

MEETING OF THE PARLIAMENT

Thursday 10 November 2005

Session 2

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Scottish Parliament

Thursday 10 November 2005

[THE DEPUTY PRESIDING OFFICER *opened the meeting at 09:15*]

Energy Policy

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Trish Godman): Good morning. The first item of business is a debate on motion S2M-3543, in the name of Richard Lochhead, on energy policy. Mr Lochhead, you have 14 minutes.

09:15

Richard Lochhead (North East Scotland) (SNP): Thank you, Presiding Officer. I shall use my time to make a number of good points. It is a pity that the Government and Tory seats are so empty for a debate that is important to the future of Scotland, but I take great pleasure in opening on behalf of the Scottish National Party.

As a result of the rise in global demand for energy, rocketing fuel prices, the fact that the United Kingdom is becoming a net importer of gas, international instability and global warming, energy issues increasingly dominate the headlines in Scotland, in Europe and internationally. That is because our standard of living depends on plentiful, accessible and affordable energy. We produce energy to heat and feed ourselves, to travel and to go about our daily lives. We know to our cost that countries will go to extreme lengths to secure access to energy supplies—indeed, they will go to war.

We in Scotland must turn our attention to our energy future. In the 21st century, the success of our economy will depend on our ability to find, produce and distribute energy and its major by-product, electricity. As we speak, Scotland is at an energy crossroads. The SNP believes that we need a Scottish energy strategy to guide us and ensure that we take the right road. We need to decide how and where we want to produce our energy and how much we need to produce. We also need the right information so that we can make informed decisions. The last thing that we need is a haphazard, ad hoc series of energy developments with no reference to any national energy strategy or policy. Indeed, the Enterprise and Culture Committee called for such a strategy in a recent report published under the convenership of my colleague Alasdair Morgan.

Scotland is a lucky country. We have abundant energy resources and we have cutting-edge energy sectors, but we need a Scottish energy policy to ensure that those resources work for the

benefit of the nation. We need to protect and grow our energy sector. However, we must recognise that a dark cloud is hanging over one of our two major power companies, with the threatened takeover of Scottish Power, Scotland's third-biggest company. The loss of that major corporate headquarters would be a body blow to Scotland, to our economy and to Scottish prestige. It would be bad for the Scottish Power employees and for Scotland.

Phil Gallie (South of Scotland) (Con): Does the member agree that it was only because of Margaret Thatcher that that company was established in Scotland with a major corporate presence? Will he also take into consideration the fact that Scottish Nuclear has, through British Energy, become the UK's voice?

Richard Lochhead: No matter what the member's intervention is about, he always turns the debate around to nuclear energy.

One thing is certain: the Government and the Parliament must fight to retain Scottish Power's independence. We must make sure that we do all in our power to resist any foreign takeover of such a major Scottish company.

It is not just Scottish Power's future that is uncertain, but Scotland's energy future. Key decisions must be taken by the Scottish Parliament on our future energy policy. If the Parliament is capable of taking decisions on the future of our education and health policies, we are certainly capable of taking decisions on the future of our energy policy. We have to make sure that our energy resources work for the people of Scotland. That is why today the SNP calls on the Parliament to support the formation and implementation of a Scottish energy policy that will give us security and continuity of energy supply and energy self-sufficiency, reduce carbon emissions so that we can tackle global warming, eliminate fuel poverty and deliver affordability and energy efficiency.

The Deputy Minister for Enterprise and Lifelong Learning (Allan Wilson): Will the member enlighten the Parliament on what the SNP means by "self-sufficiency"? Is the SNP's policy that Scotland should continue to be a net exporter of energy or does "self-sufficiency" mean that Scotland's share of the electricity generating market should reduce?

Richard Lochhead: The SNP's position is clear. Scotland's energy resources must benefit the people of Scotland first and foremost. If there is potential to export energy thereafter, that will be all very well, as long as certain conditions are met.

The UK's energy policy is failing Scotland. We are not receiving the benefits of living in an energy-rich nation at a time when the value of

energy is at an all-time high all over the world. Let us consider Scotland's oil and gas resources. We have two thirds of the European Union's oil. There is a lot of life left in the North sea industry; even Government ministers now say that there are 30 years of production left in the North sea. The oil company Talisman, whose representatives I met a few weeks ago, is the biggest independent operator in the North sea. It said that oil fields that were due to close a few years ago are having their lives extended until 2023 and it thinks that the North sea will produce oil and gas for another 50 years, not 30 years. That, of course, should mean a lot of oil revenue flowing into a Scottish exchequer and not being squandered by London and the Westminster Government. Gordon Brown should not be looking to smash and grab oil profits from the North sea, as that would destroy thousands of jobs and undermine the new-found confidence in the North sea that has been built in recent years.

We are also rich in terms of our renewables potential. We have hit the jackpot for a second time. This country has the potential to become Europe's renewables powerhouse. We have 25 per cent of Europe's wind resources, a quarter of Europe's tidal resources and 10 per cent of Europe's wave resources. We have other renewables potential as well—biomass and hydropower, which we use already, solar power and many other areas. The Government's 2001 report into Scotland's renewables potential found that we have the potential to generate six times the amount of electricity that we generate at the moment. Offshore wind power alone could generate twice the present amount of electricity in Scotland. We also have coal resources—we produce one third of the UK's coal.

As the SNP is explaining, the UK's energy policy is failing Scotland badly. Let us consider the scandal of fuel poverty. This nation is rich in energy resources, but tens of thousands of Scottish households cannot afford to heat their homes in winter. That is a scandal in 21st century Scotland. Only yesterday, we found out that there will be further increases in household fuel bills from Scottish and Southern Energy. We should not forget that every 5 per cent increase in fuel bills plunges an extra 30,000 Scottish households into fuel poverty. At the beginning of the 21st century, in one of the most energy-rich countries in the world, 13 per cent of our households are fuel poor and one in 20 deaths is a result of the cold. I commend the motion that Margaret Ewing lodged in the Parliament yesterday on excess winter deaths. It asks members to agree that the Parliament

"believes that, as an energy-rich nation, the people of Scotland should expect warm, dry and affordable ways to heat their homes".

I hope that every member will sign that motion. It is difficult to think of a bigger price that Scotland pays for being part of the UK. We have all those energy resources but people are dying of the cold in Scotland and tens of thousands of households cannot afford to heat their homes.

The business community has also been hit by high fuel prices. The Scottish Council for Development and Industry has passed figures to the SNP that show that fish farmers in the Highlands are now paying 52 per cent more for their fuel than they were last year. Manufacturers in Cumbernauld are paying 40 per cent more.

The UK's policy is also failing Scotland because of its obsession with nuclear power. During the past few weeks, we have witnessed with amazement the UK Government trying to soften up public opinion and turn it in favour of nuclear power. Some years ago, we were famously told that nuclear power would be "too cheap to meter", but now we know the truth. Scotland cannot afford to pay the economic, health, social or environmental costs of nuclear power. It will cost £85 billion just to clean up the legacy of nuclear waste. Five sites in Scotland have been earmarked by Nirex to become nuclear dumps. The Parliament must make every effort to stop any Scottish community being turned into a nuclear dump by Westminster or this Government.

Last week, my colleague Bruce Crawford received an answer to a parliamentary question that confirmed that, today in 2005, 11 farms in Scotland are still subject to restrictions as a result of the incident at Chernobyl in 1986. Surely that speaks volumes about the price that Scotland would be required to pay for nuclear power.

Alex Johnstone (North East Scotland) (Con):

Does the member accept that the accident that happened at the Chernobyl nuclear plant was the result of technology that is in no way comparable to that which has been used in this country and western Europe? Does he accept that his argument about Chernobyl is a complete red herring?

Richard Lochhead: I can tell the Tories that the only thing that our party accepts about nuclear power is that it is dirty, dangerous and expensive. The Parliament must reject it.

UK energy policy is also failing our environment. Instead of having an energy sector that is currently Scotland's biggest emitter of carbon emissions, we should be investigating alternatives and accelerating the development of renewables. Six years into devolution, latest Government figures show that the percentage of electricity that is generated from renewables has gone backwards rather than forwards, despite all our country's potential. The Deputy First Minister and Minister

for Enterprise and Lifelong Learning recently announced that he will support projects in the marine renewables sector for energy generation from wave and tidal power, but that announcement came six years into devolution and only after the public outcry that arose when it was discovered that Portugal had stolen leading wave technology from under our noses. People in Portugal will now benefit from wave technology that was developed in Scotland before the people of Scotland will. We need to consider using a mix of renewable energy sources—including offshore wind, hydrogen, biomass, biofuel, solar and even the possibilities of geothermal—to benefit the people of Scotland.

Energy policy is important because it deals not just with electricity—which accounts for only 20 per cent of energy—but with heating and transport. However, I draw to the Parliament's attention the on-going discrimination in the transmission charges that are imposed on Scottish power generators by the UK Government and its regulatory sidekick, the Office of Gas and Electricity Markets. The charges threaten to undermine renewables development in Scotland and must be opposed. We urge the minister to challenge that Westminster legislation, which threatens to destroy Scotland's renewables potential. As things stand, a generator in Skye will be forced to pay £23.10 per kilowatt for access to the grid, whereas a generator in Cornwall will receive a subsidy of £8.04 per kilowatt. That is a ridiculous anti-Scottish state of affairs and the situation must be changed if we are to deliver energy benefits for Scotland.

We need to manage demand through an energy efficiency strategy, which ministers have promised for a long time but will not—we are given to understand—deliver until spring 2006. We draw to the Parliament's attention the fact that the regulatory powers are reserved to Westminster—the Scottish Environment Protection Agency has rightly highlighted the fact that, because of that, it will be toothless to act on energy efficiency, despite the issue's importance. That is another example of why energy powers must be transferred back to Scotland.

Other opportunities for the future of Scotland's energy industry include carbon capture and storage. That could provide a huge opportunity to create new jobs in a new industry that would secure our energy future. Given that the world's largest hydrogen power station will be built in Peterhead and will supply carbon-free electricity to 0.25 million homes, we need to find similar huge opportunities elsewhere in Scotland.

Another example is clean coal. We know that, by 2015, 45 per cent of Scotland's generating capacity will close. Some 34 per cent of that is represented by the coal-fired power stations at

Longannet and Cockerzie. By installing clean-coal technology and using carbon capture and storage technology, we could not only keep those stations open and allow them to continue to deliver energy to the people of Scotland, but tackle global warming at the same time. We have the expertise in Scotland to do that, but we are crying out for Government support to allow us to lead in those technologies not just here in Scotland, but internationally.

In the North sea alone, we would have the capacity to store 755 gigatonnes of carbon dioxide emissions under the sea if we could put in place the technology that already exists in the offshore industry. That would be equivalent to Scotland's output of carbon emissions for 5,000 years. Scotland could lead the world in a whole new industry.

The SNP recognises that securing our energy future will require difficult and radical decisions, but we can keep the lights on, keep our homes warm and fuel sustainable economic development in Scotland. We have the know-how and the resources in oil and gas, renewables and other technologies, but we need the powers for Scotland to take decisions on those matters as part of a Scottish energy policy.

I move,

That the Parliament considers it unacceptable that in energy-rich Scotland fuel poverty blights our society; notes with concern that, despite Scotland possessing massive energy resources, urgent action is required to avoid an energy gap in the next decade; calls for the development of an energy policy for Scotland that will deliver security of supply, affordability, self-sufficiency and energy efficiency; recognises that the transmission charges for power generators, as permitted by the UK Government, will undermine these objectives; rejects nuclear power in favour of an energy mix that includes making Scotland the world leader in renewable energy and carbon capture and storage technology; believes that such a policy will boost our economy and meet our environmental obligations, and recognises that the Scottish Parliament requires the necessary energy powers and control over our oil and gas resources to deliver the nation's energy needs in the 21st century.

09:30

The Deputy Minister for Enterprise and Lifelong Learning (Allan Wilson): I thank the nationalists for giving us yet another opportunity to debate energy policy. Although I can agree with much of the nationalists' motion, I suspect that, as ever, the principal dividing line between us is that the nationalists want to turn our principal market for our electricity generation—the rest of the UK—into a foreign country and thereby change our position from being a net exporter of energy to the rest of the UK to being a net importer.

Contrary to the nationalist position, we are committed to working with the UK Government,

regulators and energy companies to achieve a balanced energy policy. Such a policy will deliver security of supply through diversity of supply. It will deliver affordable energy for householders and businesses, bring down the number of people who are in fuel poverty and—a critical issue of which Richard Lochhead made no mention—reduce carbon emissions. It will make the most of Scotland's natural and intellectual resources to deliver a strong energy sector.

Phil Gallie: Having heard the minister's words, I want to ask whether he realises that the target that he has set for renewables is less than what is currently achieved by Spain. Does he realise that recently Spain's system almost collapsed and was saved only by France's nuclear industry?

Allan Wilson: The renewables targets that we have set are certainly ambitious—Mr Gallie is correct at least on that point—but they are also deliverable. The targets are compatible with the energy policy that I outlined. Renewables have an important part to play in delivering security of supply through diversity of supply.

As time will inevitably be limited, I will mention only some of the Executive's achievements to date and the ambitious targets that we have set. On fuel poverty, a review of the first year of the central heating programme showed that nine out of 10 people who were fuel poor were lifted out of fuel poverty after receiving support from the programme. Over 2003-04, the average annual savings on fuel bills under the central heating programme were more than £376 for those aged 60 and over in private sector accommodation and more than £324 for those in local authority or housing association accommodation. By March 2007, all social sector housing tenants who want central heating will have it. The Executive has spent £140 million through the programme and we have provided central heating systems to more than 56,000 homes.

On energy efficiency, the Executive has allocated a further £64 million to the warm deal. Under the warm deal, more than a tenth of Scotland's housing stock has been insulated—that is more than 218,000 homes. Over 2003-04, that resulted in savings of £99 on the fuel bills of private tenants and £26 on the bills of those in housing association accommodation. As Richard Lochhead acknowledged, we are also developing Scotland's first energy efficiency strategy. Last year, we invested an additional £20 million in improving public sector energy efficiency.

On renewables, to which Mr Gallie referred, we have set a target—but not a limit to our ambition—of generating 40 per cent of our energy supply from renewables by 2020. That is a fourfold increase on current levels of renewables generation. We have also invested £3 million in

the Marine Energy Centre in Orkney and we recently announced our intention—as Richard Lochhead mentioned—to amend the renewables obligation certificates scheme to award increased numbers of ROCs for wave and tidal output.

Richard Lochhead: Does the minister accept that there is growing demand for a specific Scottish energy policy that looks at where we should produce energy, how we should produce it and how much energy we need? When will he produce that kind of policy, even within the limits of devolution? Why has he not responded positively to the request for such a policy by the Enterprise and Culture Committee?

Allan Wilson: We are producing an energy policy. The member acknowledged the forthcoming strategy on energy efficiency. Later today, I will announce the expected publication date for our independent review of Scotland's intermediate and future energy needs. We have committed ourselves to developing the very policy that the member seeks. However, it is critical that we do so in association with the UK Government, rather than by turning the rest of the UK into a foreign country or countries. It is fundamental that we have that perspective on the overall British energy market.

Mr John Swinney (North Tayside) (SNP): Will the minister give way?

Allan Wilson: No. I want to make progress.

We anticipate announcing a biomass support scheme after the new year. I believe that the thriving biomass and marine energy sectors in Scotland are second to none. They present us with the potential for an additional 1.5GW of installed capacity and up to 9,000 new jobs and they give us the opportunity to establish Scotland as a global renewables powerhouse. In the process, they would provide us not simply with security of supply, but with a sustainable energy policy into the future.

Mr Swinney: Will the minister give way on that point?

Allan Wilson: I want to make an announcement, if the member does not mind.

I am pleased to announce that, as a crucial part of having a considered and informed debate on energy policy—the point on which I was just challenged—we will release the first two volumes of the Scottish energy study by the end of the year. We commissioned the study to provide a factual overview of energy supply and demand trends in Scotland.

We recognise that conventional fuel sources are integral to meeting Scotland's energy needs. That is why we will continue to work with the UK Government, not least on the forthcoming UK

energy review that was announced by the Prime Minister earlier this year. We will also work with regulators, which is critical, and with those involved in the energy sector in Scotland to ensure that demand is met and that we get the best possible deal for consumers, within market constraints.

We are also represented on Pilot, the joint industry-Government group that is tasked with creating a climate for the UK continental shelf to retain its position as a pre-eminent active centre of oil and gas exploration. We have that concern in common with the nationalists; we want to develop production and to keep the UK contracting and supplies industry at the leading edge in overall competitiveness.

We recognise the contribution to the energy mix that can be accrued from development of clean-coal technologies, to which Richard Lochhead referred. Scottish Enterprise commissioned a report, which was published in September 2005, on carbon capture and storage, to complement the Department of Trade and Industry's carbon abatement technologies strategy, which was launched in June this year. DTI commitments to invest in CCT research and development projects amount to £13 million since 1999.

BP, Royal Dutch Shell, ConocoPhillips and Scottish and Southern Energy have invested £330 million in developing a new 350MW station at Peterhead, which is to come on stream in 2009. That is leading-edge, state-of-the-art technology. BP suggests that it could extend the life of the Miller field by 15 to 20 years and increase oil recovery by up to 40 million tonnes.

Scotland is an energy-rich country that currently exports a sizeable chunk of its electricity to England and Northern Ireland. I want that to continue. Our current total generating capacity goes well beyond what Scotland consumes. Our commitment, set out in our amendment, is to an energy supply mix that strikes the right balance—an equilibrium between, on the one hand, meeting demand in Scotland and making energy affordable to consumers and, on the other, working for a sustainable future by employing strategies to make energy savings, to meet a growing proportion of supply from renewable sources and to encourage a change in culture among energy consumers.

I move amendment S2M-3543.4, to leave out from "considers" to end and insert:

"supports the Scottish Executive's continuing commitment to the development of a wide range of renewable energy technologies in Scotland as a key element of a balanced energy supply mix; supports the Executive's commitment to achieving 40 per cent renewable electricity generation by 2020; supports the Executive's attempts to eradicate fuel poverty by 2016;

looks forward to publication of the revised Scottish Climate Change Programme and the consideration given to the contribution of energy efficiency and renewables to reduce carbon dioxide emissions; recognises the Executive's commitment, as set out in the Partnership Agreement, not to approve the construction of any new nuclear power stations in Scotland until the issue of waste has been addressed, and supports the Executive's commitment to continue to work with the UK Government and energy supply industries to ensure that the immediate and future energy supply needs of Scotland are met."

09:40

Alex Johnstone (North East Scotland) (Con):

It is something of an irony that, as we discuss renewable and other forms of energy, I am being blinded by the sun.

Alasdair Morgan (South of Scotland) (SNP): Will the member give way?

Alex Johnstone: If Alasdair Morgan has a serious intervention to make.

Alasdair Morgan: It is serious. This is the first time for many years that the sun has shone on the Conservative front bench.

Alex Johnstone: We must accept it when it comes our way.

I am glad that the Scottish National Party has raised the issue of energy policy for us to debate this morning. That is part of a process that is beginning to deliver some understanding of the ground rules on energy policy in Scotland and what we need to discuss. Too often in the past, it has been easy to bring forward ideas and to be extremely controversial in our presentation of them. Politicians like to butt heads occasionally. However, in his opening remarks today, Richard Lochhead did the whole Parliament a service by setting out the types of discussion that we need to have. He provided a comprehensive description of the situation in which we find ourselves. There was much in his interpretation with which Conservative members, like the minister, can agree.

Alex Neil (Central Scotland) (SNP): Will the member clarify whether he agrees with his new leader that energy policy should not be devolved further or whether he agrees with his new deputy leader that it should all be devolved?

Alex Johnstone: That is a spurious interpretation.

There is much in the SNP motion and all the amendments that have been lodged this morning with which I agree. However, there is much in the motion that we must debate and consider in greater detail. I agree with Richard Lochhead that security of supply is an important issue that we must address. However, if we are to have security of supply, we must be all encompassing in how we

consider future and present technologies as part of an electricity-generating programme for the future. If we are to address affordability, we must consider the cost of becoming increasingly dependent on renewables and as yet undeveloped technologies, as Richard Lochhead suggests. How can we guarantee affordability if we do not consider current technologies?

The motion also mentions energy efficiency. We accept that energy efficiency has an important role to play, but we cannot address the issue, especially in the domestic setting, without addressing affordability. Members from other parties have suggested that building regulations should be enhanced. That is a good idea—we can increase domestic energy efficiency by that means. However, if we do that in such a way as to increase the basic costs of housing, affordability of housing will become a problem. We must address energy efficiency in an all-encompassing way and ensure that account is taken of affordability and security of supply.

Rob Gibson (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): I understand that the Conservative party's policy in favour of nuclear power would override any of the considerations to which the member referred. Does he agree that, if we spend £X on energy matters, the value that we get from energy efficiency will be seven times greater than that which we get from building a nuclear power station?

Alex Johnstone: The member misunderstands the Conservative position. We are not prepared to sell our souls for nuclear power at any cost. We believe that nuclear power is part of a rational and well-developed energy policy and should be addressed as part of the debate.

I move on to some of the issues with which Richard Lochhead deals in his motion. Transmission charges for electricity will add cost to the transmission of electricity from Highland wind farms. However, we must accept that the charges deliver reduced costs to the consumer in Scotland by spreading the cost of Scottish grid development across a much larger base in the UK, rather than targeting it on Scottish consumers. It is swings and roundabouts.

Allan Wilson: The member talks about swings and roundabouts in transmission charging. Does he acknowledge the Scottish Executive's success in introducing into the Energy Act 2004 provision to cap transmission charges in the north of Scotland?

Alex Johnstone: Indeed, that was an important change in the procedure for charging for electricity.

I have taken a few interventions. I now intend briefly to run through the issues, in particular the

North sea oil industry. North sea oil is a great windfall for this country—no one would say differently. However, the idea that a windfall tax should be levied against companies operating in the North sea is wholly unacceptable, as stability in the marketplace is essential to future investment. Any change in the administration of North sea oil and gas fields would undermine confidence, particularly if such a change led to this Parliament having absolute control. The suggestion that the future stability of the North sea oil and gas industry should be thrown to the winds of this chamber would undermine confidence in the industry forevermore.

I will address the points that have been raised in interventions. On the Conservative benches, we believe that nuclear power has a future. It is important that we address that issue now; the debate must be had. Resolving the waste issue and commissioning new nuclear power stations can and must run in parallel, as the lengthy commissioning process means that decisions about new nuclear stations cannot be left until the last minute. We want to ensure that we have secure, sustainable electricity supplies through the use of existing and new technologies.

Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): Will the member give way?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The member is finishing.

Alex Johnstone: If in the long term we are to have affordable and available electricity, we must ensure that we have secure supply. We should not allow our nuclear stations to be decommissioned and not replaced, because we do not have a policy adequately to supply power in the future.

I move amendment S2M-3543.1, to leave out from first "recognises" to end and insert:

"believes that renewable and nuclear energy are complementary and that, in order to achieve a balanced energy policy, no existing or potential resource should be ignored; urges the Scottish Executive to revisit its renewable energy policy to provide proper planning guidance to local authorities, communities and developers in relation to the siting of wind farms and, until this guidance is implemented, calls on the Executive to declare a moratorium on the determination of locally-opposed wind farm planning applications, and believes that the North Sea oil and gas industry is best served by the current regulatory arrangements."

09:48

Shiona Baird (North East Scotland) (Green): The Green party very much welcomes this debate, which is extremely important, as Richard Lochhead said, and timely. However, although we agree with the bulk of the SNP motion, it does not go far enough either in recognising the role of energy in the generation of greenhouse gases or

in promoting policies that will be needed to address climate change and to develop the energy networks of the future.

Climate change must be at the heart of the decision-making process in developing an energy policy for the coming century. It is hard to overstate the importance of climate change, but suffice it to say that it remains the greatest threat that faces us, our society, our environment and our economy. It is worth bearing in mind the fact that the sectoral emissions data for Scotland show that energy in all its forms accounts for no less than 79 per cent of our carbon emissions. We agree with the SNP that decisions on energy should be devolved to Scotland, but the content of the policy is more important than the body that determines it.

Richard Lochhead: How can the member accuse the SNP of not addressing global warming in its motion when it refers to the need for renewables and for carbon capture and storage technology?

Shiona Baird: That is not what I meant: I said that climate change was not mentioned, but should be at the heart of all our decisions.

We have a clear picture of the energy future that Scotland needs, which includes a combination of radical energy efficiency gains and a sustainable energy supply. The ways in which we generate, distribute and use energy today are woefully inefficient. In coal-fired, gas-fired and oil-fired power stations, more than two thirds of the energy content of the fuel is wasted before energy reaches our homes. We emit 100 per cent greenhouse gases, but get the benefit of only about 30 per cent of useful electricity. We can do better than that.

We need to make dramatic gains in energy efficiency across all sectors—in our housing stock, in our businesses and in our transport use. Much of Scotland's housing is in poor condition, but in spite of many welcome initiatives, growing numbers of households are in fuel poverty. A focus on energy efficiency can transform lives and, in some cases, save them. Our businesses often pay scant regard to how they use and misuse energy. I have never understood why many hard-nosed businessmen overlook energy efficiency as a way to save money—as far as I am concerned, it is a no-brainer.

Phil Gallie: Which businesses has Shiona Baird talked to? I can hardly find one that does not have an efficiency engineer in order to address issues such as she raises.

Shiona Baird: Just look at the number of lights that are left on at night in all sorts of industries, factories and shops. There is Phil Gallie's answer.

In transport, improvements in engine efficiency are being outweighed by an increase in the volume of road traffic and an increase in the use of larger and less efficient, but supposedly more desirable, cars. Are we serious about tackling climate change and reducing energy use? If we are, why do we have this continuing fixation with wasting money on building more roads, which can result only in more traffic and increased carbon emissions? It is time for some joined-up thinking—although this is not a transport debate, so I had better watch my step.

Perhaps housing is the sector in which gains can most easily be made and can result in most savings. In addition to insulating our lofts and cavity walls to ensure that increasingly expensive fuel supplies are not used to heat the neighbourhood, there are now ways for households to take control of their own energy futures by generating their own energy. Several Scottish companies now offer domestic solar water heating, which can cut gas bills in half. Small-scale wind turbines will become affordable over the next couple of years and could transform not only our city skylines but our electricity bills.

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): Will the member give way?

Shiona Baird: I am sorry, but I need to move on.

We cannot sit back and wait for microgeneration to happen by itself, which is why I am proposing a micropower bill, which would set targets for installation of micropower systems, overhaul the planning system to make installation of home renewables easier, create an obligation for new buildings to have microgeneration capacity, and offer council tax and business rates rebates for people who install such capacity. Sarah Boyack also has an interest in the subject; I hope that we can work together to bring about a quiet revolution in how we generate energy.

An expansion in microgeneration must go hand in hand with changes in how our electricity supplies are transmitted and distributed. The national grid is currently wired up to support a small number of large power stations. We need to turn that on its head. Our vision is of a much larger number of small generators. Such a decentralised energy network would be more stable, more efficient, more democratic and more accountable. In the long run, it would also be much cheaper to operate.

Scotland and the UK have one of the most centralised electricity networks in the world. The majority of consumers do not know where their power comes from, other than that it comes out of a wee hole in the skirting board. A decentralised network, whereby every home, office and factory

has the potential to create its own energy, makes the connection between supplier and consumer, and inevitably breeds efficiency and innovation.

Energy and the environmental problems that arise from its generation and use remain the most pressing issues that face us today, but if we have the imagination and political courage to grasp the nettle, we can go a long way towards gaining a secure and sustainable energy future for our children. If we delay and fail to open our minds to the sustainable solutions that are out there, we will condemn our children to a future of hardship and uncertainty. That is not such a hard choice.

I move amendment S2M-3543.3, to leave out from “to deliver the nation’s” to end, and insert:

“in order to deliver Scotland’s sustainable energy needs and to tackle climate change which is recognised as one of the greatest threats to our economy, communities and environment; further considers that, if we are serious about tackling climate change, a radical overhaul of our energy use is urgently required, particularly addressing contradictory transport policies which are increasing carbon emissions, and further notes that a truly sustainable energy policy will require the widespread adoption of domestic and community-based renewable micro-generation as well as the development of decentralised energy networks.”

09:55

Nora Radcliffe (Gordon) (LD): Allan Wilson’s amendment sets out clearly how we see energy policy—it should be founded on a wide range of renewable energy technologies as a key element of a balanced energy supply. As Richard Lochhead outlined, we have huge natural resources in Scotland, including wind, wave, tidal and hydropower. He also said that we have another 25 years of North sea oil. It seems that for as long as we have had oil in the North sea, we have had a receding 25-year horizon. However, there is a lot of resource in the North sea, as well as potential for carbon storage, which is useful.

Yet again, the Tories call for a moratorium on wind power development, about which many myths exist. Strategic planning guidance has been produced on such development—we have national planning policy guideline 6 and planning advice note 45. Local authorities have avoided grasping the nettle and have assumed a sloping-shoulders policy. They cry that there is no strategic direction, but strategic direction exists and some councils have acted on it. I commend Aberdeenshire Council, which has produced supplementary planning guidance for applicants. Local authorities should develop the strategic guidance: planning is a local authority responsibility, so authorities should take it.

Alex Johnstone: Does Nora Radcliffe accept that a Scottish strategic policy on siting wind farms can be dictated only from the centre, not by local

authorities, and that therefore strategic guidance from Scottish ministers is essential?

Nora Radcliffe: Watch my lips. We have strategic guidance in the NPPG and PAN. The guidance exists, but it must be developed by local authorities. The people who oppose wind farm developments at all costs do not seem to realise that uncertainty and delays cost Scottish jobs.

Allan Wilson: Does Nora Radcliffe agree that, in order to be consistent in supporting renewables, members must consistently support projects that deliver renewables capacity?

Nora Radcliffe: Yes—that is right. We must take the hard decisions and stand up for what we believe in.

We have sometimes to challenge the perceived wisdom, which can turn out to be not so wise after all. A new wind farm has just been commissioned in my constituency. Many concerns were expressed about it beforehand, but now that it is up and running, there are no problems. Once people see developments on the ground, they find that many of the myths about the downside of wind farms are just that—myths.

Alasdair Morgan: Does Nora Radcliffe agree that the minister’s intervention does not mean that he will approve all planning applications for renewables developments that come before him for adjudication?

Nora Radcliffe: Exactly. Planning is about having the right development in the right place and people must make decisions within the policy framework. We have a strategic policy and local authorities should have local policies. Decisions must be made in accordance with those policies, but local authorities must make those decisions. The difficulty is that people shy away from making such decisions, which creates uncertainty and delay. That is not good for business and it means that Scottish workers are being laid off. I recently spoke to a businessman who manufactures stems for wind turbines and who had to lay off 30 people because delays in planning meant that orders were not coming through. He could not retain his workforce, which is a tragedy.

I turn to wave power. What is wrong with the fact that the Pelamis device is being used in Portugal? The Scottish company that developed the system has sold its expertise abroad, but the profits are coming back here and we will benefit from the development. We do not need to keep everything within our borders. Scottish Power has more than 5 million customers, 60 per cent of whom are outside Scotland. That is fine because we are an exporting nation. We are tiny, so we do not want to keep everything within our borders.

Patrick Harvie: I welcome exports when they happen because they may benefit our economy, but do we not need to use the Pelamis technology here to tap into our renewable resources? Does Nora Radcliffe agree that the company's move has been criticised because it means that that will not now happen?

Nora Radcliffe: That is a fairly apocalyptic view. We will use the technology here, in time. Pelamis was developed because we had the European Marine Energy Centre in Orkney. Without that, the company could not have progressed the technology to the point at which it could be taken to Portugal.

Hydropower will make a huge contribution to our target of 40 per cent of electricity generation from renewables by 2020. There is scope for new hydro developments, but people do not always realise that tremendous scope also exists to upgrade old hydro systems, which use plant that is 50 years old that could be replaced with much more efficient and productive modern plant to get an increase in hydropower generation.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You have one minute remaining.

Nora Radcliffe: Oh, crumbs! I had better get a move on.

At community level, we should consider local combined heat and power systems and community wind power. In Castlemilk in Glasgow, an excellent project has been established involving two wind turbines that benefit the local community. Such developments are a super way forward. We may need fiscal incentives for combined heat and power systems, but we also need a mindset change. People need to realise that the technology is perfectly viable and that they can do it. We want a can-do mentality on combined heat and power.

Tremendous opportunities exist for biomass and biodiesel systems. The National Farmers Union of Scotland is keen on development of such systems because they allow farmers to diversify. As Shiona Baird said, much can be done domestically through measures such as wind microgeneration, solar-powered water heating, ground heat and photovoltaic energy. We should consider reversible metering and give people information and perhaps grants to encourage them to do what they can domestically.

I must mention nuclear power. The Executive amendment says that we will not have new nuclear power stations until we have cracked the waste problem, which has not happened. Members know my views on nuclear power, so I will not go into that.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You must finish now.

Nora Radcliffe: We should never forget that energy efficiency is only half the answer.

10:03

Christine Grahame (South of Scotland) (SNP): I intend to speak to two lines in our motion and my colleagues will speak about the rest. The two lines, which are the most important, read:

"That the Parliament considers it unacceptable that in energy-rich Scotland fuel poverty blights our society".

I know that that view is not shared by the Conservatives or the minister and the Liberal Democrats, because their amendments would delete those lines, which is absolutely appalling. It is a bitter irony that we are compelled again to mention fuel poverty in our energy-rich nation. I do not complain that we are a net exporter of energy, but it is a bitter irony that, even as we debate the matter, people are choosing whether to eat or to heat.

The 2002 figures showed that 46,000 children lived in fuel-poor homes. I suspect that given the fuel price rises that have occurred and the fact that every 5 per cent rise puts another 30,000 households into fuel poverty, the figures are on the increase. Fuel poverty is defined as when more than 10 per cent of a household's income, including household benefit or income support for mortgage interest, must be used for household fuels.

Richard Baker (North East Scotland) (Lab): The member rightly mentions fuel prices but, at the recent SNP conference, Richard Lochhead called for eco and carbon taxes to be put on the agenda. Surely that would have an impact on taxes for companies and, potentially, on fuel prices, too.

Christine Grahame: My point is that people on low incomes are unable to cope with fuel price increases. It is significant that fuel poverty leads to respiratory problems among children, which means that they are off school. Those children are not only fuel poor, they are opportunity poor.

In a parliamentary answer to me yesterday we were told yet again—using figures that are three years old—that 286,000 households, or 13 per cent, are in fuel poverty. It would be churlish of me not to applaud the Administration's central heating programme and other targeted initiatives such as the warm deal.

Alex Johnstone: Will the member take an intervention?

Christine Grahame: I must make progress.

I would like the central heating programme to be extended to faulty and still-functioning systems, which fall outwith its remit at the moment, as do homes with children living in poverty or homes in which there are people who are disabled or severely disabled. In addition, I would like the programme to be accelerated for people who can show medical need, so that they are not just put into a queue. Those initiatives would, if they were implemented, pay dividends in human happiness, health and well-being and—incidentally—would cost society less in health care and other demands on the public purse. In the meantime, against the background of the worthy initiatives and notwithstanding the winter fuel payment, the system continues to fail children and elderly people. It is a fact of life that low wages and low pensions bind people into poverty, which keeps them in poorly insulated poor-quality homes.

Phil Gallie: Given Christine Grahame's obsession with the cost of electricity, why did she oppose the privatisation of electricity, which saw costs reduced significantly to a sustainable level?

Christine Grahame: Phil Gallie is always trying. Sometimes he is more trying than usual; that question was very trying. *[Interruption.]* I have more important issues to deal with—only a few members have dealt with fuel poverty.

The Administration has pledged to eradicate fuel poverty, as far as is practicable, by 2016. That will not happen. The Administration parties and the rest of Parliament would like it to happen, but we simply do not have the power or the opportunity to achieve it. We are constrained within the limitations of devolution. Independence is not an academic point; it is a practical, deliverable point.

Jackie Baillie: Will the member take an intervention?

Christine Grahame: No. I have only six minutes and will not get extra time for interventions.

Excessive winter deaths remain a scandal: last year's figure was 2,760, and that was a good year. In 1999, when there was a flu epidemic, the figure was nearly 6,000. It is not scaremongering to say that, given the situation in households in Scotland, the impact on Scottish people of avian flu would be far greater than even in the Scandic countries, which, although they are far colder than Scotland, suffer nothing like the number of winter deaths that we have. The minister's hands are tied because of our limited powers. We should have a thriving economy, but without the power to raise the basic level of our people in society, those winter scandals will continue. Poverty is the root of many social ills and it condemns many Scots families, our elderly people and our young people to a cold and uncertain winter. I say to the minister that that is not scaremongering. The scandal of fuel poverty

will be on all our hands, and the cold winter reality approaches fast. Without independence and the power to really deliver for the Scottish people, we will not radically change the situation.

10:08

Mr Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): I apologise because I will have to leave fairly shortly. We have visitors from the European Parliament, whom I am to take round Parliament.

I refer members to the Enterprise and Culture Committee's 2004 report into renewable energy, copies of which are at the back of the chamber. I was and remain a member of that committee. Page 7 of the report states:

"The Committee believes that the opportunities and potential benefits presented by the renewables energy sector are so great that the Executive should be prepared to invest significantly in the sector. It should be treated as a priority sector by the enterprise networks and the full range of business support mechanisms should be brought to bear on its development. In circumstances where the private sector is risk averse the Scottish Executive should take the lead."

We have heard of the welcome investment in Orkney and we heard the minister's announcements earlier. However, I would like to direct colleagues' attention—if they are not already aware of it—to a Canadian set-up called Blue Energy Canada Inc. It is well worth a look—its details are on the internet. What the company proposes is quite detailed. Such is the force of the tidal current flowing through the Pentland firth that I have in previous debates on energy described it as having the potential to be the Saudi Arabia of tidal energy. What Blue Energy has been developing is particularly interesting. It is broadening out beyond tidal energy to ocean currents, which are permanent and do not change direction—they are there for ever. We all know that as long the earth goes round the sun and the moon goes round the earth there will be tidal energy. Other members have referred to the massive potential in that, but I want to home in on it.

I do not want to pre-empt the report into growing the Scottish economy before it has been published. I see that Alex Neil, the convener of the Enterprise and Culture Committee, is eyeing me carefully, so I will not drop him in it. However, it would be fair to say that what we have heard about research and development and the way in which it is conducted in other countries is very interesting. I hope that our report will reflect that. Research and development on tidal energy continues; when we were writing the report we saw the work that is being done at the Robert Gordon University on devices that can be put on the sea bed. They are small things—not much

bigger than two chamber desks—but achieving the huge construction that is needed is where the R and D and commitment will have to come in.

Alex Johnstone: Will the member give way?

Mr Stone: I will if I have time—I have only a short time for my speech.

It is on fronts such as tidal energy that useful work could be done. The Robert Gordon University is involved; what about the University of the Highlands and Islands? What could not be achieved in engineering development?

Richard Lochhead referred to the oil sector. I worked in that sector in the 1970s and 1980s on projects such as the Hutton tension-leg platform and the Ninian central platform—albeit that I worked at skivvy level. It is the vision and the drive to get those huge technologically cutting-edge structures out there that mean that Richard Lochhead can say that we will have 25 more years of oil, and possibly more. However, the commitment of the private and public sectors in those years is essential. We need to get into fifth gear on tidal energy potential—all of us, in all parties, must keep our eye on that. If we miss that opportunity we would be making a big mistake. Denmark strode ahead and leads the world on wind energy; we have the opportunity to get in on tidal energy and we must move fast.

Alex Johnstone: Can Jamie Stone give us a date on which sufficient tidal energy will come from the Pentland firth to enable us to switch off a nuclear or a coal-fired power station? I can give him dates when those power stations will have to close.

Mr Stone: I cannot give the member a date, but I hope that it will happen as soon as possible, so that we can get the maximum energy out of the Pentland firth and use it for the good of Scotland. Arnish yard in Stornoway is already benefiting from the construction work that Nora Radcliffe talked about—think what it could do for the Nigg yard and the other fabrication yards in Scotland if we really got going on those big structures. It is too important an opportunity to miss. I commend Blue Energy to colleagues; if they have not already done so, they should take a look at what that company is doing. It is well thought out, and a lot of the technology for what it wants to do already exists.

10:13

Dr Elaine Murray (Dumfries) (Lab): I am pleased to have another opportunity to debate energy policy. It is an important issue, which tends to provoke fairly lively debate. I note that there has been some attempt to include the perpetual debate about the constitution, but I am pleased

that most members have chosen to stick to energy matters. I am pleased that the Scottish National Party has chosen to have only one Opposition debate this morning, rather than the customary two, because energy is an issue that is important enough to require the development of ideas. As the minister and Alex Johnstone did, I agree with many parts of the motion. I will say more on that in a minute.

The minister referred to the Executive's ambitious targets for energy generation from renewable sources.

Christine Grahame: Dr Murray agrees with much of the motion, so does she regret the fact that the Executive's amendment would delete the reference to fuel poverty?

Dr Murray: The minister has made clear our commitment to the eradication of fuel poverty. We all appreciate that it is an exceedingly important issue.

The target for renewables is 40 per cent by 2020. The SNP has said that it would prefer that to be increased to 50 per cent, and its motion calls for Scotland to be

“the world leader in renewable energy and carbon capture and storage technology”.

I do not disagree with that aim, but I remain to be convinced that such a target can be achieved under the SNP's current plans. If the SNP wants a target of 50 per cent to be met in the next 15 years, why do SNP politicians so often voice their objections to wind turbine developments in their back yards? Christine Grahame, Roseanna Cunningham, Fergus Ewing and Angus McNeil have all objected to such developments.

Christine Grahame: I am not opposed in principle to wind turbine developments, but the fact is that there is no national framework. Modifications have already been made to the proposals to which Dr Murray referred for a wind farm at Walkerburn; that has happened as a consequence of a proper campaign to have it moved off the southern upland way. The member should get her facts right.

Dr Murray: Christine Grahame objected to wind farms in her own back yard. Why has the SNP's economic policy over the past decade been predicated on the exploitation of a non-renewable carbon-generating source of power?

I return to the part of the motion with which I agree.

Richard Lochhead: Will the member take an intervention?

Dr Murray: No. I am sorry, but Christine Grahame made a rather long intervention.

The motion says that we should develop

“an energy policy for Scotland that will deliver security of supply, affordability, self-sufficiency and energy efficiency”.

I argue that we should develop a policy that will deliver the export of power. The motion is right, which is why I support the development of a balanced energy policy that includes a wide range of renewables—other members have said that—including tidal wave power, clean coal, biomass, energy efficiency measures and nuclear power. Whatever side of the argument a person takes, the time is coming when difficult decisions about nuclear power will have to be made. I am afraid that the wriggle room in the partnership agreement will not exist for much longer.

Patrick Harvie: Will the member take an intervention?

Dr Murray: No. I am sorry, but I must make progress.

The Committee on Radioactive Waste Management report on management of our existing nuclear waste is due next July and I understand that it will suggest a solution that could encompass disposal of future nuclear waste. We must dispel the myths about the new generation of nuclear power stations. They do not have to be linked to the production of nuclear weapons. That was true of the Magnox reactors, such as the reactor that is currently being defuelled at Chapelcross in my constituency. That reactor was not viable without the sale of tritium, but that does not have to be the case for Chapelcross 2. Unlike the Magnox reactors, the new reactors—such as the advanced passive reactor—do not produce large volumes of irradiated graphite in the reactor cores. Over 60 years, an AP 100MW reactor would produce approximately 2,000m³ of low-level radioactive waste and 700m³ of medium-level waste. The solutions that must be found for our existing nuclear waste could encompass the disposal of some of that nuclear waste.

I fear that, without nuclear power, we will not only struggle with our base-load capacity, but may become increasingly dependent on imported sources of fuel over time. I fear that the country may change from being an exporter of fuel to being an importer of fuel and that we may have to import from countries such as France and Finland, which have decided to include nuclear generation in their energy portfolios.

Nora Radcliffe: Will the member take an intervention?

Dr Murray: I am sorry, but I have only another minute and a half left.

I do not want to talk only about nuclear power; I am sure that my colleague John Home Robertson will return to the issue.

I whole-heartedly support the development of a variety of renewables technologies. Nora Radcliffe referred to the contribution that hydroelectricity has made over the years and the contribution that it will make to the achievement of our 2012 target.

Offshore wind has its place, too. I have voiced concerns about proposals for large-scale developments that would use huge turbines in locations in my constituency, but I do not oppose wind power per se, and I have an alternative solution. [*Interruption.*]

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Order.

Dr Murray: Biomass is an increasingly important and interesting opportunity. We have heard concerns about E.ON UK, but it has recently been given the go-ahead for a 44MW dedicated biomass power station at Steven's Croft in Lockerbie, which should commence generation in December 2007. That power station should support 40 jobs directly and an estimated 300 jobs in forestry and farming. It will provide a use for by-products of the forestry industry and offer an opportunity for farmers to diversify into willow production. Therefore, I was a bit surprised that the Green regional list member, Chris Ballance, attacked the proposal in the local press. Perhaps that demonstrates that it is not only SNP members who are inconsistent on energy policy.

I support the Executive's amendment, but say to members that serious debates and difficult decisions are looming on the horizon about the place of nuclear power—which is the alternative to big wind farm developments—in a balanced energy policy.

10:19

Mary Scanlon (Highlands and Islands) (Con):

I point out to Christine Grahame that the Tory amendment would retain the words “fuel poverty” and that the amendment would start to apply from the fifth line of the motion. I hope that that is acknowledged. In the interests of balance, the Labour-Liberal Executive's amendment also includes the words “fuel poverty”. It is important to be accurate.

The motion is wide ranging and there needs to be a wide-ranging debate on energy policy—or the lack of it. Jamie Stone—I am sorry that he has left the chamber—was right to talk about tidal power. I commend the excellent research on decommissioning that is taking place at the North Highland College. Cutting-edge, worldwide decommissioning research is being done in the north Highlands and more than 17 PhD students are leading the world in that respect. Tidal power is being looked into. In considering energy, we should consider the excellent research work that academics are doing in this country.

Obviously, the race to embrace wind farms through renewables obligation certificate payments results in higher prices for all consumers. Therefore, we should remember that there will be higher prices and more fuel poverty as a result of wind power. I will return to that topic later.

Elaine Murray said that any reasonable debate must include the nuclear option. Members could ask the people of Caithness whether they want their county to be covered in wind farms or whether they would like to have the next nuclear station. Those people should know the answer, as they have had Dounreay since the 1950s, and I can tell members what their answer would be.

I want to deal with something that other members have mentioned. I note the SNP's commitment to wind farm energy, which Richard Lochhead talked about passionately—I listened to him carefully. However, the member of Parliament for the Western Isles won his seat on the basis that he was opposed to wind farms. That is acknowledged in a paper that I have with me.

Rob Gibson: Will the member take an intervention?

Mary Scanlon: Not at the moment.

How can someone pursue his opposition to wind farms in a party that is totally committed to wind farms? That is simply impossible. I do not mourn the loss of a Labour politician, but I acknowledge honesty and SNP members must be honest when they debate.

Richard Lochhead: Is the member saying that it is wrong to support offshore wind farms? Does the Tory party oppose all kinds of wind energy?

Mary Scanlon: The member should have listened to what I was saying. The SNP MP for the Western Isles won the election on the basis that he was opposed to wind farms, but the party's policy is totally in favour of wind farms. There should be a bit of honesty in the debate.

There is no doubt that, to date, the Executive has seen renewable energy predominantly in terms of wind farms. I commend much of what Elaine Murray said. All members need to consider what plans are in place to replace the gas, coal and nuclear power base-load stations when they close less than two decades from now. That is a crucial question that has not yet been answered. Wind-generated power is unpredictable—gales do not always blow in the Highlands—and requires 80 to 85 per cent back-up to ensure consistent supply.

In seeking equilibrium in the energy market, we must focus on supply, although it is obvious that we cannot lose sight of demand. I note what Shiona Baird said about energy efficiency, which

must always be part of the debate. The Conservatives introduced the warm deal to encourage energy efficiency, provide warm homes and save consumers money. The Executive's free central heating programme has undoubtedly helped many elderly people to live more comfortably in their own homes, but the Minister for Communities is considering extending the programme to cover people who are in receipt of pension credit. Given the huge cohort of people on pension credit who could be taken out of fuel poverty by the programme, why has the warm deal budget been cut by £12 million over the next two years? The budget will go down from £57 million to £45 million. If we are serious about extending the warm deal, we should realise that that cannot be done through cuts.

I am sorry that I did not make an intervention during Nora Radcliffe's speech. I point out to her that, apart from the fact that the planning bill will come before the Parliament next month, the Executive's reason for putting NPPG 6—the planning guideline for renewable energy—out for further consultation in January is that it is not sufficient for dealing with the demands that planning departments, wind energy development companies and local objectors are placing on the wind power sector. The Liberal-Labour coalition is re-examining that guideline because it is not sufficient; I agree, although I disagree with the fact that the guideline will apply in parallel with the planning bill yet lie outwith its scope. I doubt whether those who object to wind power will get the same option to be consulted as those who will be included in the consultation for the planning bill. I welcome the consultation and I hope that it will give equal powers to objectors to wind farms and objectors to other developments.

10:26

Mr Charlie Gordon (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab): No debate on energy in Scotland can ignore the key role of Scotland's third-largest company, Scottish Power, with its 6,000 staff in Scotland and 15,000 staff worldwide. Scottish Power operates coal power stations, hydroelectric power stations, wind farms, gas storage facilities and, in central and southern Scotland, transmission and distribution networks. It also has a retail electricity and gas supply operation that serves 5 million customers in the United Kingdom. Scottish Power's corporate headquarters are at Atlantic Quay in Glasgow; its human resources and finance departments are at Bellshill; it has call centres and administration centres in East Kilbride and Hamilton; and about 2,000 of its staff are based in my Glasgow Cathcart constituency.

Scottish Power is a progressive company in several respects. In respect of investment, the

sum of £3.1 billion is earmarked for investment in UK generation infrastructure. In respect of corporate social responsibility, the company is ranked second in WWF's European Union rankings for power companies dealing with climate change. The company's lifelong learning department has assisted communities, staff and their families, and has provided training to around 10,000 unemployed young people. In respect of industrial relations, Scottish Power pays above-average wages and applies above-average conditions of service, especially for its call-centre staff; such staff do not always get a good deal. It provides good pension schemes. It has a good health and safety record. It has good relations with the unions that represent the workforce.

However, these are worrying times for Scottish Power. Its acquisition of PacifiCorp in the United States is acknowledged to have been a strategic error and a new strategy is now in place. As part of that strategy, PacifiCorp is now for sale and a £60 million per annum savings target is being implemented. Sadly, one of the main consequences of meeting that target is that 450 jobs at Scottish Power, including 300 jobs at Cathcart, will be lost over the next 18 months. Any job losses are, of course, very regrettable and everything possible will be done to assist people who are made redundant. Let us not forget, however, that Scottish Power created about 1,200 new jobs in Scotland last year. Scottish Power's retrenchment strategy, given a chance to work through, may well stabilise the company. It is still a strong and respected company with an international reputation. Until the acquisition of PacifiCorp, it is arguable that it had not put a foot wrong.

There are other reasons to worry about Scottish Power's future. I refer to the fact that the German company E.ON, the owner of Powergen, is considering a takeover bid for Scottish Power. As a lifelong trade unionist, and through my 18 years in local government, I have been involved in many battles to retain jobs. I am strongly of the view that no politician and no party has the right to play politics with people's jobs, but I am partisan about Scottish Power in one respect: I am on the side of its workers. As members would expect, I am in close contact with the workforce unions and I share their view that an autonomous future for Scottish Power is still a viable option. Let us not overlook that option or write it off. Let us not make a takeover a self-fulfilling prophecy by default.

Having said that, I recognise that the directors of a publicly quoted company such as Scottish Power have a fiduciary duty towards their shareholders to consider any appropriate bid that is made formally. Such a bid would inevitably increase the worries that my constituents feel. For my part, I can never view with equanimity the

practice whereby, with a stroke of the accountant's pen, the lives of hundreds of hard-working families may be blighted.

Consumers, too, might have something to fear from the success of such a takeover bid, with the consequent diminution of competition. An E.ON acquisition could result in a company with 30 per cent of the UK market. For that matter, a Scottish and Southern Energy acquisition could lead to a virtual monopoly in Scotland. I therefore wish to make it clear that, in the event of a formal bid emerging for Scottish Power, I am likely to refer the matter to the UK Competition Commission.

10:32

Frances Curran (West of Scotland) (SSP): Here we are again, discussing energy. It is a regular occurrence—we do it week in, week out, whether the debate is led by the SNP, the Tories or the Executive. There is no doubt that energy is the strategic question of our time, which the world will have to resolve. With every debate that we have held on energy, there has been no fundamental change in the strategy and policies that are advanced in the Scottish Parliament and there have been no major breakthroughs on how energy will be supplied in Scotland—and elsewhere, taking into account technology exports.

Christine Grahame referred to the 286,000 households who cannot keep themselves warm. In Scotland today, people are sitting freezing cold, wrapped up in blankets, with thick socks on. The minister says that we are an energy-rich nation, so why on earth can we not deal with that? Why have we not resolved that situation?

Allan Wilson: Will the member give way?

Frances Curran: Not at the moment. I am asking Allan Wilson a question. Why are we impotent on this matter?

Members: Let the minister answer.

Frances Curran: He is not answering the question in my time—he gets 15 minutes to sum up. Why is the Executive so impotent and unable to change the situation? We have the research, the statistics and the annual motion on winter deaths. All the charities give us their figures. The cycle repeats itself over and over again and we still cannot solve the problem.

What is the point of having power if we cannot wield it to meet a basic human need—to keep warm? One of the reasons is that the Executive is addressing only one half of the equation. The warm deal is fair enough and promoting energy efficiency in homes is fine. The big problem—the other half of the equation—is that the Executive has no control over pricing or over the costs that households pay for their energy. I have lived in

lots of energy-inefficient houses without gas central heating. Whether I was freezing cold or warm depended on two things: my income at the time and the cost of gas and electricity. The Executive has no control over the cost of electricity or gas.

I thought that Charlie Gordon was going to apply for a job in Scottish Power's public relations department. The same company that made £273 million profits, as announced in the news this morning, is trying to justify across-the-board increases in fuel costs in a country with low wages.

Alex Johnstone: Will the member give way?

Frances Curran: No thank you.

What will the Executive do, given that we have no control over oil either? Over the next 20 years or more, energy prices will go through the roof. What we have seen happen with oil is just the tip of the iceberg. We do not know where our energy supply—our natural resource—will be owned. Will it be owned in America or Germany? What influence will we have over that?

The Government has given away oil, electricity and gas, and now we are discussing renewables. Given that oil supply has peaked, everybody accepts that we need to find an answer to the energy supply problem in renewables. A race is on throughout the world in the development of that technology, but we in Scotland are about to hand it over to private companies. Renewables will be a higgledy-piggledy jigsaw puzzle.

I agree with Alex Johnstone: there is no strategic plan or strategy.

Richard Baker: Will the member give way?

Frances Curran: No thank you.

There is no way of working out where we will have the alternatives of wind, wave and biomass technology or how we will invest in such technology. How the technology will develop comes down to the figures in the papers of private companies' accountants; it is not for the Scottish Executive or the Scottish people, who are represented here, to decide. We need companies that are publicly owned and funded with strategic investment to develop renewables in Scotland.

We spent decades subsidising the nuclear industry because Governments thought—although I did not—that it was strategically important. The Government handed over £370 million to British Nuclear Fuels 18 months or two years ago. Every time that BNFL holds out its hand, the Government says "There you are", because of the problems with waste. The amount of public money that has gone into nuclear power is absolutely disgraceful. If we were to transfer that investment

into publicly owned renewables, we might make some progress in this debate.

Are we going to have private nuclear power stations? Is that what the Tories are after? I would not trust any of the companies—where the dollar is the bottom line and the shareholders come before anything else—to run a private nuclear power station in Scotland. We saw what happened with the privatisation of rail and other services. Let us not go down that road. We need publicly owned, publicly funded companies with public profits going back into renewables.

10:38

Jim Mather (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): I regret the distortion from Mary Scanlon, who has now departed the chamber. The MP for the Western Isles has called for a public inquiry, because consultation has been limited and the potential for intrusive imposition is high. Members should look at the map and see what is being proposed for the Western Isles. Nevertheless, the people who oppose the Western Isles development are in favour of wind farms. We have had one major distortion, which is enough.

The SNP is pro-enterprise and yet it is not unquestioning about the workings of the free market. We have major UK or international headquarters in only five sectors of our economy—oil and gas, banking and financial services, beverages, transport and electricity—whereas other developed countries have headquarters operating in their jurisdiction in 20 or more sectors. Two of our five sectors are energy sectors.

As Charlie Gordon told us, Scottish Power is a major part of those crucial sectors. It is our third-largest company and our largest industrial one. Given the criticality of energy in the economy and the potential for renewables in Scotland, it is important that the threatened E.ON or Scottish and Southern Energy takeovers evoke memories of the decision to maintain the independence of the Royal Bank of Scotland in 1981. By any definition, Scottish Power is strategically crucial to Scotland's future prospects; that is why we must ask questions about such takeovers.

Don Young, a former director of Redlands Aggregates, tells us that relatively few people benefit from such moves. Usually just the current senior management of both companies, the market makers, the stockbrokers, the corporate bankers, the lawyers and the accountants benefit; the shareholders rarely benefit. Those people who benefit want the churn of mergers and acquisitions and are less worried about optimisation of the economy as a whole. However, in a Scottish context, the latter objective is exactly what we

should be out to achieve. After all, economic growth is the top priority.

Along with Charlie Gordon—we welcomed his speech today—we are of the firm opinion that there are grounds for referral of the proposed takeovers to the Competition Commission. Such a move proved to be right for RBS and Scotland in the 1980s and that strengthens our belief that it is right now for Scottish Power and Scotland. That is true, in particular, because we are on the cusp of a renewables bonanza, when it is critical that we lift all the Scottish boats as part of an economic revival.

Alex Johnstone: The member referred to the situation with RBS in the early 1980s. How does he reconcile his position with the fact that RBS, having survived, went on to grow as an aggressive acquirer of companies beyond the United Kingdom and Scottish borders?

Jim Mather: I reconcile my position readily. As I said, we have headquarters present in only five major sectors. Scotland has to maintain and grow from that base position as a branch economy—as created by the Tories—not to shrink further and become even more of a branch economy. In 30 years, including the 18 years of Thatcherism that Phil Gallie lauded, not one major Scottish company was created, other than through the privatisations and deregulation of buses. That is no badge of pride. We must stick with what we have and grow it.

Many jobs, including senior posts, would be at risk. Again, I welcome what Charlie Gordon said in that regard. On the basis of a clear-cut appreciation that the takeover would have a detrimental effect on many people, primarily those Scottish Power employees, we appeal to Scottish public opinion that we must use politics to maximise Scotland's future. Consumers can expect to continue to pay more than people pay elsewhere if they are charged by a supplier whose economic interests are unlikely to be those of the Scottish economy. Local Scottish suppliers would find, as countless have found before, that when control moves outwith Scotland, the new brand status instantly leads to less business, which reduces further over time.

We aspire to having Scotland run its own economy. With a takeover there would be fewer senior jobs to tax, fewer jobs in total and Scottish firms would pay more for energy and have smaller profits to tax. There is an issue for shareholders. There is plenty evidence to suggest that the long-term investor rarely does well out of such takeovers. A 1998 study by Daimler Chrysler showed that companies failed to thrive in 73 per cent of cross-border mergers.

The threat comes at a time when Scotland has suffered a 30-year period of low growth, which has

caused massive social and economic problems and encouraged the Government to indulge in massive deception regarding our economic performance.

Masses of people, such as Tom Peters, Don Young, W Edwards Deming, Professor John Kay, who was here last week, Iain Macwhirter and Sir Iain Noble are queueing up to tell us that we need to indulge in Adam Smith's proposition of enlightened national self-interest. Scotland deserves a much more questioning approach from its political leaders, which is simply not forthcoming.

The situation is different now that people have the added clarity of seeing things in a post-McCrone-report era. Whether it was about our major oil reserves in the 1970s or whether it is about a major corporation now, facile compliance by the Government of Scotland is unacceptable. We cherish the proposition that we need to move forward and stop making it open season on Scottish assets while other countries cherish, nurture and root in place their assets.

The fact that, in 1981, the Royal Bank of Scotland's senior management backed the takeover of their own bank is evidence that Don Young was right: that would have been disastrous for Scotland. Imagine Scotland or Edinburgh without RBS. I urge members to support the motion in Richard Lochhead's name.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Murray Tosh): Before I call John Home Robertson, I advise the following speakers that they will have only five minutes. I call John Home Robertson, to be followed by Jamie McGrigor.

10:44

Mr John Home Robertson (East Lothian) (Lab): The SNP motion starts by expressing admirable aspirations for sustainability, the security of energy supplies and the elimination of fuel poverty. However it then goes adrift, rejecting the most likely solution to the imminent energy gap and concluding with the inevitable nationalist mantra about a constitutional solution to an engineering problem. Parliaments are wonderful institutions, but they are no substitute for power stations. It is not enough to vote for motions about secure supplies of electricity; we must provide for ways of physically generating the electricity that our communities and industries need.

Fuel poverty is a serious problem. We are helping by providing insulation and efficient heating for vulnerable citizens, but when there is a shortage of energy, market forces drive prices up and people on low incomes get cold. Insulation can provide only limited protection to pensioners if they are being held to ransom by energy suppliers.

We are also becoming increasingly dependent on imports of gas and oil from sources that may not be entirely secure. Pipelines from central Asia and tankers from the middle east could be subject to all sorts of risks and threats.

It is madness to burn limited global resources of gas in power stations. Natural gas and oil are precious resources that should be used very efficiently and sparingly. The burning of fossil fuels also produces enormous quantities of carbon dioxide, which, as we now know, is causing global warming. It would, therefore, be wise to minimise the use of oil and gas in power stations.

The motion, rightly, refers to the energy gap. At present, Scotland is in the happy position of being more than self-sufficient for electricity. We have nearly 12,000MW of generating capacity, which leaves a good margin for safety over our peak domestic demand. We export a lot of electricity to other parts of the UK, as the minister said, and that is good for the economies of areas such as East Lothian, where people work at power stations and wind farms. The problem is that that will change.

Some of our power plant is nearing its retirement age. Cockenzie, Hunterston B and Longannet will have to close within the next 10 to 15 years, which will take 4,646MW out of our generating capacity. That will take us close to the safe margin for security of supply for Scottish homes and businesses. If we do not replace those power stations with new generators, we will eliminate our ability to export power and sacrifice a lot of jobs in Scotland. There are lessons to be learned from the power blackouts that have occurred in California, Italy and New York. If we do not plan for the future, that could happen here.

I support the Executive's ambition to increase generation from renewables. The target of generating 40 per cent of energy from renewables is phenomenally ambitious, but renewables can make a big contribution towards our energy mix for the future. However, even if we achieve the target of generating 40 per cent of energy from renewables, that will still leave 60 per cent to come from base-load power stations. That is the point that the nationalists are missing.

The lead time for making a business case for, planning and constructing a new power station is probably close to 10 years. The time has come to face up to our responsibility to plan for secure electricity supplies for the future. The responsibility for that planning decision lies here, in Scotland.

Richard Lochhead: The last nuclear power station to be built took 12 years from the submission of planning to the completion of construction. Does the member not accept that the SNP, in our opening speeches, laid out options for

plugging the energy gap with non-nuclear sources, which could be up and running much sooner than a new nuclear power station?

Mr Home Robertson: Mr Lochhead is overstepping himself. If he really thinks that we could fill the whole of the energy gap in that way, he is living in cloud-cuckoo-land.

The big question is where that 60 per cent of base-load electricity will come from. I mean what I say about the need for a mix. Some of that power should come from clean-coal technology, using Scottish coal. However, we should keep the use of oil and gas in power stations to an absolute minimum, for the reasons that I have explained.

The Executive has rejected, rightly, the idea of building new nuclear plant until decisions have been made about the safe storage of nuclear waste. Having listened to the Committee on Radioactive Waste Management and the nuclear decommissioning authority, and having read about the work of Nirex, we know that it is technically feasible to store nuclear waste safely. That is being done in Finland and lots of other places, and it will be done in Britain.

Shiona Baird: Will the member take an intervention?

Mr Home Robertson: I am sorry, but I am in my last minute.

The Prime Minister made an interesting speech in Brighton on 27 September. He concluded that we need an assessment of all energy options, including civil nuclear power. If Britain is going to consider the possibility of new nuclear generators as part of the energy mix, Scotland should not opt out of that process. It would be madness for us to sacrifice our share of the British electricity industry and to become dependent on imports of nuclear electricity from across the border.

Scotland has a lot of experience and expertise in the nuclear industry, at Torness, Hunterston, Chapelcross and Dounreay. For goodness' sake, British Energy used to be called Scottish Nuclear. Public opinion in those areas would not take kindly to a decision made by politicians in Edinburgh to reject building clean, new nuclear generators to replace decommissioned plant when the decision is made about the permanent storage of nuclear waste. Public opinion in other areas is shifting, too. How often have I heard people say that they would prefer nuclear power stations to wind farms?

The First Minister was absolutely right when he said, on 3 October:

"I think it's right and proper that ... we keep energy options open."

He is serious about our energy policy for the future; I respectfully suggest that the SNP is not.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I am afraid that we are extremely short of time. Jamie McGrigor has five minutes.

10:51

Mr Jamie McGrigor (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I find myself in agreement with practically everything that John Home Robertson said.

Like many people in the Highlands and Islands, I am horrified by the number and sheer size of the new pylons that could be erected throughout the Highlands. If a subsea cable is planned to take electricity from Lewis to the Scottish mainland, surely it could stay subsea until it gets nearer to where most of the electricity will be used.

I was interested to hear Shiona Baird's comments. I believe that the Government should encourage micro wind turbines, which provide on-site generation of electricity. Unobtrusive small systems, which make individual houses and buildings energy independent or at least partly independent and save CO₂ emissions, should be an important part of future energy policy.

I want to talk about fuel poverty. Too many Scottish households on lower incomes spend too high a proportion of their income on fuel costs. It remains a serious problem. The Executive must act now to ensure that continued support is available for those who need assistance in upgrading their heating systems and in improving the energy efficiency of their homes. It must also ensure a far better delivery of the schemes. At the moment, I am dealing with more than 80 cases to do with Eaga Partnership applications in the Highlands and Islands. Constituents have experienced significant delays in getting work done; there has been shoddy or even dangerous workmanship in some cases; and people have simply been denied such work on dubious grounds. Although there seems to be movement in some of the cases that I am dealing with—I congratulate the Eaga Partnership on that—too many are still waiting to be resolved.

I continue to highlight the issue and encourage more people to come forward with their experiences. Who knows how many more cases there are? Who knows how many elderly and vulnerable people in the Highlands and Islands face a cold winter without adequate heating because of the Scottish Executive's failure to ensure full delivery of its schemes? The Executive is always quick to congratulate itself; it must also take responsibility when things are not working. Although there are many cases in which work has been delivered successfully, there are just too many in which constituents have experienced real and potentially dangerous problems.

For example, a constituent in Grantown-on-Spey says that she feels that she is living in a "danger zone", with live wires protruding as a result of shoddy work. She calls it "a chapter of errors". A Shetland couple have waited two years for electric heaters to be installed. A lady in Campbeltown had a contractor who left a hot pipe uncovered and rubble under her carpets. Her carpets were ripped during the installation, her fire alarm was turned off for a week and a cable was left lying across the corridor upstairs at night. She ended up at the doctor's with stress. A constituent on Islay, whose heating broke down within a few weeks of its installation, repeatedly phoned Eaga and the local contractor to get the problem sorted out before she went to stay with her family for the winter. On her return, she was told that the guarantee had run out. A Caithness woman was told that she could not go on the scheme because she already had heating—a 20-year-old peat-burning Rayburn.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Will you be returning to the motion and the amendment at any stage, Mr McGrigor?

Mr McGrigor: I am dealing with fuel poverty, which is mentioned in the motion.

In too many cases, contractors turn up when they have been advised that no one will be at home. I ask the Executive to do something for senior citizens such as those I have spoken about today.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You have one minute left.

Mr McGrigor: I end by reading out one of the letters that I received from a constituent.

"Dear Jamie McGrigor, MSP,

I kept your letter from the Northern Times about difficulties people are experiencing in getting help with central heating ...

I am a disabled woman of 75 living with my disabled husband of 80. Because of my disability I am unable to move rapidly to keep warm or wear thick clothes. I daren't get cold or my pain levels rise to a point where I am confined to a chair. It has taken me three years to achieve the vertical.

My central heating system was so old that it was repaired in January, February and March this year. I am lucky to have a plumber who understands my situation. I phoned EAGA on his last visit but they refused to replace the system because it had been repaired.

I applied for a grant through Care and Repair who awarded me £1696. Unfortunately my heating finally died during a cold snap at the end of May.

My gallant plumber put in a new system rapidly. It was his quote that had been accepted by Care and Repair. Unfortunately the grant hadn't been rubber-stamped before the work started although it was before the work was finished. Because of that the grant has been withdrawn.

I appealed to the Sutherland Committee who upheld the withdrawal because it would have set a precedent and have disastrous consequences on the Area Grant Budget.

I have thought a lot about it and it seems to”—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You must stop now.

Mr McGrigor:— “me that a precedent must be set where a person’s well-being is at risk. As the money was allocated, I don’t”—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr McGrigor, I have been very careful to point out to you that you had five minutes; you are now well in excess of that. I am sorry to stop your speech, but I have to protect time for members later in the debate.

10:57

Alex Neil (Central Scotland) (SNP): I shall, of course, keep strictly to five minutes. The debate is about whether the lights will go out all over Scotland. I do not think that the Scottish Conservatives’ lights have ever been switched on, because some of the nonsense that we have heard from them about wind farms, for example, was beyond belief.

Being in favour of a wind farm strategy does not mean that one is in favour of every single wind farm proposal. It is like taxis in Edinburgh—we are in favour of taxis in Edinburgh, we just do not want too many taxis in Edinburgh or the abuse of any taxis in Edinburgh. Wind farms are in exactly the same category.

Mary Scanlon *rose*—

Alex Neil: I do not have time to take an intervention from Mary Scanlon.

One of the great tragedies of the debate is that we do not have the study that the minister has promised by the end of the year. That will be a factual analysis of the supply and demand for energy in Scotland for the period ahead. It would be helpful to have that information so that the next time that we have an energy debate, we will be able to make a much better assessment of the energy gap that might arise in 15, 20 or 25 years.

Like the rest of the world, we have two major driving forces in energy policy. One is the insatiable demand for energy worldwide. In China and India alone, the annual demand for oil is rising by 16 per cent a year because of the massive industrialisation of those two countries.

The exponential increase in the demand for energy is side by side with the increasing evidence that if we do not do something about global warming, we will face very serious problems in the years ahead.

The question for this and every other country is how to strike a balance between satisfying the

needs of industry and individuals for increased energy while at the same time protecting our planet from global warming.

Scotland is in a unique position. We are an energy-rich country: we are rich in oil; we have been rich in gas although it is a declining asset; we are rich in coal; and we are even rich in uranium deposits, which is not something to welcome particularly.

The nuclear argument must be argued on four key issues. I do not accept, as John Home Robertson tried to kid us on, that there is an acceptable solution to the problem of nuclear waste.

There is the issue of cost. The cost and economics of nuclear energy in the past have shown that it is not economically viable as a major energy source.

There is the problem of the potential for accidents. We have seen the results of the surveys in and around Dounreay, Rosyth and other areas where there has been potential for and actual fall-out of nuclear and radioactive material.

The final danger of which we must take cognisance in all energy policy is the threat of terrorism. If a terrorist attacks a coal-fired power station, they will do enormous damage and put people’s lives at risk. However, if they successfully attack a nuclear power station, they could wipe out not just one community, but a whole country. Those facts cannot be ignored.

That is why nuclear, at the moment and for the foreseeable future, is not a viable or realistic option for Scotland or any civilised nation. That is why we have to look at all the other alternatives, including conservation. We are not doing nearly enough to conserve our energy at the present time.

It is unfortunate that I have run out of time—I made a commitment to keep my speech under five minutes, but there is so much more to say. I hope that the next time that we have a debate on energy we will have the facts and figures before us so that we can dispense with some of the nonsense that we have heard this morning.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Jackie Baillie has five minutes.

11:02

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): I will try to be equally disciplined. I share the analysis of the potential problem. We need to address security of supply, affordability, self-sufficiency, energy efficiency—all of that. However, the means of doing so suggested by the SNP is once again that we should haul up the ladder, close the doors, go

it alone and effectively say, "Could the last person out please switch the light off?"

SNP policies lack credibility if every one is proposed through the constitutional prism. Remarkably, I agree with Shiona Baird's comments that the substance of what we do on energy policy is much more important than which body does it.

I will not spend a lot of time analysing the problem; others have done so before me. We can all trade the statistics about the increasing cost of oil, the reducing level of traditional supplies, our increasing dependence on imported energy and the gradual decline—which we will need to face—of supplies from the North sea. Businesses and domestic consumers can see that as energy prices rise.

Bruce Crawford (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP): Will the member give way?

Jackie Baillie: No. None of Bruce Crawford's fellow party members took an intervention from me, so I will not take one from him.

I turn to the subject of fuel poverty. My starting point is to acknowledge the Executive's target to produce 40 per cent of our energy from renewable resources. Whether that is wind, wave, biomass or other emerging technologies, it is all critically important as part of a sustainable and balanced energy policy.

It is nonsense for members to say in the chamber that they support renewable energy, and yet to give in continuously to local pressure and block wind farm development out there. That is dishonest and it exposes the inconsistencies inherent in the SNP, not just here, but among its Westminster colleagues.

I agree with John Home Robertson: we need to focus our attention on the 60 per cent of energy that will potentially be missing in the future. Like Elaine Murray, I do not believe that we should exclude any potential future source of energy and that includes nuclear. The status quo is not an option; we need new, secure and affordable supplies.

We also need to look at the other side of the coin—we need to look at energy efficiency and approach the problem from the other end. At present, members assume that the supply of energy has to increase to meet ever rising demands. We need to consider that we already consume too much energy—a point that Shiona Baird made—and that the aim should be to cut back to make our energy use much more effective and efficient. In that regard, this Administration has raised housing standards to improve energy efficiency. For example, as members across the chamber have recognised, our central heating and

warm deal programmes have insulated and heated thousands of homes across Scotland.

I should also point out that, since the central heating programme was introduced, nine out of 10 pensioners in Scotland have been lifted out of fuel poverty, with each household saving more than £300 per year. Because of the actions of this Labour Executive working—however much it might pain the SNP to hear it—in partnership with a Labour Government at Westminster, thousands of pensioners throughout Scotland do not need to choose between heating and eating. People without a central heating system get one and, thanks to Gordon Brown, every pensioner household receives £200 every single winter.

However, we must not rest there.

Tricia Marwick (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP): Will the member give way?

Jackie Baillie: No.

I am pleased that ministers are thinking about how to expand the scheme and hope that they reflect on the speeches that have been made. Christine Grahame and Frances Curran know that fuel poverty is about income, physical improvements, energy efficiency and the cost of fuel. In recent weeks—and, in some cases, days—Scottish Gas, Scottish Power and Scottish and Southern Energy prices have gone up. A 5 per cent rise in the price of power automatically puts 30,000 households into fuel poverty.

My colleague John Home Robertson is right to say that we cannot tackle fuel poverty by energy efficiency measures alone. However, we cannot resolve the problem simply by being independent—the SNP's answer for everything—or by following the SSP's suggestion that everything should be renationalised. Both proposals are complete nonsense, all the more so because neither addresses the fundamental problem of how to deal with decreasing supply and increasing costs.

We need a mature debate on how we address the potential energy gap, because we have to come up with affordable and sustainable solutions that ensure energy supplies for future generations and tackle fuel poverty.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We move to closing speeches. I call Patrick Harvie to close for the Greens. Mr Harvie, you have a strict six minutes.

11:07

Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): Thank you. I will try to do justice to a complex and interesting debate in those six minutes.

Richard Lochhead began by talking about national control. As SNP members well know, I agree with their objective on independence. However, to what end? Shiona Baird is right to say that, sometimes, the decisions that we take are more important than where we take them.

Allan Wilson was right to question the reference in the SNP motion to “self-sufficiency”. Self-sufficiency should be about tapping into this country’s local energy resources. That is our responsibility, and we are not yet exercising it adequately.

Members will disagree with very little of what has been said about fuel poverty. Certainly, no one can doubt the sincerity with which all members approach the issue. However, in the current context, only the lever of energy efficiency is fully available to us. We have no influence over fuel prices and very little influence over incomes.

At least the SNP’s position on nuclear power is clearer than the Labour-Liberal Democrat sticking plaster. The almost innuendo of the coalition’s claim that it will not embark on new nuclear generation programmes until waste management issues are resolved allows John Home Robertson to say, “Those issues will be resolved next year, and then we’ll build the stations,” and the Liberal Democrats to refer to some far-off, future technology that will make nuclear waste safe. That is not going to happen. When that sticking plaster has to be ripped off next year, we will see the divisions between Labour and the Liberal Democrats.

Richard Lochhead’s speech clearly illustrated the SNP’s addiction to burning Scotland’s oil. In fact, in the recent Cathcart by-election, the only message that the SNP was putting out was:

“Stop the Rip-Off! SUPPORT THE SNP DRIVE FOR CHEAPER PETROL”.

As John Home Robertson made clear, burning that oil is a waste of a precious resource that is likely to run out. However, my questions to the advocates of nuclear power who have spoken in this debate are: how renewable is uranium? How much high-grade uranium is out there? How long will it last? Will it last as long as—or longer than—the oil? What then? [*Interruption.*] If the minister wishes to intervene, he should do so on his feet. He is more than welcome to come in.

Allan Wilson: How does ruling out nuclear power for ever as a potential, alternative source of energy contribute to the Greens’ stated objective of combating climate change?

Patrick Harvie: As I was about to make clear, we might move on to low-grade uranium when high-grade uranium has gone, and processing that material will result in more CO₂ emissions and an

even greater contribution to climate change. People should not be allowed to suggest that nuclear power is a sustainable, CO₂-free technology.

I do not have time to mention everyone’s speech, but I say to Frances Curran that, one day, we might have an interesting discussion about the role of the public sector, the private sector and community-owned industries such as the Castlemilk wind farm that Nora Radcliffe mentioned and which is in Charlie Gordon’s constituency. Such wind farms are smaller than Scottish Power, but equally worthy of note.

However, as far as renationalisation is concerned, state-owned oil is still oil; state-owned nuclear power is still nuclear power; and neither is sustainable. No matter whether it is operated by companies that are owned publicly, privately or by the community, renewable energy production is the way forward. Indeed, the debate should have focused on the source of our energy generation.

I have addressed nuclear power, but another of its advocates, Elaine Murray, referred to a criticism that Chris Ballance made about a biomass plant in Lockerbie. Like the rest of the Greens, Chris Ballance is a strong supporter of biomass, and his criticism centred on energy waste at the plant and the positive way in which other countries harness that waste.

Dr Murray: Will the member give way?

Patrick Harvie: I will, if the member is very brief.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Harvie, you have one minute left.

Dr Murray: Mr Ballance either must be mistaken or must have been misinformed. What he claims to be energy waste is used to dry willow and other forestry products for the next batch of biomass.

Patrick Harvie: I will happily ask Mr Ballance to discuss the matter with Dr Murray. However, the fact that an estimated 100MW of waste heat is being poured into the atmosphere should certainly be addressed.

Alex Neil is always worth listening to in the chamber—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Harvie, you have 30 seconds.

Patrick Harvie: I have never had a 30-second warning before.

Alex Neil set out some of the debate’s global aspects such as the exponential increase in energy demand. As a developed society, we have no right to expect developing countries to restrain themselves if we do not restrain ourselves. We need nothing less than a transition to a green society in which we live within our ecological

means. That will not happen with nuclear power or with the current fossil fuel economy. We—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: No, Mr Harvie. I gave you a strict six minutes. You are now over your time. I must stop you and call Euan Robson to close for the Liberal Democrats.

Mr Robson, you, too, have a strict six minutes.

11:13

Euan Robson (Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (LD): I am grateful for the opportunity to close this debate for the Liberal Democrats. It is six years or more since I last gave a speech in a professional capacity on fuel poverty; for 12 years before that, the issue was high on my daily agenda at the now-dissolved Gas Consumers Council. This morning, I will focus on it again.

Obviously, I support the Executive amendment, particularly its important reference to

“a balanced energy supply mix”.

I should point out that gas has an important role to play in base-load. Certain types of gas are not usable in domestic and industrial systems. For example, high-sulphur sour gas from the Miller field is burned at the combined cycle gas turbine at Peterhead. Such an approach is sensible. Even if imported, gas will remain an essential part of our energy supply mix. I realise that we must debate the components of that mix.

There is clearly a difference between the Liberal Democrats and Labour about the future of nuclear power, but that is something that we will all need to address when we come next year to the long-awaited but necessary review that the UK Government proposes.

I will use my short time to concentrate on fuel poverty. We know what the definition of fuel poverty is, but there is a part of that definition that is never given sufficient focus. The definition is that, in order to maintain a satisfactory heating regime, people are required to spend more than 10 per cent of their income on all household fuel. The difficulty is fairly obvious; it is to do with what is a satisfactory heating regime. That is the missing element in any debate. The definition refers to 10 per cent of income, but why not a lower figure? Why does it refer to all household fuel, however it is used?

The definition is there, although it is not as adequate as it might be, which is something that we need to look at. However, we all know what fuel poverty is when we see it. Anyone can appreciate intuitively what constitutes a cold, damp home. A number of us spent years explaining the link between bad health and poor housing when Government was trying its very

hardest not to listen. As Christine Grahame said, the phenomenon of excess winter deaths is unknown in Scandinavia, where there is far better housing stock than we have here.

The figures are fairly clear and members have quoted them. The 2002 Scottish house condition survey showed that there were about 286,000 households in fuel poverty, and a 5 per cent increase in prices brings in another 30,000, so the number of households in fuel poverty at present is probably somewhere between 300,000 and 350,000. However, that figure is down from the figure in the 1996 survey, which showed that 738,000 households were in fuel poverty; we should not underestimate the impact of policy.

There is a conundrum in the definition of fuel poverty. In many houses where there is fuel poverty, there is simply no satisfactory heating regime. Eradicating fuel poverty in that context is unachievable, because the appliances are inadequate, out of date, obsolete or partial. To achieve a satisfactory heating regime in such households will require either appliance replacement or the introduction of an appliance or a heating system. That is why the Executive's programme is so important, but experience also demonstrates that energy use can and will rise as a result.

Shiona Baird: If Euan Robson is so keen to improve energy efficiency in homes, can he explain why the amendment to the Housing (Scotland) Bill relating to improved energy efficiency was not passed?

Euan Robson: The amendment was not passed because it was defective. Nevertheless, we can come back to that, and we may well do so at stage 3.

More energy may need to be used to eradicate cold and damp in a home, even with a new appliance. Also, quite rightly, there may be a welcome increase in comfort levels in a home from an improved heating system. In circumstances where partial heating is replaced by full heating, energy use will rise. The point is that heating installations must be accompanied by energy efficiency measures, so when the Executive reviews its central heating programme, it must link the two. Much also depends upon the improved use of appliances and on better advice on their use. We have to redouble our efforts to ensure that greater advice is available when appliances are used, and the free central heating scheme must remain.

I shall make one final observation. Thirty years ago, huge numbers of central heating systems were installed, but they are now drawing to the end of their useful life. Failure to replace those old, inefficient appliances will inexorably draw

vulnerable groups back into fuel poverty. Where are the resources to come from? The Executive will clearly continue to input finance, but I believe that there is no substitute for a part of the increase in fuel prices being devoted to energy efficiency measures. In days gone by, there was a proposal for an E factor. In fact, it was applied on gas bills for a while when there was a monopoly supplier. There is no substitute for going back to that regime when we come to review energy policy next year.

11:19

Phil Gallie (South of Scotland) (Con): Unusually, I will start at the back end of the debate and pick up on the speech from Alex Neil, who, after a wondered start, got into the energy issues that we really have to face. I was surprised to hear Mr Neil's remarks, given his global perspective on the world economy and what goes on in other nations around the world. He suggested that there was no solution to the problems of nuclear waste. I suggest that he should look at Finland, France and the new, emerging economies, such as China, and ask why those countries have continued to develop nuclear programmes. They have done so on the firm basis that there is a solution to nuclear waste and that we should not take the depressed view that Alex Neil takes.

The same arguments must prevail with respect to economic issues. Those nations all see the benefit of nuclear programmes, and Europe as a whole has benefited from investment in them. In recent times, France and Finland have kept Europe's generation going—thank God they had those programmes.

Alex Neil: Does Phil Gallie accept that countries such as France do not have the resources that Scotland has in oil, gas and all the alternatives? We do not need nuclear.

Phil Gallie: We do not want to burn oil and gas, because that has an adverse effect on climatic conditions. We want to use a source of energy that is friendly to the climate change aims that we all argue about.

I should declare an interest, Presiding Officer: as a former employee of Scottish Power, I am a small shareholder in that company. I point out to Frances Curran that I was also an employee of the South of Scotland Electricity Board and of the Central Electricity Generating Board—nationalised companies under the Government. From the time that they were privatised, fuel prices dropped by more than a third. That was something from which every citizen in the United Kingdom could benefit, and I ask Frances Curran to bear that in mind when she pursues her line of argument about nationalised industries.

I agree with the first part of the SNP's motion. If Christine Grahame were to look again, she would see that we accepted that. However, there are other aspects of the debate that I would like to draw to the attention of Parliament, and they concern the economic and social issues surrounding the supply of energy. Energy is the foundation on which our modern society is built; without secure energy, our homes, our streets, our industry and our businesses are lost. Our hospitals and schools are even more dependent on a secure supply of energy, which is the fundamental issue for Conservatives in this debate. The Conservatives have seen the light, and we want to ensure that it continues to shine all across our nation.

We are right to say that in our energy-rich Scotland there are oil and gas resources that can be used in future, but we must recognise that they are finite. In future, this nation will be entirely dependent on external sources, especially for gas, as John Home Robertson said. That poses a threat for whoever is looking after energy sources in this country. There is a place for wind generation, but I differ from the minister in that I think that the current renewables targets are far too ambitious. Wind generation is basically the only known way of meeting those objectives.

Allan Wilson: Does not Phil Gallie accept that hydro technology and biomass technology are both means by which we can provide critical base-load transmission from renewable sources?

Phil Gallie: I agree that we must invest in those technologies. It is interesting that although we have considered such initiatives in the past, nothing has ever really developed, even after great deliberations on projects such as the Severn barrage. Onward research is necessary.

Although there is potential in the waves, and we must investigate that option, above all we must ensure that we have a secure energy supply. In that context, I mention Europe, as members would expect me to do. I totally agree with the Lisbon agenda objectives on energy supply, and my feeling is that the targets that the minister has set perhaps threaten that.

I would like to respond to many comments that have been made.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: But you do not have time.

Phil Gallie: I recognise the time limit.

Shiona Baird said that energy accounts for 79 per cent of Scotland's carbon emissions. I say to her that, in comparison with other nations, Scotland is a small player. Two coal-fired stations operate in Scotland, but China builds a coal-fired power station per week.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Gallie, there is no time for you to continue. I cannot make the position any clearer. Allan Wilson has a strict seven minutes.

11:25

Allan Wilson: I share the common cause that has been displayed around the chamber with much of what Phil Gallie and Richard Lochhead said and with much of what is in the nationalists' motion.

The motion asks the right questions, but our problem with it is that it gives us no answer; worse, it would probably give us the wrong answers if we were to extrapolate from it. The motion also displays a paucity of ambition for Scotland in the energy context. On the contrary, the Executive's amendment reflects a commitment to a realistic balance, by tackling climate change, addressing energy inefficiencies and at the same time working with the United Kingdom Government, the industry regulators and generating companies to ensure security of supply and affordable energy for Scots.

Mr Swinney: On the scale of the Executive's ambition, from his discussions on issues that I have drawn to his attention, is the minister satisfied of the need to have imaginative and innovative renewable solutions, such as biomass projects for major public sector works? Is the Government demonstrating enough ambition to deliver those objectives? From where I am standing, that is not obvious.

Allan Wilson: John Swinney and I have discussed that issue on several occasions. I agree that historically we could have done more, but I am pleased to be able to tell him that in the near future we will make an important announcement on biomass, which I suspect will go a long way towards meeting his demands.

As if we needed to be reminded, today of all days, energy markets in Scotland are affected not only by UK markets but by what happens in global markets. In that context, Frances Curran's cheap jibe at Charlie Gordon was misplaced. Charlie Gordon is right to reflect his constituency interest with regard to Scottish Power. I can tell the Parliament that the First Minister has been approached to meet E.ON should a bid be realised. It is important to put the situation in context. FirstGroup, Scottish & Newcastle and the Royal Bank of Scotland have all benefited from foreign acquisitions; we cannot be hypocritical about such matters. As John Home Robertson and Elaine Murray said, we currently benefit from the market by exporting to those around us who consume more than we do.

In contrast, the approach in the SNP motion would cut electricity generation in Scotland by 30 to 40 per cent. The SNP's answer to the energy gap has come out in the debate, but it is contrary to everything that Jim Mather said about the sector leading economic growth in this country. The SNP says that the gap is to be filled by cutting capacity, or by—or presumably in concert with—burning more gas. It is interesting that the SNP would import the extra gas from England, which by then would be a foreign country. If SNP members cannot see the hypocrisy in that position, I am not sure what I can do.

Richard Lochhead: I am not sure whether the minister has listened to a word that SNP members have said in the debate, because what he says bears no relation to what we said. The SNP has laid out a clear route map to meeting Scotland's energy needs without nuclear, but the minister says that he disagrees with that approach. Does that mean that he thinks that we could achieve our energy needs only with nuclear?

Allan Wilson: I intervened on Patrick Harvie on the matter. At the moment in history when global warming is the greatest challenge of the 21st century and energy policy is, as never before, based on a recognition of that fact, does it make sense to get rid of the one significant source of carbon-free generation that exists?

Patrick Harvie: Will the member give way?

Allan Wilson: With respect, I will move on. If Patrick Harvie does not mind, I will not get caught on that particular hook.

What is interesting is what is not in the SNP motion. Alex Johnstone raised the tax regime in the North sea. At the SNP conference, Richard Lochhead called for equal taxes and carbon taxes to be on the agenda, because he saw Scotland not just as a world leader in the renewables sector but as the world leader. It is hypocritical of him not to say the same to Parliament and not to mention that while he talks about introducing new taxes, carbon taxes and equal taxes to protect the environment, his colleague Fergus Ewing stalks the country and in debates with Patrick Harvie and others calls for cuts in fuel duties and in petrol prices. There is rank and apparent hypocrisy in that position.

What serious political party other than the nationalists would talk about Scotland being the energy capital of Europe and, in the next breath, would recommend reducing energy output by 30 to 40 per cent, which would make us dependent on energy imports? That is some policy; we would be some capital. Intermittent generation cannot replace base-load, so to say that Scotland can chop off the nuclear contribution and be self-sufficient with the power that remains is a pretence

on the part of the SNP. The reality is that the SNP's policy must be based on Scotland—like the rest of the UK—importing gas. In that context, Scotland would be no different from the rest of the UK. The inescapable logic of the SNP's position is that it would convert Scotland from being a net exporter of energy to England to being a net importer from England, which it would turn into a foreign country. [*Laughter.*] That is true. SNP members should deny it.

The nationalists talk a good game on renewables but, as many members have said, they do so only to mask the opportunism of their actions at a local level. They give no consistent support to projects that would turn targets into reality. Why have the nationalists not taken the opportunity today to support grid infrastructure?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Please conclude now.

Allan Wilson: On that point—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: No, minister. I have to apply the same standards to you as I do to other members.

11:33

Alasdair Morgan (South of Scotland) (SNP): I thank members for what have been, for the most part, thoughtful speeches. As Richard Lochhead said, at the beginning of last year, when I was its convener, the Enterprise and Culture Committee produced a report on renewable energy. One of the report's unanimous conclusions was that the Executive should create a comprehensive energy policy. We made that recommendation for sound reasons, which have not lost any of their validity in the past 17 months. Many members have emphasised those reasons today, because they have become more compelling as global warming has become more of an issue; as our existing power stations near the end of their useful life; as our energy demands grow; as the Westminster Government seems to get nearer and nearer to making a decision in favour of building new nuclear power stations; as opposition grows to many proposals to generate or even transmit renewable energy; and as some of our external sources of fuel become politically more precarious.

The lack of direction that comes from the lack of a comprehensive energy policy causes us difficulty at different levels. At a national level, unless our policy is far clearer than it is now, it is difficult to see how the necessary stimulus—both to people who will do the generation and to manufacturers who make the equipment that will generate the power—can be given to whichever methods of generation we decide to favour. The uncertainty also causes great difficulty at local level, particularly for the only kind of renewables technology that is coming to maturity: wind technology.

Wind farms may well be ugly to some and beautiful to others, but the current lack of certainty about how much wind generation the Executive wants to see or where it wants to locate wind farms allows those who will brook wind farms at no price or in any place to conjure up exaggerated scare stories through which they would have us believe that there will be a wind farm on every hill and the whole of Scotland will be devastated and changed beyond recognition as a result.

Clearly, not every development is acceptable, but it is important that local communities and councils make decisions on proposed developments in the knowledge of the number of proposals that can reasonably be expected to be made. That context does not exist at present, so every member in this or any other chamber has the right to take a view on each project based on the merits of the individual project alone.

I will deal with some of the points that were raised in the debate, one of which was about Scottish exports of electricity. If Scotland were to become an independent country, electricity exports would be treated in the economic books in the same way as any other kind of export would be treated. The SNP believes that Scotland should continue to export electricity, particularly to those who are less fortunate in natural resources.

However, we would not generate that electricity in a way that damages our environment. Specifically, we would not do it by building new nuclear power stations, given their legacy of high costs before and during construction—and very high costs after they have been shut down—and of waste that remains for generations. Interestingly, the Scottish Executive's own report of a few years ago said that we had a capability in Scotland of 59GW of electricity; we need to view that against the current figure for total production in Scotland of 49GW.

Another point that was raised was cost. Alex Johnstone linked the issues of electricity efficiency, building regulations and cost. Two points arise, the first of which is that energy efficiency can often be built into houses. Doing so is part of good design; it does not need to cost more and, even when it does, there is a payback over the lifetime of the asset.

Alex Johnstone also raised a bizarre point about the oil industry, when he said that it would be in a sorry state if—and I paraphrase him—it was under the control of this chamber. It is sad to see a member run down the abilities of his country, his colleagues and himself in such a way. One wonders how small countries such as Norway manage to work hand in hand with the global oil industry.

Nora Radcliffe said that we should upgrade existing hydro. I agree, but one of the problems is

that, under the current renewables obligation Scotland, assistance is given only to hydro developments of less than 20MW. In recent times, nine hydro stations have reduced their capacity as part of refurbishment in order to get financial support. The problem is that our rules seem not to be based on a coherent strategy.

In several interventions, Phil Gallie asked members to acknowledge that Scottish Power's existence is due to Mrs Thatcher and privatisation. I agree that Scottish Power was a result of privatisation, but the result could have come about in another way. There are other models: I ask Phil Gallie to consider the example of France, where EDF—Électricité de France—is still largely in state hands. The company is only now beginning to sell off some of its shares and yet it is one of the major world players—indeed, it owns several UK power plants.

The SNP motion notes that Scotland is an energy-rich country. We may be energy rich, but we must ask ourselves whether, with all that richness, we have done the best by our fellow citizens.

Allan Wilson: Will the member give way?

Alasdair Morgan: I am sorry.

We have not had the foresight of Norway, which has invested its vast oil revenues to the extent that the amount from interest on its oil fund alone is now as high as its annual oil revenues. Almost as much oil has yet to be extracted from the North sea as has come out of it to date. It is not too late for Scotland to be as prudent for the future as Norway was in the past.

It is not as if all that profligacy—the spending of all that oil wealth—without any provision for the future has brought us very much; otherwise, why would so many people in Scotland suffer from fuel poverty? Given that we have extracted so much cash from the energy of the North sea, why do so many people die unnecessarily from cold each winter?

We need to plan ahead more effectively. We need to use our resources better to exploit them for the benefit of the economy. We need to use energy much more efficiently and generate it much more cleanly. We need to make it easier for our engineers and scientists to invest in and mature the kind of energy technology that the whole world will need in the near future. We need to invest and not squander the income that we get from our energy richness. All the evidence of the past three decades shows that we will need to do that ourselves, in Scotland, because no one else will do it for us.

Question Time

SCOTTISH EXECUTIVE

General Questions

11:40

Airdrie to Bathgate Rail Link

1. Mrs Mary Mulligan (Linlithgow) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive how it is ensuring that progress is made on the reopening of the Airdrie to Bathgate rail link. (S2O-8037)

The Minister for Transport and Telecommunications (Tavish Scott): Network Rail plans to introduce a bill into the Scottish Parliament early in 2006. The Scottish Executive will continue to work with Network Rail to ensure that it has the resources that are needed to achieve that.

Mrs Mulligan: Six weeks ago, in answer to a previous question of mine, the minister indicated that the public consultation meetings on the rail link should take place between October and November. He will therefore understand my concern that those meetings will not now be happening until January. I seek two assurances from him: first, that the delay will not lose us a slot in the legislative timetable and so delay the work going ahead; and secondly, that the delay will not mean that any of the money that was identified for the project will be lost to other things.

Tavish Scott: I can give Mary Mulligan the assurance that she seeks on both points. On her question on the consultation, I understand that the information on some of the key aspects of the scheme has yet to be provided in its final form by the consultant Jacobs Babbie. Once that is done, the consultation can begin and the formal meetings can take place. Obviously, the information is required before proper consultation can go ahead. Again, on the two specific issues that Mary Mulligan raised, I give her the assurance that she seeks.

Margaret Mitchell (Central Scotland) (Con): I welcome the reopening of lines such as the Airdrie to Bathgate rail link and the economic benefits that they bring locally. Does the minister agree that there is also scope for the reopening of stations on existing lines? If so, will he give consideration to the reopening of the station at Grangemouth in my region, where there is already a freight connection to Falkirk that could easily accommodate passenger services again?

Tavish Scott: That question is a bit wide of the subject of the question that Mary Mulligan asked.

Certainly, we look at the possibilities that would arise from station reopenings or, indeed, new stations. As I am sure Margaret Mitchell will expect me to say, all proposals have to go through an appropriate procedure in relation to value for money and the need to justify costs in terms of the return that can be achieved. However, I absolutely agree with the central point that she made: the potential benefits can be considerable, in terms of advantages to commuters and local people and attracting people in general back to using our rail system.

Fiona Hyslop (Lothians) (SNP): It is essential that there is no hold-up in the reopening of the line, whether as a result of consultation or legislation. Is the minister prepared to accept the Scottish National Party's offer, which was first made by Fergus Ewing during the Borders rail link debate, of assistance in the passing of a fast-track transport and works type bill? To take such action would ensure that the line reopens. We do not want any legislative problems to arise, as is happening with the current system of private bills.

Tavish Scott: It is very welcome that the SNP supports that legislation. I recognise that it will, as Fiona Hyslop rightly says, improve the private bill process and the mechanisms that are available to the Parliament properly to scrutinise these matters. In respect of the Bathgate to Airdrie rail link, as I said to Mary Mulligan earlier, I am confident that we can deliver the legislation within the parliamentary timetable. That would, of course, allow the link to happen within the timescale that we have set out. However, I appreciate Fiona Hyslop's kind offer.

Depression (Young Children)

2. Robin Harper (Lothians) (Green): To ask the Scottish Executive what its response is to the National Institute for Clinical Excellence report published in September in relation to the provision of drug treatments to young children suffering from depression. (S2O-8053)

The Deputy Minister for Health and Community Care (Lewis Macdonald): We expect national health service boards and their partners to take account of clinical guidelines, such as the report to which the member referred, in the planning and delivery of child mental health services. In every case, clinicians should take all relevant factors into account, including the age of the patient, before deciding on the best care and treatment option.

Robin Harper: Does the Executive have any intention of calling for a review of procedures in view of the concerns that were expressed in the NICE report?

Lewis Macdonald: No, but as I said, we expect the points made in the report to be taken into

account in the delivery of service. In doing that, health boards will operate in the context of the significantly increased resource that we are making available to supporting children and young people with mental health problems, and to identifying and addressing issues of depression for all age groups.

Kerr Report (Regional Planning)

3. Maureen Macmillan (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what action is being taken to ensure that the Kerr report's recommendations in respect of regional planning across national health service board areas will be put into practice. (S2O-8026)

The Deputy Minister for Health and Community Care (Lewis Macdonald): When we published the "Delivering for Health" report two weeks ago, we made it clear that we now expect NHS boards and regional planning groups to use the Kerr report to drive their service change programmes. We also set out a range of actions for regional planning groups, and a Health Department letter will be sent to the relevant parts of the NHS in Scotland to reinforce which actions we expect to be done by which specific dates.

Maureen Macmillan: I was particularly interested in the minister's announcement at the convention of the Highlands and Islands of a new centre for telehealth and a virtual school of rural health care. Will he outline how he expects health boards to use those initiatives to improve health care in rural areas? Will he ensure that the centre for telehealth will promote videoconferencing between remote patients and city-based consultants so that patients, particularly those from the islands, do not have to continue to make unnecessary and often stressful journeys for routine consultations?

Lewis Macdonald: I am happy to be able to confirm that we will indeed look to the centre for telehealth to deliver the kind of benefits that Maureen Macmillan outlines. We have asked Grampian NHS Board to produce proposals for it to act as a centre of excellence in telemedicine to serve the NHS in Scotland. The purpose of that will be to provide technical and common standards in support of telemedicine to ensure that the help that is provided to those who are working in rural and remote locations is backed up by specialists at central hospitals in the way that Maureen Macmillan has described, and that that help is given on the basis of clinical protocols that ensure safety and efficiency, while respecting patient confidentiality.

Communication Impairment

4. Mr Kenneth Macintosh (Eastwood) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what action it is

taking to address the needs of people with communication impairment. (S2O-8030)

The Minister for Communities (Malcolm Chisholm): I am pleased to have this opportunity to recognise the work being undertaken on this issue by both the Scottish Parliament short-life working group on communication impairment and the communication impairment action group. We are currently considering a research proposal that was submitted by the communication impairment action group and hope to be able to respond to it shortly. We are also undertaking a number of initiatives across departments to address the needs of people with communication impairment.

Mr Macintosh: The minister will be aware that communication impairment encompasses but goes beyond people with sensory impairment, such as those who are deaf or hard of hearing or those who are blind. Is he aware that people with communication impairment are denied access to services and activities that the rest of us take for granted? For example, they can struggle to open a bank account or to use public transport. Does he agree that we need to have a national strategy and that, as a first step, we need to map the needs of people with communication impairment? When can we expect a decision on the research proposal that is currently before him?

Malcolm Chisholm: I certainly agree that the issue cuts across many different portfolios in the Executive. The idea of mapping the issue and involving the people who are affected is an attractive feature of the research proposal. I was pleased to be at a presentation about the proposal given by the communication impairment action group, and I liked the way in which it based a lot of the action research on the experiences of people who have communication impairment. I was generally impressed, but a lot of assessment has to be done by our social research professionals. We should be able to respond in general terms before too long.

Eleanor Scott (Highlands and Islands) (Green): The minister will be aware that communication impairment involves not just the inability to communicate orally but the inability to understand written communication. A recent press report suggested that one in five people have difficulty in complying with medication instructions because they cannot follow them. Can he confirm that any action that the Executive takes will address all forms of communication difficulty as well as how the needs of people with such difficulties can be assessed and met?

Malcolm Chisholm: I think that that is already recognised as an issue in general terms, but we will need to address the particular difficulty that

Eleanor Scott mentioned as well as speech communication impairments.

Mary Scanlon (Highlands and Islands) (Con): Will the proposal that the minister is considering also deal with the levels of communication impairment among young offenders? A high percentage of people in HM Young Offenders Institution Polmont were discovered to have a severe communication impairment. Will he consider how that issue might be addressed, particularly in relation to future offending behaviour?

Malcolm Chisholm: Again, that illustrates the point that I made about the issue's cross-cutting nature—it cuts across many, if not all, Executive portfolios—which is also a distinctive feature of the proposal that was made to us. Obviously, I was conscious of the health aspects, but the issue goes far wider. Certainly, considering how the issue affects offenders in the justice system will be important.

High-voltage Transmission Lines

5. Dr Sylvia Jackson (Stirling) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what progress is being made in discussions between it and the United Kingdom Government's stakeholder advisory group on electric and magnetic fields, which is looking into the health issues associated with 400kV transmission lines. (S2O-8022)

The Deputy Minister for Health and Community Care (Lewis Macdonald): The Scottish Executive Health Department is represented on the main stakeholder advisory group and remains committed to supporting its work. In determining future policy, the Executive will take into account the work of the group and advice from the Health Protection Agency.

Dr Jackson: In light of public concern, such as the concerns of the Stirling before pylons campaign in my constituency, will the minister encourage the Westminster stakeholder advisory group on EMF, in which he is involved, to finalise its report on the health issues of such transmission lines as soon as possible so that its advice can be taken into account when the Scottish Executive makes its decision on the proposed Beaulieu Denny 400kV transmission line?

Lewis Macdonald: I can assure Dr Jackson that members of the stakeholder advisory group on EMF—which involves all manner of interested parties, from Government to the private sector to community organisations—are determined to work together towards an agreed outcome on its considerations. I look forward to the group's interim recommendations, which should be available to Scottish ministers early next year.

Bruce Crawford (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP): Is the minister aware that the Government-funded Draper report, which was published in June this year, showed that children who live within 200m of high-voltage power lines are twice as likely to have childhood leukaemia? Will he assure us that, in its consideration of the route of the Beauly to Denny power line, the Scottish Executive will take account of the Draper report, particularly given that more than 300 students at the University of Stirling will live within 200m of the planned pylon corridor?

Lewis Macdonald: I refer Mr Crawford to my answer to Dr Jackson. We are certainly aware of the Draper report, which is the reason why we and UK Government colleagues have undertaken the SAGE process. The stakeholder advisory group will allow us to have the best available advice, which will be based on the consideration of evidence both from the United Kingdom and elsewhere in the world. That is why I look forward to those recommendations early next year, on which further decisions can then be made.

Small Enterprises

6. Nora Radcliffe (Gordon) (LD): To ask the Scottish Executive how it is creating more opportunities for small enterprises to gain new business. (S2O-7995)

The Deputy Minister for Enterprise and Lifelong Learning (Allan Wilson): Advice and support for small and growing businesses—including on aspects such as diversification and internationalisation—are primarily an operational matter for Scottish Enterprise and Highlands and Islands Enterprise, which work with local partner organisations.

The Executive has also been working directly with small and medium-sized enterprises and their representative bodies to reduce the barriers that they encounter in bidding for public sector contracts. The Deputy First Minister recently met business representatives to discuss improving SME access to contracting opportunities.

Nora Radcliffe: I am very pleased with that answer, which almost pre-empts my supplementary question.

I presume that the minister is aware that only 38 per cent of businesses with a turnover of £25,000 or less sell anything to local government, compared with 65 per cent of businesses with a turnover above £5 million. What progress has he made, through discussions with business and local authorities, on making contracts in the public sector more accessible?

Allan Wilson: The member makes reference to discussions. We have had extensive discussions with SME representatives and their representative

organisations, including the Scottish Chambers of Commerce, the Confederation of British Industry Scotland, the Institute of Directors and the Federation of Small Businesses, about improving SME access to contracting opportunities. As a consequence of those discussions, we have produced revised procurement regulations, which will place greater emphasis on the need to advertise contract opportunities, a code of good practice for purchasers and suppliers and a model qualification questionnaire, aimed at standardising processes and reducing bureaucracy. We are also making substantial progress on e-procurement, to widen access to public procurement for small businesses.

Alex Neil (Central Scotland) (SNP): Given that, according to answers that have been given to written questions, much of the information is not held centrally, how will the minister measure success in increasing the amount of business that is given to small and medium-sized enterprises in Scotland through the public sector?

Allan Wilson: Direct business support for small businesses is delivered for us by our economic development agencies, Highlands and Islands Enterprise and Scottish Enterprise. We receive a regular update, the next of which will be published soon, on progress on meeting our targets in "A Smart, Successful Scotland". That will provide the information that Mr Neil seeks.

Flood Prevention Decisions

7. Mark Ballard (Lothians) (Green): To ask the Scottish Executive whether the presence of minor underground works such as drainage has any effect on decisions made under the Flood Prevention and Land Drainage (Scotland) Act 1997. (S2O-8047)

The Deputy Minister for Environment and Rural Development (Rhona Brankin): The presence of underground works such as drainage, particularly if unknown, complicates any assessment by local authorities of the condition of watercourses and any subsequent remedial action that may be required.

Mark Ballard: Does the minister agree that minor underground works such as drainage should have no relevance when determining what is functional flood plain? Does she share my disappointment, and the disappointment felt by many residents of Murrayfield, Stockbridge and other areas of Edinburgh, that the long-awaited flood prevention scheme in the city has been delayed? Does she share the widespread concern that the Scottish Rugby Union has succeeded in using the presence of minor underground works as a justification for removing its back pitches from the flood plain?

Rhona Brankin: I am aware of the strong feelings that exist about the outcome of the inquiry and the fact that work cannot yet go ahead. More than 30 objections to the council's proposed scheme were considered at the local public inquiry. I recognise the pressing need for a flood prevention scheme for the Water of Leith. The inquiry identified that the proposed scheme has shortcomings, and ministers have proposed several modifications to address them. In proposing those modifications, ministers are obliged by the act to consult everyone on whom the local authority originally served notice—some 2,300 people in the case of this scheme. Those people have until 16 December to make their views known.

Ministers will consider representations carefully before making a decision. I assure the member that we will do that as quickly as possible. The planning authority will have regard to Scottish planning policy 7 and any other relevant planning guidance when considering proposals for development on a functional flood plain.

First Minister's Question Time

11:59

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Trish Godman): I ask members to give a warm welcome to His Excellency Josep Borrell Fontelles, who is in the Presiding Officer's gallery. Mr Borrell is the President of the European Parliament. [*Applause.*]

Prime Minister (Meetings)

1. Nicola Sturgeon (Glasgow) (SNP): To ask the First Minister when he will next meet the Prime Minister and what issues he intends to discuss. (S2F-1907)

The First Minister (Mr Jack McConnell): I expect to meet the Prime Minister again reasonably soon.

Nicola Sturgeon: Whoever he may be. I refer the First Minister to the Prime Minister's defeat yesterday on the Terrorism Bill, which many people believe was down to his arrogance and point-blank refusal to listen to reason. Is the First Minister concerned that the Lord Advocate was not consulted in advance on the proposed 90-day detention period?

The First Minister: Our officials and officials of the Home Office and other departments in the United Kingdom Government were in regular contact in recent months on that and related matters, just as we are in regular contact about the fight against terrorism and the precautions that it is necessary to take in Scotland and elsewhere in the UK. I believe strongly that the jobs of Scottish members of Parliament, the Secretary of State for Scotland and the Advocate General for Scotland—the law officer in the UK Parliament who makes recommendations and gives advice to the Prime Minister and the Home Secretary—are important. I know that the Scottish National Party would like to abolish all those jobs, but they are important roles that people should be elected or appointed to carry out, just as we in this Parliament are elected to carry out our duties.

Nicola Sturgeon: May I remind the First Minister that I asked him specifically about the Lord Advocate? Charles Clarke, the Home Secretary, confirmed that the Lord Advocate was not consulted and did not express a view. I refer the First Minister to the agreement between the Executive and the Home Office, which makes it clear that whenever the exercise of a reserved power impacts on devolved responsibilities, there should be consultation in advance.

Surely the First Minister concedes that the provisions in the Terrorism Bill have huge

implications for the separate Scottish legal system, the police, the Crown Office, the judiciary and Scottish citizens. In light of that, is it not the case that if the First Minister had been doing his job properly, he would have insisted that the Lord Advocate, like the Attorney General in England, was consulted formally and in detail before the proposals were brought forward?

The First Minister: There have been considerable discussions about the detail, as I just tried to explain to Ms Sturgeon, although she may wish to ignore that fact. The Lord Advocate, supported by other ministers, has taken the principled position that the laws relating to terrorism—in particular those relating to the investigation of terrorist suspects—should be the same throughout the United Kingdom.

If Ms Sturgeon wishes to have a different set of laws in Scotland, which would perhaps make life for a potential terrorist a little bit more attractive in Scotland than elsewhere in the United Kingdom, she should think carefully about that position. I believe, as do ministers, the Lord Advocate and, I hope, anybody who is serious about the issue, that the position should be the same throughout the United Kingdom. There should not be different laws in different parts of the UK. That is the best way for us to stand united and ensure that we are properly prepared for any potential terrorist attack.

Nicola Sturgeon: We all want to tackle terrorism, but we have a duty to resist proposals that will hinder, not help, the fight against it. I remind the First Minister that in Scotland we have a separate legal system, and that laws, even if they apply throughout the United Kingdom, have specific implications for that separate legal system. Is it not therefore beyond argument that with such a serious matter affecting devolved responsibilities, not only should the Lord Advocate have been consulted, but the First Minister should have made clear the Executive's position? Will the First Minister admit that the reason why he did not do so is that there were deep divisions in the Executive and that it was not unanimous in its support of 90-day detention? Rather than tell the Prime Minister that and be clear about it, the First Minister chose to abdicate responsibility and stay silent.

The First Minister: It is not exactly rocket science to work out that Labour and the Liberal Democrats have different positions on the issue, but at least ours are positions of principle on which both parties have been consistent for many years. We may disagree, but at least we believe in what we say. To reduce discussion of the issue to a debate about the powers of, or the extent of discussion between, the two Administrations is to belittle its importance.

There are serious questions for us to ask in this country, not just about the laws that should be

adopted—although, unlike Ms Sturgeon, I believe that the laws should be consistent throughout the UK—but about why young Asian British citizens choose to take up the bomb against their counterparts and fellow British citizens; about multicultural relations in the country; and about how we turn round the situation and legislate to deal with the threat that it poses. Those questions require serious attention by serious people, not debates about constitutional powers or about who sent which letter to whom. We need discussions that address the issues and might eventually help to solve the problem.

Cabinet (Meetings)

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We come to question 2. I call Miss Annabel Goldie. [*Applause.*]

2. Miss Annabel Goldie (West of Scotland) (Con): I thank members for that reaction, which was distinctively different from one that I have received in recent times. It is welcome; may it set a precedent.

To ask the First Minister what issues will be discussed at the next meeting of the Scottish Executive's Cabinet. (S2F-1908)

The First Minister (Mr Jack McConnell): The Cabinet will discuss issues of importance to the people of Scotland.

Miss Goldie: What happened yesterday in another place was instructive for the First Minister—it was a salutary lesson from the Prime Minister on what happens when a leader pushes his back benchers down a road that they do not want to go down. I hope that the First Minister will regard the recent experiences and defeat of his colleague Tony Blair as instructive in that regard, because, this week in this Parliament of ours, at the instigation of my Conservative colleague Margaret Mitchell, the Justice 1 Committee decided to lengthen the proposed time limits in relation to quickie divorces. Will the First Minister heed the lesson of Tony Blair's experience and accept the proposals that the amendments to the Family Law (Scotland) Bill have created?

The First Minister: We might not discuss the issue at next week's Cabinet meeting, but we discussed it at yesterday's meeting. Through that committee decision, members of different parties have expressed a view that requires our attention. We have four or five weeks before the stage 3 debate on the bill in which to come to a view on whether to accept the committee's decision. We will give the matter serious consideration and we will announce our intention to the Parliament in the appropriate way.

Miss Goldie: I thank the First Minister for what I accept as a serious response but, when a committee of the Parliament that is part of a

structure that was created to be a virtue of the institution expresses a clear view about an issue that is important to many communities in Scotland, we are all entitled to greater clarity than that which the First Minister has just provided. If the Executive is not willing to accept the sensible amendments that have been made to the bill, will the First Minister at least grant a free vote on the matter at stage 3?

The First Minister: It is important to respond to the answer, rather than read out a pre-prepared question. My point was a serious one. The committee has made a clear decision and it is incumbent on ministers to reflect on it, come to a measured decision of our own and return to the Parliament with that view. The original recommendation came from an independent report of the Scottish Law Commission on the reform of the law in Scotland; it did not come from ministers or a party manifesto. We put the recommendation to the Parliament in the bill, following at least three consultations which, in general, reflected support for the measure, although the support was never comprehensive or unanimous. We realised that the subject would be up for debate in the Parliament and the committee. The committee has now spoken on the issue and we will reflect on its decision, which we take seriously.

I wonder whether Miss Goldie is suggesting that, under her leadership of the Conservative party, the Conservatives in the Parliament will accept and vote for every decision of every committee. That will not be the case for the Conservatives and it will not be the case for the Executive either.

Council Tax Bills

3. Colin Fox (Lothians) (SSP): To ask the First Minister whether it is still the Scottish Executive's position that council tax bills need not rise by more than 2.5 per cent next year. (S2F-1919)

The First Minister (Mr Jack McConnell): Yes.

Colin Fox: I thank the First Minister for that concise answer and hope that I get two equally concise answers in response to my next two questions. The Convention of Scottish Local Authorities does not have much time for the First Minister's figures; indeed, some of his own ministers do not agree with the figures. COSLA believes that the average rise will be around double the First Minister's estimate, and that is before the much-needed equal-pay deals agreed by local authorities are taken into account. Is it not the case that council tax bills have risen by 101 per cent in the past decade and that the burden of that unfair Tory tax falls heaviest on those who are least able to afford it?

The First Minister: First, I need to make it crystal clear that it would be entirely wrong of any

Government simply to accept in-year estimates from local authorities of their increases next year and to say that those figures are acceptable, regardless of the levels. Given the funding settlement that has been agreed for local government next year, unless local authorities decide to increase their expenditure through decisions of their own free will, there is no need for them to increase council tax by more than 2.5 per cent next year. That consistent position is proven by the facts and figures. As I have said before in the chamber, and as I remind Mr Fox now, in every year since the creation of the Scottish Parliament, not only have council tax increases in Scotland been less than council tax increases in the rest of the United Kingdom, but they have been less than the increases in every one of the last five years of the previous Conservative Government. That is a record that shows not only that there has been a decent level of investment in local services by the Executive but that local authorities have been mindful of the cost to local taxpayers, have taken that seriously and, by and large, have kept their increases to a minimum.

Colin Fox: The chamber will have noticed that that answer was nowhere near as concise as the first one. It is clear that the First Minister is completely wedded to the council tax. Is it not the case that he does not give a damn how high the council tax rises because it is not he or his ministers who will suffer hardship in paying it but others who have to shoulder that burden? It is time to scrap the council tax.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Fox, is there a question?

Colin Fox: There is indeed.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Well, I would like it now please.

Colin Fox: Will the minister support the progressive alternative, which is to scrap the council tax and replace it with a tax that is based on income?

The First Minister: First, of course we care about council tax increases. That is precisely why by next year we will have increased Government funding for local authorities in Scotland by more than 50 per cent. That is a sizeable increase, which has helped to fund improvements in local services from central Government resources, rather than relying on the council tax.

When Mr Fox talks about abolishing the council tax, he never points out to the chamber the implications of the policy that he would wish us to adopt. Although he is not willing to stand up and spell it out, we all know that households of people with fairly moderate incomes, where two people are living together and both are working, would pay significantly more under his proposals. We

also know that, under the proposals of Colin Fox and the Scottish Socialist Party, we would have a national tax policy for local government in Scotland, rather than the opportunity for local authorities to make decisions based on the elections. Local people in every part of Scotland would have no say whatever over local taxation; if they were unhappy about the level, they could not vote their councillors out of office. That might happen in the kind of state that the SSP wants to create, but it will not happen in Scotland.

Mr Andrew Arbuckle (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD): Because of the obvious inequalities and unfairness in the council tax system and the serious flaws in the service tax that the First Minister has outlined, surely the only option for the future is the introduction of a local income tax.

The First Minister: I am looking forward to that debate at the 2007 election.

Speed Cameras

4. Margaret Jamieson (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (Lab): To ask the First Minister what research has been carried out into the effectiveness of speed cameras in reducing motor accidents and saving lives. (S2F-1913)

The First Minister (Mr Jack McConnell): A wide range of research studies confirms that speed cameras reduce accidents and casualties at camera sites. Those studies include the UK safety camera programme independent report and the Transport Research Laboratory report.

Margaret Jamieson: Does the First Minister accept that the first three months of operation of the SPECS system on a 46km stretch of the A77 has resulted in significant reductions in speeds and accidents and that the remainder of the A77 in my constituency continues to be used for speeding? Will he consider extending the SPECS pilot on the A77 to cover it up to the M77 and thereby further reduce speeds and accidents on the road?

The First Minister: I am not sure what the national and local decision-making breakdown is on that issue, but if Margaret Jamieson makes the point that she has just made to me to the Minister for Transport and Telecommunications, he will give a response that is within his power to give.

Margaret Jamieson's example shows how speed cameras are working effectively on a dangerous stretch of road. I am not convinced that there should be compulsory speed cameras everywhere and that they should be along the full length of every stretch of road—I hope that that is not being suggested. However, speed cameras have a role to play.

In 2004, more than 3,000 people were killed or seriously injured on Scotland's roads as a result of

road accidents. We have a duty to take action to reduce the number of accidents and to ensure that fewer people are killed or seriously injured on Scotland's roads. Speed cameras have a role to play in that respect. This week, people have claimed that speed cameras cause more damage than they prevent. They are wildly wrong, and it is hard to believe that they are being taken at all seriously.

Mr Stewart Maxwell (West of Scotland) (SNP): I am pleased that the First Minister supports the work of safety camera partnerships. Does he agree that it is perfectly reasonable that members of safety camera partnerships must make up any shortfall when a partnership fails to bring in enough money to cover its budget, but that it is entirely unreasonable for the Treasury to take money when a partnership is in surplus? Does he therefore agree that any surplus money that is generated—the total was £1.2 million in 2003-04—should be retained by the safety camera partnerships and ploughed back into additional road safety measures? There would be no additional cost, as the money would come from surplus funds. Will he commit himself to taking up that issue with the Treasury and to fighting for the retention of that additional source of funds? Will he commit himself to fighting so that that money is used to cut road deaths and injuries in Scotland rather than being lost to the Treasury?

The First Minister: That sounds reasonable, but we should tell the full story—Stewart Maxwell does not want the full story to be told. The money that goes back to the Treasury goes into the United Kingdom Government's finances, and Scotland gets back far more per head of population from those finances than it would receive if the money was kept in Scotland. The SNP wants to give all of that money back to England and Wales and not to keep it in Scotland. It would prefer Scotland to be disadvantaged, to have fewer services, poorer roads and less access to public transport simply because of the political principle that Scotland should not receive cross-subsidies from across the United Kingdom. I do not agree with those who say that there should not be such a pooled resource in the UK, or that we should not benefit from it. The SNP should admit that its solutions would cost Scotland money. We do not agree with the SNP, because we put Scotland first.

Mark Ballard (Lothians) (Green): Is the First Minister aware that research that has been done for the UK Department for Transport has found that enforcing speed limits could reduce pollution from vehicles by as much as 10 per cent? Does he therefore recognise that properly enforcing the law benefits us not only by reducing the horrific number of accidents, injuries and deaths, which

the First Minister mentioned, but by improving the wider environment?

The First Minister: I welcome the extremely helpful and constructive point that Mark Ballard makes. He has provided an additional argument in favour of speed controls on our roads. I am talking not only about speed cameras in specific locations but about 20mph limits and other restrictions that we have introduced in recent years, which are making a difference to the number of accidents that occur and to excessive fumes.

Margaret Mitchell (Central Scotland) (Con): Given the increase in the number of speed cameras, is the First Minister satisfied that sufficient action is being taken to ensure that there are still patrol cars monitoring traffic to catch motorists who are driving erratically and who might be under the influence of alcohol and/or drugs?

The First Minister: That is an important part of the duties of our police forces. They must balance their resources between the pursuit of dangerous or potentially dangerous motorists with their other duties in the community, where they need to tackle antisocial behaviour and serious crime. There is a balance to be struck in our police forces. That is why operational responsibility for the allocation of police officers—whose number is currently at record level—lies with the chief constables and their staff.

Police Forces (Extended Powers)

5. Margaret Smith (Edinburgh West) (LD): To ask the First Minister what discussions the Scottish Executive has had with the Home Office in respect of extended powers for Scottish police forces as a result of the Terrorism Bill. (S2F-1915)

The First Minister (Mr Jack McConnell): Both Scottish Executive and Crown Office officials have been involved with United Kingdom Government officials in discussions about the Terrorism Bill. From an early stage in the bill's development, Executive and Crown Office officials have provided technical advice to ensure that the bill takes account of Scots law.

Margaret Smith: I thank the First Minister for his answer and for making clear earlier the different positions of our two parties on the Terrorism Bill. I give my support to those who have welcomed the defeat of the Government's illiberal proposal for three-month detention without charge. I hope that the Government will now reconsider its position on the issue of the glorification of terrorism.

Does the First Minister agree with me that the Terrorism Bill could have a significant impact on the Scottish police and prosecution services, and that it is the duty of the Scottish Executive to ensure that the bill's consequences are known and made clear? Will he therefore ensure that the

Executive and the Lord Advocate are fully consulted as we go forward from here, whether we are dealing with 90-day or 28-day detention, or indeed with any other reserved matters that impinge on our justice system?

The First Minister: Although the policy responsibility clearly lies with the UK Government and Cabinet, it is of course right that we are involved in the discussions on the implementation and impact of the proposals on Scots law and on the operations of the Scottish police forces.

In response to Margaret Smith's comments, while recognising that our parties hold different views on the matter, I believe that, when the Scottish chief constables make representations to the UK Government to change the law on terrorism, it is important that we listen to what they say. However, we should not always accept everything that they say—there are times when we have to challenge their views and the way in which they allocate the operational resources that we were discussing earlier.

This is a very serious issue, and the police are dealing with very serious crimes and the potential of a serious threat in the future. I hope that, following last night's vote in the House of Commons, it will be possible for all of us, in every part of the United Kingdom, to move on from the debate that has now taken place and to work a bit more closely, and on a cross-party basis, with the police and other authorities that have made representations on the matter, so that there might be more agreement in the future on the measures that are taken, and so that Britain can be a safer place.

Margo MacDonald (Lothians) (Ind): May I urge the First Minister to move on from the advice that has been given by the Nickys-come-lately to this issue and to remember that a number of us have raised with him our concerns about the choices that he spoke of when he talked about the allocation of police resources for operational purposes? Those resources are being stretched because of the heightened level of awareness of terrorism and the measures that must be taken to combat it. Local police have very little or no control over those measures. Does the First Minister agree that it makes sense to use what we can learn from this episode to determine how our police forces should be funded in future and to ensure that they do not have to choose between patrol cars on dangerous roads and resourcing the requirements that are connected with the heightened awareness of terrorism?

The First Minister: As a starting point for answering that question, it is important to reiterate that, in Scotland today, our police forces and the associated agencies receive record levels of resources and have a record number of police

officers. That ensures that the clear-up rate of crime is at a record level and that the police have the most modern equipment that they have ever had. I believe that, post-devolution, they also have one of the best and closest relationships with government that there has ever been when it comes to exchanging advice and working together.

I believe that it is important that we continue to monitor those resources and their allocation to individual forces. The one thing that I would say about the debate that has taken place this week in the House of Commons is that the initial proposal came in part from the police forces of the UK, including the Scottish chief constables. They made representations in favour of a 90-day detention period based on their current resources. Although there is an issue to do with resources, which need monitoring and assessment, it is important that the forces take that into account in the representations that they make to government at all levels.

Free Personal Care (Funding)

6. Mary Scanlon (Highlands and Islands)

(Con): To ask the First Minister whether free personal care for the elderly is adequately funded. (S2F-1917)

The First Minister (Mr Jack McConnell): On the basis of estimates of the cost of free personal care that were provided by the expert care development group, ministers have provided the agreed funding, following discussion and agreement with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities.

Mary Scanlon: According to COSLA,

“free personal care policy will fail quite publicly and quite spectacularly”,

with councils being forced to put up council taxes or face cutbacks in personal care. Will the First Minister clarify whether councils are being funded adequately or whether they are diverting funding into other departments, which is leading to the shortfall?

The First Minister: The important point is that different organisations, including elected local authorities, will make representations to the Parliament, to Government and to individual MSPs of all parties for additional resources all the time. We have a choice in that situation. We could simply accept what they say and give them the money, which might be the Tory position, although I doubt that it has been historically and I hope that that will not change—I am sure that Miss Goldie will be tight on the public purse. The reality is that we need to ensure that we make a proper judgment of such bids for resources. Local authorities or any other bodies bidding for Government resources have to justify their bid and

get to agreed levels of funding. In this case, we have an agreed level of funding, which was based on the estimates that were provided to us when the policy was introduced. We continue to provide that agreed level of funding to the penny.

Christine Grahame (South of Scotland) (SNP): Is the First Minister aware that cuts in the supporting people fund are causing extensive cuts in warden cover in sheltered accommodation such as Glenfield Court in Galashiels, where residents who are much frailer than they were a decade ago have less cover than they did 10 years ago? Will he meet sheltered accommodation providers who have serious concerns about the cuts in supporting people funding impacting on warden cover?

The First Minister: There has been considerable discussion about the supporting people fund, with local authorities in particular. The budgets for the fund were escalating and were, rightly, subject to new controls by the Treasury. We decided that the level was not sufficient so we provided additional resources over and above those provided by the Treasury, which we allocated to Scottish local authorities. I am not aware of the local circumstances that Christine Grahame has reported, but I am happy to ensure that she gets a ministerial reply if she writes to me about them.

Euan Robson (Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (LD): Does the First Minister agree that affordability is about not just resources but costs? Does he therefore agree that the costs of regulation and inspection must be kept within reasonable bounds?

The First Minister: Absolutely. I believe that national agencies in particular, which are largely self-financing through charges for inspections and the other charges that they impose, must run their operations as efficiently as possible. We have made that point consistently to national bodies in this area. We expect them to keep their charges at a reasonable level and to run an efficient ship and not have a grossly inflated headquarters operation that adds unnecessary costs on to local authorities or anybody else.

Mike Rumbles (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD): Does the First Minister agree that the funding of free personal and nursing care for the individual, which is set at £210 a week, was set in 2002 and that if it was linked to inflation, it would be £250 week by 2007? There are no proposals to increase the funding. Will the First Minister consider doing so?

The First Minister: I suspect that that might be a matter of a lot of discussion in the chamber in the next few months and years. We have an agreed level of funding, which we should stick to for the moment.

John Scott (Ayr) (Con): The First Minister will be aware that there is a waiting list for free personal care in South Ayrshire. What advice can he give South Ayrshire Council on how to reduce that list, given that it tells me that it has inadequate funding to meet the demand?

The First Minister: Local authorities should manage their budgets as effectively as the local population would expect them to. Local authorities should also implement the policy, in principle and in practice, in the way that the Parliament intended. The absolute objective of the work that is currently being undertaken by the Minister for Health and Community Care and the Deputy Minister for Health and Community Care with the local authorities is to ensure that the policy is applied consistently throughout the country. That applies as much in John Scott's constituency as it does anywhere else.

12:30

Meeting suspended until 14:15.

14:15

On resuming—

Question Time

SCOTTISH EXECUTIVE

Education And Young People, Tourism, Culture And Sport

Rural Primary Schools (Closures)

1. Mr John Home Robertson (East Lothian) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive whether it will revise its guidance concerning proposals to close rural primary schools in order to ensure the application of a fair and effective test of proportionate advantage. (S2O-8019)

The Minister for Education and Young People (Peter Peacock): I have explained to the Education Committee that I am open to examining how we can further develop our approach to ensuring appropriate consideration of school closures by councils. I am in discussion with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and others about the issues and will continue to reflect on what more might be needed.

Mr Home Robertson: I understand the minister's reluctance to intervene in local decisions, but will he accept that some elected councils seem to be incapable of controlling the centralising tendencies of their education officials? Is the minister aware that one such council closed my local school under a policy whereby all village schools are subject to constant closure reviews, which is destabilising schools and demoralising families and teachers? Will he respond to growing demands for him to intervene and to apply fair criteria in order to protect good schools against bad local government, whether Tory or anybody else? There are Tories in the Borders, although there are currently none in the chamber.

Peter Peacock: John Home Robertson does us a service by pointing out that there are no Conservatives in the chamber.

Mr Home Robertson: Apart from the Deputy Presiding Officer.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Murray Tosh): In this position, I am not in any party, Mr Home Robertson.

Peter Peacock: Absolutely.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Someone with your experience, Mr Home Robertson, should readily understand that. Do not involve the Presiding Officer in party politicking.

Peter Peacock: Indeed. I was being careful not to do that—I know that your remarks were not directed at me, Presiding Officer. However, I reiterate that there are no Conservatives in the chamber. Despite the fact that they come to parts of the Parliament and claim to be concerned about rural school closures, they are not in the chamber to scrutinise my views on the issue. In addition, Conservative local authorities in Scotland are closing small rural schools.

John Home Robertson made two points. It is right to point to the fact that local authorities are accountable locally for their decisions. We should respect that and respect the power of the ballot box to cast a judgment on councils that the electorate do not think are acting appropriately. He also made the good point that some councils are adopting rigid criteria on the triggers for school closures, thereby locking themselves into a situation in which schools automatically come up for review, irrespective of political judgments. That is an unfortunate position for any council to get into. It is one of the reasons why I am prepared to consider how we might further amend our guidance to try to ensure that there is appropriate consideration and that all the facts are seen and all the arguments are heard locally before decisions are made.

Christine Grahame (South of Scotland) (SNP): I welcome the Conservatives, who have now entered the chamber, to question time. I associate myself with John Home Robertson's remarks and welcome Peter Peacock's comments, particularly because Channelkirk Primary School, which has 50 pupils and is in a growing community, is under threat of closure on 6 December. I hope that Scottish Borders Council will listen to what the minister has just said.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I am not sure that there was a question in that, but you may find one, Mr Peacock.

Peter Peacock: If there was a question, I missed it. However, I am aware of the issues that are being debated not only in the Borders, but elsewhere. I must be careful about what I say about individual cases, because in some circumstances they are referred to me. Therefore, it would not be appropriate for me to comment on the specifics of Channelkirk.

Euan Robson (Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (LD): Does the minister agree that the application of rigid criteria is ill advised because it results in a kind of rolling review of small schools, which leads to uncertainty and a lack of confidence? Does he also agree that the policy that is being pursued by the Conservative-Independent administration in Scottish Borders Council, which is doing what I described, is not a proper one? I am sure that parents will reject it.

Peter Peacock: I will make clear again to Euan Robson what I have made clear in the past, which is that I believe firmly that each case ought to be considered on its individual merits. Ultimately, such issues are matters of political judgment and not technical decisions. I have stressed time and again that, before making difficult decisions about school closures, we must weigh up the advantages against the disadvantages and come to a balanced view. As I said, political judgments are involved and politicians must take responsibility by making such judgments about what schools should be considered for closure and what schools should not be so considered. Councils should not simply be locked into a series of triggers that force reviews, irrespective of the politics of the situation.

Richard Baker (North East Scotland) (Lab): As well as ensuring that Executive guidance is properly followed, will the minister ensure that there is careful reconsideration of the advice to councils by the Accounts Commission to review the future of schools that are operating at under 60 per cent capacity? Schools are now used in a variety of ways. That can affect capacity, as can a number of other issues. As a result, the advice is now out of date.

Peter Peacock: That was one of the issues that I reflected on when I gave evidence to the Parliament's Education Committee a week or so ago and my officials are meeting Audit Scotland to talk about it. I will be careful about what I say because Audit Scotland is an independent organisation that has to make its own judgments on the criteria that it uses in best-value exercises—or any other exercises—in councils. That said, the 60 per cent rule, if I can call it that, is being interpreted literally by some councils. I am not at all sure that that was the intention of the Accounts Commission.

Since the advice was given, education policy has moved on considerably. We now have much more child care and early years provision. Our policy is to cut class sizes, which will have implications for the use of space in schools. It is therefore appropriate for us to think again, with Audit Scotland, about that rule—if we can call it a rule—and about the way in which it is interpreted by local councils.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Questions 2 and 3 have been withdrawn.

Modern Languages (Secondary Schools)

4. Irene Oldfather (Cunninghame South) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what action it is taking to promote the uptake of modern language learning in secondary schools. (S2O-8039)

The Deputy Minister for Education and Young People (Robert Brown): The Scottish Executive attaches high importance to supporting and encouraging modern languages in schools and guarantees every pupil the opportunity to learn a modern European language starting in primary school. Since 2001, we have provided education authorities with £18.5 million to support languages learning and teaching.

Irene Oldfather: I am sure that the minister is aware of the partners in excellence project in which my local authority—North Ayrshire Council—participates. He will also be aware of the independent evaluation of the project, which showed that the project increased both uptake and attainment in modern languages. Does he agree that national centres of excellence do not necessarily need to be located in one place and that the innovative use of distance learning and information and communications technology is to be welcomed? Does he understand the frustration of the authorities, project organisers, teachers and students who have invested so much time and effort in the partners in excellence project that the project's money is to be withdrawn? Will he commit to looking again at the initiative?

Robert Brown: I am well aware of Irene Oldfather's long-standing commitment in this general area. As she says, there is no doubt that partners in excellence has been a successful project in increasing uptake at higher grade and other levels in the three local authorities involved. However, she will also be aware that one of the centres of excellence projects was funded in the way that she describes and that a review of funding arrangements for the nine centres of excellence showed that some of them were not meeting the original bidding criteria. Issues arose with regard to partners in excellence. My colleague Peter Peacock advised her of that by letter in August. In short, there was a distinction between the centres that had a national role and the centres that, in essence, had a local role.

There has been discussion between the local authorities and officials in my department about how the success of the scheme can be built on. Funding is being continued until 2008 to allow the local authorities to make the key decisions on what they will then do to support the scheme. Local authorities have the central role in funding and supporting the local provision of education.

Mr Andrew Welsh (Angus) (SNP): Does the minister accept that the current uptake of European languages is simply inadequate for Scotland's role in Europe? Moreover, given the importance to Scotland of the rise of China, Japan and India, does he agree that our immigrant population could be an invaluable asset in the

promotion and teaching of languages from the wider world?

Robert Brown: I agree very much with Andrew Welsh's point, which was well made. The point has also been made by ministerial colleagues in the Scottish Executive Enterprise, Transport and Lifelong Learning Department. As Mr Welsh will know, Nicol Stephen is currently in India to discuss trade issues. As I said to the Scottish Association for Language Teaching when I addressed it on Saturday, the ability to speak in foreign languages is extremely important for the sale of goods and all that sort of thing. That is why we have been trying to expand the provision of basic language teaching in the traditional languages as well as in other languages—there is a standard grade arrangement in Urdu, for example. Such developments are moving us towards higher provision in the near future. I agree entirely that we must do much more than we have in the past.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Question 5 has been withdrawn.

Citizenship (Primary Schools)

6. Susan Deacon (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what steps it is taking to encourage active citizenship in primary schools. (S2O-8013)

The Minister for Education and Young People (Peter Peacock): Values and citizenship are one of the five national priorities in Scottish education. Citizenship will be at the heart of work to take forward a curriculum for excellence. That will be reflected in new guidance across curricular areas.

Susan Deacon: Does the minister agree that work to develop active citizenship in schools is critical and could transform Scotland? We are reminded of that when we hear directly from young people, as the minister's depute and I did yesterday when pupils from the Royal High Primary School made their needs and views known to us through work on active citizenship in their school. Does the minister also agree that in taking forward such work we should, as well as supporting young people and letting them express their views to politicians, give them the confidence to implement change at their own hand? A great deal of change comes from the bottom up through individuals, families and communities and not just top down from Government.

Peter Peacock: Susan Deacon makes two good points. First, citizenship is important in our society and it is important that young people learn about it. The curriculum review that is under way presents us with a huge opportunity to define much more clearly what it means to be a modern Scot in a rapidly changing environment and in a globalising world that has so many challenges. We are about

to stimulate much more debate on the nature of citizenship in our schools.

Secondly, citizenship is not just about understanding political structures and representation and knowing how to get access to Government to change policy, important though those things are. It is also about individuals learning what they can do to act responsibly towards themselves and their neighbours. How do we take action as individuals to improve the environment? How do we work with others in our communities to improve the environment?

Citizenship covers matters such as diet, health and lifestyle, which affect our self-esteem and the self-esteem of the wider community. It also covers issues such as poverty in Africa and how we get involved in charity work as individuals and as communities. It also concerns tolerance and respect for others and how we include others in our society. Those are all hugely important issues, which we must deal with not just at state or organisational level, but, as Susan Deacon rightly says, at the level of personal responsibility.

Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act 2004 (Implementation)

7. Mr John Swinney (North Tayside) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Executive what preparations have been made by local authorities for the implementation of the Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act 2004. (S2O-8058)

The Deputy Minister for Education and Young People (Robert Brown): Local authorities and national health service boards have been working together in local multi-agency teams on preparations for implementation since the act received royal assent in May 2004. The multi-agency teams have worked to raise awareness of the act among staff and families, to plan local services, to prepare information and advice materials and to develop staff training programmes. That work is supported by implementation funding, provided by the Executive over two years, of £17.5 million for local authorities and £6 million for NHS boards.

Mr Swinney: I recognise that the act increases the responsibility on local authorities and health boards in providing services for young people with special needs. Will the minister clarify whether the £95 million investment to which he referred in the debate in Parliament last Thursday is new money or simply an amalgamation of existing budgets? If the latter, does he accept that resources must be put in place to guarantee that local authorities can deliver on the statutory duty that the act imposes on them?

Robert Brown: The £95 million that was referred to, and which has been referred to in

previous debates, covers many issues relating to this field. As the member will appreciate, there is broad support for education funding in the first place and there are things that have an incidental connection to inclusion and additional support needs. The £17.5 million and the £6 million that I referred to are primarily to support the implementation of the act. Of course, the act is only just about to come into force and we must regard it as the beginning of a process of improvement. The extent of the preparations that have been made for the act's implementation is almost unparalleled in my experience. I hope that the legislation will lead to substantial improvements in the arrangements that are made for the young people throughout Scotland who require such services.

Tourism (Cruise Ships)

8. Kate Maclean (Dundee West) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what role cruise ships play in tourism in Scotland. (S2O-8025)

The Minister for Tourism, Culture and Sport (Patricia Ferguson): Cruise liners bring a significant number of visitors to particular areas of Scotland during the year. VisitScotland is commissioning research that will assess both the market and the economic benefits of cruise tourism to Scotland. The findings from that research should be available by the middle of next year.

Kate Maclean: Is the minister aware that, although on average 12 cruise ships a year visit the port in Dundee, there is no significant benefit to the local economy, because areas that already benefit significantly from tourism tend also to benefit from those visits? Following the research, are there any plans to ensure that local areas benefit more from the significant contribution of cruise ships to the tourism industry?

Patricia Ferguson: The findings from the research will be acted on so that we maximise the benefit of such tourism for areas around ports where cruise ships can dock. Certain areas, such as Invergordon and Inverclyde, have already taken advantage of the opportunity by considering innovative ways in which they can make their locality attractive to people who wish to leave cruise liners when they come into port. I am more than happy to speak to Kate Maclean in more detail about what might be done in Dundee, but I would have thought that the work that is going on around the harbour in Dundee—particularly around Discovery Point—might, in the fullness of time, attract visitors to Dundee from cruise liners.

Mr Jamie McGrigor (Highlands and Islands) (Con): Is the Executive doing anything to improve pier facilities at places where they have fallen into disarray, such as Tobermory on Mull? That might

encourage more cruise ships to visit such places and it would help marine tourism on the west coast of Scotland.

Patricia Ferguson: As I am sure Mr McGrigor is aware, the opportunity for cruise liners to dock at Tobermory depends on more than just the bricks and mortar of the pier. There are a lot of other issues, such as the depth of the berths that are available. The improvements that Mr McGrigor suggests are not a matter for the Scottish Executive to undertake on its own. They would have to be generated by local interest. I am not aware that any particular work is being done, but if he considers that the matter should be taken forward, perhaps he will write to me about it.

Football (Social Benefits)

9. Mr Kenny MacAskill (Lothians) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Executive what funding is provided to assist the promoting of football as a means of reducing offending and antisocial behaviour. (S2O-8046)

The Minister for Tourism, Culture and Sport (Patricia Ferguson): We understand the importance of young people having things to do and good facilities available in their area. The Executive is keen to promote all positive alternatives to offending and antisocial behaviour and to promote participation in sport as part of a healthier lifestyle. The development of diversionary activities for young people in our communities is a key priority and the local action fund is one example of how we are trying to achieve that. We particularly welcome partnership initiatives that bring together local services to find solutions to local problems.

Mr MacAskill: I am none the wiser.

Numerous officers—such as Police Constable Thomson, the community officer at Bingham in Edinburgh—have started youth football training and have consequently seen a significant decline in offending and disorder. PC Thomson could do more if more facilities and funding were provided. Given that the police force gives his time for free and that he gives up much of his own free time, is it not appropriate for the Executive to assist him by providing facilities and funding for his worthwhile project?

Patricia Ferguson: I provide information; I cannot help Mr MacAskill with his level of wisdom, unfortunately.

Obviously, we are keen to see any projects that are happening on the ground and to consider what support can be given to them. However, Mr MacAskill's original question was about methods of reducing offending and antisocial behaviour and not just about a particular football event. I point out that the programmes that work best in reducing

offending and antisocial behaviour are about more than just facilities or even the sporting programmes that happen there. The programmes that work best also offer opportunities for the development of the young people involved. To achieve that, good leadership is required. I am delighted to hear that that is being provided in the case to which he referred.

Such projects have proven to be particularly helpful in several places around the country. In East Dunbartonshire we have midnight football and East Ayrshire has active steps. In my home city of Glasgow, we have the First football programme, whereby 2,500 young people take part in such events. In the Red Road area of Glasgow, in which I lived when I was much younger and where I kicked a ball about from time to time, operation reclaim is a model that engages young people through a range of sports and arts activities. The local police force has been very much involved in that.

Figures show something like a 37 per cent reduction in youth crime in 2004, so such projects work. They need support, but that will not always come from the Executive; sometimes, it must come from other partners that work more locally on the ground.

Donald Gorrie (Central Scotland) (LD): Will the minister try to ensure that good schemes such as those that she described are kept going? Often, short-term funding is given, but nothing is worse than interesting young people in something then letting them go because nothing continues. Will she try to ensure that continuing funding is provided, whether by the Executive, other sources or all sources?

Patricia Ferguson: As I said, such activity is often the result of partnerships on the ground. It is for local partnerships to decide whether to continue. Sometimes, it will not be appropriate to continue a programme. A different programme might take place, perhaps in a different area. Donald Gorrie is right to say that continuity is needed. I agree entirely. Continuity must go further than he suggested—it must give the young people who benefit from our active schools programme, for example, the opportunity to progress to club level if they have an interest, talent or ability in a particular sport. We are very much working on that.

Finance and Public Services and Communities

Council Tax Arrears

1. Elaine Smith (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what support structures local authorities are required to have in place for individuals facing council tax arrears. (S2O-8041)

The Minister for Finance and Public Service Reform (Mr Tom McCabe): That is a matter for individual councils, which are independent corporate bodies that are required to act in accordance with the powers and duties that are set out for them in statute. I stress that there are many good examples of Scottish councils increasing their complement of money advisers. In Elaine Smith's council area—North Lanarkshire—more than 20 advisers offer free advice and support to individuals who have debt problems. Almost 500,000 people—nearly 25 per cent of all households—receive council tax benefit and about half are pensioners. On top of that, nearly 400,000 people pay no council tax at all.

Elaine Smith: I thank the minister for his answer and ask him to join me in expressing a warm welcome to the delegation from the Cuban National Assembly who are visiting the Parliament today.

Does the minister accept that a significant proportion of individuals suffer sequestration on account of council tax arrears that are not the result of their being unwilling to pay, but are because of difficulties in managing finances and complex systems that are associated with debt repayment? Does he also agree that local authorities could do more to support such people by, for example, arranging fixed appointments with local authority money advisers in order to avert sequestration, and by promoting the existence of advisers more? Does he agree that the Executive could provide clearer guidance on that?

Mr McCabe: I am more than happy to join Elaine Smith in extending that welcome. We welcome many visitors to the Parliament; I hope that the visitors who are here today find it as interesting as many other people do.

We need to remember that significant resources are being invested in front-line money advice; the Executive is investing about £5 million this year and more than 150 new money advisers are operating. A great resurgence and great investment have also taken place in the credit union movement, which assists individuals as they attempt to manage their finances. All that is important.

The Executive is trying to advance a coherent corporate debt recovery strategy that is balanced against the needs and requirements of people who find meeting their obligations challenging. That is being done through our financial inclusion action plan. We have demonstrated many positive sentiments within that.

I fully accept that debt advice has to be proactive on the part of the advisers, who have to make themselves and the services that they provide known to the people that need them,

which relates to management of the advisers. I am content that local authorities will, as well as being determined to raise the level of council tax income that they draw into their accounts, balance that with proper compassion for people whose ability to pay is challenged.

Efficient Government (Financial Targets)

2. Mr Andrew Arbuckle (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD): To ask the Scottish Executive when it will be in a position to announce progress in respect of meeting its financial targets under the efficient government programme. (S2O-7994)

The Minister for Finance and Public Service Reform (Mr Tom McCabe): Our targets are efficiency targets rather than financial targets. As I said when I gave evidence to the Finance Committee in September, we will report our progress annually. I plan to announce the actual savings that are made in the first year of our efficient government programme in the summer of 2006, once the outturn figures for 2005-06 are available.

Mr Arbuckle: I appreciate that the targets are efficiency targets, but as we are seven months into the first year, should not we be seeing a difference in our public services because of the efficiency programme?

Mr McCabe: I am happy to confirm that, since 1997, there has been a progressive improvement in our public services, which has speeded up considerably since the creation of the Parliament. As a consequence of the efficient government programme, there is a constant dialogue going on between us and our delivery partners. We are currently speaking to the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities about the methodologies that it is developing to establish baselines. Through the programme, we will be able to demonstrate to ourselves and the people of Scotland how resources are being more efficiently used to increase delivery of front-line services. We will report on that on-going work at the appropriate time.

I remind Andrew Arbuckle that the efficient government programme is a long-term programme and that we are only seven months into it. I know that some people have tried to put pressure on us, as if we were involved in making a cup of instant coffee. However, we will not be pressured in that way—we will stick with the programme and we are determined that it will succeed. Over the period, we will see that resources are applied far more effectively and efficiently in Scotland, and that the beneficiaries will be the people who require front-line services.

Mr John Swinney (North Tayside) (SNP): Without wishing to judge the minister's ability to

make instant coffee, can he tell me whether, as part of the efficient government programme, he intends to consider the report that Audit Scotland published this morning? That report highlighted the fact that more than a third of 74 projects that were funded by the Scottish Executive to a total of £1.4 billion had no specific objectives. What does that say about efficient government?

Mr McCabe: Mr Swinney takes his own interpretation of the report that was published this morning. It contained many positive aspects. It is part of my duty as a minister and parliamentarian to pay considerable heed to the thoughts and offerings of Audit Scotland. That is why we offered Audit Scotland our efficiency technical notes in connection with the efficient government programme. That is also why we publish the comments that we receive back from Audit Scotland and are involved in a continuing dialogue, in which we take the advice of Audit Scotland and refine the processes that we employ to ensure that the initiative is effective and efficient on behalf of the people of Scotland.

Local Authorities (Meetings)

3. Alasdair Morgan (South of Scotland) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Executive what recent discussions it has had with local authorities. (S2O-7980)

The Minister for Finance and Public Service Reform (Mr Tom McCabe): Ministers and officials regularly discuss a wide range of issues with local authorities.

Alasdair Morgan: At First Minister's question time today, the First Minister said that he did not think that council tax increases need be more than 2.5 per cent. As a result of his discussions with local authorities, has the minister formed any impression of what council tax increases will be? Will they—once again—be in excess of inflation?

Mr McCabe: My discussions with Scotland's local authorities, which are on-going and were particularly intensive over the summer, have convinced me that there is an increased determination among many elected councillors and their officials to serve the people of Scotland as best they can and to ensure that the burden that is placed on people at local level to fund services is as small as possible. I am perfectly content that councils throughout Scotland are making their best efforts to minimise the tax increases for the public in the next financial year.

We—and I, personally—have continued to make the point strongly that the Scottish Executive has considerably increased the level of resources that are available to local authorities in Scotland. We believe that proper management of those resources should result in a far less severe tax

burden at local level. That is why the First Minister said what he said today and why I repeated what has been said previously when I gave evidence to the Finance Committee earlier this week. We will continue to make the point that the precious resources that have been made available have been considerably increased in Scotland and that it is incumbent on each and every one of us in the Scottish Executive and at local level to ensure that they are applied effectively and efficiently.

Mike Rumbles (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD): Has the minister ever discussed free personal care in his many discussions with councils? In particular, is he aware of Renfrewshire Council's decision to charge people for preparation of meals, which is contrary to the letter and spirit of the legislation that the Parliament passed?

Mr McCabe: I have discussed that issue with local councils over a long period and in various guises; I did so when I was the Deputy Minister for Health and Community Care and have done so as the Minister for Finance and Public Service Reform. I am aware of the points of view that councils have put forward, but as the First Minister said this morning, we have fully funded the recommendations of the independent committee that considered the requirements for the service in question and we are confident that enough money has been supplied. We keep the policy under constant review.

I am aware that certain local authorities have put a particular interpretation on preparation of food. We disagree fundamentally with that interpretation and have said so strongly to the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities. Discussions continue and I hope that a firm conclusion can be reached in the near future in the interests of the people who require the services.

Best-value and Budget Decisions (Community Benefit)

4. Donald Gorrie (Central Scotland) (LD): To ask the Scottish Executive how it will ensure that best-value and budget decisions at local and national level take full account of the benefit to the community of providing services in ways that give support and human contact to service recipients. (S2O-7998)

The Deputy Minister for Finance, Public Service Reform and Parliamentary Business (George Lyon): The Executive is committed to ensuring that public services are designed and delivered around the needs of the people who use them. Best value plays a key role in supporting that commitment. In particular, a best-value organisation is responsive to the needs of its communities, consults them on services and is accountable to them.

Donald Gorrie: We could all give examples of bad use of best value, in which it is applied on a very narrow financial front rather than based on examination of the wider picture, which the minister said should happen. I hope that the minister will use his influence at national and local levels to ensure that a more humane and intelligent interpretation of best value is used. For example, many councils have given meals-on-wheels contracts to companies that deliver frozen meals once a week; people will therefore lose the human contact that is provided by local organisations, the Womens Royal Voluntary Service or whomever. People from such organisations might visit those people more often, chat to them and give them food that they will eat. Will the minister try to pursue such examples?

George Lyon: I will indeed. I take Mr Gorrie's point and assure him that best value is not only about finance—it is about ensuring that services meet users' needs as effectively as possible. Ministers are determined to ensure that all services that are delivered by the public sector, and by the voluntary sector on behalf of public bodies, are effective and deliver the benefits that the end user should expect.

Fiona Hyslop (Lothians) (SNP): I am not sure whether the minister heard the answers that were given following question 1 on education and young people, tourism, culture and sport, but it is clear that the 60 per cent capacity rule in schools, which was determined by the Accounts Commission in relation to best value, runs counter to much of the guidance on rural school closures. Will the minister liaise with his counterpart, the Minister for Education and Young People, to pursue that issue with the Accounts Commission?

George Lyon: I would be pleased to engage with the Minister for Education and Young People to pursue that matter.

Telecommunication Masts, Antennae and Associated Equipment

5. Mr Ted Brocklebank (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): To ask the Scottish Executive what legislation exists to prevent public buildings throughout Scotland from being used to site telecommunication masts, antennae and associated equipment. (S2O-7991)

The Deputy Minister for Communities (Johann Lamont): Depending on the circumstances of a case, there may be a number of pieces of legislation with which such installations would have to comply if they were to be allowed on or in a public building or any other building. Examples include the Town and Country Planning (Scotland) Act 1997 and the Health and Safety at Work etc Act 1974.

Mr Brocklebank: Does the minister share the concerns of many people who live in the centre of St Andrews that masts seem to be proliferating at an alarming pace on the roof of the New Picture House on North Street? I understand that there are four masts there at present. I have approached Fife Council on the matter, but it does not even appear to know who is operating the masts, despite the fact that further planning applications are being lodged. Does the minister share my concern and that of constituents on the matter?

Johann Lamont: I would prefer to have more detail on such an individual case before commenting on it. I am conscious that comments on individual planning issues can be extrapolated in a way that might not be helpful for continuing and constructive debate. It is incumbent on everyone involved to be as transparent and open as possible about where the masts are going, who is operating them and so on, particularly given the unease about telecommunications masts. Current research does not reinforce that unease, but I know from my area that neither the current research nor emphasis of the fact that we are tracking the matter sufficiently reassures people.

It is important—I know that the industry is committed to this—to work as closely as possible with people, to continue dialogue with them and to try, if possible, to site masts where people are comfortable with them while recognising the tensions that the technology creates by virtue of its having to be spread around the country. It is important that people on all sides of the debate, through information and knowledge, can have more confidence about what is going on.

Community Planning Partnerships

6. Brian Adam (Aberdeen North) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Executive what progress community planning partnerships have made since their inception. (S2O-7972)

The Deputy Minister for Communities (Johann Lamont): The aim of community planning partnerships is to deliver improved services that are more responsive to the needs of communities, to free up efficiencies through pooling resources and to increase trust, understanding and co-operation between partners. Community planning partnerships have made significant progress since their inception, particularly since the statutory framework was introduced in 2003. At national level, progress is monitored as part of the continuing programme of audits of best value and community planning. Audit Scotland's extensive baseline review of community planning will be published early in 2006.

Brian Adam: I thank the minister for that reply, although it does not quite gel with Audit Scotland's recently issued report, which says that the £318 million community regeneration fund—which is supposed to improve Scotland's most deprived communities and help families to escape poverty—has been found to have failed to define criteria for success, to plan ahead, to give clear guidance or to deliver results. In the light of Audit Scotland's findings, what plans does the minister have to issue guidance to community planning partnerships regarding community regeneration fund spending?

Johann Lamont: I am sure that Brian Adam would wish to recognise and welcome the significant funding of £318 million for Scotland's most deprived communities, while understanding that there is a poverty of place and that multiple deprivation has an impact on health and other outcomes. That is the right approach.

There are issues about how CPPs are rolled out in a way that sits comfortably with communities. The challenge is that we cannot set levels nationally and then claim that the money is a community regeneration fund. The initiative must come from the bottom up. Communities clearly understand what needs to be done in their areas and the challenge for community planning partnerships is to work in harness with the funding. That does not necessarily fit comfortably with some views about how money should be monitored, managed and so on. There must, of course, be a robust financial framework.

I do not accept the characterisation that Mr Adam applies to the Audit Scotland report. That report will go before the Parliament's Audit Committee. We will await the committee's comments on it and act on any lessons that emerge. We must recognise the substantial policy position that lies at the heart of this issue, which is to address poverty hand in hand with the communities where that is needed.

Competition (Public Sector)

7. Derek Brownlee (South of Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Executive to what extent it considers that competitive pressures and incentives increase quality, efficiency and responsiveness in the public sector. (S2O-7976)

The Deputy Minister for Finance, Public Service Reform and Parliamentary Business (George Lyon): Quality, efficiency and responsiveness are among the core principles on which we are continuing to reform and modernise Scottish public services. There are a number of factors that will support the Scottish Executive's aim to continue to deliver high-quality, user-focused, effective and efficient public services. The incentive to deliver higher levels of

achievement can clearly be evidenced across the wider public sector, and the positive dynamic of continuous improvement has been strengthened by the introduction of best-value audits in local government and the development of best-value principles across public services.

Derek Brownlee: What specific plans does the Executive have to extend choice and competition in public services in Scotland, particularly in health and education?

George Lyon: As I said in my earlier answer, public services are as complex as the lives of the individuals whom they serve; no single factor can be considered in isolation. Competitive pressures and incentives to perform already exist in public services and have done for many years. Other drivers to ensure that we have fit-for-purpose public services include a high calibre of management and leadership, well-trained and skilled employees in public service organisations and the organisations that we partner, and effective performance and accountability systems.

Rail

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Murray Tosh):

The next item of business is a debate on the future of rail in Scotland.

14:56

The Minister for Transport and Telecommunications (Tavish Scott): I thank Fergus Ewing and David Davidson, who lead for their respective parties on transport, for their helpful suggestions about the structure of today's debate. I genuinely hope that this can be an opportunity to consider longer-term perspectives on rail and why it is important to Scotland and that the debate can take place in that spirit.

The biggest transfer of powers to Scotland since devolution has happened. Scottish ministers now have the central decision-making role in the future of rail in Scotland. We can and will bring a real focus—a Scottish focus—to the needs of Scottish passengers and businesses.

This morning I travelled on one of Scotland's key commuting lines, the Fife circle. We are using our new role to lead a joint performance team to consider performance on that line. That team has already identified options for further investment over the coming years to improve its performance. That has been possible because of our new role in rail infrastructure and because of this devolved Government working in partnership with Network Rail and First ScotRail to deliver integration and co-ordination of their work.

Mr John Swinney (North Tayside) (SNP): On the integration of the network, one of the points that concern me is that Network Rail and the Scottish Executive are making available facilities to encourage more freight to travel on the Highland line, which goes through my constituency but, unfortunately, users and operators of the service are now in retreat, rather than advancing. What more can the Government do to work with operators and Network Rail to encourage more freight to get off the road and on to rail?

Tavish Scott: That is an important aspect of the approach, which will be dealt with in the on-going consultation exercise. Mr Swinney might wish to bear in mind two specific points. One is the use of the freight facilities grant and the ability of that mechanism, which has been used widely in Scotland already, to be developed further. The other is the route utilisation work that is being undertaken by Network Rail, which will consider the pinchpoints, the balance between freight trains and passenger trains and how we maximise the use of our network. I will try to say a few more words about that in due course.

The opportunities to deliver performance improvements that I believe we have and can take are already being realised right across the Scottish rail network. As Minister for Transport and Telecommunications, I will not be complacent about the performance of First ScotRail and Network Rail. That is what the transfer of rail powers to Scotland is all about. I met First ScotRail and Network Rail bosses together in Edinburgh last night to discuss the issues at the heart of rail performance in Scotland.

Rail architecture in Scotland is simpler than elsewhere, with fewer bodies, fewer companies and a unified approach. I want an approach with Government, First ScotRail and Network Rail working together to deliver for rail passengers.

Tommy Sheridan (Glasgow) (SSP): How will the Executive remain neutral in industrial disputes in the future, given that it has agreed to continue the practice of indemnifying companies for lost revenue during any industrial disputes? Does that not put the Executive on the side of the bosses in any strikes that might take place in the future?

Tavish Scott: Unlike Mr Sheridan, I do not want there to be strikes on the railways; I want the railways to provide good services for passengers. I will work with the Scottish Trades Union Congress, which I will meet shortly to discuss those and other issues.

These opportunities offer a big but exciting challenge to build on what we have already done and on what we can do for the future. I hope that that is what today's debate can be about. I aspire to better connections across Scotland; faster connections between Scotland and the rest of the United Kingdom; and better use of the rail network to enable more goods to get to market, as well as more people to get to work, by rail.

For the first time, we are asking in the consultation exercise what people and businesses in Scotland want from rail and where the balance lies between the transport choices that we face—the choices that people have about rail. That is why we have launched the consultation on rail strategic priorities. When I met the Confederation of British Industry earlier this week, I asked it those questions and I look to it, as to other business organisations, to consider why rail is important to business and to supporting the economy and how rail can give Scottish companies a competitive advantage.

Today's debate is an opportunity to develop a new Scottish vision for rail. Why should we not have a high-speed intercity express network on a European or far eastern model if that is what Scotland needs for its future? Can high-speed links to and from Scotland help our economy and Scottish tourism and be a real alternative to the

plane in the context of London links, or is it right to focus simply on improving existing links and connections? We have the opportunity to set out the future of rail in Scotland. I want to set out a strategic framework that will allow us to do that, and I encourage my fellow parliamentarians to take this opportunity to debate the questions that really matter. The challenge for us, in Parliament, is to look 10, 15 or 20 years hence in considering these issues.

Real devolution provides a new framework for rail in Scotland. It provides a new legal framework, as Scottish ministers today have far wider powers than before. It provides a new financial framework, with more than £360 million of funding transferring year on year to support us in our new role going forward, added to record investment in rail to date. We have a sound financial basis on which to build. Real devolution also provides a new operational framework, meaning clearer relationships that will enable greater co-ordination of activities and interaction by the key players. It means Transport Scotland having the flexibility to develop its own direct relationships with the private sector and better engagement between the rail industry, passengers and freight customers.

Mr David Davidson (North East Scotland) (Con): The minister mentioned £360 million of additional funding coming with the new permissions, and so on. Can he tell me where he would like to spend that money? I do not expect him to name specific projects, but does he wish to improve infrastructure, or is he going to mix it across the different aspects?

Tavish Scott: That £360 million is about Network Rail and the outputs that we will look for from it in relation specifically to the tracks and the infrastructure. We will discuss that matter further at the Local Government and Transport Committee next week, when I will be able to give a better and longer answer to those questions.

We have made a record investment in rail, which is delivering for passengers. The First ScotRail franchise in its first year has delivered significant improvements. The number of train delays caused by First ScotRail was down 20 per cent in the first year of the franchise. A new regime for higher-quality standards for stations and trains that is unique to the ScotRail franchise is ensuring a continuing improvement in service quality for the passenger. Investment in customer-focused areas has seen 400 new staff join First ScotRail; a new customer contact centre in Fort William; better cycle storage facilities; enhanced customer information services; and train fleet refurbishment.

Investment is gathering pace, with the franchise also set to deliver a £40 million package of improvements throughout Scotland, including the upgrading and improving of all stations and the

introduction of closed-circuit television and customer information systems at stations.

Margaret Jamieson (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (Lab): I am delighted to hear the minister say that there will be much-needed improvement in some stations. However, he will be aware that people in my constituency would like to have more trains per hour between Kilmarnock and Glasgow. Can he give me an assurance that he will discuss the dynamic loop further with Strathclyde Passenger Transport?

Tavish Scott: I would be happy to discuss the dynamic loop further with SPT. However, we need further information from SPT, as Margaret Jamieson knows. Once that is received, the matter can be taken forward.

We are also supporting the growth of the rail franchise: 29 new trains providing more than 5,900 extra seats, complemented by longer platforms at 26 stations, thereby increasing capacity on key commuter routes by 30 to 50 per cent. We are delivering a large programme of enhancements to the rail network that will see passenger services, freight services, service quality, network performance and patronage grow and improve over the next decade.

Mike Rumbles (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD): Talk of improvements to stations brings to mind the reopening of Laurencekirk railway station in the Mearns in my constituency. I am sure that the minister is aware of the positive business case that has been made for reopening that station by the Scottish transport appraisal guidance appraisal and the engineering report that is about to be published. Will he confirm that such measures go hand in hand with Scottish Executive policy to increase use of the railways?

Tavish Scott: The reopening of Laurencekirk station has been championed for some time and I know that it is important to Mike Rumbles. I have looked at the latest information on the matter, and note that a process must be gone through. However, I take his point about the advantages of new station openings. I ask him to bear it in mind that when decisions about station openings such as the one that he mentioned are made, there are consequences for the city-to-city connections that we also want to maintain. The balance of that argument is one of the matters that must be considered.

The results of the consultation will be used to guide rail investment decisions in future. Other work continues, such as the route utilisation strategy for Scotland, which will identify hot spots on the network, the issues that affect performance and the options for alleviating them.

We are also leading a study to produce a Scotland planning assessment to look at what rail

is good at and what it does best. That will indicate demand over the next 10 to 20 years and the extent to which the current network will have to change to meet that demand.

A sustainable, effective and efficient transport system is crucial to the economic health of Scotland and its people. This is an exciting time for rail in Scotland. We have a huge opportunity to shape Scotland's railways for generations to come. I want Scotland's railways to be as good as those anywhere in Europe or, indeed, the world—a genuine renaissance for rail in Scotland. I ask Parliament today to give voice to that challenge.

15:07

Fergus Ewing (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP): I thank the minister for agreeing that this debate should not have a motion and amendments because that means that we can have an open debate about how we see Scotland's rail services developing.

The Scottish National Party wishes to emphasise four points in this debate. The first and main point relates to the consultation. What do passengers want from Scotland's rail service? We submit that the answer to the consultation—we await the responses with interest—might be the same as it was to the previous consultation five years ago. Passengers want reliable train services that they know will leave at a specified time and arrive at the time stated in the timetable. It therefore seems that, in the short to medium term, we should focus on delivering that reliable service. From our discussions with industry experts, we believe that we should address in the expenditure of taxpayers' money the capacity constraints, the pinchpoints and the bottlenecks, which might be single-track sections, outdated signalling, old track, insufficient platforms or myriad other problems.

On its website, Network Rail divides Scotland into three sections and identifies some of the constraints in eastern Scotland, which is the most populous part. I submit that although the focus in the Scottish Executive's policy on rail in Scotland for the first six years of the Scottish Parliament has been on delivering new lines, we should now turn our attention to the improvement of the existing network.

Although the Scottish National Party supports improvements such as the Stirling-Alloa-Kincardine railway line, the Airdrie to Bathgate line and the Borders rail link, had there been an SNP minister for transport six years ago, assessing how best the substantial amounts of money should be spent, they would probably not have concluded that some of the projects that have been promoted by the Executive would be the top priority. Politics is not easy, Government is not easy—

Sarah Boyack (Edinburgh Central) (Lab): Will the member give way?

Fergus Ewing: Not at the moment.

Government is not easy—

Mr Andrew Arbuckle (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD): Will the member give way?

Fergus Ewing: Not at this point.

In politics and Government, we need to distinguish between the important and the essential. That is not to say that the SNP opposes the projects that I have mentioned, which will go ahead. After all, they have already been planned and it would be foolish to cancel projects that have been agreed.

However, spending on the existing network has not followed what we regard as the priorities. For example, according to Network Rail's analysis and forecast expenditure for the east of Scotland, the total enhancements—or improvements—expenditure for 2005-06 is £18 million. However, approximately £2,200 million has been earmarked for new routes. If I were a commuter on the Glasgow to Edinburgh line on which severe problems over the summer and into early autumn caused the line to be cut, I would question whether the creation of new routes should be the top priority. As I have said, the SNP supports the projects that I have mentioned, but it is only reasonable to make that point. After all, the debate's purpose is to focus attention on ways of addressing capacity constraints.

Mr Arbuckle: Although Mr Ewing makes a fair point, will he also be fair to the chamber and give us an idea of the projects that he would abandon?

Fergus Ewing: If Mr Arbuckle had been listening to me, he would have heard me say that I supported the projects that I mentioned.

Other projects have been proposed, and we support in principle the Glasgow and Edinburgh airport rail links. It is also right that the close parliamentary scrutiny of the Edinburgh tramlines should reach a conclusion; however, the former Minister for Transport himself questioned whether the lines would represent value for money if their costs increased. Of course, he said that before the costs increased.

Turning to point two, at the business in the Parliament event that took place in the chamber on 9 September, Janette Anderson made a lot of sense when she highlighted what she felt to be an element of confusion and lack of clarity in how projects can and should be delivered. In this debate, which is about the Parliament co-operating to take politics with a capital P out of transport, I repeat to the minister the offer that the SNP made in the debate on the Borders railway

project. We agree with the First Minister's comment at the opening of the parliamentary year that we need to reform the existing parliamentary system in that respect. He said:

"Too many critical transport projects that we have planned are taking too long to implement"

and

"we will legislate to simplify the process."—[*Official Report*, 6 September 2005; c 18782.]

If the minister wishes to fast-track the process, we will co-operate. If we can do it for a bill that, allegedly, is required to satisfy the European convention on human rights, we should do it for a bill that is necessary to deliver more successful links for rail passengers.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Ewing, you have one minute for points three and four.

Fergus Ewing: Thank you, Presiding Officer.

We should also introduce an integrated ticketing system. If people can buy a phone card for, say, £20, why can they not buy a transport card that can be used on any form of public transport and can be topped up on the bus or train? If we are going to have smart cards for concessionary travel schemes, the same measure should be extended to the whole range of travel.

Finally, in the extremely short time available to me, I should say that the SNP agrees with and welcomes many of the long-term transport objectives for Scotland, including swifter intercity links and better links with London. Ideally, there should be more rail passengers and fewer air passengers. As the party that will form the next Scottish Executive, the SNP will wish to play a part with its Westminster partners to meet those objectives.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Members should be aware that, as the debate is oversubscribed, we will stick strictly to the time limits.

15:14

Mr David Davidson (North East Scotland) (Con): First, I apologise to the chamber, because I will have to leave before the end of the debate. I have already apologised to the minister for that.

The Scottish Conservatives broadly welcome the transfer to Scotland of additional powers over rail, particularly given that we also have powers to deal with the road network. Surely connectivity is the key to this issue.

I am, however, concerned about the potential increase in bureaucracy and central control that the minister might threaten us with. There is little doubt that the establishment of the new national

transport agency and a network of regional transport partnerships will increase costs and slow progress, and we must ensure that those organisations actually deliver. However, there is clear evidence in some regions of Scotland that there are already developed transport partnerships—such as the north-east Scotland transport partnership—that work well without interference by ministers.

There is a simple philosophy to be applied when the minister is using the new powers: if it ain't broke, don't fix it—and, in the case of rail, that is how the minister is perceived. I would like to think that he will use the new powers to decrease bureaucracy and state interference in the railways and to focus instead on developing opportunities for front-line service improvements by freeing up the service providers and encouraging investment and cross-sector co-operation on timetabling and through-ticketing.

If we look at the rigidity of the current ScotRail franchise we can see that, despite the amazing service improvements by First ScotRail in its first year of operation, the company does not have the opportunity to consider which rolling stock should be used and how the hardware of the business can be improved in the long term. I find it strange that the franchise was cut from 15 years down to seven and that the operator was required to take over rolling stock that, in many cases, is inappropriate. There is little opportunity or encouragement to improve and generate greater private investment, which is currently dwarfed by public subsidy.

The Executive's excessive interference mantra has resulted in a lack of freedom for the train operating companies, whereas we wish to see operators freed up but still accountable—I stress that they should still be accountable. A recent respondent to *The Scotsman* online debate stated:

"Scotland's railway problems are not of First ScotRail's making ... As franchise-holders, they seek to meet operational and performance criteria set by Scottish Executive mandarins who wouldn't know a Turbostar from a Hogwarts Express."

To be fair, I am not attacking mandarins, but that is a view that has been expressed.

There must now be an opportunity to provide clarity about how the decisions are made. I appreciate the fact that the Executive has announced a consultation on rail, which I welcome. I hope that it will use that opportunity to maximise and develop its responsibilities, providing that we see new, clear and long-term strategic thinking about the issues faced by rail operators, both passenger and freight, and about the needs of passengers and businesses.

The resulting new strategy must take a long-term view to address the relevant points, and I

was heartened by the minister's words on that. That is particularly true where there are pinchpoints in our railway network, and the Executive must take a long-term view on how it intends to deal with infrastructure development and with the maintenance and upgrading of existing track and stations. Most of all, the Executive must ensure that the taxpayer gets maximum value for money, while providing increased opportunity for private sector investment. It is not just about profit; it is about the introduction of the huge capital requirements that we need to modernise the rail service, so as to offer a fair return to the investor and the operator and to help our transport system to develop.

I have little doubt that the primary role of the Scottish Executive in all of that is to ensure high standards of operation, real commercial flexibility, encouragement of competition and true public audit of performance. The Conservatives do not believe that the minister should run the railways directly. The new transport agency is, quite frankly, an illusion that he has let go, and he will have to work hard to convince me that he really wants that new agency to be strictly arm's length in its work with the rail operators.

No one in this chamber can have missed the fact that the minister recently threatened to terminate the rail operations of Strathclyde Passenger Transport as we know it. That is a major U-turn from November 2003, when the current Deputy First Minister gave us explicit assurances that SPT, or its successor body, would continue to manage, develop and monitor rail services in the area. We are now being told that, as the result of an agreement forced on SPT, an organisation and brand that enjoys public confidence will have its powers in key areas such as fares and branding curtailed, with the Executive merely agreeing to consult it. Perhaps the minister will clarify the situation and say what improvements will come about because of his actions. To those on the Conservative benches, it seems a wee bit like minister-knows-best interference.

Bruce Crawford (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP): Does David Davidson accept that it is a question of achieving a balance between the Executive's accountability for the rail operators and what the rail operators deliver? Is it not true that what the Tories did during privatisation was to let go so much that we had a disaster?

Mr Davidson: The proof of the pudding will be in the eating, because we have to look forward.

The First Minister said in the debate on the Executive's legislative programme that he wanted transport infrastructure projects to be rolled out quickly. Conservative members want to see firm commitments to the upgrading of several major

pieces of infrastructure to help with that work and to prove the point. Those projects include the upgrading of Waverley station and a new crossing of the Forth—that means a multimodal bridge or tunnel that includes rail, because one of the worst pinchpoints on our railway system is the bottleneck at the current Forth rail bridge, which muddles express trains and freight trains with local commuter services.

In conclusion, I ask the minister to continue with what he has promised us today: open discussion and debate. The Conservatives will certainly cooperate with him.

15:21

Bristow Muldoon (Livingston) (Lab): Fergus Ewing expressed scepticism about some of the projects in the Executive's plan. I encourage whichever member winds up for the SNP to name the projects that the SNP would not have proceeded with had it been in power. If SNP members sincerely believe that the projects were not all justified and were not all priorities, they should tell us which ones they would not have proceeded with.

Mr Davidson's approach was unbelievable. He seemed to put responsibility for all the rail industry's current problems into the hands of the Scottish Executive and failed to take on board Mr Crawford's point about the Tories being responsible for many of the rail industry's problems because of how they handled that industry in the 1990s.

Mr Davidson: Will the member give way?

Bristow Muldoon: Not at the moment. I might take an intervention later, but Mr Davidson has just spoken.

If the Tories are ever to be credible in Scotland they must accept that they have made mistakes. Their failure to do so and their refusal to recognise the problems that stem from their era ensure that they will remain in their current position—an irrelevance in Scottish politics.

A modern and efficient transport infrastructure is essential to any developed economy in order to sustain and enhance our standard of living and to develop in a sustainable manner. The development of a modern transport system is even more relevant to Scotland, a country on the western edge of Europe.

I firmly believe that rail can and should be a major component in the development of our infrastructure. That is an obvious and commonsense observation, but it is only a decade since the Conservative Government that Mr Davidson wishes to forget saw the rail network as a throwback to a different era. The Conservative

Government believed that the rail industry was in slow and terminal decline and planned gradually to reduce investment in it. I am pleased by the Scottish Executive's record on the prominent delivery of public transport since devolution, when my colleague Sarah Boyack was Minister for Transport, which has continued through to the current minister, Tavish Scott. There is a shared agenda in respect of the role that rail can play in helping to deliver the economic, social and environmental aspirations of our country.

There have been a number of achievements to date, some of which Mr Scott mentioned. Those include the completion of the Edinburgh crossrail scheme, many enhancements to capacity that have taken place on some of our busiest commuter lines, more car parking and more security measures.

We have contributed more towards the freight facilities grant, but there remains much more for us to do to encourage more freight to travel by rail.

I draw attention to the freight inquiry that the Local Government and Transport Committee will embark upon shortly. I encourage all interested parties in the Scottish economy and in the transport sector to participate in that inquiry so that we can establish ways in which we can enhance the level of freight that is carried by rail and alleviate the burden on our roads.

I do not have time to mention all the major projects, but I will mention three that I think are particularly important. First, and most important within the current plans, is the project to enhance capacity and facilities at Edinburgh Waverley. That project is important not only to the east of Scotland and to Edinburgh, but to the whole of Scotland's transport infrastructure because of Edinburgh Waverley's crucial position on long-distance, intercity lines and its interaction with many key commuter belts within the central belt of Scotland. I do not see it as an east of Scotland project, but as one that is essential for the whole of Scotland. I hope that the minister will ensure that it is given top priority.

Secondly, the Edinburgh airport link is another ambitious project and potentially the most expensive of the current projects in the transport budget. Again, it could produce an exciting transport interchange at Edinburgh airport that will link the airport with Scotland's biggest cities by rail, road, air, bus and—potentially—tram. The project is of critical strategic importance to the country.

Finally, the project that is close to my heart is the reopening of the Bathgate to Airdrie line. Again, the project is of significance not only to my constituents and those of Mary Mulligan and Karen Whitefield, but to people who live and work

along the M8 corridor. It will alleviate congestion in that busy part of Scotland.

The minister touched on the new powers. Given the shortage of time, I will have to leave that to one side. I commend the Executive on its proposal to introduce a transport and works-type bill. The proposal aims to address some of the bottlenecks in parliamentary procedures. I look forward to dealing with that bill in due course.

The final issue that I want to mention is one that the minister addressed earlier. It is possible that the Executive may have to compensate a franchisee in the case of industrial action. Like the minister, I hope that there is no industrial action over the course of the franchise. Will the minister expand on that and reassure staff and commuters that that will not encourage any potential franchise holder to act in a cavalier manner in its industrial relations because it does not have to face the downside of revenue loss as a consequence?

The prospects for the rail industry are positive. In terms of the contribution that rail can make in its own right, the question is what it can achieve for the Scottish economy and for social opportunities and environmental goals. I support the minister's proposals. The challenge that the minister, the new agency and the rail industry face is to deliver the proposed enhancements on time and on budget. If we do so, we will have delivered a rail network that is fit for the 21st century.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Trish Godman): We move to the open debate. A considerable number of back benchers have indicated that they wish to speak and I have already had to tell one that he will not be called. I ask members to keep to a strict six minutes.

15:27

Bruce Crawford (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP): I am a little disappointed that some members who have contributed so far have not managed to get out of the trenches a bit more. Surely the purpose of the debate is to approach the subject in a different way.

I, for one, warmly welcome the new powers that have been devolved to Scotland, and to the minister, from 1 April next year. They are a great idea. The powers will result in First ScotRail being contracted to the Scottish Executive through the franchise and Network Rail being contracted to First ScotRail in terms of the responsibility for track access arrangements. However, one of the missing pieces of the jigsaw is the need for Network Rail to be more accountable to the Scottish Executive. Further discussions should take place to improve the situation. I accept that arrangements have been put in place, but they are not the same as having a binding contract or real

accountability. The issue needs to be examined; we need to get it right for the longer term.

I recognise the considerable challenges that face the minister. The consultation paper is a good start. The first question asks:

“Following the delivery of the current major projects, should we change the focus of investment in the railways to concentrate on securing the benefits from the existing network”?

That is an important question. Fergus Ewing alluded to that when he spoke about the need to examine what the Executive has said about its planned projects.

We have to start getting the basics right: the challenge is staring us in the face. The small number of pinchpoints throughout Scotland give rise to considerable difficulties. If we were to lever in only a small amount of investment, it could make a significant difference to the rail network in that regard.

We need to get the fundamentals right. The question is how to get a lot more out of the existing infrastructure. I will move on to address capacity issues, but before I do, I will dwell on some of the significant questions that are raised by the Executive’s planned extensions to the network.

What lessons can we learn from what has been happening, for example, with the Stirling-Alloa-Kincardine line? That line is very welcome, but the costs went up from an initial cost-base of £37 million to something like £60 million; the cost was never going to be the earlier figure. I have been told that there must be five appraisal stages for such projects before a robust cost analysis can be made, but the figure and the go-ahead for the Stirling-Alloa-Kincardine line were announced at stage two. The result was an unexpected and undeliverable cost factor for that railway line. There must be much more robust financial planning before such announcements are made to ensure that they are much closer to the final, real sum.

The costs could have been much higher and matters could have been more difficult than they have been had not Network Rail been as flexible as it was on the grouting of the mineworkings that exist along the route. I understand that there is also conflict in Alloa, because the building of a new superstore means that the station car park will have space for only 50 cars. That is not enough space for the Alloa station car park in this modern day and age. We must try to resolve such conflicts. The Alloa link might become a route into Glasgow for a large part of Clackmannan, Fife and, indeed, southern parts of Perthshire. We must examine the Alloa situation much more carefully.

Bristow Muldoon talked about the Airdrie to Bathgate line, which is important. However, significant issues must be resolved with regard to the tunnelling at Waverley. If the line is to be electrified, we must ensure that the improvement works at Waverley railway station happen at the same time as the works on the Airdrie to Bathgate line. Otherwise, train users will suffer a double hit of inconvenience. We must find better ways of planning projects. That is what I mean by the lessons that must be learned.

We had a debate in the chamber last week about the problems that the Forth road bridge faces. I inform David Davidson that, if he thinks we need a new rail bridge, he should look up the Forth just a little bit closer to the road bridge. That rail bridge, I have been informed, will possibly last us for a couple of centuries yet, unless something goes significantly wrong. It is time that David Davidson got his technical expertise improved.

Mr Davidson: Will Mr Crawford give way?

Bruce Crawford: On you go.

Mr Davidson: What I was talking about earlier was the separation of local commuter routes from through-freight and express routes. That is one of the big problems. More capacity must be available in order to make that kind of separation. In fact, should we need to do anything with the Forth rail bridge, we must have somewhere else to go.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You are in your last 50 seconds, Mr Crawford.

Bruce Crawford: I realise that.

Perhaps Mr Davidson thought that he said that, but I can assure him that that was not what members heard. There are, of course, issues around the rail bridge—for example, it needs improved signalling. We must start discussions with English Welsh & Scottish Railway about whether the products that it runs on the rail bridge line can be moved on to the new line between Stirling and Kincardine and whether EWS will give up some of its passes so that we can get more trains across the Forth rail bridge. Doing that would make a significant difference.

There are many more things that I would like to discuss in this debate; I wish I had time. However, as far as the rail bridge is concerned, I hope that the minister takes my particular points on board. We must get into some serious planning because of difficulties that may arise on the other bridge.

15:33

Karen Whitefield (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab): I welcome the debate and I am sure that there will be a broad consensus that rail has an important part to play in the creation of a modern, co-ordinated transport system in Scotland. No doubt,

however, there will be some debate on the best way to achieve that and to what extent rail should take precedence over the car.

Recent years have seen an improvement in both the number of passengers using rail services and the quality of the infrastructure. Since 1996-97, passenger use of ScotRail services has increased by 9 per cent; and by 2006, the Scottish Executive will be spending £1 billion a year on transport, of which 70 per cent will be targeted on public transport. That funding is helping to deliver significant improvements in the rail infrastructure. Seventy-five new trains have been delivered since 1999 and 20 more new trains have been ordered. Work has also begun on the Larkhall to Milngavie line and the Stirling to Alloa line.

Those are just a few of the major projects planned by the Scottish Executive. The transfer of rail powers and resources from London can only help to ensure that we continue the process and deliver a co-ordinated and strategic rail service that joins up with car and bus journeys and complements other major infrastructure developments such as hospitals, housing and business developments.

The Bathgate to Edinburgh rail service provides clear evidence that investment in infrastructure can lead to significant passenger demand for a service. Since its reopening in the late 1980s, the service has gone from strength to strength. In fact, the number of passengers wanting to use the service increased so much from the original estimates that a number of platforms had to be extended to enable more carriages to run.

I am completely confident that the reopening of the Airdrie to Bathgate line will have a similar level of success. The Bathgate experience clearly demonstrates that a well-thought-out and well-located rail service can not only respond to customer needs, but stimulate additional journeys, moving people away from their cars and on to trains.

The reopening of the Airdrie to Bathgate section will provide not only a much more reasonable transport option for those who already travel from Airdrie and Coatbridge to West Lothian and Edinburgh, but greater employment, educational and recreational opportunities for the people of my constituency. The reopening will also help to reduce congestion on the M8.

I welcome the progress on the Airdrie to Bathgate project and in particular the appointment of Network Rail as the project promoter. It is vital, however, that we continue to consult the communities who will benefit from, and be affected by, the reopening of the rail line.

I would like to take this opportunity once again to restate my belief that there must be a proper

balance between the aspiration for a relatively speedy service between Glasgow and Edinburgh and the need to serve local communities such as Plains and Caldercruix in my constituency. I am firmly of the view that both those villages must be served by stations—even if that means a less frequent service that alternates between the two stations. I ask the minister to consider that as the project progresses.

Yes, it is important that we have fast, efficient transport links between our major cities, but it is also important that some of our smaller, more isolated rural communities have access to the employment and educational opportunities that the project can deliver. The social justice that can be delivered by good public transport must be made available to those communities as well.

I also ask the minister to consider the case for improving both the quality of the station at Shotts and the service. At present, the journey from Shotts to Edinburgh takes so long that it is not seen as an option by commuters. I ask the minister to consider the Caledonian proposals. I believe that those proposals would offer a viable option for people in the Shotts area who want to commute into Edinburgh by rail. Likewise, people in Livingston would have a viable rail option for commuting into Glasgow. There could be great economic benefits for the North Lanarkshire area. The redevelopment of Shotts station would be required, to ensure much-needed disabled access. There should also be sufficient park-and-ride facilities.

I would like to conclude by saying a few words about Strathclyde Passenger Transport, a subject that has already been touched on. The new Scottish transport agency will be set up following the model introduced by SPT many years ago. SPT emerged because it was recognised that there was a need for a more strategic and co-ordinated approach to public transport in the west of Scotland and around major conurbations throughout the United Kingdom. It makes sense that that strategic approach should now be taken across Scotland as a whole.

I would like to put on record my recognition of the good work carried out by SPT over the past 30 years. I am pleased that the dispute between SPT and the Executive has been resolved. Perhaps David Davidson needs to catch up with the news.

I look forward to the new west of Scotland transport authority working in partnership with the national agency over the coming months and years.

15:40

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I welcome the fact that the Executive is dedicating

some of its debating time to the important subject of rail. I do not want to spend my speech making partisan, party-political points, despite the temptation to do so. However, I thank Karen Whitefield for her good grace in praising the Bathgate line, which was a creation of the last Conservative Government; I shall resist the temptation to dwell on that.

As the Executive knows, Scotland's railway network is vital to the country's economic performance—people rely on trains to commute to work and business relies on trains for freight haulage—and it links all parts of Scotland. I want to concentrate on rail services because they affect my constituents in Mid Scotland and Fife. I am sure that I am not alone in having a mailbag that is full of letters from constituents about the inadequacies of the rail service.

I have been a strong advocate of more rail services to Perth and of improvements to the station there, but I fear that Perth's rail situation is another example of the city being forgotten by the Executive. Of the £40 million that First ScotRail is investing in infrastructure, it is investing only £155,000 in Perth, which is to be spent on improving the station's closed-circuit television system and upgrading its clocks. The people who use Perth station will appreciate that many more upgrades than just those are required. There is a lack of vision for Perth and a lack of will to improve its train services.

People in Perth want—indeed, they deserve—a decent train service. There are not enough services to Edinburgh. Surely it is unacceptable that most services from Perth to Edinburgh are indirect and take more than two hours. Of course, we used to have a direct rail line from Perth to Edinburgh, but it was closed in 1970—I remind Mr Muldoon that that was done under a Labour Government. I am sorry for making partisan, party-political points again. Trains now have to loop round by Stirling and Dunblane or along the Fife circle. We are far from being able to make a case for reopening the direct line from Perth to Edinburgh, but surely we can come up with a better solution that provides more effective and reliable rail services between the two cities. Such services are essential for the Perth area and its economy. What a difference having fast, regular and direct links to Edinburgh would make to Perth's economy.

First ScotRail is responsible to the whole of Scotland. It is all very well for it to invest £100 million in Waverley station—that is tremendous news—but surely Perth station deserves more than £155,000 for better services.

Christine May (Central Fife) (Lab): Given the consensual nature of the debate, does the member not accept that without the investment in

Waverley, improving facilities at Perth would not give his constituents any better access to the main station in the capital?

Murdo Fraser: I accept that there is a major constraint on Waverley station and that expansion will open the door to more services, but much more could be done. For example, extending the commuter service from Edinburgh to Dunblane as far as Perth would give more opportunities to people in Perth and the wider area.

We have heard about the reopening of stations. My colleague David Davidson—no doubt, with a little assistance from Mr Rumbles—was involved in the campaign to reopen Laurencekirk station, but I want to mention the case for reopening Blackford station in Perthshire, which a feasibility study shows would be of massive benefit to the area.

We all know about the success of Dunblane's park-and-ride scheme for commuters who travel to the central belt, but there is now immense pressure on car parking capacity in Dunblane, the streets of which have been left chock-a-block with cars by people commuting to Glasgow or Edinburgh. It would make sense to reopen Blackford station, if only to relieve some of the pressure on Dunblane. Commuters from Crieff and other parts of Strathearn who do not use a rail service to the central belt might be more inclined to do so if Blackford station were reopened, as it would be closer to their homes. That would also relieve traffic pressure on the roads and be more environmentally friendly.

Furthermore, a reopened station at Blackford would provide local businesses with opportunities for freight haulage. The best example of such a company is Highland Spring Ltd, whose product—water—is heavy, stable and high volume and would be perfect for rail transportation. The Highland Spring plant sits right beside the main railway line. With a little imagination, surely we could get such goods on to trains. That would ease the pressure on the A9, which carries a higher percentage of heavy goods vehicles than the national average. Taking some of the traffic off the A9 would reduce the horrendous accident statistics on that road.

I discussed the idea with Highland Spring and it is interested in transporting its goods by rail. All that is needed for that to happen is a bit of encouragement from the Executive, so I urge it to give the suggestion serious consideration.

The minister said that he travelled on the Fife circle line this morning. I hope that he had a better experience than many of my constituents, who complain regularly about severe overcrowding and the line's poor punctuality record. First ScotRail must make it a priority to improve that part of the

rail network. I drive in over the Forth road bridge and I know that many people who make that journey by car would rather use the train, but do not do so because the service is simply inadequate. It is essential for the Executive to consider improving the service on the Fife circle.

I have concentrated on local issues because they are a microcosm of the problems on the network as a whole. The Executive has much more to do if it is to deliver the rail service that the people of Scotland deserve.

15:46

Sarah Boyack (Edinburgh Central) (Lab): I want to add some perspective to what has been an interesting debate in which most members have been positive and upbeat. There are significant choices to be made in the coming years, but we should all be proud of what we have achieved on the railways since the Parliament was set up.

Fergus Ewing did not let me intervene during his speech, but I was going to say that when I inherited the road and railway programmes in 1999, we had the possible Larkhall to Milngavie rail project and about 19 big roads and motorways projects. Those were the choices for significant transport expansion in Scotland, so it is clear that we have achieved a huge amount in the past few years. We now talk about real rail projects such as the Bathgate to Airdrie line, the Edinburgh crossrail project, the Waverley line and the Stirling-Alloa-Kincardine line, which in 1999 were aspirations rather than worked-out schemes. The Edinburgh airport rail link represents a huge opportunity to link up the central Scotland railway network and it will massively increase travel opportunities for people who cross the central belt. In 1999, that project, just like the Edinburgh tram project, was not even on the horizon.

We have come a long way and the money has come with the projects. In 1999, we did not have significant resources in the transport budget, but the two subsequent spending reviews gave us those resources. For the first few years, we concentrated on how we could make the most effective use of the railways in the short term. We knew that we wanted to improve access for commuters, safety, the quality of services, reliability and comfort. Improvements such as CCTV have made a huge difference to passengers' sense of comfort and personal safety on our railway network.

In addition, we have done a great deal of work on access to the rail network, particularly through park-and-ride schemes. The best park-and-ride schemes now fill up quickly. We face the challenge of how to target small amounts of

money on schemes that link in to the railways. Now that more people use the railways, we need longer trains and platforms—that was another of our early priorities. Apparently simple things have not been simple to deliver on the railway network. One of our biggest collective achievements is the fact that we now have a range of powers and a more integrated network, which gives us more opportunities for the future.

The expansion of freight transport by rail is a huge achievement by the Scottish Parliament, but we are still at an early stage and a lot more can be done. I hope that Tavish Scott will examine that during his time as Minister for Transport and Telecommunications. We used to have almost abandoned railways in Scotland, but we now regard the rail network as a core part of the country's transport network.

There are key pinchpoints on the rail network. Although I am glad that members have mentioned Waverley station, we need to mention Haymarket station in the same breath because, uniquely, it is national, regional and local. Phase 1 of the Waverley redevelopment is to be welcomed as a superb step forward, but the increase in capacity that it will produce is marginal. If we are to realise the aspirations to which Murdo Fraser referred and those that were discussed in last week's debate on the Forth road bridge, we will need more access at Waverley and Haymarket. Work has already been done, such as the engineering project to increase capacity, but the fact that Waverley still needs to be transformed is a measure of how much more we need to do.

Tavish Scott talked about what we want for the future. A key priority should be targeting commuting routes where motorways and other roads are massively congested and where we know from our national planning framework that more houses, businesses and other developments are planned. That is crucial. It is important to make best use of the existing network in doing that, but we must consider expansion, too. We are experiencing a renaissance.

In the summer, I unveiled a small plaque to John Miller, the bicentenary of whose birth we were celebrating. It was stunning to consider the huge expansion of the railway network that took place 200 years ago. Our railway network is undergoing a more modest but equally significant expansion. I need only point to the crossrail project in Edinburgh, whose three new stations at Brunstane, Newcraighall and Edinburgh Park have totally outperformed expectations, as has the Bathgate to Edinburgh line, and as I am sure the Bathgate to Airdrie line will do. People will use the railways when they are available and of good quality.

Nobody has mentioned this week's announcement about the Invernet services, for which existing track will be used to allow commuters to go between Inverness and Kingussie, Aviemore and Carrbridge. It is crucial that the far north line is also involved—that is a hugely significant step for people in the very small rural communities in mid-Sutherland. We need more such initiatives.

When we consider the significant expansion of rail services, it is crucial to consider expanding the rail network. If I agree with one point that SNP members have made, it is the idea of examining pinchpoints at which the relatively minor step of doubling track in key areas could hugely improve service reliability. By not sorting out the situation involving slower freight trains that are not time critical and commuter services that are hugely time critical, we can create problems in the rail network. In addition to new railway lines, I would like close work to be done on the pinchpoints around the network.

As our lifestyles have changed, the world has shrunk and we are all prepared to commute much longer distances. That means that a more flexible and integrated railway network is needed that pulls in not just cars, but buses. We could usefully consider that as part of the process of letting people use the railway network.

We have a huge opportunity. I hope that the minister will accept my invitation to speak a bit more about Haymarket and Waverley stations. We should continue the debate and consider how to expand use of the railway network and make the most of the renaissance that I truly believe is happening on it.

15:52

Mr Andrew Arbuckle (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD): Last Friday, I attended a briefing—it is intended that such briefings will occur regularly—on progress on reopening the Stirling-Alloa-Kincardine line. It was not only useful to hear information about progress on that exciting development, but instructive to hear about the demands that are made on new projects.

When the rail companies blasted through the countryside almost 200 years ago, they might have needed acts of Parliament and armies of navvies, but they definitely did not have environmental assessment officers, health and safety officers or local community relations representatives. Such people are now part and parcel of new rail developments. Some people, such as Bruce Crawford, may grumble and worry that that adds to projects' costs, but the bottom line is that there is more consideration given to, and community planning of, such developments.

Unfortunately, the presence of such people and the increased democracy of the 21st century lead to long timescales for completion of new projects. Much to the frustration of all who are involved, several major rail projects are behind schedule, often because of land-purchase difficulties. Typical of those is the situation in Kirkcaldy, where a car-park extension has been delayed until spring next year. Another example is the multimillion-pound improvements to Markinch station, which have dragged on well beyond the original target dates. Those are two of the many significant developments that are regenerating old facilities.

It is accepted in many such projects that Scotland has a reduced rail network and that to cope with increased demand and maximise rail traffic, links must be made with other forms of transport, whether bus, car or whatever. As Sarah Boyack said, park-and-ride schemes are extremely—almost embarrassingly—popular.

Sarah Boyack also referred to the fact that after a century of neglect and decay, investment is going into the Scottish rail network system to help to meet the transport needs of the 21st century. The Scottish Executive is showing the way with its financial commitment to rail transport. I reckon that support for rail transport is now more than £500 million annually in Scotland. Seldom—if ever—has such a vast sum of money been invested in improving rail transport.

However, there is a problem with all that development, which is that it raises expectations and causes demands for more. Most members who have spoken have had a dash of parochialism in their speeches; I will add some to my speech by saying that I would have joined the Minister for Transport and Telecommunications on his rail journey this morning, but the train from Perth to Edinburgh does not stop in my local town of Newburgh. That is not surprising: 40 years have passed since the last train stopped there. The railway line runs through the town and passengers can see the old station as they pass through it, but unless there is an act of civil disobedience and somebody—perhaps even an MSP—presses the emergency stop button, no trains may stop and the people of Newburgh are left with nothing more than the occasional blast of a horn from the train.

Bruce Crawford: Does Andrew Arbuckle accept that most of the train stations in this country were built to serve the time of the horse and cart and that it is time we had a good old examination of where the stations are, whom they serve and how we can make the network better? We might need new stations in places that would surprise people.

Mr Arbuckle: That is true. However, at the moment, I am concentrating on towns and communities that have working railway lines running through them but where trains do not stop,

much to the annoyance of the local population. People want trains to stop in their towns not for the pride of having a station, but so that they can get the train to work and leave the car at home. That would allow them to cease worrying about the cost of fuel for their cars and to sit back and relax at either end of their working day.

Murdo Fraser said that the route from Fife to Edinburgh goes round the Fife circle line, but it does not: it goes through Newburgh and Ladybank rather than round the circle. He also mentioned the station in Blackford. Another place that is in the same situation as Blackford and Newburgh is Bridge of Earn, whose station closed years ago. Now, everyone who lives there commutes. There is an opportunity to increase our park-and-ride provision to enable the residents of such towns to get to their places of work.

Every member who has spoken today has said that more and more people want to let the train take the strain. Although the Scottish Executive is getting the message, there is a great deal of catching up to do and a great deal of cash is required to get us to where we want to be. Needless to say, we want to go there by train.

15:58

Mark Ballard (Lothians) (Green): The Greens welcome the debate and, in particular, the Executive's plans for a transport strategy for Scotland. We need such an holistic vision of transport in Scotland. I hope that the debate will be followed by a debate on buses and a bus strategy for Scotland. If we are serious about public transport improvements, we must acknowledge that buses are just as important as trains.

We should examine the key issues for transport in Scotland, which include how to tackle excessive and inappropriate use of cars, use of road freight and air travel. Rail is central to our meeting those three key challenges, which are vital to our meeting long-term social, environmental and economic needs. That is why I welcome the transfer of powers to the Scottish Executive in the Railways Act 2005. We need rail to be the mainstay of commuter travel. We need speedy and reliable rail alternatives between Scotland's major population centres so that no-one chooses to use a car on those routine journeys. However, last year, people in Scotland took an average of only 13 rail journeys each compared to 17.5 across the United Kingdom. There is much more to be done if we are to make rail the central means of getting around.

We need rail freight to replace road freight. Currently, only 3.8 per cent of the total volume of freight in Scotland is transported by rail. There is

much that we can do to improve that in dealing with the competition between passengers and freight for line access, tighter integration between rail and local road haulage, improving gauges—

Helen Eadie (Dunfermline East) (Lab): Will the member give way?

Mark Ballard: I am sorry, but I must stick to my six minutes.

I agree with Fergus Ewing that too many people fly to London. Sixty per cent of flights that leave Edinburgh airport head to London. Air passenger journeys have doubled in the past decade, but rail travel is up by only 17 per cent. There is no logical reason why a person should fly from Edinburgh or Glasgow to London. High-speed rail alternatives are needed so that nobody has to make a choice. International flights are an entirely different matter, but why do so many people fly from Edinburgh and Glasgow to London and back? Flights are increasingly becoming a part of our climate problem and they need to be tackled.

What should be done? First of all, spending should be increased. Sarah Boyack spoke about the spending increases, which are welcome. Money at the levels that are spent in Germany, Italy and France is now being spent on our public transport system, but those countries did not suffer from the years of neglect that many members have mentioned. If we are going to close the gap, we must do more than simply match our European competitors' spending—we must make up the deficit.

I also agree with Fergus Ewing that priority should be given to dealing with pinchpoints and upgrading parts of our network as opposed to continually emphasising large and complicated high-profile projects. Unlike Fergus Ewing, however, I have a target—the Edinburgh airport rail link is excessively expensive for what it will deliver. The current bus link is a public transport alternative and we are looking for a new light rail public transport alternative that will take people to Edinburgh airport—I refer to the Edinburgh tram project. Those should be the priorities.

Iain Smith (North East Fife) (LD): Does Mark Ballard accept that the rail link to the airport will provide services for people who do not come from Edinburgh as well as for people who do, and that such a link is not yet provided by any form of public transport?

Mark Ballard: The issue is our priorities and how people can get around Scotland. There are cheaper alternatives if we are looking for a rail link to Edinburgh airport. There could be a station near Turnhouse on the Fife line or integration with the proposed trams to the Edinburgh Park station and the station at the Gyle. That is the way forward.

Whatever arguments there might be between Andrew Arbuckle and Murdo Fraser over the Edinburgh to Perth route, the reality is that the time that it takes to get from Edinburgh to Perth has lengthened in the past 100 years. In that context, how will we be able to persuade people to get back on to trains?

There are many innovative ideas that we could use; for example, we should learn from our European competitors and consider integrated ticketing systems, such as the time-limited *strippenkaart* system in the Netherlands. One ticket allows people to purchase access to rail, buses and ferries. A more flexible ticketing system is the way forward.

Tighter integration of all forms of public transport is needed. Buses must arrive on time for trains and trains must depart and arrive punctually. We can match our European competitors in that way. If we are to have a rail system that is the envy of Europe, we must learn from Europe and invest as other European countries do. Those would be the first steps in building a sustainable public transport system for Scotland.

16:04

Alasdair Morgan (South of Scotland) (SNP): I speak as an unashamed rail enthusiast, even if I did not collect engine numbers as a boy. Indeed, there was not much point in doing so because only two steam engines ever came to Aberfeldy.

I am prompted to make a small point about disused or closed railway lines because I read the other day that the Goldielea viaduct on the old line from Dumfries to Stranraer—which has long since been lifted and closed—is to be restored for a 50-year life. The viaduct is clearly an important architectural monument and an important part of our heritage. Restoration will cost a considerable sum, which I presume will not be paid by Railtrack, but by BRB (Residuary) Ltd, or another body.

The maintenance of a viaduct that does not carry a track, and presumably never will again, contrasts with the important issue of disused *in situ* lines. One of the weak points in the objections to the reopening of the Stirling-Alloa-Kincardine line was to do with the fact that there is always a fair chance that a railway line at the bottom of somebody's garden will eventually have a train using it. On the other hand, I had some sympathy with the objectors, although in some places the railway line was so overgrown that only Tarzan, lord of the jungle, could have got along it.

To run modern freight services often requires that old freight lines be upgraded, but restoration and reconstruction of, and planning for, a line that has not been maintained for many years is—although the line is still there—a problem. Other

lines in Scotland are in that situation. There is a freight line from Dumfries out towards Maxwelltown and there is a disused line to Charlestown leading off the Kincardine to Dunfermline line. It is hardly possible to see the rails on that line because of vegetation. There is also a line going to Stranraer town station, which is the freight terminal. I do not know what the current condition of the Leven line is. The point is that many lines exist that are disused, but which could be used in the future. As far as I can see, there is no strategy to keep them under any sort of maintenance, which would make them easier to use should their time ever come. Such maintenance ought to be something that we want to do.

Many of the lines that I mentioned were freight lines; that takes me on to freight and a point that John Swinney made. I will break with the consensus of joy about what is happening at the moment because the level of freight carryings by rail in Scotland is very disappointing. We recovered overall from the bleak years of the early 1990s, but that increase has stalled and the level of use has even fallen, according to the latest available figures. If we remove minerals—mostly coal—from the total, the figures for other categories of freight are very poor indeed: they are lower than they were 10 years ago. I am not knocking coal, which is an ideal good to move on rail, but I suspect that in the medium term the volume of coal that is transported by rail may well decline, especially if John Home Robertson gets his way and builds a few more nuclear power plants.

I know that the Executive is committed to there being more freight on rail. It is clear, however, that the measures that are currently in place to encourage that are not working well enough. If they were, the total amount of non-coal freight would not have decreased over the past 10 years. I would be interested to know what the minister and his advisers think we can do to remedy that situation. The matter is particularly important because we know that the biggest contribution to reducing carbon dioxide would be to move freight journeys from road to rail. That would have a much bigger effect than moving passengers from road to rail.

I wish to make the case for ensuring that we allow for freight when mainline facilities are built or improved because I am concerned that freight is always seen as a Cinderella service. Improvements are often driven by MSPs, whose constituents' interaction with the railway is, by and large, as passengers. Very few of them are likely to be freight consigners. I suspect that the responses to the consultation will be along the same lines, which means that they will be in favour of passenger transport.

Sarah Boyack: Will the member take an intervention?

Alasdair Morgan: I am sorry—I am really short of time.

I am worried that, because the Executive's closest direct relationship is with ScotRail—a much more direct relationship than it has with the freight operators—there is a potential built-in bias for passenger services as opposed to freight services.

I have a further point about express services versus stopping passenger trains. As usual, every member wants their local Brigadoon-in-the-mist station to be reopened. I am not necessarily against such calls but, if we are going to do all that, we must ensure that the appropriate infrastructure and investment are put in place. That might include better signalling, new loops or whatever to allow the intercity express routes to carry on at least at their current level of service. City-to-city links compete on journey times and too many of their services are already on the margin of losing the battle with the car for passengers. I would hate it were that to happen.

I conclude with a plea for continuity of investment. Over many years under the Conservatives and, it has to be said, under the dead hand of the Treasury under whatever party has been in power, rail investment has been intermittent. The result has been deteriorating infrastructure and a decline in the number of UK manufacturers that can provide locomotives and rolling stock. Whatever level of investment we get—rail investment is a very good long-term investment—must be maintained.

16:10

Christine May (Central Fife) (Lab): As other members have done, I welcome the transfer of rail powers to the Scottish Executive, because it creates a new opportunity for us to revitalise rail services and to consider the infrastructure needs in Scotland.

We have heard from many members about the welcome investment that has gone in and which will be going into a number of major projects in the next few years. We have heard about the general welcome growth in passenger traffic, the extra rolling stock, longer platforms and grants for new freight facilities, which enable new freight flows to be established.

I support Alasdair Morgan's closing remarks: when I spoke to people at the annual meeting of the Minerals Engineering Society, I found that movement of aggregates and coal, the time slots that are available for that and the reliability of the rolling stock are major concerns to it. They should

be major concerns for all of us who seek to increase the amount of goods carried by rail. There is a difficulty in that if we put on more passenger trains and increase the length of trains, we will increase journey times and restrict our ability to put freight on lines. The minister might want to address that in his closing remarks.

Despite claims to the contrary, Scotland has a much better record in delivering rail schemes than is the case south of the border. TRANSform Scotland, which I imagine has briefed every single one of us, has noted a number of things that it would like the Executive to do. Those include small-scale, high-value, priority projects that improve journey times, which we are doing; introduction of local schemes such as Aberdeen and Inverness commuter schemes, which we are doing; work on nationally important projects such as Waverley station, which we are doing; and consideration of longer-term priorities to improve services and make it easier to reach destinations quickly.

However, I have a problem for the minister—he was thinking that my speech was too good to be true—which has been highlighted by other members. Many people are frustrated by the delays that are caused by the bureaucracy of Network Rail. Difficulties and delays have beset Markinch transport interchange in my constituency, which Andrew Arbuckle mentioned, but it is now on track and on time. It is a major plank in building the case for reopening the Leven line, because that is where we are going to build passenger demand. There have also been delays in the installation of a small railhead on the mothballed Thornton to Methil line. That would allow coal to be taken out, which Fife Council and the operator want and which would be paid for by the operator. I will pass to the minister five pages from the opencast operator detailing the work that it has done to try to get the project carried out.

Lawyers in London are debating the finer points of the right-to-roam legislation and its impact on level crossings, while we sit in goggle-eyed disbelief that something that was delivered in Cumnock in three months cannot be delivered in Fife in three years. I hope that the minister will take up the suggestion from Fergus Ewing and others to have a good look at how to make Network Rail accountable to the Executive.

We also have funding available for a car parking project. We hear frequently that there has not been enough car parking in Dunfermline since 1994-95. However, because of legal difficulties with Network Rail, the project has still not been delivered. Andrew Arbuckle also mentioned Kirkcaldy.

We are considering initiatives, such as a rail halt for which the private sector will pay, which will

trigger Network Rail's legal obligation to maintain the Leven line and which will, in turn, help us to justify the case for reopening the line and reduce the eventual cost to the public purse. It will also provide somewhere for the already lengthened Fife circle and other east-coast trains to be parked during off-peak periods. We in Fife will help the Executive in many ways.

What I have said supports the contention that was made last week that transport improvements, not just in Fife but in other parts of the country, are important for the economic well-being of Scotland. We are not just talking about moving goods and people in Fife; we are talking about the ability of the economy of Scotland from Aberdeen down to south of Edinburgh to operate appropriately in the 21st century. That includes trains that run faster, buses that link with trains, and it includes the new Forth road bridge, which we debated at great length last week. I welcome the minister's assurance that he will respond to Parliament when more information on the road bridge is available. I look forward to hearing that.

As I said last week, without proper integrated transport planning, the economy of Scotland will not grow and thrive as we all want and we will not be able to use the skills, the land and the abilities of our people to maximum effect. We will not have the sort of Scotland that I am glad to hear that we all want to see.

16:15

Tommy Sheridan (Glasgow) (SSP): I want to raise two specific points to which I would like the minister to reply in his summing up. The first relates to indemnification. I hope that the minister is willing to apologise for misleading Parliament; it may not have been deliberate. When I asked in a parliamentary question how much has been spent over the past three years on indemnifying ScotRail in connection with industrial disputes, I was told that the information was "commercially sensitive" and, therefore, could not be released. However, at Westminster the figures were made freely available; therefore, we know that, over the past two years, the Government has paid £23 million to private companies that are involved in industrial disputes to compensate them for loss of revenue and that ScotRail has received £12.65 million in relation to that policy of indemnification.

I know whose side I am on in industrial disputes, although I appreciate that the minister does not share that commitment. I am always on the side of the trade unions. The minister may not like that, but it is a fact of life. He, however—[*Interruption.*] I am sorry. Does the minister want to intervene?

Tavish Scott *indicated disagreement.*

Tommy Sheridan: I am sorry, but the minister is sitting there talking away as if he wants to intervene but is unable to.

The minister is supposed to be neutral in industrial disputes—that is what we keep getting told. Yet, he has decided to accept lock, stock and barrel the Strategic Rail Authority's commitment. He accepted it last October, despite telling me in various committees that he had not yet made a decision. It is now clear that he made the decision last October to accept the SRA's continuation of indemnification for companies that are involved in disputes. That is important not just because of the public money that is involved, but because there is no incentive for companies to resolve industrial disputes—indeed, there is an incentive for them to be bad employers, because they can provoke industrial disputes in the knowledge that the Scottish Executive will compensate them for any lost revenue. That is a bad decision by the minister. I hope that he will accept that in his summing up.

I also ask the minister, in his summing up, to give a cast-iron guarantee to workers who are currently employed by Strathclyde Passenger Transport that, in the case of any transfer from SPT to the Scottish Executive, there will be continuity of employment conditions, including wages and pension rights, and that longer contracts will be offered—not just 12-month contracts—to ensure that people who have given a lifetime's commitment to transport services in the west of Scotland will not suffer financially from their transfer, under the new powers, to the Scottish Executive.

This is supposed to be a strategic debate. Christine May made some interesting points about the need to sort out the problems that we have with bureaucracy, delays and Network Rail and she appealed to the minister to make Network Rail accountable to the Scottish Executive.

According to the Ernst & Young report into the railway industry in Scotland, the industry cost £519 million to run in 2004-05. That included £119 million on rail maintenance and £120 million on operating costs including staff expenditure. Of that £519 million, £459 million of it came from the public in the form of direct public grant. Some £53 million of it came from passengers in the form of fares. In other words, 90 per cent of the money to run the rail industry in Scotland in 2004-05 came from the public in one form or another, but we do not own or control the industry that we pay for. Perhaps it would make sense to cut through the bureaucratic delays. When it comes to making bodies accountable, perhaps it would make sense to have them owned and democratically controlled by the people who work in and use the industry.

That is why the idea of a publicly owned rail network is so important.

When Mr Armit of Network Rail told the Local Government and Transport Committee earlier this year why Network Rail had brought rail maintenance in house, he admitted that when the rail industry was privately controlled, for every pound that was committed to rail maintenance, only 30p of it was spent on the rail. The other 70p went to contractors, subcontractors, consultants and agents.

Is it not about time that we took the whole operation in house—not just maintenance, but renewals and running the industry as well as the train operating companies? That would make strategic sense and allow us to plan and implement our vision for a high-class network that is safely run for the benefit of passengers and people who work in the industry, and not for profits and dividends.

16:22

Mike Rumbles (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD): I am pleased to participate in the debate. As we have heard, a number of rail improvements are taking place throughout Scotland and I take this opportunity to highlight just one of them.

Laurencekirk station was closed to passenger traffic by the Beeching cuts in 1968. To judge from his earlier comments, Murdo Fraser has been badly briefed and must be completely unaware that the long-standing campaign to reopen the station goes back to the time when our Deputy First Minister, Nicol Stephen, was the member of Parliament for Kincardine and Deeside. That was long before some people even appeared on the scene. Nicol Stephen has supported that campaign fully and constructively since that time.

Murdo Fraser: Would Mr Rumbles like to confirm that the person who started the campaign for Laurencekirk station was Alick Buchanan-Smith when he was the Conservative MP for that constituency?

Mike Rumbles: I know that it was certainly not David Davidson.

I am delighted to tell the chamber that moves to reopen the station are gaining pace. The Scottish transport appraisal guidelines study that was carried out last year found that there was a robust and positive business case for reopening the station. Of course, every infrastructure project that requires Government funding support must, quite rightly, be subject to the STAG process. I say to Andrew Arbuckle that although I support the reopening of his local station, there is a long queue. We must ensure that the reopening of

stations provides value for money. Earlier this year, Aberdeenshire Council approved the next stage of the process, which is a detailed engineering study to firm up the detailed engineering requirements and give robust cost estimates for the proposal.

The proposal to reopen Laurencekirk station fits in very well with Scottish Executive and NESTRANS policies to deliver a balanced and integrated transport system. We need to get many of the commuters who travel north to Aberdeen and south to Dundee off the roads. A renewed and reopened station at Laurencekirk will renew the whole of the Mearns. Laurencekirk is doing well in anticipation of the opening of the railway station. The plan is to reopen a two-platform station, refurbish the former station building and provide a 50-space car park, and it is estimated to cost about £3.2 million.

We now await the detailed engineering study's conclusions, which are imminent and will form the basis of a bid for Scottish Executive funding to complete the project. Aberdeenshire Council has informed me that if the engineering case is proved—as I am positive it will be—and if the bid for funding is successful, the work will take four to six months to complete and the station could be open by the start of 2007.

I listened to the minister's reply to my intervention, but I tell him that we must not confuse the issue of reopening Laurencekirk station with concerns about interfering with intercity traffic. No one expects every train to stop at the station.

I hope that, given the robust business case and STAG appraisal and subject to a favourable engineering report, the minister will confirm when he winds up that the Executive will continue to support this important project for my constituents in the Mearns and for rail travellers throughout the north-east.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Murray Tosh): As Mr Rumbles has finished two minutes early, I am prepared to give those two minutes to Iain Smith.

16:26

Iain Smith (North East Fife) (LD): Thank you, Presiding Officer. That is very generous indeed.

I thank the minister for accompanying us this morning on what is known locally as the late-running 07:26 from Ladybank to Edinburgh, as it gave him an opportunity to see for himself some of the problems that commuters face on the Fife network.

I accept that a great deal of investment has been made in the rail network and I welcome the

new longer rolling stock, which has made a big difference to overcrowding. However, since it took over the franchise, First ScotRail has failed to deliver significant improvements in reliability and journey times on the Fife service. I realise that the fault is not all First ScotRail's; many of the problems centre on the infrastructure, which comes within Network Rail's ambit. As a result, I welcome the Executive's new powers, which might allow it to give more direction to Network Rail.

Will the minister consider asking First ScotRail and Network Rail to carry out a study to identify the main causes of the various delays on the Fife line and to find out the investment that will be required to reduce those delays significantly? Signalling will have to be improved; passing loops might be required; and the pinchpoints at Waverley station and the Forth bridge will have to be addressed. If we spend a relatively small amount of money in Fife, the service's quality and reliability will improve significantly and many of the delays will be cut out.

Very few members mentioned the consultation document on rail priorities, which I welcome. I realise that all of us would like trains that stop at our own station, do not stop anywhere apart from our destination and do not get delayed in the middle of the journey. However, we need to strike a balance between fast express trains and the local services that are so important to commuters. That will require some investment in better signalling and more passing points on the line.

16:28

Dr Sylvia Jackson (Stirling) (Lab): After the speeches that we have heard this afternoon, no one can say that devolution does not work. Members around the chamber have been very constructive about the transfer of powers to the Scottish Parliament.

On 1 April 2006, Scottish ministers will assume responsibility for the majority of rail functions in Scotland. Indeed, they have been directly managing the First ScotRail franchise since October 2005. Moreover, in April 2006, the Scottish Executive will take on the new role of funding all Scottish rail infrastructure in Scotland and, via the Office of Rail Regulation, will specify the network outputs that Network Rail will be tasked with delivering in Scotland.

The Local Government and Transport Committee has been interested in pursuing greater accountability and transparency in Network Rail, and that very point was made this afternoon by Bruce Crawford, Christine May and Tommy Sheridan. Tommy Sheridan mentioned that effectiveness and efficiency could be improved by bringing certain Network Rail

functions in house. Bringing the powers for train and rail infrastructure together will create a simpler industry, leading to greater co-ordination and hence greater efficiency. Christine May talked about integration and the possibility of a more co-ordinated approach in relation to other areas of public transport. SPT has also been referred to in relation to transfer of powers. I have been approached by constituents about that issue, and it would be informative if the minister could tell us what progress is being made on that.

Many MSPs have spoken about the structures that are being put in place for the transport agency and the transport overview. I would like to say a little about the arrangements at regional level and the regional transport partnerships. Fergus Ewing and other members of the Local Government and Transport Committee know that we were keen to get guidance for those partnerships so that we would know more about what would be involved, and I am glad that we have recently received the draft guidance. One important task for the partnerships will obviously be the link between local authorities, which will have their own transport plans. The dovetailing of those plans within the regional transport partnerships will be one of the early tasks that must be done.

We have talked about constraints and about how we accommodate intercity express links on the same tracks as our commuter services and our freight, as will happen through Stirling with the new Stirling-Alloa-Kincardine line.

Mike Rumbles: It can be done.

Dr Jackson: It can be done. Indeed, First ScotRail has been most constructive in holding discussions through the Rail Passengers Council with the public and with MSPs and asking about the most appropriate way to run express services and more local commuter routes. We have gone some way towards getting that on the Stirling to Edinburgh line.

Fergus Ewing also mentioned reliability. Through our discussions with First ScotRail, we have managed to achieve a more reliable service between Dunblane and Edinburgh. Maybe I should cross my fingers in case it becomes less reliable this evening, but I certainly feel that we are getting there and that First ScotRail has been most constructive.

There are new developments. Sarah Boyack and Bristow Muldoon mentioned the Waverley station development, and we have heard many times in the chamber about the Borders railway. In my area, there is the Stirling-Alloa-Kincardine line. I know that Karen Whitefield has long campaigned for the Airdrie to Bathgate line, and many of us will be affected by the much-needed links with Edinburgh and Glasgow airports.

Only last week, I and many other MSPs in my area attended an updating meeting, which Andrew Arbuckle has already mentioned, on the Stirling-Alloa-Kincardine railway. Additional investment of £27.6 million is needed to ensure that construction work can take place, but it certainly seems to be on track, if members will excuse the pun. The other interesting thing that we learned is that the old rail will be recycled, possibly for use by historic steam organisations.

I would like to say a little about something that has not been mentioned much today but which has been mentioned in the Local Government and Transport Committee, particularly by Paul Martin—disability. We have spent a lot of time thinking about social inclusion and how we should best be providing for people with visual impairment and for deafblind and deaf people. There are a number of issues to consider, as I know from talking to my local group in Stirling, such as how gates can be better manned.

Tommy Sheridan: Will Sylvia Jackson take an intervention?

Dr Jackson: Yes.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I cannot allow an intervention. You have had six minutes, Dr Jackson, and you must draw your remarks to a conclusion.

Dr Jackson: Right. I just want to say that those issues are very live issues indeed.

In conclusion, I want to say that sustainability is important and that I would like the minister to say what progress—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Quickly.

Dr Jackson:—is being made on the noise and freight issues in relation to Crianlarich. I think that—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Close now.

Dr Jackson: I am just saying—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I must insist that you close now.

16:35

Derek Brownlee (South of Scotland) (Con): I make it clear that we support the devolution of rail powers to the Scottish Parliament. When it is sensible and in the best interests of the people of Scotland that the Parliament takes on additional powers, we should not be afraid to argue for that.

Even now that the powers have been devolved, rail is an area in which the wider issue arises of our links to England and, in particular, London, which many members have mentioned. The west coast and east coast main lines are crucial not

only to business and to people who go to London but to people who go to the key centres of population in the midlands. It is important to realise that if we are going to limit the growth of air transport—the Greens made a valid point about the environmental consequences of that—we need to have an effective transport system that connects Edinburgh, Glasgow and points further north with the midlands and with London.

We would do a disservice to the rail industry if we gave the impression that rail should be viewed in a Scotland-only context, even now that it is devolved. It would also be a disservice if we allowed the Department for Transport in London to think that that was the case. We cannot always rely on the Secretary of State for Transport being a Scottish member of Parliament—perhaps we cannot always rely on the Secretary of State for Transport full stop, but that is another matter.

Our view is that politicians should make the policy decisions and set the objectives for transport policy but that they should not be involved in the day-to-day operational management of the railways. That is a key point. The Executive must tread a fine line between being specific enough to guarantee a service that is acceptable to the public and not being overly prescriptive and thereby constraining the way in which rail services can be provided.

All of us who travel on the services of the different operators around Scotland will see subtle differences between them; it would be helpful if we could allow the operators a greater degree of innovation. The Executive and the minister must resist the desire to meddle. I do not see the minister as the fat controller and I am not sure whether he would have the abilities either.

Tavish Scott: That is decent of the member.

Derek Brownlee: I make the comment in the spirit of consensus.

A number of improvements could, of course, be carried out on the rail system in Scotland. The upgrade of Waverley station is one of the most important, as it seems to be crucial for future expansion. There has been a significant increase in the number of rail passengers over the past decade, since privatisation. If that trend is to continue, the Waverley station upgrade is crucial.

We must encourage investment in the railways. It is important that we get investment from the private sector as well as from the public sector, because we realise that, even with this Executive, public spending has to be limited. However, if private investment is to be encouraged, we must ensure that private investors have confidence in the system. The figures for the current franchise show that the amount of capital investment that is being contributed by First ScotRail is very small.

That is symbolic of the fact that we need to increase the amount of private investment in the rail industry in Scotland. However, from the perspective of the private sector, why would it invest significant amounts of capital when the franchise period is so short and memories of what happened to Railtrack are fresh? The Executive and the UK Government must bear those points in mind.

Of course, everyone has their own pet local project. I could not possibly let a debate on rail pass without mentioning the importance of the Waverley line to the Borders and to Midlothian. I am grateful to the minister for his assurances on the robustness of the estimates for the cost of construction for that project. Cost control is essential for the delivery of all new rail projects throughout Scotland and we must ensure that we get a grip on that.

Bruce Crawford raised an interesting point about the siting of stations. That comes back to the strategic element of rail policy, which has perhaps been lacking in the past. We ought to be mindful of the comments that were made on the matter.

There has been a good consensual spirit today, although there have been one or two barbs about privatisation. Privatisation certainly increased the number of users of the railway and brought significant investment into it. We need to learn from that. I hope that the minister does not heed Mr Sheridan's call for the renationalisation of everything that is connected with the railways. I think that I am not pushing the minister too far in saying that—indeed, I suspect that I am pushing at an open door.

The past decade has brought significant growth in the use of rail. We have to welcome that and see what we can do to encourage it. We welcome the consultation and hope that it stimulates debate right across Scotland. However, if we are to see a rising trend in the use of rail, the Executive needs to operate at a strategic level and not get itself tied up in the minutiae. We have to ensure that the people who are operating the rail services in Scotland are allowed to innovate in order to develop services and respond to the needs of the travelling public.

16:40

Brian Adam (Aberdeen North) (SNP): We should be able to rely on our new Minister for Transport and Telecommunications to be objective about rail, given that he is one of the few members who does not have a constituency interest in the subject. Many members have rightly spoken about constituency interests. Some members made interesting and challenging contributions to the debate. Indeed, in addition to the constituency

interest, the anorak interest was represented when my colleague Mr Morgan felt it necessary to deny that he had taken down the numbers of trains during his youth in Aberfeldy.

The debate was also interesting in the sense that some constructive suggestions were made to the minister. I hope that the debate will continue in that spirit as it draws to its conclusion. However, I was disappointed that some members felt the need to make party-political points. I was particularly disappointed with Murdo Fraser's efforts in that regard, given that he set out by denying that he would get involved in any kind of politicking. I am glad that he says that he is giving up politics, but in his case—and to paraphrase his friend, or former friend and erstwhile colleague, Brian Monteith—one can perhaps take the boy out of politics, but one cannot take the politics out of the boy.

I share Mr Rumbles's interest in the reopening of Laurencekirk station. I was glad to join him in calling for that and I am delighted that we are making some progress. However, that has been largely in the form of a commitment for the future; we have not had much at the delivery end, and I look forward to the delivery.

Sarah Boyack rightly referred to a number of projects that are now beyond the stage of the pie-in-the-sky wish list, but we have not seen their delivery on the ground yet.

Some members interpreted Mr Ewing's contribution in a way that was not intended. It is true to say that we now have a substantial programme of capital projects in rail and related activities, but it dwarfs the Executive's commitment to improve pinchpoints, and we need to redress that balance.

Christine May: Does the member accept that the delivery on the ground of many of the smaller projects was mentioned in the debate? I hope that he will join me in welcoming that. The major capital projects take much longer to deliver and it is those projects that need to be speeded up. I hope that the member will join me in urging the minister to do that.

Brian Adam: Absolutely. I plan to address that subject later in my speech. A range of projects are almost at the point of delivery. Members highlighted a number of them, in particular the crossrail projects for Edinburgh and Aberdeen. Indeed, in referring to the reopening of Laurencekirk station, we need also to highlight the crossrail project for Aberdeen. Instead of seeing further studies or hearing about commitments, I look forward to seeing the delivery of that project. Perhaps the minister will refer to it.

The strategic decisions that must be made are not always easy. My colleague Mr Morgan rightly

spoke about the competition between freight and passenger rail. Freight has not been a major focus in the debate. Despite the introduction of the freight facilities grant, progress on delivering the change from road to rail is in doubt.

Sarah Boyack: This is meant to be a constructive intervention. It strikes me that we have been good at putting new money into individual rail freight projects at the ends of lines, but does Mr Adam agree that the minister and his officials could consider a bit more strategically the future pinchpoints for rail freight?

Brian Adam: I agree. The freight facilities grant is worthwhile, but we need a review of why we have not had the major shift that we need of freight from roads on to rail—or, indeed, on to sea transport, although there have been recent changes in that direction.

There is also competition between local and national interests. I am glad that my colleague from the north-east, Mr Rumbles, made the point that there does not have to be an either-or choice. If we are careful in our planning, we can deliver both interests.

The method of traction has not been mentioned so far. The major intercity services on the east coast main line are currently delivered by diesel traction. When the diesels are required south of the border, there is a significant loss of service. That has happened regularly over the past few years. Electrification of the east coast main line will need to be addressed at some point. Some members referred to electrification in relation to developments that will perhaps happen in the central belt. The debate is about whether we should consider committing to one form of traction for the future. Doing that would help to improve the infrastructure on the east coast main line, in which I have a significant constituency interest.

One of our Green colleagues made a small reference to conflicts between road and rail. All I say in response is that the argument of two rails good, four wheels bad is not sustainable. For example, when the Edinburgh to Glasgow rail line was off recently, if we had not had the M8 and other routes, we would have had serious problems—although the situation is serious enough as it is.

We must take a strategic view and address the competing issues. On behalf of the Scottish National Party, I make a commitment that we will participate in the consultation exercise. Members have made good points about freight, pinchpoints and, indeed, the preservation of existing but unused rail routes. If we are to have a progressive future for rail, as I hope we will have, I hope that the minister will take those points on board, not just in his winding-up speech but in the decisions

that he will have to make on our behalf in the near future.

16:47

Tavish Scott: Mr Adam was right to say that I have no constituency interest in rail, unlike in some other transport projects. However, I say at the outset that one of my predecessors, in representative terms, went down to the House of Commons fees office—I hardly dare raise the issue of expenses—and was given a travel sheet to indicate what mode of transport he would use and where his nearest transport points were. When asked what his nearest railway station was, he replied, “Bergen.” Therefore, I have an interest in rail matters, albeit that they are sometimes in different countries.

The debate has been a thoughtful one. I apologise for picking out just two members, but I would particularly like to thank Sarah Boyack and Alasdair Morgan for raising the important judgment calls that must be made in balancing the particular challenges of freight and rail commuters.

I start by acknowledging what Fergus Ewing said at the outset. He gave a genuinely brave analysis of the position, and I hope that he does not suffer that terrible crime in politics of being selectively quoted thereafter. I certainly take the point that he made. I also take seriously Derek Brownlee’s point about meddling. I can assure him that this is not a minister who wants to meddle in the system at all, which is why we have set up the transport agency. That is what it is there to do and that is why it will have operational responsibility. All I say to Derek Brownlee is that he should ensure that David Davidson understands that point, because he did not show that he did in his opening remarks. Operational responsibility is very much at the core of the transport agency.

Having been told that it was not appropriate for a minister to meddle, I was then encouraged in many contributions to meddle hugely. Not least of those contributions was that of Mike Rumbles, who seemed to be getting into a bidding war with other colleagues on who should take personal responsibility for putting forward the aspirations of the community in Laurencekirk. I will watch that with interest.

Mr Duncan McNeil (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab): Will the minister take an intervention?

Tavish Scott: I really should not, but I will.

Mr McNeil: I missed my opportunity to bid earlier. Will the minister confirm the Executive’s continued support for the transport interchange at Gourock station? We had a recent meeting on the subject; will the minister tell me when he will be able to report on progress?

Tavish Scott: I knew I should not have taken an intervention but I take the member's point. I have discussed the issue with him and I assure him that progress is being made on the project. A specific point has arisen to do with the developer's contribution. We will have to consider what can be done there before the funding package can start to take the shape that we will need it to take for the project to happen.

Bristow Muldoon, Sarah Boyack and others talked about the strategic overview and the importance of Waverley. I will reflect on that and on a number of capital projects, and I will talk about why we are investing in those projects. The projects are not just simple solutions to pinchpoints; they are of strategic importance to Scotland, as Bristow and Sarah said. That is very much the case with Waverley.

I say to Sarah Boyack that I know that City of Edinburgh Council is considering a number of options for further development of Waverley station, and we are very much encouraging that. The objective is to improve transport efficiency and passenger access, and to upgrade passengers' rail and station experience. Edinburgh Waverley should be a flagship for the whole of Scotland. It is a fantastic building in its own right and we should make as much as we possibly can of it. My officials and officials at Network Rail are assisting the council with the project.

A number of colleagues have spoken about the Edinburgh airport rail link. That, too, should be a great project for Scotland not only for tourism but in providing the kind of transport experience that we Scots get in many other parts of Europe. I cannot agree with Mark Ballard that the link is just about Edinburgh. It is not; it is about the whole of Scotland. That is why it is such an important project for all members of the Parliament.

I take Karen Whitefield's points about stations on the Airdrie to Bathgate line. We are currently looking into that and I hope that we can make progress as quickly as possible. Karen and others spoke about how the line could help to alleviate congestion and reduce pollution. They made important points about the strategy behind our capital investments in rail systems.

Fergus Ewing: The minister mentions the Airdrie to Bathgate line. Will he comment on my offer that the SNP will be happy to help to fast-track the proposed transport and works act so that the Airdrie to Bathgate line is not delayed by the parliamentary committee process? That process is likely to add a year or two to the timescale.

Tavish Scott: I wanted to pick up on that point and am happy to do so now—especially as the Minister for Parliamentary Business is sitting to my left. We would be very happy to work with the SNP

to make the parliamentary process better. I am sure that we can do that positively.

A number of colleagues have spoken about car parks, again in the context of reducing pollution and congestion. Christine May and many others made strong arguments for creating more car parking spaces at stations throughout the network, to encourage more people to use rail. I am determined that we should find solutions to those challenges.

Alasdair Morgan spoke about freight, as did John Swinney and Murdo Fraser. Murdo spoke about Highland Spring and I would be more than happy to find out about the particular circumstances there and to see whether we can help.

In answer to John Swinney earlier on, I think I mentioned the route utilisation exercise that is under way. However, Alasdair Morgan was right: we have to make fundamental choices about the balance between city-to-city links, stopper services that satisfy more local transport needs and freight services. Striking that balance will be fundamental in our consultation and in our route utilisation study. That study is about finding out about the capacity of the system and how it can be used.

Rob Gibson (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): Will the minister use the Scottish transport appraisal guidance approach to take on board the longer lines in the far north of Scotland, so that the next phase of rail development can include them in a way that this one has not?

Tavish Scott: That is part of the consultation exercise. It is also part of the strategic projects review, which will flow from the national transport strategy next year. I believe that it will provide opportunities to take forward exactly those points.

Unlike those who grandstand permanently from the back benches, Bristow Muldoon made a reasonable argument about staff and strikes. I will discuss the issue with the STUC. It cannot be in the interests of the franchise operator to cover industrial action, despite what Mr Sheridan may think. No one in the real world could believe that a franchise operator could subsequently win a franchise having allowed such a thing to happen, but then perhaps Mr Sheridan is not in the real world. How we take that forward is important, and we will do it in the right way and not in any other way.

I am happy to meet Sylvia Jackson to discuss Crianlarich. I know that she has been concerned about that issue for some time. We need to find a resolution to it as quickly as possible.

Many members raised the issue of costs as well as issues concerning Network Rail. I understand colleagues' concerns about projects that are not

proceeding as quickly as they should. The devolution of rail powers and responsibilities for Network Rail and the work that the transport agency will do give us a real focus on those issues. I know that many of the projects need a bit more effort—and a bit more communication with MSPs, apart from anything else—a little more efficiency and some quicker responses. I am determined to find ways to allow that to happen operationally through the agency.

I can tell Fergus Ewing that I met Janette Anderson for discussions. We dealt with how we can best fast-track parliamentary bills with the appropriate scrutiny. I discussed with her the funding mechanisms and the process that Parliament undertakes on scrutiny.

I hope that I have dealt with the Conservatives' arguments about bureaucracy. I cannot resist one bit of party politics, because this is a good quotation.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You have one minute left, minister.

Tavish Scott: It is a one-minute quotation.

Bristow Muldoon was right about the Conservatives. Rail was a privatisation too far, as the Tories have said themselves. I can do no better than David Willetts, a man with some knowledge of the Conservative party, who said:

"I would not defend the way we carried out the railway privatisation ... Rail privatisation was a classic example of taking a model that had worked for one industry and wrongly applying it to different circumstances."

We should all learn from that, and perhaps when the Tories are criticising us heavily they should reflect on Mr Willetts's words.

This has been a good, useful debate in which important and strategic issues on the future of Scotland's rail system have been raised and we have debated what we need to do. We have come a long way from the experience of the passenger who got off a train at a certain stop only to hear an announcement ring out over the station platform: "Will the passenger who has just left the train please rejoin it immediately, as this was an unscheduled stop?" We are doing much better than that.

In 2005-06, for the first time, we will be spending more than £1 billion—which will increase to £1.4 billion by 2007-08—of the Enterprise, Transport and Lifelong Learning Department's budget on meeting the commitments in the 10-year transport plan. Seventy per cent will be spent on public transport over the period of the long-term transport investment plan to fight congestion and to promote more sustainable transport.

It is right to invest in that way, and Parliament has an opportunity to be part of it.

London Olympics Bill

16:59

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Murray Tosh):

The next item of business is consideration of motion S2M-3506, in the name of Patricia Ferguson, on the London Olympics Bill, which is United Kingdom legislation.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees that those provisions in the London Olympics Bill which relate to the arrangements for staging Olympic football matches at Hampden and the prevention of ticket touting and which are within the legislative competence of the Scottish Parliament, including those which confer powers on the Scottish Ministers, should be considered by the UK Parliament.—[*Patricia Ferguson.*]

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

Decision Time

17:00

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Murray Tosh):

There are up to five questions to be put as a result of today's business. In relation to this morning's debate on energy policy, if the amendment in the name of Allan Wilson is agreed to, the amendments in the names of Alex Johnstone and Shiona Baird will fall.

The first question is, that amendment S2M-3543.4, in the name of Allan Wilson, which seeks to amend motion S2M-3543, in the name of Richard Lochhead, on energy policy, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

FOR

Arbuckle, Mr Andrew (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Richard (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Barrie, Scott (Dunfermline West) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Edinburgh Central) (Lab)
 Brankin, Rhona (Midlothian) (Lab)
 Brown, Robert (Glasgow) (LD)
 Butler, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab)
 Chisholm, Malcolm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab)
 Craigie, Cathie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab)
 Curran, Ms Margaret (Glasgow Baillieston) (Lab)
 Deacon, Susan (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (Lab)
 Ferguson, Patricia (Glasgow Maryhill) (Lab)
 Finnie, Ross (West of Scotland) (LD)
 Gillon, Karen (Clydesdale) (Lab)
 Glen, Marilyn (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Godman, Trish (West Renfrewshire) (Lab)
 Gordon, Mr Charlie (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab)
 Gorrie, Donald (Central Scotland) (LD)
 Henry, Hugh (Paisley South) (Lab)
 Home Robertson, John (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Hughes, Janis (Glasgow Rutherglen) (Lab)
 Jackson, Dr Sylvia (Stirling) (Lab)
 Jackson, Gordon (Glasgow Govan) (Lab)
 Jamieson, Margaret (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (Lab)
 Kerr, Mr Andy (East Kilbride) (Lab)
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab)
 Livingstone, Marilyn (Kirkcaldy) (Lab)
 Lyon, George (Argyll and Bute) (LD)
 Macdonald, Lewis (Aberdeen Central) (Lab)
 Macintosh, Mr Kenneth (Eastwood) (Lab)
 Maclean, Kate (Dundee West) (Lab)
 Macmillan, Maureen (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Martin, Paul (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab)
 May, Christine (Central Fife) (Lab)
 McAveety, Mr Frank (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab)
 McCabe, Mr Tom (Hamilton South) (Lab)
 McConnell, Mr Jack (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)
 McMahon, Michael (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab)
 McNeil, Mr Duncan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab)
 McNulty, Des (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab)
 Morrison, Mr Alasdair (Western Isles) (Lab)
 Muldoon, Bristow (Livingston) (Lab)
 Mulligan, Mrs Mary (Linlithgow) (Lab)

Munro, John Farquhar (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD)
 Murray, Dr Elaine (Dumfries) (Lab)
 Oldfather, Irene (Cunninghame South) (Lab)
 Peacock, Peter (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Peattie, Cathy (Falkirk East) (Lab)
 Purvis, Jeremy (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD)
 Radcliffe, Nora (Gordon) (LD)
 Robson, Euan (Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (LD)
 Rumbles, Mike (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD)
 Scott, Tavish (Shetland) (LD)
 Smith, Elaine (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab)
 Smith, Iain (North East Fife) (LD)
 Smith, Margaret (Edinburgh West) (LD)
 Stone, Mr Jamie (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)
 Turner, Dr Jean (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Ind)
 Wallace, Mr Jim (Orkney) (LD)
 Whitefield, Karen (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab)
 Wilson, Allan (Cunninghame North) (Lab)

AGAINST

Adam, Brian (Aberdeen North) (SNP)
 Aitken, Bill (Glasgow) (Con)
 Baird, Shiona (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Ballance, Chris (South of Scotland) (Green)
 Ballard, Mark (Lothians) (Green)
 Brocklebank, Mr Ted (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Brownlee, Derek (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Canavan, Dennis (Falkirk West) (Ind)
 Crawford, Bruce (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perth) (SNP)
 Curran, Frances (West of Scotland) (SSP)
 Douglas-Hamilton, Lord James (Lothians) (Con)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP)
 Ewing, Mrs Margaret (Moray) (SNP)
 Fabiani, Linda (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Fox, Colin (Lothians) (SSP)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gibson, Rob (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Goldie, Miss Annabel (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Grahame, Christine (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Harper, Robin (Lothians) (Green)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Lothians) (SNP)
 Ingram, Mr Adam (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Johnstone, Alex (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Lochhead, Richard (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 MacAskill, Mr Kenny (Lothians) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Margo (Lothians) (Ind)
 Martin, Campbell (West of Scotland) (Ind)
 Marwick, Tricia (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Mather, Jim (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Maxwell, Mr Stewart (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 McFee, Mr Bruce (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 McGrigor, Mr Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Milne, Mrs Nanette (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Morgan, Alasdair (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Neil, Alex (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee East) (SNP)
 Scanlon, Mary (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Scott, Eleanor (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Sheridan, Tommy (Glasgow) (SSP)
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banff and Buchan) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Swinburne, John (Central Scotland) (SSCUP)
 Swinney, Mr John (North Tayside) (SNP)
 Welsh, Mr Andrew (Angus) (SNP)

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 43—

Sorry, let me start again. The result of the division is: For 63, Against 48, Abstentions 0. I apologise for that frisson of excitement.

Amendment agreed to.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The amendments in the names of Alex Johnstone and Shiona Baird have been pre-empted, so the next question is, that motion S2M-3543, in the name of Richard Lochhead, on energy policy, as amended, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

FOR

Arbuckle, Mr Andrew (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Richard (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Barrie, Scott (Dunfermline West) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Edinburgh Central) (Lab)
 Brankin, Rhona (Midlothian) (Lab)
 Brown, Robert (Glasgow) (LD)
 Butler, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab)
 Chisholm, Malcolm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab)
 Craigie, Cathie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab)
 Curran, Ms Margaret (Glasgow Baillieston) (Lab)
 Deacon, Susan (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (Lab)
 Eadie, Helen (Dunfermline East) (Lab)
 Ferguson, Patricia (Glasgow Maryhill) (Lab)
 Finnie, Ross (West of Scotland) (LD)
 Gillon, Karen (Clydesdale) (Lab)
 Glen, Marilyn (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Godman, Trish (West Renfrewshire) (Lab)
 Gordon, Mr Charlie (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab)
 Gorrie, Donald (Central Scotland) (LD)
 Henry, Hugh (Paisley South) (Lab)
 Home Robertson, John (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Hughes, Janis (Glasgow Rutherglen) (Lab)
 Jackson, Dr Sylvia (Stirling) (Lab)
 Jackson, Gordon (Glasgow Govan) (Lab)
 Jamieson, Margaret (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (Lab)
 Kerr, Mr Andy (East Kilbride) (Lab)
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab)
 Livingstone, Marilyn (Kirkcaldy) (Lab)
 Lyon, George (Argyll and Bute) (LD)
 Macdonald, Lewis (Aberdeen Central) (Lab)
 Macintosh, Mr Kenneth (Eastwood) (Lab)
 Maclean, Kate (Dundee West) (Lab)
 Macmillan, Maureen (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Martin, Paul (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab)
 May, Christine (Central Fife) (Lab)
 McAveety, Mr Frank (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab)
 McCabe, Mr Tom (Hamilton South) (Lab)
 McConnell, Mr Jack (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)
 McMahan, Michael (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab)
 McNeil, Mr Duncan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab)
 McNulty, Des (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab)
 Morrison, Mr Alasdair (Western Isles) (Lab)
 Muldoon, Bristow (Livingston) (Lab)
 Mulligan, Mrs Mary (Linlithgow) (Lab)
 Munro, John Farquhar (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD)
 Murray, Dr Elaine (Dumfries) (Lab)

Oldfather, Irene (Cunninghame South) (Lab)
 Peacock, Peter (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Peattie, Cathy (Falkirk East) (Lab)
 Pringle, Mike (Edinburgh South) (LD)
 Purvis, Jeremy (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD)
 Radcliffe, Nora (Gordon) (LD)
 Robson, Euan (Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (LD)
 Rumbles, Mike (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD)
 Scott, Tavish (Shetland) (LD)
 Smith, Elaine (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab)
 Smith, Iain (North East Fife) (LD)
 Smith, Margaret (Edinburgh West) (LD)
 Stone, Mr Jamie (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)
 Swinburne, John (Central Scotland) (SSCUP)
 Turner, Dr Jean (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Ind)
 Wallace, Mr Jim (Orkney) (LD)
 Whitefield, Karen (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab)
 Wilson, Allan (Cunninghame North) (Lab)

AGAINST

Adam, Brian (Aberdeen North) (SNP)
 Aitken, Bill (Glasgow) (Con)
 Baird, Shiona (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Ballance, Chris (South of Scotland) (Green)
 Ballard, Mark (Lothians) (Green)
 Brocklebank, Mr Ted (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Brownlee, Derek (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Canavan, Dennis (Falkirk West) (Ind)
 Crawford, Bruce (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perth) (SNP)
 Curran, Frances (West of Scotland) (SSP)
 Douglas-Hamilton, Lord James (Lothians) (Con)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP)
 Ewing, Mrs Margaret (Moray) (SNP)
 Fabiani, Linda (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Fox, Colin (Lothians) (SSP)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gibson, Rob (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Goldie, Miss Annabel (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Grahame, Christine (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Harper, Robin (Lothians) (Green)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Lothians) (SNP)
 Ingram, Mr Adam (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Johnstone, Alex (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Lochhead, Richard (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 MacAskill, Mr Kenny (Lothians) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Margo (Lothians) (Ind)
 Martin, Campbell (West of Scotland) (Ind)
 Marwick, Tricia (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Mather, Jim (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Maxwell, Mr Stewart (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 McFee, Mr Bruce (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 McGrigor, Mr Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Milne, Mrs Nanette (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Morgan, Alasdair (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Neil, Alex (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee East) (SNP)
 Scanlon, Mary (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Scott, Eleanor (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Sheridan, Tommy (Glasgow) (SSP)
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banff and Buchan) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Swinney, Mr John (North Tayside) (SNP)
 Welsh, Mr Andrew (Angus) (SNP)

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 66, Against 47, Abstentions 0.

Motion, as amended, agreed to.

Resolved,

That the Parliament supports the Scottish Executive's continuing commitment to the development of a wide range of renewable energy technologies in Scotland as a key element of a balanced energy supply mix; supports the Executive's commitment to achieving 40 per cent renewable electricity generation by 2020; supports the Executive's attempts to eradicate fuel poverty by 2016; looks forward to publication of the revised Scottish Climate Change Programme and the consideration given to the contribution of energy efficiency and renewables to reduce carbon dioxide emissions; recognises the Executive's commitment, as set out in the Partnership Agreement, not to approve the construction of any new nuclear power stations in Scotland until the issue of waste has been addressed, and supports the Executive's commitment to continue to work with the UK Government and energy supply industries to ensure that the immediate and future energy supply needs of Scotland are met.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The third and final question is, that motion S2M-3506, in the name of Patricia Ferguson, on the London Olympics Bill, which is United Kingdom legislation, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to.

That the Parliament agrees that those provisions in the London Olympics Bill which relate to the arrangements for staging Olympic football matches at Hampden and the prevention of ticket touting and which are within the legislative competence of the Scottish Parliament, including those which confer powers on the Scottish Ministers, should be considered by the UK Parliament.

Scottish Food Fortnight

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Trish Godman): The final item of business today is a members' business debate on motion S2M-3242, in the name of Alex Johnstone, on Scottish food fortnight. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament congratulates the organisers of Scottish Food Fortnight which seeks to reconnect the people of Scotland with their countryside through the continuing promotion of high quality local produce to local people; recognises the importance of food production to the rural economy and supports efforts to promote rural enterprise and diversification of small businesses; notes the nutritional value of quality local fresh produce and the environmental benefits of reducing transport costs as promoted by Scottish Food Fortnight, and believes that the Scottish Executive should take measures to increase the use of local, regional and Scottish produce by organisations such as schools and hospitals.

17:04

Alex Johnstone (North East Scotland) (Con): The farmers market came to Holyrood some five weeks ago with representatives of food producers from all over Scotland. Stalls were set up in the garden lobby and members of the Scottish Parliament were invited to go along, try the wares and find out more about the need to promote good-quality Scottish food.

Those who took the trouble to count tell me that as many as 60 MSPs attended that event—they did not attend the whole event, but they were there at some point. When we consider the turnout of MSPs for some events, 60 is an extraordinary number. The quality of the food was therefore all the more important—those who went along enjoyed high-quality food and drink. I am not sure whether it is within the rules, but I think that some business was done that night and that some food and drink left in plastic carrier bags.

The object of Scottish food fortnight is to promote Scottish food. The fortnight ran from 17 September to 2 October. The event on 5 October marked the end of activities. During the fortnight, attempts were made to promote good-quality Scottish food at farmers markets all over Scotland. Good-quality Scottish products were also promoted at a range of restaurants and local shops throughout the country.

We must take the opportunity to consider the aims of Scottish food fortnight. Some five weeks later, it is a good time to reflect on the priorities that the fortnight was designed to promote. One main object was to nurture a renaissance in the pleasures of preparing and eating locally produced food and drink. Another aim was to help the flow of

readily available low-fat healthy food to enter the Scottish diet. Locally produced materials fit into that category because they are, of course, not processed as other foods are.

Other objects of Scottish food fortnight were to increase awareness that Scottish food is of the highest quality and meets the most stringent safety standards and to build awareness that buying Scottish food and drink in season and in particular when produced in small volumes by speciality producers will result in large-scale support for farms, small rural businesses and independent shops.

Another object of the fortnight was to highlight the ridiculous number of food miles that our food runs up. By strengthening local food networks, the shortest possible chain can be created between producer and consumer. One intent was to preserve local independent retailing and catering, by encouraging Scottish people and visitors to Scotland to buy regional speciality food and drink from small shops, pubs, hotels and restaurants. Another aim was to promote the goodness of Scottish game through endorsement of the new Scottish game marketing initiative.

More than 100 food businesses from throughout Scotland took part in the fortnight and 23 farmers markets were held in the two weeks. The average footfall per market was 4,000, which is very encouraging. As I said, the farmers market in Holyrood was a success. With speeches from Tony Andrews, the chairman of the Scottish Countryside Alliance Educational Trust, who helped to organise the food fortnight, and from Lady Claire Macdonald, who spoke about the quality of Scottish products, it was obvious that support came from across the board.

The farmers market movement in Scotland dates back to 1999. In the past six years, the number of markets has grown to more than 60. The estimated turnover for farmers markets is about £20 million. Buying local food from local producers and retailers puts more money back into the local economy than does buying the equivalent goods from supermarkets. Statistics suggest that every £10 that is spent locally benefits the local economy to the tune of £25 when it is multiplied up, whereas it is worth just £14 when spent in a supermarket. That is because vibrant local shops keep people in the area, which makes the local petrol station, bank and other facilities more viable. Also, local retailers employ local people, who will then spend their wages locally, which has a multiplier effect.

Another issue that it is necessary to highlight is that we sometimes misunderstand how the benefits of local products can be exploited. There are those who will argue in favour of organic products, for example. Although there is no reason

why organic products cannot be quality local products, that is by no means guaranteed; organic products on our supermarket shelves can quite often be guilty of having travelled as many food miles as any other product.

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Before Alex Johnstone reaches the end of his remarks, could he tell us whether he enjoys Scottish food and, if so, in what quantities?

Alex Johnstone: Who is he trying to kid?

As a farmer, I know just how high the quality of Scottish food can be. Scottish food fortnight demonstrated to more than 90,000 visitors at 23 farmers markets the quality that can be provided.

By purchasing local food from local producers, the customer is ploughing back money into their local community, which helps to provide a vibrant shopping experience in retail outlets employing local people. It is not just up to the individual consumer to do that, however. Local authorities and health boards enjoy substantial buying power and could make a huge positive difference not only to their local economy, but to the quality of the food that they serve to patients and children. More could be done to promote to those institutions the benefits of using locally produced food. Doing so need not cost any more than the current arrangements, but the Scottish Executive might well need to intervene to force the hand of health boards and education authorities.

17:12

Christine Grahame (South of Scotland) (SNP): I congratulate Alex Johnstone on a motion that is close to my heart. Before Murdo Fraser leaves, I should tell him that I have a picture of a certain MSP—at 8.30 am in our canteen—deeply absorbed in a large plate of bacon, black pudding, eggs, mushrooms, tomatoes and hash, delightfully dismissive of the fresh fruit shelf. It is indeed appropriate that we are debating Alex Johnstone's motion tonight.

Where to begin? The seared scallops of Kirkwall—I will give members the recipe later—and the langoustines of Shapinsay, which I savoured this summer, still make me salivate. Highland Park, MacAllan and Bladnoch whisky are all, unfortunately, good friends. The Broughton beers in my fridge here are beautifully labelled and are also local to the Scottish Borders. The Selkirk bannock, which must be eaten warm with the butter soaking into it. Peebles cake. The vegetarian sausages that are produced by Wicken Fen, where I did my business exchange and, as hot sausages accelerated past me and draped themselves across my wellingtoned feet, shouted the predictable words, "Maureen, shut the machine off!" The good, simple meat from the

butcher near my local Gala office, including loin pork flavoured with apple and cinnamon, peppered steaks and butchers steak pie. I hope that members are getting hungry, because I am.

There is good Scots food all around us. Well, it is almost all around us—everywhere but in this building. I appreciate the constraints of the Sodexo contract, but why cannot the Parliament have themed weeks—perhaps starting in the members dining room—featuring good Scottish food from the Borders, the Highlands, the Islands, the west and the east? That way, our many visitors could literally get their teeth into it. At the moment, only the cheese board features Scottish food. That is a missed opportunity. My suggestion would benefit not only our producers but, rightly, this Parliament, which would be showcasing those culinary delights. That would enhance our position after the bad publicity.

Although I have talked so much about food, I have to advise the chamber that I will be unable to stay until the end of the debate—even if it has good recipes in it—because the Lancastria family members who are having an exhibition in the Parliament today are waiting to eat, as am I.

Again, I congratulate Alex Johnstone. I cannot think of a better man to make a speech on Scottish food, although there was a little bit of irony in his talking about healthy eating: I say no more. As I have made a rather light-hearted but partly serious speech, I also congratulate Enric Miralles, who put my office so far from the chamber that at least I take lots of exercise when I go to and from the chamber after I have eaten my food.

17:15

Eleanor Scott (Highlands and Islands) (Green): I welcome the motion; indeed, I can say that Alex Johnstone has lodged a motion that I entirely support. I echo his congratulations to all those who are involved in Scottish food fortnight and thank the Scottish Countryside Alliance for helping me to obtain helpful facts and figures about food production.

The Scottish food fortnight and those who have organised it are part of a wider movement that encourages eating more local food and reclaiming our food culture and traditions. That movement shows itself in various ways—the farmers markets, which Alex Johnstone mentioned, are part of it, as is the slow food movement. I will not do what Christine Grahame did and give a list of recipes, but I will say that one of the best events to which I have been invited as a member of the Scottish Parliament was the founding congress of Slow Food UK, which took place at Sabhal Mòr Ostaig on Skye a couple of months ago. I will not tell

members about everything that we ate there, because I could not list everything. The slow food movement is very much about local, seasonal food and being respectful of local food cultures and traditions. Its aims can be satisfied only by local growers producing for local markets. Seasonality and variables, which are anathema to the big retailers, are involved.

I was glad that the motion focused on local food for local consumption. I have nothing against our quality products being exported to niche markets elsewhere—it is important that that is recognised—but the local market must be the principal outlet.

The motion lays out clearly the advantages of local production. That the whole production process should take place locally and should be truly local is important. For example, if lamb from Skye must go to Dingwall to be slaughtered and must then come back to Skye to be processed and cooked, the localness of the process will be diluted, as it will be if lamb from Islay must go to Paisley and then go back to Islay. It is important that the whole food production chain, including abattoirs—which I have spoken about in the chamber previously—should be local.

There is a general move towards producing food locally. The Highlands and Islands local food network, which is supported by Highlands and Islands Enterprise, links producers with interested consumers and links up community-supported agriculture projects in which people buy in advance whatever a farm or grower produces. The aim is to have 50 community-supported agricultural-type businesses in the Highlands and Islands. There is a definite move towards such food marketing and production becoming more mainstream.

The other week, I organised a meeting in Assynt that brought together local food producers and potential consumers, such as hotels. A lot of good came out of that meeting.

The motion mentions the crucial issue of public procurement, which I want to talk a little bit about. The objective of the food for life project, which is aimed at schools, is to have 70 per cent fresh produce—50 per cent is to be local and 30 per cent is to be organic. The project, which is run by the Soil Association, has been piloted in a couple of schools. So much demand exists that there is talk of taking on another co-ordinator to see the project through. The demand and the producers who want to produce for the project are out there.

As supermarkets have become our main producers—80 per cent of our food is currently sold through our supermarkets—our consumption of vegetables has steadily decreased. There are issues that we can tackle. We can eat more

healthy locally produced food and the food chain can be shortened. There are many reasons—such as local employment and environmental reasons to do with transport and food miles—for shortening the food chain, for putting people more in touch with the food that they consume and for not overregulating small producers with regulations that are meant for large factories and are not applicable to small producers.

17:20

Richard Lochhead (North East Scotland) (SNP): I congratulate Alex Johnstone on securing the debate. It is highly appropriate that Alex—the Parliament's very own Desperate Dan—is holding a debate on food. As we all know, he complained to the Parliament's canteen staff about their not stocking enough pies. I think that the problem has now been fixed, as there are now always plenty of pies in the canteen. I had thought that he might lodge a motion calling for a Scottish pie fortnight—perhaps that is the next one in the pipeline.

Alex Johnstone: Next year.

Richard Lochhead: The farmers market that was held here in the Parliament a few weeks ago was excellent. I commend the macaroon bars, which were the best I had tasted in my life; I bought some to take back to my family. That was a very good initiative.

Apart from the minister, there are no Labour or Liberal Democrat members here for the debate. That is a pity, given the importance of the food sector to Scotland—it employs 53,000 people, which accounts for 2 per cent of employment in Scotland. Our food sector does an excellent job in promoting Scotland overseas. We should think of all the products on shelves around the world that are produced in Scotland. They include shellfish, salmon, shortbread, beef and many others.

I want to raise with the minister the issue of how successful the Irish are when it comes to exporting food. We are relatively successful in Scotland but, by looking at how Ireland does things, perhaps we can learn some lessons and become even more successful. Bord Bia—the Irish Food Board—has offices in Amsterdam, Chicago, Frankfurt, London, Madrid, Moscow, Milan and Paris, as well as its headquarters in Dublin. It gets a Government budget of €25 million to look for new export markets for food and to promote Irish food overseas. Would the minister be willing to investigate the possibility of introducing such an initiative in Scotland, or at least to learn lessons from how the Irish promote food overseas? It might be very worth while to do so.

Food security should come on to the agenda in Scotland. Food producers would like that to happen, but is difficult to pin down ministers on

whether they think that food security is an important thing for Scotland. It could help to increase food production and improve the sales of locally produced food in Scotland, not just sales in other markets. It could cut down total food miles, which would be good for cutting costs and would possibly bring down the prices of some foods. That would also be good for the environment, as less transportation and fuel would be required. Food security coming on to the agenda would be especially welcome in the farming sector, as well as the food sector in general.

I turn to farmers and fishermen. I represent Grampian, whose food sector is one of the most valuable, if not the most valuable, in the whole of Scotland. The sector is celebrated every year at the taste of Grampian event at Thainstone, near Inverurie. I mention farming and fishing because of the pressure that both industries are under. Our farmers have recently been protesting at the unfair deal that they get from supermarkets in Scotland. I hope that ministers can intervene and set up an official forum in which farmers could speak regularly to the supermarkets; the forum could support farmers' calls for an ombudsman to look into the trade issues between the food producers and the supermarkets. The farmers have been calling on the Scottish Parliament's Environment and Rural Development Committee to conduct an investigation, and I hope that the committee's members will support that.

Fish is a very healthy food but, unfortunately, not enough of it is eaten in this country. It was disgraceful that two Liberal Democrat MPs, Norman Baker and Dan Rogerson, tabled a motion in the House of Commons calling for haddock to be removed from supermarket shelves. That is an utter disgrace, given that haddock is the stock that is at its healthiest. The stock was described even by European scientists as robust and healthy. For those two MPs to be so ignorant as to table a motion—even though they now say that they regret doing so—and not to withdraw it is terrible. It sends out the wrong message entirely.

Skills issues are very important to the food industry. Many foreign workers are now relied upon to supply the necessary skills for the industry and they play a very valuable role. We should look to increase the level of skills in the food sector, as well as cutting down on transport costs.

This is a good opportunity, which I welcome, to celebrate Scotland's food industry.

17:24

Shiona Baird (North East Scotland) (Green): I welcome Alex Johnstone's motion. I will not make any further comments—he is lovely just the way he is.

I congratulate both Alex Johnstone and the Countryside Alliance on what was an amazing evening. The range of food that was on display in the garden lobby at the recent event was quite spectacular and its quality was amazing. In particular, the event gave people the opportunity to have tasters. I have to confess that I tasted oysters for the first time. I was not quite certain about them. They were pleasant, but I do not know whether they are worth the amount of money for which they are usually sold. The whole point is that the event gave me an opportunity, which is what is lacking nowadays. People are not adventurous with their food and are not given the chance to taste the high-quality food that Scotland can offer.

The event was an amazing opportunity and needs to be replicated throughout Scotland in the way that farmers markets are, or to an even greater extent. We need to celebrate Scottish food throughout our hotel industry, hospitals and schools. We need to be proud of the fact that we are producing a first-rate commodity that has so many added benefits. Much more emphasis needs to be placed on that.

The fact that nowadays people spend on average just 10 per cent of their income on food whereas, I gather, in the 1970s they spent something like 25 per cent on it shows what little value we put on food. We need to address that issue, because of the knock-on effects.

My colleague Eleanor Scott mentioned knock-on effects in relation to local procurement. I refer to the knock-on effects on farming. We are not getting the local connection with what people are eating; people are not aware of where their food comes from. With such a lack of connection, there is no awareness; people are not looking at labels and choosing to buy from Scotland. Somehow or other we need to reintroduce the culture of food. Claire Macdonald is a great exponent of that. She uses local, quality ingredients in her recipes.

By buying locally we support local farmers and, by supporting local farmers, we support local businesses. Alex Johnstone and I know from our farming backgrounds that when we buy machinery parts and the various nuts and bolts that we need to support the farm business, we buy them locally. That helps to keep the money in the community and supports local businesses. It is a vital, unseen part of the whole food chain.

I echo Richard Lochhead's comments about food security. We need to take that far more seriously. I am glad that it has come up the agenda. We need to focus on our ability to grow our own food, not just because we are growing such good food, which is helping to keep disease out of the country, but because reducing food miles is vital in addressing climate change.

There are very few members in the chamber, unfortunately, so I am probably preaching to the converted, but when members go to buy food, they should read the label and put down the stuff that comes from abroad and pick up the equivalent that comes from Scotland.

17:28

Mr Andrew Welsh (Angus) (SNP): This market day is wearing late, but the subject being discussed makes the debate worth while. I welcome the debate, which is all about food quality, standards and more sustainable and sensible use of economic resources.

Good food means good health. I support absolutely Scottish food fortnight's promotion of the greater use of local produce to create local employment and its encouragement of higher standards of husbandry, animal welfare and ingredients in food production.

Having long supported a fair deal campaign for food producers abroad, I believe that we need a similar campaign for Scottish farmers and our fishing industry. Local farmers markets, which have been reintroduced into Scotland, have reminded customers exactly what quality food tastes like and has allowed farmers direct connection with customers, along with a better price for their product. In contrast, Scotland's dairy industry faces a financial crisis, in spite of a promised fairer deal from supermarkets. Scotland's quality beef industry is being undercut by a cheap, foreign imports policy. The fair trade campaign, which ensures direct payment and benefit to primary producers abroad, should also be applied to our own Scots farming industry to provide a just and fair return for its efforts.

Thankfully, there is now a rising in Scotland—a positive consumer reaction at a local level, with the growth of locally produced quality foods and local business opportunities. Basic, well-produced foodstuffs that are suited to local climates, that involve minimal transportation and that are sourced from trusted and known sources of production are now creating local employment and local economic benefit. I have seen at first hand the growth of this Scottish niche market and its potential for local and national economic development and services.

In Angus, there is the annual Forfar food festival at Glamis castle. When I was there, I met representatives of the world gathering of the Aberdeen-Angus Cattle Society in what was a showcase of good, wholesome Angus food production and sales. The Arbroath seafest celebration is attracting massive crowds. Farmers markets are now well established in Arbroath, Forfar and Montrose, and there are more to come.

Letham village has its craft fair and Victorian market. The Arbroath smokie now has European official status, and a locally produced smokie tartan, and I thoroughly recommend both.

The motion seeks to get local authorities involved. I assure Alex Johnstone that Angus Council is already involved. It has introduced a berry day in Angus schools, as part of the national hungry for success programme, supporting healthy eating in schools with superb Angus soft fruits on every school menu. Our local factories produce quality fish and fruit products, and we have a magnificent array of restaurants with locally produced foods on their menus. Near where I live, in Carmyllie, the Milton Haugh farm shop has grown from small beginnings into a substantial, thriving business that is based on quality and attracting customers in search of good, quality-assured wholesome meals and foodstuffs. There is now an established and growing quality-foods system that is dedicated to the appreciation of genuine taste and quality, which is re-educating a generation about what food should taste like. Such local products, the origins of which are known, lead to greater trust and appreciation by consumers.

The debate is about an opportunity to meet a growing demand for good food that is quality assured and locally produced and which sustains local employment and economic well-being. I congratulate this new development and wish it all success as an important part of improving the quality of life and reminding us that good food does, indeed, mean good health.

17:32

Mr John Swinney (North Tayside) (SNP): For those of us who live in rural Scotland, the ability to access farmers markets is an extraordinary privilege and is very much an every-weekend occurrence, certainly in my constituency. It was, therefore, helpful and to be welcomed that a farmers market came to the Parliament. That allowed members from other parts of the country—although there are several urban farmers markets—to see the benefits of access to the farmers market approach. In that respect, the market was very successful.

I was delighted that so many different outlets took part in the event. Two ventures from my constituency were involved: Bruce's of Balmyle, which specialises in high-quality soft fruit and has several established and successful quality markets for its products; and the Tombuie Smokehouse, from Aberfeldy. It was great that members from around the country had the opportunity to sample the excellent produce that those of us who live in close proximity to those ventures are able to access weekly. I congratulate Alex Johnstone on

bringing the issue for debate in Parliament tonight, which gives us the opportunity to share some of the issues on a wider platform.

While representing my constituency, I have seen a number of such ventures develop over the years. I had the privilege of launching the Atholl Glens marketing initiative, which involved bringing together about eight organic meat producers in the highland Perthshire area to do their marketing under the single Atholl Glens umbrella. That has put together the strength of their produce with simple marketing materials, which allows them to trade directly with consumers.

That model, which is being followed increasingly in other parts of the country, allows producers to take much more control of their interests and businesses instead of their becoming entirely dependent on supermarkets purchasing their products. Supermarkets expect the producers to carry 100 per cent of the risk in production but allow them to share in only a small proportion of the return on that risk. Ventures such as the one that I described are successful in direct promotion of produce from the point of production directly to the consumer.

My colleague Mr Welsh mentioned the Forfar food fest, which has been enormously successful in gathering together a number of different food outlets from the Angus community. When I attended the Forfar food fest this year, I was pleased that education about many aspects of food production was available to my children. I never thought that I would live to see the day when my children would be confident enough to get past the visual obstacles of Arbroath smokies and to eat them, but when they saw them being expertly prepared, they consumed them—much to my chagrin because I did not get my fair share. Educating our children about preparation of our food direct from the point of supply is important and gives our young people a greater appreciation and understanding of the quality issues that are involved.

My final point concerns the infrastructure that supports the farmers market industry and its producers. We must attend to the points that were made by Shiona Baird and Eleanor Scott about the availability of local slaughterhouses in order to ensure that produce does not have to travel ludicrous distances to reach the marketplace. It is absolutely ludicrous that livestock is transported to Wales to be slaughtered only to return to Scotland. It is damaging to the environment and it undermines the quality of the produce. This debate helps us to focus on such issues. I look forward to hearing what the minister has to say.

17:37

The Deputy Minister for Environment and Rural Development (Rhona Brankin): The debate highlights the important work of the Scottish food fortnight and recognises the important part that food production plays in sustaining rural economies and communities. I thank Alex Johnstone for giving us all the opportunity to speak about the importance of that to Scotland.

Scottish food fortnight encourages the supply of fresh local produce by bringing together local producers and consumers and providing individuals with recipes and nutritional information on locally produced food.

Several members referred to the food chain. We are keen to see primary producers and the food and drink industry in Scotland benefit from working more closely together. We recognise the benefits of shortening the supply chain between producer and consumer by schemes that encourage local producers to supply local consumers and which encourage local consumers to seek out local produce. Many members here tonight, including Eleanor Scott and John Swinney, are involved in such initiatives in their areas.

The Executive's food grant schemes have delivered £56 million of grant assistance to food businesses in the past four years. The schemes aim to increase the amount of Scottish produce. Many such projects make a direct link between producers and local outlets such as farmers markets, farm shops and other retailers.

Assistance has also been given under the farm business development schemes. To date, we have approved grant of some £16 million, which has helped farming families to develop projects that are worth about £75 million to the Scottish economy. Many projects reflect the desire to promote local produce. The grant schemes have assisted the growth of new food businesses in rural areas. That has wider benefits in maintaining communities by, for example, sustaining local shops and services that enhance the quality of rural life.

In some cases, wider benefits are provided, such as in food tourism. VisitScotland estimates that a quarter of the £4 billion of tourism spend in Scotland is on food and drink. It recently launched the EatScotland scheme to enhance Scotland's reputation as a good food destination and to raise standards of food service. The food service sector is itself a fast-growing market that provides opportunities for Scottish food producers.

Members have mentioned public procurement. We want very much to encourage use of local food

in schools, hospitals and other public services and we have produced guidelines on public sector procurement to encourage public bodies to ensure that suppliers meet farm assurance standards so that they can secure local, fresh and seasonal produce that is of high nutritional quality. Indeed, Eleanor Scott highlighted some excellent work in the Highlands and Islands, and we have introduced a pilot project in Ayrshire.

We want Scottish producers to get a fair chance to compete for public contracts, so we have commissioned research into local sourcing in public sector food procurement to identify how to overcome the constraints that are faced by purchasers and producers, and how to enhance incentives. The people who award public contracts are not allowed to discriminate between products purely on the basis of country of origin. Scottish suppliers must compete on an equal footing with others; however, they have a competitive opportunity when it comes to quality, value, freshness and reliability of supply. The priority is to ensure that Scottish suppliers are well informed about their opportunities to compete to supply public service customers.

Mr Swinney: On the requirement for producers to compete on a level playing field, is not it important for the Government to insist on the same standards of quality for produce both from this country and from abroad to guarantee that Scottish producers are not undermined by producers from abroad who compete simply on price?

Rhona Brankin: Yes—the definition of best value includes quality. In that respect, local authorities should follow the Executive guidelines as closely as possible. However, such decisions are for local authorities, which is why initiatives such as the provision of locally sourced food for schools in the Highlands and Islands and in Ayrshire are hugely important. Authorities are taking a great deal of interest in the process and I think that we are taking some positive strides. Indeed, it would be interesting to have another debate on those initiatives.

Alex Johnstone and other members pointed out the importance of food miles. Of course, sourcing food locally has a positive effect by reducing food miles. After all, the transportation of food—and other products—is a source of the greenhouse gas emissions that contribute to climate change. Although food will continue to be transported, the impact of its transportation can be reduced by efficient use of transport. There are already some good examples of work on that.

Another aspect of food that receives public attention is health. People, especially in Scotland,

are becoming much more conscious of the need for a healthy diet. In fact, 63 per cent of people are now aware of the message that they should eat five pieces of fruit and vegetables a day, compared with 19 per cent in 1996. They might be aware of the message, but it is a somewhat harder challenge to change their behaviour. I also point out that access to locally sourced healthy produce is fundamental to the Executive's policy on healthy eating and that local produce features throughout our action plan on food and health.

Although local food plays an important part in the spectrum of food that is available to the public, we need to recognise that consumers will continue to shop at supermarkets and other outlets that provide a wide range of goods at competitive prices. We want retailers in Scotland and throughout the United Kingdom to stock as much Scottish produce as possible. However, no matter how successful our local producers are, we need to bring some foods into Scotland if we are to eat more fruit and vegetables for the sake of our health, and if we want to enjoy a wider variety than can be provided by home-grown produce. That said, I am very much aware of the importance of the slow food movement.

On supermarkets, we acknowledge what members have said about farmers' and producers' concerns over farm-gate prices. In our regular ministerial meetings with major retailers, we will continue to emphasise the seriousness with which we view the sustainable food chain and the fact that healthy trading relationships between suppliers and retailers are vital.

We want to give consumers the opportunity to enjoy Scottish produce. Indeed, Richard Lochhead highlighted the importance of marketing such produce abroad. We do that energetically, but we are always open to suggestions as to how we can do it better.

I congratulate the organisers of Scottish food fortnight, and I confirm that the Executive acknowledges the importance of food production to the rural economy. We support provision of fresh local produce through a wide range of outlets. We must also ensure that Scottish producers and processors have the opportunity to grow their businesses by supplying domestic and international markets.

Meeting closed at 17:45.

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