme Dey raise the problem of BSL interpretation being made available in such facilities. Mr Dey may be right that there is a specific problem with the provision of BSL interpretation, but I have been pleased to read in Historic Scotland's access guide detailed information about the buildings that Historic Scotland owns, their accessibility and, importantly, the accessibility of the exhibits on offer in any given place. I offer a short quote to show the kind of detail that Historic Scotland goes into. It says about one venue, which will remain nameless:

"The Whitehouse is reached over a large rough stone culvert cover and a slight threshold at the door."

That may not mean that it is going to be an easy place to get into—perhaps it cannot be—but at least people will know before they get there exactly what the situation is, and that might influence their choice of places to visit. I congratulate Historic Scotland on that. However, perhaps, like others, it could do better when it comes to issues such as BSL. I intend to contact Historic Scotland to find out what feedback it has had from users and to see whether we can suggest any further improvements.

As colleagues have suggested, Inclusion Scotland has given us some interesting information about the revamped Waverley station. Looking around when the changes were first made, I thought that there was a problem in the making—a problem that is particularly acute for disabled users. I understand that discussions are now taking place about how to address the difficulties that are being encountered, but is it not a shame that the same effort was not put into resolving potential issues before the changes were made? Why could those changes not have been discussed with some of the many organisations that assist people with a disability or help to look at access issues? It seems to me that it would have been common sense for a big organisation such as Network Rail to do that. I hope that those issues can now be resolved.

Inclusion Scotland also made the point that accessible accommodation is often available only in more expensive hotels. It also said that people with a disability are more likely than those without a disability to be living in poverty. That problem requires more than just a structural response, although I hope that VisitScotland and others will consider it.

I was very struck by the comments that Stewart Stevenson made before he left the chamber about the fact that insurance can be an issue for those with a disability or an illness. However, people do not need to be unwell to have an insurance issue; they only have to be over a certain age. I have experienced that when trying to book accommodation and holidays for my parents when they were both in their 80s. The insurance ended up costing more than the holiday, which surely cannot be right in this day and age. My father wanted to travel to America, but when the fact that he has had a triple heart bypass was added in, we had to forget the holiday. Even the fact that my stepmother had a pacemaker implanted meant that she, too, found it almost impossible to travel to the United States. That is not a problem for VisitScotland, but travellers are facing such issues as they want to travel round our world as it becomes smaller.

As I said, I am delighted with Scottish tourism's efforts and that VisitScotland is leading on those efforts. I am conscious of the fact that 10 years ago or so, VisitScotland literally led the world on green tourism. I sincerely hope that in the next few years we will see VisitScotland leading on accessible tourism.

I ask the minister to indicate whether accessibility and related issues will become part of VisitScotland's grading system in the near future.

15:31

**Chic Brodie (South Scotland) (SNP):** I, too, welcome the debate and our visitors today.

My son is a professional golfer. A few years ago, he was asked to appear on the BBC's "Today" programme, to be interviewed about his wish to introduce to the United Kingdom special sports equipment. Manufactured in the USA, the paramobile allows people with disabilities to have real and full access to the great game of golf. I use golf as an example to illustrate the possibilities involving one important element of tourism—golf—and the need to increase accessibility in relation to tourism more generally. Of course, the Ryder cup—the greatest golf attraction in the world, and the greatest global tourist attraction in my opinion—starts with a practice round today, with the first round taking place tomorrow.

When I questioned my son, Greg, about the viability of his project, he waxed lyrical about the opportunities that the equipment afforded. We discussed needs and the ramifications of the equipment. The equipment is for the chair-bound. It allows golf users—it can be used not just for golf, but for archery and other sports—to be erect so that they can drive into bunkers, trees and what have you and enjoy the sport's full attractions.

The major features that my son highlighted were not just about overcoming the physical barriers to golf, but about optimising the opportunities, buttressing them even more with good customer service, the attitudes of people, staff and golf course owners to the disabled, and the availability of full information about accessibility.

I am encouraged that all those elements will feature in the Ryder cup, as they should elsewhere. As we know from VisitScotland's comments, there will be absolutely no discrimination at the Ryder cup and all people will be treated equally, with the same quality and level of service; accessible information about the event will be available to all, including those with infirmity; and services will be delivered that are appropriate to actual, as opposed to presumed, need. Other support will be provided, such as access buddies—I am glad that George Adam is not here—who are volunteers who help people

with limited mobility or sensory impairment and the elderly, allowing them to move around not just the course and the tented villages but the surrounding area.

Accessible tourism contributes almost £370 million to the Scottish economy. That is no small amount. It provides huge potential economic benefits to hundreds of businesses in Scotland, not least train services.

It is significant that the opportunities that come with that business are met with improved customer service. As has already been mentioned, in its briefing, ScotRail highlights a recent improvement. The recommended amount of notice to be given by customers with disabilities when booking travel assistance with the company has dropped from 24 hours to just four hours. The availability of a passenger assistance app for ScotRail staff can only add to the wider spectrum of improving customer service.

All such events augment the possibilities of the accessible tourism project, which can make Scotland one of the most accessible tourist destinations in Europe by identifying the physical and service barriers that are faced by those with disabilities who holiday or plan to holiday here. The partnership of Capability Scotland, VisitScotland and the Government under the auspices of that project is to be commended for programming in overcoming those barriers. It is a key vehicle for the future success of the accessibility programme.

Those barriers are not limited to the architecture of tourism—restaurants, accommodation and tourist attractions—but relate to everything around the periphery that is associated with it, such as the shops and stations that complete the tourist experience. Patricia Ferguson made the important point that it is not just about money.

We have all said that 2014 is the year in which we welcomed and continue to welcome the world. We have had the Commonwealth games, with services for people with disabilities provided by the front-runner volunteers and Clyde-siders. That has all been, and will be, achieved and complemented by the online training programme that has been mentioned. It is a tool for staff and associated tourism enterprises and a vehicle that will allow all our guests who have a disability to enjoy the Scottish experience fully through excellent customer service.

Those are all important. However, the most important real, on-going benefits will flow from the feedback of customers with disabilities.

Professor Stephen Hawking, a sufferer of MND, said:

“There is a severe lack of quality information about disabled access in the UK, particularly services giving the end-user’s perspective.”

Like Jenny Marra, I applaud Euan MacDonald, a local person who, like Professor Hawking, suffers from MND and who has developed Euan’s Guide, which is a disabled access review website and app that provides credible information on tourism sites that he and others with disabilities have compiled. People with disabilities have reviewed 600 places in 250 towns. That is no small achievement.

That kind of initiative, partnered by the work of Capability Scotland, VisitScotland and, of course, our Government, can not only secure enjoyment but ensure that Scotland is at the forefront of—indeed, that it is a trailblazer for—the growth of accessible tourism in years to come.

15:38

**Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD):** I join others in welcoming the presence of BSL signers for the debate. As a member of the corporate body, I reflect on the fact that the Parliament has a good track record on accessibility. It is a key guiding principle of the institution, but that is not to say that we cannot keep on learning and improving.

I also welcome the debate and congratulate the minister on his motion and Jenny Marra on her helpful amendment, which draws attention to the accessible tourism project in particular.

I declare an interest because, as colleagues may know, my brother has been a wheelchair user since a serious rugby accident 18 years ago. In my remarks, I will draw on some of the first-hand experience that he has had and that we as a family have had.

This is an issue of principle. It is a question of fairness, equity and social justice. The minister quite rightly asked why those who have a disability should have any less of a right to a holiday or to a break than the rest of us.

These debates are often in danger of lapsing into discussions around the cost and practicality of adaptations, the cost of preparing materials and so on. It is therefore important that we emphasise the significant opportunities that we have. As other members have said, tourists who have disabilities contribute £370 million to our tourism industry. The trend is on the rise, which perhaps reflects the loyalty of those who find destinations and accommodation that meet their needs.

High as that figure is, it could and should be significantly higher. Research commissioned from the University of Surrey and published earlier this year suggests that the European tourism sector is



missing out on around €140 billion per year because of the lack of support offered to travellers who have special access needs.

That does not surprise me. My first family holiday after my brother's accident was to Barcelona 15 years ago. I was interested in Mark Griffin's comments about Spain being an exemplar because, certainly 15 years ago, there was a lack of information, and although there were facilities, there were not many. Patricia Ferguson made the same point that Inclusion Scotland brings out very clearly in its briefing: the facilities are at the higher end of the market and perhaps not financially accessible to many who wish to travel.

It is not just a question of accessibility when travelling. Those who have disabilities are often required to travel with particular clothing, medication or equipment, and those who are flying—as we did—might not be able to keep their equipment and so on with them at all times. The risks associated with that were rammed home to us when British Airways lost my brother's shower chair on the flight on the way out. I spent the first 48 hours of that holiday pushing my Spanish language skills to the absolute limit in pursuit of a replacement. Members should not labour under the misapprehension that that was a bit unfortunate for us, because BA managed to lose two of the wheels on the return journey a week later. Significant improvements have been made since then, but the Commission-sponsored research suggests that we have a way to go yet.

The question is often one of providing information for travellers, and the Scottish Government-sponsored project during the Commonwealth games drilled down into that aspect. I entirely agree with the minister that hotel access statements are not gobbledegook; they are absolutely essential, as, indeed, is the training for volunteers. The feedback shows that they are being seen as part of the success of the games that were held earlier this summer.

A lack of facilities is a frustration, but it is as nothing when compared with the frustration felt by those who arrive at a destination to find that the facilities are not as advertised. Chic Brodie and Jenny Marra referred to Euan's Guide and the service that it provides. It is absolutely critical that people who have disabilities test out facilities, provide their feedback and make that feedback as widely available as possible. The more input and feedback there is, the better the service will become.

I will conclude with a couple of examples from my own constituency. Buchanhaven cottage is a self-catering cottage in Kirkwall for people who have dementia. Given the increase in the numbers of dementia sufferers that we have seen and the projections for those numbers in the future, I

welcome the fact that that part of the market now appears to be being catered for. Buchanhaven cottage is owned and managed by Marilyn Buchan, who was, for 25 years, a nurse who supported those with dementia and other mental health issues. In the cottage there is a focus on things such as lighting, colour and signage. For example, the doors are brightly painted and labelled. The facility recognises the particular needs of dementia sufferers as well as those who have autism and other mental health issues. That example highlights that there is a need for not only overall improved provision and information but more specific and tailored provision.

The motion talks about the importance of the public and private sectors working closely together. That point has been well made. It has been illustrated to me by the visits that my brother, who is based in Edinburgh, continues to make up to Orkney.

In addition to good self-catering accommodation and more accessible facilities, the support from the occupational therapy team—from hoists to expert advice—has been invaluable. If it were not for the contribution from the public sector, what is on offer from private providers and local businesses would be far less accessible. That is probably reflected nationwide.

I welcome the debate. Raising public awareness and improving the information that is available are critical to removing many of the physical, mental and other barriers that continue to exist. It is a simple question of fairness and equity, but by reinforcing the message about the economic benefits we improve the chances of improvements being made more quickly.

15:45

**Jamie Hepburn (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP):** I thank the Scottish Government for bringing forward this debate. I have been motivated to speak in the debate by the difficulties that a constituent of mine has experienced in trying to go on holiday with his wife, who uses a wheelchair. I will come back to that.

Tourism is clearly important to Scotland's economy. Recent figures show that 11.2 million tourist trips were made to Scotland, contributing expenditure of £2.6 billion. The sector is important, and we should always look to grow it.

Some people might regard the provision of infrastructure for accessible tourism as a challenge. They should not do so; accessible tourism is a massive opportunity for Scotland and already contributes almost £400 million to the Scottish economy, as members said. Worldwide, between 600 million and 900 million people have an impairment, and in Europe 70 per cent of the

124 million people who have a disability are physically and financially able to travel and often do so accompanied by friends and family. The estimated purchasing power of people with disabilities in the UK is £80 billion a year.

People with disabilities—I am conscious of what Dennis Robertson said about the terminology and I will try not to let him down—represent a huge market. We have a chance to ensure that Scotland is prepared to benefit from accessible tourism, but there is some way to go. We know that 70 per cent of disabled people are able to travel but do not do so, because of a lack of accessible accommodation and basic facilities.

I am pleased that work is being done in that regard. The minister and other members mentioned the training on making services for tourists more accessible, which I very much welcome. In this year of the Commonwealth games and the Ryder cup, great efforts have been made to ensure that events are accessible. There has been a massive effort to ensure that flagship events are as accessible as possible, but it is probably easier to put in place arrangements for one-off events than it is to ensure that tourist facilities more generally are accessible. In its helpful briefing, Inclusion Scotland set out a range of issues that face people with disabilities, such as the shortage of fully accessible public transport, which is a key barrier.

That reflects the concerns of my constituent. He contacted me about the problems that he has had over the past two years in arranging suitable holiday accommodation for his wife, who is disabled and wheelchair bound, due to frontotemporal dementia, and needs fully accessible disabled accommodation that has an overhead or portable hoist and stand aid in the bedroom and toilet. He talked about the lack of hotels and B and Bs in Scotland that have such facilities and made the point that establishments that provide equipment often charge extra for it. He has been able to find only one establishment that does not charge extra for specialist disabled equipment: Crathie Opportunity Holidays, in Mr Robertson's constituency, which was mentioned by Nanette Milne.

Inclusion Scotland referred in its briefing to the concern that

"accessible accommodation is often only available in the more expensive hotels"

or that hotels charge for specialist equipment. We know that people with disabilities are more likely than non-disabled people to be living in poverty, yet they must bear the brunt of those extra costs.

I wrote to VisitScotland on my constituent's behalf and it talked in its reply about the accessible tourism project, part of whose purpose

is to share information and ensure that businesses help each other to find the most suitable and reasonably priced equipment. I hope that that will succeed and lead to more locations not charging a premium for providing such equipment.

Another issue that my constituent raised, which Jenny Marra and Nanette Milne touched on, is the lack of disabled-access toilets in Scotland, which can make journeys nigh on impossible and very difficult. My constituent referred to particular problems in the Highlands, the Borders, the Western Isles and the northern isles, which he described as no-go areas for disabled people—or people with disabilities, I should say—who need fully accessible toilets.

I raised that issue with VisitScotland, which said that it does not have jurisdiction over the matter. I accept that, but I hope that it can work with its partners to improve the situation.

**Mike MacKenzie (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)** *rose—*

**Jamie Hepburn:** Do I have time to give way, Presiding Officer?

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (John Scott):** Yes.

**Jamie Hepburn:** I give way.

**Mike MacKenzie:** Do local authorities have a role in providing public toilets and do they need to be partners in what Jamie Hepburn describes?

**Jamie Hepburn:** Absolutely. Local authorities probably have the lead role in providing such facilities, but it would help if VisitScotland worked with them as partners to improve the situation.

The last issue that my constituent raised, which might not be immediately obviously a tourism matter, is difficulties in accessing personal care or respite hours for his wife while on holiday. When he travels to an area, the local authority there might provide respite care and assistance, but he has had the problem that some areas do not do that—the provision is patchy. That is not VisitScotland's primary responsibility, but it is an important part of ensuring that we have the best set-up to cater for people with disabilities.

I hope that I offer those concerns constructively on behalf of my constituent and others who are like him. I thank the Scottish Government and VisitScotland for the work that they are engaged in and I look forward to hearing about the work that will continue, to ensure that Scotland has the best accessible tourism infrastructure that we can have.

15:53

**Dennis Robertson (Aberdeenshire West) (SNP):** In my intervention on the minister, I made

a point about the phrase “people with disabilities”, because it is important to recognise that we must put people first. It is people who have a disability or an impairment. It is easy—I have done it many a time and I have no doubt that I will do it again, perhaps even this afternoon—to use the word “disabled” before the word “people” but, when we look at accessible tourism, it is important to consider the broad aspect of accessibility and what it means. Most members have made telling contributions about the wider meaning not for the individual but for the individual and their family.

Holidays are often family holidays. During her training to be a paediatric nurse, my daughter did social care work. I take up Nanette Milne’s point about nursing colleges looking at nurses getting into an aspect of social care and providing respite care, perhaps in holiday destinations.

My daughter cares for a young man who has severe and complex mobility issues. She says that the difficulty that she has when she is out with him—she has been on holiday with him—is the basic accessibility to what we consider to be the normal places that we would like to visit. That includes things such as shops, restaurants and cafes—things that we take for granted.

We have come a long way. I have been involved with access panels for probably around 40 years, and that has always been worth while, because I have seen the progress that has happened.

When I am considering going on holiday, I tend to look at venues that do not require me to cross busy roads. If I go abroad on holiday, I tend to leave my guide dog at home, because I think that he probably deserves a holiday from me at the same time as I probably deserve a holiday with my family. I do that deliberately because I want to be able to still have a degree of independence. I want to be able to enjoy the freedom of being on holiday and the relaxation.

I have many friends who have disabilities. The examples that we bring to the chamber quite often come through family members or friends. One friend in particular tells me that his biggest frustration—we have witnessed this ourselves—is in simply going out for a meal when he visits other friends in other parts of the country, down south, or abroad. He says that, when he finds restaurants with level accessibility and accessible toilets, he then finds that he cannot use the facilities. The problem is that, between where he is and the accessible toilets, the tables and chairs will be placed in such a way that there is no room. We then have to ask people whether they would mind moving so that we can get a wheelchair through. That should not be the case; we should always have direct access to accessible toilets.

There is another frustrating thing that many people bring up. I am sure that many tourists who come to this country sometimes simply shake their head and say, “My goodness! There’s an accessible toilet here, yet it’s got the trolley for the cleaner in it, the pail, the mops, the waste bins and whatever.” Sometimes there will be an accessible toilet, but people cannot get in to use it. We need to be sure that, when we have those facilities, they can be used for the purpose for which they were designed. Access means accessibility. That should be there.

When we are considering people with sensory impairments, we have to consider whether the equipment in many of our wonderful facilities—whether in our castles or in Holyrood palace across the road, which is an exemplar for people who are deaf or hard of hearing or who have other sensory impairments—works and that the people who provide it know about it. In many places that provide hearing loops, for instance, those hearing loops can be faulty or the person in that place may have no idea how to manage them or instruct on their usage.

I want to stick to some basics. It is quite often about awareness and common sense. There is the frustration of a person with a hearing loss, for instance. If they go into a ticket office to buy a ticket for a particular venue, sometimes the lighting is not good enough, so they cannot lip-read what the person behind the glass counter is saying. Worse than that, the person behind the glass counter quite often looks down or away, so there is absolutely no way that they can lip-read what they are saying anyway. We need to be aware of that basic aspect of training and awareness, and that does not cost money; it simply costs a little bit of training and awareness. That is not in itself a huge expense for people to take on board.

I take on board what the minister said about the VisitScotland website and the training facility and training tools there, but I gently say to him and to those who create the website for VisitScotland that it could be better. When I navigate the website through the search engines to look at accessible accommodation, it is not particularly easy. Given that we are trying to entice people to come to Scotland, regardless of where they are from and what their needs are, the VisitScotland statement should say, “Yes—our doors are open, and if you have a particular disability, impairment or need, we can manage and cope with it.” It is not difficult.

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

**Dennis Robertson:** We should be up front about what we mean by accessibility. It should be what it states that it is: accessible.

16:00

**Margaret McCulloch (Central Scotland (Lab)):** Time and again in debates in Parliament we have discussed how we could, and why we must, make Scotland the best destination in the world. It is clear from those debates that Scotland has what it takes to be a world-class destination—indeed, in many ways and many places, it already is.

Tourism makes a huge contribution to the Scottish economy, and Barclays expects spending from overseas visitors to grow by 40 per cent by 2017. We have discussed VisitScotland's thematic approach to marketing Scotland, from the year of creative Scotland to the year of natural Scotland to the year of homecoming.

We have heard about the events that bring people here and keep them coming back, such as the Ryder cup, the Commonwealth games and our world-renowned festival season. We have debated business tourism and the propositions that Scotland must be joined up with better transport links and that more of our young people must learn modern languages so that everyone is made welcome in our country.

Today, we are asked to take another look at tourism and think about how we can make Scotland not only an attractive destination but a more accessible one. The Labour amendment specifically applauds the work of the accessible tourism project in

“aspiring to make Scotland the most accessible tourist destination in Europe.”

The European Commission study by the University of Surrey found that the tourism sector across Europe is losing up to €142 billion every year because too many attractions, venues and transport connections are not accessible enough for those with special access needs. If they were accessible, tourism in the Europe could support an extra 3.4 million jobs.

Thankfully, Scotland and the UK do well in comparison with other destinations in Europe. In comparison with other European countries, we have a relatively good infrastructure for tourism. We have a wealth of visitor attractions; brown signage; tourist information offices; extensive public transport, although it could be better; a broadband network that is being improved and expanded as technology moves on; and widespread access to ATMs and cashless payment facilities.

We have made more progress in meeting the special access requirements of people with disabilities than many of our European neighbours have. We still have some way to go, but we are moving in the right direction. For Government, accessibility must remain a priority. For

businesses, making their hotel, venue or attraction more accessible must be viewed as an investment rather than a cost.

However, accessible tourism is not just about physical infrastructure. It is equally about providing reliable information and a good standard of service. The accessible tourism project consulted widely with disabled people. The themes that emerged, in addition to cost, included the need for travellers to have more information and communication and better customer service.

Our venues, attractions and hoteliers must provide information on accessibility as standard, and that information must be kept up to date. With such information, people with disabilities are in a better position to plan their journeys. We also need to ensure that there is a good standard of customer service throughout the hospitality and tourism sector.

The project identified concern about the attitudes of staff towards disabled people as well as the service that they can sometimes receive. I would therefore welcome the development of new training tools by VisitScotland and others to promote accessible tourism. We have to address, and prevent, behaviour that makes disabled people feel uncomfortable, patronised or in any way unwelcome. If Scotland is to be a world-class destination, visitors should expect world-class service.

We cannot underestimate the potential of Scottish tourism. Tourism in Scotland is growing and it was growing even when the economy as a whole was contracting. Scotland is one of the world's greatest destinations and it is getting better all the time, so let us make sure that everyone has the chance to enjoy it.

16:05

**Rob Gibson (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP):** The concept of people first and of ensuring that they are able to get to parts of our country for holidays is complex and difficult to achieve. However, the disposable income of the grey pound, which has been recognised, and, increasingly, the disposable income of the disabled pound, can bolster many local services and businesses if the welcome includes making it easy for the less able to arrive.

People with disabilities being able to get to parts of the country that I represent is perhaps one of the challenges that a number of members have already mentioned. I will take that point forward in two ways. First, I will refer to a book that was written in 2002, which is called, “The Creaky Traveler in the North West Highlands of Scotland: A Journey for the Mobile But Not Agile”. The book recognises that there are a range of abilities,

which we are talking about today. It talks about the kind of facilities that were required by an American couple, Warren and Gerda Rovetch. They were at the less disabled end of the spectrum. Nevertheless, what the book showed was that many people are needful—that is a really good Americanism, I suppose. People are needful at various levels of requirement. The book identified the kind of things that would make it possible for people like that couple to enjoy a holiday in bed and breakfasts and so on, and the kind of facilities that they would require.

I will return to those issues in a minute. However, in order for people to get to places such as the north-west, they have to travel using their own transport or by public transport and, as was mentioned earlier, that is where some of the major problems lie. Of course there are low-entry buses in the cities—indeed, there are such buses in the city of Inverness—but getting access to those buses in the north-west of Sutherland, where there are very few transport links, is a huge problem. Bus route development funds should have ability issues built into the way in which the money is given, not just in the cities. That would ensure that the buses that Stagecoach, for example, has told us it uses are available for routes outwith the large centres, so that people can have access to them. However, it is very difficult for someone with a wheelchair to get on to a coach, which is the more likely form of transport. The Stagecoach coaches have a lift mechanism, but they have timetables to meet and it is quite time consuming for anyone to access a bus in that way.

When we look at the rail situation, there are many non-staffed railway stations in the north and in the west. We are talking about a lack of aid to help someone with a mobility problem, except for the staff who are on the train. We have to ask ourselves whether it is possible for people with mobility problems to travel to such places when the nearest railhead to Assynt—I will talk about Assynt in a minute—is some 30 or 40 miles away. We are talking about whether there is someone there to help when those people want to use a train. That issue has to be dealt with in the staffing policies of ScotRail.

The third aspect concerns CalMac ferries in particular, and indeed the ferries for the northern and southern isles in Orkney and for Shetland. I am sorry that Liam McArthur is not here at the moment, but I am sure that he would agree that the older ferries have very poor facilities indeed for people with mobility problems. Work needs to be done on those ferries—a major catch-up is needed in order to make them disability friendly in terms of disability discrimination act issues. However, new ferries will be disability friendly, I hope. When we finally see the new ferry to Stornoway, the Loch Seaforth, which is a couple of months late, I hope

not only that the electrics will work but that the lift systems will be properly accessible.

Turning to facilities, which have been talked about, I want to mention a place that I visited when it was opened in 2006—the all-abilities path at Leitir Easaidh in Little Assynt, which is in the far north-west of Sutherland. The pathway was completed in 2005 and officially opened in May 2006 by Jamie Andrew, a mountaineer who was badly frostbitten and lost his limbs. The path came about through the hard work of the Culag Community Woodland Trust. Leaving the new all-access car park at Leitir Easaidh near Loch Assynt lodge, the pathway, which is suitable for those in wheelchairs as well as those of limited mobility, leads to two lochs along a well-made and carefully graded trackway. At each of the two lochs, there is a picnic area with composting toilets that are accessible to those in wheelchairs, a shelter and a jetty to give access to boats for fishing. There is disabled angling access, with two boats that people can be aided on to in order to partake in angling.

That is an example of a project in the far north-west of Sutherland that allows people with a range of abilities to access such things. It suggests that we need to ensure that transport provision makes it possible to easily visit the accommodation and places that Euan's Guide identifies.

To take a point that Patricia Ferguson made, people, including people with disabilities and their carers, can benefit spiritually from the intangible and tangible cultural elements on holidays. That is the great possibility that comes from visits to places such as Little Assynt. Indeed, the creaky travellers that I mentioned benefited from that—the information on the book states:

“Celtic history and tradition comes alive as our hosts meander their way along.”

What an opportunity there is to see something uplifting, and people of all abilities should be able to access that. As the debate has shown, we are on the way, but we are not there yet.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Thank you for that very detailed speech. I now call Stewart Stevenson—you have a generous seven minutes or thereby, Mr Stevenson.

16:12

**Stewart Stevenson (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP):** I will kind of disagree with everybody who has spoken so far in the debate, because we have been utterly without ambition in our contributions, and I intend to remedy that in my seven minutes or so.

We have just heard from Rob Gibson, who said that

"we are not there yet."

However, nobody has described what "there" is. Nobody has said what the world would look like if we had a blank canvas and we drew it anew. The reality is that the world that we all seek is one in which there are no special facilities for people with special needs or disabilities, not because we do not provide for them but because every facility meets their needs and everybody uses them.

Is that hopelessly ambitious? Not necessarily. Those who have travelled on a class 170 train on our railways—they are the trains that are mostly used between Edinburgh and Glasgow, so many members might have done that—will know that the toilets are disabled capable. They are not disabled toilets, as we all use them. Why should that not be the case everywhere?

**Dennis Robertson:** Will Mr Stevenson take a brief intervention?

**Stewart Stevenson:** I will in a minute or two, but I want to say a little more first.

We have spent far too much time focusing on people's inabilities and not enough time on realising people's capabilities that we currently do not provide for. I will give a few examples. A colleague that I used to work with was registered blind and his visual acuity was, in essence, restricted to being able to distinguish light from dark, yet one of his hobbies was flying gliders. He did not do it on his own, but he was able to fly gliders. Was that not stepping up to something ambitious?

Do members know that it is possible for people to get a private pilots licence when they have only one eye and they cannot hear? Why should not more people who have only one eye and no hearing get that pilots licence? Why do we not have cookery courses, or gardening courses, for people with a range of shortcomings in sight, hearing or touch? Why should not holidays for people with some restricted capabilities also be holidays for their carers? Taking on holiday another team of carers would double the economic benefit and the benefit to individuals.

When we get away from the ghettoisation of some members of our community and we are all the same and all accessing the same facilities, that will be the real triumph.

**Dennis Robertson:** The gold standard was spoken about earlier by Nanette Milne and Jamie Hepburn in relation to Crathie Opportunity Holidays, whose chalets are fully accessible not only to people with mobility or sensory impairments but to people who have no mobility or sensory impairments whatsoever. The beauty of such a facility is that it shows that the gold

standard can happen, because it is fully accessible to all regardless of need.

**Stewart Stevenson:** Delightful, excellent and a model for everywhere, but we succeed only when everywhere is like that. I do not think that we are setting our ambition high enough. Of course, in reality we can probably never realise every aspect of that ambition. However, if we aim for the highest possible standard and drop a little bit short, is that not better than aiming for mediocrity and succeeding? I say to colleagues around the chamber that that is the key message.

There are a few other things that have not been mentioned. There is a range of sensory deprivations that people might have and ways in which we might stimulate the senses. That might particularly be the case for people with a degree of mental ill health, who might benefit from being able to go into a garden and just listen to the bumblebees gathering the pollen from the flowers. As someone without any particular needs, I love doing that. There was a garden for smells in Aberdeen at one stage—I do not know whether it is still there—which people with particular needs felt were interesting.

In my intervention on the minister, I talked about the need to consider people who are suffering ill health, whether it is temporary or permanent, and who are unable to get insurance to travel internationally and are experiencing some limitations. We must include those people. That means, for example, that they need to have confidence that they can get their specialist medicines if they need them in, perhaps, Acharacle or some more distant part of Scotland. We need to ensure that that happens and that local medical people can get access to their records if they are required in order to give confidence to the people concerned that that will be possible.

Let us not underrate the ambition of people who have apparent restrictions. A great event—I have not heard of it for a wee while—was the Grampian Society for the Blind racetrack day, when blind people drove around a racetrack. Someone sat beside them saying "Left", "Right", "Slow down" and occasionally "SLOW DOWN!" That was great excitement for people who are blind. Of course, us sighted people got blindfolds and drove around the track blind as well, and we were not nearly as fast as the people who had no sight at all.

I think, too, of Evelyn Glennie, who plays in an orchestra and yet has no hearing. Why should we not encourage people who have no hearing to follow Evelyn Glennie's example and have a holiday playing in an orchestra and learning an instrument? We have got to use every means to create the opportunity for people to extend their experience and capabilities and test their limits.

That applies to us all, by the way. This is not a ghetto issue, but a matter for all of us. That is what life is about. It is about grabbing it by the throat and trying new things. We must create a society and a world in which that is possible.

We will triumph when there are no disabled signs visible anywhere. We will triumph when everybody is treated equally and has equal opportunity. It may not be possible, but it is about time that we started to think in terms of trying.

16:19

**Margaret McDougall (West Scotland) (Lab):** I, too, welcome the use of BSL in the chamber today.

When I first thought about writing this speech, I thought about my wheelchair-bound brother, who has travelled extensively since being confined to a wheelchair. He has been to Canada, America and New Zealand, yet when he wanted to do a coach tour of the Scottish Highlands, he was told by the tour company that he could not, because private coaches in Scotland do not have to provide access for people with disabilities until—I believe—2020. He was offered a coach tour in England, because coaches there do provide for the disabled. I sincerely hope that my brother is still fit and able enough to go on his coach tour of the Highlands in six years' time.

I ask the minister whether this Government has any plans to bring forward legislation on the matter, because it is vital that we ensure that, where possible, our tourism attractions and destinations in Scotland are easily accessible and have the required facilities and that all hospitality and tourism industry staff have adequate training on accessibility.

"VisitScotland Accessible Tourism Involvement Events: Report of Findings", which was published in December 2011 by Capability Scotland, highlighted numerous barriers to disabled people. They included physical access problems and a lack of information, and the most highlighted problem was with staff attitude and customer service. On physical access, I wish to speak about the specific aspect of access to toilet facilities. The Capability Scotland report quotes a participant who stated:

"It's no good the restaurant, bar or tourist attraction being accessible if they don't provide an accessible toilet."

The changing places website lists 99 fully accessible public toilets in Scotland. They are toilets that have space for two carers to support the person, a changing bench and a tracking hoist. Although the number is up from 57 when the report was produced, Scotland still pales in comparison with the rest of the UK, which has 565.

It would be beneficial if better guidance could be produced on people's expectations of accessible toilets, and I wonder whether VisitScotland will consider installing them in larger visitor centres. It would also be helpful if better guidance was made available on what constitutes an accessible toilet.

My second point is that there is still a huge gap in the availability of information across Scotland. For example, before making my speech today, I looked on the CalMac Ferries website for accessibility information about the Arran and Cumbrae ferries. The information was difficult to find and, when I did find it, there was little of it, perhaps, as Rob Gibson said, because not much is available for disabled people. All that I could really find out was that disabled toilets are available on some of the larger ships.

It is just not acceptable that, if a disabled person manages to find suitable accommodation such as a hotel or a self-catering cottage—we heard about accommodation earlier—they then find that they are trapped there because there are no accessible facilities in the surrounding area, or there is no suitable transport to get them there in the first place. Disabled people should not have to go hunting for that information. Clear and concise information should be easily accessible so that everyone knows exactly what kind of facilities, conditions and access they can expect before they travel. That is all the more important given that such information is crucial to people's ability to make an informed choice, and as our islands and our economy are so reliant on tourism.

Of course, that does not apply only to CalMac. No matter what the organisation is, and be it public or private, the onus should be on it to ensure that information can be easily found. It should be provided in a range of formats, and staff should have proper training so that they can deal with questions about access and which alternative formats information is available in.

It would also be helpful if people with disabilities were involved in access audits of accommodation and tourist attractions. That would facilitate the provision of better information.

On staff attitude and customer service, it seems that issues arise when staff lack understanding of certain conditions. The best way to provide support for them is through training, which is essential if we are to improve in this regard.

In advance of the Commonwealth games it was great to see VisitScotland launching a website to provide Scotland's hospitality industry with the knowledge needed to cater for the requirements of people with access needs, including those with physical, sensory or learning disabilities, elderly visitors and parents with small children. It was an excellent example. Accessibility information was

easy to find for all venues and all organisations were linked up to provide the best support possible to those with access needs.

I welcome the fact that the e-learning accessible tourism course will also be used for the Ryder cup. Can the minister confirm whether the site will be rolled out across Scotland so that the whole industry can have the knowledge and confidence to cater for the requirements of people with accessibility needs?

We have made great strides in accessible tourism through the Commonwealth games. We must keep that momentum going. I would love to see the e-learning accessible tourism course used more widely and I would love to see all organisations in Scotland working together to provide up-to-date and easy-to-access information. If that happens, more people with disabilities will be able to enjoy a holiday in Scotland.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Many thanks. I call Mark McDougall. You have seven minutes or thereby.

16:26

**Mark McDonald (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP):** I have been rechristened, Presiding Officer.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Forgive me, Mr McDonald.

**Mark McDonald:** I am sure that Margaret McDougall would welcome me to the clan nonetheless.

I refer members to my declaration of interests. I am a trustee of a recently established charity called Friendly Access, which aims to encourage and facilitate businesses and public bodies to increase their awareness, understanding of and openness to individuals on the autistic spectrum. I will touch on that theme during my speech.

Stewart Stevenson spoke about the garden of smells in Aberdeen, which he recalled. I am not sure whether the one that he referred to still exists, but I refer to the recent refurbishment and reinvigoration of the Duthie park in Aberdeen, which was brought about through the Heritage Lottery Fund and a significant bequest. While I was vice-convenor of housing and environment at Aberdeen City Council, I instigated the incorporation of a sensory area in the Duthie park, to ensure that individuals who would benefit from such an area could do so.

There has been much talk of physical disability or, rather, visible disability. I want to talk a little bit about individuals whose disability might not be obvious when they present at facilities or when they travel on holiday. Good work is being done. I

certainly welcome the funding that has been allocated by the Scottish Government. I welcome the launch of the online training programme as well, which I hope that businesses across Scotland will sign up to.

One of the things that has been highlighted in the debate is that often when we think about tourism we think of a visitor attraction or a hotel, but our entire society should be accessible, because people who visit Scotland, or people who holiday within Scotland, will use all kinds of facilities and services in order to enjoy themselves. We should not limit ourselves to thinking about visitor attractions and accommodation, although, that said, I will probably spend the rest of my speech talking about those very things.

I want to focus on some of the challenges and ambitions out there and on things that could be done a bit differently. A couple of months ago, I did a large piece of work on autism in the airports in Scotland, to try to help people on the autistic spectrum who want to fly to find their way through the airport process. A lot of good work is being done in Scotland's airports, and my aim was to bring it to the fore and make people aware of it.

That work led me to think about what happens in other countries. After all, if we want to attract people to Scotland, we must replicate the supports that people on the autistic spectrum who might need to fly into the country have in their home nations. I realise that the minister does not have jurisdiction over such areas, but it might be worth considering the issue in discussions and conversations with representatives of other Governments and finding out what they are doing to ensure that their nationals who want to come to Scotland are able to do so.

Another issue is accommodation. We have talked a lot about accessibility in this debate, but we also need to think about security. Because my son is what we might call an escape artist, we have to be very careful about the hotel rooms that we book when we go on holiday. In many rooms, one exits simply by turning the handle and opening the door. That is a genuine concern for many who look after individuals on the autistic spectrum, who often have no concept of danger or the rights and wrongs of leaving a hotel room. My son's autism comes with a free sleep disorder, as is often the case with people on the autistic spectrum; they are up at 4 or 5 in the morning, often before anyone else in the household. If my son were to wake up at 4 or 5, turn the handle on the hotel room door and exit, we could well find when we woke up a couple of hours later that he had left the facility. We therefore have to look at this issue from a business perspective and find out whether hotels and other forms of accommodation



are geared up to cater in the best way for individuals and their needs.

When I posted on the pages of a couple of Facebook groups of which I am a member, asking for people's thoughts and experiences on this matter, one mum told me that at a certain local attraction in Scotland they had found it very easy to get in and get the discount for disabled individuals and carers but they then had to queue for everything in the attraction. For many on the autistic spectrum, the concept of queues can cause great anxiety and stress—and often meltdown—and we need to think about whether facilities should put in place the kind of fast-track procedures that some major attractions have introduced to facilitate access for families who have such difficulties.

It has been brought to my attention that there is no changing places toilet at the recently refurbished national museum of Scotland. Parents have told me that they would like that to be addressed, and I wonder whether the minister can raise their concerns with his colleague the Cabinet Secretary for Culture and External Affairs and find out whether anything can be done. After all, many families and individuals who require such toilets visit that facility, and if one can be put in place, it definitely should be.

I should also note that hand dryers in toilets are often terrifying to people with particular sensory disorders. However, because such dryers are often the only game in town, people have to either use them or dry their hands with toilet paper, which is not very dignified.

I was going to mention a couple of other issues, Presiding Officer—is it okay if I take just a little bit longer? I see that you are saying no, so I will wrap up with a couple of asks of the Scottish Government. The first is about the retrofitting of existing public buildings to ensure that they are accessible to visitors, and the second is about the definition of accessible toilets in building standards. The feedback that I have received is that the current definitions are not cutting the mustard, and I wonder whether the minister can take that issue back to his colleagues who are responsible for such matters and see what can be done.

16:34

**Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con):** I thank the Scottish Government for the debate. I also thank Fergus Ewing for his introductory remarks and everyone who has contributed to what has been a wide-ranging and informative debate. In terms of the tone of the debate, it has been refreshing not to be talking about independence for the first time in a number of

weeks. I hope that we will move on to deal with other business in coming weeks, as well.

The background to the debate is the fact that, in recent times, society has challenged the hurdles that prevent people with disabilities from enjoying full and normal lives.

After the past few months of intense campaigning, I am sure that we are all looking forward to the October recess, which I think is precisely 15 days away. However, as Fergus Ewing said, many people who have life-altering conditions do not get the opportunity to have a break; the depressing statistic is that four out of five people who have a disability do not get the chance to have a normal holiday like other people.

We have to work hard with businesses—much of what we are talking about today is provided by the private sector—to ensure that we have accessible accommodation, travel, hospitality and retail and tourist attractions.

In my region of Mid Scotland and Fife, many facilities have achieved top marks for accessibility on the Euan's Guide website, to which Jenny Marra referred. Before I mention those, I note that the Scottish Parliament has a good track record on leading from the front, and that Euan's Guide, which collates reports and scores from disabled people on the accessibility of tourist attractions and other sites, gives the Parliament a score of five out of five. Well done to Liam McArthur, who is on the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body, for his efforts in that

However, I want to speak about a couple of examples of facilities in my region that have come to my attention. Tulchan Farm Lodges, near Glenalmond, enjoys a five-star rating and provides specialist facilities and respite breaks for the disabled. Its services include round-the-clock care staff, meal provision and the opportunity to go out on expert-led outings and excursions. In Fife, MND Scotland has invested in an accessible caravan, which helps to provide a safe environment for people with limited mobility. Both those examples demonstrate the importance of new surroundings in improving the outlook and the quality of life of people with disabilities.

As the minister acknowledged earlier, VisitScotland has done a good job in trying to equip businesses with the tools that they need. So far, it has signed up more than 600 businesses to its accessible tourism online training tool. We are making good strides but, as Stewart Stevenson ably pointed out, there is much more that can be done, and we need to do what we can to encourage the private sector to step forward.

I want to pick up on a few of the points that have been made in the debate. A lot was said about transport. The form of transport that is probably

most used by people with disability is the private car. In that regard, we have come on in leaps and bounds in recent years. Virtually any facility with a car park—be it a tourist attraction, a restaurant or whatever—will provide disabled parking spaces, usually right beside the main door. That is a welcome development that has emerged in recent years.

The challenges that face us are greater with regard to public transport. Rob Gibson spoke about that.

**Dennis Robertson:** Mr Fraser will be aware that many blue badge holder spaces are taken up by cars that do not have blue badges. I ask hotels, restaurants and so on to police that more readily than they do.

**Murdo Fraser:** Yes, indeed. We are familiar with Mr Robertson's work in this area and with his bill. When we are dealing with private land, we need the owners of the facility to police use of the spaces. That is a well-made point.

There are issues with buses, especially in rural areas. With regard to trains, Chic Brodie referred to First ScotRail's record on booking travel assistance in advance, and pointed out that it has reduced the notice period from 24 hours to four hours. That is an important step forward, but there is more that can be done.

The Gleneagles station has just opened. People who are attending the Ryder cup will be making use of it and will find that it is very friendly towards people with disabilities, as a result of the new lifts and so on that have been installed.

Many members—Jenny Marra, Nanette Milne and others—referred to the problem with Waverley station. There is a genuine issue with regard to the removal of vehicular access to the heart of the station. It always seemed to me that there did not seem to be a particular problem with having taxis there. Quite apart from the issue of access for people with disabilities, during the festival period, we saw tourists having to queue outside in the rain to get taxis; previously, they would be inside and under cover. I urge the minister to do what he can to engage with Network Rail and Waverley's management to see whether there is anything that can be done to improve that situation.

Nigel Don made some thoughtful comments about transport more generally.

Patricia Ferguson talked about heritage. In dealing with Historic Scotland, we need to recognise that some buildings simply cannot be adapted because they would lose their historic nature. Nevertheless, a lot is being done and I was interested to hear her comments about the benefit that access statements provide.

Jamie Hepburn and Mark McDonald mentioned accessibility of public toilets, which is an important subject. Public toilets are important not just for people with disabilities, but for people who are elderly or who have young children, as I am sure the minister knows. However, over the past two decades we have seen a serious reduction in the availability of public toilets in Scotland. During the summer, we were on holiday in Northern Ireland. We stayed in Portrush, which is a small seaside town, but the provision of public toilets there is far above what we would have found in an equivalent town in Scotland. The toilets were accessible, clean and well maintained.

We know that the level of public spending is higher in Northern Ireland than in Scotland, but there is a real issue here. If we are trying to make Scotland an attractive place to visit, not just for people with disabilities but for everybody, including families and the elderly, we need to look again at public toilet provision. A lot of councils have gone down the road of comfort schemes, whereby they have a relationship with a local provider. Often, however, the shop, hotel, bar or restaurant that provides the toilets will close or change and no alternative facility is made available. For the sake of tourism, we need to look at that.

I see that the Presiding Officer is waving at me to finish.

Attitudes are very important. Hostile, inappropriate or patronising behaviour to people with disabilities by those who provide services is off-putting and detrimental.

I close by going back to the minister's point that four out of five people with disabilities do not enjoy a holiday. That is not acceptable—we have to change that.

I support the motion and Jenny Marra's amendment.

16:42

**Jenny Marra:** I have enjoyed the debate immensely. Like most of my colleagues, I have enjoyed the change of pace and tone from the debates of the past few weeks. The subject is also an important issue for us to discuss in Parliament, especially in this year of increased tourism to Scotland, with all the incredible events that we are witnessing in our country and all the visitors that they are bringing. I will reflect on the speeches that members have made this afternoon and will go over three substantive points that were raised in the debate.

First, I turn to Stewart Stevenson's speech. It was the speech of Mr Stevenson's in Parliament that I have enjoyed most because he started by saying that we have all been particularly

unambitious. I started by agreeing with him that we have been mulling over advances that have been made until now, and I think that everyone in the chamber would share his ambition to do more. However, as I reflected on other issues that were raised—for example, Rob Gibson raised the need to update the ferry fleet—I concluded that, across the chamber, we all recognise that we are having to make advances within constrained public spending. I am sure that the minister would be the first to point out that although we would like every CalMac ferry to be fully accessible now, it will happen in time and probably as quickly as it can. It is important to have the debate in order to remind ourselves that although accessibility should always be right at the forefront of planning and management decisions, as I said in my opening speech, we are nevertheless making good progress within public spending constraints.

**Liam McArthur:** I listened with great interest to what Stewart Stevenson said. The point that Jenny Marra makes in relation to ferries is valid, but I recall that, not long ago, taxis were required to be wheelchair accessible. For some, that was a practicable option and we have moved in that direction; however, for minicabs it was frankly impossible. The risk is that we would choke off businesses that cannot adapt for no benefit, either to those who are able bodied or to those who are not. As Jenny Marra said, we need to be careful about how we transition from where we are to where we aspire to be.

**Jenny Marra:** That point was well made, and I thank Liam McArthur for his intervention.

Stewart Stevenson also said that we will triumph only when there are no disabled signs anywhere. I completely agree. As I have said, that is a mark of our aspiration to equality. However, his remarks reminded me of a conversation that I had with some young students at Craigie high school in Dundee, which has a special facility for deaf students. I was told about the barriers that they face in everyday life, such as ordering their food in McDonald's, getting a Saturday job and making their way around the city. What really struck me was the bus issue. Some of the students were from eastern Europe and had come to live in Scotland. They reckon that disability provision on buses in Latvia is better, as is provision in other parts of the European Union, because there is much more signage on them.

That matter has been legislated on in Europe and through the Westminster Equality Act 2010. I wonder whether there is pre-existing legislation on a lot of the issues that we are discussing that we need only to comply with or enforce. I ask the minister to reflect on that, too.

Nigel Don made a very thoughtful contribution. The issue that he raised about travelling

companions for people who require them and whether they can travel for free on our rail network has come up in my constituency, as well. Perhaps the minister will also allow me to say that we must bear it in mind that there will always be financial barriers. We can have equal and accessible facilities, but there will be financial barriers to allowing people on lower incomes to access those facilities. Nigel Don's point is important, so I ask that the minister has those discussions with ScotRail or that he looks towards the next franchise to sort out the problem.

The Equality Act 2010—which was one of the last very good pieces of legislation of our UK Labour Government—and the public sector duties that are included in it would perhaps address Nigel Don's point. Will the Scottish Government explore that, too?

Patricia Ferguson raised a very interesting point about travel insurance premiums and travel abroad, which has also come up in my constituency. People with disabilities and elderly people face increased travel insurance premiums.

**Stewart Stevenson:** Some insurance companies restrict insurance for foreign travel to people who are under 70. As someone who is reaching for that shortly, I feel that very keenly.

**Jenny Marra:** That is absolutely right.

We do not have jurisdiction over the issue in this Parliament; there probably is not even jurisdiction over it in the UK Parliament. However, we should, across all parties, discuss the matter with our European Union colleagues because it could be dealt with through the European single market and therefore could be raised legitimately in the European Parliament.

I was very struck by the personal experiences in Liam McArthur's and in Margaret McDougall's families. Liam McArthur's speech raised the importance of good facilities when travelling. Mark McDonald also mentioned that Scotland's airports are doing a lot to help people with disabilities to navigate their way through them. I did not know that, so that was very good to hear.

I return to my point about PAMIS and its changing places toilet facilities campaign, as well as my point about financial inclusion, because those are particularly important issues. Not everyone in our communities can afford a holiday—we are talking about tourism—but being able to spend time on days out with family or friends makes a real difference to the quality of people's lives and that opportunity is really restricted for people who do not have access to such changing and toilet facilities.

With the news that there is not one of those facilities in the refurbished national museum of

Scotland—I think that Mark McDonald raised that—I wonder whether the Scottish Government could commit to doing an audit of the changing places facilities throughout Scotland and finding out where the gaps are in the tourism industry, shopping facilities and other facilities for a day out. That might be a good step forward from today's debate.

16:50

**Fergus Ewing:** I have thoroughly enjoyed the debate. I congratulate all members on their speeches, which have been varied, thoughtful—replete with experiences from the lives of family members, friends or constituents who have a disability—insightful and extremely helpful.

As I always do, I will ask the Scottish Government officials in the tourism section to study the *Official Report* and ensure that, where a specific response has been sought on a specific point, I answer it if I do not do so in the next wee while during my speech. I am conscious that around 100 points were made and I feel as though I am in an examination in which I have 10 minutes to answer 100 questions. I suspect that I will probably not be able to answer them all.

To take one point, Mark McDonald asked specifically about facilities in the refurbished museum of Scotland. I will come back to him on that and, equally, to other members who have specific points of that nature.

If members feel particularly strongly about any of the matters that they have raised with me and I fail to answer them in the next nine minutes, they should write to me and I will most certainly respond. That is my responsibility on matters about which members feel strongly—although that is perhaps a risky strategy, as MSPs as a breed tend to feel strongly on just about everything.

I will respond to three areas on which a number of points were raised. The first relates to the response of the private sector and business.

Marc Crothall from the Scottish tourism alliance is in the public gallery. I had the pleasure of having lunch with the STA executive earlier this week. The STA has more than 250 members, as opposed to 90 just a short while ago, and is now the main voice of the private sector in tourism. It has agreed to be a champion in promoting accessible tourism.

I mentioned earlier that 625 businesses are registered on the online training programme, with 67 having completed it. The STA's message to the industry is that it aims to reach 5,000 businesses. The Federation of Small Businesses, which represents a large number of bed-and-breakfasts

and small establishments, will also play a constructive role.

I also point out other opportunities that we might want to take in promoting the online training toolkit, such as evidenced in the Wood commission report, which suggests that school pupils in secondary 4, 5 and 6 might be encouraged to complete the online training to improve attitudes.

In part, the issue is education and attitudes in society. Just as drink-driving became totally unacceptable behaviour a few decades ago and just as smoking in restaurants and pubs has become unacceptable in the past decade, so too, I suspect, will behaviour that lacks respect for people with a disability become unacceptable and beyond the pale. It is partly a matter of social attitudes and partly a matter of effective communication of a training programme that has cost relatively little and is already beginning to achieve good things.

Nanette Milne mentioned the excellent example of Crathie Opportunity Holidays. I understand that Maggie MacAlpine is a member of the accessible tourism steering group. I am informed that her establishment has welcomed more than 620 disabled people on 1,400 holidays. Of the 2013 bookings, 51 per cent came from people who had previously enjoyed a holiday there. That is repeat business.

I refer to that excellent holiday establishment because if it has succeeded in providing excellent facilities, that is a sign to many other businesses that there is a great business opportunity in doing this, and Crathie Opportunity Holidays is by no means alone in that respect. I praise that business and potential new establishments such as The Rings, which I think Patricia Ferguson mentioned, and at which I had the pleasure of cutting the sod recently.

**Dennis Robertson:** The point about Crathie Opportunity Holidays is that it provides an opportunity for all, not just people who have disabilities. Although the site is fully accessible to anyone with any disability, it is open for all, including people who have no disability.

**Fergus Ewing:** I am glad that Dennis Robertson has corrected me; he is absolutely right. I might have mentioned earlier that people who have a disability will often be accompanied by carers and friends, sometimes as many as four or five people, and they tend to stay for longer periods. Dennis Robertson is absolutely correct.

Many members mentioned various issues about rail. I am pleased to say that the ScotRail franchise has fairly rigorous new commitments that members will welcome. There is also the procurement for the Caledonian sleeper franchise.

However, I should refer to the four or five members who talked about the problems at Waverley. I am advised that Network Rail continues to engage with disability organisations to address concerns that have been raised as a result of the removal of taxis from inside Waverley station in June. It was required for security reasons. This is not my portfolio responsibility, so I must choose my words with a degree of care to avoid getting into difficulties. However, members from every party in the chamber raised concerns about the issue. It would be sad if security was to triumph over the needs of people who have a disability. We would all be sad about that. I do not know the particular criteria concerned, but I will certainly pass a copy of the *Official Report* to Keith Brown, the minister responsible for the issue, and to Mr Montgomery, the chief executive of Transport Scotland. I will ask that I be provided with an explanation of whether there is any prospect that improvements can be made in relation to an issue that has been raised by a great number of members. Out of respect to this chamber, it would be appropriate to do that.

The third topic that was raised concerns VisitScotland. I am happy to respond to—was it Mark Griffin, or Mark McDonald or Dennis Robertson? My memory is beginning to fail me. They said that the website was not as friendly as it should be with regard to information about accessible tourism. I am pleased to be able to report that VisitScotland discussed the matter today and it is changing the website to make it more accessible. I like Winston Churchill's phrase "Action this day" but it is not often that I can give such a good example of it having taken place.

Chris McCoy is the head of equality and diversity at VisitScotland and the accessible tourism project manager. I am pleased to mention her because she has played a blinder with this agenda. She is recognised in the sector as having given dynamism, leadership, vision, energy and enthusiasm to the subject. As I remarked to her recently, Chris McCoy makes Lawrence of Arabia look like a couch potato. That was meant as a compliment.

**Jenny Marra:** Will the minister give way?

**The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick):** I am sorry Ms Marra; the minister is in his last minute.

**Fergus Ewing:** I apologise because I am in my last minute; I have to move to a conclusion.

This has been a great debate. We have covered a large number of areas. We have heard a lot of positive suggestions. I am confident that many of the things that we can do so that people who have a disability can enjoy a holiday just as the rest of us do are not necessarily things that involve huge expenditure of money, taxpayers' or otherwise.

They simply involve us all treating people who have a disability in the same way as we treat everyone else, as Stewart Stevenson and Dennis Robertson urged us to do: with courtesy, respect, friendliness and regard to their particular considerations.

**The Presiding Officer:** That concludes the debate on accessible tourism. I thank the BSL interpreters and the palantypist, who have assisted us throughout the day. We are most grateful to you. [*Applause.*]

## Committee of the Regions (Membership)

17:00

**The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick):** The next item of business is consideration of motion S4M-10987, in the name of Joe FitzPatrick, on the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities membership of the Committee of the Regions.

*Motion moved,*

That the Parliament notes that the representation from local government to the Committee of the Regions will be Councillors Cormack McChord and Anthony Gerard Buchanan as full members and Councillors Gary Robinson and Barbara Grant as alternate members of the Committee of the Regions from January 2015 to December 2019.—  
[Joe FitzPatrick].

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

## Decision Time

17:00

**The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick):** There are three questions to be put as a result of today's business.

The first question is, that amendment S4M-10988.1, in the name of Jenny Marra, which seeks to amend motion S4M-10988, in the name of Fergus Ewing, on accessible tourism, be agreed to.

*Amendment agreed to.*

**The Presiding Officer:** The next question is, that motion S4M-10988, in the name of Fergus Ewing, on accessible tourism, as amended, be agreed to.

*Motion, as amended, agreed to,*

That the Parliament recognises the important contribution to the Scottish economy that accessible tourism makes across many sectors; further recognises that disabled people should be able to enjoy a holiday or break in the same way as others do; acknowledges the work underway and notes the progress made by VisitScotland and partners in developing the accessible tourism online training tools for managers and staff in individual enterprises; recognises that the whole tourism sector and wider public and private sectors need to work together closely to make accessible tourism ever more successful; notes the efforts made to ensure that the tourism industry recognises the mutual benefit to businesses and consumers from the opportunities for accessibility being maximised for all events taking place during the next four themed years; applauds the work of the Accessible Tourism Project in trying to make Scotland the most accessible tourist destination in Europe by identifying the barriers faced by disabled people holidaying in Scotland and promoting the business benefits of accessible tourism to the industry, and recognises the importance of accessible tourism to securing delivery of opportunities for sustainable economic growth and employment in communities across Scotland.

**The Presiding Officer:** The next question is, that motion S4M-10987, in the name of Joe FitzPatrick, on Convention of Scottish Local Authorities membership of the Committee of the Regions, be agreed to.

*Motion agreed to,*

That the Parliament notes that the representation from local government to the Committee of the Regions will be Councillors Cormack McChord and Anthony Gerard Buchanan as full members and Councillors Gary Robinson and Barbara Grant as alternate members of the Committee of the Regions from January 2015 to December 2019.

**The Presiding Officer:** That concludes decision time. I close this meeting and this week.

*Meeting closed at 17:01.*

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