

MEETING OF THE PARLIAMENT

Thursday 29 May 2003

Session 2

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Scottish Parliament

Thursday 29 May 2003

[THE PRESIDING OFFICER *opened the meeting at 09:31*]

Scottish Executive's Programme

The Presiding Officer (Mr George Reid): The first item of business this morning is a debate on the First Minister's statement on the Scottish Executive's programme.

09:31

The Deputy First Minister and Minister for Enterprise and Lifelong Learning (Mr Jim Wallace): The annual commemoration service at the national war memorial takes place this morning and I preface my remarks by saying that, although I will stay as long as I can to hear the speeches following mine, I will have to leave the chamber at about 10.40. I hope that members will understand.

The partnership agreement between Labour and the Liberal Democrats, "A Partnership for a Better Scotland", together with the statement that the First Minister made yesterday on the Executive's programme for 2003-04, provides a clear, ambitious and radical programme for the second session of the Scottish Parliament. Everything that the Government does will be directed towards delivering the commitments that we have made to the people of Scotland—commitments to encourage and stimulate economic growth, tackle poverty and disadvantage, to improve and sustain our environment and to help all our communities to live securely. Those are the goals that we have set ourselves and the commitments that we are determined to honour.

As the First Minister said yesterday, growing the economy is our top priority. To strengthen public services and to improve the prosperity of all Scotland's people, we need a successful economy. We cannot achieve our social justice goals—better health, improved education, safer communities and the protection of our environment—without economic prosperity. Economic growth is essential if we are to modernise our public services, to increase employment and to generate the wealth to support our people and our communities and, in so doing, to tackle poverty and disadvantage head on.

The challenges facing our economy are complex and require a long-term approach. Not for us the short-term, populist fix; we need a medium to long-term strategic approach. That will involve giving

support for innovation and technology transfer to grow high-value and high-skills businesses; working with Scottish businesses to enhance productivity and to improve investment in research and development; and investing in skills and the commercialisation of research.

Crucially, Scotland's future economic success will also depend on our ability to sustain greater entrepreneurial dynamism and creativity. To achieve that, we must support enterprise and responsible risk taking by tackling cultural and social barriers to entrepreneurship. That is why, before the election, the First Minister and I launched the education for enterprise proposals. We want to ensure that every pupil has the opportunity to learn entrepreneurial skills at school; to that end, we shall expand the number of schools involved in the enterprise in education programme from 10 per cent to 100 per cent.

We recognise that Scotland needs the stability of a strong and determined Government and a vibrant Parliament to deliver the change and improvements that people deserve. Our vision is for Scotland to be a place where enterprise can and will flourish, where opportunity exists for all and where our people and our country have the confidence to face the challenges of a global society.

We will use the powers of the Scottish Parliament to help to create conditions for higher growth and to support businesses to grasp the opportunities of the new economy. We value enterprise and shall promote an entrepreneurial culture. We recognise the need to support risk taking as a means of growing the economy for the benefit of all.

We already have in place a clear and effective enterprise strategy, which is contained in the document "A Smart, Successful Scotland". Indeed, in *The Herald* on 15 May, Alf Young, commenting on the Porter report, "UK Competitiveness: Moving to the Next Stage", which was commissioned by the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, said:

"Here in Scotland, you cannot read this Porter study without reflecting that much of his diagnosis is in line with our own executive's Smart, Successful Scotland strategy ... he has delivered to the DTI an analysis whose essentials it could have downloaded for free from the Scottish Executive's website."

Mr John Swinney (North Tayside) (SNP): I have listened with great care to what the Deputy First Minister has said about the economy and I am sure that he knows that the Scottish National Party also thinks that the economy should be the top priority. However, will he set out the Executive's ambitions for economic growth over the next four years? Does the Executive intend to ensure that Scottish economic growth equals the economic growth in the rest of the United

Kingdom, if that is higher? Does he accept that our ambition should be to ensure that economic growth in Scotland starts to reach the levels that are commanded by small European countries with which we do not compete at all just now?

Mr Wallace: Given our exposure to a number of global conditions over which we have no more control than Mr Swinney would have in an independent Scotland, I think that setting such targets on a short-term basis is pointless. I have indicated that we have long-term ambitions in relation to the growth of our economy. That is why we emphasise the importance of productivity.

In that regard, today I was encouraged to read in *The Scotsman*—not a newspaper that is usually terribly friendly to some of the objectives of the Executive—a story with the headline, “Scotland’s economy on brink of recovery”. The story reads:

“Experian Business Strategies said Scottish GVA, a measure of output similar to GDP, is set to rise by 1.5 per cent this year. Its forecast is considerably higher than the nil growth of 2002 ... By the end of 2004, Experian estimates that Scotland will be beating its long-run average growth rate of 2 per cent. It expects Scots GVA to rise 2.4 per cent next year and 2.8 per cent in 2005.”

I accept that a variety of studies by such organisations exists, but I believe that that study shows that there is cause for optimism. Those who usually run down the Scottish economy ought to consider the number of positive things that are taking place.

Mr Swinney: Will the minister give way?

Mr Wallace: I have already allowed Mr Swinney to intervene.

We recognise that we will achieve improvement in our growth rates in the medium and long term only by putting in place the kinds of measures that are included in “A Smart, Successful Scotland”, not by implementing a quick-fix strategy.

Phil Gallie (South of Scotland) (Con): Will the Deputy First Minister judge his success in his job by whether he has improved on the figures that he quotes from *The Scotsman* or whether he has merely held on to the figures that he believes are to be expected?

Mr Wallace: Many economies across the world have been in recession recently. Everyone in the chamber wants the Scottish economy to grow, but I believe that that will be done not by taking a quick-fix approach, but by implementing the medium to long-term strategy that is set out in “A Smart, Successful Scotland”, which provides a robust framework for addressing—

Mr Swinney: Our growth has been low for 40 years.

Mr Wallace: I will give way to Mr Swinney.

Mr Swinney: I am grateful to Mr Wallace for giving way, as that saves me from shouting from the sidelines. For 40 years, Scotland has had a low trend rate of economic growth. What are the Executive’s targets for the improvement of that rate, not over six months or a year, but over the four-year term of this supposed Administration?

Mr Wallace: I note that Mr Swinney sees his place as being on the sidelines, but I will not comment further on that.

The point that I was making is that we want Scottish growth to improve on its historical rate. None of us can take satisfaction from the fact that it has trailed during the past 40 years. That is why we have put in place the framework that is detailed in “A Smart, Successful Scotland”. As Alf Young pointed out, many of the measures that we have been implementing are ones that the report commissioned by the Department of Trade and Industry identified as key ways in which to stimulate economic growth.

We want to work with business and the education sector to enhance our skills base. For example, we shall increase the apprenticeship programme to 30,000 places and the budget for higher and further education by 16 per cent by 2006.

We also intend to take advantage of the potential in Scotland for job creation in the green economy. For the past two years, the Executive has been putting in place the foundations on which we believe Scotland can develop a thriving renewables industry. Such an industry has the potential to augment Scotland’s manufacturing capacity, to develop new indigenous industries, particularly in rural areas, and to offer significant export opportunities.

Bruce Crawford (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP): Will the Deputy First Minister give way?

Mr Wallace: I have given way quite a lot already.

We have already seen some 130 new jobs at the Vestas-Celtic Wind Technology Ltd plant at Campbeltown and plans for the development of the Arnish yard hold the prospect of bringing new jobs to the island of Lewis. If Denmark has been able to create more than 16,000 jobs through the development of wind generation, surely a similar potential beckons for us through the development of new marine energy technologies. We have already committed £2 million towards the construction of the marine energy test centre in Orkney and have ambitions for the centre to become the facility for the testing, certification and accreditation of marine energy devices. Marine energy holds a potential from which, with vision and determination—which we in the Scottish Executive have—we can reap environmental benefits and create economic opportunities.

Bruce Crawford: I am grateful to the Deputy First Minister for telling us about the Executive's green credentials, which I welcome. The Liberal Democrat manifesto for the 2003 election said that the Liberal Democrats would

"Oppose plans for any new nuclear power stations in Scotland."

However, by the time we come to the partnership agreement, that becomes:

"We will not support the further development of nuclear power stations while waste management issues remain unresolved."

Labour party weasel words have been introduced. That is another sell-out by the Liberal Democrats, who accept that nuclear power is on its way.

Mr Wallace: Mr Crawford tries to distort words to make a point that does not exist. The words are the very ones that Ross Finnie used in our response to the consultation on the United Kingdom Government's energy white paper. Our position on the development of nuclear power is clear.

It is widely recognised that an effective transport system is central to meeting the needs of business and the travelling public alike. To that end, we are committed to investing in and delivering a modern, efficient and integrated transport system. By the end of 2006, our annual budget for transport will reach £1 billion, 70 per cent of which will be targeted on public transport.

Our partnership agreement identifies a series of specific transport links that the Executive is determined to support, including airport links for Edinburgh and Glasgow, which have been much and long talked of and are now to be delivered; the Borders rail line and other rail developments; the extension of direct air routes; the completion of the Aberdeen western peripheral road; and work to reduce the cost of lifeline air links within, to and from the Highlands and Islands through the suitable use of public service obligations.

To focus on improving delivery in the transport infrastructure and to secure proper co-ordination of national concessionary fares schemes for the elderly, the young and disabled people, we shall consult over the summer on proposals for a new strategic transport authority and publish a white paper before the end of the year.

Our commitment to the environment is a green thread that runs through every aspect of the partnership agreement and will be reflected in the programme throughout the next four years. The partnership agreement made a simple but bold statement:

"We want a Scotland that delivers sustainable development; that puts environmental concerns at the heart of public policy".

I will say more about the detail of that in a moment, but let us remind ourselves why we chose to take that route. Our environment—Scotland's environment—is vulnerable. The consequences of a poor environment are with us now. Global warming—the result of greenhouse gas emissions—is causing climate change. There is also persuasive evidence that environmental problems are a key factor in a range of illnesses, including asthma and cancer. We can see pollution in towns and cities day in, day out.

We have therefore put the environment at the heart of government to improve our health and quality of life and those of our children and our children's children. That is why we will legislate in the first year of the session to introduce strategic environmental assessment, which will ensure that public sector strategies, programmes and plans are properly assessed for their environmental impact as they are developed. That means that Government, local government and public bodies will all have to put sustainability at the heart of what they do.

A green thread runs through other areas of policy, such as our policy for delivering improved public transport. In education and planning, we will ensure that new school buildings—as part of the largest-ever school buildings programme—will meet the highest environmental standards. We will extend home insulation and central heating programmes to improve another 4,000 homes by 2006 and introduce a decent-homes standard that will include an energy-banding system for houses.

The Executive is clear that, to be smart and successful, Scotland must be sustainable. During the first year of the new session, we will introduce legislation on nature conservation that will build on proposals that we published in March. That substantial piece of legislation will introduce a new general duty for public authorities to further the conservation of biodiversity, thoroughly overhaul the sites of special scientific interest system and introduce further reforms of the law on wildlife crime. The water services bill, which is to be introduced later in the year, will safeguard environmental protection and public health. That proposed legislation, together with necessary investment in public water, can only underline our commitment to keep Scottish Water in public ownership.

The partnership programme addresses the challenges that rural, remote and island Scotland faces. We will focus on Scotland's needs in reforming agriculture and fishing policies. This Government is determined to build on the reforms that we have already achieved in the common fisheries policy and to protect Scotland's farmers and crofters, particularly those in our more fragile communities.

As I have said, a sustainable and growing economy is essential if we are to achieve better public services and, in turn, the delivery of high-quality public services—not least in health and education. Improving Scotland's health is central to the welfare of our society. For too many people, opportunities are diminished or lost through ill health. Yesterday, the First Minister outlined a package of reform measures that is designed to make our health service less bureaucratic and more focused on front-line services and on addressing patient needs. Our strategy will also promote good health by introducing a range of measures to encourage safer, healthier lifestyles, by securing improvements in the treatment services for alcohol and drug-related problems, by improving mental health services across Scotland and by systematically introducing free eye and dental checks for all before 2007.

Tommy Sheridan (Glasgow) (SSP): The criminal justice approach to drug abuse has failed miserably, so will the Executive give a commitment to take more money from that budget and spend it on drug treatment and rehabilitation, which is more beneficial not only economically, but socially?

Mr Wallace: The choice is not an either/or one. We are investing in rehabilitation and in bodies such as the Scottish Drug Enforcement Agency. However, through using the Proceeds of Crime Act 2002, we will take money from the criminals and reinvest it in the communities that are most blighted by drug abuse.

In education, we want to ensure that we regain our position as world leaders. We will therefore learn from other countries. We will improve pupils' confidence and attainment by changing the ethos of primary 1, freeing up the curriculum, introducing less formal teaching methods and enabling early professional intervention. With significantly increased teacher numbers, we shall reduce the maximum primary 1 class size to 25.

In a similar vein, to bridge the divide between secondary and primary schools and to increase continuity for pupils, we will increase the number and range of teachers in secondary 1 and enable them to move between secondary and primary. We will reduce to 20 class sizes for English and maths in S1 and S2.

We intend to provide more time for teaching and learning in the classroom by ending the current system of national tests for five to 14-year-olds. Indeed, because we recognise the importance of meeting pupils' needs and realise that the current school curriculum no longer engages the interest of a number of 14-year-olds and older children, we will enable 14 to 16-year-olds to develop vocational skills and to improve their employment prospects by allowing them to undertake courses

in further education colleges as part of a school-based curriculum

We attach a high priority to working for a safer Scotland, as the First Minister made abundantly clear. That is why, in the partnership agreement, we talk about reducing crime, reducing reoffending and tackling the causes of crime to make our communities safer places for people to live, work and enjoy their leisure time. That means tackling the blight of crime on communities, individuals and businesses.

In the first session, we delivered record police numbers and we provided new powers for the police and the courts and new protection for the victims of crime. We developed and began to implement a comprehensive new youth crime action plan. However, we acknowledge that there is much more still to do. Therefore, we intend to move quickly to crack down hard on antisocial behaviour, to speed up the courts, to give more power to police officers and to put the interests of the victim at centre stage. We want to build stronger, safer communities in which antisocial behaviour is not tolerated and its perpetrators are held accountable for their actions.

A draft Local Governance (Scotland) Bill was published for consultation in February and will be introduced before the end of this year. As promised in the partnership agreement, it will renew local democracy by introducing a single transferable vote system for the next local government elections. It will also reform and modernise voting arrangements by, for example, removing unnecessary political restrictions on standing for election, lowering the age limit for candidates to 18, establishing an independent remuneration committee for councillors and introducing severance and pension arrangements. Those measures will allow more people to stand for election and give communities more choice in their representation.

We have announced a substantial and ambitious programme of legislation for the next year. It includes action on health, education, the economy, the environment, transport and tackling crime and disorder. Including the annual budget bill, this year we are planning to introduce 14 bills that will give effect to key commitments that are set out in our partnership agreement. That legislative programme directly reflects the policies and priorities that we have set ourselves and it will continue to do so throughout the next four years.

I hope that the shared objective of members from all parts of the Parliament is to work constructively for the benefit of the people of Scotland. What we do in the Parliament can make a difference to the lives of ordinary people, to our schools and hospitals and to the other services on which we rely daily. Our challenge is to make that difference. The priorities that are set out in the

partnership agreement are robust and radical, but they are realistic. They are the right policies for Scotland and I commend them to the Parliament.

09:50

Roseanna Cunningham (Perth) (SNP): John Swinney has already promised the coalition partners a fair wind to pursue their agenda. The Scottish National Party intends to be positive and constructive about the ideas of others, but I hope that we will meet with some reciprocal acknowledgement that good ideas are not strictly the Executive's prerogative.

On looking through the partnership agreement, I noticed that there was much "supporting" and "encouraging" going on and I can only assume that Cabinet ministers are all to be trained as counsellors. When the "supporting" and "encouraging" are taken out of the partnership agreement, there is a lot less in it than there appeared to be at first.

On good ideas, the Liberal Democrats appear to have been more successful at getting bits of their manifesto into the partnership agreement than they were in getting bits of their policies into their manifesto. It is a pity that the agreement and the programme for government do not include a moratorium on genetically modified crop field trials or anything on the abolition of the private finance initiative, both of which the Liberal Democrat rank and file would have welcomed as much as would the SNP.

The Parliament has limitations and one of those is in dealing with the European Union. The fishing debacle has shown our powerlessness when it comes to exerting any direct influence on European decision making, dependent as we are on an unsympathetic Westminster minister to make the necessary representations. Nowhere in the partnership agreement or yesterday's statement is there any acknowledgement that the EU is now central to our ability to make our own decisions.

Yesterday, when I asked the First Minister about that, I listened carefully to his answer—or non-answer. I was particularly struck by his woeful response to my colleague Richard Lochhead, who directly quoted the very minister who was supposed to be acting on behalf of Scottish fishermen in the recent negotiations. Notwithstanding the First Minister's reluctance to acknowledge Labour's shortcomings while he was on his feet in the chamber, I hope that he will take that matter up with Elliot Morley at his earliest convenience, so that when the issue is next raised in the Scottish Parliament—and it will be—the First Minister will have a rather better answer than he did yesterday.

Yesterday's responses to questions on Europe

were indicative of a problem. The EU has a huge impact on what we can do. Sometimes the EU is cynically used as an opt-out on difficult questions. For example, Meacher's recent comments about not having any options on GM products conveniently ignored the fact that Belgium managed to deal with that issue on its own. The First Minister and his Government let Scotland down on that issue for four years and look set to do the same over the next four years.

Arguably, the proposed changes to the European constitution will have a bigger impact than anything that we have seen so far. However, nowhere in the Executive's programme or the partnership agreement is there any recognition that that is the case. I see no difficulty with holding a referendum on the EU constitution although, given Labour's reluctance to hold referenda, I will not hold my breath waiting for the Executive to endorse the idea. However, we in the Parliament should lead the debate in Scotland.

Not everything that emanates from Europe is bad, but all of it is important. I strongly believe that the Executive and the Parliament must bring European issues into the foreground and must be candid about what freedom of movement there is in many important policy areas. Members of the Executive must be far more candid about what they will be permitted to do by their Westminster colleagues. They must be proactive rather than just reactive.

Phil Gallie: Twice in two days, Roseanna Cunningham has made a point about the possible difficulties that will come up with the European constitution. Does that suggest that the SNP line on Europe is now moving away from the views that its members held previously?

Roseanna Cunningham: We have been making those points all along, particularly for the past six to 12 months on the fishing industry. We have always said that there are matters about which Scotland should engage directly in Europe. The key issue is that we are not engaging directly in the European debate.

There is also nothing in the programme that addresses the failures of some of our key institutions such as Scottish Enterprise, the social inclusion partnerships and Scottish Water. Although I note that there is to be a consultation paper and a water services bill—I hope that that will have some impact on those services—there is little about Scottish Enterprise or the SIPs, despite recent concerns about their effectiveness. Those issues should be addressed.

I will talk about the economy and enterprise. The first sentence of the new partnership agreement says:

"Growing the economy is our top priority."

That is a welcome commitment, which we applaud. However, the people who are making that commitment lack the power to deliver on it. Let us consider the number of economic levers that are controlled by Westminster: income tax; social security; VAT; corporation tax; fuel duties; stamp duty; beer, wine and spirits duties; landfill tax; inheritance tax; aggregates levy; climate change levy; North sea revenues; betting and gaming duties; air passenger duties; and insurance premium tax. What do we in Scotland have? We have the council tax, business rates and the ability to vary the basic rate of income tax by 3p in the pound.

The latest figures from the Office for National Statistics show that Scotland's economy did not grow at all in 2002. I noticed that the Deputy First Minister was keen to cite what seemed to be a slightly favourable independent report. Of course, he ignores all the other less favourable reports. The truth is that Government statistics from the Office for National Statistics show that Scotland's economy did not grow at all in 2002.

The Minister for Finance and Public Services (Mr Andy Kerr): Does the member agree with the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, which says that, at some point in the past two years, 60 per cent of world economies have gone into recession? Does she also agree that the underpinning values of the United Kingdom that are set by the Chancellor of the Exchequer act in favour of the Scottish economy?

Roseanna Cunningham: That statement would have been much more impressive if we had not had four years—and now we are to have another four years—of this Administration promising us heaven on earth with respect to the economy and failing to deliver.

Manufacturing and production figures are down. Almost every other indicator of growth is down. How exactly does the Executive intend to turn that round? The partnership agreement says that the Executive intends to

“use the powers of the Scottish Parliament to create the conditions for higher growth”.

I am interested to hear exactly which powers can be used to achieve that and how. What does “support businesses” and “value enterprise” mean in practice? What mechanisms does the Executive intend to use to

“work with the UK Government to maximise the conditions for economic growth”?

Does the Executive intend to bother reporting back to the Parliament on the so-called joint working, or will that joint working just be Westminster letting the Executive know the score?

What does the Executive intend to do to address the low-wage economy that exists in large parts of Scotland? This might come as a surprise to many members, but Perth and Kinross has the lowest average wage of any region in the UK. I see nothing in the Executive's programme that will change that for my constituents or for Scots in general.

In legislative terms, the Executive's commitments boil down to a bill on bankruptcy. As important as that might be, I am underwhelmed at its inclusion in a section dealing with the economy. It looks as if the Executive has laboured mightily to bring forth a mouse.

Mr Kenneth Macintosh (Eastwood) (Lab): Ms Cunningham started her speech positively by saying that she would pay tribute to the positive aspects of the Labour-Liberal Democrat agreement. I have put my word checker on and note that so far she has made reference to failures, inadequacies and woeful shortcomings. When will she get round to paying tribute to the skills agenda in which we have invested and which will make a difference to the future of our young people and our economy?

Roseanna Cunningham: Perhaps the member should have waited until the end of my speech before he made his comments.

The SNP's 1999 manifesto contained several ideas on justice that were not in either the Labour or the Liberal Democrat manifestos but were nevertheless enacted subsequently. Examples of those ideas are drugs courts and the lifetime supervision of sex offenders.

Of course, the Executive was never going to acknowledge that those were SNP ideas, because the acknowledgement of constructive ideas in the chamber goes only one way. It is supposed to go only towards the Executive and never the other way. In the spirit of consensual politics promised by John Swinney, the SNP manifesto offers a few more ideas. How about weekend courts, guys? Let us get moving on that. I ask the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to try not to wait so long before implementing the SNP manifesto this time, because we wasted a lot of time in the past four years while they hovered and pretended that they objected to our ideas, when in truth they knew that they were good ones.

I want to mention yesterday's crime statistics, particularly the shocking increase in drugs crime, which we can compare with the bland commitment to expand the Scottish Drug Enforcement Agency. I am unclear about how that commitment will make the impact required. It is nothing but a pledge recycled from 1999, which at least then included a commitment to double to 200 the number of police officers involved, although that is notably missing this session. We have so far got no further, and it

is difficult to imagine how that commitment will make the slightest difference to drug crime.

The partnership agreement states:

“We will put in place an integrated transport system”.

Most of the rail proposals appear to be based in the central belt. Quite rightly, the areas that already have the widest choice of public transport links are to get more. However, those areas of Scotland with the poorest public transport provision can look forward to—well, precisely nothing. What is there for them? There is a review of existing bridge tolls and negotiations with a view to ending the discredited toll regime for the Skye bridge. I hope that John Farquhar Munro is not holding his breath on that one.

Improved air links are important, and all very well, but people have to be able to get to the airports in the first place. The real changes in rural areas will come about when there are extensive bus and rail links that make using public transport a realistic option for people in rural areas, which at present it is not.

The document also says:

“We will continue to ensure that bus timetable information is easily available and that bus services offer convenient links between communities and other types of public transport.”

That makes it sound as if that happens already, when it does not. It makes it sound as if the Executive will be able to do something about it—I am not sure that it can. If the Executive is serious about that commitment, I invite it to use Perth and Kinross as a pilot.

The Executive will have its work cut out for it. I have letters here on the very issue that might make the Executive think about the reality of what that commitment means. A letter from ScotRail says:

“It would not be practicable for us to vary for the sake of bus connections our train timetables”.

National Express says that it takes

“no account of train times when designing the National Express timetables”,

and Stagecoach UK Bus says in its letter that

“bus operators are not usually consulted by train operators when timetables change”.

There is the question whether bus operators should retime their services as a result of train timetable changes.

The challenge for the Executive is how precisely that attitude will be changed. It hampers integrated transport throughout Scotland. While we are on the subject of public transport, will the Executive now take the opportunity to buy out the ScotRail franchise? That is another idea that it is welcome to take from the SNP.

The opening words of the section on rural issues in the partnership agreement lay bare the failure of the Executive to recognise the serious difficulties facing our rural communities. The Executive is committed to maintaining strong, prosperous and growing communities in rural Scotland, but the reality is that 350,000 people in rural Scotland are believed to be living in poverty. The take-home pay of many low-paid workers in rural Scotland is little more than the amount of money that they would receive if they were on benefits. Eighty-four per cent of Scottish agricultural land qualifies as less favoured. Those are the realities of rural poverty in Scotland, which seems to be ignored by the Executive. The approach to our rural areas should not be one of maintaining the status quo but one of working towards economic growth and regeneration in our rural communities.

There are other areas that can be addressed. Much of what is contained in the section on health is laudable, but the real question is whether the Executive has the ability to deliver. The past four years suggest that the answer is that it does not. In the sphere of education, there are things that we can agree with—and indeed welcome and support—such as the scrapping of league tables and assessment for five to 14-year-olds, the expansion of breakfast and after-school clubs, and free music tuition for young people. However, as I made clear at the outset, the fair wind that we have promised to the aspects of Executive policy that we believe will be good for Scotland does not mean that we will not vigorously oppose those policies that we believe to be harmful.

In education, one of those key areas is the private finance initiative. There is no doubt about the need to invest in rebuilding our schools—I know that from my constituency and from what people tell me elsewhere. However, the building programme that is proposed by the Executive is carried out under a system for which Audit Scotland found that

“The higher cost of capital adds costs of between £0.2 million and £0.3 million a year for each £10 million invested in a project”.

How on earth does that constitute good financial management?

It is impossible to address adequately all the areas covered in the partnership agreement and the statement in one short speech. My colleagues will no doubt deal with many other matters. The hallmark of the programme is what is not in it, because what is there is indicative of ambitions stunted by the constraints of devolution. It is an opportunity missed, and what there is suggests that the Executive knows that the limitations of devolution mean that it can have no impact on the really big problems facing Scotland. We should aspire to something far greater than this.

10:06

David McLetchie (Edinburgh Pentlands)

(Con): The last thing most people in Scotland expected to hear in the wake of 1 May was, "Carry on as before," or, "Let's have more of the same." Any objective analysis of the election results would have concluded that it was time to think again, to work out what had gone wrong in the first four years of the Parliament and to try to do something about it. Sadly, there is no sign that such an analysis has taken place or that the Scottish Executive has any idea about how to put things right. It is quite the opposite, as Mr McConnell has chosen to pat the team on the back and, in true Mr Grace style, tell them that they are all doing terribly well. Such a failure to recognise the public mood shows how out of touch the Executive is.

Anyone who has spent time talking to voters in the recent election must surely understand that the one thing that voters knew about the Parliament, and which did more than anything else to undermine their faith in it, was the amount of their money—taxpayers' money—that was being wasted, particularly on the parliament building at Holyrood. Mr Stone may shake his head, but he has a heavy responsibility for that. As we urged during the campaign, the sensible response from the new Executive to those concerns would have been a concerted drive to reassure voters that the Executive understood those concerns and was determined to tackle waste and reduce dramatically the cost of government in Scotland.

Iain Smith (North East Fife) (LD): The one thing that the Conservatives did not tell us during the election was exactly what they would do about the Holyrood project. They talked about the waste, but they did not say that they would do anything about it.

David McLetchie: We proposed a programme to reduce the cost by more than £100 million a year.

Members: What about the building?

David McLetchie: We would never have built it in the first place and thrown away the hundreds of millions of pounds that the Executive has poured down the drain in the past four years.

We have heard the usual warm words from Mr McConnell that he understands the problem, followed by a failure to do anything meaningful about it, which only makes matters worse, because voters see that the concern is a sham and that they are being fobbed off. All that that does is increase cynicism about politicians and the political process.

The First Minister may be prepared to launch an inquiry into the Holyrood building project, but that is the bare minimum that is required. He still

refuses to accept his own and his party's responsibility and culpability for the spiralling cost of the project and the disastrous series of decisions and deceits dating back to 1997 that has brought us to the sorry point we are at today. Until he does so, his crocodile tears about wasted public money will be viewed with understandable cynicism by people in Scotland.

Tommy Sheridan: Does Mr McLetchie agree with the Scottish Socialist Party that, given that the root cause of those mistakes emanated from Westminster, Westminster should be picking up the tab for the fiasco of Holyrood?

David McLetchie: I rarely agree with the Scottish Socialist Party. In a sense Westminster is picking up the tab, because Westminster levies the bulk of the taxes that finance the Scottish block, from which the money came that has been wasted on the Scottish parliament building.

Why has there been no attempt to make a bold statement that the Executive recognises the mistakes that it has made in the past and intends to correct them? Where, for example, is the commitment in the programme for government to reducing the cost and scale of government in Scotland? Already the First Minister has missed a fantastic opportunity to show that he has learned those lessons and intends to cut government in Scotland down to size. As we know, however, leopards do not change their spots, and the result is that the new Cabinet is even bigger than the old one.

Regaining the confidence of the Scottish people also requires a recognition that, in the previous session, far too much time, effort and money were wasted on discussing things that are irrelevant to the vast majority of people in this country, such as section 28, land reform, fox hunting, fur farming and banning the smacking of children. No one in their right mind could claim that those issues were priorities of the public, yet the public perception was that they were the issues of concern to politicians and so were at the top of the agenda. Against that background, is it any wonder that many people concluded that politicians were out of touch and half the electorate did not bother to turn out to vote?

To be fair, the First Minister occasionally recognises that mood and pays lip service to it. Rarely a speech goes by without mention of his determination to focus on crime, jobs, hospitals and schools. However, when examining the programme for government, I think that it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that far too much time in this session will be taken up by discussion of the introduction of proportional representation in local government. Certain Liberal Democrats speak of little else; for them, the single transferable vote is an OCD—an obsessive compulsive disorder.

Fortunately, however, those Liberal Democrats are not typical of the population as a whole. To most people, PR is an entirely esoteric question that is of concern to political anoraks but has no impact on their quality of life.

The great claims that have been made on behalf of PR are also starting to look a bit thin, to say the least. Remember all those Liberal Democrats who assured us that it would boost turnout? Now those same people tell us that it will lead to better government at local level. The idea that a voting system determines the quality of administration is simplistic nonsense. I doubt that too many people in Scotland think that government here has improved since devolution, despite what many within these four walls might think.

PR is no panacea and we do ourselves a disservice if we claim that it is. If we fall into the trap of treating it as the most important issue that faces Parliament, we will merely reinforce the damaging impression that we are divorced from reality.

The same is true of the proposed family law bill. I am not opposed to everything in the proposed bill by any means, but we should remember the lesson of section 28 and not get bogged down in potentially controversial reform where there is no pressing need or demand for it. As I have said on numerous occasions, we need to discipline ourselves in Parliament and concentrate on examining fewer bills, but we must give them far greater scrutiny to ensure that they are of a higher quality and are a credit to us.

The waste and irrelevance of the Executive's agenda were contributory factors to the disappointment that so many felt with the fruits of devolution. That disappointment stemmed from a failure to make a difference to everyday lives through a reduction in crime and an improvement in our public services. The overwhelming concern of the Executive should be to take a hard look at the situation, work out why it was so and institute the necessary change. Until we do that, the new devolved settlement will not regain public confidence. There is little evidence that that analysis has been undertaken.

Let us consider crime, on which the record of Labour and the Liberal Democrats in the past few years has been truly pathetic. Crime—particularly violent crime—has risen and far too many of our neighbourhoods and communities are blighted by crime, disorder and the menace of drugs. However, the initial response in the Criminal Justice (Scotland) Bill failed to introduce effective measures to tackle those problems and originally proposed to send 16 and 17-year-old offenders to the children's panel. Is it any wonder that people despair?

It is not just I who thought that the Executive was too soft on crime. Mr McConnell spent most of the election campaign going round the country saying that we had to be much tougher on crime and, particularly, on persistent young offenders. Who had been in power for the previous four years? It is all very well for Mr McConnell to try to pin the blame on Mr Wallace, but I do not recall too much support for our sensible amendments to improve the Criminal Justice (Scotland) Bill, including measures such as the tagging of young offenders which miraculously, and barely three months later, are now to feature in the proposed antisocial behaviour bill. The First Minister's tough talk, therefore, is just a mea culpa for four years of Labour failure to tackle crime and his bluster about locking up parents is simply a smokescreen to obscure the truth. The omens are not good that effective action will at last be taken. The First Minister has so little faith in his new Minister for Justice that he has given responsibility for his proposed flagship antisocial behaviour bill to the Minister for Communities. If the First Minister does not trust Cathy Jamieson to tackle crime effectively, why should we?

We will continue to argue for a far greater police presence on our streets to deter and detect crime, while backing that up with tougher sentences, particularly for drug dealers, and a determination to take persistent young offenders off our streets. Where the Executive introduces sensible measures in line with our proposals, we will support it. However, it has to back up its tough talk with some effective action.

The same is true of policies designed to create the right conditions for economic growth. The record of the past four years in that area has been dismal, with our growth rate consistently lower than that of the United Kingdom. There was a belated recognition of the importance of investment in roads and public transport, but that did not make up for the years of neglect that preceded it.

Mr Kerr: Years of neglect by the Tories.

David McLetchie: Neglect by Labour from 1997 onwards—the record speaks for itself on that point. The record shows that investment in roads in Scotland was far higher in our years of office than it has ever been under Labour.

The Executive's recognition of the fundamental importance of economic growth to raising living standards and improving the quality of our public services is welcome. However, closer inspection of the approach to the economy shows that the lessons of the past four years have not been learned. Sadly, we still have the same old management-speak jargon about the Executive growing the Scottish economy, which is simply a justification for much of the unnecessary

intervention that is stifling our economic potential when what we need is exactly the opposite. We need to remove the obstacles in the form of higher taxes and excessive regulations that Governments place in the way of our businessmen and women and which constrain economic growth and development. Until the Executive recognises that and begins to cut the taxes and red tape that hold back our businesses, our economy will continue to underperform. If it admits that the decision to raise the business rate poundage in Scotland was a mistake and takes steps to remedy it while investing more in transport, that would be a welcome sign of a fresh approach, but I will not hold my breath.

Alasdair Morgan (South of Scotland) (SNP)
rose—

David McLetchie: I will, however, hold my breath for Mr Morgan.

Alasdair Morgan: Mr McLetchie mentioned cutting taxes on business. Will he say which taxes our Parliament has control of that affect businesses in Scotland?

David McLetchie: The Parliament has control over water rates, which have soared to a disastrous level. It has control over business rates and it has a tartan tax power, which the SNP wanted to use at one time and which would have penalised many small businessmen for whom income and business tax are the same. The Parliament has powers that it intends to apply in many council areas to levy tolls on people using our roads and entering our cities—all of which will add to the burdens on businesses in Scotland. Are those enough taxes for Mr Morgan?

Sadly, the Executive's policies on health and education have proved to be equally ineffectual and the performance in both those areas has been a severe disappointment.

Our nationalised system of health care is failing all of us. Choice is the preserve of the few when it should be the right of us all. Most of us have to settle for what is on offer rather than what we would choose for ourselves. Despite all the extra spending, which I acknowledge, our health service is failing patients. Fewer patients are being treated and they have to wait longer on longer waiting lists.

Our schools face similar problems. In our one-size-fits-all comprehensive system, which was supposed to be about equality, there is an enormous gulf between the best and the worst-performing schools. Far too many of our children are trapped in poor schools and, overwhelmingly, they are in the most deprived communities, which denies them the educational opportunities that might allow them to improve their quality and standard of life. Standards of discipline in our

schools are falling and one in four children leaves school unable to read and write adequately. Mr McConnell and the Executive might promise excellence for all, but the reality is mediocrity or worse for far too many.

The truth is that our monopoly health care system and the local monopolies that operate in education are not working. We need to shake off the complacency and face facts while learning the lesson from countries such as France, Germany, Denmark and the Netherlands about how they run their public services. Our health and education services need liberalising reform so that we can continue to guarantee access for all, but free up those systems and decentralise power to allow them to grow and develop without the constant need for direction from ministers for interference. That means putting patients and parents first, by giving them genuine choice and empowering the people who work in those services to respond to them.

The timidity of the programme for government does not inspire much hope. It talks about decentralising reforms—giving those at the front line more say in our health service and devolving more control over its budgets to schools. However, the programme for government does not even go as far as the limited reforms that were contemplated by the Labour Government down south. There is still no mention of foundation hospitals and no determination to extend opportunity and choice to pupils and parents through a major expansion in the number of specialist secondary schools.

Instead, the new Minister for Education and Young People had the brass neck to say that he wants to tackle a discipline problem that has been exacerbated by his own Executive's targets to reduce exclusions. If the minister is serious about tackling that problem, he should scrap those targets and return full control over discipline in our schools to our head teachers. If he were to do that, he would have the whole-hearted support of the Conservatives.

Sadly, Labour will not be given much help in adopting a liberal agenda—or a liberalising agenda—by the Liberal Democrats, who have long ceased to be liberal, having swallowed the social democratic mantra whole. Now that it would appear that Labour has accepted proportional representation, there is nothing to prevent this marriage of true minds from going ahead. That said, no doubt, true to politically correct form, the coalition partners will probably want to call it a civil partnership.

The Scottish National Party is, of course, no better. If it stops talking about independence, it will only make it even more obvious that nothing distinguishes it from Labour and the Liberal

Democrats, as they are all cut from the same political cloth.

The programme for government is a rehash; it is more of the same. It will be no more successful the second time round than it was the first time.

The Presiding Officer: I call Duncan McNeil.

Mr Duncan McNeil (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab): No. Scott Barrie is next. I am still writing my speech.

The Presiding Officer: In that case, I call Scott Barrie.

10:22

Scott Barrie (Dunfermline West) (Lab): Yesterday the chamber heard the First Minister make his statement outlining the Executive's programme for the coming year. Today we heard the Deputy First Minister echo those comments. Both addresses to the Parliament build on the document "A Partnership for a Better Scotland", which spells out the vision and policies that are required to achieve a better, fairer Scotland over the next four years.

Yesterday, during questions on his statement, the First Minister was asked by several Opposition members why the agreement document did not contain this or that. He was asked why the partnership agreement had only 79 specific words on older people or why it did not address the issue of poverty. Taking the last point first, in his statement yesterday, the First Minister's first commitment, which was made in the opening minute of his speech, was to say that the Executive wished

"to build a Scotland that delivers social justice".—[*Official Report*, 28 May 2003; c 81.]

The first paragraph of the first section of the partnership agreement sets out:

"A successful economy is key to our future prosperity and a pre-requisite for building first class public services, social justice and a Scotland of opportunity."

To my mind, social justice is all about addressing poverty, as well as inequality and lack of opportunity, which are the issues that underlie poverty whether in relation to health, education or employment. In direct contrast to what some members claimed yesterday, I believe that when Labour talks about social justice, implicit in that—at the heart of it—is the issue of addressing poverty.

Tommy Sheridan: Does Mr Barrie agree that it is regrettable that the document to which he referred—14,400 words of it—mentions poverty only three times and inequality once? His own First Minister failed to mention either word in a 40-minute speech. Does that not show the

Executive's lack of urgency and lack of desire to tackle the obscene inequality that scars this country?

Scott Barrie: On the contrary, at the beginning of my speech, I addressed the point that Mr Sheridan made yesterday. If we talk about social justice, that means an attack on the inequalities that we face in contemporary Scotland. A commitment to doing something about them is at the heart of the partnership agreement. Implicit in social justice is an attack on poverty.

The Labour party's manifesto for the election campaign, which was backed by more of the electorate than any of the other parties' manifestos, was a coherent, costed, integrated set of commitments designed so that Scotland would be a stronger, better, fairer place to live in 2007 than it is in 2003. The Labour party manifesto forms the bulk of the partnership agreement. Once the agreement is implemented fully, it will achieve that goal.

The Executive's programme for the next year reflects clearly the people's priorities of health, education and justice. It readily chimes with what I was told on the doorstep and in the high street by my electors in Dunfermline West. I also know that it chimes with what my Labour colleagues were told during the election campaign. It should also chime with what members of other parties, and of none, were told if they chose to listen to their voters.

I am particularly pleased that the Executive is going to progress the themes that were outlined in "Partnership for Care", the white paper that was published earlier this year. The Executive will devolve power to local communities, strengthen public involvement and promote health improvement—all of which will benefit the people of Scotland.

As a general rule, decisions that affect local health provision should be taken by local people within local structures. The national health service must learn to listen better to local issues and concerns that are raised and to involve local people more effectively in the planning decisions that will ultimately shape health provision in their local areas. I acknowledge that that is beginning to happen, not least in my own health board area in Fife, which like others in Scotland has in the past come in for heavy criticism for not effectively involving the general population in the planning process. However, from next month, a series of workshops will be held in every part of Fife. The workshops, which are open to everyone in the kingdom, will examine the next stage of "Right for Fife", the health board's service planning document.

What makes the process different from previous exercises is that the planning of those events has

been undertaken not by the health professionals, as occurred in the past, but by ordinary Fifers, some of whom have been some of the sternest critics of the health board to date. I appreciate that the proof of the pudding is in the eating, but this new approach shows that Fife NHS Board has begun to learn from past mistakes. I hope that other health boards will also learn in that way.

Bruce Crawford: Since the election, what approaches has Mr Barrie made to the new Minister for Health and Community Care to persuade him that the decision to downgrade the Queen Margaret hospital in Dunfermline was wrong? What real action has he taken?

Scott Barrie: Mr Crawford is wrong to talk about the downgrading of the hospital. As I outlined, Fifers are to be involved in the planning of the services that are to be made available at both district general hospitals in Fife. I welcome that.

I am pleased that the quality and consistency of health care will be improved by two specific measures in the proposed health reform bill. The first is the placing of a new duty on national health service boards to co-operate with each other to enable more effective regional planning. That measure is particularly important for constituencies such as mine, where hospital-based services for people in Kincardine, for example, are more likely to be provided by Stirling royal infirmary or Falkirk royal infirmary than by the Queen Margaret hospital in Dunfermline. The second measure is the extension of ministerial powers to intervene as a last resort in the event of service failure, which is a measure that will secure the quality of health care provision. It should never be forgotten that, although services are provided locally, the health service is first and foremost a national health service—one that should deliver for all of the people of Scotland.

I am pleased that before the summer recess a bill is to be introduced for the protection of vulnerable witnesses. For too long, some of the most vulnerable victims have faced the toughest time in the witness boxes of our courts. Although provision exists for young people to be shielded from the accused in court or to give their evidence via a video link, such provision is not always available in every court. In my previous occupation, I experienced the promise of such provision, but found that it was not available on the day that it was needed.

I hope that the proposed legislation will reflect the principles that were contained in the members' bill that Mr John McAllion proposed in the last session of Parliament. I hope that there is agreement that such measures need to be extended to other vulnerable groups, particularly adults with learning difficulties, who at present see their cases not getting to court because it is feared

that they will not make credible witnesses once they are subjected to some of the excesses of our adversarial court system.

The Criminal Justice (Scotland) Act 2003 provides greater protection and support for victims, but many people, including me, believe that the act does not extend that support far enough. I am glad that the Labour-led Executive is to return early to the subject and I wish the Minister for Justice well in addressing that matter.

For far too many of our communities, the antisocial behaviour of a small minority is a constant problem. Members have commented on the issue in the past and some—not least my good friend and comrade Johann Lamont—have taken it up vigorously. Antisocial behaviour orders have begun to make small inroads into curtailing the unacceptable behaviour of some people in our communities, and it is right that their effectiveness should be monitored and reviewed and that their scope should be extended, including—where appropriate—to under-16s.

As members pointed out in debates during the last session, Fife has had more ASBOs granted than any other local authority area. I know how grateful communities in my constituency are when sources of so much misery to law-abiding citizens are removed. When the Parliament met in Aberdeen, I mentioned that the number of ASBOs that have been granted does not mean that the propensity towards antisocial behaviour is greater in Fife than it is in other areas; instead, it is a testament to our local authority's determination to tackle the problem.

Few members in this chamber have a greater commitment to the children's hearings system than I have. Indeed, I was proud to be asked to be the main speaker at a civic reception that Fife Council hosted last Friday evening to acknowledge the invaluable work carried out by children's panel members. I still believe and will still argue that, although our system was introduced 30 years ago, its innovative combination of youth justice and child welfare provides a good means of addressing the needs of the majority of young people who are referred to the children's reporter, whether they have committed offences or need care or protection.

However, any child and family social worker will point out that one of the greatest frustrations in working with a family within the hearings system is its current lack of any sanctions that can be placed upon a parent. Section 1 of the Children (Scotland) Act 1995 might mention parental rights and responsibilities, but it provides no legal locus for attempts to make a parent exercise such rights and responsibilities over a child. The only option that is open to a children's hearing is to place a young person on a supervision requirement; the

panel can take no action against a parent, even if they are deliberately acting against the interests of their child.

Of course, parents who find it hard to cope or are faced with a youngster beyond their control must receive appropriate help and assistance from the statutory agencies. However, I am pleased that, for parents who refuse to assist their child appropriately despite any help that might be offered, it is planned that parent orders will be introduced as a last resort through the civil courts and will require parents to act in their child's best interests. Such orders would be based on a parent's actions or inaction, and would not depend on the actions of their child. Such an initiative will place responsibility exactly where it belongs, and I commend the Executive for taking it.

Phil Gallie: What measures will the Executive take against parents who just will not comply and who turn their back on any representations that are made to them?

Scott Barrie: I assume that, because we are talking about a civil action, the civil courts will determine the matter appropriately, and will deal with people as they would deal with anyone who disregarded any other civil action.

As for the proposed local governance bill, it should be remembered that there is more to modernising local government than merely changing the electoral system. For far too long, local councillors have not been adequately remunerated or rewarded for their years and even decades of public service. As a result, I am glad to hear that there will be a new and comprehensive package for our elected councillors, many of whom have sacrificed careers or opportunities for promotion in order to serve their local communities. I wonder whether, in advance of the establishment of a specifically legislated remuneration committee for councillors, the Executive will consider setting up a small, short-life working party to carry out appropriate background work and ensure that there is real progress on this long-overdue reform.

I was also pleased that the First Minister's statement contained a commitment to remove unnecessary restrictions on people who want to become involved in local government. I hope that such a step will also mean the removal of the political restrictions that were introduced by the Tories at Westminster on many people who work in local government. Those restrictions were no more than a spiteful measure and, like the misconceived section 2A of the Local Government Act 1986, should be consigned to the legislative dustbin.

This partnership agreement is designed to deliver a better, stronger and fairer Scotland by

2007. The legislative programme for the next year builds on work that has already been done and begins that process towards 2007. It will make a difference and will be delivered.

10:34

Eleanor Scott (Highlands and Islands) (Green): Just as I read the partnership agreement with interest, so I listened with interest to the First Minister's statement yesterday. However, it was interesting not so much because of the detail that it contained—although that was obviously of interest and I will refer specifically to some of it—but because of its overall philosophy. After all, the statement indicates the Executive's idea of the sort of Scotland that we are trying to create.

I took careful note of when the First Minister began his statement: it was 14:07 by the clock. It took him until 14:20 precisely—that is, 13 minutes—before he mentioned the word "environment". When we add that to the news that his ministerial team does not include a dedicated minister for the environment and that the Transport and the Environment Committee has been disbanded and its responsibilities divided between two other committees, I wonder just how visible his green thread will be in the grey fabric.

The First Minister began by talking at length about the need to grow the Scottish economy. Growth is fine if the right things are growing. However, if the Executive has its way, what exactly will grow will be a very mixed bag from a Scottish Green Party perspective. It is fine that public transport is set to grow; however, the number of motorways will also grow, which makes a nonsense of the claim that there is a green transport policy. I should also point out that, although there have been some eloquent speeches about greenhouse gases, climate change and the Executive's commitment to renewable energy, all those commitments centre on generating electricity from renewable sources, and electricity takes up only 20 per cent of our energy use. Transport takes up—

Phil Gallie: Will the member give way?

Eleanor Scott: Be my guest.

Phil Gallie: The member has just referred to the effect of motorways on the environment. Does she think that the M77 extension between the M8 and the A77 has improved environmental conditions for the many people in Glasgow who were subjected to slow-moving traffic and the fumes that were emitted?

Eleanor Scott: No, I do not think that. Furthermore, I do not think that the proposed M74 extension will improve conditions either. Indeed, it will cost more and will be a considerably greater

waste of money than the new Parliament building. I thank Mr Gallie for his point.

As I was about to say, transport accounts for a large proportion of the 80 per cent of energy use that is not electricity related.

According to the partnership agreement, recycling is set to grow by a pathetic amount—25 per cent by 2006 and 55 per cent by 2020—which will still leave us at the bottom of the European recycling league tables. Those amounts are woefully modest by European standards. Waste production will also grow; certainly, there is no target for waste reduction. I looked through the agreement carefully and could not find one. The First Minister stated that the Executive valued enterprise above all and I fear that sustainability will be sacrificed for short-term growth.

I have already mentioned targets. Although there should be waste reduction targets, none has been set. Likewise, the Executive continues to fight shy of targets for organic food production, despite their benefits to the environment, rural jobs and consumer choice. Furthermore, although I looked hard, I could not find a target for traffic reduction. The First Minister's eloquent words have not been backed up by any proposals for action.

Targets have been set for what might be termed the softer areas. For example, I want to examine the health content of the First Minister's statement, as it is an area where we might find it salutary to stand back and consider the overall philosophy behind and direction of Government policy.

The NHS has suffered for years from not knowing where it is heading. I do not blame the Executive for that situation; it started with the reorganisations of the Thatcher era. The trouble with those changes in the NHS was not just the nature of the so-called reforms—which were awful—but the fact that staff had no idea where they were heading. We should never underestimate the value of the vision thing. People do not feel secure if they are proceeding blindly, at speed and completely unaware of their ultimate destination. Successive Governments have never succeeded in restoring staff morale in the NHS; frankly, their approach seems to have been designed to do the reverse.

It is easy to set targets in the NHS, and I would not quarrel with the principle that patients should expect and receive an acceptable standard of service. However, it is not enough for the Executive simply to decide on a target and then tell the public services that they have to meet it. The services must be resourced to ensure that they do so. The trouble comes when a target is set and health boards are simply exhorted to meet it; the boards in turn exhort the senior management

of their trusts, who exhort their departmental heads and so on. It is all exhortation and no support. Staff at all levels simply feel put upon and pressured.

Similarly, measures intended to improve standards, such as appraisal and revalidation, should be supportive and helpful to staff, but in the present climate they are simply seen as threatening. I have worked in the NHS for 30 years. I will not say that there were not problems when I started—of course there were. Pay was low and hours were long, but people felt valued. Now they do not, and I am afraid that, until that changes, recruitment and retention of staff in the NHS will remain a major problem.

The situation is the same in education. I have serious concerns about the prospect of ministerial interventions in failing schools, because I worry that failure will be measured by some league-table, bean-counting measure rather than by taking into account genuine staff endeavours. I am concerned about the philosophy that education should be all about enterprise. What happened to learning, knowledge and possibly even the acquisition of wisdom?

I am also concerned, as is my colleague Patrick Harvie, about the underlying attitude to young people that is evident in the partnership agreement. We should see our young people as an asset, not a threat; they will be providing our community care one day. The First Minister said that he wanted to put respect for others back into communities. Perhaps I could respectfully suggest that children and young people might best learn respect by being shown it. A smart, successful Scotland must become a smart, successful, sustainable Scotland, but it must also be a caring, compassionate Scotland.

10:41

Tommy Sheridan (Glasgow) (SSP): If Edmund Hillary and his expedition had shown a similar lack of ambition and vision 50 years ago today to that displayed by the Executive's programme, they could hardly have conquered a molehill, never mind climbed Mount Everest. The truth of the matter is that the Executive's strategy document lacks ambition, lacks vision and simply represents a regurgitation of the failed Thatcherite Reaganomics and the trickle-down economic theory that has failed not only the developed world but also the underdeveloped world for the past two and a half decades.

Mr Brian Monteith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Will Mr Sheridan accept an intervention?

Tommy Sheridan: If Brian Monteith could give me a chance to get into the first minute of my speech, I would then gladly take an intervention.

The theory that runs through the document is encapsulated by the First Minister's statement yesterday, repeated by the Deputy First Minister this morning, about entrepreneurship, the importance of enterprise and how we must forget about education in schools and just turn out as many businessmen and businesswomen as possible. In his statement yesterday, the First Minister said:

"there is nothing more important to us than growing the Scottish economy. Scotland must generate more wealth to fund and resource excellence in our public services."—*[Official Report, 28 May 2003; c 82.]*

What that fails to address is the fact that we already have masses of wealth that deserves to be redistributed.

Rhona Brankin (Midlothian) (Lab) rose—

Tommy Sheridan: What the Executive document fails to do is to address the need for redistribution of our existing wealth.

Mr Monteith: I was interested to hear Mr Sheridan say, in what was no doubt a Marxist analysis, that the Executive is essentially being Thatcherite. Would not he agree that both Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan were tax-cutters, and that Gordon Brown and Jack McConnell are in fact tax-raisers, given that 72 taxes have risen since 1997 under the Labour Government and the Executive?

Tommy Sheridan: I would have expected Brian Monteith to be a wee bit better informed. He may remember that for nine years under Mrs Thatcher's Government the top rate of taxation in the UK was 63 per cent. Unfortunately, new Labour is less willing to tax the rich and wealthy than even Mr Monteith's glorified Mrs Thatcher was. The truth of the matter is that Thatcher and Major delivered in this country a great deal of darkness and inequality, which has unfortunately now been surpassed according to the Office for National Statistics, which reported only last week that inequality under new Labour is greater than the inequality generated under Thatcher. That is why I referred to the Executive's strategy as Thatcherite Reaganomics. It is a trickle-down theory and a philosophy that will not deliver anything like the social justice that some members on the Labour benches pretend to be concerned about.

Rhona Brankin: Tommy Sheridan said in the past that he did not believe in companies making profits. That statement was then changed to say that small businesses should be allowed to make profits. Could he tell members just how successful a business has to be before it is nationalised?

Tommy Sheridan: The point that was made before—I am sure that Rhona Brankin heard it, although she may want to ignore it—was that 99

per cent of Scottish business is small business. The problem is that 1 per cent of big business runs and controls our economy and drives that economy on the basis of profit first and last. We are saying that the big business interests in the economy, the manufacturing concerns and the utilities of Scotland should not be owned and controlled on the basis of profit, but owned and democratically controlled on the basis of the provision of service first and foremost. Let us give the biggest boost possible to the small business community here in Scotland.

The rub of the matter is that members on the Executive and Tory benches—even those who are concerned about poverty—would have us believe that the only way in which we can tackle poverty is by creating more wealth. Those with genuine social concern believe that if we redistribute our existing wealth, putting money in the pockets of ordinary men and women in Scotland, they will spend it. When they spend it, that generates more growth in our economy and more wealth. If members examine the economic facts across our world today, they will see that the most successful economies are those with lower levels of inequality. That is why we have to tackle inequality in order to arrive at greater economic growth, and the strategy document illustrates the failure of the Executive to use even its limited powers to do that.

We in the Scottish Socialist Party believe that, in order genuinely to transform Scotland, we must have an adult country and a proper, mature country with control over all of its economic affairs. We desire and will campaign for an independent socialist Scotland, but in the meantime, let us use our limited powers to the maximum. Let us change the unfair council tax system for a start. Let us introduce a personal income tax system that taxes people according to their ability to pay, so that the wealthy and well-paid in this chamber pay more and the pensioners and ordinary workers in Scotland pay less. When they pay less, they will have more money in their pockets to spend on goods and services in order to grow our economy and create more wealth by redistribution of existing wealth.

That is the failure of the Executive's strategy. It does not address the need to redistribute wealth, and it does not address the fact that 40 per cent of the adult poor are now in employment. It is no good talking about the lowest unemployment for decades. If someone takes a low-paid job, they go from being the unemployed poor to being the employed poor. That is why we must tackle the low-wage culture, and that is why we in the public sector need to use our limited powers to introduce a decent minimum living wage with a shorter working week. That will make the public sector more attractive for those who work in our hospitals and schools. The nursery nurses have gone on

strike today and yesterday because they are woefully underpaid, and there is absolutely nothing in the Executive document that will address or tackle low and inadequate pay in the public sector.

The problem with the Executive strategy is its lack of ambition and its lack of desire to tackle inequality. We will continue to fill in those gaps over the coming four years by proposing policies that do tackle poverty and inequality.

10:49

Mr Duncan McNeil (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab): I am pleased to support the programme for government and to take this opportunity to congratulate our Liberal colleagues on signing up to a partnership document that so faithfully reflects the Labour manifesto.

I am sure that the constituents of Greenock and Inverclyde will be encouraged by the pledge that they will benefit from the economic growth in which all Scotland will share.

I look forward to delivering, through the agreement, the planned regeneration of

“communities where there are persistently high levels of unemployment.”

I hope that we take advantage of the opportunities that lie along the A8 in my constituency.

It goes without saying that the measures to crack down on crime and to build safer, stronger communities cannot come soon enough for the decent, hard-working families that it is my privilege to represent.

I look forward to the publication of the proposed legislation to tackle crime and antisocial behaviour. I ask the critics and doubters to understand the fear of the elderly who are frightened in their homes and are frightened to go outside.

Mr Bruce McFee (West of Scotland) (SNP): Mr McNeil mentioned attempts to tackle antisocial behaviour. Can he tell my why, since the introduction of antisocial behaviour orders, Labour-controlled Inverclyde Council has refused to use them to try to bring about some decency and calmness in the areas that he talks about? His own colleagues refuse to use the legislation that the Parliament passed.

Mr McNeil: Many councils throughout Scotland have found it difficult to use antisocial behaviour orders. That is why we will make it easier for them to use the orders and we will extend the orders to cover under-16s who cause problems in our communities.

I ask the critics and doubters to understand the anger of hard-working people who have had their property vandalised. Finally, I ask the doubters to

give proper consideration to the real victims of youth crime: young people who have their education disrupted, who are bullied, assaulted and robbed in our streets.

I will focus the remainder of my remarks on the health service. I welcome much of what the programme has to say. It is good news that—the coalition document states—the Executive wants to

“devolve power to the lowest level.”

It is good news that national health service reform and the establishment of community health partnerships are on the agenda. It is also good news that community-based centres and hospitals are to be supported and that artificial health board boundaries will be able to be examined where necessary. Taken together, I hope that those measures signal a commitment from the Scottish Executive to halt the march towards centralisation of services in the NHS. That is not an easy task.

We must address several factors, which I have been trying to address over the past four years. The impact of the European working time directive, the agreement on junior doctors' hours and the move towards sub-specialisation are making it difficult, if not impossible, to deliver services in hospitals in my constituency and throughout Scotland. That limits local access and forces people to travel further for treatment. Although I am in no way against improving working conditions for staff in the hospitals, I ask myself what other business or public service would cease to provide a service based on rules, guidance or agreements with the work force. I can think of no service that would do that.

Tricia Marwick (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP): Will Duncan McNeil give way?

Mr McNeil: I am sorry; I have almost finished.

In my constituency, the Rankin maternity unit is under continued threat because of junior doctor cover. Although sterling efforts are made to plug gaps, such problems are being used to centralise services. If we do not tackle the issue, with the royal colleges and others, I fear that our ambitions for the health service in Scotland will not be realised.

10:54

Nicola Sturgeon (Glasgow) (SNP): There is a great deal to welcome in the programme for government and in the partnership agreement. The objectives of growing our economy, improving public services and strengthening communities will attract widespread support, but unity around policy objectives does not absolve the Opposition from its responsibilities. We have a responsibility to ask hard questions. How do we grow our economy

without the important powers to compete? How will better growth—even if it can be achieved—result in greater resources for our public services when our Parliament's funding depends not on our national wealth but on a block grant decided in Westminster?

We also have a responsibility to scrutinise the detail of all the proposals and to monitor whether the policy initiatives have the desired effect. For example, we must monitor whether the policies that were outlined yesterday on health result in shorter waiting times for patients; the latest statistics that were released this morning show that all previous initiatives have failed abysmally to do so. The SNP will not shirk from those responsibilities.

We will work to ensure that our Parliament also looks outwards. I will expand on Roseanna Cunningham's remarks about the future of Europe. I make it clear—for Phil Gallie's benefit—that the SNP is pro-Europe, but we are also pro-Scotland within Europe. Developments that are taking place right now on the European stage will have lasting implications for the governance of our country and a profound impact on our lives. The fundamental decisions that are taken on the EU constitution about areas where states are willing to pool sovereignty and those in which they want to retain national control will redefine what it means to be independent for existing member states and, in future, for Scotland. In the here and now, those decisions will determine in no small measure the ability that we have to conduct our devolved responsibilities in Scotland. For all those reasons—and others—we cannot afford to be bystanders in the process. We must exert influence now as the constitution takes shape.

The United Kingdom's agenda is pretty clear: it wants to resist the development of a common foreign affairs and defence policy while it is happy to allow control of national resources, such as fisheries, to rest with Europe. We must ask ourselves whether we are happy with that, or whether it would better suit Scotland's interests and priorities to have those priorities reversed and turned on their head. We must have that debate.

We also have a duty to debate what we want Scotland's relationship with Europe to be. As is the case now, notwithstanding any arrangements that are made for consulting regional Parliaments, member states will be the component units of the EU and the collective decision makers on all matters of policy, post-constitutional change. That leaves devolved Scotland in the position of being represented on vital issues—many of which are devolved to this Parliament—by the UK Government, whose interests may or may not coincide with ours. Is that the best arrangement for Scotland in the new Europe?

It is worth noting that, post-enlargement, 70 per cent of member states will have populations of fewer than 10 million. If Cyprus, Malta and Slovakia can have seats at the top table, why cannot Scotland? That question is worth asking.

My plea, at the start of the second session of Parliament, is this: let us move away from the conflict between the SNP and Labour, which sometimes masquerades as a debate about the future of our country, and engage genuinely and honestly in a discussion about the place in the world that we want our Parliament and our country to have. I believe that if we start from there and work backwards we might at long last start to get it right.

10:58

Bristow Muldoon (Livingston) (Lab): At the start of the second session of the Scottish Parliament, it is important that we reflect on some of the lessons of the recent election. In particular, all parties should reflect on the low turnout, which should be a concern to everyone in the chamber who believes in democracy. The lesson appears to be that after the first session of the Parliament, the people of Scotland are not yet convinced that we have made the difference in their lives that they wish us to make. However, I still believe that we have the opportunity to do that over the next four years.

When we established the Parliament after the referendum in 1997, there was an enormous feeling of hope and optimism about what the Parliament could achieve. I believe that over the next four years it is our duty to try to reconnect with that feeling of hope and optimism. If we do so, we can start to reconnect with the people and ensure that they participate in democracy more in the future.

I speak in support of the Executive's programme, as outlined by the First Minister yesterday and the Deputy First Minister today. I do so on the basis mentioned by my colleague Duncan McNeil that the Labour manifesto, on which I fought the election, concentrated on the key issues that the Parliament should deal with: growing the Scottish economy, improving public services and tackling crime and antisocial behaviour. I also do so on the basis that that manifesto is extensively replicated, and has been enhanced by some of the issues that our Liberal Democrat colleagues have brought to the table, in the programme for government that has been agreed.

I also believe that the legislative programme and the spending priorities that have been outlined can make the difference for the better that is essential if we are to reconnect the Scottish people with the

Parliament. I will touch on a couple of those priorities. The emphasis on growing the economy has to be the correct emphasis. We will work in partnership with the Westminster Parliament and colleagues throughout Europe, but we can also improve Scotland's economic outlook through improving skills in the further and higher education sector by increasing the budget for that sector by 16 per cent. By promoting and supporting the excellent research that already takes place in our universities, we can develop the skills of the Scottish people far more and ensure that we are able to compete internationally.

One of the most effective ways in which the Parliament can contribute to economic growth is through the way in which we develop our infrastructure, particularly our transport infrastructure. I welcome the commitment to delivering the programme that was outlined by Iain Gray prior to the election, which involved delivering rail links to Glasgow and Edinburgh airports; reopening rail lines such as the Airdrie to Bathgate line; redeveloping Waverley station; and completing the central Scotland motorway network. However, I offer a piece of advice to our new Minister for Transport. One of the key drivers of the railway aspect of the programme will be his taking a grip of the railway industry early on. Due to the problems that that industry has experienced, it has not been effective in recent years in delivering major rail infrastructure programmes. If we are to have any chance of delivering on the transport programme, he will need to take a grip of the rail industry quickly. I wish him well in that task, and I will support him in the Parliament in any way that I can.

I turn to one of the public services in which reform through the programme for government is essential: the national health service, to which my colleague Duncan McNeil referred. It is important that far greater emphasis is put on improving lifestyles and diets. Far too many of us add to the risk of disease later in life through our lifestyle choices. Through the series of measures that are proposed in the partnership agreement, we can start to make a difference in the years ahead.

I particularly welcome the proposed NHS reform bill and the Executive's commitment to removing unnecessary layers of bureaucracy from the NHS. That will make the NHS more effective in delivering health improvements.

Extra resources are going into the NHS, but people on the ground are not yet experiencing the improvements that we wish them to experience in their day-to-day contact with the health service. In particular, I emphasise—in reference to the question that I asked the First Minister yesterday—that it is essential that we get front-line practitioners and the public more closely involved

with decision making in the health service. Far too often, decisions affecting the delivery of health services have been made at a senior level in the NHS without any genuine engagement with the public. I would like the Minister for Health and Community Care and the First Minister to drive forward that issue even before the proposed NHS reform bill is published.

The Scottish Executive and the Scottish Parliament face major challenges in the years ahead to prove that we can make a difference to the lives of the people whom we were elected to represent and to ensure that the Parliament is seen as relevant. However, I am confident that, if we deliver on the aims that are outlined in the partnership agreement and the Executive's programme, we can reconnect with the public and start to rebuild the hope that Scottish people felt back in 1997.

11:03

Phil Gallie (South of Scotland) (Con): The delivery of the Executive's programme depends, in the longer term, on the powers that are devolved to the Scottish Parliament. Those responsibilities are defined well in the Scotland Act 1998 and have been relatively uncontested, except by the nationalists who—quite rightly—see their objectives taking precedence over them and, as we have heard today, by Tommy Sheridan. The First Minister yesterday confirmed his belief that no further constitutional change is desirable. I agree with that, especially given the dissatisfaction that we all came across in the recent general election campaign over the performance of the Parliament in its first session. That dissatisfaction was well recognised by the First Minister during the campaign, and he frequently referred to the fact that the Parliament and the Executive had to do better.

Yesterday, Mr McConnell accused David McLetchie of regurgitating old complaints. Undoubtedly, there is an element of truth in that. Such regurgitation is inevitable when the Executive has failed to address shortcomings that David McLetchie has highlighted previously. It could also easily be shown that that was a case of the pot calling the kettle black, as Mr McConnell's comments ran rich in aspiration that was founded on promises made by the previous First Ministers, Dewar and McLeish, which ultimately failed to bear fruit.

Tommy Sheridan: Phil Gallie talks about promises failing to bear fruit. He earlier asked a question relating to the M77. On the basis of information from the greater Pollok social inclusion partnership, I can confirm that no new businesses have been generated as a result of the construction of the M77 in the greater Pollok area.

Can he tell me how many new jobs and businesses have been created in Ayrshire through the construction of the M77?

Phil Gallie: Jobs have come under great pressure under this Administration. We have seen a loss of manufacturing and production jobs; however, I do not link that to the M77. The point that I was making was that there has been a massive environmental improvement for people who live on the south side of Glasgow thanks to the provision of the M77.

There seems to be a change of emphasis in the programme that has been published by the Executive—a change that has perhaps come about through Labour's recognition, at last, of the misery that is caused to many people by the antisocial and criminal activities of the few in our society. During the previous session, Conservative members repeatedly asked for those issues to be addressed, and we welcome the intent that is now stressed.

We are not surprised that the First Minister has removed a Liberal influence from the justice portfolio. It is a pity that that took so long, especially considering the crime statistics—which were held back until after the election and released only yesterday. The statistics show that the number of reports of rape has increased by 20 per cent; that the incidence of drug offences has increased by 12 per cent; that the number of robberies has increased by 17 per cent; and that the number of violent attacks has increased by 20 per cent. That is a shameful situation after four years of the previous Executive's administration of Scotland's affairs.

We are, however, surprised that the First Minister has replaced Jim Wallace with Cathy Jamieson, who is not known for having anything other than hard left views. I would argue that her view is compassionate towards the perpetrators of crime rather than towards the victims of crime.

The Minister for Justice (Cathy Jamieson)
rose—

Phil Gallie: I will give way in a moment.

Nevertheless, when a poacher turns gamekeeper the results can sometimes be very good. Perhaps that is why Jack McConnell saw Cathy Jamieson as the best option that was open to him.

Cathy Jamieson: I was not expecting what I think was a compliment from Mr Gallie. I was going to point out that the voters of Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley have clearly chosen me as a better option than him. However, that would have been a cheap point to score, following the example that was set by my colleague Ms Curran yesterday.

Does Mr Gallie accept that it was made perfectly clear last year that the crime statistics would be published in May this year, following the Scottish Parliament elections, and that people would have known that for a considerable time if they had been paying attention?

Phil Gallie: That might have been the stated intention, but it would have been interesting if we had had the statistics at the time of the election for use as a debating point. With respect to Cathy Jamieson's other point, I am delighted that 28 per cent of the voters in Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley voted for the Conservative candidate, many of them for the first time. She should look to her laurels in the future because the Tories are in there and battling. However, it would have taken a major swing for us to have won Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley. If I had won that seat, I doubt that there would have been many of Cathy Jamieson's colleagues on the Labour benches.

The main point that I want to make relates to my concern over the effect of the European convention on the powers of the Scottish Parliament. I believe that it would have an immense effect by reducing the number of issues with which the Scottish Parliament could deal.

For more than 30 years, many who are now members in the chamber attempted to bring about the establishment of a Scottish Parliament to give Scots some rule over their affairs. I must concede that I was not one of those people, but many who are now members had the ambition to establish a Scottish Parliament. The European convention threatens all that. Signing up to the convention could threaten the Scottish Parliament's powers in almost every area in which we are involved. In a constructive vein, I ask the Executive to address the issue by giving every minister the task of considering those aspects of the European convention's proposals that would affect their brief. Ministers should consider the proposals constructively and try to determine precisely how they would affect us. Let us not go on fears and promises but on facts. I believe that the Executive should include my suggestion in its programme for government.

The issue is one for the Parliament as well as for the Executive. The Parliament's subject committees should consider the convention to assess how the Parliament's powers might be diminished if it were signed up to. Now is our opportunity to do that. Ultimately, only Westminster will have the power to address the matter, but it is important that the First Minister and the Executive are able to give informed comment on the issues as they affect Scotland and the Scottish Parliament.

11:11

Mr Jeremy Purvis (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD): It is an honour to make my maiden speech in the Parliament and to do so on behalf of the people of Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale. My constituency is as diverse as it is beautiful, stretching from the proud Midlothian town of Penicuik to beyond St Mary's loch, and its cultural heritage is renowned across the globe. As I look forward to a summer of local festivals, which starts tonight with the Penicuik hunter and lass festival, I am privileged to be a standard bearer for my area in the Parliament.

I also pay a brief tribute to my predecessor, Ian Jenkins. Few MSPs made as human a mark on the Parliament as he did. I know that many new colleagues are honoured, like me, to count Ian as a friend. I will not match his pithy contributions in the chamber, nor his command of Shakespeare, but I will seek to honour his name by being a local representative who is based in, and committed to, the constituency.

Tommy Sheridan: Will the member take an intervention?

Mr Purvis: I would appreciate it if the member would be so kind as to not intervene in my maiden speech.

Our debate today is on the Scottish Executive's programme, which addresses the many difficulties that my area faces and to which it has had to respond over recent years. Its economy has been stricken by the decline in manufacturing and electronics and in the great Borders industries that the River Tweed has sustained for centuries: farming and textiles. Our wages are among the lowest in Scotland, our growth is lower than the Scottish average and our infrastructure is poor. Too many of the young people who benefit from the high standard of education that they receive in the area leave and do not return. Creating opportunities for our young people through training and job creation are, rightly, priorities in the programme for Government, as is improving infrastructure, along with a commitment to broadband and the construction of the Borders railway. Training, skills, vocational education and apprenticeships will all give our youngsters opportunities, so I am pleased that those areas are prominent in the programme.

Although I am aware of the difficulties that my area faces, I am proud of its achievements. I celebrate our cultural heritage, our entrepreneurialism and our creativity. Within 5 miles of my home in Galashiels is Lochcarron of Scotland, the world's largest supplier of tartan, which is seen on the most prestigious catwalks. There is also Peri-dent, which supplies 60 per cent of the United Kingdom's dental floss, and Lindean

Mill Glass, which makes some of the most stunning glassware that is retailed in Tiffany's in New York. Those companies have nothing in common other than that each is committed to the highest quality, which is a word that I wish to be synonymous with the Borders and Scotland.

I want the partnership agreement to ensure that the Borders and Penicuik have the most qualified students in Scotland because the area has the highest quality primary and secondary education and the highest quality vocational opportunities for teenagers; that it has the highest quality of life because our health service focuses on health improvement and on cutting waiting times; and that it has an economy that is of the highest quality because we have the infrastructure that we were denied for too long, better roads and a railway that will serve the Borders and, eventually, beyond.

I am proud that the predominantly Liberal Democrat partnership agreement includes all of that and I am proud to support it today.

11:15

Elaine Smith (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab): I believe that the programme for government that is being debated sets out many principles that, when subjected to robust scrutiny by our committees and back benchers, can only be improved on and which will undoubtedly lead to many policies that will deserve the Parliament's support. However, I am disappointed that the partnership agreement does not make tackling poverty, inequality and deprivation its top priority, although I acknowledge that much of the action that is proposed in it will work towards that aim. As I said yesterday, I hope that all policies will be proofed for their impact on poverty, deprivation and inequality as thoroughly as they will be for their environmental impact.

Coalition government is never ideal and my own views on the subject have been well recorded over the past few weeks, but I think that it is now time to look forward to the job of governing Scotland. I am pleased that we have a comprehensive and strategic programme in front of us today that we can build on. Obviously, the debate makes it possible to focus on any part of the programme, although it is difficult to limit that within a short speech. I want to concentrate on higher and further education because the measures to be introduced will have a particular significance within my constituency. Student finance is a major issue, of course—I welcome the commitment to having no top-up fees—but it is not the only issue and I want to consider others.

The partnership agreement focuses on various courses of action but primarily on increasing the higher and further education budget by 16 per cent

by 2006. I unequivocally welcome that measure, but I must say that in my constituency the local college has found itself in a situation whereby the revenue that is currently provided by the Scottish Further Education Funding Council does not stretch to cover staffing costs, which make up 75 per cent of the total costs. I ask the Executive to make it clear where the additional money is to be directed and to scrutinise carefully the levels of funding that individual institutions will receive.

I welcome the Executive's proposals to merge the Scottish Higher Education Funding Council and the Scottish Further Education Funding Council, and to encourage acknowledgement by business and education providers of the Scottish credit and qualification framework.

Tommy Sheridan: Will the member take an intervention?

Elaine Smith: I am sorry, but I do not have time.

A recent study by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation found that students from disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to follow complicated paths within higher education and often find that the transition between further and higher education is problematic. That can lead to their foregoing the opportunity to progress to more advanced courses. A relevant point is whether higher national certificate and higher national diploma courses should count towards university degrees. If we are to improve accessibility and effectiveness in further and higher education, we must identify the best practice that exists between some further and higher education institutions and make a concerted effort to foster a more holistic and cohesive solution to the problem of transition.

The Rowntree report also found that students from disadvantaged backgrounds were more likely to reduce prematurely their level of participation in education. I ask the Executive to reconsider the current system of funding in Scotland, which supports the recruitment of students but does not give incentives to institutions to support, and increase the retention of, students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

From a local perspective, I welcome the plans for greater transparency within the sector, particularly the application of the Nolan principles in the appointment of principals. I hope that the proposals will prevent situations arising such as that which arose in my constituency last year when, after a critical report by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education, a college board was able to appoint a new principal without the position being advertised either internally or externally. Surely in any education institution in which public money is being spent it is essential that appointment processes are mindful of the need for

proper procedures to ensure openness, accountability and the observance of equal opportunities. That should apply also to the appointment of board members. The right to refer to an ombudsman will have a positive impact on levels of accountability. My dealings with constituents lead me to welcome that measure, as well as the fact that it will improve student rights.

I am encouraged by many of the Executive's proposals. However, although the promise to merge the higher and further education funding councils makes sense in terms of cutting red tape, it will not, unfortunately, result in a bonfire of those particular quangos. Democratising FE by giving management back to councils or joint boards or by establishing a new executive agency would ensure application of the Nolan principles and would allow standardisation of salaries and conditions of service for staff. It would also deliver the more cohesive approach to further and higher education to which I alluded earlier.

Such an approach could allow the Scottish further education service seriously to strive for excellence. Resources that are currently employed in supporting 42 separate infrastructures for 42 separate colleges could instead be invested in the delivery of high-quality education and training for our Scottish students. I ask the Executive seriously to consider that issue as part of the proposals for further and higher education that are included in the partnership document. I do not want to take anything away from those proposals, which are strong and are beginning to move us in the right direction. However, I wish that they moved us that bit further.

11:21

Mr Stewart Maxwell (West of Scotland) (SNP): I begin by thanking the people of the West of Scotland, who have given me the opportunity to represent them over the next four years. The West of Scotland is a very diverse region. Geographically, it ranges from Eastwood on the border of Glasgow down to the Clyde coast. It covers both sides of the River Clyde, from Strathkelvin up to Argyll. It is also very diverse economically and socially. In the next four years, I hope to represent all the people of the West of Scotland equally.

I welcome many of the Executive's proposals for local government, particularly the proposal to reform the voting system for local government elections from the first-past-the-post system to the single transferable vote system. However, I remain unconvinced that the Executive will fulfil that promise. I believe that my suspicions are well founded, because four years ago the Lib Dems went into office with the promise of electoral reform. After four years, there was absolutely

nothing—certainly no reform. We have had reports, inquiries, consultations, a draft bill and plenty of kicking the issue into the long grass, but no reform. We have even had the spectacle of the Liberals voting against the introduction of STVPR, when they voted against Tricia Marwick's Proportional Representation (Local Government Elections) (Scotland) Bill in the previous session.

This time the partnership agreement states that we are to have STV. However, it also states that multimember wards will have either three or four members—there will be complete inflexibility. Where did that come from? It did not come from the McIntosh or Kerley reports—Kerley recommended that there should be up to five councillors per ward. The idea did not come from Tricia Marwick's member's bill, which contained complete flexibility and would have allowed for a maximum of eight councillors per ward. It certainly did not come from any of the submissions to the consultations that have taken place on this issue.

So where did it come from? As Sherlock Holmes famously said:

"When you have eliminated the impossible, that which remains, however improbable, must be the truth."

In this case, we are left with the truth that the only reason for choosing to have three or four members per ward is to save the jobs of as many Labour councillors as possible.

This week we have had the unedifying sight of Labour MPs and councillors uniting in an attempt to block the introduction of a fair voting system. Scottish Labour MPs have the temerity to state that they will take revenge on the Parliament if we introduce fair voting for councils. All they have proved with their comments is how antidemocratic they are and why it is vital that the Parliament takes control of its affairs.

This is not the first time that the attempted manipulation of the voting system to favour one party unfairly or to discriminate against other parties has been tried. In the context of what is contained in the partnership document, what De Valera did in Ireland may sound very familiar. De Valera increased the total number of three-member wards by 47 per cent—a move that favoured Fianna Fáil over other parties. As one commentator wrote:

"constituency revision achieved its purpose."

In his biography of De Valera, Coogan states:

"It was a blatant attempt at gerrymander which no Six County Unionist could have bettered."

The attempt by Labour and the Liberals to gerrymander the vote must be stopped. I support STVPR, but not STV without PR. The Liberals have stated that PR is one of their core principles, but they are willing to sacrifice PR by supporting

the reduction in the number of members per ward to a point where proportionality barely applies.

For me, proportional representation is not an abstract concept. It is about fairness and is supposed to be about democracy. This is a golden opportunity for us to introduce a fair voting system and to allow a democratic renewal of local government to take place. We must not let that opportunity slip away by succeeding in introducing the single transferable vote system but failing to introduce proportional representation.

11:25

Dr Jean Turner (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Ind): Thank you for allowing me to speak in today's debate. I will confine myself to health, which will not come as a surprise.

Although I welcome much that the First Minister said about improving the NHS, I am concerned that he does not understand the problems that beset Glasgow and, in particular, Stobhill—the hospital that I defended at the election. Between 2001 and 2005, Greater Glasgow NHS Board plans to have reduced the number of acute beds by 11 per cent, despite a year-on-year increase in acute admissions such that patients languish on trolleys awaiting admission to wards for three to four hours—and even eight hours or more—after their arrival at hospital. I am aware of one case in which it took 14 hours for a patient finally to be admitted. That is no way to treat people in the 21st century.

The First Minister said that he wished

"to build a Scotland ... whose institutions are open and accountable and reflect the people's priorities".—[*Official Report*, 28 May 2003; c 81.]

I am one of 129 MSPs; the Scottish Executive may ignore me, but the priorities of the thousands of people who voted for me should not be ignored. It is disgraceful that people have to lie around on trolleys. Believe it or not, more trolleys were ordered, but patients need more beds. General practitioners also need more beds so that they can fulfil their obligations to patients. I urge the Scottish Executive to set up a national bed inquiry, as happened in England when Frank Dobson was Secretary of State for Health. The result of the bed inquiry was Alan Milburn's U-turn and decision to stop the closure of smaller hospitals, which are closer and therefore more accessible to patients in their communities.

I draw the Executive's attention to the document entitled "Keeping the NHS Local—A New Direction of Travel", in which Alan Milburn realises that, in respect of hospitals, big is not always beautiful, but small is. Kidderminster provides a good example of services returning to a downgraded district hospital because the plan to send everything to Worcester did not work.

Given that there is no slack in our system and that people currently lie on trolleys bumper to bumper, I ask the Scottish Executive to halt any further loss of beds in Glasgow and to halt the demolition of six wards at Stobhill that is planned to take place before November this year. That project should be cancelled immediately, until we know how many beds we need. Waiting times will not improve if we do not have the right number of beds. Common sense and concern for the well-being of patients who suffer the indignity and discomfort of lying on trolleys in corridors and accident and emergency units dictate that we should build more in-patient wards and provide more beds at Stobhill instead of demolishing wards. Patients deserve proper beds now—they cannot and should not have to wait for a much-needed independent Scottish national bed inquiry, important though that is.

The Stobhill campaign has tried to highlight the disastrous effect of what the loss of Stobhill's general hospital status in favour of a stand-alone ambulatory care and diagnostic unit—a large out-patient department without in-patient beds—will mean to the community that it serves. Although the intention is to perform day surgery at Stobhill, it is not intended that any back-up services will be provided on site. That is extremely risky.

The work that Stobhill hospital does will be split between Glasgow royal infirmary and Gartnavel hospital. That means that—to mention only two departments—1,000 cardiac or coronary care patients per year will be added to the 50,000 or 60,000 casualties per year who must be dealt with at other hospitals. In addition, people from a large part of my constituency will have to travel through the Clyde tunnel to the accident and emergency unit at the southern general hospital because there will be only two A and E units in Glasgow—one north-east, and the other south-west, of the Clyde. Given the traffic congestion that exists today, lives will be put at risk, if not lost.

I hope that the Executive's proposed NHS reform bill will, as has been stated, provide a new structure for public involvement, ensuring that local health services match the needs of individuals and of communities. That is a commendable goal and I urge the Executive, in order to achieve it, to listen to what the electorate said on 1 May. It is sad that I had to become an MSP to be heard in Parliament, but I hope that the Executive is listening because patients need action now.

11:30

Mr David Davidson (North East Scotland) (Con): I intend to spend only a short time on the health proposals, which is probably all that is needed, given the content of what we heard from the First Minister yesterday. Yesterday we heard

the good news that there will be reform of the public services, which the First Minister talked about. The bad news was that we did not see evidence of real intent to deal with the changes that are required to improve health care in Scotland. It is very much business as usual—we are still stuck with the central control freakery of the Executive. Nothing seems to have changed and, with the proposed abolition of the hospital and primary care trusts, we see a reinforcement of central control. The line of command is now shorter and the last thing that the Scottish people, particularly patients, need is even more central control.

Part of the agreement is that there will be only 12 priorities in health per year. When did the politicians decide that they know what the priorities should be? They have not got a clue. The truth is that the professionals who work in all aspects of health care and the patients should decide where the urgency lies. A few weeks ago, a clinician said to me, "The most important case is the one that presents next to me in my surgery." That is the sort of control that we need in the health service.

Yesterday, the First Minister talked about empowerment of the front-line staff in the health service. Did he mean that he was going to give health professionals more say in the running of the NHS and take politicians out of its day-to-day running? I suspect not. In a recent interview, the First Minister talked about GPs' acquiring the most appropriate treatment for the patient, regardless of where it comes from. Does he really mean that we are going to see a return to the successful fund holding by GPs? Is he going to buy into the foundation hospital movement that obviously offers such a lot to Scotland?

The Conservatives have always wanted to put the patient at the centre, which comes down to patients having real access to health care, regardless of where they live. We got the guarantee on waiting times, which was supposed to be fantastic, but I have in front of me the latest figures that the health service has published on behalf of the Executive. Since the Conservative Government left office in 1997, the median out-patient waiting time has increased by 22 days, which is just over three weeks. Since the Parliament was established—I say this just in case the Liberal Democrats think that they can slide out and blame the Labour party—those waiting times have increased by nine days. That hardly represents success after four years. There has been an adjustment of the figures for the total number of people on waiting lists; the figure is only 3,000 more than it was in 1997. However, since the Parliament was established and the coalition Government started its first term, the total number of people on waiting lists has increased by 17,500. Is that success after four years?

I wonder whether one of the ministers might tell us later how they will deliver all the extra access by the end of this year and by the end of 2005, given all the figures that have been quoted. There is no evidence that the Executive knows how to go about that.

Jack McConnell said yesterday that postcode prescribing would be abolished. That is fine, but issues other than prescribing relate to postcodes. Whether patients get access to many services depends on where they live. We supported free personal care, but each council seems to have a different interpretation of who qualifies for it—I thought that it was a national scheme. Each council seems to have projected the wrong numbers for those who are likely to get it and the result is that there will be rationing. I have evidence, which I will present to members on another occasion, of four councils that genuinely query the Executive's ability to understand what it needs to do to deliver something for which the Parliament asked.

Comments were made yesterday about capacity in the health service. I say to Dr Turner that that is not just about the number of beds; it is also about the people who deliver health care. What are we doing to make better use of the professionals? What are we doing on the Liberal Democrats' big success in getting a commitment to free dental checks? If we do not have the dentists, how will we get the dental checks done? Are we to assume that, because the Liberals say that they want free dental checks, the Labour Party will have to deliver the dentists to fulfil its little promise? I am beginning to wonder whether there is any joined-up thinking and planning at all from the coalition, which is no different from the last time around.

Many of the problems with staffing levels throughout the country arise out of the trusts' and boards' inability to retain staff. We have to make working in the health service attractive to people and we have to ensure that every health professional has access to continuing professional development. GPs, dentists, nurses and so on have mentioned problems with that.

If we are to have a health service that means something in the next four years, I want to see evidence from the First Minister and his team that mental health will really come to the fore. One person in four in Scotland will suffer from a mental health problem at some time in his or her life. I want to see hard evidence from the Executive that it means business. To date, the Executive has laid out nothing but a series of ambitions that do not even match the ambitions of the people of Scotland.

11:37

Chris Ballance (South of Scotland) (Green): I will address the transport commitments in the partnership agreement, many of which we welcome. It is clear that the election of seven Greens has already had an effect on the partnership programme, but we will be watching closely to ensure that our public transport network does not continue to degenerate. We are concerned that there is no commitment whatever even to stabilise road-traffic growth, let alone reduce it.

Transport impacts on the environment and on social inclusion, because mobility and exclusion go hand in hand. It impacts on health, because pollution causes illness. Road pollution doubles the risk of childhood asthma, while walking and cycling have benefits. Transport impacts on communities, and all land-use planning decisions have transport implications. We therefore welcome the acknowledgement that transport is a key policy area in its own right.

We welcome the decision to commit two thirds of the transport budget to public transport, which will be to the benefit of everyone. When, however, will the rail improvements happen? Are they costed, and what are their start and completion dates? The Aberdeen peripheral road was costed fully for each year of expenditure before planning permission for it had been granted. Has the public transport investment been similarly costed?

Where is the commitment to reduce road traffic? Wendy Alexander at least promised to stabilise road traffic levels at 2001 levels. Has the Executive quietly abandoned that promise? Why does it not appear in the agreement? For my region—the South of Scotland—the Executive has announced a major upgrade of the A75 and A77 to the port of Cairnryan for the Cairnryan to Belfast link. Some £44 million has been committed to those roads, but not one penny has been committed to provide rail links to the new port. While road building continues apace, Cairnryan—Scotland's most important port and one of the biggest ports in the UK—will be the only major port in the UK to have no capacity for rail freight. There are many fine words in the partnership agreement, but that is the practice. We want a commitment to change over the next four years.

Half of all car journeys in Scotland are for distances of less than 2 miles. Any plan to reduce pollution must address that point, but we see nothing in the partnership agreement that does so directly. Does the minister favour and support congestion charging? It has been an extraordinary success in London and has gained near-universal approval despite the cries of horror in advance. Will the rail franchise go to the most passenger-friendly bidder, or to the cheapest? We want commitments on such issues.

The *Sunday Herald* has worked out that the commitment to plant trees as a carbon sink for new road building will entail the planting of 1.5 million trees. Has the minister contacted Reforesting Scotland for advice? Has he ordered the saplings of his green credentials?

11:41

Karen Whitefield (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab): I am pleased to speak in today's debate, because the programme for government sets out a bold, decisive and responsive plan of action for Parliament over the next four years. The policies in the programme respond to the real needs, concerns and aspirations of the people of Scotland. They will help to create jobs; help in the fight to make our communities safer and better places to live; help to improve public services; and help in the delivery of a transport system that is fit for the 21st century. Countless people in Airdrie and Shotts raised those issues with me during the election campaign. The issues are common to communities throughout Scotland and I am pleased that they are the very issues on which the Labour party's manifesto, and now the programme for government, have focused.

I am pleased that the First Minister has made tackling crime and antisocial behaviour one of the key priorities for the Scottish Executive over the next four years, and I am especially pleased that he is determined that legislation on the issue will be among the first to be passed during this session of Parliament. I can say honestly that no other issue was raised more often during the election campaign than crime and antisocial behaviour in our communities. I am sure that many in the chamber will have often been told despairingly by people of the misery that is being caused by a small number of people in their communities. People in too many of our communities feel helpless to respond to the antisocial and criminal behaviour of the few. Rightly or wrongly, those people believe that the police are either unwilling or unable to deal with the problems. That must change: we must enable decent people, who are the vast majority, to regain ownership of their communities. Antisocial behaviour is not only an attack on the lives of individual victims, but on the social capital of our communities. It erodes communities and leads to isolation and powerlessness. That is why I strongly support the Scottish Executive's plans to deal swiftly and effectively with those who commit crime and to secure a criminal justice system that fully supports victims and witnesses.

Those who wish to play an active and positive role in communities must be given the support and the resources to do so. I am confident that Margaret Curran and Cathy Jamieson will ensure

that our communities are given support to deal with antisocial behaviour. I know that our Minister for Justice will work with her ministerial colleagues to deliver positive alternatives to crime and antisocial behaviour for our young people.

I am pleased that the theme of environmental justice runs through the Executive's programme. In particular, I welcome the Executive's commitment to consider properly the environmental impacts of all new strategies, programmes and plans that are developed by the public sector, by legislating to introduce strategic environmental assessments. I also welcome the Executive's commitment to ensure that the voices of communities are listened to more effectively during the planning process. That has been vital to people in my communities—particularly in Greengairs and Morningside, where people's views on opencast mining and landfill have been rejected time and again. If we are to retain confidence in our planning system, individual members of communities must feel that they can engage properly in the planning system.

It will come as no surprise to MSPs who were in the previous Parliament that I welcome in particular the partnership agreement's recommitment to the opening of the Airdrie to Bathgate rail line. I have campaigned since my arrival in Parliament in 1999 for the reopening of that line and I will continue to press the Executive until my constituents are able to board in Airdrie a train that is bound for Edinburgh.

Fiona Hyslop (Lothians) (SNP): I, too, am delighted by the prospect of the Bathgate to Airdrie line. However, so that not only the people of Lanarkshire, but the people of West Lothian can benefit from that line, will the member join me in campaigning to ensure that there will be an additional stop in Armadale at least, but perhaps elsewhere, too?

Karen Whitefield: I am glad about the member's support for the line, but it would be better if she joined my colleagues Bristow Muldoon and Mary Mulligan, who have campaigned tirelessly for the reopening of the service. It would be better if she did not scaremonger and suggest to people in West Lothian—as she has done—that the line will never open.

On transport more generally, I welcome the Executive's commitment to invest £1 billion a year by 2006, with more than two thirds of that money being spent on public transport. That is a serious commitment on the part of the Executive to improving Scotland's transport infrastructure and to offering alternatives to travel by car. Crucially, the commitment is about offering attractive alternatives and not about punishing motorists. I am pleased that the Scottish Executive has

committed the resources that are required to upgrade the M8 after many years of neglect by the Tory Government. The Tories spoke about upgrading for 18 years, but did not do it.

Yesterday's statement by the First Minister represented the beginning of a bold and progressive programme for Parliament—a programme that I believe will have a direct and positive impact on the lives of my constituents and the wider population of Scotland. We must do more than talk; we must now deliver. I am sure that that is exactly what this Executive will do.

11:47

Mike Rumbles (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD): The programme that the First Minister outlined yesterday is indeed an ambitious and radical agenda for Parliament. I was taken by Duncan McNeil's speech and pleased that he is delighted by the partnership agreement, as are other Labour MSPs. I can assure him that Liberal Democrat MSPs are equally delighted with it. Is it not satisfying, and a sign of a successful negotiation, that both sides are equally delighted?

The First Minister said yesterday, and the Deputy First Minister has repeated today, that nothing is more important to the Executive than growing the Scottish economy to generate more wealth to fund and resource excellence in our public services. That is why I am particularly pleased that Jim Wallace has been appointed as Minister for Enterprise and Lifelong Learning, to take charge of the enterprise agenda.

The second most important development in the Scottish Parliament as far as the economy is concerned is the creation of a minister who has sole responsibility for transport. Nicol Stephen is now in a prime position to deliver the effective and reliable transport system that is needed throughout the country. I look forward to the delivery of the western peripheral route round Aberdeen, to progress on the Borders railway and to a successful outcome to the negotiations to abolish the discredited toll regime on the Skye bridge.

Tommy Sheridan: Will the member give way?

Mike Rumbles: In a moment, but I want to make progress first.

In health care, the Scottish Executive's programme will deliver real change. I was astounded when I listened to David Davidson talking about health issues; he has obviously not even read the partnership agreement. The NHS reform bill, which will be introduced before the summer recess, will abolish hospital trusts, end the unnecessary duplication of effort between trusts and health boards and create new

community health partnerships to strengthen local involvement in the provision of services—that is the point. A specific range of health measures was published by the Executive in "A Partnership for a Better Scotland". Those measures include: free eye and dental checks; routine issuing of digital hearing aids, when they are the most clinically effective option for patients; the end of postcode prescribing for approved drugs; and a review of prescription charges for people who have chronic health conditions. Those are just some of the many important issues on which I and others members have been campaigning for the past four years. I am delighted that the changes will be implemented by the Executive.

In addition, the fact that we simply do not train enough dentists in Scotland has at last been recognised. The commitment to establish an outreach training centre in Aberdeen and to consult on the creation of a full dental school there is a major step forward. There are so many positive commitments from the Executive in health that it is literally impossible in such a short time to highlight them all.

I want to spend some time focusing on the Executive's commitment to reform and renew local democracy. I refer, of course, to the commitment to introduce—

Tommy Sheridan: I had to ask at least one of the Liberal speakers today about the fact that they are so happy with the partnership agreement, because there is in it not one single mention of reform of the council tax. Is their position that they now accept the council tax?

Mike Rumbles: Tommy Sheridan has not read the document, because there is mention of the council tax, which I will come to in a moment.

On reform and renewal of local democracy, I refer—of course—to the commitment to introduce a local governance bill before the year is out. I welcome the fact that the coalition is clear in its commitment to introduce, in time for the next local government elections in 2007, the proportional single transferable vote system of election. As for the Tories, I notice that Mary Scanlon seems now to be in favour of proportional representation. What a conversion!

Voting reform is an enabling measure that will, in my opinion, transform the way in which local services are delivered throughout Scotland. That long-overdue reform will mean that local councillors are at all times really responsive to the needs of their electors. The system will restore power to the voter, it will reinvigorate local democracy and it will ensure that every single person's vote counts equally.

Reform of the voting system—I say this to Tommy Sheridan—coupled with the commitment

to review local government finance means that we will indeed have in Scotland a local government system that is fit for the 21st century. Not only will we review the way in which the money is dispersed, we will review the way in which it is collected.

Tommy Sheridan: Oh!

Mike Rumbles: Tommy Sheridan would have recognised that if he had read the document.

In conclusion, those reforms alone are enough for me to support the Scottish Executive in the delivery of its programme over the period of this Parliament. Of course, many more initiatives and plans that deserve our full support are packed into the Executive's programme. I have no hesitation whatever in backing the Executive's programme and I am sure that every one of my Liberal Democrat colleagues will be as enthusiastic as I am about it.

11:52

Mr Rob Gibson (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): The success of this Parliament will, in the minds of the voters who I was elected to represent, be measured by whether we reverse the depopulation that blights much of the Highlands and Islands today. We lose most of our youngest and brightest people, despite the huge sustainable resources that the area contains. The First Minister acknowledged last year that emigration is a blight. Just how much of a blight is revealed in the 2001 census: Caithness lost 4.5 per cent of its people in 10 years; Sutherland lost 0.5 per cent; Lochaber lost nearly 3 per cent; Orkney lost 2 per cent; Shetland lost 2.4 per cent; Argyll lost 3.3 per cent; and the Western Isles lost more than 7 per cent. The true extent is disguised by the arrival of well-off retirees, who are far less economically active.

The loss from my area of major employers—such as the Nigg oil rig fabricators and the tweed maker Hunters of Brora Ltd—has forced economically active people to leave. That situation has to be reversed. Beyond Inverness, the inner Moray firth and Skye, that is the prime challenge, because a growing population will grow our economy. During the election campaign, Jack McConnell promised to focus on our needs, and noted that there is a particular disengagement between the Highlands and Islands and the Scottish Parliament. I disagree with the First Minister: that disengagement is from the Executive, which refuses to see the need for more powers for the Parliament to build our future.

Immigration could help—asylum seekers with skills could fill many jobs, but success will be measured when the children of families who are raised in the Highlands and Islands can find work

there. Not unreasonably, people want Government to offer equal opportunities for their children to have a choice to work where they were raised. Compare that picture with the lives of families in rural Norway or Finland, or in the west of Ireland, whose Governments put them at the heart of those small independent European nations. They are culturally confident, ecologically diverse and have buoyant economies and local democratic powers that are far better than we experience here.

Fundamental to rebuilding population is the availability of land for affordable housing. How often do youngsters seek in vain for a house site in the crofting communities or a building plot in some small town? Landlords, planning laws and water authorities are the major problems that they face. Is the only alternative for the enterprising to leave?

The partnership agreement claims that the national planning framework will “support area regeneration”, and that enhanced powers of the Scottish land fund will

“assist the purchase of land for community activity.”

It also states that rural and remote communities will

“have their distinct needs reflected across the range of government policy and initiatives.”

I issue this challenge, and will follow it up in the next four years: the coalition should bite the bullet and free up land for affordable housing. Will the coalition beef up compulsory purchase powers for local authorities and communities to buy land at prices that local residents and housing associations can meet? In the past four years the Executive has, in case it upset a few landowners, failed to give that matter real priority.

What about the people? If the First Minister's programme is to mean anything, it must meet people's needs, but the partnership agreement skates over the urgent need to find housing land and to make it available. Does the coalition really care that the lifeblood that is our young and active citizens is draining from huge areas of Scotland? With boundless green energy potential and acres of underused land, the Government must support repopulation of the most endangered species in the north of Scotland, and let people build the modern homes that they need in order to kick-start the economy there once again.

11:57

Rosie Kane (Glasgow) (SSP): This is my first speech as an MSP, not my maiden speech. “Maiden speech” implies losing some sort of verbal virginity, but I lost that a long time ago, on the subject that I am going to refer to today.

Yesterday, the First Minister talked about best value and environmental justice, both of which are to be welcomed. I am sure that many of us, in particular on this side of the chamber, were delighted to hear that, but it is difficult to understand how he is going to deliver best value and environmental justice and condone the construction of the M74 northern extension. The fact is that he cannot tell us that we are going to get environmental justice by ploughing 110,000 cars per day through urban Glasgow. He cannot tell us that we are getting best value when he is going to spend possibly £500 million on the construction of that monstrosity.

David McLetchie spoke earlier about the spiralling cost of the Scottish Parliament. We are all worried about spiralling costs. I am sorry that David McLetchie is not here, but I wonder if his colleagues would let him know that the road was initially costed at £250 million, then it was cut back to a bargain-basement price of £174 million, and we hear this year that it is going to be £500 million.

I am not surprised that it will cost £500 million, because there is underground toxic waste where they intend to build the road, and to deal with it will cost a pretty penny. To build a motorway high they must dig deep, which will throw up chromium, arsenic and lime that have been buried for 100 years. Labour might know about that, because Keir Hardie campaigned against the burial of that waste in the first place. Those are the environmental justice issues that concern me.

The road is an amazing exhibit of environmental injustice. Its route goes through Shettleston constituency, which is about the poorest constituency in the United Kingdom. It is known as the sick old man of Britain, and the last thing that it needs is 110,000 cars per day ploughed through it.

Had I stood here in the mid-1990s and made this statement, David McLetchie and the Conservative party would have been the only people who would have shouted me down and perhaps heckled me. The fact of the matter is that everybody in here would have applauded, because all the other parties opposed the construction of the M74, but they have since picked up the mantle and the mantra of big business and now they support it.

My concerns are about the people along the route, the wider community and the planet. People argue that the extension will alleviate local road difficulties in Rutherglen—I think that Janis Hughes said that last week. Although it might do so initially, we should not think that the cars will all have gone home—they will simply have been displaced. We must remember that the motorway will run parallel to the main street in Rutherglen. Although initially the people in that community

might not see or feel the pollution, believe you me, it will still be there and will get worse.

The other argument in favour of the M74 northern extension is economic. However, the M77 and M8 pass through Easterhouse and Pollok, which are in social inclusion partnerships because they are skint. Those areas do not have a good economy and the people along those routes are suffering. As Tommy Sheridan said earlier, the motorways did not benefit those people one iota. We cannot use the economic argument in favour of the M74 extension, which does not represent environmental justice.

I am sure that the Conservative party will back up the point that the economic argument is lame. In the mid-1990s, Mrs Thatcher, who opposed the environmental movement, commissioned a report from the Standing Advisory Committee on Trunk Road Assessment, which found that the construction of motorways gets more people into cars. There are a number of reasons for that. I would need 20 minutes to tell members about them, but I am sure that members can find them out for themselves.

The partnership agreement does not promise anything for the environment or for good value. It does not even have the bottle to mention the M74 extension, although we all know that the proposal is in there, underneath the veils. The people who live along the proposed route deserve better and the Parliament should deliver better. If the Parliament were to hold a public inquiry on the issue, some consultation might take place. The road was conceived in 1965, or perhaps before. I was also conceived around that time and, like all members, I have learned a lot in my life. The least that we can do is to revisit the issue, which is an old one. The extension does not belong in the year 2003 and should not be built along the proposed route.

I think the partnership agreement states that something must be done about light pollution. The extension would be 50ft high and would be lit 24 hours a day in what is a built-up area. In opposition at Westminster, the Labour party opposed motorway construction and wanted a moratorium on it. I ask that party: please go back to the original position; please deliver for the people of Glasgow; please deliver environmental justice; please deliver best value; and please use the money for something else.

12:03

Marlyn Glen (North East Scotland) (Lab): I welcome the programme for Government, particularly the emphasis that is to be placed in the next four years on policies for young people. I look forward to the debate on that subject next week. I

will direct my remarks to the education priorities and will link them with social justice matters, as those issues cannot be separated.

The agreement talks of excellence in schools, which is a concept that I applaud and one that I tried to encourage throughout my long teaching career. Academic excellence is accepted as the usual aim of schools, but it is far from the only strand of excellence in our education system. We must celebrate achievement in all areas of school life, including attendance, behaviour and many more. To take extreme situations as examples, for an attendance officer, excellence is a perpetual school refuser or truant at long last turning up at school, or, for a behaviour support teacher, excellence is a challenging pupil eventually settling to a small piece of work.

“Excellent,” should also be the message that we give to education staff for a difficult job well done. People, whether pupils or staff, respond to praise and the one thing that makes an appreciable difference to education overall is the morale of the staff who are involved. The staff know all about positive discipline and the incontrovertible fact that expectations are self-fulfilling. If we want good results, we must show that we expect good results and are prepared to supply the support that is required to achieve them. People live up—or down—to expectations and education professionals look to the Parliament for a positive lead in that respect.

As I taught in one of the pilot new community schools, I have recent, first-hand experience of how a flagship policy works on the ground. Like others who have recently left the classroom or who will leave soon, I hope that good use can be made of our invaluable experience, but I have one caveat. Bolt-on solutions, whether they are new community school links or interventionist strategies from the centre, do not in themselves make fundamental changes to education establishments, particularly if they prove to be short term or temporary. To make extras effective in the long run, they must be fully integrated and accepted into the running of a school. They need to become part of the establishment and not just a set of hit-and-run innovations that leave the participants reeling from the impact and so shellshocked that they return to past practices without accepting even the best innovations.

Advice about the importance of consistency is always given to teachers and, yesterday, the First Minister, who is a former teacher, mentioned the importance of consistency in sentencing. We also need a consistent general approach to young people. Social inclusion means that teachers in schools must deal with pupils who have social, emotional and behavioural difficulties. Those pupils are frequently the same young people who

are the targets of the new justice initiatives, such as the antisocial behaviour orders for under-16s and electronic tagging.

The First Minister spoke about the need to redress the balance in our neighbourhoods. I suggest that a school should be seen as a neighbourhood in itself, as well as being part of its community. We need to redress the balance in schools and classrooms so that there is no tolerance of antisocial behaviour and so that all our schools become decent local environments. I eagerly await the details of how we might unlock the potential of all our children, thereby securing the highest standards for and from every child.

12:06

Campbell Martin (West of Scotland) (SNP): Whether members are new or re-elected—I was going to say old, but I am probably older than some of the old members, so I will not—surely the least that we can bring to the chamber is the hope that we can contribute to building a better Scotland for the people of Scotland. However, having read the partnership agreement and listened to the speeches from some of the unionist members, there is little that gives me hope that the Parliament will deliver a better life for the people of Scotland.

It is six years since Tony and Cherie swept into Downing Street with the background of all the wee Labour lackeys with their unionist flags. It is six years since Tony Blair promised us that things could “only get better.” However, for far too many people in Scotland, things have not got better; they have got worse. We have lived through six years of the Labour reality in Scotland, which for too many people means long-term unemployment. The Labour reality means that, in Scotland, one in three children and one in four pensioners still live in poverty. That is a disgrace, but the partnership agreement document offers little hope that the situation will change.

To use an in-phrase, the document is not a road-map to a better, more prosperous Scotland; it simply says what the Labour party and the Lib Dems think that they have to say to get away with another four years in power.

On the economy, the document states:

“We will use the powers of the Scottish Parliament to create the conditions for higher growth.”

Members can use the powers of the Parliament until their wee unionist hearts are content, but if they do not have powers over macroeconomic policy, taxation, social security and benefits and pensions, they will not be able to give Scotland an economic advantage and deliver a better life for the people of Scotland. If the Executive does not have the full normal powers that come with

independence, it will continue to fail the people of Scotland. The Executive should be ashamed of that.

The document states:

"We will work with the UK Government to maximise the conditions for economic growth in Scotland."

I say to the unionist members that if they think for a minute that Her Majesty's Government in London will prioritise chilly jocko land over the south-east of England, they are probably gullible enough to believe that the Barnett formula is a good thing and that it is not designed to cut public spending in Scotland.

The document says:

"We will support ... our key manufacturing industries, such as aerospace".

Some members might have forgotten and some might never have known a fact that some of us who worked in the aerospace industry well remember: that it was a Labour Government that oversaw the ending of aircraft manufacture in Scotland. It was Labour ministers who stood back and let Jetstream Aircraft in Prestwick go down the pan. That has not been forgotten in Ayrshire and it should not be forgotten in the chamber. Although the partnership agreement pledges to work with key industries such as the aerospace industry, 900 Aerostructures workers in Prestwick face an uncertain future. They might think that, given the record of this Government, that pledge is nothing more than hypocrisy.

I am proud to have grown up in Ardrossan in Ayrshire. However, like many towns across Scotland, Ardrossan does not have its troubles to seek. Some friends with whom I went to school have not worked for 20 years. Their children have grown up not knowing their mum or dad ever to have had a job and they are now moving into the family business of unemployment.

I am proud to have grown up in Ardrossan and am delighted to represent the area as part of the West of Scotland region. I am also glad that I do not have to sell the partnership agreement to the people with whom I grew up, because I could not look them in the eye and tell them that the policies in the document will provide a better life for them—they will not. It is dishonest of the Liberal Democrats and the Labour party to say that they will.

As long as we are prepared to tolerate having a limited Parliament with limited powers, we limit what we can do for the people of Scotland. Therefore, unfortunately, we will continue to disappoint them.

There has been a lot of talk of consensus and of political parties working together, so let me say something to the unionist members in the

chamber: I am prepared to work with them just as soon as they get off their knees and start fighting for Scotland.

12:12

Mr Brian Monteith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I can testify that I am standing.

A recent press article said:

"governments cannot create jobs, they can only foster the conditions in which businesses generate employment. Unfortunately, it remains an article of faith for many in the party"

—that is, the Labour party—

"that expanding central and local government spending can create real, lasting jobs.

One of the principal tasks over the next few years will be to challenge the assumption that bigger government is better - in reality, the Scottish Executive is an expensive, and growing overhead, which consumes money which could be more productively used elsewhere.

Too often we fiddle with micro-incentives and interventions in an attempt to steer business growth. It's time now to show some humility and try to learn from successful modern Scottish businesses: for instance, instead of preaching about modernising government why don't we learn from the oil and gas industry or the financial services sector, both of whom went through massive restructuring, in the Eighties and Nineties respectively, and are now leaner and more innovative. The alternative would be to accept we must build additional office space at Victoria Quay - what an admission of defeat that would be. And we need to understand that legislation is not free - all too often it inflicts unnecessary additional costs on the productive sectors of the economy.

Let us be more wary about boasting that the parliament has delivered because it has passed 65 bills, and more scrupulous about assessing fully the real costs of regulation."

Those are the words, not of some rabid, right-wing ideologue—such as some people might consider me to be—or a best-selling, free-market economist, but of John McTernan, in this week's *Scotland on Sunday*. Interestingly, John McTernan was the author of Labour's manifesto in 1999.

John McTernan is not alone in drawing attention to the threat of having too large a public sector. I quote:

"Scotland has the largest state sector in western Europe. It also has the worst health, worst reading and writing standards in S2 classes and the weakest economy. Some day, the electorate will figure out that those facts are related."

Those are the words of former Labour councillor and SNP candidate, George Kerevan, writing in *The Scotsman*—not a paper that is a friend of the Tories.

The point that those writers make is simple: to have good public services that relieve poverty and widen opportunity—I say to Mr Sheridan that Tories use the word "poverty"—

Tommy Sheridan: That is because they create it.

Mr Monteith: No. Everybody starts poor.

To have such services we must have a smaller state sector. We must reduce the overheads that the wealth-creating sector bears so that it is able to fund better health care, education and policing. Sadly, the Government's programme will increase the burden on Scottish business through rising costs and further costly intervention.

I noticed earlier that the Minister for Finance and Public Services was keen to bandy about the name of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development to make a point during an intervention. I recommend to him an OECD report that showed that to increase taxes damages economic growth. The study estimated that, for every increase of 1 per cent in the tax burden, there would be a reduction in gross domestic product of 0.7 per cent. By encouraging growth, lower taxes can also create the revenues to fund the public expenditure that we wish. A further study, by PricewaterhouseCoopers, also found that higher Government borrowing reduces economic growth, which closes that escape hatch for Gordon Brown and the Executive, which welcomes his largesse from higher taxation.

Scotland needs a growing, innovative, dynamic economy. The Government's programme will not deliver that; it will inhibit it. Without real cuts to business rates and the removal of costly regulations, the poor will get poorer under the socialist Government. *Toujours la même*—always the same.

12:17

Iain Smith (North East Fife) (LD): If the SNP has a new policy of being positive, I hate to think what it will be like if it starts to be negative again, because it has certainly not been positive during the debate.

Unlike the SNP, I welcome "A Partnership for a Better Scotland". It is a good programme. It will deliver for Scotland the improvements to our public services that we all require. I welcome the commitments in the agreement to, for example, more nurses, doctors and other health staff. I welcome the commitment to further measures to prevent ill health. I welcome the commitments to employ more teachers and to more flexibility in the curriculum for ages three to six, more vocational courses for 14 to 16-year-olds and investment in further and higher education to improve Scotland's skills base. I welcome the commitments to our rural communities, including the greater role that will be given to our fishermen in the management of our coastal waters and the measures to protect our rural community pharmacies and local post

offices. I also welcome the green thread that runs throughout the agreement, including investment in public transport and action on recycling and renewable energy. Of course, I also welcome the commitment to proportional representation for local government.

Those commitments reflect the Liberal Democrats' manifesto priorities at the Scottish Parliament elections. However, the programme also reflects the pledges that I made in my local campaign in North East Fife. For example, on public safety, I pledged that we should have more police in our communities and 20mph zones outside our schools. The partnership agreement will deliver more police in our communities and 20mph zones outside more schools.

I also pledged free eye and dental checks. The partnership agreement will deliver those. I pledged progress on the proposed new hospital and health centre for St Andrews. The partnership agreement contains an expanded commitment to develop community health services and the role of community hospitals. The north-east Fife local health care co-operative has played a central role in developing the plans for the new community hospital and health centre for St Andrews. The new community health partnerships, which will develop the successful partnerships and LHCCs, will help to build on that success. However, we cannot wait for the reform of the national health service. We must start to build that hospital now, and I am confident that the Executive will support that.

I also pledged a new secondary school for north Fife. The partnership agreement will deliver the largest-ever school building programme in Scotland's history. A new north Fife secondary school and a redeveloped Madras College in St Andrews must be part of that programme.

I am taking the opportunity to invite my colleague Euan Robson, the new Deputy Minister for Education and Young People, to come to North East Fife and St Andrews to see the intolerable conditions under which the staff and pupils of Madras College struggle with the modern curriculum. Madras College is one of Scotland's largest secondary schools. It is on two sites that are some distance apart, which causes logistical problems for the school's management. Both sets of buildings are in urgent need of major renovation and modernisation. More than half of the pupils are based in north Fife and have to be bussed a considerable distance to St Andrews, with the associated problems that that brings.

The case for redeveloping Madras College into a new school in north Fife is overwhelming. To date, Fife Council has failed to face up to its responsibility to provide the children of north Fife and St Andrews with schools that are fit to provide

21st century education. I assure members and my constituents that my Liberal Democrat colleagues on Fife Council will ensure that the new minority administration in Fife faces up to its responsibilities and I, in this Parliament, will do all that I can to ensure that North East Fife benefits from the record investment in new schools by getting that new school for north Fife.

12:21

Dennis Canavan (Falkirk West): I welcome the Executive's attempt to democratise local government with the introduction of the single transferable voting system. Jack McConnell and his Labour colleagues have already incurred the wrath of some of their own backwoodsmen who want to retain the status quo, including Labour MPs and councillors. Of course, they have a vested interest in retaining the status quo, but the interests of democracy are far more important than the interests of any political party.

Critics of PR claim that it will produce hung councils where no party has an overall majority and there will have to be some form of power sharing. So what? Power sharing can be constructive and is certainly preferable to one party being in sole power indefinitely on a minority vote.

In the Parliament, no party has an overall majority and the Executive is a form of power sharing. I realise that that causes problems for some Labour members, but it can have benefits. For example, if the Labour party had had an overall majority in the previous parliamentary session, I do not think we would have seen the reintroduction of student grants, the abolition of up-front tuition fees and the introduction of free care for the elderly. In the new session, I hope that the composition of the Parliament will also help to deliver better policies and stop some of the extreme proposals emanating from the new Labour zealots.

Mr Monteith: Does the member not accept that the evidence of proportional representation from many countries shows that parties are in power indefinitely? They are the minority parties that decide with which of the larger majorities they will form coalitions.

Dennis Canavan: At the end of the day it is up to the people to decide on the respective proportions of support for the various political parties. I do not believe that any system is perfect in every respect, but the worst of all systems is the first-past-the-post system.

For example, youth crime is a problem, especially in some of our most deprived areas, but it is simplistic nonsense to suggest that young people's behaviour will magically improve if we

throw their parents into jail. That is the kind of inane suggestion that used to earn standing ovations from the hang-'em-and-flog-'em brigade at Tory party conferences. I hope that the Parliament will not stoop to such reactionary nonsense, but will instead take effective action to improve the children's hearings system and encourage more parental responsibility, in order to help stamp out the kind of criminal behaviour that is making life a misery for so many law-abiding citizens.

I also hope that we will take effective action to improve standards in our schools. Ministers already have powers to send in inspectors and to intervene in certain cases, so I am concerned to read reports about sending in so-called hit squads to take over failing schools. Where did that idea come from? Shortly before the recent election the Minister for Education and Young People was reported to have granted an audience to the Westminster MP for Falkirk West to discuss alleged failings in local schools. Following that meeting, *The Scotsman* reported that the Scottish Executive was going to send troubleshooters into Falkirk, and Eric Joyce MP publicly called for the resignations of the chief executive and the director of education for Falkirk Council. That kind of ill-informed and irresponsible headline grabbing is bound to have an adverse effect on the morale of education officials and teachers. I suggest to the Executive that if meetings with parliamentarians on devolved matters are to be arranged, it should be members of this Parliament who are invited, rather than any Westminster MP, especially one with a track record of making cowardly attacks on education employees.

We all know that there are some schools that are not performing as well as they should, but the Scottish Executive should consider a whole range of measures, including more in-service training opportunities for teachers, and the employment of more teachers in order to reduce class sizes so that educational opportunities for children in our schools are improved.

There is no easy, instant answer to some of the problems facing us over the next four years. Legislation may help, but legislation alone cannot solve all of those problems, and I hope that the Parliament's legislative programme will be backed up by Executive action to ensure the provision of adequate resources to meet the challenges ahead.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Trish Godman): I appreciate that some members have been sitting there all morning and have not been called, but the debate will continue this afternoon after First Minister's question time.

Business Motion

12:28

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Trish Godman): The next item of business is consideration of business motion S2M-71, in the name of Patricia Ferguson, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, setting out the new business programme.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees the following programme of business—

Wednesday 4 June 2003

2:30 pm Time for Reflection
 followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions
 followed by Stage 1 Debate on the Education
 (School Meals) (Scotland) Bill
 followed by Financial resolution in respect of the
 Education (School Meals) (Scotland)
 Bill
 followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions
 5:00 pm Decision Time
 followed by Members' Business

Thursday 5 June 2003

9:30 am Executive Debate on Young People
 followed by Business Motion
 2:30 pm Question Time
 3:10 pm First Minister's Question Time
 3:30 pm Continuation of Executive Debate on
 Young People
 followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions
 5:00 pm Decision Time
 followed by Members' Business

Wednesday 11 June 2003

2.30pm Time for Reflection
 followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions
 followed by Stages 2 and 3 of the Education
 (School Meals) (Scotland) Bill
 followed by Final Stage of the Robin Rigg
 Offshore Wind Farm (Navigation and
 Fishing) (Scotland) Bill
 followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions
 5:00 pm Decision Time
 followed by Members' Business

Thursday 12 June 2003

9:30 am Scottish National Party Business
 followed by Business Motion
 2:30 pm Question Time
 3:10 pm First Minister's Question Time

3:30 pm

Executive Business

followed by

Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5:00 pm

Decision Time

followed by
*Ferguson.]*Members' Business.—[*Patricia*

Motion agreed to.

12:29

Meeting suspended until 14:30.

14:30

On resuming—

Question Time

SCOTTISH EXECUTIVE

Depleted Uranium Weapons Testing (Protests)

1. Ms Rosemary Byrne (South of Scotland) (SSP): To ask the Scottish Executive what its position is on protests on 29 May 2003 about the environmental effect of the testing of depleted uranium weapons at Dundrennan. (S2O-47)

The Minister for Environment and Rural Development (Ross Finnie): The Scottish Executive respects the public's right to peaceful protest.

Ms Byrne: In the partnership agreement that they drew up, the two coalition party leaders stated that they would work

“to improve and sustain our environment”,

to put

“environmental concerns at the heart of public policy”

and to secure

“environmental justice for all”.

Given that the environment and health are devolved matters and in light of the Royal Society's 2002 report, which stated that there were areas of depleted uranium contamination that posed a risk to children and that there were areas that should be cleared of contamination—

Members: Speech!

Ms Byrne:—will the minister give an undertaking to stop the test firing of depleted uranium shells at Dundrennan and will he initiate a clean-up project immediately?

The Presiding Officer (Mr George Reid): Before Mr Finnie replies, I should say that I will not allow questions of that length in future. I did so on this occasion because that was the member's first question.

Ross Finnie: The member is right to point to the substantial commitments to the environment that are contained in the partnership agreement—there is no way that we will renege on them. However, she makes a small error about the issue being wholly devolved. The legal framework relating to radioactive substances is the Radioactive Substances Act 1993, under which the Ministry of Defence—as the Crown—has an exemption. Therefore, the monitoring of the depleted uranium is conducted by the Secretary of State for Defence.

That is not entirely satisfactory for our being able to observe what happens in Scotland, but we have sought and obtained clear guidance that the Scottish Environment Protection Agency should satisfy itself that the procedures followed by the MOD are adequate—I am pleased to say that SEPA has done so. Furthermore, we recently received confirmation that the MOD will make arrangements for copies of its monitoring reports to be placed in the Scottish Parliament information centre. That will allow MSPs to arrive at an informed judgment about their contents.

Alex Fergusson (Galloway and Upper Nithsdale) (Con): Although I would never want the right of an individual to demonstrate peacefully to be compromised, I refer the minister to an answer given by Dr Lewis Moonie in the House of Commons on 20 March 2002. He stated:

“Comprehensive environmental monitoring programmes have been in place at ... Kirkcudbright ever since the beginning of the DU munitions trials announced in the House in 1979. These programmes have focused on the collection and analysis of samples of soil, vegetation, freshwater, seawater, seaweed, molluscs and seabed and shoreline sediments ... This monitoring continues to show that DU does not pose a significant risk to members of the public or site personnel.”—[*Official Report, House of Commons*, 20 March 2002; Vol 382, c 312W.]

Does the minister agree that, as no significant risk has been detected for 24 years, the Royal Society's assessment of the health effects of depleted uranium—that the risks are very low—is entirely correct and that that renders the need for demonstrations such as the one taking place in my constituency entirely unnecessary?

Ross Finnie: The questions are not getting any shorter, are they, Presiding Officer?

The Presiding Officer: Let us try with the answer.

Ross Finnie: I do not think that the state of play on any subject in any way detracts from an individual's civil-libertarian right to protest, so I will not change the original answer that I gave. However, the point that Alex Fergusson makes demonstrates that the exemption under the 1993 act does not remove the need for the Crown to carry out such monitoring, which I confirm is carried out by contractors for the defence science and technology laboratory. I also confirm that the results to which Alex Fergusson referred are in the public domain—he is also right about that.

The Presiding Officer: I call Chris Ballance. He must keep his question tight.

Chris Ballance (South of Scotland) (Green): Will the minister ask SEPA to conduct an inquiry into radioactivity in the Solway to examine whether radioactive material has got into the food chain and whether our fish are safe to eat? The issue is not just about Dundrennan; it is also about Chapelcross and Windscale/Sellafield.

Ross Finnie: I can only repeat the advice that I have, which is that SEPA has confirmed that it is satisfied with the present monitoring programme. SEPA has not drawn my attention to any matters that would require it to instigate any such inquiry, but, if it does so, an inquiry will take place.

Alasdair Morgan (South of Scotland) (SNP): Given the Executive's stance on antisocial behaviour, would the minister think it right if somebody dumped 7,000 tin cans over the cliff at Dundrennan? If that would not be right, how much worse is it that the MOD has dumped 7,000-plus DU shells over the cliff there and continues to do so? Given that the MOD does not even know where the shells are and, a couple of years ago, managed to lose the test rig that was sent down to find them, how confident can we be in the reassurances that have been given?

Ross Finnie: That question should properly be answered by the Ministry of Defence.

Area Tourist Boards

2. Alex Neil (Central Scotland) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Executive when it will announce the results of the area tourist board network review. (S2O-37)

The Minister for Tourism, Culture and Sport (Mr Frank McAveety): The outcome of the review of the area tourist boards is an important matter that deserves careful consideration. The Cabinet will consider how best to take the matter forward in the context of the commitments relating to tourism in "A Partnership for a Better Scotland". No decisions will be announced on the outcome until that process of wider consideration is complete.

Alex Neil: I am disappointed in the minister's reply, given that his predecessor said to the chamber on 13 February that a decision would be made soon and would be announced soon after the election. It seems that we have delay, delay, delay. People in the industry are fed up to the back teeth of reviews and considerations of reviews; they want results.

Mr McAveety: One of the key recommendations on Scottish tourism from the Enterprise and Lifelong Learning Committee, which Mr Neil ably convened in the previous parliamentary session, was that we should try to get it right. The current delay will not jeopardise the longer-term aim of ensuring that we have the right strategy for tourism in Scotland. I had understood that that aim was shared by Mr Neil in his previous role as a convener, but perhaps he has some greater ambitions this afternoon.

A9 (Kessock Junction)

3. John Farquhar Munro (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD): To ask the Scottish Executive whether it will carry out an urgent survey of the A9 at Kessock junction and undertake any improvements identified. (S2O-34)

The Minister for Transport (Nicol Stephen): The Executive has instructed BEAR Scotland Ltd to investigate and report on the safety of the North Kessock junction by the end of June 2003. Any short-term safety improvements that are recommended will be implemented.

John Farquhar Munro: The minister will appreciate that the Kessock junction has been a source of concern for many years, as it has resulted in numerous serious and fatal accidents. I understand that the proposed improvements have been designed and agreed by the Scottish Executive and the local authority. When is construction work likely to commence?

Nicol Stephen: The scheme is developer led and progress has been frustratingly slow. Planning permission was first granted for housing development in the area as far back as 1998. Both the Scottish Executive and the local authority are involved in making a financial contribution but there is, as yet, no commencement date. My primary concern is for road safety so that we do whatever can be done to prevent further fatal accidents. That is why I am determined that action should be taken on the junction following receipt of the BEAR Scotland report.

Maureen Macmillan (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): I am glad to hear the minister's reassurances about the safety issues. Is he aware that the developers do not consider the project to be developer led? They think that it is Scottish Executive led. Does he realise that the problem is the underwriting of the bond for the contractors? Does the Executive plan to underwrite the bond, or will it consider retendering the contract or building the junction itself and recovering the developers' share later?

Nicol Stephen: I can only repeat what I have said—the scheme is developer led and is related to planning consent. The Scottish Executive and the local authority are both involved in the process and are willing to continue discussions with the developers to ensure that the grade-separated junction is commenced as soon as possible. That will not happen as quickly as I would like. That is why the temporary measures need to be considered urgently.

Economic Growth

4. Mr Jim Mather (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Executive what recent steps have been taken with Her Majesty's

Government to formulate policies and strategies to ensure that Scottish economic growth matches that achieved by the rest of the United Kingdom. (S2O-18)

The Deputy First Minister and Minister for Enterprise and Lifelong Learning (Mr Jim Wallace): Growing the economy is the Executive's top priority and we will use the powers of the Parliament to create the conditions for higher growth. Furthermore, I will be seeking opportunities to discuss relevant reserved issues with UK ministers, including the Chancellor of the Exchequer.

Mr Mather: What additional steps will the minister take if, as is forecast, such convergence of economic growth rates does not take place?

Mr Wallace: I am not quite sure which forecasts the member is referring to. The Experian Business Strategies forecast summary that is commented on in this morning's *The Scotsman* predicts that growth will be 1.5 per cent this year, 2.4 per cent next year and 2.8 per cent in 2005. Businesses are what grow the economy. Our role is to try to create the conditions and the environment in which growth can take place and business can flourish. That is the intention and it is what we must do to deliver on "A Smart, Successful Scotland".

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I am glad that the Deputy First Minister seemed to acknowledge that to grow the economy we must reduce the burdens on business. Why will he not listen to the business community and reduce business rates in Scotland to remove the competitive disadvantage from which Scottish businesses suffer in comparison with their counterparts south of the border?

Mr Wallace: We had such a debate before and during the election and, from what Murdo Fraser has said, it looks as if it will continue beyond the election. It is fair to say that we have taken measures to freeze business rates this year and to bring in rate relief for small businesses. The partnership's view is that the Executive's limited resources are far better deployed on tackling skills shortages, for example. That would be of far more lasting benefit to business than the kind of quick fix to which Murdo Fraser refers would be.

In addition, Mr Fraser ought to take into account the fact that revaluation in England was different from that in Scotland. The rate burden, as opposed to the rate itself, is a combination of the rate times the valuation. The Conservative party conveniently ignores that.

Edinburgh Tram Network

5. Mr Kenny MacAskill (Lothians) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Executive what the commencement date will be for the construction of the Edinburgh tram network. (S2O-39)

The Minister for Transport (Nicol Stephen): Subject to the necessary parliamentary powers being obtained, Transport Initiatives Edinburgh expects construction to commence in 2007.

Mr MacAskill: Can the minister tell Edinburgh's pensioners whether they will ride on the trams under the concessionary fares scheme for travel on buses or whether they will be restricted to the second-class scheme that is available for travel on trains?

Nicol Stephen: One of my responsibilities is to progress the concessionary fares scheme, not only for older people, but for young and disabled people throughout Scotland. I will look at the details of that. I would also be delighted to consider the issues surrounding the implementation of the scheme for trams, because I am looking forward to trams forming part of the public transport network in Scotland's capital city.

Sarah Boyack (Edinburgh Central) (Lab): Will the minister ensure that we get an integrated approach to the development of the tram network in Edinburgh? In particular, will he require consultation between Transport Initiatives Edinburgh and all the public transport operators to ensure that we obtain a tram network that builds on and complements existing transport networks in the city, rather than competing with them?

Nicol Stephen: That is an important issue. In some cities that have gone for a tram network, there has been conflict with other forms of public transport. It would be wrong to go for anything other than a fully integrated approach. That means full consultation with those involved in light rail schemes, bus schemes and other public transport initiatives to achieve a fully integrated approach that frees up the limited road space in the capital city, reduces congestion and provides higher-quality public transport.

Scottish Ambulance Service

6. Stewart Stevenson (Banff and Buchan) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Executive what progress has been made in reducing the amount of on-call work carried out by Scottish Ambulance Service staff. (S2O-3)

The Minister for Health and Community Care (Malcolm Chisholm): Last year, the Scottish Ambulance Service converted stations at Dunoon, Fraserburgh and Stranraer from part-time to full-time working. The service has a programme of reducing on-call work wherever possible and constantly monitors on-call hours worked.

Stewart Stevenson: Is the minister aware that the Scottish Ambulance Service's chief executive wrote to me on 10 April last year to give the commitment that Peterhead station would be upgraded to full-time working? Staff were told on 22 April 2002 that 10 staff would be recruited in the year ending April 2003. On 28 February 2003, the then Deputy Minister for Health and Community Care could not give me a date for full-time working at Peterhead. When will the Executive fulfil its commitments, give me a date and give the people of north-east Scotland the service that they need?

Malcolm Chisholm: That decision is properly for the Scottish Ambulance Service's chief executive. One of the service's priority stations for conversion from part-time to full-time work is Peterhead, but Mr Stevenson should remember the other significant changes that have taken place in the service in his area recently, such as the start of priority dispatch, joint working initiatives with the national health service and full-time working at Fraserburgh, to which I referred. He should also remember the significant developments in the service throughout Scotland, most notably the recruitment of 200 extra emergency ambulance staff in one year—last year—throughout Scotland.

Stewart Stevenson: That is a no, is it, minister?

The Presiding Officer: Order.

Scottish Agricultural College

7. Brian Adam (Aberdeen North) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Executive when it next plans to meet the Scottish Agricultural College and what matters will be discussed. (S2O-2)

The Minister for Environment and Rural Development (Ross Finnie): The Executive meets the college regularly to discuss a range of matters relating to the research, education and advisory services that it commissions from the college.

Brian Adam: Does the minister share my concern that all the proposed changes in the college—not just those in the Deloitte & Touche report—risk undermining severely the college's ability to serve Scotland's land-based industries? Will he take urgent action to ensure that, until the proposed changes have been fully investigated, the college's management are advised not to lay off staff or to dispose of assets piecemeal?

Ross Finnie: I am well aware of the potential ramifications of the proposals that have been set out and provisionally endorsed by the college's board of management. Brian Adam will be aware that, immediately before the dissolution of the Parliament, I wrote to express to the board my serious reservations about several matters on which it has reached conclusions.

It is regrettable that several suggestions have been made about moving staff and some assets, but I understand that no irrevocable decisions have been taken. I intend to pursue that matter, because I share Brian Adam's view that such suggestions undermine an objective assessment of the proposals that are on the table.

Mr John Home Robertson (East Lothian) (Lab): I recall some vigorous discussions in the Rural Affairs Department three years ago about the costs of the Scottish Agricultural College to the taxpayer, so I commend the minister's proposal to refer the college's structure to independent consultants. Deloitte & Touche has come up with the right solution to build on the excellence of the main SAC campus in and around Edinburgh. I urge the minister to have the courage of his convictions and to see that decision through.

Ross Finnie: As I said to Brian Adam, there is no doubt that Deloitte & Touche's report confirms what many of us knew—that the college occupies five times the amount of space that it requires to run an effective and efficient agricultural college and to deliver research services.

It is clear that the college cannot survive with more than one campus site. I have said and I stick to the view that the selection of the campus site still requires the SAC to show that it can deal with the criticisms that have been levelled against its management and about the delivery of its educational service; the SAC must also show that it can justify some of the assumptions that it supplied to Deloitte & Touche. If it can do that, all members will feel much more satisfied with the decision, but that has not yet happened. I await the SAC management's response to the questions that I have posed to them.

John Scott (Ayr) (Con): Does the minister intend to invite the new environment and rural development committee to investigate the restructuring of the SAC and to prepare a report for the Parliament, given that the Deloitte & Touche report appears to be fundamentally flawed?

Ross Finnie: One thing that a minister should never do is instruct any parliamentary committee to do anything. What parliamentary committees do is for parliamentary committees to decide—that is the proper course of action.

Forth Road Bridge

8. Mr Keith Raffan (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD): To ask the Scottish Executive whether it will meet the Forth bridgemaster as a matter of urgency to discuss measures to relieve peak-hour congestion levels on, and leading on to, the Forth road bridge. (S2O-30)

The Minister for Transport (Nicol Stephen): The Executive is in regular contact with the

bridgemaster and is a member of the Forth Estuary Transport Authority management group, which discusses all aspects of the operation of the Forth road bridge.

Mr Raffan: If the minister is regularly in touch with the bridgemaster, he will be aware that congestion—especially at morning peak hours and on the southbound carriageway—exceeds the bridge's capacity of 3,600 to 4,000 cars an hour, which leads to ever-lengthening tailbacks. Perhaps he will assure me that he is aware of that issue. Will he seriously consider the following: introducing higher tolls at peak hours; ensuring an early start in rebuilding Waverley station; renewing the signalling network; and extending railway platforms in Fife to increase capacity? Will he also, when it is completed, consider seriously the study that has been commissioned by Fife Council and others on cross-Forth ferry services?

Nicol Stephen: I have spoken today to Alastair Andrew, who is the bridgemaster, and am aware that he is considering all those issues. A south-east Scotland transport partnership consultancy study that is in part funded by the Scottish Executive is due to be commissioned shortly and will consider those issues. Through the Forth Estuary Transport Authority, Alastair Andrew also has a consultant considering the implications for the current toll regime on the Forth road bridge.

The issues are sensitive, but important. The facts are plain: currently, about 23 million vehicles a year go across the bridge. Based on the current rate of growth, as estimated by the bridgemaster, that will have increased to 30 million vehicles by 2010.

Homeless People (Edinburgh)

9. Margo MacDonald (Lothians) (Ind): To ask the Scottish Executive what discussions there have been with City of Edinburgh Council about its new housing system for homeless people. (S2O-20)

The Minister for Communities (Ms Margaret Curran): The Scottish Executive has been providing support for the development of a common housing register in Edinburgh and is also aware of recent changes to the council's letting policies that are designed to provide greater choice to applicants.

Margo MacDonald: I thank the minister for her usual attention to such matters and urge her to keep a close eye on the "EH—your key to choice" programme, which is a new programme for letting in Edinburgh. The programme might be a very good idea, but might also put undue stress on people who have chaotic lifestyles and who are in most need of housing. Although the scheme is very recent, will the minister assure me that she will keep a close eye on it?

Ms Curran: I am happy to assure Margo MacDonald that I will do that. Of course, I am assisted in that task by the operations of the regulation section of Communities Scotland, which is required by law to ensure that there is proper compliance with the law and that the interests of homeless people are well protected. We will look at the matter carefully.

Congestion Charging

10. Scott Barrie (Dunfermline West) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what assessment it has made of any implications of the congestion charging scheme in London for similar schemes proposed in Scotland. (S2O-42)

The Minister for Transport (Nicol Stephen): We are watching developments in London with interest and look forward to seeing the six-month report that Transport for London plans to publish. We know that Transport Initiatives Edinburgh Ltd is also monitoring progress and expects to learn from London's experience.

Scott Barrie: Given the opprobrium that was heaped on Mayor Livingstone's scheme when it was first mooted, does the minister agree that that scheme is now recognised as being successful? As a result, there might be lessons to be learned for Scottish cities when measures to deal with severe traffic congestion are considered.

Nicol Stephen: It is certainly the case that the London scheme has been far more successful than many people predicted. However, that does not mean that such schemes will work in every city in the United Kingdom. It is clear that there are important lessons to be learned for any Scottish city that is considering such a scheme.

Economic Growth

11. Marilyn Livingstone (Kirkcaldy) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what its first steps will be to achieve economic growth. (S2O-53)

The Deputy First Minister and Minister for Enterprise and Lifelong Learning (Mr Jim Wallace): As I indicated in an earlier answer, growing the economy is our top priority, but there are no quick fixes that will achieve that. Our first step will be to continue the approach that is set out in "A Framework for Economic Development in Scotland", which recognises that economic development relates to all parts of Scotland's economy and society. The most crucial element of that approach is the medium and long-term enterprise strategy, which is set out in "A Smart, Successful Scotland".

Marilyn Livingstone: The success of an economic strategy is dependent on the skills of the work force. What progress has Future Skills Scotland made in matching Scotland's skills requirements with industry's needs?

Mr Wallace: I agree entirely with Marilyn Livingstone that addressing skills needs in Scotland is vital; indeed, it is one of the key features of the “A Smart, Successful Scotland” strategy and it is also well set out in the partnership agreement. We believe that Future Skills Scotland has an important role to play. If we are going to address skills and try to match skills with need, it is important that we have the intelligence to do that.

In the Executive’s “The Lifelong Learning Strategy for Scotland” document, which was published earlier this year, we underlined the important role of Future Skills Scotland in developing the knowledge and understanding of the requirements of Scotland’s labour market. In the weeks and months ahead, we will want to draw on the important contribution that Future Skills Scotland makes.

Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): Is the minister aware of the work of the economist E F Schumacher, who challenged the notion that a concept of economic growth that includes activities that undermine people’s health, freedom and dignity is a false measure of economic growth? Will the minister commit the Executive to investigating more sophisticated measurements of economic well-being? If he does not, is not the Executive’s green thread already fraying badly?

Mr Wallace: I certainly am aware of the work of E F Schumacher—I recall listening to him speak in a hall in Dumfries in the late 1970s and I have read “Small is Beautiful: A Study of Economics as if People Mattered” and other publications of his. Indeed, the Executive has indicated that sustainability is an important part of all our policies, not the least of which is our economic development policy.

In response to the point that Mr Harvie raised about health, I also believe that only with a growing economy can we address adequately and effectively issues such as improving the health of our nation, and ensure that we have the kind of education system that produces young people with skills and talents and which allows them to develop their abilities. That is why we believe that achieving growth in our economy is vital to achieving our social justice objectives.

National Waste Strategy

12. Shiona Baird (North East Scotland) (Green): To ask the Scottish Executive how the national waste strategy will ensure the future of community-based recycling schemes. (S2O-57)

The Minister for Environment and Rural Development (Ross Finnie): The wording of the national waste strategy recognises the key role of the community sector in achieving sustainable

waste management. We expect that community-based recycling schemes will continue to play an important part in the implementation of the 11 area waste plans.

Shiona Baird: Given that the national waste strategy guidelines indicate that the waste strategy should be determined at all levels by a combination of one third local authorities, one third private sector and one third community groups, will the minister explain why there is community representation in only three of the 11 area waste groups? Is the minister willing to contact the area waste groups to find out why that is the case?

Ross Finnie: I am disappointed by the lack of community representation. When meetings were held at national Government level in the immediate run-up to the launch of the national waste strategy, I paid particular attention to ensuring that the community sector was included in the area waste groups. I am happy to take up Shiona Baird’s suggestion and will follow it up. It is important to the Executive that community groups are an integral part of the development of the scheme—they should not be dropped by omission.

Borders Railway

13. Mr Jeremy Purvis (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD): To ask the Scottish Executive what progress is anticipated on the construction of the Borders railway. (S2O-27)

The Minister for Transport (Nicol Stephen): The Waverley railway partnership is taking the project forward. I would expect to see the business case presented to the Executive and a private bill introduced to Parliament in the coming weeks.

Mr Purvis: The minister will be aware of the transport infrastructure needs of the Scottish Borders. Will he make every effort to secure parliamentary time for the passage of the enabling bill for the railway? Moreover, will he ensure that public money is committed to support its construction?

Nicol Stephen: On timing, I am aware of the reply that Mr Finnie gave earlier. I will do what I can to ensure that parliamentary time is allocated, but, because that is a parliamentary matter, it would be wrong of me as a minister to interfere. That said, I have no doubt that there is wide interest in the issue across the Parliament and that time will be allocated in due course.

As for funding, the railway is a partnership project and will involve local authorities and the private sector. As a result, it would be wrong at this stage to commit a figure up front on behalf of the Scottish Executive. However, I can say that the Executive is committed to progressing the project and that we will make £3 billion available for major infrastructure projects over the next 10

years. It is expected that funding for the Borders rail link will make up part of that figure.

Mr Duncan McNeil (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab): I wish the minister well in his new job. Will he initiate a departmental inquiry into the continuing and unacceptable three-year delay in the construction works that are necessary on the A78 West Station bridge in my constituency?

Nicol Stephen: I am not quite sure of the relevance of that question to the Borders railway. However, I will undertake to examine the matter and am happy to meet Duncan McNeil soon to discuss the matter further.

The Presiding Officer: I think that that would be best.

Christine Grahame (South of Scotland) (SNP): I heard the minister's comments about funding, so I should remind him of the Liberal Democrats' manifesto pledge to fund and build the Borders railway if it got into Government. In the light of his reply, do I take it that they will not fund it? After all, the partnership agreement—*[Interruption.]* Hurts, does it? The partnership agreement merely mentions

"Supporting construction of the Borders ... Line".

Does the word "supporting" mean "funding and constructing"?

Nicol Stephen: I welcome Christine Grahame's reminder of the Liberal Democrat commitment. Our commitment to the financing of the scheme is exactly as I described it in my previous response.

Scottish Agricultural College

14. Nora Radcliffe (Gordon) (LD): To ask the Scottish Executive what discussions it has had with the board of the Scottish Agricultural College regarding its rationalisation proposals. (S2O-43)

The Minister for Environment and Rural Development (Ross Finnie): The Executive has had a number of discussions with the college about its proposals for rationalisation. The college has been asked to submit revised proposals that address ministers' concerns.

Nora Radcliffe: The SAC proposes to move most of its teaching to Edinburgh on the basis of a consultant's report that assumes that student numbers will not only remain stable, but increase. Given that considerably more than half the current cohort has chosen to go to Auchencruive, that half of the remainder has chosen to go to Aberdeen, that agricultural students from farming backgrounds are often needed to work part-time on the farm and therefore need to be within reasonable travelling distance of home, and that there are differential accommodation costs within and outwith Edinburgh, does the minister agree

that the Deloitte & Touche report is hanging that particular assumption on a very shoochy nail?

Ross Finnie: Following my response to the earlier question on the subject, I think that we must be clear about several things, the first of which is that the SAC will simply not survive unless there is serious rationalisation. We must focus on the assumptions that underlie the Deloitte & Touche report and the conclusions that are drawn from them. I recall that, in my evidence to the Rural Development Committee during the last parliamentary session, I made it clear that the college board had to come forward and explain the basis of several of the assumptions, not the least of which is the assumption about student numbers. I have other reservations about the nature and delivery of education provision and I await a response on that. If members are concerned about the report's conclusions, they must go back and seek answers to the assumptions that underlie and underpin it.

Rhona Brankin (Midlothian) (Lab): Does the minister agree that, because the SAC is a separate company and is therefore not part of a Government department, its directors are required by law to take decisions based on the most financially prudent route for the college? Does he also agree that continuing with four times the space that it needs for teaching, at an annual cost of £4.6 million, is a gross waste of taxpayers' money?

Ross Finnie: I have no hesitation in agreeing with that. However, we should also be clear that it has not been made obvious to anybody reading the Deloitte & Touche report that any of the conclusions that are posited are themselves financially viable. That is a question about which every member of Parliament, and everyone who takes a serious interest in the future of the Scottish Agricultural College, must be seriously concerned.

Charity Regulator

15. Cathy Peattie (Falkirk East) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive whether it will introduce legislation for a statutory independent charity regulator, supported by an accessible appeals procedure and incorporating a new definition of charity based on public benefit and limiting charitable status to bodies independent of Government and, if so, when it will do so. (S2O-63)

The Minister for Communities (Ms Margaret Curran): As I made clear in my statement on the issue yesterday, the Executive is committed to legislating on charity law. I am considering the scope and timing of such legislation and am determined to ensure that it will be as comprehensive and effective as possible.

Cathy Peattie: I remind the minister that not all charities are large national organisations; some small organisations are the backbone of our communities. Will she assure us that she will consult all the small organisations and umbrella bodies when making any decisions about legislation?

Ms Curran: Cathy Peattie makes a significant point about recognising the smaller organisations and the distinctions and variety that exist in the sector. I am aware of those and am committed to ensuring that we consult as widely as possible. I do not know whether I can guarantee that I will consult each and every small organisation, but I will certainly ensure that our consultation is as comprehensive as possible. I am happy to meet Cathy Peattie to ensure that she is satisfied with that.

Tricia Marwick (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP): Will the minister acknowledge and admit that the office of regulator will have no more statutory power to prevent another charity scandal than exists in the present system? Will she take advantage of the genuine cross-party support in the Parliament and give both an undertaking that a Scottish charities bill will be introduced as an immediate priority, and a time scale for its introduction?

Ms Curran: I made my commitment absolutely clear yesterday, and I think that I demonstrated genuinely that I am determined to move as swiftly as possible on the issue. I do not have Tricia Marwick's luxury of being able to stand up every day and say that everything is an immediate priority; I am trying to be as honest as possible, and the Executive will be as honest as possible. We have laid out our legislative programme for the next year and we will deliver on that. As soon as is suitable, I will move swiftly and effectively on charity law reform.

National Health Service (Consultant Surgeons)

16. Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what action it is taking to increase the number of NHS consultant surgeons. (S20-67)

The Minister for Health and Community Care (Malcolm Chisholm): The Scottish Executive is committed to aiming to increase the number of consultants in the NHS, including consultant surgeons, by 600 by 2006. We are centrally funding some posts in specialties in which there are shortages. In the past two years, the number of specialist registrars in surgical specialties has increased from 287 to 339.

Jackie Baillie: The minister will be aware of the contingency plans that have been proposed for surgery and accident and emergency services at

the Vale of Leven hospital. It is a matter of much concern that, because of a shortage of consultant surgeons, there will actually be a reduction in elective and emergency surgery. Will the minister review the circumstances that led to that decision in order to ensure that all alternatives were explored fully, and will he consider how we can attract some of the additional consultants to posts outwith city hospitals?

Malcolm Chisholm: The decision that was taken in the Argyll and Clyde NHS Board area was made very much on the ground of clinical safety; I am sure that everyone must agree that clinical safety and the quality of care must be absolutely fundamental to such decisions. There is on-going work in Argyll and Clyde to examine the configuration of services in accordance with those principles. In response to Jackie Baillie's substantive question, however, we are taking unprecedented action to increase the consultant work force. My reference to specialist registrars is particularly important, because that is the grade below consultant level and that is where we have increased the numbers.

I would like to mention one other important issue. In Scotland, we are still successfully negotiating the final details of the consultants' contract, which is something that has not happened in England. That will be good for consultants and, more important, good for patients and it might give us an advantage over England.

First Minister's Question Time

15:10

Tommy Sheridan (Glasgow) (SSP): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. Can you provide an assurance that the format for today's First Minister's question time does not set a precedent? Two political parties in this Parliament have each newly earned the right to question weekly the First Minister on the issues of the day. Today, that right has been denied to one of those parties. Can you give an assurance that the matter will be reviewed?

The Presiding Officer (Mr George Reid): We have adopted a procedure that will see us through to the summer recess. I have set that out perfectly clearly. The Procedures Committee will consider the format for questions over the summer. I hope to have a longer form of First Minister's question time in place by the second week after the recess. The current procedure applies for five weeks.

Prime Minister (Meetings)

1. Mr John Swinney (North Tayside) (SNP): To ask the First Minister when he next plans to meet the Prime Minister and what issues he intends to raise. (S2F-35)

The First Minister (Mr Jack McConnell): We plan to meet again shortly. I am certain that we will discuss, among other issues, the best practice and the best ideas for tackling crime and antisocial behaviour north and south of the border.

Mr Swinney: In Parliament yesterday the First Minister expressed his pride at the significant impact that he had made on the European convention, which meets tomorrow to consider the new European constitution. Has he made any representations to the United Kingdom Government on provisions in that constitution that he would like to see vetoed?

The First Minister: Both Rhodri Morgan, the First Minister in Wales, and I spent a considerable amount of time before the elections discussing those matters with the UK Government. We made recommendations to the UK Government and were consulted on its approach. We are full members of the UK Cabinet's sub-committee that deals with those matters. Scotland and Wales therefore have a considerable direct input as well as input through members of Parliament, Cabinet ministers and other ministers in Whitehall. In addition to all that, we agreed with Peter Hain, then Minister of State for Europe in the UK Government, a paper that was submitted to the European convention to represent the views of the UK as a whole. It contained significant provisions that will take forward the influence of devolved

Administrations, not only in Scotland and Wales but throughout the European Union. We await the results of that representation, but we certainly feel that although there are problems with some other European countries, which are extremely resistant to devolved Administrations being involved with the EU, we have made some headway.

Mr Swinney: I thank the First Minister for that long and thoughtful answer, but it does not quite get to the point that I asked about, which was whether there are any areas where he wants a veto to be exercised. I urge him to take up that issue.

Tomorrow, when the convention meets, it will consider a proposal to make fishing policy a matter for the EU's exclusive control. Does the First Minister's Government support that proposal? After the atrocious experience of the Scottish fishing industry in Europe, would not it be sensible to return those powers to this Parliament, rather than to give more powers away to the EU?

The First Minister: In the chamber we often hear Mr Swinney praising other parties for adopting SNP policies, so it is nice to hear the SNP adopting a Tory policy for a change. In this case, both parties are wrong.

This may surprise some members in the chamber, but fish can move from one set of coastal waters into another set of coastal waters. Fish can travel across the sea and therefore we need to have a common fisheries policy in Europe so that we have a common approach that tackles the maintenance of sustainable fishing stocks on an international basis, rather than on a pseudo-nationalist basis.

Roseanna Cunningham (Perth) (SNP): Sell-out.

The First Minister: Ms Cunningham would be wise to wait until the end of the answer.

Mr Swinney asked a specific question about the specific proposal for exclusive competence on the common fisheries policy. Not only have we made representations on that matter, but we have written to the UK Government and asked it to oppose the proposal. Not only has the UK Government made representations, but it has written to the EU to make it clear that it is also opposed to the proposal. Not only is this Administration opposed to it, but the UK Government is opposed to it. We will ensure that that view is put across.

Mr Swinney: I am glad that the First Minister thinks that the fishing industry is a laughing matter. [*Interruption.*] Labour members were laughing a moment ago; they will not be laughing when the fishing communities of Scotland have to face tough times because Labour and the Liberal

Democrats sold out in the EU negotiations last December.

Can we have an absolute commitment from the First Minister not only that he will write letters and make telephone calls, but that the British Government will veto that proposal, which will be very damaging to the Scottish fishing industry?

The First Minister: We will not win arguments by vetoing proposals before the argument has even begun. The British Government is putting very persuasive arguments to the European Union to ensure that the convention suits our national interests, in Scotland and in the rest of the United Kingdom. I am happy to support the British Government on that.

Cabinet (Meetings)

2. David McLetchie (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Con): To ask the First Minister what issues will be discussed at the next meeting of the Scottish Executive's Cabinet. (S2F-22)

The First Minister (Mr Jack McConnell): The next meeting of the Cabinet will take forward our programme of legislation and proposals to implement our partnership agreement. I am sure that members will hear, in due course, what decisions we make.

David McLetchie: I sincerely trust that, at its next meeting, the Cabinet will find the time to discuss the rising tide of serious crime in Scotland, exemplified by the statistics that came out the other day.

During the election campaign, the First Minister said that he was concerned about convicted drug dealers being released early from prison through automatic remission. I note, from the partnership agreement, that a sentencing commission is to be established. Does the First Minister acknowledge the fact that automatic remission was ended by the last Conservative Government, through the Crime and Punishment (Scotland) Act 1997, and that that was repealed within a year by the incoming Labour Government? Accordingly, does the responsibility for letting drug dealers out of jail early not lie with the First Minister and his Labour colleagues?

The First Minister: Frankly, I am interested in solving problems rather than in making petty political points. I could make several points about the crime and justice record of the last Conservative Government, but that would not prevent one crime or one incident of antisocial behaviour, and it would not ensure that drug dealers and others serve proper sentences in our prisons and elsewhere. That is the objective that we have set ourselves. When our sentencing commission is established, it will ensure consistency of sentencing throughout Scotland

and will, quite properly, review the current provisions for remand, bail and certain specific sentences. I hope that the commission will be brought into being very quickly and that its results will be supported by all members when we publish them at a later date.

David McLetchie: I believe in honesty in sentencing, as do the public. Honesty in sentencing means that the sentence that is handed down by the court should be the sentence that is served. That is why Conservative members attempted on two occasions, during the debates on the Criminal Justice (Scotland) Bill in February and March, to end automatic release. However, that idea was voted down by Labour, the Liberal Democrats and the Scottish National Party. If the First Minister has now converted, he is welcome to join our cause, albeit belatedly. Does he agree that four years should mean four years; that 10 years should mean 10 years; and that, in certain cases, life should mean life? If so, will he introduce legislation to that effect?

The First Minister: No, I do not agree. That would be an extremely stupid and irresponsible policy for any Administration to adopt. I believe strongly that people should be directed into a better standard of behaviour and away from criminality. That should be attempted whether they are given prison sentences or community sentences. The sentences should fit the crimes, but, while serving those sentences, people should be offered the opportunity to rehabilitate themselves and to learn a better way of living. If they do not take up that opportunity, their sentences should mean what they say. That is why I am opposed to automatic remission at 50 per cent of sentences of less than four years. Nevertheless, the right way in which to revise that policy is through an independent sentencing commission that is judicially—not politically—led and that acts objectively, so that, I hope, all parties might support the outcome. We will thereby have better sentencing policy. Yes, we will have rehabilitation and sentences that fit the crimes, but we will also have a better criminal justice system as a whole.

Paul Martin (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab): Has the Cabinet discussed the rise in the number of attacks on firefighters and other emergency staff, who provide a valuable service in our communities? During the election campaign, the First Minister advised that he would legislate to protect our emergency staff. Can he update me on the position, as there was no reference to that issue in his statement yesterday?

The First Minister: The Cabinet discussed the matter on Wednesday and we decided—properly, I believe—that the antisocial behaviour bill would be the wrong place in which to legislate on crimes

of violence or other forms of intimidation against emergency workers. However, we remain committed to legislating quickly on such matters and will consider the best way to do so. That might be done in a short bill or in consultation with a parliamentary committee. We will introduce proposals in due course.

Mr Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): Given the complaints that many of us have received about the standard of service that ScotRail delivers—indeed, the First Minister will recall that, when the Justice 2 Committee travelled to Inverness, the train's lavatory doors automatically locked themselves just north of Edinburgh—will the First Minister ensure that the Cabinet deliberates on suitable, high-class standards of service when it considers the new rail franchise agreement?

The First Minister: Such issues are certainly a central part of our attempts to improve, modernise and refresh the franchise agreement. I hope that on the occasion to which Mr Stone referred he did not urgently require the use of those particular facilities and that, if he did, he will have better success in the future.

Cabinet Sub-committee on Sustainable Scotland

3. Robin Harper (Lothians) (Green): To ask the First Minister when he will reconvene the Cabinet sub-committee on sustainable Scotland and what issues will be discussed. (S2F-21)

The First Minister (Mr Jack McConnell): We will decide Cabinet sub-committees shortly. However, whatever arrangements we agree, environmental considerations will be at the heart of government, because we must deliver sustainable development for Scotland and secure environmental justice.

Robin Harper: I thank the First Minister for those commitments. He will be aware of the WWF International report that was published this morning on the ecological disaster facing wild salmon, stocks of which have declined by 45 per cent since 1983. Given that the Executive's aquaculture strategy might not come into full effect—if it ever does so—until seven years after the Parliament first met, will the sub-committee discuss the salmon issue as a matter of urgency and ensure that the Executive is represented at the North Atlantic Salmon Conservation Organisation's conference in Edinburgh next week? Further, in order for failing sustainability policies such as the aquaculture policy to be audited properly, will the Executive consider giving that responsibility, as a matter of course, to the Parliament's Audit Committee?

The First Minister: Like Mr Finnie, I do not want to presume which parliamentary committee should

consider which items. However, I would certainly be happy if the new environment and rural development committee or any other parliamentary committee wanted to scrutinise the implementation and progress of the aquaculture strategy. The department and, if necessary, any sub-committee that is established will certainly monitor the implementation of the strategy. It is important to acknowledge that the strategy is a recent one and that it was discussed at length not only with people in the aquaculture industry in Scotland, but with wild salmon fishery interests.

We must ensure that we have a strategy in place that deals with sustainability, given that the scientific evidence does not always appear to back up the perception that aquaculture development in Scotland has affected wild salmon fisheries. Therefore, the fact that there are conflicting arguments and that there is a lack of scientific evidence to back up the arguments one way or another means that we must ensure that our strategy involves the interests of both sides of the argument and of the Government. We must progress the strategy and ensure that, at the end of the day, we can rebuild wild salmon fisheries in Scotland.

The Presiding Officer: You can have a single, supplementary question, Mr Harper.

Robin Harper: I thank the First Minister for that reply. However, there has been a full investigation, so I ask again how the Executive will audit its sustainability strategies.

The First Minister: We will do so by several means, not least of which will be through our strategic environmental assessments. However, we will also audit the strategies through the work that we will do in the sustainability sub-committee or whatever equivalent replaces it, given that we need to reassess constantly the best way to ensure that sustainable development and environmental justice are at the heart of the Government's policies. That is exactly what we will do.

Antisocial Behaviour

4. Mr Kenneth Macintosh (Eastwood) (Lab): To ask the First Minister when the Scottish Executive will introduce measures to tackle antisocial behaviour. (S2F-30)

The First Minister (Mr Jack McConnell): We will be publishing before the summer recess draft proposals for an antisocial behaviour bill, which we intend to introduce to Parliament in the autumn.

Mr Macintosh: I thank the First Minister for his reply. Does he agree that the majority of people, not only in East Renfrewshire but throughout Scotland, know that we are on their side when it comes to tackling serious crime through record

police numbers, the Drug Enforcement Agency and new powers to tackle sexual offences? Does he also agree that the seeming freedom and impunity with which some families are able to disturb and even terrorise neighbours gives us cause for concern? Will he reassure the chamber that we will tackle antisocial behaviour now—before the much-needed legislation to which he referred is enacted—to let people know that we are on their side in that area, too?

The First Minister: The answer to the final part of Ken Macintosh's question is, of course, yes. We need new laws and will introduce the antisocial behaviour bill in due course, but there needs to be action right now—not just by national Government, but by local government and other agencies. This morning I discussed that matter with the Association of Chief Police Officers in Scotland, which is as committed as we are to tackling with urgency the issue of antisocial behaviour. ACPOS needs new laws to back it up, but it must also ensure that there is high police visibility on the streets and that people understand that they will be tackled when they commit antisocial acts.

That applies not just to adults and older teenagers who are involved in antisocial behaviour, but to very young children. In the past fortnight, I have come across seven, eight and nine-year-olds who are involved in putting fireworks through the letterboxes of old-age pensioners and in similar activities. They and their parents need to be held accountable for what they have done. We do not need to wait for new legislation to do that—the police and local authorities can act now.

Nursery Nurses

5. Tricia Marwick (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP): To ask the First Minister what action the Scottish Executive is taking to ensure that there is a national review of nursery nurses' pay and conditions. (S2F-29)

The First Minister (Mr Jack McConnell): We recognise the important contribution that is made by all early-years and child care workers. It is extremely regrettable that industrial action is now being taken by nursery nurses across Scotland.

A review of nursery nurses' pay and conditions is being undertaken by local authorities. I encourage both the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, representing local authority employers, and Unison, representing the nursery nurses, to work together to complete the review as quickly as possible.

Tricia Marwick: Does the First Minister accept that the role of the nursery nurse has expanded because of Executive priorities for the pre-fives? Does he accept that he has a duty to ensure that

the people responsible for delivering those priorities should be rewarded adequately for their skill and expertise? Does the First Minister think that an average wage of £13,000 is a fair wage, or does he want pre-five education and child care on the cheap?

The First Minister: I am absolutely certain that the vast majority of nursery nurses in Scotland—if not all of them—do an excellent job. They certainly do an extremely important job, not just in their workplace but as part of our national strategy to improve children's services, child care and nurseries.

However, the responsibility for nurseries lies with our local authorities. It is vitally important that they accept that responsibility and manage nurseries well. I am sure that nursery nurses feel that they have a very strong case. Local authorities have a duty to manage their financial responsibilities. They must get together to resolve this dispute, to ensure both that nursery nurses receive a decent rate for the job and that authorities have the right pattern of expenditure across all their responsibilities.

Elaine Smith (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab): On the subject of conditions of service for nursery nurses, what consideration—if any—is the on-going review of initial teacher education giving to the development of a framework for part-time and distance learning teaching qualifications that will be accessible not only to graduates but to those with relevant experience, such as nursery nurses?

The First Minister: I am not aware of the specific provisions of the review to which the member refers, but I am very conscious of the need for us to ensure that a variety of routes are available to those who want to go into the educational profession. When I was Minister for Education, Europe and External Affairs, I was strongly of the view that it should be possible for people to train to be secondary teachers if they did not have exactly the degree sought by the teacher training institution but had relevant experience in industry, finance or elsewhere that would help them to be a good teacher in the classroom. I imagine that similar considerations may apply in relation to nursery education. However, I do not want to pre-empt the results of the study that Elaine Smith mentioned without knowing all the facts.

Carolyn Leckie (Central Scotland) (SSP): The nursery nurses have been pursuing their regrading claim for nearly two years, are clearly in dispute with the local authorities and have been forced to take industrial action. I congratulate them on the solidarity that they have displayed. A word from the First Minister acknowledging that their claim is just and encouraging COSLA to pay up would

settle the dispute very quickly. Is he prepared to do that?

The First Minister: Members who have been in the chamber when I have been asked similar questions at First Minister's question time in the past will know that I do not believe that we should become involved directly in unresolved industrial disputes between employers and employees. However, it is important that we state that the dispute should be progressed quickly. It has taken far too long—I am not sure on which side the fault lies for that. Both the employers and the nursery nurses should talk—quickly—to ensure not only that the nursery nurses are paid the rate for the job but that the nurseries and children of Scotland have the facilities and services that they require.

Scottish Executive's Programme

Resumed debate.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Mr Murray Tosh): The next item of business is a continuation of the debate on the First Minister's statement on the Scottish Executive's programme. Given that all the screens have been down since this morning, I require members who wish to take part in the debate to press their request-to-speak buttons now.

15:31

Maureen Macmillan (Highlands and Islands (Lab): I will of course speak in support of the Executive's programme for government and I will talk about two issues that arose time and again on the doorstep during the recent election campaign.

First, I will say a word about the police statistics, which have been much in the news recently. There was a 2 per cent increase in crime in the Northern constabulary area, but the statistics for the first quarter of this year show a more than 17 per cent decrease in crime and a large increase in detection rates in that area. We should congratulate Northern constabulary on that. The sharp decrease in theft and housebreaking in the Highlands is due to the incarceration of heroin misusers who steal to feed their habit. There is little doubt that when they leave prison, they will return to that behaviour if their drug habit is not addressed. That is why I welcome the commitment to rolling out drugs courts and drug treatment and testing orders. I make a plea to the Executive for the Inverness and Easter Ross area to be one of the first areas to be included in that roll-out.

I also welcome the promised introduction of a seamless correction service, which I believe will better support rehabilitation. Although I am unhappy with the name, I approve the principle. I realise that there are concerns in local authorities about the future role of criminal justice social work and I have had assurances previously from the First Minister that there will be full consultation.

The Opposition has made much of the view that we should pay less attention to antisocial behaviour and concentrate on serious crime. The means of combating serious crime are already there; the laws are in place. The problem with antisocial behaviour is that there are not sufficient sanctions or ways of dealing quickly with young perpetrators. That is what frustrates both the police and the communities that suffer.

I welcome the introduction of antisocial behaviour orders for the under-16s and the fast tracking of persistent offenders. Antisocial behaviour is as much a problem in rural areas as it

is in urban areas and it is not always caused by youngsters. Throughout Scotland, there is a culture of alcohol-fuelled mayhem. A constituent in Fortrose on the Black Isle—a sort of mini St Andrews—described weekends there as a nightmare. Pensioners in Scorguie in Inverness complain of gangs roaming. Ordinary family men in Merkinch are afraid to pass the louts at the street corner for fear of being challenged. A constituent in Nairn describes persecution by teenagers invading his garden. Local papers report vandalism, destruction, the smashing of gardens, the breaking of windows and running fights, much of which is fuelled by alcohol. Therefore, I welcome the commitment to tackle the problem of alcohol abuse, which is paramount if we are to address antisocial behaviour and violence in society.

The police work extremely hard to build good relationships with communities. That hard work is paying off in towns such as Alness, where local people are working in partnership with local officers on issues such as vandalism and drug misuse. There is no doubt that the police are challenged by the distances between communities and by the court system in the Highlands. We need to rationalise the number of small courthouses—some of which are woefully inadequate—and to build two new courthouses, one in Easter Ross and the other in Inverness. Much has been spent on refurbishment but some courthouses are not capable of being modernised structurally and others are now far from centres of population.

Community wardens could be of enormous help in combating antisocial behaviour. Everyone in a community knows which garage or corner shop sells to underage drinkers, but it is not easy for the police to get evidence, any more than it is easy for them to witness drug dealing. Community wardens can be the witnesses where others are too afraid to speak out. Make no mistake: complaining to the police about a child's behaviour can result in a whole family of parents and relatives battering at the door. That, by the way, is why we need parental orders. Parental orders are a child protection issue. Parents who allow their children to rampage, to smash, to steal and to get drunk need to face their responsibilities. All of us with children knew when we had to confine them to barracks and knew when they were too cheeky by half. It is not easy for a parent with a recalcitrant teenager, so help must be available in a way that does not make that parent seem a failure. There is a difference between a parent who eggs on his child and does not care what his child is up to, and a parent who is trying his best but is losing the battle.

Young people deserve our support and investment. I welcome the commitment to increase

access to sport and leisure services, giving youngsters an alternative to the streets. I urge the Executive to ensure that those services are affordable and accessible to youngsters in rural areas.

Rob Gibson raised the issue of rural housing and I endorse most of what he said. There is a distinct need for affordable housing if we are to sustain rural development properly. There should be a particular commitment to the needs of remote and rural communities. We need to consider the shortage of land and the difficulty of getting infrastructure in place. If the Scottish Environment Protection Agency will not have another septic tank in an area and Scottish Water refuses to put in sewerage, how can we grow communities? I ask the Executive, in its support for rural areas, to consider particularly how we can access more land and get more infrastructure. I ask the Executive to speak to organisations such as the Highlands Small Communities Housing Trust to find the best way to make progress.

The partnership document is relevant to rural areas and to urban areas. I commend it and look forward to its implementation.

15:38

Mr Jim Mather (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): For some time, I have been identifying the impact that low economic growth has on real people in terms of lower incomes, poor health, lower life expectancy, family separation and population decline. Although I welcome the fact that the coalition, in its partnership agreement, has bowed to SNP pressure to focus on economic growth, that in itself is not enough. Scotland's Government must concentrate on achieving levels of growth that are at least equivalent to that achieved in London, the south-east and the rest of Europe. That is the standard by which we will measure the Government—nowhere more so than in the Highlands and Islands.

That is why I welcome the appointment of the new Minister for Enterprise and Lifelong Learning. The social and economic issues that disproportionately beset the Highlands and Islands should now be communicated to the heart of Government. However, I am not confident of major improvements, as the minister is sticking to what does not work any more. By that I mean policies and strategies that do many good things in terms of developing people, new technologies and new businesses, but that in themselves are not enough to keep talent and wealth in Scotland. His economic bucket is the same one that his three predecessors tried to build and maintain—one with holes in it, where the wealth and talent leaks into other economies.

The solution that we have advocated for some time—financial independence for the Scottish Parliament—is the missing piece in the Scottish jigsaw that would make all our other wonderful attributes and advantages come alive and enrich us all. It is the one measure that would take us from being a budget-focused branch economy to being a normal economy with the right and ability to maximise our income and be all we can be.

Instead, we remain the one deviant economy on the planet that has opened a bank account with our neighbour and simply hopes that it will be successful and fair to us. Such an impotent option can never pay, yet sadly that is exactly the strategy that the Executive has adopted. It is a strategy that denies a record of repeated failure and the fact that Scotland's share of the UK population, which was 9.3 per cent in 1974, is now 8.6 per cent, and is forecast to drop to 7.5 per cent by 2036.

The bad news for the Minister for Enterprise and Lifelong Learning is that we and the Scottish electorate will be counting the costs, and the costs will mount, because Mr Wallace remains boxed in by a refusal to accept a proposition that will be the future consensus in Scottish politics. He is like an old-time Viking standing on his longship off Kirkwall, about to sail to the battle of Largs, yet refusing to show any interest in a gatling gun. He is in effect saying, "Okay, it is powerful, but it would mean constructional change in the longship, and I've got a war to fight."

Well, our gatling gun—financial independence—is needed even more crucially as an economic weapon that will defend and protect the interests of Scottish people and future generations. That is the tragedy for Scotland. Quite simply, the combination of being a branch economy with a falling and aging population and continuing low levels of productivity makes the prospect of achieving respectable levels of economic growth quite impossible. In the next four years, the number of people who are aware of that and its pernicious effects will grow and grow, building support for our argument.

In conclusion, I echo the comment in *The Scotsman* in April that "A Smart, Successful Scotland" on its own was

"a dangerous delusion, for which we would all pay a heavy price."

I encourage the minister to learn the lessons of history, and to join the clamour for the financial powers that are needed genuinely to create meaningful economic growth in Scotland.

15:41

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I congratulate Jim Mather on an excellent maiden speech. I have always thought that Mr Mather makes some good points, but I am sure that his colleagues on the SNP benches will soon beat that out of him. He may wish to reflect on the unfortunate experience of his predecessor, Mr Andrew Wilson, who of course talked very much the same language as Mr Mather, and was rewarded by the SNP activists by being kicked out of this Parliament.

The first sentence in the partnership agreement that we are debating this afternoon is:

"Growing the economy is our top priority."

Those are fine words from the coalition parties. Let us just hope that this time the delivery matches the promises.

If we examine the coalition's record of the past four years, we see that it is not one of which to be proud. The Scottish economy grew by only 0.1 per cent last year. In 2002, we saw Scotland in recession for the first time in 20 years. Manufacturing has been particularly badly hit, with more than 7,000 job losses in 2002 and, since 1997, more than 57,000 job losses in the manufacturing sector. Business start-ups were down in 2002, despite extensive funding for the enterprise networks. Perhaps most significantly of all, there has been a marked increase in company insolvencies in Scotland, with 2002 showing a 23.6 per cent increase over 2001.

What are the coalition parties proposing to do to turn around this sorry situation? There are plenty of woolly words in the partnership agreement: woolly words on working with Scottish business and supporting manufacturing industries; woolly words about working in partnership with business and trade unions; woolly words about reducing unemployment; and woolly words about pursuing the creation of centres of excellence in industries. However, there is no detail on how those things are to be achieved. There are woolly words on encouraging local authorities to give school pupils hands-on opportunities in enterprise initiatives but, again, no detail. There are woolly words on working in partnership with trade unions on learning initiatives but, again, no detail, and so on.

There is a specific commitment to review the law of personal bankruptcy. That is welcome, but it says a lot about the expectations of the Executive when the emphasis is on businesses that fail, rather than on businesses that succeed. The Executive is to consult on a review of planning laws. That will be welcomed by many in the business community who see the current system as slow, expensive and cumbersome—indeed, as

a real barrier to economic growth. Fortunately, the Liberal Democrat manifesto commitment to grant third-party rights of appeal—a proposal viewed with horror by the business community—does not appear in the partnership agreement, although I was concerned that the First Minister did not rule that out when I questioned him on it yesterday.

My major criticism of the programme is that, when it comes to business, it misses the point completely. The key priorities for Scottish businesses are the twin burdens of business taxation and over-regulation. During the first term of the present Administration, the level playing field between Scotland and England on business rates, which the previous Conservative Government achieved, was lost.

Fergus Ewing (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP): I asked this question during the past four years and did not receive an answer, but I will persevere. Murdo Fraser says that a level playing field was achieved under the previous Conservative Government, but why was it achieved only in 1995, which was 16 years into Tory rule?

Murdo Fraser: As Mr Ewing is aware, historically, Scottish councils had the right to fix the level of business rates, which meant that it took some time to move from that situation to the unified business rate. Mr Ewing should congratulate the previous Conservative Administration on achieving the UBR. Scottish businesses were delighted at that achievement and want to return to what they had between 1995 and 1997. However, the Executive does not propose action to restore the level playing field, which demonstrates how out of touch it is with the business community.

Business rates are not the only problem. Scottish Water's charges have increased substantially in the current year. I have been contacted by businesses whose charges have increased by 200 per cent, 300 per cent and, in some cases, 500 per cent. As Scottish Water is a monopoly supplier, businesses must pay the charges or they are cut off. We need an urgent inquiry into the activities of that unaccountable quango, but there is nothing in the programme for government that offers any hope in that regard.

There is little in the programme about the widely discredited quango, Scottish Enterprise. Indeed, it did not even feature in the Labour party's manifesto—perhaps the party was too embarrassed to mention it. The Scottish economy needs a shift away from the bloated quango culture. Scottish Enterprise absorbs millions of pounds of taxpayers' money, but does little to grow the economy and helps only a favoured few businesses. We should cut Scottish Enterprise's budget and return the money directly to businesses in the form of rate reductions.

We have had four years of poor growth, manufacturing recession, poor business start-up figures and increasing levels of business failure. The programme for government offers more of the same and fails to address the business community's real concerns. I hope that, during the next four years, the economy in Scotland will grow, but I fear that this timid programme is a recipe for another four years of economic failure.

15:47

Bill Butler (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab): I, too, congratulate Mr Mather on his maiden speech. I do so straightforwardly—it was combative and interesting and I hope to hear more such speeches from the SNP members, rather than the sort of stuff that we heard this morning.

I welcome yesterday's statement by the First Minister on the Labour-led Executive's programme for the second session of the Parliament. I believe that, essentially, the programme is a coherent plan of action to tackle many of the challenges that face Scotland. It is a practical programme that recognises the people of Scotland's legitimate demands on the issues of jobs and the wider economy, health care, education, transport and the creation of safer communities.

I offer my welcome genuinely, despite one particular aspect of the agreed programme. It will come as no surprise to members that I refer to the fact that the programme does not include my proposal for directly elected health boards. That proposal was contained in Scottish Labour's manifesto, but did not make it into the agreed text of the programme for government. I am sure that there is a good reason for that and I have written to the Minister for Health and Community Care to ask for it. I am still hopeful that the Executive will look favourably on my resubmitted member's bill on the subject, which has attracted cross-party support and which is a sensible, if modest, extension of the democratic principle.

Notwithstanding that omission, I am content to support the essentials of the Executive's programme in the policy areas that are important to the people of Scotland. I will focus on two of the reforms that the First Minister announced yesterday. I believe sincerely that the proposed national health service reform bill is a sensible and necessary measure. When enacted, it will ensure that NHS Scotland improves patient care and the quality of service.

I believe that the abolition of national health service trusts will at last clear away the final remnants of the Conservatives' failed experiment to transmogrify a public service into a private business. NHS trusts led to the development of a bureaucratic and inefficient health system that was

burdened by unnecessary duplication. The move towards unified local health systems, built around NHS boards, will end the lack of clarity, the confused accountability and the unnecessary fragmentation of health service provision, which are the consequences of a dinosaur-like belief in the efficacy of the free market at all times.

Mary Scanlon (Highlands and Islands) (Con): What is Bill Butler's estimate for the reduction in bureaucracy to be brought about through the transition to unified health boards?

Bill Butler: It is almost immeasurable. The reduction in bureaucracy will follow the change to the new system as night follows day. The solutions offered by the Tories in the 1980s were no solutions at all; they formed part of the problem. They do not meet the complex challenges that we face as we attempt to create a responsive health service that is able to carry out up-to-date procedures in modern facilities.

Real, progressive reform, such as the abolition of the cumbersome trusts and the creation of community health partnerships, must and will go hand in hand with record levels of investment, such as the £700 million that is to be spent on adult acute hospital services in the Greater Glasgow NHS Board area over the next 10 years, which I welcome.

The second reform that I wish to mention is the additional support for learning bill. Its aim will be to provide for all pupils, giving them a positive, inclusive educational experience and the necessary support for them to fulfil their potential. The measures in that proposed bill have been developed as a result of extensive consultation with parents and educationists. That consultation showed a need to rectify the deficiencies in the current record of needs system, which is viewed—correctly, I believe—as overly bureaucratic, inflexible and difficult for local authorities to implement fully.

I welcome the proposed bill and the measures that it contains: changing the terminology; increasing the level of support; and replacing the record of needs document with a co-ordinated support plan for pupils with multiple or complex needs, who require services from several agencies to support their learning. All those component parts will strengthen rights for parents and pupils. It is a good, practical, progressive piece of proposed legislation.

The two proposed bills to which I have referred contain reforms that are part of a programme that will, I believe, lead to a more equal, more caring and more democratic Scottish society. They form part of a programme that, I contend, mirrors and responds to the day-to-day priorities of the overwhelming majority of Scotland's people. On

that basis, and as a democratic socialist, I commend the programme to the Parliament.

15:53

Mike Pringle (Edinburgh South) (LD): I am pleased to have this opportunity to support the Executive in its programme for the next four years. I take the opportunity to pay tribute to the extremely hard work that my predecessor, Angus MacKay, put in on behalf of the constituents of Edinburgh South. I say this for myself, and I think that I say it for him too: neither of us saw the election result coming. I wish Angus well in whatever his new endeavours happen to be. I hope, of course, that they are so successful that he is not tempted to return to the Parliament in four years' time.

I first became involved in politics in the early 1980s. One of the many attractions of getting involved in politics then was the commitment of the Liberals and the Social Democratic Party to implementing proportional representation in local government. Since then, I have been determined to see that goal achieved. As a result of the agreement before us and of the work of the Liberal Democrats, I know that it will be brought to a conclusion in 2007. I realise that not everyone shares my joy at that achievement, and I understand that the MP for Edinburgh South is just a little vexed by the decision. Unlike Mr McLetchie, I believe that it will bring better accountability to local government.

There are many other commitments in the partnership agreement that will benefit Edinburgh, and Edinburgh South in particular. We will deliver the rail link to Edinburgh airport, and the tram network will, I hope, ease congestion, particularly in the central part of Edinburgh. The greatest benefit to Edinburgh South will come from the construction of the Borders rail link. The failure to provide park-and-ride sites in the south of Edinburgh has meant that the northern part of Edinburgh South has become an unofficial park-and-ride site, which has caused severe congestion. I hope that commuter use of the rail link will ease the conflict between residents and commuters.

Edinburgh South has one of the largest concentrations of elderly people in Europe, so the extension of concessionary fare schemes on public transport across Scotland is welcome. I know that the extension of the home insulation and central heating programmes to the elderly—initially to the over-80s and then to other pensioner groups beyond 2006—will also be appreciated by many of my elderly constituents.

I think that all teachers will welcome the agreement. There are a number of reasons for

that, but I will give just three: first, the scrapping of national league tables; secondly, the ending of the current system of national tests for five to 14-year-olds; and, thirdly, the introduction of a more flexible scheme for the part of the curriculum for three to six-year-olds. I believe that that flexibility will be welcomed most, as it will change the ethos of primary 1. By freeing up the curriculum and having less formal teaching methods, there will be less pressure in the first year, and that will encourage a better start for all of our futures—the children of Scotland.

I am extremely pleased to note the measures in the partnership agreement to tackle antisocial behaviour, which many members have referred to. In the Inch, which is in one part of my constituency, we have a real problem.

I have found my first 28 days in the Parliament rewarding and probably very exciting. There is no doubt that it is a friendly place and I thank all those who have helped me begin to settle in. The most rewarding part is being able to help my constituents, so I will take every opportunity in the next four years to lend as many of them such assistance as I can.

What is more important to any of my constituents than having a job, particularly when they have given loyal support to their employer? My majority was only 158 and, although I would say that I do not want to go through that experience again, it could be argued that, as more than that number work for Scottish Natural Heritage in Edinburgh South—well, I am sure members can draw their own conclusions.

I believe that we must be careful about how the Executive's policies affect not only the future well-being of those employees but the very existence of the organisation. Few members may be aware that a recent survey of SNH employees in Edinburgh found that 90 per cent were very unhappy with the present proposal and were very unlikely to move. I was, and am, a strong supporter of devolution. It is right that devolution of power to Edinburgh will lead to devolution from Edinburgh. However, I suggest that, while we pursue such a policy, we must be sympathetic towards those whose lives are affected by the decisions.

My commitment to the electors of Edinburgh South is that I will support them in any way that I can over the next four years.

15:58

Mr Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): In recent weeks, there has been much talk about how the political map of Scotland has been redrawn after the election. That may be the case, but the Green group in the Parliament is

more concerned with how the physical map of Scotland will change as a result of the partnership agreement.

The first issue is the Cairngorms national park boundary, which bears little relationship with what is physically on the ground and has everything to do with political boundaries and political shenanigans. That is the first and easiest bit of the map that needs to be redrawn so as to include highland Perthshire.

We also urgently need new lines to be marked on the map to extend the national grid infrastructure to those remote areas that could supply renewable electricity. If the Executive is to have any chance of meeting the renewable electricity target, that issue must be progressed as a priority.

Of course, some things need to be scrubbed off the Executive's map. The completion of the motorway box around Glasgow will cram us even further into congestion claustrophobia. We would rather see just a fraction of the £500 million that is to be spent on 5 miles of the M74 being put towards placing towns such as Leven and St Andrews back on the rail network where they belong. That would deliver economic growth for those communities and would deliver some social justice for people without cars.

Given the Executive's commitment to plant 150 million trees to offset the pollution from all the new roads, the land in between the roads should certainly look green enough. I hope that the Executive will uphold its commitment to introduce competitive payment rates for organic farmers and will respect the wishes of consumers who do not want genetically modified crops in their local fields or on their plates.

The true test of any addition to the new map of Scotland is whether it will contribute positively to the lives of future generations. We welcome the introduction of strategic environmental assessment in Scotland, which could provide the crystal ball for looking at how our decisions today will affect the future, but we need reassurance that the Executive will ensure that sustainability is mainstreamed in the thinking not just of the Cabinet but of civil service departmental heads and their middle managers and staff.

We need to know that the approach of assessing the sustainability of our actions today will apply to all the Executive's strategies and programmes and to the whole of the public sector. Unless we adopt such an approach across the public sector, we will not be able to act strategically or to assess much and we will leave many gaps for the environment to be degraded.

I hope that the new map of Scotland that will emerge from the Parliament's work will be fit for

future generations. We intend to play a full part in guiding the Executive towards that goal.

16:01

Bruce Crawford (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP): I begin by congratulating Ross Finnie on holding on to his ministerial portfolio. Over the past few years, he has had to endure some pretty torrid media headlines. On occasion, he has been compared to Captain Mainwaring from “Dad’s Army”. Although it is true that there is a physical likeness, by holding on to his portfolio, he has proved that he has more staying power and durability than the wavering Captain Mainwaring had. I wish him all the best for the next few years because, from what I have seen of the partnership agreement and the programme for government, he may need it.

There is some good stuff in the programme for government and the partnership agreement—in particular, as other members have mentioned, the proposals for legislation on strategic environmental assessments and the commitments on green energy and waste. However, there are also areas in which the new Government’s commitments require to be tested and there are significant voids that need to be explained.

I sincerely hope that the strategic environmental assessments will describe how the Executive will set greenhouse gas reduction targets for the transport, agriculture and forestry sectors in Scotland, as well as for the energy sector. I guess that I should not hold my breath for long, because the partnership agreement contains very little about the impact of climate change and the need to reduce Scotland’s footprints on the world.

It was good to see in the agreement a commitment to exploiting Scotland’s renewable energy potential and recognition that the strengthening of the grid is a major impediment to achieving the Executive’s goals. Make no mistake—as Mark Ruskell said, the upgrading of the grid will be a litmus test of whether, given the powers that are available to the Parliament, the Executive will be able to achieve all that it aspires to.

What will the Executive do if the UK Government continues to ignore the strategic economic importance to Scotland of grid upgrade, which is what the UK Government has done to date? Will the Executive simply shrug its shoulders and say that it has done all that it can within the powers that are available to the Parliament, or will it accept the inevitable conclusion that, to resolve serious energy matters such as grid upgrade, energy policy must become the Scottish Parliament’s responsibility?

It will also be interesting to see the Executive’s consultation paper on its proposed water services bill. Will it herald the introduction of competition and the beginning of the front-door privatisation of Scotland’s water services?

Alex Johnstone (North East Scotland) (Con): Hear, hear.

Bruce Crawford: The Conservatives did not argue for that in their manifesto—they argued for mutualisation, which is not privatisation. It is obvious that Alex Johnstone does not agree with some Tory policies.

How will the proposed bill deal with the impact of water charges on the small business sector? The First Minister was right to put the economy at the centre of the Executive’s programme and to make it a top priority. The small business sector is vital to the Scottish economy’s success. If the Executive shares that view, the discrimination against small businesses because of Scotland’s high water charges in comparison with those for our nearest competitors in England and Wales cannot be allowed to continue.

I will give members examples of what I mean by that from figures that the water industry commissioner provided. The average water bill for a newsagent in England and Wales is £141, but in Scotland it is £526. The average water bill for a restaurant in England and Wales is £975, but in Scotland it is £4,658. The average bill for commercial premises in England and Wales is £1,772, but in Scotland it is £28,494. The average bill in retail in England and Wales is £12,024, but in Scotland it is £83,700. If the Executive is serious about the Scottish economy, it must tackle that discrimination and introduce proposals in the water services bill to help Scotland’s small businesses. Otherwise, Executive members and their rhetoric will be proved to be like empty vessels, rattling about with no ideas.

16:06

Dr Elaine Murray (Dumfries) (Lab): I will describe experiences of my constituents that show why I welcome the partnership proposals to make our communities safer.

Last summer, I was contacted by a group of residents in my constituency. They were neighbours who were frustrated beyond endurance by a gang of young people in their early teens. The group complained of abusive behaviour and language, harassment and vandalism to the local school and their properties. Everybody knew who was doing the deeds—they were local kids whose parents did not seem to bother—but it seemed that nothing could be done about them.

I met the community police officer, who was frustrated, too. He had a record of reported incidents and had pressed charges against those involved, but the system was slow and it seemed that he could not do much to improve the situation. He had spoken to the parents of the young people, but one father had said that the kids were out of control and that he could do nothing about it.

I met the reporters to the children's panel, who knew the family well and were anxious to make progress. They told me about a list of problems that prevented them from making progress, such as a lack of sufficient places in secure accommodation, especially in our locality, which meant that the panel often had to rely on foster carers. There is a lack of alternative disposals for people who are under 16 and there is a serious problem with the number of social workers who are trained and available to implement the disposals.

Eventually, the ringleader returned to secure accommodation, the dark nights came in and the situation seemed to quieten down. However, last week, two upset and angry ladies called at my constituency office. They were the mother and grandmother of a very young girl who had been seriously assaulted, possibly by someone with a sexual intent. It was fortunate that a passer-by pulled the teenage boy off the girl and called the police, which allowed charges to be brought. Of course, the girl was terrified. Her terror increased as the boy and his friend took to harassing her family, to hanging around outside her school as she left and outside her house and her grandmother's house, and to following her to the shops.

The police and lawyers said that nothing could be done to prevent the teenage boy and his friend from doing that. That was when the women approached me in frustration. During our discussion, it soon became clear that the boy was one of the gang that had harassed the neighbourhood a year before. Unfortunately, he had graduated from petty street crime to violent crime that could place him on the sex offenders register. Those women wanted to know why the law could not protect that little girl from harassment by her attacker. They felt that the assailant was given greater consideration than the victim. I promised them that we would try to change the law and redress the balance in favour of the victim.

Sadly, such incidents are replicated in every constituency. That is why I welcome the commitments in "A Partnership for a Better Scotland" to legislate to tackle antisocial behaviour. Perpetrators who are under 16 should no longer believe that they are exempt from the law because of their age. I welcome the

commitment to make parents accept their responsibility for controlling their children's behaviour.

During my time as a councillor in Ayrshire and as an MSP, several police officers have reported to me that, late at night, they have quite often picked up children as young as 12 or 13 who were drunk and getting up to mischief. The police officers have taken them home to their parents, but their parents' attitude has been, "What do you expect me to do about it?" That is not good enough. Such parents are letting their children and their communities down.

However, it would be wrong to give the impression that all young people are involved in crime. The vast majority of young people have responsible parents and behave compassionately and respectfully towards one another, despite the many pressures on young people nowadays. Alongside taking tough action to deal with antisocial behaviour and the lack of parental responsibility, we must help to support young people and enable them to make positive choices not to get involved in crime or drugs.

At the beginning of this week, I was fortunate to witness such a scheme when I attended a performance that was given by young people from S1 to S4 at the Moffat Youth Theatre. With the assistance of drama instructors, they had put together a moving series of plays about bullying, social inclusion and lack of self-esteem and they explored ways in which they could reject becoming involved in criminal and antisocial activity. I am delighted that Moffat Youth Theatre has just been successful in obtaining a grant of £185,000 from the Community Fund to expand such excellent work. I am also pleased that the partnership agreement directs an extra £10 million to provide additional support for localised action and initiatives to divert young people away from crime.

Making Scotland a better place to live means taking tough action where individuals act against the collective interest and giving people the opportunity to make positive choices. The proposals in the new partnership agreement do both. I congratulate colleagues in the Labour party and the Liberal Democrat party for their hard work in putting together a programme that will make a real difference to the real problems that are faced by people in our constituencies.

16:12

Colin Fox (Lothians) (SSP): I promise the Presiding Officer that there will be no singing today.

The statement that the First Minister made to the Parliament yesterday has been criticised today and yesterday as being complacent and

representing much more of the same, when promises of profound improvement are what Scotland needs most. However, critics of such political laziness have so far been unable to spot the underlying title of the partnership document. The Executive has presented us with “Carry on Maggie Volume 2”—the film version is to be known as “The Matron Reloaded”. As an SSP MSP for the Lothians, I much prefer the Jack McConnell whom I met 20 years ago as a young socialist to the Jack McConnell yesterday whom I saw banging the law-and-order drum. For all the world, I thought that I was listening to Mrs Thatcher when he was pandering to the fear of crime that blights our communities. Like Mrs Thatcher, he was flimsy in detailing what moneys are to be invested in providing what the partnership document promises to be exciting opportunities

“that will excite and stretch our young people”.

At the same time, the document is saturated with tough new punishments for those young people and their guardians.

Providing facilities and support for our youngsters and investing in their needs have surely long been proven to be a much more effective long-term solution to combating youth crime. The bag-load of sticks that the First Minister announced yesterday belongs in the dustbin of history alongside Mrs Thatcher.

In the light of figures that were released yesterday showing that youth crime levels in Scotland are no higher than they were 10 years ago, a person could be forgiven for thinking that the Executive is pandering to a fear of crime rather than allaying such fears. It would be better if such fears were put in context or if the root causes of crime in our schemes and communities were addressed in Edinburgh—for example, in the Inch, where I live and which Mike Pringle mentioned—and throughout the Lothians and Scotland. The Executive and the Parliament know full well that the level of youth crime and indeed all crime is disproportionately higher in the poorer areas of our society. To go on, as the First Minister did yesterday, about job culture simply offers failure upon failure. The suggestion is that some youngsters are beyond the pale and that society has given up on 14 and 15-year-olds.

That approach has little to offer as a serious solution to the problem of antisocial behaviour. There were few less edifying sights in the recent election than that of Scotland’s political leaders—all middle-aged men—queueing up in some kind of Dutch auction to attack and punish some of Scotland’s most deprived youngsters.

The way forward on this issue is to include those youngsters in society. We need to encourage

them to feel part of and involved in their society, give them goals that reward them for playing a part in our society and make them part of social progress in Scotland. The way forward is not to ban them or manacle them and it is certainly not to punish and jail their parents.

16:16

Donald Gorrie (Central Scotland) (LD): I have a constructive suggestion as to how the Executive could further develop its excellent policies to develop better communities: the Executive should make greater use of the contribution of the voluntary sector. That is a sphere in which collectively we did not do as well as we should have over the past four years.

The voluntary sector covers the whole range of Scottish life: youth work, health, arts, sport, environment, caring and welfare. It also supports families, the elderly, the community, and people with drug and alcohol problems. All voluntary sector organisations suffer from the same problem, which is short-term funding for new projects—whether from the Executive, local councils, the lottery, charities or sponsorship.

There is a current idea that new is good and that new is newsworthy—the minister, councillor or whoever gets his photo taken with something new. However, the idea that new is good is bad because we fail to support organisations adequately. Core funding is not provided, which means that many organisations struggle to exist at all. If they have a good project, they cannot keep it going because the money goes to another new project rather than to keeping going an existing project that is working well. That leads to a waste of resources. If a project is funded for three years, the project staff wander about for a year finding out what they are meant to do. They follow that with one year of good work before the final year in which everyone is busy looking for their next job. It is ridiculous that one year’s work results from three years’ money.

Such funding is based on competitive bidding. As far as I can see, the overall figures show that one bid for funding in six is successful. That means that five out of six organisations have wasted all the energy and skill that went into the unsuccessful bid. The scheme-based funding approach means that organisations have to invent a specious new scheme, which is usually an old scheme dressed up. Organisations lose staff and they have no coherent strategy. We need to redirect budgets from departments to make better use of the voluntary sector, which makes a great contribution to our society.

I will take youth work as an example. All members visit schools and the main thing that

young people say to us is that they have nothing to do in the evening. If we invested more in good things for young people to do, we would not need to invest so much in dealing with the problems that they raise. If we could mobilise the voluntary sector, we would make a huge difference to our communities and get much better value for money.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Trish Godman): I call Alex Johnstone, who has three minutes.

16:18

Alex Johnstone (North East Scotland) (Con): I will go very quickly.

I am interested by some of the bills that are proposed in the partnership agreement. I will deal first with the proposed nature conservation bill. It will make a nice change for the Parliament to spend time doing something in favour of nature and wild animals rather than on the politically motivated protection of foxes, which characterised the Parliament four years ago.

I will be taking the opportunity to further the aim, which I set out in the last session, of protecting the red squirrel—a measure that has hit the news again today. Although the subject can raise a laugh in the Parliament, the protection of the red squirrel in Scotland is a key objective of any wildlife policy. I look forward to proposing such a measure during the passage of the nature conservation bill.

I will move on to what might be considered rather more serious matters. The proposed water services bill gives the Parliament the opportunity to consider once again the problems that we have with our water industry. Bruce Crawford rightly said that the Conservatives did not propose wholesale privatisation during the election campaign; we once again proposed mutualisation as an alternative structure. We need that alternative structure. Although Scotland has so much clean water—indeed, it is hard to imagine where it all goes—it has among the highest water charges in Europe. Bruce Crawford chose to compare those with charges south of the border. Admittedly, the charges here are much higher, but the charges south of the border were achieved under what was perceived in Scotland to be an unpopular and politically incorrect system. We need to examine our system once again and find out whether we can deliver reasonable water charges.

I remain to be convinced that strategic environmental assessments will be as effective as some people believe they can be. I am concerned that, when we talk about sustainability, we too often mean policies that are uncosted or uncostable. Indeed, the problems highlighted

today with integrating children with learning difficulties into our schools show what can happen to the public purse when the charges under an uncosted policy begin to mount up. That should teach us all that, if we are to have sustainability, any such measures must be costed. If they are not costed, they are unsustainable.

The First Minister's statement did not cover concerns about genetically modified organisms. I am perhaps one of the members who is closest to being convinced of the need for GMOs in our environment. However, we need a robust assessment of all the evidence. Moreover, we must complete the testing programme, which—given the problems that it has faced—might mean extending it over more years than was originally planned. After that, we need to make a properly informed decision during this session.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You must wind up now.

Alex Johnstone: I got through most of my speech. Thank you very much.

16:22

Robert Brown (Glasgow) (LD): On the whole, this afternoon's speeches have been very good and are a considerable improvement on the set pieces with which the debate opened this morning. I congratulate colleagues from all parts of the chamber who made maiden speeches this afternoon—most recently, Colin Fox made a good speech based on his perspective on youth crime.

The change of mood from the conflict of the election campaign to the serious business of Parliament and government is sometimes a difficult one. The desire to continue a half-finished debate or to score a goal after the referee, in the form of the electorate, has blown the whistle is understandably strong. Each session of Parliament will have its own mood music. In this session, the Parliament has serious work to do. It needs to build on the foundations that have been laid over the past four years, to deliver real and sustainable improvements in our health service and opportunities for our economy and young people and to rebuild our public infrastructure, whether it be transport or school buildings, private homes or the fabric of our towns and cities. Such serious work requires the whole chamber's input, which will mean a constructive approach from the various Opposition groups and a generous inclusiveness from the Government parties.

Unfortunately, judging by their opening speeches in today's debate, I think that the leaders of the Opposition parties—like the Bourbons returning after Napoleon's defeat—have learned nothing and forgotten nothing. The old records are still playing. We need neither the

sterile—and usually indirect and insidious—attacks on the Scottish Parliament as an institution and the Parliament building that sometimes motivate the Tories, nor the endless constitutional debates that distort the SNP's input.

Alasdair Morgan: Simply in the interests of having a bit of variety, I thought that I would correct the member's history. I thought that the Bourbons were in power after Napoleon's defeat, not in opposition.

Robert Brown: Good point. I accept that input to the debate.

Given the electorate's verdict in the recent elections, the constitutional debate is dead for a generation. Despite the impressive contributions of new members such as Jim Mather to today's debate, it would be far better if the SNP concentrated on its role of criticising and holding to account the Government parties instead of endlessly treating us to tirades about independence.

Although I had some hopes when Roseanna Cunningham opened her speech with an offer of a constructive approach, the only positive suggestions that I took from her speech were her advocacy of weekend courts and better bus timetables. She dismissed health and education in two sentences, in which she indicated her broad support for the Executive programme but doubted our competence to carry it out.

David McLetchie was next in, for the Conservatives. He has made his name in the Parliament with studied, if superficial, sallies against the size of the ministry and the cost of the Holyrood building. He is good at knocking copy, but he is not so good at positive suggestions. He is against proportional representation, despite the fact that the current system guarantees large and unaccountable majorities for his political opponents in places such as Glasgow and despite the fact that the Conservatives would not even muster a place on the Parliamentary Bureau without proportional representation in elections to the Parliament. That sort of stuff might have done well in the old session of Parliament, but it will not do in this one. In this session, the Parliament will, like all Parliaments, be judged on the success of its work on the key priorities of health, education, enterprise, transport and crime.

The progressive programme for government and the legislative proposals are the result of a successful negotiation between the Liberal Democrats and Labour. From our point of view, the programme is a Liberal Democrat one, which we support with enthusiasm. It is radical and constructive and will make Scotland a significantly better place in four years' time. As John Swinney pointed out yesterday, there is much in it that

overlaps with the programmes of other parties and to which those parties can contribute. I sincerely hope that members will use their talents, through the committee system and through debates in the chamber, to that end. Effective democracy needs an effective Opposition just as much as it needs an effective Government.

There are, of course, areas of tension between and within the Government parties, notably on local government reform and on the approach to crime. It would be surprising if that were not the case. However, I would like to say a word or two about children's hearings, which the Executive is pledged to develop, improve and support with adequate resources. Elaine Murray talked in considerable detail, and with some effect, about the experience that she had in her local area with regard to such problems.

A recent report by the reporter to the Glasgow young offenders forum noted that 40 to 50 per cent of the more persistent offenders had previously been referred on care and protection grounds. To put it another way, teachers, social workers and other professionals tell us that a large percentage of potential young offenders can be spotted at the age of six and that their problems are often caused or contributed to by parental neglect. That is the real area of priority and I am strongly of the view that we should not be diverted from tackling it by tough talk about fast-track justice and more police cracking down on antisocial behaviour, relevant and important as those things are. It is far more important to put in place the resources to give young people challenging opportunities, which will divert the at-risk minority from criminal activities and support the work of children's hearings.

Dennis Canavan commented that it was simplistic nonsense to suggest that young people's behaviour would magically improve if we threw their parents in jail. He is entirely right, but I am glad to say that that is not what the partnership agreement proposes. It provides for a procedure for ensuring that parents co-operate with children's hearings. That is the sort of power that any legal system must have and is akin to remedies for breach of interdict in cases where estranged husbands will not leave their wives in peace or where parents allow their children to truant from school. We want to tackle crime, but measuring that simply in terms of the number of offenders caught is a recipe for disaster. We do not want to catch more offenders; we want to prevent people from committing criminal acts or acts of vandalism in the first place.

The programme is bold and imaginative. I am delighted that the Liberal Democrats have had such a major influence on it, but I invite the whole chamber to support it in testing it, moulding it and

making it a major instrument for improving the life chances of the people of Scotland.

16:28

Miss Annabel Goldie (West of Scotland) (Con): Mr Brown has been the personification of tolerance and patience, but that is about as far as I can go on consensus. There are various forms of torture that one group of human beings may seek to visit on another, but the Scottish Executive subjecting the hapless group of souls called the wind-up speakers to four and a half hours of sitting in sepulchral Gothic surroundings on chairs akin to picnic stools while listening to 36 speeches is among the more excruciating. As a mechanism for debate, that structure has been cumbersome, unfocused and tedious and I hope that it is not repeated. Despite that, I agree with Mr Brown that there have been some excellent maiden speeches and some worthy contributions from all sections of the chamber.

The content of the legislative programme may also be described as unfocused. My colleague Mr McLetchie posed a general question: has the Executive analysed what the electorate told it on 1 May, when less than half the population voted? The population told us that there is disillusion with politicians, disillusion with politics and disillusion with devolution. Is that because of the flagship of Scottish Executive profligacy—the cost of the new Parliament building? Is it because of the money that is spent by politicians on politicians, on the number of ministers and on the size of Government? Is it to do with failure of delivery, whereby there are bigger waiting lists, longer waiting times, escalating crime, failing standards in education and mounting indiscipline in the classroom? The list could continue.

What is the Executive's analysis of the troubling malaise? Its analysis seems to be that Labour and Liberal Democrat politicians know best. Rather than radical, focused and prioritised measures to dispel the malaise, reassure the electorate and address the problems, there is in the legislative programme either silence or atrophy.

This morning, Mr Wallace said that the economy was the top priority. So it should be, as there is growth stagnation, the highest business rate in the UK and a seized-up transport system. What specific proposals does the Executive have? None.

Figures that were released yesterday disclosed an alarming situation in relation to law and order. Most disturbing was the increase in drugs crimes, but what specific proposals does the Executive have for improved drugs rehabilitation? None. Are there proposals for more police to address the rest of the turbulence in the law and order scene? No.

Are there proposals for honest sentencing? No.

It is surprising that the Executive's focus turns on youth crime. Members may be equally surprised to learn that I agree with much of what Mr Fox said. The focus on youth crime is surprising for two reasons. First, other forms of crime are showing more marked increases than youth crime. Secondly, when in the previous session the Executive had the chance to support Conservative amendments to the Criminal Justice (Scotland) Bill to achieve greater robustness in dealing with youth crime, it voted against the very measures that it now seeks to introduce.

More disturbing health statistics have been disclosed today. The reform that the legislative programme proposes is tinkering at the margins; the programme proposes no radical restoration of control to our health professionals and to patients, but a temporary adjustment of procedures and of some mechanisms.

The legislative programme does not answer the plaintive plea of the people of Scotland, which was so clamantly expressed on 1 May. Where the programme should respond it is silent and when it responds it either misses the mark or does not even reach the target. The programme is timid, because where it should shout it is mute and where it speaks it whimpers.

16:33

Alasdair Morgan (South of Scotland) (SNP): I will start by making a couple of points that arise from the First Minister's statement yesterday afternoon. The first relates to Mr McConnell's extolling of the benefits of the first four years of the partnership. He stated:

"700,000 tenants in social housing now have greater rights".—[*Official Report*, 28 May 2003; c 81.]

He also boasted about investment in new schools.

That is a rosy-tinted perspective. I will give two examples of how of the Government's record sounds a bit hollow in Dumfries and Galloway. It sounds a bit hollow to council tenants who sat for many years on the council waiting list and gained some comfort from the fact that, even if they were not going to get a house, they were accumulating some housing points from their time on the list. They now discover, after the total transfer of the council's stock to a housing partnership, that the points system has been changed and that their time on the waiting list is to be ignored. No one told them that in advance of the ballot. The housing partnership and the council are now arguing about who knew and who told whom when. All that the council tenants know is that they were sold a pup and that the greater rights that the First Minister talked about seem very insubstantial.

The Executive's record also sounds a bit hollow to the parents and others who packed a public meeting in Dunragit, Wigtownshire, on Monday night to listen to proposals to close the village school. It is an excellent school of 28 pupils, which has received the most glowing of inspectors' reports. It has a building that even the education authority admits is in excellent condition. However, the powers that be want to close it, because they cannot fund the PFI scheme for the whole region without making small savings here and there at the expense of small communities. The First Minister should not talk to the people of Dunragit about investment in new schools; he should just tell them that they can keep the one that they have.

My second point concerns the First Minister's top priority, of which we have been reminded several times today: growing the Scottish economy. The point has been made that, out of a lengthy statement running to some 10 columns of the *Official Report*, the references to growing the economy barely manage to fill two paragraphs. I am happy to concede that that does not imply any unwillingness on the part of the Executive to grow the economy; rather, it betrays the fundamental lack of any levers in its control that can make a significant contribution to that objective.

When the First Minister responded to that criticism yesterday, he had to resort to talking about the infrastructure investment that the Government is planning to make. Although I gladly acknowledge the fact that any such investment is a necessary condition for sustained economic growth, the Government's argument totally misses the point. While the economy continues to stagnate—I apologise for using that term; stability is the Government's preferred term and zero growth is the ultimate in stability—the amount of tax revenue that is available for such investment will allow us to improve our infrastructure at a rate that goes nowhere near addressing the neglect that it has suffered during 18 years of Conservative Governments and six years of a Labour Government.

Bizarrely, the First Minister said yesterday that we have to deliver growth to allow us to fund our services. He said that we

“must generate more wealth to fund and resource excellence in our public services.”—[*Official Report*, 28 May 2003; c 82.]

Let us set aside the fact that there is nothing in the Government's plans that will make the Scottish economy different. Let us assume that the Scottish economy grows. Let us assume that increasing corporation tax revenues begin to fill the Government's coffers because the economy is expanding. How much of that will

“fund ... excellence in our public services”?

The answer is less than 10 per cent of that increased revenue from growth, as that is the Barnett share that will come to the Scottish Executive.

Mr Kerr: Is the member at all aware of international economic events? Is he aware that economic growth in the euro zone this year is forecast to be only around 1 per cent for the third successive year? Does he understand anything about international economics? The economies of our major competitors, such as Germany, Japan and America, have all been in recession. What we provide through our partnership with the UK Government are the lowest-ever inflation rate, the lowest-ever interest rate, the highest-ever employment rate and the lowest unemployment rate for a very long time.

Alasdair Morgan: That was a fairly long speech to concede that the Scottish economy is going down the tubes. Andy Kerr does not explain how it has been going that way over the past 40 years or how he is going to fund increases in services through increased growth in the Scottish economy when we do not get the revenue from the tax growth. Even the 10 per cent Barnett share of our tax revenues depends on decisions of the United Kingdom Treasury concerning how it spends the money. If Messrs Blair and Brown were to mess up their approach to the euro—which they might well do—and lose an election as a result, allowing the Tories to get into power at Westminster, we could see public expenditure fall at Westminster and we would get no benefit from increased growth in the Scottish economy because our share of that increased growth would fall. The current system has not worked for the past 40 years, as Jim Mather powerfully pointed out, and there is no likelihood of its working in the next 40 years.

We have had a good debate today, and I echo the comments that have been made by other members about the quality of the speeches. Mike Pringle was modest almost to the point of rubbishing his own campaign. At least he admitted that he did so from the standpoint of having a majority of 158, which compares well against my majority of minus 99. Generally, the speeches were of a high standard and I hope that the comments in tomorrow's press refer to that.

In his excellent first speech, Mr Stewart Maxwell pointed out flaws in the three-member ward system for the single transferable vote. He made what I thought was a reasonable point, which is that STV is not proportional representation, despite the lyrical praise with which Mike Rumbles lauded it and his description of it as proportional. I inform Mr Rumbles that STV is not PR.

Mike Rumbles: How can Alasdair Morgan say that the single transferable vote is not proportional, when it is clear that it is? I grant that the more

wards there are, the more proportional STV is. However, wards of three or four members are still proportional. I suggest to Alasdair Morgan that he is misleading members.

Alasdair Morgan: The point is that STV is not proportional; it is more proportional than the first-past-the-post system and it gets more proportional the more members there are in each seat, but limiting the number to three per ward does not result in a very proportional system. The example of De Valera is an instructive one.

I am also interested in what Mr McLetchie said, which was that voting reform is a waste of time. It would be interesting to know whether he wants to retain the proportional system of voting for the Scottish Parliament or whether he wants to dispense with it and return to first-past-the-post elections for the Parliament, now that his party has achieved three seats through that method. That would seem a logical step to take and Mr McLetchie is normally a logical man. He is right to criticise the cost of the Holyrood building, but he has a responsibility to say what he would do now, apart from having the inquiry that we all want. He said in response to an intervention on that point that he would not have built the Parliament building in the first place. However, we all know that he did not want a Scottish Parliament anyway. He did not want it at Holyrood or Calton Hill because he did not want a Parliament in Scotland. Therefore, what he said does not take us much further forward.

Chris Ballance, too, made a strong first speech, but I must disagree with a couple of his points. I understood him to say that the Executive is planning major improvements to the A75 and the A77 in south-west Scotland. I concede that they will be welcome improvements and I would hate to disappoint Mr Ballance, but the improvements will be a long way from being major or sufficient. He also referred to the need for a rail connection to Cairnryan. I speak from the standpoint of being both a rail enthusiast and an enthusiast for rail transport, if members can work out the difference. With any budget, we must assess the practical returns for our investment in relation to the economy. I must say that, considering both the nature and the frequency of the traffic at Cairnryan, the case for a rail link is difficult to make when the basic road infrastructure is still so inadequate in south-west Scotland.

Regardless of our enthusiasms, we must remember that railways are not a guarantee of economic prosperity. In my former constituency, there were three towns with rail connections: Stranraer, Kirconnel and Sanquhar. They had one other point in common, which was that they had the highest unemployment figures in the constituency. Rail is no panacea for developing the economy.

In what I thought was another cogent first speech, Mr Rob Gibson referred to rural depopulation in the Highlands and Islands. He rightly identified the need for affordable housing as an aspect of tackling the problem, which is not unique to the Highlands and Islands but affects all areas of rural Scotland. Mr Gibson talked about the availability of land in that respect. However, we need to pay attention to an unsympathetic planning regime and an inadequate utilities infrastructure if we are to address the housing shortage.

I have a final point on rural issues. I notice that the partnership agreement states that the Executive will develop the core path network. One of the achievements of the previous session was to get through the land access reforms in the face of opposition from vested interests represented by the Conservatives. However, if we are to benefit from the huge boost to tourism that walking can bring, we need development in many areas of the core path network. I ask what resources will be given to that, because it is clear that local authorities do not have the resources.

Will Scotland be better after the next four years, when we come to the end of the Government's programme—assuming that the coalition does not fracture before then? After four years and after spending about £90 billion—which is what the figure will be at current prices—it will be astonishing if Scotland is not a little bit better. However, will Scotland be the best that it can be? Will we really release the potential of our land and our people? I very much doubt it.

16:44

The Minister for Justice (Cathy Jamieson): I congratulate the Deputy Presiding Officer on being in charge at this stage of a very interesting debate.

Like Annabel Goldie, I have sat through more than 36 speeches today in these fine surroundings. It was important for me to sit through those speeches to hear what people had to say—particularly the new members who were making their first speeches in Parliament. It is important that the Parliament reflects the views of the Scottish people and that the Executive takes on board the comments that were made about looking and listening to what people are saying, both outside and inside the Parliament.

Miss Goldie: I would be very grateful if the minister would indicate which of the 36 speeches to which she listened she considers worthy of being taken into account in the legislative programme. What changes will be made?

Cathy Jamieson: It will not be possible for me to respond in detail to every point that was made in the 36 speeches. However, one sign of a

mature Parliament and a mature Executive—if I may describe myself as mature—is that we take on board all the points that have been made. As members may have noticed, I have taken copious notes. I will raise directly with other ministers the points that I will not be able to cover in my speech today.

It is important to recognise that the programme that the First Minister announced yesterday is for the first year of a four-year term that will deliver the policies set out in the partnership agreement. Our programme is very substantial. We have four years in which we need to combine investment with reform and modernisation with delivery. It is very important that we secure improvements that make differences to the lives of ordinary people in Scotland—the people who wanted a better Scotland. We recognise that, as Annabel Goldie said, many people are disillusioned with politics and politicians. There is a responsibility on every member of the Parliament to work to remedy that situation and to ensure that we are seen to listen to the people of Scotland.

I do not agree with those members who have suggested that we are focusing on the wrong priorities. We have heard a number of powerful speeches that show exactly why the Executive has the right priorities. Those include making improvements in education and health, and tackling the problems of disorder and crime in local communities—an issue to which I will return later in my speech. We have put at the top of our agenda working to encourage economic growth, to tackle poverty and disadvantage, to improve and sustain our environment, and to help all our communities to live in peace and safety.

Today members have spoken about the economy. Of course we want to do more to stimulate business growth and want businesses to be sustainable. I recognise the value of small businesses, which are often the life-blood of local communities, particularly in rural areas. However, we should recognise that we have the lowest unemployment levels for a generation—for as long as I can remember. Young people are now seriously talking about a choice of career and what they want to do with their lives, rather than wondering whether they will have a career at all. Let us celebrate that fact and the work that the UK Government has done.

Richard Lochhead (North East Scotland) (SNP): Will the minister give way?

Cathy Jamieson: No—I want to move on to some different points.

Over the next four years, we will continue to use the powers that the Scottish Parliament has. Instead of tinkering or seeking further constitutional change, we will use those powers

productively. We will promote Scotland as a good place in which to live and work, with a high quality of life that will be attractive to fresh talent from around the world.

A number of members commented on transport. Some good, pertinent speeches were made on that. An effective transport system is central not only to a thriving economy, but to strong communities. We must put in place an integrated transport system that gets goods to market quickly and efficiently, and gets people to work safely and on time. In our programme for government, we are setting out a clear agenda and giving transport a degree of priority. We will ensure that we deliver on our aim of making Scotland accessible. Scotland will have a modern, safe, efficient and sustainable transport system. We will minimise the impact of transport on the environment, especially by encouraging greater use of public transport. However, we must recognise that in some instances, in order to connect communities and to tackle disadvantage, upgrading of the road infrastructure is required.

People deserve and expect public services of the highest possible quality, which give them the greatest possible choice. That is why, in our programme, we will continue to use the record level of investment in our public services to secure new and better facilities, particularly for schools and hospitals. It was disappointing to hear some members commenting today that we should perhaps abandon those programmes. People in our communities expect us to deliver on our promises. The people who want better schools, who want their children to be educated in modern classrooms and who want new health provision expect us to deliver on that. We intend to deliver in our public services with the interests of the pupils, patients, passengers and victims of crime always coming first.

We also need to ensure that services match the needs of individuals. Duncan McNeil and others talked about the need to regenerate local communities. I do not share the disappointment that some people express about social inclusion partnerships and how we will move on to community planning. Social inclusion partnerships in many areas have delivered regeneration and community building in a way that we want to develop in the future and they have built confidence both for the individuals living in the communities and for community groups.

Donald Gorrie mentioned voluntary sector funding. We do not want to make life more difficult for the organisations; rather, we want to ensure that the voluntary sector is a genuine partner in delivery with the public and private sectors. We will continue to invest in and reform public services to cut through bureaucracy, simplify the funding

processes and ensure that the services are flexible.

Health was mentioned in a number of powerful speeches. Jean Turner brought the benefit of her experience. Nicola Sturgeon and David Davidson welcomed the range of measures that we are going to implement, although of course they also identified measures that they want us to consider in future.

On education, Marlyn Glen, who has a long history of working with difficult and disadvantaged young people, made an excellent first speech in the Parliament. Elaine Murray made a powerful contribution on the needs of Scotland's children and young people, how we need to work positively with them, and the role that drama, the arts, culture and other positive activities can play in that.

I will spend a couple of minutes talking about safer communities. In the articulate contributions made by Scott Barrie, Karen Whitefield, Maureen Macmillan and Elaine Murray we heard clearly why the public expects us to do something about the misery of youth disorder. I make no apology for being clear about this. We will continue to work towards a safer Scotland, reducing in particular violent and drug-related crime and reoffending. We need to implement strong measures and take tough action. We need to change a culture that is all too prevalent in some communities, whereby young people think that it is appropriate to carry knives, to use weapons and to be involved in gang warfare and whereby the numbers of sexual offences and violent crimes are rising. That is unacceptable and we must send a clear message to our communities that we will not shirk taking effective action, whether in legislation, policy development or determining how we shape our services to tackle those problems.

Bill Aitken (Glasgow) (Con): I agree entirely with the minister that urgent action is necessary. However, when the Executive was faced with the difficulties that have arisen—not just last week, last month or last year, but over some time—why did it not accept the appropriate amendments to the Criminal Justice (Scotland) Bill that I proposed, which are identical in many respects to what the minister has proposed today?

Cathy Jamieson: The First Minister made it clear in his contribution yesterday, when the same point was raised, that the amendments were not made to the appropriate part of the bill and that there had already been problems around the scope of the bill. We are putting together a coherent package that will combat antisocial behaviour and reform the courts and the legal processes to deal with cases more efficiently.

Let us be honest, Bill—there is no quick fix, and people in communities that are blighted by crime

and disorder know that there is no quick fix. Politicians who promise quick fixes are one reason why people distrust politicians. We promise a sustained programme of action over the next four years to tackle the problems in communities where people cannot enjoy a decent quality of life and where there is poor housing, a blighted environment and, yes, poverty. We want everyone to have a decent home. We want to ensure that neighbourhoods are kept safe and clean and that, yes, our planning laws work to improve the environment for all. We want to tackle the social, educational and economic barriers that create inequality, and we will work to end child poverty by tackling deprivation and social need. We will support those who make a valuable contribution to people in communities through their work in the voluntary sector and through volunteering, in order to ensure that communities are empowered to shape their own lives and agenda.

I have little time left to deal with a number of issues that have been raised, but I want to pick up on one point that may not have had a great deal of coverage. Sport, culture and the arts will have a key role in today's diverse Scotland. Our vision is of a Scotland where cultural life is inclusive and accessible. We acknowledge our proud and distinctive heritage and we want to embrace that diversity of language and culture. We will develop a plan to support traditional and other languages, promoting the widest possible participation in a vigorous and diverse cultural life in Scotland. That will bring real benefits to local communities and to individuals, as part of an overall process of building a better Scotland. The creative industries will have an increasingly important role in Scotland's economy. We can already demonstrate that there has been considerable impact in industries in that sector, and we will improve the conditions that will allow them to flourish.

We have put together a coherent programme of legislation, containing a vision and a policy agenda that will see us through the next four years. Over the past few weeks, people may have become used to me and Tavish Scott being the public face of the partnership, giving the latest updates on how the coalition negotiations were progressing. However, if anything sums up the partnership and how we will operate over the next four years, it is the partnership approach of Duncan McNeil and Mike Rumbles. I am sure that colleagues will agree that that bodes well for the future. I look forward to working with everyone in this chamber to ensure that we make progress with our agenda. We have made it clear that when good ideas come from people in other political parties, or from people of no party, we will listen and we will work constructively with them. However, those other political parties, and those people of no party, will have a responsibility to work with the Executive in delivering for the people of Scotland.

Point of Order

16:58

Fiona Hyslop (Lothians) (SNP): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. We are about to move to Parliamentary Bureau motions, two of which refer to the Education (School Meals) (Scotland) Bill. That legislation tries to close the loophole that was created by the fiasco over school meals and child tax credit at Westminster. The bill involved a cost in time, money and effort for MSPs, for Executive ministers and their staff, and for local authorities, which are currently trying to ensure that emergency measures will be in place to ensure that 7,000 children get their free school meals. Will it be for the Presiding Officer or the Executive to pursue the Secretary of State for Scotland, who has obviously been negligent in her duties, for the cost of all that time and effort?

The Presiding Officer (Mr George Reid): That is a political point, but it is not a point of order.

Parliamentary Bureau Motions

16:59

The Presiding Officer (Mr George Reid): The next item of business is consideration of four motions, in the name of Patricia Ferguson, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau. The first is motion S2M-72, on days on which the office of the clerk is open. The second is motion S2M-73, on standing order 2.3.1. The next is motion S2M-76, on the Education (School Meals) (Scotland) Bill and electronic voting. The last is motion S2M-85, on the Education (School Meals) (Scotland) Bill and the suspension of standing orders.

The Minister for Parliamentary Business (Patricia Ferguson): I assure Miss Hyslop that I will pass on her concern for the Executive staff and for my colleagues on the ministerial benches as soon as I have the opportunity.

I move,

That the Parliament agrees that between 1 June 2003 and 27 August 2004 the office of the Clerk shall be open all days except: Saturdays and Sundays, 28 November 2003, 24 December (pm), 25 December and 26 December 2003, 1 and 2 January 2004, 9 and 12 April 2004, 3 May, 28 May and 31 May 2004.

That the Parliament agrees the following dates under Rule 2.3.1: 28 June – 31 August 2003 (inclusive), 11 – 26 October 2003 (inclusive), 20 December 2003 – 4 January 2004 (inclusive), 14 February – 22 February 2004 (inclusive), 3 April – 18 April 2004 (inclusive) and 26 June – 29 August 2004 (inclusive).

That the Parliament directs that under Rule 11.8.3 of the Standing Orders any division at Stage 2 of the Education (School Meals) (Scotland) Bill shall be conducted using the electronic voting system.

That the Parliament agrees that Rules 9.5.3A, 9.5.3B, 9.6.1, 9.6.2, 9.6.3, 9.6.4, 9.6.5, 9.6.6, 9.7.9 and 9.8.3 of the Standing Orders be suspended for the purposes of the Education (School Meals) (Scotland) Bill.

The Presiding Officer: The questions on those motions will, of course, be put at decision time.

Decision Time

17:00

The Presiding Officer (Mr George Reid): There are four questions to be put as a result of today's business. The first question is, that motion S2M-72, in the name of Patricia Ferguson, on days when the office of the clerk is open, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to.

That the Parliament agrees that between 1 June 2003 and 27 August 2004 the office of the Clerk shall be open all days except: Saturdays and Sundays, 28 November 2003, 24 December (pm), 25 December and 26 December 2003, 1 and 2 January 2004, 9 and 12 April 2004, 3 May, 28 May and 31 May 2004.

The Presiding Officer: The second question is, that motion S2M-73, in the name of Patricia Ferguson, on rule 2.3.1, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to.

That the Parliament agrees the following dates under Rule 2.3.1: 28 June – 31 August 2003 (inclusive), 11 – 26 October 2003 (inclusive), 20 December 2003 – 4 January 2004 (inclusive), 14 February – 22 February 2004 (inclusive), 3 April – 18 April 2004 (inclusive) and 26 June – 29 August 2004 (inclusive).

The Presiding Officer: The third question is, that motion S2M-76, in the name of Patricia Ferguson, on the Education (School Meals) (Scotland) Bill and electronic voting, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to.

That the Parliament directs that under Rule 11.8.3 of the Standing Orders any division at Stage 2 of the Education (School Meals) (Scotland) Bill shall be conducted using the electronic voting system.

The Presiding Officer: The fourth and final question is, that motion S2M-85, in the name of Patricia Ferguson, on the Education (School Meals) (Scotland) Bill and the suspension of standing orders, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to.

That the Parliament agrees that Rules 9.5.3A, 9.5.3B, 9.6.1, 9.6.2, 9.6.3, 9.6.4, 9.6.5, 9.6.6, 9.7.9 and 9.8.3 of the Standing Orders be suspended for the purposes of the Education (School Meals) (Scotland) Bill.

The Presiding Officer: This is the last business that we shall have in The Hub. I thank the staff of The Hub and the parliamentary staff who organised the move. [*Applause.*]

Scottish Agricultural College

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Mr Murray Tosh): The final item of business today is the members' business debate on motion S2M-10, in the name of Adam Ingram, on the Scottish Agricultural College. The debate will be concluded without a question being put. I invite members who wish to speak to press their request-to-speak buttons now.

I am already horrified by the long list of names on screen.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament views with concern the plans by the Scottish Agricultural College (SAC) board to move the college's teaching and research services from Auchincruive, Ayrshire and Craibstone, Aberdeen to Edinburgh; believes that there should be a full economic impact assessment that takes into account the effect that this move would have on students, staff and local communities before the proposal is approved by the Scottish Executive; questions the methodology used by the consultants in their review and report, and considers that there should be a halt to the movement of staff from the SAC campuses in Ayrshire and Aberdeen to Edinburgh, which runs contrary to the Scottish Executive's policy of dispersing agency and department jobs and offices outwith the central belt, until proper scrutiny is carried out by the Parliament and its committees.

17:03

Mr Adam Ingram (South of Scotland) (SNP): It is with a mixture of anger and dismay that I rise to speak to the motion. Those feelings are shared across the spectrum of the SAC's stakeholders in Scotland and among staff, students and rural communities throughout the country who have bought into the SAC's mission to enhance the sustainability of our land-based industries, and into its vision to be a focus in Scotland for innovation and the transfer of knowledge to those industries. They are angry at the performance of an inept board—largely self-appointed and unaccountable as it is—and a succession of senior managers who have failed to rise to the challenge of change, to the point at which the financial viability of the whole operation is seriously under threat.

Those people are also dismayed that despite the intervention of the Parliament and the Minister for Rural Development last year to stop ill thought-out plans to close the Auchincruive campus, the board has come back this year with proposals to close not only Auchincruive, but to close Craibstone in Aberdeen, with a view to centralising its operations in Edinburgh. What more intuitively absurd proposition could there be, that in order to promote the rural economy, we must close rural campuses in favour of city locations?

The proposals have an all too familiar ring to them. When the centre is in trouble, the solution is

to asset strip and sell off the outlying parts of the organisation—even though they might be perfectly functional or profitable on their own—and to consolidate on the site with which senior managers are more familiar and comfortable.

I have little doubt that the process has been in train for several years; Auchincruive in particular has suffered from the erosion and transfer of research capability. Perhaps the most blatant example is the transfer of grassland research away from Scotland's principal dairy farming area. Not only have staff and facilities moved away, there has been a deliberate policy of disinvestment. The maintenance backlog at Auchincruive is estimated to be £2 million and at Craibstone it is £700,000, but the figure is only £350,000 in Edinburgh. What clearer indication do we need of the board's long-term intentions? Perhaps a ban on initiatives to realise development opportunities that arise from underutilised physical assets would be a clearer indication. Such a ban has been in place at Auchincruive for some years.

Given the background, I am disgusted with the board's attitude that, if politicians do not like the proposals, they must cough up more taxpayers' money to bail out the board. That said, we are where we are, and there are hard choices to be made if we are to secure financial viability for any organisation that seeks to deliver education, applied research and advisory services to our land-based industries. Given the Minister for Environment and Rural Development's responsibility to achieve best value from public money, he would no doubt agree. The question is whether the board's proposals are based soundly on an objective appraisal of all the available options. I will be interested to hear from the Deputy Minister for Environment and Rural Development whether he agrees with me—and many colleagues—that the proposals are not based on such an appraisal.

After his meeting with the Rural Development Committee just prior to the break-up of the Parliament for the elections, Ross Finnie said that he and his officials were asking questions about the underlying assumptions that are built into the Deloitte & Touche report. I hope that Ross Finnie's deputy will share with us any answers that have been received. I also urge him to acknowledge that the proposals should be the subject of an urgent inquiry by the new rural development committee.

Many stakeholders are deeply sceptical about the options appraisal and the heavy influence of the SAC's executive management team in directing and informing the consultants. For example, the projected figures for future student numbers seem to be particularly dubious. Where

will the increase of 400 full-time equivalent students over the existing number of 1,100 come from? All the evidence suggests that removing Auchincruive, which accounts for 60 per cent of the student body, will significantly reduce demand for the SAC's educational services. The notion that higher national diploma or higher national certificate students from local further education colleges will transfer readily to an Edinburgh campus for degree courses flies in the face of experience.

The financial performance of a centralised SAC would be critically dependent on student numbers. Failure to reach the target of 1,500 students—we should remember that the campus at Edinburgh King's Buildings has at present only 115 students—could lead to losses that would make the existing deficit and debt look like a drop in the ocean.

In scrutinising the plans, the Parliament has a duty to take into account considerations that are wider than those that exercise the SAC's board and management. The impact on the wider community of changes to the structure of the SAC must be assessed. A recently released report from Scottish Enterprise Ayrshire revealed that Auchincruive puts £10 million into the local economy each year, supports 410 full-time equivalent jobs and is supplied by 198 local companies. Craibstone will, no doubt, have similar figures to report.

I appeal to Ross Finnie, the Minister for Environment and Rural Development, to resist the temptation to put his accountant's hat on, and to remember that growing the economy is supposed to be the Executive's number 1 priority. In that context, can the deputy minister flesh out the proposal that is outlined in the partnership agreement for

“the establishment of a Rural Development Institute”?

What relationship does he foresee between such a body and the SAC's rural campuses? It is time to think out of the box in which the SAC board wants to confine itself.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: As the debate is heavily oversubscribed, I ask that speeches be kept to a maximum of three minutes, please.

17:10

Margaret Jamieson (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (Lab): I intend to keep within the three-minute limit in order to accommodate some of my colleagues.

I congratulate my constituent, Adam Ingram, on securing the debate. The Scottish Agricultural College at Auchincruive, which is in Cathy Jamieson's constituency, is an important part of

the economy of Ayrshire and south-west Scotland. The impact of the recommendations of the Deloitte & Touche report on that economy appears not to come under the agenda of the SAC board.

I recently attended a meeting with MPs and other MSPs in Ayr. We were advised that an unknown—perhaps I should say “undisclosed”—organisation had requested Scottish Enterprise Ayrshire to undertake an economic impact assessment of the Deloitte & Touche report’s proposals. My personal view is that that undisclosed organisation was in fact the SAC board. I would be interested to find out from Adam Ingram from where he got his information about the economic impact assessment.

In my view, the way in which the SAC board has conducted itself thus far is totally out of order, and I believe that no one in Ayrshire has any faith in the board. It is an absolute disgrace that public moneys have been used in a way that runs contrary to the new Scotland to which we all belong, which is open, transparent and accessible. I ask the minister to demand that Scottish Enterprise Ayrshire—a publicly funded body—share the findings at least with him, if not with local politicians.

Many opportunities are available on the current Auchincruive site. That fact is not new to the SAC board, although it has chosen to ignore those opportunities since it became responsible for Auchincruive in 1990. The three Ayrshire councils, the University of Paisley—Craigie campus—Ayr College, Kilmarnock College, the local branch of the National Farmers Union of Scotland and the staff and students at Auchincruive, together with Ayrshire MPs and MSPs, have a vision that is built around the opportunities that are available at Auchincruive, which could secure the continuation of agricultural education and research and which could contribute to the economy of Ayrshire and Scotland.

Like many people in Ayrshire, I have no confidence that the SAC board can conduct a review in an open and transparent way—it would be required to publish the remit that was given to Deloitte & Touche in the first instance. I urge the minister to take those points into account when the SAC board makes its final recommendation to him later this year.

17:14

John Scott (Ayr) (Con): I congratulate Adam Ingram on securing this debate so early in the parliamentary session, and I endorse all that he said this evening.

I want the SAC to be prosperous and well run. However, I am well aware of the problems that it faces, and of the need to address them. They

were first brought to my attention almost two years ago. That is why I welcome the minister’s intervention on the restructuring exercise. I had believed that I would welcome the Deloitte & Touche report that followed, but that report did not yield what we, as politicians, had expected. Indeed, so much doubt has been cast on the report’s value that it should be set to one side.

The problems remain, however, and it is for that reason that I called some months ago for a Scottish parliamentary inquiry into the future of the SAC. In my view, the Parliament would welcome it if the new rural development committee were to instigate an inquiry and prepare a report on the future of the SAC. I hope that the minister might be able to do something in that regard. Such an inquiry would have several advantages. First, it would introduce transparency into the decision-making process. Secondly, it would reassure us all that the £17 million of public funding that the SAC receives annually is being wisely spent. Thirdly, it would help the minister to come to a view about the future role of the SAC and the amount of Government funding that the SAC should receive in future.

In addition, we need to start considering other alternatives. For example, we could consider a future for Auchincruive outwith the SAC structure. For 80 of its 90 years’ existence, Auchincruive was a free-standing institution of world renown—perhaps it could be so again. I share the view of most people in Ayrshire that it is unacceptable that the Auchincruive estate, which was so generously gifted by the Hannah family, should be sold off. Indeed, it beggars belief that Auchincruive’s only value to the SAC is as an asset to be sold off to pay for the development of an Edinburgh site.

In addition, taking jobs and investment from the rural areas and regrouping them in and around Edinburgh flies in the face of the Government’s jobs dispersal policy. The proposed transfer of assets from west to east represents asset stripping on a grand scale—

Rhona Brankin (Midlothian) (Lab): Will the member take an intervention?

John Scott: I am sorry, but I do not have time.

For those reasons, we need to consider a future for Auchincruive as a stand-alone site. Auchincruive could become the rural centre for the west of Scotland in the same way that a rural centre cluster exists at Ingliston. Organisations such as the Scottish Environment Protection Agency and Scottish Natural Heritage could be encouraged to relocate from Ayr to Auchincruive. The Scottish Executive Environment and Rural Affairs Department might also consider moving from the centre of Ayr to the Auchincruive site. Commercial enterprises might also wish to locate

there if a one-stop shop rural centre were developed.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Please wind up.

John Scott: That would secure a future for Auchincruive in which student education could continue to be provided as well as scientific work. There could be an advisory service and veterinary investigation services. Indeed, given the close proximity of the Hannah Research Institute, there might exist the possibility that the area could be jointly developed into a bioscience park. The possibilities are endless and we need to be utterly positive about the future of the site.

I am sorry—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: So am I, Mr Scott, because you are over time.

John Scott: I will finish.

I welcome the cross-party support for a better solution than that which is currently on the table, and I welcome the feasibility study that is being carried out to assess the viability of such a future. I look forward to hearing other members' speeches.

17:17

Mike Rumbles (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD): I begin by congratulating Adam Ingram on securing tonight's debate and on making, if I may say so, a first-class speech. He hit all the nails right on the head.

Since the SAC board announced its plans, my office has been inundated with letters, e-mails and telephone calls from staff, students and members of the public alike. They are all horrified by the prospect of Craibstone's and Auchincruive's closure. The vast majority of those people have been at pains to point out the serious flaws in the Deloitte & Touche report. Perhaps the most important of those flaws is the fact that the SAC hopes to increase the number of campus-based students. However, the National Union of Students Scotland has pointed out that almost 80 per cent of SAC students are currently based at either Craibstone or Auchincruive. Many of those students will be unable or unwilling to move to Edinburgh.

Another problem is that none of the report's proposals is financially viable beyond 10 years or so. I, for one, feel that any proposals that will radically change the structure of the SAC in the long term must be thorough and robust and must ensure the institution's longevity. The proposals in the report simply do not achieve that. I therefore welcome Adam Ingram's call for a full economic impact assessment into the proposals.

The fact that the SAC board has endorsed the recommendations contained in the Deloitte &

Touche report without consulting the major stakeholders is, to be quite frank, staggering—staff and students should obviously have had the opportunity to give their views. I also find it incredible that the Scottish Executive, which is the SAC's biggest stakeholder and provides 40 per cent of the funding, was not consulted.

I am sure that none of us needs to be reminded that the proposals are wholly inconsistent with the Executive's policy of decentralisation and of trying to widen access to higher and further education.

An inquiry by the new rural development committee is absolutely vital if we are to get answers to the various questions that need to be asked before the matter can be taken forward. At its last meeting on 25 March, the previous Rural Development Committee, of which I was a member, agreed unanimously that the proposals that the board of the SAC made as a result of the report were unacceptable. I still feel as strongly about the issue as I did then and I hope that the new rural development committee, whatever its membership, will take the same view.

In conclusion, we cannot consider the issue purely on the basis of the SAC's finances. There are wider implications for students, staff, local economies and the agricultural industry as a whole. Millions of pounds of public money are put into the SAC, so Parliament needs to ensure that any decisions that are made on the future of Craibstone and Auchincruive are made in the public interest.

17:20

Shiona Baird (North East Scotland) (Green): I wish to draw to the attention of the minister a benefit that is unique to Craibstone and which the Edinburgh campus cannot offer the agricultural community—a fully organic farm with staff who are fully versed in organic farming and who have years of experience. A price cannot be put on such an asset; it is simply invaluable. I very much doubt whether the Deloitte & Touche report even considered trying to put a price on it. Many people will not appreciate the significance of the unique status of the farm at Craibstone or of the staff who are employed in the organic research facility.

Conventional farming is about feeding the plant; the fertilisers and the herbicides are put on to ensure that the plant grows and the soil is merely the medium in which the plant grows. In organic farming, the soil is paramount. Building a healthy soil is the first and most fundamental priority. Many years ago, the Soil Association insisted that there should be a seven-year conversion period to achieve organic status. The principle was that it took that long to clear the ground of artificial inputs and to rebuild it organically.

The fact that the farm at Craibstone has been organic for 10 years gives a valuable insight into how the organic principle develops and shows how fertility builds over the years. That level of knowledge and expertise cannot just be acquired; we would have to start again and it would take 10 years to reach the point that we are at at Craibstone. If the Executive has any genuine commitment to furthering organic production in Scotland, a 10-year gap to achieve that level of knowledge is just not acceptable.

I have been told that the organic dairy herd is to be sold in July. I urge the Executive to act swiftly to put that on hold and to ensure that nothing is done about the sale of the organic farm until there has been independent financial scrutiny of the Deloitte & Touche report. If the SAC is to adhere to the concept of openness and accountability, it must release the financial report for independent scrutiny and time must be allowed for further investigation into how the organic expertise at Craibstone can be maintained.

17:23

Brian Adam (Aberdeen North) (SNP): Craibstone lies within my constituency of Aberdeen North. It is impossible to overestimate the depth of anger about the proposals in the north-east, which is felt throughout the agricultural industry and by many others beyond it.

A number of major questions about the conduct of the SAC and the background to the Deloitte & Touche report have already been raised and many remain unanswered. As John Scott and Shiona Baird have suggested—and as I proposed in the motion on the subject that I lodged—they can be answered by holding a parliamentary inquiry. Such an inquiry needs to be conducted soon, because the issue cannot be left hanging around for ever and a day.

I am very concerned that assets will be sold off. Shiona Baird is right—the dairy herd is likely to be sold in July. I do not believe that that relates to the Deloitte & Touche report. The SAC executive is taking action that will undermine future possibilities. Options will be removed bit by bit; it is all about asset stripping. As well as the dairy herd, the unique organic farm at Craibstone will be affected.

Will we get value for money? The Executive is finally committed to the idea of the western peripheral route around Aberdeen. Craibstone is conveniently placed there. If the land is sold prematurely as an organic farm, as straightforward farmland or for another purpose, we will not get value for the public pound. The land remains a public asset. The western peripheral route will enhance values in that area. Indeed, the SAC

has—rightly, to an extent—attempted to sell some land for industrial and commercial development, but it has not been successful. A hasty decision might undermine the SAC's future.

I am disappointed that the SAC is trying to asset strip Auchincruive and Craibstone to finance new buildings in Edinburgh. Craibstone has fantastic new buildings—the Ferguson building is ideal and was built to be fit for purpose—because the arrangement between the University of Aberdeen and the SAC failed. Those buildings cost £7.5 million, the bulk of which came from SEERAD. Will we have the same situation a few years down the road if the University of Edinburgh and the SAC disagree about funding? The proposed course of action would not be wise.

Margo MacDonald (Lothians) (Ind): I am a novice in the issue and I am here to learn. Will Brian Adam explain whether Craibstone could establish the centre of excellence and the critical mass of academic achievement and research potential that exist in Edinburgh? Does he suggest that that could be moved from Edinburgh to Craibstone?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Adam's speaking time has expired.

Brian Adam: I accept that Margo MacDonald is a novice in the matter and it is nice that she also accepts that. A range of research and development is undertaken throughout the SAC. Some major work takes place at Auchincruive and some takes place in Aberdeen, including work with organic material and by the animal livestock group, which is scheduled to move to the Bush estate.

The critical mass concept is of dubious value. What we have are people who will not necessarily move but who attract grants. If the unit moves and the people do not move, will the grants move? No. The SAC undertakes three types of activity, including its advisory role and the research role—I acknowledge that excellent research and development is undertaken at the Bush estate.

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

Brian Adam: As others have said, we must think outside the box and produce an alternative solution. The way to do that is through a parliamentary inquiry by the appropriate committees.

Alex Fergusson (Galloway and Upper Nithsdale) (Con): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. Is it possible for me to move a motion without notice to extend the time limit for the debate, given that people are being cut off when they are just getting going?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: It is possible to ask me about that, but I am not exercising the discretion to extend the debate this evening.

17:28

Mr Richard Baker (North East Scotland) (Lab): I congratulate Adam Ingram on securing the debate.

The SAC board's plans to shut the campuses at Craibstone and Auchincruive were announced at the outset of the election campaign. Brian Adam's predecessor in Aberdeen North, Elaine Thomson, was at the forefront of the campaign to keep Craibstone open and candidates from all parties met staff and students at a hustings to hear their grave concerns about the plans. I still share their concerns, because although it is clear that the SAC needs to rationalise, I do not agree that that means closing the Craibstone campus. Many of the issues that have been raised in relation to Auchincruive are echoed at Craibstone.

We must put in context the plans that have been announced. The staff and students whom I met at Craibstone expressed deep concern at the total lack of consultation with them about the plans, so the board was uninformed about how they would react. The plan suggests selling land at Craibstone when, as Brian Adam said, other developments in the city, such as the bypass, mean that the land will more valuable in the future.

Not all the financial data for Deloitte & Touche's report have been released to allow independent scrutiny. Apart from the plan's financial impact on the college, the Executive must consider the financial impact on agriculture in the north-east, which is an important industry in the region. I question how financially preferable it is to centralise the SAC's activities in one of the most expensive parts of Scotland. That will be an important issue for students who are deciding where to study. As John Scott said, such centralisation runs counter to the Executive's policy of relocating its agencies to other parts of Scotland. Overall, I question the robustness of the Deloitte & Touche report as the best financial option for the SAC. It is certainly a backward and bad option for farming in the north-east.

A lack of consultation with students means that the authors of the report have not learned that many will vote with their feet. Like Mike Rumbles, I received a letter today from my successors at the National Union of Students Scotland. It was pointed out that almost 80 per cent of SAC students are based at either Auchincruive or Craibstone and that many of them are unwilling or unable to study in Edinburgh. That is bad business for the SAC. The lack of consultation with staff means that their expertise and suggestions for

alternatives to the plans, based on knowledge of the research being carried out and the education being provided, were not considered.

I was glad to hear the minister say that the decisions are not irrevocable, as I believe that they should be revoked. Craibstone campus should be kept open and better decisions should be made for the college and for the economic development of our rural communities, including those in the north-east.

17:30

Mrs Nanette Milne (North East Scotland) (Con): My contribution will be brief. I have come to the issue in question somewhat later than many members and most of my knowledge of the SAC relates to its campus at Craibstone.

There are many excellent reasons for keeping Craibstone, which I am sure have been rehearsed in the Parliament in recent months. Equally, there are reasons why the status quo is unviable and why changes must be made in the near future. However, I have been forcibly struck by the very low morale of staff at Craibstone and their distrust—almost fear—of the SAC management, which appears to stem from a lack of transparency, informed debate and consultation between management and employees. Staff accept that changes need to be made in the SAC, but they would like to be taken along with management and not dictated to by them.

There are serious doubts and questions surrounding the Deloitte & Touche report, which is why staff are eager to see the financial data that were used in compiling the report and why they would like independent financial scrutiny to be carried out. They feel that the availability of the financial detail would make possible the exploration of alternative options. Through the deputy minister, I ask Ross Finnie to consider requesting the SAC to make available all the financial data that were used to compile the Deloitte & Touche report. That would go at least some way towards improving staff morale.

17:32

Nora Radcliffe (Gordon) (LD): I think that we all accept that the status quo is not an option. We want the SAC to be a viable organisation and we agree that perhaps nettles were not grasped when they should have been a dozen years ago. However, I am deeply uneasy with the board's proposals, as it has not proved its case. Questions about the assumptions that underlie the proposals have been posed and have not been answered. To each question, the answer has not been, "We reached this conclusion because of A, B or C", but, "We considered this—full stop."

There is over-provision of built estate, but how can the answer be more new build? How many failing businesses cure their problems by building new headquarters? The number of administrative staff is noted but not examined. The recommendations build on a shaky foundation of proceeds from the sale of assets that may not realise the sums that are projected and the assessed value of which rests on, for example, planning permission for change of use. It was mentioned that, in many cases, the assets have been acquired through generous local benefactors. Assets such as the organic farm that a colleague of mine mentioned, a recently created golf course or soil demonstration plots that have been there for 100 years cannot be quickly or easily replicated.

The report argues for close working with other bodies. Local authorities and enterprise companies in the north-east have an immediate interest and considerable expertise in rural and agricultural matters. The Rowett Research Institute and the Macaulay Institute, which are in close proximity to Craibstone, are world-class institutions. The University of Aberdeen offers a degree course in agriculture. There is critical mass to spare in the north-east.

The SAC board may have arrived at the right answer, but it has not shown the workings. Until it can produce a robust business plan based on solid evidence, it should not proceed with anything that cannot be undone, such as the sale of its organic dairy herd. If it is certain that it is proceeding wisely, it should be able to prove its case.

17:34

Rhona Brankin (Midlothian) (Lab): I rise to oppose Adam Ingram's motion on the SAC. The issue is extremely difficult for the college. The basic problem stems from the SAC's establishment 13 years ago, when it was formed as a result of a merger of three colleges. Since that merger, nothing has been done to rationalise the accommodation of the services that the college provides.

The costs that the inherited facilities incur are huge. Let us be absolutely clear: no business or body that is partly funded from public resources can continue with four times the space that it needs at an annual cost of £4.6 million. That is a gross waste of taxpayers' money.

Alex Neil (Central Scotland) (SNP): Will the member give way?

Rhona Brankin: No. There is a lot that I want to say.

Following the board's recommendations, Ross Finnie called for the independent Deloitte &

Touche report. It is now absolutely vital that Ross Finnie does not rewrite the rules because some members do not like the results of the report.

Let us also be clear about who makes the decision. The SAC is a separate company—it is not part of an Executive department. Its directors are required by law to take decisions that are based on the most financially prudent route for the college and that are in the college's best interest.

Margaret Jamieson (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (Lab): Will the member give way?

Rhona Brankin: No.

Unless the college gets the position sorted out for once and for all, it simply cannot survive. *[Interruption.]* Members might not like to listen to what I am saying, but it is important that they do so.

The college has already cut costs by reducing staff, but the unnecessary overhead of teaching facilities at three locations simply cannot be allowed to continue.

The findings of the Deloitte & Touche report followed a consultation with 10,000 stakeholders. Those findings were clear cut, allowing the Executive and the SAC board to identify a clear way forward. Contrary to many assertions, rather than centralisation in Edinburgh, the study advocated a hub-and-satellite model. It is important to note that the SAC intends to retain its advisory services throughout Scotland near to where its customers—the farmers—are based.

Let me turn to what Ross Finnie said—rather surprisingly—about the decision being contrary to the Executive policy of dispersal of jobs. I repeat that as the SAC is not a non-departmental public body, the minister cannot tell it where to put the jobs.

Mike Rumbles: Will the member take an intervention.

Rhona Brankin: No, thank you.

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

Rhona Brankin: Ross Finnie and Jim Wallace should be encouraging the college to do what is best for the college, which is research and development. The college's decision fits absolutely with the Executive's strategy on bioscience clusters. The ministers need to take cognisance of that.

Can the deputy minister confirm that the final decision will be taken by the SAC itself? One of the things that the Parliament has been criticised for in the past is that it has been swayed by vigorous lobbying into taking what are sometimes the wrong decisions.

The SAC is making absolutely the right decision. Agriculture in the 21st century is different from that of 50 years ago. The plan for the future takes into account the changes in the distribution and nature of agriculture in Scotland and advances in information technology. The Scottish Agricultural College deserves the support of the Scottish Parliament.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The minister has indicated a willingness to extend the debate in order to accommodate additional speakers. In those circumstances, I am now prepared to accept the motion that Mr Fergusson indicated that he was willing to move, if he will now do so. Is that agreed?

Members indicated agreement.

Alex Fergusson: I am sorry, Presiding Officer—*[Interruption.]* I was cardless. After your former strictures, I thought that I would remove my card.

I move,

That, under rule 8.14.3, the debate be extended for up to 10 minutes.

Motion agreed to.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I ask the remaining speakers to take two minutes each.

17:39

Phil Gallie (South of Scotland) (Con): I congratulate Adam Ingram on securing the debate. As Mike Rumbles said, he hit the button on virtually every issue that he raised. Many of the other speakers made points that I also wanted to make, but I will not repeat them.

I admire Rhona Brankin for standing up and saying what she said. She spoke for her constituents in the same way that many of us have spoken for ours. However, logic does not seem to be on Rhona Brankin's side. The fact is that we are talking about agricultural colleges in rural communities, and the closure of Auchincruive and Craibstone would certainly have devastating effects in those areas. Deloitte & Touche has not got down to the bones of that matter, and it must be addressed.

Despite that, I should remind Rhona Brankin that she has supported the Executive's policy of jobs dispersal. Although the SAC is not technically a Government body, the fact is that a major element of Government funding goes into it. As a result, the Government should have some exercise over the central policies and issues that it wishes to be addressed if the college has to be relocated and—as I accept—rationalised in order to live within its means.

One issue that has not been mentioned is the cost of property in Edinburgh, which according to a

recent report is almost twice the level of any other area in Scotland. Given that, I do not understand how staff can be expected to move from Aberdeen or Ayrshire to work in Edinburgh. The logic is that we should move in the other direction, because doing so must have benefits for students.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I re-emphasise that members must limit their speeches to two minutes.

17:41

Stewart Stevenson (Banff and Buchan) (SNP): The fate of the remote colleges at Craibstone and Auchincruive has been driven by a matrix provided by the SAC board. The matrix contains 121 numbers that show the weighting and importance given to different topics that were chosen by the board—not by the consultants, who were told not to touch it. In fact, one need change only four of those 121 numbers to conclude that the answer to this situation lies in Craibstone and Auchincruive, not Edinburgh. That is what is called in consultancy-speak a sensitivity analysis. The consultants were denied the opportunity to carry out such an analysis; the Parliament should not make the same mistake.

Location and success are not inescapably joined together. When I was on holiday last summer, I visited the successful North Atlantic Fisheries College at Scalloway on Shetland, which is as far away from Edinburgh as it is possible to get. It is possible for Auchincruive and Craibstone to be similarly successful.

Location does matter. Edinburgh became a centre of scientific excellence, particularly in medicine, for the whole of Europe because the streets outside the chamber to which we will return next week were a cesspit of morbidity and ill-health. The cry "Gardylloo!" in those streets determined that the medical college came here hundreds of years ago. The same logic says that an agricultural college will flourish when it is next to its key stakeholders in the rural communities. Our environment and rural development committee must examine the issue anew, and I am sure that the matter is not closed in the Parliament.

17:43

Alex Johnstone (North East Scotland) (Con): I want briefly to correct a misunderstanding that seems to exist in certain quarters. Although I have received letters from many members of staff and students, particularly from Craibstone, I have also received communication from the same representative groups in Edinburgh. Those groups have sensibly suggested that it would be worth while to argue for a centre of excellence in

Edinburgh that would have the ability to raise educational standards to the very pinnacle.

The problem is that that is not what Craibstone and Auchincruive are all about. My experience, particularly of Craibstone, suggests that the colleges have produced modular, broad-based courses that deliver to the local farming community and those who wish to get into the various industries. The problem with going for the pinnacle of excellence is that it does not produce such a broad base.

The courses at Craibstone in Aberdeenshire were delivered largely in conjunction with Aberdeen College's campus at Clinterty, where modular land-based courses were also provided. Sadly, Clinterty is already further down the road of removing farming assets: the farm there is in the process of being sold off. If we lose Craibstone, we will have no broad base or bottom to the educational ladder.

Those who take the courses at the bottom of that ladder are not those who are able to come to Edinburgh as students; they are 16-year-olds who are living at home or in college accommodation. As other members said at question time this afternoon, many of them are working the family farm part time as well as taking a course. That was the experience that I had with my son during his education. It is that broad base that we must be prepared to protect, and it is the modular courses, especially those available to 16-year-olds, that must be a priority.

17:45

Mr Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): In 1995, I lived for a year on the Craibstone campus while undertaking a master's degree in sustainable agriculture. It was an excellent course, run jointly at that time by the SAC and the University of Aberdeen. Even then, the reputation for research, teaching and advisory support on organic and sustainable farming topics that had been built up at Craibstone was well known in academic and industry circles. It was enough to lure me away from the Stirling area to relocate to Aberdeen, and I was joined on the course by students from as far away as Germany and Zimbabwe. What was pivotal to the reputation of the course was the quality of the organic teaching, research and advisory personnel clustered around Craibstone, and the fact that the estate has its own organic farm, which allowed research to be conducted and teaching to take place there.

I am deeply concerned about the proposed move, not least because the provisions in the partnership agreement could point organic farming in Scotland in a positive direction, but only if we

have a first-class organic research, teaching and advisory cluster here. What concerns me further is the potential clustering of facilities around the Bush estate and the possible reasons that underlie that proposal. Unlike Rhona Brankin, I do not see the future of Scottish agriculture as being bound up in biotechnology, some aspects of which have little application in Scotland, little support from farmers and, more important, no market. In Scottish agriculture, where we should be responding to market signals, we must wake up and smell the organic coffee.

I support the motion and I urge the SAC to reconsider the options available in conjunction with the Scottish Executive. I believe that the success of the Executive's organic action plan may depend on it.

17:49

Alex Neil (Central Scotland) (SNP): I want to make a couple of very sharp points. First, the Deloitte & Touche report is not an independent consultants' report that considers the issue comprehensively and objectively. A definition and remit were given to Deloitte & Touche to suit the answer that the board wanted in the first place. That done, criteria were selected and the board members came back in and, against subjective observations of their own—not objective criteria set by the consultants—decided that the answer was Edinburgh. Requests to the board and to Professor McKelvey to tell us which criteria the board used still go unanswered.

When I was in consultancy, people used to joke that consultants borrow one's watch to tell one the time. In this case, the board did not tell the consultants the time; they reset the watch to suit themselves. Rhona Brankin may have the idea that the Deloitte & Touche report is an objective report that can be taken seriously, but if she had studied the matter she would realise that that is nonsense. I am glad that she is no longer the minister dealing with the matter.

My second major point relates to the need that Margaret Jamieson quite rightly emphasised for an economic assessment. We have a wider responsibility to the taxpayer, and not just for the financial viability of the SAC, important though that is. We have a responsibility to everyone in Ayrshire and Aberdeen who relies for their job on those colleges and campuses. It is absolute lunacy to shut down facilities in economies that are feeling the cold and which are up against it and place all those jobs and all that money in an overheated Edinburgh economy. I understand that Rhona Brankin has to engage in pork-barrel politics because she represents an Edinburgh area. Let the rest of us consider the matter objectively and do what is right for the whole of Scotland.

17:50

Mr David Davidson (North East Scotland) (Con): Like many other members, I have had phone calls in the middle of the evening and so on from farmers, students and staff. We have all received the information and I will not go over a lot of what has been said in the debate.

Among the meetings that I attended was the public meeting that the SAC held at the Thainstone market. The meeting was chaired by Dr Maitland Mackie, who is the chairman of the SAC board and is from a farming background. I challenged the assumptions of the board; he did not like that. I challenged the assumptions that his staff team and his researchers, who do world-renowned research, would be happy to move; he did not like that. The suggestion that students might not want to move to Edinburgh did not go down well. When I challenged the assumptions in the report, he said, "This is not a business plan." This is not a personal matter, but if the board is saying that it has to have a business plan to go forward and Maitland Mackie stands up on behalf of the board in front of hundreds of people at a public meeting and says, "This is not a business plan," how on earth is the board fit to make the decision?

I say to the minister that he has an involvement in the matter because he provides the SAC with 40 per cent of its revenue. Many members have asked for the new rural development committee to examine the issue; the Parliament has a right to examine it on behalf of all the people of Scotland. The fact is that at that public meeting Maitland Mackie said that it was "over to the politicians". If that is the view of the board chairman, he should give the matter to us to deal with in a parliamentary committee.

17:52

Richard Lochhead (North East Scotland) (SNP): Brian Pack, who runs the biggest farming co-operative in Scotland, the ANM Group Ltd, which is situated just up the road from the Craibstone site, stated in *The Press and Journal* recently:

"If we lose Craibstone, then SAC also loses something precious and that is something that is not captured in the figures."

That sentiment is shared by Aberdeen City Council, which passed a motion opposing the closure of Craibstone; Aberdeenshire Council; Moray Council; the local agricultural advisory committee; and the staff and students at Craibstone and Auchincruive, who are also opposed to the proposal. That is one of the reasons why so many MSPs have turned out for the debate and why there is such a high demand to speak from members who represent areas the length and breadth of Scotland.

I support the comment made by Alex Neil that we must consider not only the economics of one site against another site, but the economic cost to local communities, because any savings from closing the wrong sites will have an economic cost. In the north-east of Scotland, the situation that other rural industries currently face is a problem.

I will address the education aspect of the debate, as not too much time has been devoted to that matter. The proposal that is on the table to split the teaching element from the advisory and research elements is wrong because it means that the quality of education will deteriorate. The synergy of having advisers and researchers working with the teaching side is valuable and that would be lost under the consultants' proposal. We cannot consider only the salvage costs of the sites when taking the decision. The consultants admitted to the Rural Development Committee that the fact that more cash would be gained from selling Craibstone, because it is a valuable piece of land, is the factor that disadvantaged Craibstone.

It is imperative that the minister takes a hands-on approach to the issue and that the new rural development committee—I hope along with the education committee—launches an inquiry into the issue.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I thank all members for their co-operation in enabling all those who wanted to speak to participate in the debate.

17:54

The Deputy Minister for Environment and Rural Development (Allan Wilson): I thank the Presiding Officer for his generous agreement to extend the time available for us to debate this important issue. I suspect that even with that generosity I will not be able to cover every point that has been raised, but I make the offer that I always make in such circumstances to enter into one-to-ones with members on any matter that continues to concern them after I have spoken.

I add my congratulations to Adam Ingram to those already given by other members on securing this important debate. It mirrors his success in securing a similar debate on the same topic a little more than a year ago. I also express my personal gratitude to Cathy Jamieson, who is sitting on my left-hand side, for her continued interest in the SAC and for her contribution to developing policy in her capacity as the constituency MSP in Auchincruive.

At the time when Adam Ingram lodged the motion in response to the SAC's continuing financial and operational problems, Ross Finnie

asked the college to conduct a review of the services that it should be aiming to provide and then to conduct an appraisal of the options for delivering those services. The SAC engaged the external consultants Deloitte & Touche to assist with that work. Following extensive consultation with stakeholders, the consultants produced the first of two reports in October. As a result of that, Ross Finnie and I reaffirmed the need for the Scottish Agricultural College to complete an analysis of its education markets and, importantly, to provide a clear education strategy, which is the overriding objective. We agreed that the SAC should proceed to appraise the options for the physical infrastructure that is required to deliver its education and research services. The SAC proceeded to appraise the options for delivering its services and published the first volume of the Deloitte & Touche phase 2 report in February.

A key issue that emerged from that work was the fact—which has been mentioned—that the SAC's combined estate was five times greater than its requirements. That meant that significant cost savings and economies of scale and staff utilisation could be achieved through rationalisation. The option appraisal process that was conducted by Deloitte & Touche was extensive and 10 different options were considered. Those options included all those that have been discussed tonight and others. However, the option that was recommended by the consultants for both financial and non-financial reasons was that the SAC should consolidate its campus-based education and research facilities in the Edinburgh area. That remains the SAC's preferred option.

The Deloitte & Touche phase 2 report makes a powerful case for some form of rationalisation of the college's facilities. I welcome the fact that many members tonight, and others elsewhere, have commented to ministers on the report. The SAC recognises that the status quo is untenable and accepts the need for change. That said, there are concerns over the SAC's proposals, which I share. After careful consideration of the report, Ross Finnie and I raised several concerns about the college's proposals.

We asked the college to undertake further work on its education strategy and projected student numbers—the very ethos of the college's proposals. We also asked the college to set out clear proposals for how it will respond to local student markets where it plans to withdraw from campus-based provision; to revisit the financial assumptions to see whether any of the options could be made financially sustainable, as none of them is financially sustainable as proposed; to come forward with proposals to address the funding gap that remains in the SAC's preferred option; and to consult staff and stakeholders on its

proposals—something that we would have expected to happen anyway.

Ross Finnie and I have asked the SAC to take those concerns fully on board and to come back to the Executive with revised proposals. I stress the fact that no decision has been made on the final outcome of the option appraisal work.

Brian Adam: I am concerned—as are others—that, although the SAC, rightly, has not acted on any of the recommendations in the Deloitte & Touche report, it is acting on other matters, including the dairy herd and the farm at Craibstone. It has already issued redundancy notices to staff there, although it withdrew them. There are rumours that it might be about to issue them again. Can the minister give us an assurance that he will go to the SAC and ensure that no steps—not just the ones that are mentioned in the Deloitte & Touche report—are taken before there is an opportunity for Parliament to conduct an inquiry?

Allan Wilson: I will preface what I am about to say—which I suspect is what Mr Adam wants to hear—by affirming that it would be an injudicious minister indeed who sought to pre-empt any decision in favour of or against a parliamentary committee inquiry. That is entirely a matter for parliamentary scrutiny and for the committee. As the minister, I believe that the SAC should postpone any decisions on, for example, the disposal of the Tulloch unit until the outcome of the wider strategic review to which I have referred has been determined. That would also allow my department to consider the implications of possible dispersal for the research programme to which Shiona Baird and others referred.

We share the concerns that members have expressed about the option appraisal methodology on which the phase 2 report is based, and about proposals that run counter to the spirit, if not the letter, of the Executive's relocation policy. We also share concerns about the possible economic impact of the proposals and the wider economic impact that we, as ministers, require to take into account in the decision-making process. We also share concerns about possible pre-emptive decision making by the SAC, which would subvert the democratic process.

As should be self-evident by now, I am not here to defend the SAC's proposals. However, it is important—and I respect what Rhona Brankin has to say—that any debate and opportunity for comment are used to assist the college with the process of change and to help it to become operationally and financially viable so that it can provide the best-quality education to future generations of students. That can be done best by focusing on the SAC's preferred option and by challenging, I believe, the assumptions in the Deloitte & Touche report.

Perhaps I may comment now on specific concerns that have been raised. I think that Alex Neil is perhaps still a practising consultant; there is probably a better future in that than there is in nationalism. However, it is perhaps inevitable that there is always an element of subjectivity in the appraisal methodology.

Alex Neil: What about my reports?

Allan Wilson: I seem to remember that some were more subjective than others.

Inevitably, there is an element of subjectivity in the appraisal methodology—for example, in the determining and, crucially, the weighting of the non-financial criteria. However, I am sure that Alex Neil will agree that the important aspect is to ensure that the process is balanced appropriately at the end. I, for one, am not convinced that that has happened.

On the economic impact, there is little doubt that the SAC cannot continue as it is—I think that I have made that clear, too—and that the scale of change that is needed cannot be implemented without having an economic impact. I repeat that ministers must take account of wider economic impacts than the simple economic impact to which the report refers. However, that situation is some way off and we await revised proposals from the SAC.

Nevertheless, as it stands, the SAC's preferred option runs counter to the spirit of the Executive's relocation policy. That is why Ross Finnie and I have asked the SAC to re-examine the extent to which it proposes to relocate services from south-west and north-east Scotland. That re-examination will include consideration of whether some of those services could continue to be provided in the Aberdeen and Ayrshire areas either by the SAC alone or in partnership with other organisations.

I thank the Presiding Officer for giving me the time to address the points that have been raised. As regards concerns about the SAC taking pre-emptive decisions, the college announced last month that no irrevocable decision on the future structure of the SAC would be taken until the planning process is completed. On the question of who will take the decision, the SAC's public statements have indicated that a final decision on the matter has been taken. However, that is not so. The proposals require the agreement of Scottish ministers to the reinvestment of the disposal proceeds of surplus assets that were acquired with the Executive capital grant. Further, as members will know, the SAC relies on continued funding by the Executive because we pay for several of its functions and services. I hope that that answers the question that Rhona Brankin posed.

Ministers have concerns about the SAC's preferred option. We have asked the SAC to address those and to submit revised proposals. I urge Adam Ingram and every other member who has specific concerns about or who supports the proposals to register either those concerns or that support with the Scottish Agricultural College, if they have not already done so.

Meeting closed at 18:05.

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