

MEETING OF THE PARLIAMENT

Thursday 26 January 2006

Session 2

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Scottish Parliament

Thursday 26 January 2006

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

East of Scotland Economy (Transport Links)

The Presiding Officer (Mr George Reid): Good morning. Our first item of business is a debate on motion S2M-3863, in the name of Murdo Fraser, on the economy of the east of Scotland.

09:15

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): The Scottish Executive is in a shambles over the future of the Forth crossing. There is a proposal from the Forth Estuary Transport Authority to increase the toll at peak times from £1 to £4—a proposal that was supported by Labour and Liberal Democrat members of the authority using powers that were conferred upon them by the Parliament. The proposal is opposed by the great majority of people in Fife, including, it seems, both the Labour and the Liberal Democrat candidates in the Dunfermline and West Fife by-election. However, the Executive has still to make up its mind on the matter.

More seriously, it is now almost universally accepted that we will need a new Forth crossing, otherwise the economy of Fife and the east of Scotland will face meltdown within 10 years. Yet the Executive sits on its hands and refuses to commission work on a new bridge. In simple terms, the Executive is failing the people of Fife and the people of Scotland: it must take action now to resolve those two issues.

We should not forget that the background to the variable tolling that is proposed by FETA for the bridge is the Transport (Scotland) Act 2001. Section 49 allows for local authorities to establish a road user charging scheme; and section 69 gives ministers the power to establish by order a new joint board that would be able to use those powers for the management and maintenance of the bridge. The introduction of those powers was supported by Labour, the Liberal Democrats and the Scottish nationalists—they were opposed only by the Scottish Conservatives.

Let us see no crocodile tears from members on other benches about increases in the toll that FETA proposes. It was always foreseen that that would happen. That is why the Scottish Conservatives opposed those measures in the

Transport (Scotland) Act 2001. All other parties are culpable in the latest proposed toll increase.

Christine May (Central Fife) (Lab): Does Murdo Fraser accept that Fife Labour members on the FETA board did not support the increase in tolls to £4?

Murdo Fraser: I accept that. However, Andrew Burns, Ian Murray and Lawrence Marshall—all Labour members of the board—voted in favour of the increase. Let us have a little consistency from the Labour Party.

Let us consider the position of the Liberal Democrats, which is, frankly, bizarre. The Liberal Democrat candidate in the by-election is running around telling anyone who will listen that he opposes the introduction of variable tolling. Yet two Liberal Democrat members of the FETA board, George Grubb of Edinburgh and Bob Scott of Perth and Kinross Council, voted in favour of the increase. What is the Liberal Democrats' position? Are they up to their usual trick of saying one thing in one part of the country and another elsewhere? Are they saying one thing in Fife and something different in Edinburgh? Are they saying one thing at one end of the street and something different at the other? We all know the sordid political tactics that only the nasty party of British politics is capable of. The minister should come clean and tell us whether he agrees with his party's candidate in the by-election and with Gordon Brown that an increase in tolls should be opposed. Or does the minister agree with the First Minister, who said on Tuesday:

"It would be utterly irresponsible for us to make a decision on the financing of the bridges across the Forth in advance of a decision on whatever we have to pay for another bridge."

Which is it?

Mr Andrew Arbuckle (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD): Perhaps Mr Fraser could clarify by outlining the Conservative policy on tolls. Mr Brocklebank tells us that there will be no tolls at all, while the rest of the Tory party tells us that there will be tolls. Which is it—tolls or no tolls?

Murdo Fraser: We do not support an increase in tolls at this time, as it would be entirely unjustified. We need some consistency from the Liberal Democrats. The Conservative party alone opposes the powers for differential charging that are contained in the Transport (Scotland) Act 2001. We have a consistent position against differential tolling.

In many ways, tolls are a secondary issue. More important is the future of the bridge itself and whether a second bridge is required. There is a growing consensus on the need for a second bridge, as the existing bridge suffers from chronic overuse. FETA has warned that the bridge could

be closed to heavy goods vehicles by 2013 and it might have to close altogether by 2019. Either of those scenarios would be an utter disaster for the economy not just of Fife, but of the whole east of Scotland. A new bridge is essential if we are to avoid chaos in the Scottish economy. Moreover, it is essential to allow the economic expansion that is being hampered by traffic congestion on the existing bridge. Given that the bridge manager, Alastair Andrew, estimated that it would take 11 years to build a new bridge, work must start now. The Executive can no longer drag its feet.

However, members should take not just my word for it. Scott Barrie, in a members' business debate last year, said:

"we need to start planning now. The Forth road bridge is one of Scotland's most important transport arteries, but it is no longer fit for purpose ... the time to get serious about planning a second crossing is now."—[*Official Report*, 2 November 2005; c 20246.]

Fife Labour members queued up to echo his comments: Christine May, Helen Eadie and Marilyn Livingstone all backed him. Even Alistair Darling, the Secretary of State for Scotland, said on Monday:

"The key thing now is to campaign for a second bridge because of the fact that the existing bridge is not going to last as long as people thought."

We have a consensus—or almost—because the First Minister said on Tuesday:

"It would be utterly irresponsible to make a decision without knowing the technical evidence."

They are all out of step but oor Jack. Everybody—Labour Party representatives in Fife, the Labour Party's candidate in the by-election, Alistair Darling—knows that we need a new bridge. Everybody apart from poor Jack, that is. It is time that the Executive bowed to the inevitable and started work on options for a new crossing.

The Conservatives believe that the Executive should look at a number of funding models for the bridge. One of our proposals is that it should look at a privately funded second bridge on which tolls would be charged in much the same way as on the M6 express route. Let me explain. Under such circumstances, the existing bridge could be converted to a toll-free route. Bridge users would have the choice of using the free bridge or the new toll bridge, with the latter providing congestion-free access to the motorway network. That is exactly the model that is being used for the M6 expressway, which has been extremely successful. If the existing bridge had to close for repairs, the new bridge could have its tolls reduced for the period of closure.

Tricia Marwick (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP): The estimated cost of a new bridge would be in the order of £700 million to £1 billion, but a bridge

costing £1 billion would cost about £2.5 billion under a private finance initiative. Will the member tell us how much he would charge in tolls?

Murdo Fraser: That would be a matter for the private company. It would set its tolls at a market rate, which would be enough to attract customers to the new bridge but not enough to deter people from using it.

I find the SNP's scepticism curious. If the system that I propose works on the M6 expressway, why could it not work on a new Forth crossing? We have come up with a proposal, but we have heard silence from the other parties on what they would do. The SNP supports the idea of a new bridge, but will they pay for it out of general taxation? If so, have SNP members checked with their finance spokesman to find out where in the budget the money would come from? The Labour Party and the Liberal Democrats and their candidates in the by-election say that we need a new bridge, but where in the budget will they find the money for it? Have they allocated the resources for it? We need to be told. The Conservatives are expressing options and setting out proposals that the Executive should explore. We accept that there may be other ways of funding a Forth crossing; the Executive should look at them all. The important thing is that there be no further delay.

We are in this situation only because of the refusal of the Scottish Executive to face up to the real problems on the Forth crossing. The Executive has the power to prevent FETA from charging differential tolls. It has done nothing. The Executive has the power to start work on options for a new bridge, given the consensus that a new crossing is required. It has done nothing. The Executive is, once again, failing the people of Scotland. It must act now before it is too late. I have pleasure in moving the motion in my name.

I move,

That the Parliament opposes the dramatic increase in tolls on the Forth Road Bridge being proposed by the Forth Estuary Transport Authority (FETA); notes that the proposals flow directly from the powers to implement road user charging granted under the Transport (Scotland) Act 2001 which were opposed by the Conservatives and supported by Labour, the Liberal Democrats and the Scottish National Party; further notes with concern the view of FETA that the bridge could be closed to heavy goods vehicles by 2013 and to all traffic by 2019; believes that either of these scenarios would have extremely serious consequences for the economy of the east of Scotland; supports the Scottish Executive's decision to carry out a comprehensive assessment of the structure of the current bridge; further believes, however, that in light of the timescales involved, this must be conducted simultaneously with preliminary work on options for a new crossing and how this might be funded, and calls on the Executive to commence such work without delay.

09:25

The Minister for Transport and Telecommunications (Tavish Scott): I want to dispense with the pretence that the debate is an earnest intellectual contribution to strategic transport policy in Scotland, because it demonstrably is not; the debate is about a key issue in the Dunfermline and West Fife parliamentary by-election. Nothing illustrated that better than Mr Fraser's speech. In the first minute of it he said that he and his party were against tolls; by the sixth minute, he was saying that he and his party were in favour of tolls.

Murdo Fraser: Increase in tolls.

Tavish Scott: The Conservatives were against an increase in tolls yesterday and on Tuesday and Monday, but they are now in favour of it.

Murdo Fraser: Will the minister give way?

Tavish Scott: No, certainly not. I will come back to the member. In a moment, I will deal with exactly what the Conservatives have said this week, which has been different on every day.

The Conservative motion asks the Parliament to accept that all other parties are in favour of bridge tolls and that, as they voted for the enabling legislation, they are therefore guilty as charged. The motion also dictates that the Scottish Government should start work immediately on a new toll-free second road bridge. I want to illustrate the utter hypocrisy of the Tory policy on both counts. The Scottish Government enacted the Transport (Scotland) Act 2001, which sets the framework for local traffic authorities that seek to introduce road user charging schemes. The Forth Estuary Transport Authority is such an authority, but I want to make it clear that FETA's proposals for bridge tolls will be analysed carefully, fully and in detail and that then, and only then, will ministers decide on them. However, I was astonished, as were all the Scottish ministers, by the scale of the proposals.

David McLetchie (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Con): Will the minister go further and rule out a maximum £4 toll, as proposed by FETA?

Tavish Scott: I will repeat what I said, because Mr McLetchie clearly did not listen to it. FETA's proposed bridge tolls will be analysed carefully, fully and in detail. However, as every minister has said, we are astonished by the scale of the proposed tolls and there is consensus that the proposals will be considered in that light.

It is important to reflect on the Conservative record on tolls. The Tory motion opposes tolls, although, by the sixth minute of Mr Fraser's speech, he was in favour of them. When in power, Tory Governments were in favour of tolls. Section 27(1) of the New Roads and Street Works Act

1991 authorises the charging of tolls by ministers. That Conservative act of Parliament was introduced by a Conservative Government and introduced Conservative tolls.

Then there is Carrie Ruxton, the Tory candidate in the by-election. I presume that Mr Fraser thought he was doing her a favour when he dreamed up today's motion. However, let us read carefully what Carrie says in her campaign leaflet. When asked about resolving the problem of the Forth road bridge, she replies:

"I would build another bridge. I think we should look at building a new toll bridge and making the existing bridge toll free ... So that people had a choice."

That is the new Cameron-Goldie Tory transport policy. The Tories give the people of Fife a choice: they could use Cameron's crossing, the toll bridge, if they are green, liberal and concerned about the planet's future, or they could use Goldie's gateway, the free-market, freely available, free bridge. What a lovely policy that is; Cameron's crossing or Goldie's Gateway so that Carrie has a choice. What are the people of Fife to make of that Tory choice? It is a no brainer—people would have to have no brains to vote Tory in the by-election in a couple of weeks.

Do members see poor Mr Fraser's difficulty? On Monday, the Tories lodged a motion advocating the Tory policy of no tolls. On Tuesday, the Tory candidate in the by-election supported tolls. On Wednesday, the Scottish Tory leader, who is up at the back of the chamber, enthusiastically proposed more tolls. Today in Parliament, Mr Fraser had it both ways within six minutes of his speech. To cap it all and to illustrate the depths of Tory hypocrisy, it was successive Tory Governments that introduced, backed and implemented tolls throughout the United Kingdom.

Mr Fraser's response to Tricia Marwick's intervention was illuminating. In answer to a question about who would set the tolls, he said that it would be the private sector. We all remember what happened when the private sector set tolls under a Tory Government. That was when Lord James Douglas-Hamilton was minister with responsibility for transport. On 3 May 1989, in response to questions from members of Parliament on the Skye bridge tolls, Lord James said:

"The amount of toll will depend on proposals made by the private sector."—[*Official Report, House of Commons*, 3 May 1989; Vol 152, c 163.]

David McLetchie rose—

Tavish Scott: I will take no sanctimonious questions from Mr McLetchie about who will set the tolls. Under the Conservatives, they would be set not by Government, but by the private sector. To heck with the people who live in Fife; the tolls

would be set by the private sector. That is Conservative policy.

I want to deal with the important issue of the state of the existing Forth road bridge. At the end of October 2005, FETA received the emerging conclusions on the condition of the bridge's main cables, which suggested that serious corrosion has occurred and that action needs to be taken now if we are to avoid major restrictions on the bridge. There are no immediate safety concerns and the bridge can carry existing traffic loads. I met FETA on 2 November 2005 and within a few days we commissioned the Flint & Neill Partnership to carry out a technical audit of the work that has been done. The report from Flint & Neill, which is one of the UK's leading consultants on cable-supported bridges, will be with me next week.

Let me be clear that decisions about the Forth crossing are a matter for the Scottish Government. The Scottish ministers, and no one else, will decide on the FETA proposals and on the long-term needs of the Firth of Forth, including whether a replacement crossing for the road bridge is needed and what form of crossing that might be. The Cabinet has agreed to consider the current FETA proposal for toll changes in conjunction with the future of the Forth road bridge. It would make no sense to decide on tolls before we consider the related issues of the condition of the bridge and a replacement Forth crossing. As I have said on several occasions, I will of course keep Parliament informed of progress on that matter.

I move amendment S2M-3863.2, to leave out from "opposes" to end and insert:

"notes the record of successive Conservative governments in approving tolling regimes on bridges, and further notes that the Scottish Government believes that a Forth road crossing is essential for the Fife economy and that it will make its decision on the FETA toll application after examination of the condition of the current bridge and the need for any replacement."

09:32

Bruce Crawford (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP): Unlike the rather shoddy Tory motion in the name of Murdo Fraser, or the Executive amendment, the SNP amendment addresses the impact of the closure of the Lexmark International factory with the loss of 700 jobs, which is the most important issue affecting the east of Scotland economy at this time. I cannot believe that, in a motion that is entitled "The Economy of the East of Scotland", the Tories and the Executive have chosen to airbrush out the closure of the Lexmark factory as if it had not happened.

Tavish Scott: The motion that I seek to amend is that of Mr Fraser, on transport issues—it does not mention that closure.

Bruce Crawford: I hear the minister's explanation, but the motion is entitled "The Economy of the East of Scotland". It is up to the minister to choose his priorities.

Murdo Fraser: How many jobs does Mr Crawford think will be lost in the east of Scotland if a new Forth crossing is not completed?

Bruce Crawford: A large number of jobs could be lost, but the issue in Dunfermline and West Fife this week is the closure of Lexmark. I cannot believe that the Executive did not include that in its amendment. That underlines the staggering complacency in the Executive about the loss of manufacturing jobs in Fife. I am glad that Nicol Stephen, the Liberal minister in charge of that matter, is present.

The SNP amendment goes on to consider constructively how best to deal with the vexed question of the Forth road bridge, its tolls and its future as a crossing. It will not be much comfort to the Lexmark workers at this time, but I am sure that all members would wish to express their sympathy for the uncertain future that those workers face. The SNP wants several measures to be put in place with immediate effect. First, we need targeted measures, similar to those that were introduced following the Motorola closure in West Lothian, that are aimed at assisting the workforce.

Secondly, we need a strategy from the Scottish Executive and Fife Council to drive forward the revitalisation of Dunfermline town centre. That proud town has a rich history and deserves a much better deal. It has been neglected for far too long. Let us use the opportunity of this difficult time for the area to ramp up the economic impact of the town centre with a vision for its future and a positive energy force to drive change forward.

Thirdly, Transport Scotland should, as a priority, be charged with responsibility for investigating how best to improve transport links into the area to the benefit of the economy. Fourthly, it is time to end the bickering between Labour and Liberal Executive ministers and the Brown-Darling London axis. The past week has seen a catalogue of spectacular stairheid rammies and contradictions of stated Government policy. No one knows any longer who is in charge of the issue, what to believe about the future of the tolls or indeed whether a second crossing is planned. When I saw the headlines in the press on Tuesday, I could not help but remember the immortal words of Burns:

"Such a parcel of rogues in a nation!"

It is time not only to stop the bickering but to give a boost to the east of Scotland economy by announcing a freeze on the tolls at the current level of £1—the Scottish National Party's stated

and consistent position. The Executive cannot kid on that the tolls are a form of congestion charge when there are no alternative routes across the estuary that can deal in any meaningful way with the expected rise in traffic. It is time for the First Minister and the Liberal transport minister to stop hiding and to come clean about their intentions. If they continue to prevaricate, people will see their intentions for what they are: a cynical attempt to hide the truth until after the Dunfermline and West Fife by-election. It is interesting that, in response to an earlier question, the minister did not rule out a £4 toll on the bridge. What will the new toll level be? Will it be £2? Will it be £3? Will it be £4? Or will the toll double, like the tolls have in London, and be more like £8 in just a few years? Today is the minister's chance to put to rest all the damaging speculation. It is time to come clean.

I move amendment S2M-3863.1, to leave out from "opposes" to end and insert:

"notes with regret the announcement by Lexmark that it intends to close its factory in Rosyth with the loss of 700 jobs; expresses sympathy for the workers affected; is concerned about the impact the closure will have on the economy of Dunfermline and West Fife; believes that, in response to the closure, an action plan targeted at assisting the Lexmark workforce should be introduced immediately; further believes that the Scottish Executive, in conjunction with Fife Council, should put in place, as a matter of urgency, a strategy for the economic revitalisation of Dunfermline town centre and that Transport Scotland should be directed to improve the transport links to the area in order to make it more attractive for investors; agrees that, as part of a package to help the economy of Fife, an immediate announcement freezing the level of tolls on the Forth Road Bridge at £1 should be made, and further agrees that planning for a new crossing should begin immediately in view of the fact that the bridge will close to heavy goods vehicles in 2013 and to all traffic in 2019 if a satisfactory engineering solution cannot be found to overcome the bridge's structural problems."

09:37

Christine May (Central Fife) (Lab): There is a by-election on, isn't there? The slapstick has started. It is the "Celebrity Big Brother" approach to politics. I shall try to elevate the debate ever so slightly beyond the slapstick, although, if I may be parochial for a moment, I agree with Bruce Crawford that the 700 job losses at Lexmark International in Rosyth are a devastating blow and that the arguments about it—given the national prominence of the area as a result of the parliamentary by-election—do nothing to help to support those whose jobs are being lost.

However, I want to set the debate in the context of the wider economy of the east of Scotland, as do Murdo Fraser's motion and the Executive amendment. Let us consider the economic successes in Scotland. There are 170,000 more people in work than in 1999—200,000 more than in 1997. Our employment rate is now the highest

in the United Kingdom—second only to Denmark. Our economy is growing. More than 34,000 modern apprenticeships have been created and a further 340 have just been announced for Rosyth. That is the economic context of the east of Scotland and Fife that makes the issues of a new bridge, of the amount of any tolls and of whether there are tolls so important.

Tricia Marwick: The member is bound to be aware that we have lost 805 jobs in Fife since 2000, including 100 at ABB in Glenrothes and 185 at Canon Manufacturing UK. In 2002, we lost 75 jobs at BBR Systems in Glenrothes and 90 jobs at Brand-Rex in Glenrothes. What will she say about the success of industry now?

Christine May: The statistics show that despite the losses—which I accept have been devastating—there has been a net gain in jobs in Fife. However, what should exercise us today is the potential loss of jobs that might be caused by the loss of a major arterial crossing. All the welcome improvements in transport—the longer trains; the longer platforms; the road improvements; the freight facilities grant; and everything that is being done at Waverley station—are likely to increase public transport capacity. Nevertheless, the south-east Scotland transport partnership integrated transport corridor study—the SITCoS study—that was published last year considered all those improvements and still concluded that a new crossing was needed. That was before the corrosion report was published.

Phil Gallie (South of Scotland) (Con): In response to a point made by the member to Tricia Marwick, is it not the case that the jobs in Fife have been created principally in the public sector and the service sector? The real wealth-creating jobs to which Tricia Marwick referred are the jobs that Fife has lost, which is extremely bad for the economy of Fife and of Scotland as a whole?

Christine May: I am flabbergasted at that disgraceful slur on the hard work of many in the service industry. The member suggests that service jobs are not real jobs and that they do not contribute to the economy. Of course they do.

It has been suggested that instead of a new bridge we could have a tunnel. In a letter to me in December, Alastair Andrew, the bridge manager, said that a tunnel would cost

"£500-£600 million at 2004 prices"—

and that is without the ventilation and everything else that would be needed. He went on to say:

"Bored tunnel options were even more expensive".

Turning to tolls—

Murdo Fraser: Will the member give way?

Christine May: No. I am in my last minute.

As the minister pointed out, Ms Ruxton, the Conservative candidate in the by-election, said that she would support having a new bridge and that, while that bridge would be tolled, the old bridge would not. So, for Fifers and others there is a choice: they can use the Tory tolled bridge, or they can use the free bridge. Never mind that it might fall in the water; shucks, you take that risk. I exaggerate for effect only. I believe that the case for a new bridge is made. Given the competing transport priorities in Scotland, I recognise that the Executive needs to be convinced before taking a decision, but I repeat: a decision needs to be taken soon. I agree with the terms of the Tory motion: parallel planning is essential. I make no apology for putting pressure on the transport minister and the Executive, and I will keep up that pressure. They have competing transport priorities, which they must balance. Nevertheless, the support from all my colleagues is most welcome. As for the £4 toll, as the First Minister made clear, that is dead in the waters of the Forth. I support the Executive amendment.

09:43

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton (Lothians) (Con): Today, we have a growing consensus that an operational arterial road bridge across the Forth between the areas around North Queensferry and South Queensferry is in the national interest. The economy of the east of Scotland is heavily dependent on the availability of a suitable road crossing that benefits commuters, business and commerce in getting goods to market. That crossing being brought to an end would enormously disadvantage the economies of Fife, Edinburgh and the east of Scotland, which is accepted by Gordon Brown and Alistair Darling, although Alistair Darling was in the past passionately opposed to the concept of a second road crossing and said that it would congest the whole centre of Edinburgh. Nonetheless, his apparent conversion does not alter the reality that the decision is for the First Minister and for the Executive, who wish to examine the options.

In the 10 years during which I was transport minister I, too, was anxious to know what might be the possibilities with regard to a second Forth crossing. I seem to recall opposition not just from Alistair Darling, but from the Labour group on Edinburgh District Council and from the *Edinburgh Evening News*. According to my recollection, at the time of our examination a route was safeguarded to the west of Queensferry, although that safeguard may have been dropped with the accession of a Labour Government; the Executive has still to answer my written parliamentary question on that subject. If that route's safeguarding has been dropped, that is contrary to Scotland's national interest because it could be a

decade or more before a new bridge could be ready, if the present bridge has to close.

The most recent Conservative Government did not proceed with a second bridge because there was a great deal of opposition to a second bridge. Although elements of Fife Council wanted a bridge, they did not want tolls. Without tolls, there would have been insufficient resources and a second bridge was less of a priority at that time.

Christine May: Will the member take an intervention?

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton: I will give way briefly, but I have quite a lot to say.

Christine May: Does the member have any evidence for his assertion that the land for the crossing has not been safeguarded? If so, we would like to hear it.

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton: Christine May must not address me as if I am a minister of the Government, which I am not. Tavish Scott is. I lodged a parliamentary question on the matter, so it is for Christine May's colleague on the front bench to answer. I hope that he will have the moral courage to do that—even if his answer implies criticism of his Labour colleagues.

As Christine May said, there is an urgent need for forward planning, but Gordon Brown and Alistair Darling may well be mistaken if they have the impression that the bridge will automatically be funded from public sector resources. The reality for the Executive is that a new bridge could be funded from public expenditure, from borrowing, from tolls, or from a mixture of some or all of those. If a new bridge were built, the existing bridge could be closed and extensively overhauled.

As a list MSP for the Lothians, I am bound to flag up the interests of Queensferry and district community council and the residents of the area. I appreciate their concern that the project would disrupt their lives and cause a loss of amenity because it is important that we reconcile the interests of residents and the interests of commerce and industry. To do so will be like treading on eggs, but a Government that is acting in its national interest will have to do just that.

The procrastination, delay and confusion between the Executive and the United Kingdom Cabinet—including Tavish Scott's statement this morning that he cannot rule out a £4 toll—are astonishing and unacceptable. People to the north and south of the Forth have a right to know what on earth is going on.

09:47

Mr Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): What a treat we have had in the past

week. Westminster ministers and Westminster wannabes have been climbing over each other to convince us that congestion on our roads can magically disappear and that new bridges over the Forth can sprout up at no cost to the taxpayer. I am glad to say that their views count for nothing because it is the Scottish Parliament that will make the decision about the Forth road bridge.

One of the most responsible positions that has been taken in the past week is the Executive's position, which is why the Greens will support the Executive's amendment, although given what Christine May said, the Executive might need our votes to get its amendment through. It is obvious that some form of financial incentive will be needed to reduce congestion on the bridge, but it is equally obvious that we cannot have no road crossing between the Lothians and Fife. FETA tells us that the bridge will fall into the Forth in 2019, so we need either to replace it or to pursue other options such as strengthening the main cable. That has been done on the Golden Gate bridge in San Francisco and I know that the minister is considering that option.

Christine May: Will the member take an intervention?

Mr Ruskell: I do not have time to give way. I have a very tight time in which to make my speech.

Despite what Christine May has no doubt said in press releases today, everyone knows that FETA has no intention of replacing the road bridge. On 20 November 2005, Tom Aitchison, the chief executive of FETA, said:

"The most important thing to get across is that the bridge is capable of carrying traffic now and for many years to come ... We are taking action now to prolong the life of the bridge as long as possible."

He talked not about replacing the bridge, but about prolonging its life. We all know that FETA wants to double the capacity by having two bridges across the Forth—if we can believe what we read in the *Edinburgh Evening News*, FETA wants three bridges across the Forth. It is quite clear that FETA is in a mess. If Lawrence Marshall—a Labour councillor from the City of Edinburgh Council—had been in the chair, we would not be talking about replacement bridges or second bridges because the board would have accepted the officers' recommendation and we would be working towards a package of anti-congestion measures. By now, we would have rejected the case for a second road bridge.

In this debate, we should forget about the environment—although it has not been mentioned—and talk about the long-term and short-term needs of the Fife economy. If we build a second road bridge, it will alleviate congestion

and benefit the Fife economy in the short term. However, we know from SESTRAN's cross-Forth study that, if we double the road capacity across the Forth, by 2030 we will be in the same position as we are in now. Road capacity will have been exhausted and traffic congestion will have risen. The economy will be even more crippled by congestion than it is today and we will be using even more resources.

We should reflect on the fact that, by 2030, energy prices will have gone through the roof and we will be competing on the global stage with low-carbon economies. BP is taking the issue seriously, which is why it is trying to push us towards a low-carbon economy. The Tories should listen to the private sector and wake up to the nature of the competitive environment in which Scotland will have to compete in 2030. We must consider the long-term health of our economy.

We have witnessed some breathtaking political naivety in Fife. Alistair Darling assumes that everyone in Fife wants a second bridge, but people's views are quite balanced on the matter. Many people in Fife realise that a second bridge would lead to more congestion, that it would take money away from public transport alternatives such as a new railway station at Leven, and that it would lead to vast and unwelcome infrastructure developments in west Fife. That is why many people in west Fife and west Edinburgh do not want a second bridge. The real test of the issue will be not in a few weeks' time but at next year's Holyrood elections.

09:51

Helen Eadie (Dunfermline East) (Lab): It is rich for the deputy leader of the Tory party to attack the Executive on the timescale for a decision to invest in further major transport infrastructure at the Forth estuary, which will affect Fife and the Lothians. I remember how long Fife Council and the people of Fife campaigned for a new Kincardine bridge during the dark days of Tory Government. I also remember how long we campaigned for an upgrade to the A8000.

Phil Gallie: Will the member take an intervention?

Helen Eadie: I have not started yet.

I remember the silence from the Tories when we campaigned for the Superfast ferry. Despite all of that, Fife Council has invested more than £70 million in transport infrastructure, which is almost the highest investment made by any local authority in Scotland. That shows how much the Labour Administration values support for the economy and transport infrastructure.

Phil Gallie: Will the member remind us which Government built the Forth road bridge? Was it a Tory Government?

Helen Eadie: The first decision to build the bridge was taken in 1947. That shows how long it took to build it. It was 1964 before we actually got the bridge. I agree with Christine May—I add my voice to hers—that we need to make decisions on the matter now because of the timescales that are involved.

There is so much politicking going on this morning; I remind members again of the hypocrisy that the Tories are showing. They have forgotten what happened to us on the day before the 1997 general election. In the most blatant example of opportunism that there has ever been, the Tories signed away the jobs of 6,000 people throughout east and central Scotland when, in an attempt to purchase votes, they gave the Trident refit contract to Devonport instead of Rosyth. We remember that and we will always remember that the Tories devastated the mining communities in central and eastern Scotland.

Of course, a by-election campaign is under way in Dunfermline and the Tories are using this debate as part of their campaign. As a result, a great deal of attention has been paid to who said what in the media. The Opposition is trying to portray Labour in Scotland as being at odds with Labour at Westminster on the matter, but there is absolutely no truth in that. We have to go through due process and we must consult colleagues and the community at large. The First Minister's spokesperson clearly set out our position on 18 January 2006 when he stated that the Cabinet had agreed to consider FETA's proposal for tolls in conjunction with the future of the Forth road bridge.

Despite FETA's request that ministers make a decision, ministers believe that it would make no sense to do that until they have considered the related issue of the condition of the bridge and the replacement Forth road crossing. The Minister for Transport and Telecommunications is not due to receive the report on the condition of the bridge until the end of January, which is only next week. It is sensible to get that report. The Green party and others have said that we need to be crystal clear about, and to make a well-informed decision on, the bridge's condition. We will obviously consider the matter carefully, and we hope to make an announcement in late February or early March. That is not long—we first found out about the state of the bridge six months ago, and we will be able to make a decision about it in March. It is likely that issues related to the bridge will be progressed within the same timescales.

The Presiding Officer: Will you begin to wind up your speech, please.

Helen Eadie: FETA has proposed changing the toll from a flat rate of £1 to a sliding scale of charges. We await the outcome of that proposal. Jack McConnell stated clearly last week:

"I speak for our Scottish Executive and ministers—for the Scottish Government. We agreed yesterday that the right way forward for the Forth road bridge was to link any decision on tolls with decisions on the long-term future of the crossing. I am sure that our decision will be welcomed by all local politicians in Fife and, of course, by local people."—[*Official Report*, 19 January 2006; c 22550.]

We will properly go through the necessary due process. There are many unresolved issues and we will decide on current and future proposals. The decisions will be based on the critical need to secure a crossing for the people of Fife. We will do that with the interests of communities and the economic and environmental arguments in mind. It is up to Scottish ministers to decide the eventual outcome.

09:56

Fergus Ewing (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP): Contrary to what Helen Eadie said, a decision cannot be made next month. Lawrence Marshall, the convener of FETA, is reported in *The Scotsman* as saying that although the cable investigations will be reported to the minister next month—as the minister has agreed—it will not be clear until next year whether repair options will be pursued or a replacement bridge will be constructed. It should be stressed in a debate such as this, in which there is a lot of heat, but not a lot of light flickering at the end of the tunnel, that the timescale for any transport project in Scotland is horrendous. The timescales are unnecessarily long and should be focused on in this debate. Lawrence Marshall stated that it could take up to 11 years to complete a bridge. If the warnings that the bridge must be closed to freight traffic by 2013 are correct, we already face the certainty that freight traffic will not be able to cross the firth. That will cause devastation and environmental damage, so I am pleased by the surprising but welcome news that the Green party is now in favour of a replacement bridge.

We must address the timing of construction and transport projects in Scotland. Projects take so long because of what I call the compliance bureaucracy. There is no doubt that if a new method of crossing is decided on, we will rightly need every type of expert report under the sun—engineering, hydrological, geological and environmental reports will all be necessary. Several people from RSPB Scotland will have to be hired. We will have to get mollusc and worm reports and we will have to consider the interests of dolphins and whales—[*Interruption.*] I kid you not. All of that will happen, which is why Mr

Marshall said that it will take 11 years to complete a bridge.

According to the Labour Party, Mr Marshall and his colleagues have ruled out a tunnel, but Mr Roy Pederson, a transport expert, writes in *The Scotsman* today that a tunnel should not be hastily ruled out. He said:

"Since 1983 more than 25 sub-sea road tunnels have been built in Scandinavia"

at a cost of £10 million per mile. Therefore, a three-lane 10-mile tunnel would cost about £100 million. I do not know whether he is right—

Christine May: Will the member take an intervention?

Fergus Ewing: Christine May has made her points.

Mr Pederson may be right, but I know that FETA has ruled out a tunnel. However, as the minister said, it is for the Government, not FETA, to decide whether there should be a replacement and if so, what it should be. I am quite sure—

Christine May: Will the member take an intervention?

Fergus Ewing: No. I am sorry—I have very little time.

I am quite sure that the minister agrees that it would be utterly irresponsible and negligent not to investigate fully the possibility of building a tunnel, especially if it were to cost anything close to £100 million, although a tunnel would extend even further the 11-year period that Mr Marshall said it would take to build a new bridge. That suggests that successive Governments have been negligent in failing to do as the Scottish National Party has advocated and plan for a new bridge crossing.

I know that the minister takes seriously the timing of transport procurement projects. However, we must accept that the costs of the compliance bureaucracy and the green tape in which we are fankled are unacceptable and unworkable. If the worst fears about the structural state of the Forth bridge are borne out, the price tag that is attached might seriously be that no freight will be able to cross the Firth of Forth.

10:01

Mr Andrew Arbuckle (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD): If ever a subject suffered because too many politicians rushed in and let their opinions run ahead of due consideration, it is crossings over the Forth. Murdo Fraser was a prime example this morning of such premature ejaculation being induced by a by-election. The Tories have suggested that we should pay for one bridge and get another free. I remind them that this is not a supermarket. Their madness is based on the

frantic desire of David Cameron and his cohorts to appeal to everyone, regardless of the rationality or common sense of their proposals. It is not so much a policy as it is the latest Tory flight of fancy. They may well need the one free bridge and one toll bridge option to cope with their varying views; indeed, Ted Brocklebank opted for the free crossing, while the rest want to pay tolls.

Mr Ted Brocklebank (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Will the member take an intervention?

Mr Arbuckle: Yes—a brief one.

Mr Brocklebank: Is not it a fact that Mr Arbuckle has been widely quoted as saying that he believes in toll-free bridges?

Mr Arbuckle: I have been quoted for about 20 years pointing out the effect that tolls, north and south, have on the Fife economy. Mr Brocklebank is right to say that.

The Tory record on bridges is not good; several members have mentioned the Skye bridge. That initially had an £5 toll even though it cost less than £20 million. How can the Tories have suggested a £5 toll then but oppose a £4 toll for the people of Fife now? We are asked to compare the Tory proposal for two bridges with two roads in Birmingham, one going through the centre of a busy city and the other going through open country.

Mary Scanlon (Highlands and Islands) (Con): Will the member give way?

Mr Arbuckle: Not just now.

The comparison is between two bridges. As Christine May has hinted, will one be deemed to be a safe bridge and the other to be a less-safe bridge? Where does the Tory proposal leave less well-off people? There will be not just two bridges, but two tiers of transport: one for the rich and another for the poor. I await with trepidation the next Tory suggestion—to get a shorter bridge for less money.

It is sad that political madness is not confined to the Tory party. No doubt under the pressure of the Dunfermline by-election, a local resident, a Mr Gordon Brown, accompanied by a friend, a Mr Alistair Darling, decided to lob their views into the debate. Do they not understand devolution? Do they not know that their opinions are seen as political posturing? Is Mr Brown a chancellor or a political chancer? I hope that I pronounced that last word correctly.

Bristow Muldoon (Livingston) (Lab): Does Mr Arbuckle wish to give way?

Mr Arbuckle: Not just now.

Does Mr Darling, the United Kingdom Secretary of State for Transport, not realise that his view this

week contradicts his view of 10 years ago? The Liberal Democrats support the First Minister's wing of the Labour Party, which says that people should continue to tell their friends to keep their noses out of Scottish issues. All the Labour Party turmoil proves is that there is a need to draw lines of responsibility and that bridges should not be built for political convenience. Let us push the politics aside.

The Tory motion mentioned the economy. The Forth crossing is vital not only to the economy of Fife, but to the whole of Scotland. As Bruce Crawford pointed out, the Fife economy has suffered a blow with the redundancies at Lexmark. Recognising that, the Deputy Minister for Enterprise and Lifelong Learning asked for and received the intervention of the rapid response group, which will help to retrain and redeploy the people who are affected.

Some 25,000 Fifers cross the Forth each day to work south of the river. As Christine May said, the crossing has helped to transform employment statistics for Fife which, little more than a decade ago, had one of the country's highest unemployment rates. It might be a commuter economy, but that means that we must work on transport links that take the emphasis away from the private car.

The Scottish Executive has helped with the funding of park-and-ride facilities, which are being expanded. It has also helped with funding for additional car parks at stations.

Let us have, in the old Scots, a caum souch on the way forward and think before we jump to conclusions.

10:06

Colin Fox (Lothians) (SSP): Many members have rightly highlighted the fact that the Tory's motive for lodging such a motion at this time is the Dunfermline West by-election. Like other members, I would have thought that a more pressing debate following the announcement this week would be about the 700 jobs that are to be lost at Lexmark in Dunfermline. Such an interesting debate would have highlighted that the reason why the company has upped sticks from Fife and gone to the Czech Republic is the search for cheap labour. That is ironic when we consider that the reason why Lexmark came to Fife in the first place was the cheap labour that was offered to it in Scotland. That does not half highlight the insecurities and the wage slavery that working people continue to face in this neo-liberal economy. There is no sign of workers' rights and protection at Lexmark. Is not it unfortunate that so many parties in this Parliament gave Lexmark carte blanche to do what it liked?

Today's debate is similar to Scott Barrie's members' business debate in November and we have aired much of that debate's subject matter again today. The Tory motion is a response to the FETA proposals for a £4 toll, but FETA also talks about multi-occupancy discounts and encouragement of off-peak toll reductions.

Today's debate has highlighted the differences between the parties but—my goodness—it has really exposed the differences in the Labour Party. Helen Eadie remarked on the amount of politicking that is going on today; that is especially true in the Labour Party, where the chasm between the different wings is as wide as the Forth itself. The debate has highlighted the completely opportunistic divisions in the Labour Party.

Murdo Fraser talked about the parties that support user charging schemes. The Scottish Socialist Party did not support such privatisation and neither do we support the Trojan horse that Murdo Fraser tried to introduce into the debate; namely, the proposal to build a private commercial bridge across the Forth to make a profit from the people whom he represents. I would have thought that the best way to stimulate the Fife economy would be to scrap the tolls on the Forth road bridge. We should scrap the tolls on all the bridges in Scotland to stimulate the economy everywhere. Never mind the £4 toll, let us scrap the current £1 toll. Bridges are part of the infrastructure of this country, like our roads and so much else, and they remain the responsibility of Government. It is the Government's responsibility to look after the infrastructure that aids and directs the economy.

The abolition of the Erskine bridge and Skye bridge tolls has been announced—both in order to help the economies in those areas. I support the same being done to the Forth road bridge toll because the reality is that we are trying to raise money to pay for a bridge that should be the Government's responsibility. The tolls are an extra charge on the Fifers who have to use the bridge twice a day to commute back and forward to Edinburgh and Glasgow.

In conclusion, the debate has been about whether it is necessary to build a new bridge, and the structural assessment that will take place in the next few weeks. One possibility must surely be to consider a multi modal road and light-rail bridge, offering incentives to use public transport to cross the Forth and including multi-user lanes to encourage more people to get out of their cars. That is the way forward as far as the Scottish Socialist Party is concerned.

10:10

Jim Mather (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): I also want to talk about a bridge, but a different

kind of bridge—a bridge that has the scope to encourage and meet the challenges of future growth and which will be able to link Fife and the rest of Scotland to valued destinations. I speak not of a physical bridge, but of a bridge to an economically resurgent future. It is obvious that that bridge is needed now.

I am sure that there will be claims that such a bridge already exists, but such claims do not bear audit, given the 7,000 jobs that have been lost in Fife—including 1,600 from the Rosyth dockyards—since Labour took power, and given the decision this week at Lexmark to close with the loss of 720 jobs. The lack of a pipeline to bring a steady stream of new, well-paid jobs into Fife and elsewhere also does not bear audit. We know that because the Joseph Rowntree Foundation tells us that 41 per cent of working-age people who are either in work or who would like to work earn less than £6.50 an hour or are on benefits, an early pension or are totally unwaged. That is 1.159 million people.

In designing a bridge to solve that problem, we must properly define the problem and we must start from a proper position of reality. Last night we had the ignominy of watching on “Newsnight” an Executive minister cite figures that have been recalibrated and re-indexed so regularly that eventually, Scotland blips ahead of the United Kingdom. That is just not good enough, especially when we face intensifying competition from emerging economies, when people are paying the price of low incomes, when they are being forced to commute and migrate and when they are unable to find in Fife, or elsewhere in Scotland, work that adequately matches their skills. The moral imperative is on Parliament to do something about that.

We should learn from information that was published in *The Economist* this week that examined exactly those matters. It said that Europe and Japan cannot afford to drag their heels over reform or to leave workers ill-equipped to take up tomorrow's jobs, and that the move upmarket into new industries and services will mean that emerging economies will fare best as they come of age. What the author was really saying was that we have an opportunity, but it exists only if we do not resist change. If we resist change, all we can look forward to is years of relative decline. That is what we have had for 30 years here, where resistance to change is greater.

The people of Fife are paying the price for that. Decline is happening, especially in Scotland, where Government is resistant to change, let alone able to facilitate meaningful and beneficial change. We fall into the trap that has been identified by Jean Pierre Cotis, the chief economist of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation

and Development, who says that failure to converge is failure to learn. Patently, we are failing to learn.

I will not be in the least bit surprised if the minister, in winding up, tells us that *The Economist* criteria are satisfied by the concept of a smart, successful Scotland. I look forward to the Executive putting that shabby claim on record one more shameful time.

There are five reasons why the Executive approach falls short of a proper bridge to a better future. First, we have no control over our economy; secondly, wealth that is created here leeches into other economies; thirdly, we have a cycle of relative decline, as evidenced by population numbers, the working-age population and life expectancy in Scotland; fourthly, we languish way down on the Institute for Management Development world competitiveness league table; and fifthly, we are already in manufacturing recession, even after recalibration, trade-linking and re-indexing of all our industry.

The 1.159 million people to whom I referred know that the current situation is totally untenable and that the strategy is not working. There were no answers last night from the minister on “Newsnight”—he gave us the same old false-hope syndrome. Our appeal goes out to those 1.159 million realists in Fife and the rest of Scotland who would benefit from our bridge to a better future.

I support the amendment in Bruce Crawford's name.

10:14

Bristow Muldoon (Livingston) (Lab): It is a shame that the debate is not considerably longer, because more time would have allowed us to get into many of the issues more seriously than we have done so far. There is broad agreement across the parties on the importance of the Forth road bridge to the economy not only of Fife, but of the whole of Scotland. If the prognosis for the current bridge is accurate, it is undeniable that we need to construct a replacement Forth bridge. That is agreed by all parties.

Margaret Smith (Edinburgh West) (LD): Will Bristow Muldoon give way?

Bristow Muldoon: I will not give way quite yet.

Realistic questions need to be asked. We need to assess the remaining life of the existing bridge and to determine whether there are any realistic means of prolonging it. If we are to build a replacement bridge—I firmly believe that we must do that—we also need to ask what type of bridge it should be.

Mary Scanlon: Will Bristow Muldoon give way?

Bristow Muldoon: I will not give way yet, as I have an awful lot to cover.

We need to ask what the design of, and the sources of funding for, a replacement bridge should be. That is the serious long-term debate that we should be having, but much of it has been overtaken by the by-election in Fife.

The Tories' position is quite bizarre, in that they argue for a toll bridge and a toll-free bridge. Murdo Fraser acknowledges that, according to FETA's analysis, the existing bridge does not have a long lifespan, but part of his answer to Fife's continuing need to be connected to the Lothians is to make that bridge toll free. That is a completely ridiculous position. He compares it to the M6 and the toll on that motorway, but I have not heard of any engineering prognosis that predicts that the M6 that goes through Birmingham will close in the next 12 or 13 years, as it is predicted will happen to the existing Forth bridge.

Murdo Fraser: I have an important point of clarification. My proposal is predicated on the life of the existing bridge being able to be extended. The bridge might have to close for a period, but if it can be repaired and if its life can be extended, it would be toll free thereafter. If that were not possible, we would not wish there to be a privately tolled bridge on that crossing.

Bristow Muldoon: The other core Conservative party position is its criticism of a £4 toll. Murdo Fraser does not wish to set any sort of toll; that would be left to the private sector. The point has been made that, when the setting of tolls for the Skye bridge was left to the private sector, the outcome was a toll of £5 per crossing. Therefore, the toll on the bridge that the Tories propose could be much more than £4 per crossing; we just do not know.

I have some concerns about whether FETA is the appropriate body to build a new bridge connecting Fife and the Lothians. I ask the minister to consider whether it might be appropriate to transfer responsibility for building a new bridge to Transport Scotland. Could the proposed transport and works bill be part of the answer?

Bruce Crawford spoke about the job losses in Fife over the past day or two. That is an important point and I apologise for not giving it enough attention in the short time that I have. Bruce Crawford mentioned the Motorola closure in West Lothian. We can look to West Lothian with hope for Fife's future because, although West Lothian lost 4,500 electronics jobs in a short period, it is now one of the strongest parts of the Scottish economy. West Lothian has lower unemployment than it did when those electronics factories were open and one of the highest rates of new business

start-ups in Scotland. We can learn the lessons of West Lothian and improve the Fife economy in the years to come.

I will address Andrew Arbuckle's hypocrisy. He attacked other politicians for drawing devolved matters into a Westminster by-election. However, the Liberal Democrat campaigning in the Livingston by-election majored on health issues and the Liberal Democrats are attacking the Labour Party on the proposed £4 toll although a Liberal Democrat councillor voted in favour of it.

Members: Two!

Bristow Muldoon: Yes, I accept that correction: two Liberal Democrat councillors voted in favour of it. The Liberals are also attacking the UK Government on the economic record in Fife although a Liberal Democrat minister is in charge of the economy in Scotland.

We are all agreed on the need for a new bridge. Let us leave aside the shabby politics and get on with what we need to do.

10:19

Tricia Marwick (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP): Bruce Crawford rightly said that it was outrageous that neither the Tories in their motion nor the Executive in its amendment referred to the devastating news of the Lexmark closure. They should be ashamed of themselves.

This debate has shown the splits between Labour and the Liberal Democrats and between Labour MPs and MSPs, with Liberal back benchers attacking Labour ministers. It has shown the absolute confusion and hypocrisy at the heart of the supposed coalition Government.

The Forth bridge is a vital part of the infrastructure, so we cannot simply wait until planning for a new crossing begins. The Executive has been in possession of the facts on the condition of the bridge since November 2005. Put starkly, if repairs cannot be made, heavy goods vehicles will be banned from 2013 and total closure will take place in 2019. That is the stark reality that we face. Even if the bridge can be repaired, which is in doubt, we face months of closure while the works are carried out. Equally, even if repairs are possible, the bridge will have to be replaced at some point by a new crossing. The level of uncertainty that has been created by the Labour-Liberal Democrat Executive will have a detrimental impact on Fife's economic prospects, which are reeling from the Lexmark closure announcement.

Sarah Boyack (Edinburgh Central) (Lab): Does the member agree with her colleague Fergus Ewing that the Scottish National Party will consider the construction of a tunnel under the Forth?

Tricia Marwick: The SNP has not ruled out any option. We will consider plans for a tunnel crossing in the same light as a bridge crossing. What is certain, however, is that the Executive needs to consider plans for a new crossing. If a company was seeking to invest in Scotland, would it choose to locate itself north of the Forth bridge—which may be closed to its HGVs by 2013—where it would be forced to pay a £4 toll for every crossing, or south of the bridge? There is really no contest.

Helen Eadie claimed that there would be a decision on a new bridge in March. That is not true. In November 2005, the First Minister told me that it would be particularly stupid to begin planning a new crossing and that he intends to wait until further analyses are completed in 2007. Either the First Minister lied to me then or he has changed his position since. He has a duty to inform us of his position. Instead, what is particularly stupid is that the Labour-Liberal Executive ostrich continues to bury its head in the sand when faced by the facts on the bridge.

The minister has not ruled out an increase in the toll to £4. The Greens will support the Executive on that, as they believe that a £4 toll is possible and that there will be an increase in tolls. Although the Tories claim that they would build a new bridge under PFI, they have not said how much the tolls under such a scheme would be.

In 1985, Gordon Brown informed the Forth Road Bridge Joint Board inquiry into proposed increases in bridge tolls:

“The unjust treatment of bridge users is exemplified by the fact that they effectively pay several times over for the facilities they use—as taxpayers, rate payers, road-tax payers and as toll payers. Consequently, the increase in tolls proposed by the Secretary of State represents an unreasonable addition to an already unfair burden. In equity, pending financial review, the tolls on the bridge should be at their existing levels.”

The Labour Party has been in Government since 1997, but we still have the tolls. If the Labour-Liberal Executive has its way, the tolls will soon increase to £4.

10:24

Tavish Scott: From comments that have been made by the Deputy First Minister and Minister for Enterprise and Lifelong Learning, the Deputy Minister for Enterprise and Lifelong Learning, Allan Wilson, and various other ministers, it is clear that discussions were held with the Lexmark bosses and a rapid reaction plan is in place. The local enterprise company has brought forward an action plan for the local economy. There will be help with resources. The Executive is determined to assist in attracting new jobs to Fife. We understand that this is a difficult time for the men, women and families who are affected by the closure, but the

Executive is determined to work on the situation. I do not think that it is at all appropriate to start making cheap remarks about a line in a parliamentary motion. What matters is what we do to help people in really difficult circumstances.

I turn to the wider points that were raised in the debate. As I said at the start, this debate is about the by-election so I will not say that we should avoid shabby political point scoring. To be totally honest, we have all indulged in that and I am probably no better than anyone else.

Members: Hear, hear.

Tavish Scott: We can agree on that if on nothing else.

Members have made serious points about the strategic importance of the crossing of the Firth of Forth. That is probably the one point on which there is consistency and agreement. I give credit to those members who, in the course of a bit of political point scoring, have raised serious issues. We take those arguments seriously and we will study them.

A number of members have commented on traffic growth and on the condition of the existing Forth road bridge, not just in terms of corrosion. Tricia Marwick is quite wrong to say that we have all the information and that we must therefore make a decision today. If Tricia Marwick knew anything about government, she would know that that is just not how it works. We must ensure that we have the appropriate information in front of us.

Tricia Marwick: Will the minister take an intervention?

Tavish Scott: No, I will not give way. I have responded to Tricia Marwick on that point several times at question time, as well as today.

If traffic growth continues at its current rate, the bridge will be carrying 30 million vehicles a year by 2018. The rate of traffic on the bridge has grown at almost twice the rate of Scottish traffic and more than 70 per cent of cars at peak times have single occupants. There would be a 21 per cent increase in annual average traffic growth if we simply cancelled all the tolls now. We have to look closely at those facts and at the environmental scenarios. It is important to recognise that.

Several members, such as Helen Eadie and Mark Ruskell, pointed out the public transport choices. The choice is not just as the Tories would have it—between the free bridge and the new toll bridge that they would have—but about public transport. We have made progress on the issues and arguments that Christine May raised about rail in particular. That is important.

I turn to the points that were made by Fergus Ewing and Bristow Muldoon.

Bruce Crawford: Will the minister give way?

Tavish Scott: I am trying to answer the questions.

Fergus Ewing mentioned the timing of planning matters. The national planning framework and the Planning etc (Scotland) Bill have potential, and it is up to those of us who will scrutinise that bill and take it through Parliament to get it right. The bill has the potential to move the process forward. I take the point about all the pressures and interests that are involved in such a major decision, but if we were to back away from that process, or to try to circumvent it in any way, we would be taken to task.

I did not agree with Bristow Muldoon's points about the Liberal Democrats—I state that for the record—but he made a fair point about FETA. I have a lot of sympathy with that point and we will reflect on his views, as well as those of the Local Government and Transport Committee, which he convenes, and others.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Trish Godman): You have one minute left, minister.22754

Tavish Scott: Lord James Douglas-Hamilton asked me a fair question about the position with regard to land. He is not correct to say that his Government safeguarded the route; that is not my understanding of the situation. However, land was purchased and is still held by the Government. As I understand it, the Tory Government of the day did not safeguard that route, although land is still held on the north and south sides of the Firth of Forth. I hope that he accepts that.

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton: Will the minister give way?

Tavish Scott: I have dealt with the point. If the member will forgive me, I am being asked to wind up.

Finally, I turn to the point about political chicanery. I can imagine the howls of protest from the SNP and the Conservatives if Government ministers had made a decision on tolls and the Forth road bridge during a by-election campaign.

Mr Brocklebank: What about Gordon Brown?

Tavish Scott: He does not sit in this Parliament.

The Conservatives in particular would have been sanctimonious in their abuse. I will not have it. There is a due process to go through; we will go through it and make the decisions at the appropriate time.

When Ted Brocklebank winds up for the Tories, perhaps he can clarify their position, given that

Murdo Fraser changed it three times during the debate. He can also tell us his own position. I see from the "Leven News"—an important organ, I am sure—that the leader of Fife Council's Conservative group

"hit out at Mr Brocklebank after the MSP's call to abolish tolls ... He said: 'He thinks you can tell people one thing to their face while your party policy says exactly the opposite. Ted has been a loose cannon since the moment he was elected in May 2003. I think a spell without a portfolio would give Ted time to'"

think. It is about time he dealt with that point.

10:30

Mr Ted Brocklebank (Mid Scotland and Fife)

(Con): I rise with some relish to sum up an enjoyable debate that had some richly ironic overtones. Tavish Scott will be happy to know that I will give my views on tolling; we will come to that.

Like all Fifers, I am deeply dismayed not only that the current bridge might be unsafe in just over a decade, but that plans are afoot to quadruple the tolls in the meantime. Tavish Scott has done nothing today to scotch those claims.

We are told that 23 January is the gloomiest day of the year, but Monday past was surely the exception. On that day, Labour—at Scottish and United Kingdom level—chose to stick a collective and massive foot in its mouth. I am sure that Alistair Darling and Jack McConnell found nothing at all funny about the coverage of their bizarrely varying comments on the subject of a new bridge, but, as Christine May pointed out, for the rest of us it was slapstick bordering on farce.

"Who runs Scotland—Gordon, Alistair or Jack?" Such were the headlines that blazed across the papers. In the wake of that, Jack McConnell has suddenly gone silent. With the wheels birling off the Labour campaign in Dunfermline West, and in a week when Lexmark has gone to the wall, throwing 700 people on to the dole, the truth is that Jack McConnell is terrified of saying anything. The Executive is paralysed until after 9 February.

As Murdo Fraser reminded us, Labour, the Liberal Democrats and the SNP all supported the variable tolling powers that FETA proposed under the Transport (Scotland) Act 2001. Of the grown-up parties, only the Tories voted against them. The spectacle of the Liberal Democrat and Labour candidates in Dunfermline West clamouring to tell us that they oppose FETA's proposed increase is as hypocritical as it is opportunistic.

The Labour candidate for Dunfermline West claims to be against the increase, but that claim rings particularly hollow when we remember that the FETA vote on the proposed price hike was split five to five and that the £4 sum was approved only on the casting vote of the Labour chairman,

Councillor Lawrence Marshall of Portobello. Helen Eadie accuses us of hypocrisy, but how is that for hypocrisy?

The real issue, of course, is a replacement bridge. No one who has spoken in the debate doubts that the current bridge is chronically overused. We all agree about that. As far as I can gather, no one other than Jack McConnell, Tavish Scott and perhaps the Greens is in any doubt that a second bridge will eventually be required. Tricia Marwick is right to say that the Executive's delay in putting in place contingency planning borders on the criminal. Perhaps the Executive cannot tell us exactly what it proposes, but it should have some kind of contingency planning in place; I cannot believe that it does not. As we have heard, the Conservatives aim for a solution that will last for 50 years, not one that will swing votes over the next two weeks. The Executive must confirm immediately that the toll on the current bridge will not rise above £1 at this time, and that tolls will be used—

Tavish Scott: Is that the member's position or his party's? What is his position?

Mr Brocklebank: I am coming to it; wait for it.

Will the Executive confirm that the toll on the current bridge will not rise above £1 at this time, and that the tolls will be used to fund repairs, maintenance and running costs and nothing more?

I do not know what variable transport charging will bring in the future, and I make no apologies for saying that it is my personal view that Fifers who have no choice but to use the Forth and Tay bridges should not be penalised by tolls at all. In that, I think that there is much in what Colin Fox said.

John Swinburne (Central Scotland) (SSCUP): Does Ted Brocklebank agree that in all the talk of tolls, no one has thought of pensioners? Is it not high time that the Government decided to make pensioners toll free and to give them free access to Fife and other areas?

Mr Brocklebank: As I am rapidly heading in that direction, perhaps that very thought underlies what I am saying.

Murdo Fraser is right to float the idea of a privately funded second bridge, on which tolls could be charged in much the same way as they are charged on the M6 express route. That would provide the element of choice that has been the hallmark of Tory policies.

Helen Eadie: Will Mr Brocklebank take an intervention?

Mr Brocklebank: No, I will not.

A new bridge would allow the possibility of converting the existing bridge to a toll-free route.

Helen Eadie: And the new bridge would have a £5 toll.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Do not make interventions from a sedentary position, Mrs Eadie.

Mr Brocklebank: We fully accept that there may be other solutions. Ours is not the only solution, but it is time to consider the solutions. What is wrong with proposing a solution that does, at least, offer some choice?

The economy of Fife is far too precarious to be turned into the kind of political football that people have been trying to turn it into today. In the run-up to a by-election, Fifers need answers and action on the Forth crossing. What we have seen from the Executive parties in recent days has been guddle, muddle and gutlessness. Unfortunately, Bruce Crawford got in before me, but he was right, in this Burns season, to say of Gordon Brown, Jack McConnell, Alistair Darling, Tavish Scott and all the rest of them that we have never seen

"Such a parcel of rogues in a nation!"

Energy Policy

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Trish Godman): The next item is a debate on motion S2M-3870, in the name of Alex Johnstone, on future energy policy.

10:36

Alex Johnstone (North East Scotland) (Con): During many debates on the subject of renewable energy, the environment and sustainability, the subject of nuclear energy and its future in Scotland has been ancillary. It has always been my view, and that of others in the chamber, that there would be a time when it was appropriate to initiate a debate specifically on the nuclear issue. The opportunity that we have today is important for this Parliament, and I hope that it is the start of a vigorous and constructive debate that will ultimately lead to important decisions being made for Scotland's future energy needs.

It appears that it is not only I who believe that the time has come for the debate. In the past week, we have seen stories in the *Sunday Herald* trying to undermine the credibility of the cross-party group on the civil nuclear industry, and today the BBC website is carrying a story about a leaked report that attempts to rubbish efforts by Government agencies to find solutions to the nuclear waste problem. I worry that that is an indication of how our opponents intend to conduct the debate in future and of what we can expect of them. In this chamber and wherever necessary, we intend to be above board and to meet the arguments fairly.

Shiona Baird (North East Scotland) (Green): Will the member take an intervention?

Alex Johnstone: No, I will not.

Shiona Baird: Why not?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The member has already said that he will not take an intervention.

Shiona Baird: I have a point of information to make.

Alex Johnstone: Shiona Baird can press her button and try to catch the Presiding Officer's eye.

It has to be said that energy issues are, in themselves, not devolved. However, another revelation that we have had in the past week is that the Scottish Executive has a veto when it comes to decisions on siting future nuclear power stations in Scotland, so the issue is highly relevant to this chamber.

It is also relevant for the secure and affordable supply of electricity for Scotland in the future.

Energy efficiency has its place, but we must remember that the provision of electric trains and trams may push up future demands for electricity, so we must consider where that electricity will come from.

Richard Lochhead's amendment points out that Scotland is an energy-rich nation, and I cannot dispute that, so why should we worry? We should worry because we are highly dependent on gas supplies. Even though Scotland is a major producer of gas, it will always come to us at market price—unless, of course, the Scottish National Party nationalises it, as it intends. The "I'm all right, Jack" idea that we in Scotland can burn coal, oil or gas and not worry about our international obligations in relation to CO₂ emissions is an attitude that we cannot accept.

Christine May (Central Fife) (Lab): Will the member take an intervention on that point?

Alex Johnstone: Not at the moment.

Of course, carbon sequestration is possible, but it will come at a price, and when fuel poverty is one of the declared priorities of the Parliament, we must always consider the price of power as it is generated. We are always told that nuclear energy is expensive, but if we compare it with energy produced by the traditional generators, who in the past were able to throw their pollution into the air, we realise that the true cost of traditional methods of power generation has never been assessed properly. With the imposition of a carbon tax, there may be a much more level marketplace.

Wind turbines have often been the subject of discussion in the Parliament, but they are not a cheap way of generating electricity either. The system of renewables obligation certificates has served to encourage such development and to offset the price to some extent, but we must always remember that the true cost is the cost that we will ultimately pay, and the true cost of wind energy is extremely high.

Rob Gibson (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): Will Alex Johnstone give way?

Alex Johnstone: Not at the moment.

Environmentally based sources of energy have a huge role to play in the future, but they can only ever be part of the mix. They are largely unpredictable, certainly inappropriate to demand and always impossible to control. Accordingly, they must be backed up by other generators to maintain constant supply to the grid.

In Scotland, the Executive has failed to outline an energy strategy that sets out total requirements for future energy production and consumption. Instead, it has focused on a narrow proportion of that production—the proportion of electricity that is generated by renewable energy sources.

Currently, most of Scotland's power comes from five big plants, of which two are coal fired, one is gas and two are nuclear. The coal-fired plants have life expectancies of less than 20 years, the gas plant will perhaps last 30 years and the two nuclear plants are licensed until 2011 and 2023.

The First Minister has said that the Scottish Executive will not make any decisions on the future of nuclear power in Scotland until the issue of radioactive waste management has been resolved properly. That, of course, reflects the delicate policy mix of the Liberal Democrats' opposition to nuclear power and Labour's unwillingness to rule it out. The Executive position is highly ambiguous, as the First Minister would not set out when he would consider the waste question to be adequately resolved, whether it is when the Committee on Radioactive Waste Management reports or when the new waste facility is built and operating. We must also recognise that the issue of nuclear waste storage and disposal is essentially an historical one, built up over 60 years. A new generation of nuclear power stations will add only marginally to the total waste burden, and could certainly be accommodated within the solution to an historical backlog.

Finally, I remind the Executive of some prophetic words, which ministers would do well to heed in the future:

"Two nagging questions remain. In terms of security of supply, does it make sense—even with a substantial contribution from renewables—to become so dependent on imported gas? And does it make sense, at the very time when climate change and the reduction of greenhouse gases have shot up the political agenda, to be planning the elimination of nuclear power?"

I believe that the moment has come for that important debate to be held.

I move,

That the Parliament notes with interest the UK Energy Review; believes that provision of a secure and affordable supply of electricity is essential to Scotland's future prosperity, and therefore believes that all options, including the construction of new nuclear power stations to replace existing nuclear capacity, should be considered for inclusion in Scotland's future energy mix.

10:44

The Deputy Minister for Enterprise and Lifelong Learning (Allan Wilson): The Executive amendment reflects our commitment to our policy objectives on increasing the proportion of energy generated from renewable sources, tackling climate change and fuel poverty, and ensuring security of supply for Scottish consumers. Current and future security of energy supply for Scotland is dependent on supporting a diverse fuel mix—of which nuclear is undoubtedly an important part—

and on constant dialogue with United Kingdom Government colleagues and, crucially, the regulators and the companies themselves.

We recognise that we must find solutions to our future energy needs that improve the efficiency with which we use energy while reducing the environmental impact of energy generation.

Alex Neil (Central Scotland) (SNP): Will the minister indicate when the study into Scotland's energy needs, which was promised before the end of last year, will be published?

Allan Wilson: This afternoon.

We have set targets for 40 per cent of our energy supply to come from renewables by 2020. That is a fourfold increase on the current level of renewables generation.

We have invested £3 million in the European Marine Energy Centre in Orkney and we recently announced our intention to amend the renewables obligation to award increased renewables obligation certificates to wave and tidal output. The success of using ROCs to incentivise the growth of renewables capacity has been seen in the sizeable growth achieved in renewable generation development.

Phil Gallie (South of Scotland) (Con): The minister referred to 2020. What does he estimate the gigawatt output requirement will be in 2020? Up until now we have been given percentages, but percentages of what?

Allan Wilson: The energy study that we have implemented and which has just been referred to maps energy supply and demand in relation to not only electricity generation but transport and domestic use. It shows demand between 1990 to 2002. The next stage of the study will map future demand and will investigate where energy can be sourced from.

The biomass and marine energy sectors in Scotland are thriving and present us with the potential for an additional 1.5GW of installed capacity and to create jobs, and the opportunity to establish Scotland as a global renewables powerhouse in the process.

We are developing our own energy efficiency strategy to complement the United Kingdom strategy. Last year we allocated £20 million to help bring about public sector energy efficiencies.

On climate change, which I think everyone will agree is the most important issue that faces the world, we will publish a revised Scottish climate change programme to complement the forthcoming UK programme and to provide a framework for the development of Scottish climate change targets.

Finally, as a crucial part of the considered and informed debate that we hope to have on energy policy, we will, as I said, publish later today the first two volumes of the Scottish energy study. Those were commissioned in 2004 to provide a factual overview of energy supply and demand trends in Scotland between 1990 and 2002.

The Scottish Executive is represented on Pilot, the joint industry-Government group that is tasked with creating a climate in which the UK continental shelf can retain its position as a pre-eminent active centre of oil and gas exploration, development and production and in which the UK contracting and supplies industry remain at the leading edge of competitiveness. The UK and the UK continental shelf still represent a favourable market for oil and gas operators to invest in.

We recognise the contribution that the development of cleaner coal technologies can make to the energy mix. Scottish Enterprise commissioned and, last September, published a piece of work on carbon capture and storage to complement the Department of Trade and Industry's own carbon abatement technologies strategy, which was launched in June of last year. DTI commitments to invest in cleaner coal technologies research and development projects amount to £13 million.

The Executive's amendment recognises that to meet Scotland's future energy needs, we must have a reasoned discussion about the realities of energy supply and consumption. That is why we are working closely with the UK Government on the UK energy review and why we foresaw the need for a comprehensive piece of research on energy trends in Scotland. To meet Scotland's long-term energy needs, we must recognise the role that conventional fuel sources play in the energy mix. My only argument with the Tory motion is that it focuses consideration on one source of supply to the exclusion of others. The energy review is about more than nuclear power, although we recognise the role that nuclear power plays in generating electricity for Scotland.

We will await the findings of the Committee on Radioactive Waste Management report in July and we will engage with the UK energy review. I encourage everybody else to do likewise.

I move amendment S2M-3870.4, to leave out from "notes" 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 target that 40% of electricity generated in Scotland by 2020 should come from renewable sources; 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; endorses the Executive's

commitment to tackling fuel poverty; acknowledges the Executive's commitment to not support further development of nuclear power stations while waste management issues remain unresolved; welcomes the forthcoming release of the first two volumes of the Scottish Energy Study; recognises the importance of the UK energy review, and supports the Executive's engagement with the UK Government, Ofgem and the energy industry to ensure that the future energy supply needs of Scotland are met."

10:49

Richard Lochhead (North East Scotland) (SNP): I start by observing that two days after the BBC broadcast a powerful drama documentary that portrayed the awful events in Chernobyl almost 20 years ago, only the Tories could come to the Scottish Parliament and call for more nuclear power. The reality is that Scotland is an energy-rich country. We can meet our energy needs for the future and meet our environmental obligations with our existing resources. Indeed, we can make a disproportionate contribution to cutting emissions globally. We do not need nuclear. There is plenty of evidence that Scotland does not want nuclear—there is no public support for nuclear in Scotland—and we certainly do not need nuclear power.

The reality is that the UK energy review is a nuclear review by the UK Government in London, which wants to foist a new generation of nuclear power stations on the UK. That raises the prospect of new nuclear power stations being built in Scotland with the backing of Labour ministers in this Executive.

The idea that the UK energy review will consider—and put first—Scotland's interests, Scotland's priorities and its unique energy profile is absurd. Of course it will not do that. Scotland will not have a voice in the UK energy debate unless this Parliament ensures that Scotland makes a unique contribution to that debate and takes forward our own arguments here in Scotland.

The Scottish Government's argument on nuclear—which is that it will await the outcome of the review into the management of radioactive waste, which will be produced in July—has been blown apart by the leak this morning from CORWM that it will not produce a solution to the problem of dealing with the UK's radioactive waste.

Shiona Baird: It is not a leak; I will explain the situation later in the debate.

Richard Lochhead: I am happy to correct the phrase and to say that the reporting of CORWM's proposed recommendations indicates that there will be no solution to the problem of dealing with the waste. Therefore, the fence on which ministers in Scotland have been sitting has been blown

apart. Will they stop dithering, rule out nuclear once and for all and concentrate their energy elsewhere?

Allan Wilson: The member refers to a leak, which he then concedes is not a leak. Will he also concede that CORWM was set up to consider not detailed safety cases but management options and to explore the type of solution that could be found for the future management of waste?

Richard Lochhead: The fact is that the minister says that his policy is based on waiting for the outcome of that report to see what can be done with waste before taking a decision on nuclear. We now know that there will be no solution to the problem of dealing with nuclear waste, so the minister must take a decision now. He must stop dithering and concentrate on realising the massive potential of Scotland's alternative energies. That is the key to our future in Scotland. Scotland is one of the most energy-rich nations per head of population in the world. We have 62.4 per cent of the European Union's proven oil reserves, 12.5 per cent of the EU's gas reserves, 69 per cent of the UK's coal reserves, 25 per cent of the wind resource in Europe, 10 per cent of the wave resource in Europe and 25 per cent of the tidal resource in Europe.

We must scotch the myths that are being perpetuated in the UK media and by the UK Government. Scotland is not a gas importer; we are a gas exporter. Our energy policy should not be based on being a gas importer, because we consume only an eighth of the gas that we produce in Scotland. We should use that for the benefit of Scotland's energy future. We must develop clean technologies and examine how we will extend the life of Longannet using clean technologies that are being developed here in Scotland. The likes of Longannet must have a future role in meeting Scotland's energy needs.

The minister should devote his attention to developing those clean technologies. One example is the carbon capture and storage technologies that are being developed in Peterhead—a world first. A hydrogen power station will be built there, which will give carbon-free electricity to the people of Scotland.

We have a 10-to-15-year window to get our approach right. We need an energy plan for Scotland that considers where we will produce our energy, how we will produce it and to what extent we will produce it. Only this Parliament can deliver that. The UK energy review will not deliver for Scotland. We need energy powers here in Scotland to decide our own energy future. Otherwise, we are in real danger of having an energy-rich Scotland in which the lights are out.

I move amendment S2M-3870.2, to leave out from “with interest” to end and insert:

“that Scotland is an energy rich nation; rejects calls for investment in new nuclear power stations in favour of accelerating the development of our renewables potential and emerging clean technologies; notes that, contrary to the impression given by many commentators, Scotland is a gas exporter and consumes only one-eighth of gas produced, and believes that the Parliament requires the political powers to determine our own energy future and ensure that our energy resources benefit the people of Scotland.”

10:54

Nora Radcliffe (Gordon) (LD): I speak in support of Allan Wilson's amendment, but I will comment first on Alex Johnstone's motion.

Let us consider the construction of new nuclear power stations and let us nail that as an option once and for all. Nuclear electricity generation is expensive. It is also dangerously susceptible to both accidents and terrorism. It is not carbon free and it depends on an imported material—uranium. It does not guarantee uninterrupted base-load. Perhaps we should probe more deeply why people are hellbent on pushing the nuclear option in the face of all the arguments against it.

We should be sensitive to the effect of our energy choices on our global relationships. I would rather offer developed sustainable energy technology to the rest of the world than use nuclear power myself while denying it to others, whatever justification I may think I have for so doing.

I am sorry to say that in this debate, as in others, new nuclear has been a dangerous distraction when we should, as the Executive amendment says, concentrate on developing

“a wide range of renewable energy technologies”,

tackling the waste of increasingly expensive energy,

“tackling fuel poverty”

and sorting out priorities for future investment.

Scotland has the resources, the marine expertise, the marine energy expertise and the manufacturing capability to develop a world-leading industry that would bring new jobs and profits. The Carbon Trust published a report yesterday that said:

“Marine energy could provide up to 20 per cent of the UK's current electricity needs and become cost-competitive with conventional and other renewable types of energy generation in the long term—given the right level of investment now.”

The minister mentioned other potential options, such as biomass. Our farmers, who face a

changing situation in their economic lives, would like us to develop that more.

Energy efficiency could reduce demand by 30 per cent. It makes sense to tackle fuel poverty by insulating houses and not just by giving people more money to burn as energy prices rise.

Microrenewables offer huge potential to reduce household bills and demand for centrally generated electricity.

Alex Johnstone: All the options that the member has mentioned are important and viable, but does she suggest that they are capable in themselves of supplying 100 per cent of our electricity demand 100 per cent of the time?

Nora Radcliffe: I am confident that if we spent the money that we would invest in developing new nuclear power stations on developing clean coal technology, carbon sequestration, energy efficiency and all the other measures such as microrenewables and biomass instead, we could meet our energy demands sustainably for ever.

The ministerial foreword to the Department of Trade and Industry's energy review document says:

"Decisions to be made over the next few years by government and the private sector will have a big influence on our energy future for decades to come."

As an aside, I point out that the private sector will not touch nuclear with a bargepole. We should make the right decisions, ignore the nuclear cul-de-sac and use our resources to get on with the sensible and sustainable energy options that are available to us.

10:58

Mr John Home Robertson (East Lothian) (Lab): I am a loyal Labour member and I am particularly loyal to the Labour minister who is present, so I am prepared to support his amendment, because it endorses the UK energy review and acknowledges the need to meet Scotland's future energy needs. That is what the debate is all about: security of energy supplies for households and businesses; reducing emissions of carbon dioxide; and employment for people in an important Scottish industry.

The big, inescapable issue is that 2,342MW of generating capacity from Cockerzie and Hunterston B is close to the end of its design life and another 2,304MW at Longannet is not far behind. If we want secure electricity supplies in future, and if we want to keep Scotland's share of the British electricity generation industry, we must start the long process of planning for new base-load generators. Before we can do that, we need decisions about the generators that we want.

Unlike Nora Radcliffe, I honestly believe that we need a balanced mix of energy for the future. I strongly support the Executive's policy of maximising the potential for renewables. I supported the Robin Rigg wind farm when I was a member of the Robin Rigg Offshore Wind Farm (Navigation and Fishing) (Scotland) Bill Committee and I support appropriate wind farms in my constituency, even when they are unpopular. I doubt whether the Executive's target of generating 40 per cent of energy from renewables is achievable, but by all means we should try. The target is important and I wish to be positive about it.

As I come from a former coalfield constituency, I am keen on clean coal technology, too. However, I am acutely aware of justified public opposition to inappropriate opencast mining and we should be concerned about excessive dependency on imported coal.

I am also enthusiastic about energy efficiency and insulation—I agree with Nora Radcliffe about that.

All that is very fine, but it will not make up for the loss of 4,646MW when the power stations that I mentioned have to be decommissioned in just a few years' time. Even if we reach the ambitious target of 40 per cent of energy from renewables, we will still need to supply the remaining 60 per cent from base-load generating stations. If we fail to take sensible decisions about new base-load stations soon, we will create an electricity shortage that could mean market-driven increases in electricity prices and would mean a risk of power cuts and the loss to Scotland of many electricity supply jobs.

What are the options? Clean coal technology has some potential, but supplies of imported gas and oil are increasingly expensive and insecure, and hydrocarbons cause emissions of greenhouse gases, which cause global warming. That must stop.

What about nuclear? The Executive amendment is right to refer to the big issue of permanent safe storage for nuclear waste. Nirex told the cross-party group on the nuclear industry last week that it will be expensive but perfectly feasible to construct a permanent national repository for the inherited legacy of nuclear waste. The cost of making that store big enough to take the waste from a new generation of nuclear power stations would be marginal.

In those circumstances, the UK Government is right to address its inherited responsibility for existing nuclear waste. In that context, it is right and proper that the review of options to meet our future needs for electricity without carbon dioxide emissions includes the nuclear option. When the

decision is taken on permanent storage of nuclear waste on the basis of the best scientific evidence—as it must be—the condition on storage in the Executive's policy on nuclear power will be fulfilled. If the UK Government opted for new nuclear stations to meet our future needs, it would be perverse for the Scottish Executive to sacrifice Scottish interests by refusing to allow any new stations to be built in Scotland.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Murray Tosh): You must close.

Mr Home Robertson: People who live around Torness, Hunterston or Chapelcross would welcome new reactors, so why would our Executive spite the minister's and my constituents by insisting that Scotland should import all its nuclear electricity up the wires from England?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You must close.

Mr Home Robertson: That cannot be allowed to happen. I support the Executive amendment and the Conservative motion.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We have a timing difficulty. I will call Alex Neil, to be followed by Phil Gallie. The remaining members will have only three minutes each, so please tailor your speeches now.

11:03

Alex Neil (Central Scotland) (SNP): It is a great pity that we do not yet have the document that is to be published this afternoon on Scotland's future energy supply and demand requirements as currently forecast, because the starting point for the debate on energy must be at what point Scotland will face a gap between its energy supply and its energy demand. We are debating how—if and when we reach that position—we should close the gap between demand and supply. Until we quantify the gap, we cannot answer questions about how and when to close it. I hope that, when we have the next energy debate, we are much more factually informed and have the forecasts for supply and demand.

I acknowledge that people such as John Home Robertson honestly believe in the nuclear option, but I totally disagree with him. He was right to say that we cannot rely on imported coal and several members have said that we cannot rely on imported gas. However, if we take the nuclear option, we will end up relying on imported uranium. The fact is that the worldwide supply of uranium is estimated to last only 40 years. On previous estimates, Scotland will not face an energy gap until about 2025. Indeed, the extension to the life of Torness that has been announced means that Scotland probably will not face an energy gap until beyond 2025. From now

until 2025 is 20 years and 20 years is half of 40 years, so by the time Scotland faces an energy gap—

John Scott (Ayr) (Con): Will the member give way?

Alex Neil: I would usually be delighted to take an intervention, but I have only three minutes.

By the end of the timeframe that John Home Robertson is talking about for the development of new nuclear facilities, there will be only a 20-year worldwide supply of uranium left. That fact, combined with the threat of a terrorist attack on nuclear installations, the cost of nuclear power and the fact that we do not yet have a sensible answer to the waste problem, makes the nuclear option unviable on at least four or five counts.

That brings me to my final point. In three months' time, the outcome of the UK energy review will be announced. The chief scientific adviser to Tony Blair has already let the cat out of the bag. In Downing Street, the decision has already been taken in principle to go for the nuclear option. The key to the difference between Downing Street's decision and Scotland's decision is that Scotland does not need or want nuclear power, so there is no reason why we should have it forced on us.

11:06

Phil Gallie (South of Scotland) (Con): To my mind, the debate on energy is all-important. Energy is a key issue for the Scottish Parliament and the national Government at Westminster to address. I identify with every word of John Home Robertson's speech and will be able to curtail my own a little by not repeating much of what he said.

There are three main issues. The first is climate change, the second relates to a European initiative that I applaud—the Lisbon agenda—and security of energy supply, and the third is the genuine problem of nuclear waste, which must be tackled.

There is no doubt that, in future, we will have to use a range of means of generation to combat climate change. At the moment, we use known technology, but to meet the Government's targets we are considering the use of technology that—except in the case of wind—is still developing. That is not good enough if we are to meet the requirements of the Lisbon agenda and ensure that we have security of energy supply. We must confront the issue globally. With great respect to the nationalists, Scotland cannot consider only its own energy requirements. If nothing else, we are part of Great Britain—that is a geographical fact. We cannot be isolated on energy.

The present wind technology means that back-up from conventional power sources must always

be available if we are to have security of supply. That is a fact of life. When I crossed the Forth bridge into Fife last Tuesday, I noticed that all four units at Longannet power station were showing signs that they were on or had been on in the immediate past. I thought about how Kincardine power station, which could be seen over to the left of the bridge, was no more. In fact, Fife used to have five power stations. In my days in the power industry, there were stations at Townhill, Methil and Keltly. Those small, high-polluting stations have gone because they were not felt to be adequate to meet future needs.

Whichever way we consider the problem, we must acknowledge that nuclear power offers a safe option. Richard Lochhead mentioned Chernobyl, but that has been the world's only major nuclear disaster. It happened in Russia and another accident could happen in another land at any given time. The fact that the UK had nuclear expertise meant that we were able to help the Russians to tackle a global problem. Richard Lochhead should take that on board. We cannot isolate ourselves on nuclear power.

When we consider future nuclear generation, we must look back on the success of our industry in Scotland. Our nuclear power stations at Chapelcross, Hunterston and Torness have consistently and safely ensured security of supply. The local communities have no fear of those facilities and would welcome their expansion, if that were to be a factor.

What is most important is that we take a long-term view of our energy sources. We talk about fuel poverty and its effects on the elderly. Given that we recognise that we will need heat and light into the future, we should not deprive future generations by opting for technologies that have not yet been fully developed. Nora Radcliffe said that it is necessary to ensure that homes are properly insulated. We have known and have been doing something about that for years. Although that is part of the solution, it is not the whole solution.

11:10

Shiona Baird (North East Scotland) (Green):

It is extremely difficult to have a mature debate when Conservative members provide such misinformation. The CORWM report is a draft report that is on that body's website; it has not been leaked. If we are to take a correct stance on nuclear power, although we must listen to all sides, we must listen very carefully when experts make statements.

Phil Gallie mentioned what happened at Chernobyl. Although that event took place 20 years ago, there are still nine farms in Scotland

that are under restrictions as a result of it. That is how devastatingly dangerous nuclear power is. I find it quite offensive for Alex Johnstone to say, with a smirk on his face, that nuclear power is clean. It is not.

One of the most important points to bear in mind is that electricity makes up only a small proportion of our final energy consumption. Figures that the DTI released last year show that 18 per cent—less than a fifth—of our final energy use is in the form of electricity. That means that even in Scotland, nuclear power accounts for less than 7 per cent of final energy use. It is widely accepted that we need to reduce our carbon emissions by 60 per cent by 2050, so it is clear that nuclear power could never deliver anything like those savings, even if it were carbon free.

Phil Gallie: Will the member give way?

Shiona Baird: No, I do not have time.

Nuclear power is not carbon free, it is not cheap, it is not safe and it is not sustainable. Any objective assessment of nuclear power will come to those conclusions. It is hopelessly naive to suppose that we will ever be able to tackle energy policy simply by talking about electricity. We need to talk about the energy that is used in transport, the energy that is used in industry and the energy that is used in the home.

Other members have spoken about the amount of energy efficiency that is available to be captured. The Conservative party—the party for business—will be interested to learn that the Scottish Executive estimates that Scottish businesses waste £1.3 billion every year through energy inefficiency. Does any member think that that is acceptable and that businesses can afford to throw away so much money?

Energy policy is about much more than providing a supply of electricity. We need to be innovative and imaginative, not lazy and complacent. New nuclear power stations would be a distraction and an admission of failure—an admission that we could not be bothered to think things through properly. We need to apply our minds and find the right solution because the rewards for us all will be enormous.

11:13

Frances Curran (West of Scotland) (SSP): My first point is that at least the Tories are honest—at least they commit themselves by stating clearly that they are in favour of nuclear power and new nuclear power stations. We know that although Labour is pretending that it is not in favour of nuclear power, its members will all end up on John Home Robertson's side when it comes to the vote,

because that is what Westminster will tell them to do.

The surprising aspect of the Tories' advocacy of nuclear power and new nuclear power stations is not their use of the political argument but their use of the economic argument. The liabilities of Britain's two nuclear generators, British Nuclear Fuels Ltd and British Energy, are £7 billion more than the assets that they have set aside to pay for them. In a free market economy, those two companies would have been bankrupt by now. In fact, British Energy should have declared itself bankrupt in 2002 when it was threatening to go into liquidation because it did not have the money to go on. The only reason why it did not go bankrupt was that the Government stepped in and offered the company £650 million as a bridging grant. The fact that the money was given as a grant and not a loan shows that the Government did not expect to get it back.

The Government has taken responsibility for all nuclear waste processing at a cost of between £150 million and £200 million. Again, taxpayers' money is being used to subsidise private companies. If we were talking about a shipyard, car plant or electronics company, the Tories would be up in arms at the idea of using taxpayers' money to subsidise companies that pay dividends to their shareholders—for example, British Energy paid out £48 million in the same year as it said that it was going bankrupt. How on earth can the Tories defend public subsidy being given to that sort of company?

The argument is clear: the production of nuclear energy is not a profitable venture. Have the Tories changed their philosophy so much that they want to sink more and more public money into doomed companies that cannot make a profit? In fact, before we build even one new nuclear power station, we have to deal with the even higher cost of disposing of the 60 million tonnes of plutonium that no one knows what to do with. It will be very expensive to deal with that.

I have a question for the Tories. Why are they in favour of public subsidy being given to BNFL and British Energy when nuclear power is so expensive to produce and when they are not in favour of giving public subsidy to other industries? My position on the issue is clear: I am in favour of public subsidy. Margaret Thatcher would be shocked to hear of the deviation that the Scottish Tories have taken in a free market economy. I ask the Tories to answer the point in their summing up.

11:17

Sarah Boyack (Edinburgh Central) (Lab): It is difficult to make a coherent contribution on this complex subject in just three minutes, so I will

make only a couple of points. First, I cannot share the enthusiasm of colleagues that we should rush headlong into a nuclear future. Secondly, I despair at the lack of political support among Tory members for putting energy efficiency at the top of our agenda. Thirdly, we need to have a balanced energy policy that looks at some of the new and exciting opportunities, on which, as Allan Wilson outlined, the Executive is leading the way.

Energy policy has to be about more than renewables. I have heard a lot of talk about security of supply this morning. It is important that we do not get fixated on electricity alone. Some exciting things are happening at the moment, even on the issue of the security of electricity supply. For example, Denmark is looking at 50 per cent of its electricity production being supplied through decentralised energy networks. One of the important debates that Scotland needs to have is on energy supply and electricity networks, but we have not even started that public debate; we are way behind on the issue.

The real problem that we must face up to is our fixation with big power stations—regardless of whether they are nuclear or coal fired. I accept that big power stations have a part to play in the debate, but our fixation on them means that we are constantly being diverted from looking at the range of solutions that are out there.

Richard Lochhead: Will the member give way?

Sarah Boyack: No, I cannot give way in a three-minute speech.

The Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution looked at a range of energy scenarios in a recent report on the subject. I suggest that colleagues take a long, hard look at the report, whose recommendations provide options for a nuclear-free future.

Many difficult questions have to be resolved. The UK Government's performance and innovation unit has suggested that the cost-effective potential for energy efficiency is 30 per cent of our final energy demand. That should be the starting point for our debates on energy.

We are wasting our precious and expensive energy resources and that is the wrong approach to take. We need to put energy efficiency at the top of the agenda and we must do that with some urgency. Energy efficiency is good for both businesses and householders; it is a key part of the solution to fuel poverty in Scotland.

Climate change demands that we start with energy efficiency and our CO₂ demands. Energy efficiency should be what drives our housing and other building procurement and design and our future industrial and wider economic performance. We have to buy ourselves time and not fall for the

simple, easy, quick fix that the Conservatives have offered us today in their motion.

Solar panels are being used in Edinburgh to create hydrogen through water electrolysis. Other exciting work is being done in Shetland. A lot of that new work will give us solutions for the future. We have to look at a balanced range of mechanisms to deal with supply and demand. That has to be where we go in future.

Allan Wilson outlined the excellent work that the Executive is doing. We have to continue that work and not be diverted from it. That has to be our top priority today. Let us reject the Tory motion and vote for the Executive amendment.

11:20

Jeremy Purvis (Tweeddale, Etrick and Lauderdale) (LD): In such a debate, it is hard not to be emotive or to polarise the arguments. I know that because last summer I met children from Chernobyl when they visited my constituency for the one week in the year that they spend in an unpolluted environment.

Of course, there are practical arguments against nuclear. Briefly, one such argument is that no private investor in isolation has built a nuclear power station anywhere in the world since what happened at Three Mile island and Chernobyl. When President Bush's Energy Policy Act was passed by Congress in August 2005, he said that it would reverse the fact that no new power stations had been built in the US since the 1970s. However, the act included several massive incentives to encourage the construction of new nuclear power plants. The incentives included production tax credits, loan guarantees and risk protection for the companies that decided to pursue the first new reactors.

Nuclear power plants are not economically viable as investment opportunities unless there is massive Government intervention, as there is in Finland. Furthermore, our experience in this country tells us that, once they are built, they are uninsurable. The low unit price of nuclear generation has to be offset against the financial cost of managing construction, the cost of decommissioning and the cost of waste management for many generations to come.

However, the debate is not a straightforward one. Even though I oppose new nuclear across the UK and especially in Scotland, I know that, as other members said, we cannot afford to be wholly reliant on gas to meet our energy needs. As Brian Wilson, the former Minister of State for Energy, outlined very well at the weekend, research shows that, without diversification in generation, the UK will become reliant on gas for 70 per cent of its

energy needs, 90 per cent of which would be imported. That is a concern.

John Scott: Will the member take an intervention?

Jeremy Purvis: I am sorry, I do not have time.

Any observer of the recent disputes between Russia and the Ukraine and, most recently, between Russia and Finland will be very sensitive to the insecurity that such heavy reliance on importation can cause.

These are big strategic decisions for the UK and we must get them right. However, Executive ministers must be applauded—Ross Finnie, Jim Wallace and Nicol Stephen in particular—for taking Scotland forward faster and further than their ministerial colleagues south of the border have done. We have ambitious targets in Scotland and we are matching them with considerable investment and with research and industrial support under the green jobs strategy. However, we can and we must go further.

On Saturday, I will chair the first Borders energy summit. I put the summit together with great support from Scottish Borders Council, Heriot-Watt University, the Borders construction industry forum, the Southern Upland Partnership and others. For the first time, policy makers, practitioners and researchers will come together to discuss how we in the Borders can have a fully integrated energy strategy for the area involving Government, business and the community. On Sunday, the Southern Upland Partnership has arranged a series of exciting workshops and seminars, which members of the public can attend and in which they can discuss energy needs and the barriers to a more radical approach being taken.

In common with other members, I find that energy is one of the themes running through my constituency casework. I refer to the damp homes that constituents have to endure before their houses are repaired, controversial wind farm applications and the lack of central heating and proper insulation in many older people's homes. Too many of my constituents are fuel poor. They live in housing stock that is desperately in need of insulation. Too many people, particularly those on low incomes and the elderly, suffer in the winter months because of poor heating and fuel bills that eat into low fixed incomes.

However, close to home, the Borders has pioneers who are making changes. They include the Berwickshire Housing Association with its hydrogen cell scheme in social housing and the Buccleuch Estates with its biomass energy investment. Although that is all very exciting, we have the potential to go further and to become self-sufficient in energy. Indeed, in the public

sector and social housing, we should consider generating our own electricity that could be bought back and used locally. We should use the regulatory regime more innovatively. I am pleased that the director of the Office of Gas and Electricity Markets Scotland will be at the Borders energy summit on Saturday to give us his advice.

In effect, the Borders could be off-grid. We could reduce our reliance on others and mainstream the benefits of clean and sustainable energy, whether that is from biomass, ground source heating, wind or micro hydro. If areas such as the Borders take a more radical approach, there will be benefits for all.

11:24

Rob Gibson (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): In their motion, the Tories avoided the hard questions. For example, they avoided the question of what the cost was of developing nuclear power in the past. They do not tell us how much the taxpayer paid to do that, nor do they measure that cost against the cost of developing renewables. In the main, the funding for renewables seems to be coming from the private purse, albeit with some Government subsidy.

The fact that a huge amount was spent on developing the nuclear industry in the past distorts the debate. The Tories will not admit that its position is completely untenable. As Michael Meacher—who, of course, they will say is biased—said last weekend, building new nuclear power stations is

“financially insane, unless there is absolutely no alternative”.

There is an alternative. The problem that the Tories have is that they consider the British context, in which large centres of population can be served by large units. In Scotland, we have a much more dispersed population. We need to consider the process of serving that population and accessing the wider market for what we can produce from clean sources. The Tory argument is skewed away from the reality of meeting the needs of Scottish constituents.

Several Labour and Liberal Democrat members talked about off-grid potential and decentralising the power that people have over energy production. I challenge those members to support the findings of inquiries of the Environment and Rural Development Committee and the Enterprise and Culture Committee into the potential for that. The silence from those members is deafening. We await their response with interest.

Labour has put some Scottish Executive money into ROCs and wave and tidal energy development in Orkney. I am happy about that, but the amount of money is minuscule, compared with

the huge sums that were spent on developing the nuclear industry. Until we have power over energy policy in Scotland, we are not going to get the Government backing that is required to put the renewables sector on a much firmer footing.

Nora Radcliffe mentioned energy efficiency. How much carbon would be saved by investing £X million in energy efficiency, rather than in a new nuclear power station? Energy experts estimate that seven times as much carbon would be saved, reducing the requirement for the power to be produced. The Tories do not have one argument that stacks up financially.

Energy security in Scotland is about our ability to organise our tremendous resources. Offshore wind is much more predictable than the Tories admit. Companies such as Talisman, which is prepared to invest something in the region of £1 billion in the Moray firth Beatrice scheme, do not throw their money around lightly. They see offshore energy as part of an energy mix. That mix has to include biomass, which we can develop here, and other energy sources.

The issue of access through the grid to a market for that energy affects any kind of production. At present, there is no guarantee that the smaller companies that we want to encourage can access the grid without having to pay a ransom to get their supply in.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You must close now.

Rob Gibson: By privatising the grid and making it a free market organisation, the Government is causing us in Scotland to have this stupid debate, which does not address the reality and the potential—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I have to stop you.

11:28

Allan Wilson: I agree that the energy study that will be published this afternoon will shed light on the matter. I hope that as a consequence we will have more light and less heat in future.

We cannot divorce Scotland from the rest of the UK. We have a single energy market here in Scotland. We acknowledge that nuclear power plays an important role in that single market in generating electricity for Scotland. We await the findings of CORWM in July. We will engage with the UK energy review, rather than speculate wildly on its outcome and possible implications for Scotland.

The energy review will assess progress against four goals: to put the UK on a path to cut carbon dioxide emissions by 60 per cent by about 2050,

with real progress made by 2020; to maintain the reliability of energy supplies; to promote competitive markets in the UK and beyond; and to ensure that every home is heated adequately and affordably.

Richard Lochhead: Is the Scottish Government going to make a submission to the UK energy review?

Allan Wilson: Yes and part of that submission will refer to the energy study that we have commissioned.

There has been a lot of discussion about waste, which is important. We have said that we will not sanction the construction of new nuclear power stations until the issue of waste is resolved. We have a legacy of carbon waste. To date, no safe disposal route for carbon waste has been found. Our industrial society has historically dumped that waste into the earth's atmosphere in the shape of CO₂ and other greenhouse gases. That is why many experts from Kyoto to Montreal, such as Professor King and James Lovelock, say that the biggest danger to future generations is climate change and greenhouse gases.

Sarah Boyack is absolutely right to say that there is now a broad scientific consensus that the climate is changing as a result of burning fossil fuels. The 22nd report of the Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution, which was published in 2000, recognised that and said that the proven ways of generating electricity on a large scale without producing carbon dioxide are nuclear fission, large-scale inland water power and tidal barrages.

Shiona Baird: Is the minister saying that the whole life cycle of nuclear power does not create any CO₂ emissions and that it is clean?

Allan Wilson: I am not arguing the case for or against in that context. I am saying that the reason why Professor King and James Lovelock, who are environmentalists like Shiona Baird, support the nuclear option is that it combats the effects of climate change.

Shiona Baird's prospective allies in the SNP claimed that the CORWM report was a leak. It is of course nothing of the sort. The Greens have to examine their prospective relationship with the nationalists, the alliance between the Greens and the yellows—the environmentalists on one hand and the environmental cowards on the other. From what Richard Lochhead said, it sounds like the SNP wants to burn more gas and therefore increase CO₂ emissions. If the oil companies shout "Jump", Alex Salmond shouts, "How high?" Richard Lochhead and Alex Salmond want to Hoover up every last fish in the North sea and ignore all the scientific advice. I put it to Shiona Baird that the relationship or love affair—or

flirtation, as Patrick Harvie put it—is nothing less than attempted rape by the nationalists.

Nora Radcliffe made an important point on the Carbon Trust's report on marine energy, which is a welcome endorsement of the potential of marine renewables, which is very much in line with the Executive's plans for the sector. The Executive and the Carbon Trust will work together further to promote marine renewables.

I recommend heartily that everyone make their contribution to the UK energy review.

11:33

David McLetchie (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Con): I am sure that members will agree that our motion on future energy policy is framed in the most reasonable terms. In his opening speech, my colleague Alex Johnstone invited members to debate the subject with open minds. In our motion, we do not proclaim the superiority of one mode of electricity generation over another. We simply ask that all options be considered.

It is fair to say that, as Rob Gibson pointed out, in assessing the overall balance sheet, many cost factors are attributed to the development of the nuclear industry—historical and prospective—which have to be taken into account. That is why it is important that there is transparency about the cost implications and why people must approach the debate with open minds. It is not a matter of coal against gas, or wind power against nuclear energy; it is about ensuring that we have a secure and affordable supply of the energy on which our prosperity and way of life depend, not least for the sake of those citizens who live in lower-income households and for whom fuel poverty is a major issue.

I am an agnostic on the question of how we achieve that secure and affordable supply. Nothing would please me more than to see the development of technologies that would supply all our energy needs at affordable prices from domestic renewable sources, be they wind, wave, tidal, biomass or solar power. Sarah Boyack made some useful points on localised generation and the importance of energy efficiency.

Christine May: Mr McLetchie mentioned wind power and spoke about his support for renewables. Why have the Conservatives quite shamefully and blatantly campaigned against every wind farm application across Scotland?

David McLetchie: That is a gross distortion. The member will find that the Conservative party has campaigned against extensive, large-scale and wholly inappropriate wind farm developments in certain parts of Scotland. We have done so because we cannot understand what is green or

sustainable about despoiling the scenery and natural beauty of Scotland for the purpose of generating expensive windmill electricity, which is sustainable only at considerable cost to our hard-pressed taxpayers and overcharged consumers. That is what informs our attitude to that issue.

The evidence is that there are still many closed minds in the Parliament on the subject of future energy and a determination on the part of some to rule out a nuclear option. That is all the more staggering when one considers the concerns about the security of gas supply from abroad—which were recently exemplified by the situation with regard to the Russian Federation—the significant contribution to electricity generation that is made by nuclear power stations, which will have to be replaced, and the major contribution that nuclear generation makes to achieving our CO₂ emissions target and fulfilling the international environmental obligations to which the previous Conservative Government committed us at Kyoto.

Alex Neil: Will the member give way?

David McLetchie: Sorry, I have no time.

It seems to me, having listened to the speeches of Richard Lochhead and other members of the SNP, that the attitude of members of the SNP—which is that they object to nuclear power on the basis that Scotland generates far more electricity than it consumes—is extremely curious. The SNP wants us to be an independent nation, but its policy would prevent some of our most successful companies from exporting their product. Characteristically, we were about five seconds into Mr Lochhead's speech when we heard all about Chernobyl. The fact of the matter is that the accident at Chernobyl happened because the communists wanted to build nuclear energy on the cheap. The accident was the result of a failure of a failed political system. The design of that system did not encompass a building to contain any leak that might happen. As Phil Gallie, with his expertise in the electricity industry, pointed out, the safety record of the nuclear industry in this country is outstanding.

Allan Wilson: Will the member give way?

David McLetchie: The minister is welcome to make what will be his most important contribution of the day.

Allan Wilson: On the issue of the nationalists' policy on the relationship between energy supply and consumption, does Mr McLetchie agree that if we applied the same criterion to the whisky industry—which would mean that we would produce only for our own consumption—that would have a negative impact on Scotch whisky exports?

David McLetchie: It would have a devastating impact. However, Mr Wilson and I would make a noble effort to try to plug the gap and sustain employment.

Those who have declared their outright opposition to nuclear power stations have a degree of honesty. However, I cannot say the same thing about Her Majesty's Government and the Executive, which hide behind the fiction that decisions cannot be taken on new nuclear power stations until the issue of waste disposal has been resolved. That is nonsense because it implies that there are no such issues to be resolved at present. We all know that that is far from being the case. Something like 90 per cent of the waste already has to be disposed of. The issue has to be resolved in any case and I have no doubt that it will be.

In that context, all the expert evidence—for example, the report from the Council for Science and Technology that was published in May last year—shows that waste products from the 10 new nuclear power stations that are required to replace the current nuclear component of the generation mix would add no more than 10 per cent to the existing volume of radioactive waste over a 60-year period. That report goes on to say:

“The issue of nuclear waste from modern reactors might therefore be seen as a smaller barrier to positive decisions on new power stations than that currently perceived. Furthermore, we believe that any ultimate solution derived for the existing legacy should be suitable to accommodate the waste from new nuclear plants.”

Quite so.

We all know that, on this issue, as on many others, the Scottish Executive is adept at playing for time. However, time is not on our side, as John Home Robertson pointed out in his sensible and balanced speech. We need to take decisions in the near future because of the timescales involved. Therefore, I urge Her Majesty's Government to make up its mind on the energy policy of Britain, of which I am proud that we Scots remain a part, and I urge the Scottish Executive to co-operate in the implementation of that policy and not to frustrate it, so that we in Scotland can play our part in securing an affordable supply of energy for ourselves and future generations.

Question Time

SCOTTISH EXECUTIVE

General Questions

11:41

Waste Electrical and Electronic Equipment Directive

1. Marlyn Glen (North East Scotland) (Lab):

To ask the Scottish Executive whether it has developed a timetable with the Scottish Environment Protection Agency and local authorities for the implementation of the waste electrical and electronic equipment directive and, if so, what the timetable is. (S2O-8799)

The Minister for Environment and Rural Development (Ross Finnie): We are working with the United Kingdom Government on further proposals for consultation and a final timetable for implementation of the waste electrical and electronic equipment directive across the UK.

Marlyn Glen: That answer gives me some measure of reassurance, but there is concern about the delay in the timetable.

Does the Scottish Executive plan to become involved in any monitoring and evaluation process once collection and recycling begin?

Ross Finnie: Obviously, that would be the case. The difficulty at the moment, as Marlyn Glen will be well aware, is that the WEEE directive places a burden on the manufacturer or the importer of the equipment. Clearly, it will be important for us to ensure that, once we have established an agreement to implement the directive, it does not fall on parties who should not be responsible. We must ensure that responsibility lies where the directive implies it should be.

Alasdair Morgan (South of Scotland) (SNP): What steps is the minister's department taking to encourage firms that specialise in recycling to prepare for the opportunities that will be available?

Ross Finnie: Our waste policy makes clear the fact that there are huge opportunities—including enormous business opportunities—for specialists and for other people across the sector. The green jobs strategy highlighted the volume of business for specialists and new entrants that will arise from recycling at domestic, municipal and industrial levels. We are engaged with the companies that the member refers to, as we are engaged with the companies that seek to expand the market.

Phil Gallie (South of Scotland) (Con): Is the minister aware of the report that was published by

the Institute of Directors two days ago? It refers to the complexity of the situation for small businesses, particularly in relation to the implementation of European environmental laws in the United Kingdom. What does the minister suggest we in Scotland do about those problems?

Ross Finnie: That is not directly related to the WEEE directive. The Institute of Directors report generally encompassed the fact that small businesses are encountering difficulties. That is particularly true in rural Scotland, as businesses there are unable to collaborate with other businesses to reduce costs in the way that those in urban areas can.

We are in discussions with such businesses and with local authorities. No one expects to be able to solve the problems for nothing—the Federation of Small Businesses has made it clear that it is prepared to pay a price. We are encouraging small businesses to talk to local authorities, some of which are being extremely proactive in assisting small businesses.

Flood Management

2. Sarah Boyack (Edinburgh Central) (Lab):

To ask the Scottish Executive whether it will change the procedures for flood management schemes in light of future estimates in respect of the incidence of flooding. (S2O-8793)

The Deputy Minister for Environment and Rural Development (Rhona Brankin): Given the concerns that have been expressed about the statutory procedures, we are examining the scope for improving them. In particular, on the time taken to develop a flood alleviation scheme, we gave a commitment in the white paper "Modernising the Planning System" to improve the interaction between the planning process and other statutory procedures for flood prevention schemes. That commitment will be taken forward through the Executive's flooding issues advisory committee.

Sarah Boyack: I welcome the minister's commitment, but it is nearly six years since my constituents in Roseburn and Murrayfield were flooded out of their homes. We have still had no progress with the flood prevention scheme. Local people are deeply unhappy with the proposed scheme, and I share their concerns. Will the minister take on board the fact that the process is interminable, which frustrates progress, and the fact that, with climate change, the demand for flood prevention schemes will increase? Will the minister consider the issue with some urgency? It is not something for the back burner.

Rhona Brankin: I am very much aware of the concerns about flooding risks in various constituencies, and I very much share them. We will have to come to a conclusion on the matter as

quickly as possible. I recognise that many years have passed since the process began. We need to address the matter. The flooding issues advisory committee is doing just that.

I am aware that the City of Edinburgh Council has done some work on the matter recently. I look forward to receiving its report. I have asked the flooding issues advisory committee to work on the issue as quickly as possible. It might be that we can create a single legislative procedure, for example. We need to consider the workings of the Flood Prevention (Scotland) Act 1961—it is now over 40 years since the act was passed—and we will do so as quickly as possible. I am well aware of the concerns of the constituents whom Sarah Boyack represents.

Richard Lochhead (North East Scotland) (SNP): Is the minister aware of the concerns that are being expressed about the approach of the United Kingdom insurance industry to household insurance policies in Scotland when properties have a history of flooding? Only those measures that are being taken by the UK Government to tackle flooding south of the border are being taken into account; measures that are being taken by the Scottish Government are not. Has that matter been raised with the minister? Is she aware of it?

Rhona Brankin: Representatives from insurance organisations are involved in the flooding issues advisory committee. I am more than happy to give the member an update if there has been any discussion on that particular issue.

Waiting Times (Out-patients)

3. Dr Sylvia Jackson (Stirling) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what new measures it will put in place to reduce the longest waiting times for hospital treatment, particularly for out-patient appointments. (S2O-8803)

The Minister for Health and Community Care (Mr Andy Kerr): NHS Scotland has made tremendous progress in reducing waiting times for patients across the country. In the past year, the number of patients with a maximum waiting time guarantee who have waited more than six months for in-patient and day-case treatment has been cut by more than 6,000, and the number of patients with a guarantee who have waited more than six months for a first out-patient appointment has been reduced by almost 42,000.

Validated figures for 31 December 2005, which will show whether NHS Scotland has met our six-month maximum waiting time target, will be published by NHS National Services Scotland on 23 February 2006.

Dr Jackson: As the minister knows, the waiting times for orthopaedics in the Forth Valley NHS Board area need to be reduced. Can he say how

those waiting times might be reduced further, for example by using more allied professional input for certain procedures?

Mr Kerr: In line with what Professor David Kerr wrote in his report, and in line with our response, “Delivering for Health”, we can implement a number of significant measures to ensure that we achieve our targets on behalf of patients much more effectively. We are involved in many pieces of work around service redesign, new ways of working and the use of the Golden Jubilee national hospital. As the member points out, better use of the national health service team—including allied health professionals, in whom we have made a huge investment—will enhance the service to patients, so that they get the right person with the right skills in the right place to deal with their ailment. As we can see from our statistics, there have been historic reductions in out-patient and in-patient waiting, which suggests to me that we are getting the balance right on behalf of the patient.

Mrs Nanette Milne (North East Scotland) (Con): In my NHS area—Grampian—the use of private consultant out-of-hours clinics has significantly reduced out-patient waiting times. That being the case, will the minister consider increasing the resources that are allocated to health boards to allow them to negotiate contracts with independent consultants beyond the £45 million that is currently allocated, so as to decrease waiting times significantly?

Mr Kerr: In the past, I have consistently said that we will use the private sector as and when the patient requires the service in question. We want to guarantee that our targets are met on behalf of patients throughout Scotland. If that requires additional capacity under the control of the NHS and the use of the private sector, we will continue with that approach. I have met patients in Aberdeen and elsewhere who have access to state-of-the-art technology—sometimes mobile technology—and it is clear from their reaction that they are happy with the service that they receive, not only from the NHS but, on the occasions when it is required, from the private sector. That is good for patients, good for their families and, in my view, good for the health service in Scotland.

Concessionary Travel (Entitlement Cards)

4. Michael McMahon (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive whether all eligible people, in particular those in North Lanarkshire, have received the new entitlement card which will be required to access free Scotland-wide concessionary travel from 1 April 2006. (S2O-8811)

The Minister for Transport and Telecommunications (Tavish Scott): The new national entitlement cards will not be issued to

individuals until March 2006, as the Scotland-wide free bus scheme for older and disabled people will not be introduced until 1 April 2006. The Executive, local authorities and Strathclyde Passenger Transport are encouraging all eligible people to apply for their card now, to ensure that they receive it in time for the scheme's introduction.

Michael McMahon: In accordance with the requirements of the new concessionary travel scheme, can the minister provide some assurance that the equipment and technology that will be required by the bus operators to operate the scheme will be in place in time? Can he assure us that all bus companies that wish to participate in the scheme will have equal access to the technology?

Tavish Scott: I am grateful to Michael McMahon for raising this important issue at this time. We are working hard to achieve exactly the outcome that Michael McMahon desires, which we are looking to achieve on 1 April, and to ensure that the cards are ready and operate as smart cards using the appropriate technology, and that bus operators, both small and large, are ready to implement the system. We are working closely with the bus operators and the Confederation of Passenger Transport to achieve that. I ask Michael McMahon and other colleagues in Parliament to raise with their constituents the need for those who have not already done so to apply for the card, so that we can achieve the maximum take-up when the scheme comes into operation.

Organic Aid Scheme

5. Eleanor Scott (Highlands and Islands) (Green): To ask the Scottish Executive how, in the event of the new payment rates inducing a higher uptake from new entrants to the organic aid scheme, the Executive will decide its priorities within the rural development budget. (S2O-8833)

The Minister for Environment and Rural Development (Ross Finnie): If the new payment rates lead to a higher level of good-quality applications to the organic aid scheme that cannot be met within the existing allocation to that scheme, I will review the allocations to other schemes within the rural development budget with a view to transferring more funds to the organic aid scheme budget. In doing so, I will take account of the Scottish Executive's targets and commitments in respect of organic farming and other schemes within the rural development budget.

Eleanor Scott: The minister must admit that the budget for the organic aid scheme is grossly underfunded. If all those who are eligible to claim maintenance payments do so—as they are entitled to do—the budget for the scheme will

need to be increased fourfold. Where will the minister get the money from? Will he take it from the rural stewardship scheme, or perhaps from the less favoured areas support scheme?

Ross Finnie: I have already answered that. All the member has done is rearrange the furniture of the question. Her party colleague Mark Ruskell, who is sitting next to her, asked me the same question twice at the Environment and Rural Development Committee. I have answered the same question. If the rates induce more good-quality applications, I will have to consider the budget of the rural stewardship scheme, balance that against commitments that the Scottish Executive has made, and transfer moneys to pay out on the organic aid scheme. I do not think that it could be clearer than that.

The Presiding Officer (Mr George Reid): Question 6 is withdrawn.

Bridge Tolls

7. Tricia Marwick (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Executive whether there have been any further developments in its plans to publish the tolled bridges review and when it will make a decision on whether to support the Forth Estuary Transport Authority's proposal for a £4 toll on the Forth road bridge. (S2O-8836)

The Minister for Transport and Telecommunications (Tavish Scott): This sounds vaguely familiar. Ministers will consider the current charging proposals from FETA in conjunction with the future of the Forth road bridge. I am due to receive a report on the condition of the bridge at the end of the month, and I want to consider it carefully. We will take forward the bridges review in conjunction with those issues, and thereafter make an announcement.

Tricia Marwick: There have been further developments since I lodged the question, not least a by-election in Dunfermline and West Fife. This morning, the minister refused to rule out the possibility of an increase in tolls. Will he take the opportunity that I am giving him now to assure the people of Fife that there will be no increase in tolls on the Forth road bridge?

Tavish Scott: Ministers have made it clear—indeed, we debated the matter this morning—that they have concerns about the FETA proposals. I am not going to add to what was said earlier or reinterpret it all over again. The issue was properly debated this morning, and I have nothing further to add.

The Presiding Officer: Mr Scott is right: this is vaguely familiar, with perhaps more to come, so those who have lodged supplementaries will be disappointed.

Chewing Gum (Health)

8. Dr Jean Turner (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Ind): To ask the Scottish Executive what plans it has to introduce a national health programme to educate the public on the risk of spreading infection by spitting and discarding chewing gum in our streets and other public places. (S2O-8790)

The Minister for Health and Community Care (Mr Andy Kerr): The Scottish Executive Health Department has no plans to introduce a public education programme on the risk of spreading infection by those antisocial practices.

Dr Turner: I am disappointed to hear that, as many people outside the Parliament think that there is an urgent need to educate the public. Dry spittle becomes airborne infection, which can be inhaled. There are good advertisements on television about various health risks; we could link bad habits such as coughing and sneezing to them. One advertisement concerns spreading infection on a bus, and encourages people to get the flu injection. There may be an avian flu epidemic on the way, so we need to up our standards now. The public would like to know that the Scottish Executive will have a national programme on general hygiene in our communities to combat MRSA and winter and summer vomiting infections.

The Presiding Officer: That is a bit wide of chewing gum, but we will wait for the minister's reply.

Mr Kerr: With all due respect to the member, that is not the question that she asked initially. Had she asked about airborne infection, I would have responded completely differently. We are not aware of any health risks from people spitting in the street, however antisocial and, bluntly, disgusting such a practice may be. The Executive and NHS Scotland issue material on infection, including information on the need to take precautions when sneezing and coughing, such as using handkerchiefs and covering mouths. We want to continue with that education programme.

To answer the member's secondary question, the Executive is focused on airborne infections and diseases, and does a great deal in its public information programmes to highlight those issues. However, my first answer was predicated on her initial question.

Roads (Casualties)

9. Marilyn Livingstone (Kirkcaldy) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what measures are in place to help to reduce the number of people killed or seriously injured on roads. (S2O-8805)

The Minister for Transport and Telecommunications (Tavish Scott): The Executive is addressing road safety through a combination of engineering, enforcement and education.

Marilyn Livingstone: Will the minister join me in congratulating Fife constabulary on looking at holding a road safety reception, perhaps in the spring? Would the Executive support such a reception, at which initiatives such as safe drive, stay alive, safer Fife, pass plus, safer routes to school and 20's plenty would be considered? The reception might also afford us the opportunity to see the best of the rest of Scotland. If such a reception were held, would the minister attend it?

Tavish Scott: I would be delighted to take part in the reception that Marilyn Livingstone mentions. I also congratulate Fife constabulary on its work on road safety, and I am happy to discuss the issue further. The member raises an important point about the incidence of accidents on Scotland's trunk and local roads, and the measures that we are taking. The 20mph zone scheme, which she mentioned, is particularly important for Scotland's schools: 173 primary and 123 secondary schools already take part in that scheme. I hope that we can do much more.

First Minister's Question Time

12:00

Cabinet (Meetings)

1. Nicola Sturgeon (Glasgow) (SNP): To ask the First Minister what issues will be discussed at the next meeting of the Scottish Executive's Cabinet. (S2F-2072)

The First Minister (Mr Jack McConnell): Next week's Cabinet will discuss issues that are important to Scotland.

Nicola Sturgeon: Last week, the First Minister confirmed that increases in Forth bridge tolls are still firmly on the agenda of his Labour-Liberal Government. Will he therefore explain why, on Monday of this week at Labour's by-election campaign launch, Gordon Brown again publicly misled the public by stating that any toll increases are dead in the water?

The First Minister: I have made clear the position on the issue in the past week. As stated last Thursday and since then, the position is that we have a set of proposals from the local councils in the area that make up the transport authority for the bridge. We have to consider those proposals, following the due process that is set out in the Transport (Scotland) Act 2001. We will do that properly, but we also need to make a decision about the current condition of the existing road bridge. The report that we have commissioned on that is due to be with us by the end of this month. We intend to consider the report and make a decision on the bridge before we make a decision on the tolls.

As I said last week, the proposal for a £4 toll, which is the largest proposed increase, does not receive support in Fife or, I believe, anywhere else. This morning, Tricia Marwick again made points that were contradictory to the negotiations of Mr Salmond. Other members must answer for their policies. If the Scottish National Party is in negotiations with the Green party for Government after the 2007 elections, does it support the Green party's proposals to support the toll proposals in their entirety?

Nicola Sturgeon: The SNP's position is clear: we think that a £1 toll is enough. The position of Labour and the Liberals is many things but, frankly, clear is not one of them. On Monday, Gordon Brown said:

"The whole proposal is dropped".

I remind the First Minister that the proposal that Gordon Brown was talking about is for variable tolls—there would be £4 tolls at some times and £3 or £2 tolls at other times. Gordon Brown said

on Monday that all of that had been dropped. Is it not the case that, if Gordon Brown is telling the truth, the First Minister should be able to stand up right now and rule out any increase in tolls? If the First Minister cannot do that, Gordon Brown is clearly not telling the truth. Which is it?

The First Minister: There is clearly a problem with hearing in the chamber. The position has not changed since I outlined it last Thursday or since the Minister for Transport and Telecommunications and my official spokesperson outlined it last Wednesday. We have an important decision to make on the future of the Forth road bridge. We have a report from the Forth Estuary Transport Authority, which indicates that the current condition of the road bridge is serious and that therefore traffic on it might have to be limited by the early part of next decade and that subsequently it may have to be closed. We have commissioned a technical survey to find out whether that information is accurate and what solutions there might be. That will allow us to make a decision about the future of the bridge and to ensure that there remains a crossing over the Forth for the people of Fife and others in the north-east and south of Scotland who use the bridge at present and who would use it in the future. We will make that decision before we respond to the Forth Estuary Transport Authority on its proposals for increased tolls. The proposal for the top increase in tolls to be to £4 does not have support in Fife or anywhere else, but we must ensure that we follow due process and make rational decisions at the end of the day.

Nicola Sturgeon: Let us get this clear: when Gordon Brown said that

"The whole proposal is dropped",

he was not telling the truth. I understand the First Minister's position, although I think that it is wrong. He backs higher tolls—that is the Labour and Liberal position. Will he now tell the chancellor to stop trying to mislead the people of Fife? Does he agree that, especially in a week in which 700 of those people have lost their jobs, they deserve a lot more honesty from the Labour Party?

The First Minister: I am sure that everyone in the chamber would want to express their sympathy to those who are affected by the announcement this week of redundancies in Fife. Our absolute priority is to ensure that those individuals and their families are able to rely on continuing employment—as happened in similar circumstances in other parts of Scotland—and the action that we are able to take to secure not only new jobs but training and other opportunities for those affected. We will take that responsibility seriously and we will ensure that action is in place right away to help them.

To return to the issue of the tolls, our position is absolutely clear. We have a proposal from the local transport authority, which we will consider seriously, because there is a need to consider the current crossing over the Forth and ensure that the people of Fife and others have a road crossing over the Forth for years and years to come. That is a far more consistent position than that of a political party—the Scottish National Party—that advocates in its national policies, and indeed in manifestos, that it supports road tolling and congestion charging, yet, whenever anybody comes up with a proposal anywhere in the country to increase anything by any more than a penny, is opposed to that proposal because it cannot face up to the consequences of having to justify it. That is sheer hypocrisy, sheer dishonesty and an attempt to deceive voters. It is not credible and it is one of the reasons why the SNP's support in every election since the Parliament was created has gone down while others have managed to stay in Government.

Nicola Sturgeon: It seems that Labour politicians leave any notion of the truth behind them when they cross the Forth bridge into Fife. The First Minister says that a proposal is still on the table, yet Gordon Brown insists on repeating that that proposal has been dropped. Most people would describe that quite simply as a lie. The question for the First Minister is: will he condemn it or does he condone it?

The First Minister: I hesitate to say, yet again—for about the fifth time—what the Executive's position is. I stand by that position, but I also demand that Opposition parties are clear about their own policies. The SNP cannot negotiate with and side up to the Green party, proposing a coalition Government that would include actions such as congestion charging and road tolls, and then come along here and say that it would oppose every one of the measures that the Green party would propose. It cannot have one policy in the first week of January and a different policy in the third week of January, just because there is a by-election. The SNP should be more honest; it should answer the question and tell us what it really thinks.

Prime Minister (Meetings)

2. Miss Annabel Goldie (West of Scotland) (Con): To ask the First Minister when he will next meet the Prime Minister and what issues they will discuss. (S2F-2073)

The First Minister (Mr Jack McConnell): I have no immediate meetings planned with the Prime Minister, but I would certainly advise him and his parliamentary colleagues to avoid in future attending—as one of them has done in recent weeks—the “Celebrity Big Brother” house.

Miss Goldie: No doubt, that is sound advice. I hope that, when the First Minister next meets the Prime Minister, he will ask the Prime Minister to tell his colleagues at Westminster to keep their noses out of devolved party business.

When it comes to apportioning blame for the signalled £4 toll on the Forth bridge, should not we start with the Labour, Liberal Democrat and SNP members of the Parliament, who voted for the charging schemes and the establishment of the Forth Estuary Transport Authority under the Transport (Scotland) Act 2001 that have resulted in the current position? The First Minister described that as “due process”. Is not it the very granting of those powers that has led directly to the proposal for a £4 toll?

The First Minister: I have one very short answer to that. I quote the Conservative candidate in the current by-election, which no doubt will be mentioned in the chamber again over the next fortnight:

“I think we should look at building a new toll bridge”
for the Forth.

Miss Goldie: Something with which the First Minister is not familiar and to which the Scottish Executive is a stranger is a position that my party enjoys, called clarity of position. Unlike the First Minister and his Executive colleagues—not to mention his so-called friends at Westminster—my party has made it clear that, in so far as the existing bridge is concerned, we consider that the existing toll should not be raised at this time. [*Interruption.*] We have also made it clear that we are prepared to face up to what is now the clamant need of the communities of Fife for a new Forth crossing.

The Presiding Officer (Mr George Reid): And the question? [*Interruption.*]

Miss Goldie: I think that, despite the hubbub, I am entitled to try to respond to the point that the First Minister made. Our clear position is that we will not apologise for a possible model that includes tolling if that provides—

Members: Tolling!

Miss Goldie: There is no secret about that. We will not apologise for that model if it provides an answer—[*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: You must go for a question, Miss Goldie.

Miss Goldie: The First Minister may try to shirk his direct responsibility and that of his Labour and Liberal Democrat colleagues for the proposal. However, having set up the grouping that allowed three Labour and two Liberal Democrat councillors to push for a £4 toll, does he accept that that would be a congestion charge? Does he support

the application of a congestion charge or is he in the dead-in-the-water camp, which is led by Gordon Brown and Alistair Darling?

The First Minister: I have made clear my view on the current proposal and I have also made clear the view that we take on the decisions that we now have to make. However, I make a number of things clear in response to Annabel Goldie's statement. There is a role for tolls on bridges and, from time to time, for tolls on roads for congestion charging purposes. In relation to bridges, there is a role for tolls to pay for maintenance and perhaps even for replacement.

However, when ministers make decisions on those matters, they have to do so reasonably. That is why we commissioned, for the Forth crossing, a technical survey of the evidence that we received from the transport authority. That survey will ensure that the evidence is accurate and that all the solutions have been looked into. When we receive the technical survey we will be in a position to make, we hope very quickly, a decision in principle about the future of the crossing over the Forth. We will do that on the basis of sound evidence. That is a responsible position for a Government to take.

We will then make a decision on the proposal from the Forth Estuary Transport Authority about its plans to increase tolls on the existing bridge. It would be wrong to make a decision on that proposal before we know what we might be faced with in terms of the financial challenge associated with maintaining the current bridge and, perhaps, building a new one. The series of decisions will be made responsibly by Executive ministers. I give one absolute guarantee. Whatever solution we devise for the Forth crossing—be it a road bridge or otherwise—and whatever regime we put in place to pay for that, it will be an awful lot better than the tolling regime that the previous Conservative Government put in place on the Skye bridge, which we have now abolished.

The Presiding Officer: Miss Goldie, you may ask a further question only if it is very brief.

Miss Goldie: The First Minister's response, frankly, is cop-out and delay. His dilemma is that he is hoist with the petard of what his colleagues and back benchers want. His colleague Christine May implied that he is in the dead-in-the-water camp. He has colleagues from Westminster telling him what to do. My final question to him is this. In the midst of the bruising that he is getting from all quarters, does he agree that this degrading public spat must stop and that he must state the official Scottish Executive position on the £4 toll? People in Fife want to know the Executive's position now.

The First Minister: I credit the people of Fife with some intelligence. I believe that they will

understand, when we make decisions on the future of the crossing over the Forth, that we need to do so in the light of the full evidence, that we need to make a responsible decision, that there will be a need to pay for whatever work is required, and that we therefore need to make a decision on tolls. We will do so without imposing unreasonably on them or anybody else and in a way that ensures that we have thought through the options and have made a responsible decision. That is precisely what we were elected as ministers to do, and it is precisely what we will do.

The Opposition parties are clamouring for an early decision, even though the decision timetable was clearly laid out in advance of the writ being moved for the current parliamentary by-election. If we announced today that we were definitely going ahead with a new non-tolled bridge over the Forth, people would rightly accuse us of saying that only because of the by-election. We have taken a hard and tough position to ensure that our decisions are responsible and sustainable. We will stick to that position for the next fortnight.

The Presiding Officer: Before I take two supplementary questions that are of regional importance, members will wish to welcome the Ambassador of Austria, Her Excellency Dr Gabriele Matzner-Holzer. [*Applause.*]

Helen Eadie (Dunfermline East) (Lab): I am certain that the First Minister shares the concern of the people of Fife about Lexmark's decision to close its factory at Rosyth. Will he send the message to all agencies across Scotland that top priority must be given to arranging immediate meetings with Scott Barrie and me and to making available additional support and finance to support the relocation into other jobs of all those concerned? Will he also confirm that, in the next round of relocation of Government agencies, the constituencies in Fife will be at the front of the queue for those relocated jobs?

The First Minister: Those are important points, and I am sure that those meetings can be organised. However, I repeat that it is appropriate on occasions such as this to think primarily about the affected individuals and families and to secure their continuing employment, preferably in their local areas. The rapid reaction teams that we put in place have worked well in recent years. We all know about Motorola, which is across the Forth in West Lothian. Although 3,000 jobs were lost there, the unemployment rate in that area 12 months later was lower than it had been when the announcement of job losses was made because of the actions taken by Scottish agencies to ensure that local people had alternatives. That is exactly the kind of response that we will put in place in Fife. I welcome Helen Eadie's and Scott Barrie's support for all that we are doing.

Bruce Crawford (Mid Scotland and Fife)

(SNP): As I said during the first debate this morning, while it will not be of much comfort to the workers at Lexmark, I am sure that everyone's sympathy is with them and their families at this difficult time.

Will the First Minister give more specific details about the targeted measures that have been put in place to help the workers? Does he understand that the closure of Lexmark and the loss of 700 jobs come on top of the loss to the Fife economy of 7,000 manufacturing jobs since 1998? Will the loss of the 700 jobs at Lexmark in Rosyth at last shake the Executive out of its complacency over a manufacturing sector in Fife that is failing before its eyes? What does he intend to do about that?

The First Minister: There are different parts to that question. First, it is important to stress that the workers at Lexmark have excellent skills and have proven that they are good workers. Therefore, in supporting them we signal to other companies and potential employers that they deserve to be employed. Our agencies will work closely with those individuals, with the bodies that are responsible locally and with private companies to ensure that the workers have the maximum employment opportunities and, critically, training opportunities so that they have the best possible chance of finding continuing employment. We have done that successfully elsewhere in Scotland, and we will do it in Fife.

Secondly, although Bruce Crawford has quoted the figures that suit him, it is important to note that employment in Fife has increased by 11 per cent since 1997. Scotland's employment rate remains the highest in the United Kingdom. That is precisely because we have the right policies to secure people continuing employment with new skills and opportunities. These are difficult times, with global downturns in certain industries and jobs moving to areas in which conditions of employment are significantly poorer and costs are significantly lower than they are in Scotland. That is the case because people are paid scandalously low wages in some other countries that are clearly outwith the European Union and it is therefore difficult for us to influence the conditions under which people there work.

Here in Scotland, however, our role—and one of the key reasons for having this Parliament—is to grow Scottish companies and not rely as much as we did in the past on companies coming to Scotland from overseas, although their investment is still important. Our role is to grow our own companies so that they export more goods and expand into other countries and markets. That is our strategy—it succeeds increasingly and we continue to back it.

Secretary of State for Scotland (Meetings)

3. Shiona Baird (North East Scotland)

(Green): To ask the First Minister when he will next meet the Secretary of State for Scotland and what issues he intends to discuss. (S2F-2075)

The First Minister (Mr Jack McConnell): I meet the Secretary of State for Scotland regularly and clearly we discuss issues that are very important to Scotland.

Shiona Baird: Will the First Minister reaffirm his previous statement that a decision on nuclear power stations would not be considered as long as the problem of nuclear waste remained unresolved? He referred to waiting to see the recommendations from the Committee on Radioactive Waste Management.

The First Minister might be aware that paragraph 64 of an outline draft of the CORWM report, which is published on the CORWM website, states:

"If Ministers accept our recommendations, the UK's nuclear waste problem is not solved. Having a strategy is a start. The real challenge follows."

Will he confirm that he would not give the go-ahead to new nuclear power stations based on that CORWM conclusion?

The First Minister: Shiona Baird asked me first to confirm our existing position and then to contradict it, so I will not do that.

Our position is clear: we will not consider the possibility of new nuclear power stations in Scotland until such time as the waste issue is resolved. We expect the Committee on Radioactive Waste Management to report later this year. We await that report with some interest and will consider it carefully. At that point, we will consider what to do next about nuclear power.

Shiona Baird: I hope that the First Minister appreciates that we are discussing a serious issue that should not be sidestepped, nor should people sit on the fence. Is he aware that, according to Nirex, if the UK goes for the much-touted 10 new AP1000 reactors, there will be a 300 per cent increase in high-level nuclear waste? That represents a rise from 7,000 to 28,000 containers of high-level waste. Does he agree that we have no right to be so irresponsible in creating so much more waste for future generations to deal with?

The First Minister: What Shiona Baird says justifies our position, which is that we need to deal with the waste issue before we consider the position in relation to nuclear power stations. She highlights the crucial importance of the situation and that is why we have taken such a responsible attitude to it.

I do not often listen to the radio on Thursday morning, but this morning I heard the spokesperson for the Committee on Radioactive Waste Management say that he felt that his committee had an absolute duty to ensure that our generation considers the situation rather than leaves it to future generations. That is a very responsible approach. I am sure that the committee will have a responsible attitude to its report, and it would be responsible of us to wait until we get that report before we decide what to do next.

Skills Improvement

4. Christine May (Central Fife) (Lab): To ask the First Minister what action is being taken to improve the skills of Scotland's workforce. (S2F-2076)

The First Minister (Mr Jack McConnell): The Scottish Enterprise network and the colleges and universities funded by our Scottish Government are working with the employer-led sector skills councils to ensure we have the right skills for Scotland. We are investing in vocational education, modern apprenticeships, business and individual learning accounts and other programmes.

Christine May: What are the First Minister's views on the role of human resource development and careers services in the work of Scotland's economic development and regeneration agencies, and what are his expectations in that regard as a result of the current review of the structure of the enterprise network, which currently incorporates Careers Scotland?

The First Minister: As we debate regularly in this chamber, in order to secure improved economic growth for Scotland, we need to have investment in infrastructure, including the right investment in physical infrastructure. Secondly, we need to grow Scottish businesses and to promote their work overseas. Our enterprise network has a role in assisting with the key growth areas in that regard, but it also has a role in relation to skills.

It is through the skills of the people of Scotland and through their ability to be flexible and innovative and to apply those skills to the modern world that we will succeed and will continue to have jobs in Scotland as part of the very challenging global market. Scottish Enterprise has a continuing role to play in that, but it is also right that Scottish Enterprise is discussing the role of Careers Scotland and careers guidance within the overall framework.

Public Sector (Employment)

5. Dennis Canavan (Falkirk West) (Ind): To ask the First Minister whether the Scottish

Executive is satisfied with the number of people employed in the public sector. (S2F-2079)

The First Minister (Mr Jack McConnell): Although we are determined to ensure the most efficient delivery of public services, I believe that the additional nurses, teachers, police officers and others who have been employed in Scotland since devolution were needed and are making a difference.

Dennis Canavan: Does the First Minister agree that it is absolute nonsense for the Confederation of British Industry, *The Scotsman* or anyone else to claim that public sector workers make no contribution to the economy? What chance is there of building a smart, successful economy if there are not enough teachers? What chance is there of a healthy, efficient workforce if there are not enough doctors and nurses? Will the First Minister step up his efforts to employ more essential workers—such as doctors, nurses and teachers—to improve standards in health and education and improve our economic performance?

The First Minister: Dennis Canavan makes a valid point. Improved health in Scotland is vital for improved economic performance, as are improvements in education, led by investment not only in our schools, but in our universities and colleges. However, private sector jobs are also important for improved economic performance, and I am proud of the fact that two thirds of the 200,000 additional jobs that we have created over the past several years have been in the private sector. In addition to all the extra nurses, teachers, police officers and people working in the community to help the most vulnerable people in our society, twice as many jobs are now available in private companies in Scotland. That is a good thing; it is one of the reasons why our economic growth was yesterday recorded as being higher than that south of the border.

Prisoners (Automatic Early Release)

6. Jeremy Purvis (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD): To ask the First Minister whether the Scottish Executive intends to end automatic early release for prisoners. (S2F-2080)

The First Minister (Mr Jack McConnell): Yes. The present, discredited system of automatic early release will end. We will build on the Sentencing Commission's report, which was published on Monday, and will publish our proposals in the late spring before introducing a sentencing bill in the summer.

Jeremy Purvis: I thank the First Minister for that welcome response.

Does the First Minister agree that the commission's report should be welcomed because

its broad thrust is in line with what the Liberal Democrats have been calling for? Some recommendations, however, will require close scrutiny, particularly those relating to ministerial powers. Does he also agree that, if the recommendations for part-custody, part-community sentences are to be effective for safer communities and the rehabilitation of individuals, our community justice authorities must have proper resources and programmes?

The First Minister: I strongly welcome the Liberal Democrats' support for the Executive's proposal to implement the end of automatic early release, and I particularly welcome Jeremy Purvis's continuing support for a tough approach on crime.

Crime is a serious issue. A consistent and clear system of sentencing is needed, in which people have confidence—particularly victims and witnesses who come forward to report crimes or assist the authorities. That is why we will introduce a new system. Sentences will be clearer and will be applied to the individuals who receive them. Such an important change will be welcomed throughout Scotland. I hope that the legislation will be in place within this parliamentary session, as we promised. In that way, we will complete the current package of justice reforms that I believed were essential in 2003.

Margaret Mitchell (Central Scotland) (Con): Will the First Minister confirm that he supports the Sentencing Commission's recommendation that ministers should have a say in when all prisoners are released from jail?

The First Minister: Our proposals will be published in the spring. We will need to examine in detail some of the specific proposals made by the Sentencing Commission. Additional safeguards for the public may be included in the proposed bill. We may also find elements of the Sentencing Commission's proposals to be inconsistent with our position. The full proposals will be published in the spring and the bill will be introduced in Parliament in the summer. We hope that it will be passed and that the legislation will be in place by the end of the parliamentary session.

12:30

Meeting suspended until 14:15.

14:15

On resuming—

Question Time

SCOTTISH EXECUTIVE

Finance and Public Services and Communities

Public Service Reform

1. Derek Brownlee (South of Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Executive what progress it is making on delivering public service reform. (S20-8755)

The Minister for Finance and Public Service Reform (Mr Tom McCabe): Significant progress continues to be made in developing options for continued public service reform. The reform will deliver corresponding improvements to the lives of the people of Scotland. We value public services and our belief in and commitment to public services are underpinned by our continuing investment in public services.

Derek Brownlee: I thank the minister for his response, but my question was about progress in delivering public service reform rather than plans to introduce it in future. Is the Executive still committed to going further than Gershon, as the First Minister indicated some time ago?

Mr McCabe: The member asks in one breath about public service reform and in the next about efficient Government initiatives. There may be a correlation, but they are two separate questions. I have already made clear my point about public service reform: we will produce a discussion document in the very near future. In the interests of the people of Scotland, we also intend to pursue a rigorous programme of reform, in which not just those who work in the service but end users will see a difference. Of course we are determined to seek out efficiencies where they can be sought.

Mr John Swinney (North Tayside) (SNP): The minister has responded to the concerns raised in the Finance Committee's report on stage 1 of the budget process by saying that the efficiency targets for local government are 3.4 per cent. However, the efficiency targets for numerous Scottish Executive departments, including the Enterprise, Transport and Lifelong Learning Department, are only 0.22 per cent. He says in his response that the Executive is making efficiency savings where it has been identified that efficiency savings can be made. Does that mean that the departments with responsibility for enterprise and lifelong learning, the environment and rural

development, communities and transport cannot do better?

Mr McCabe: First and foremost, the percentage that Mr Swinney quotes for local government may be accurate, but, in percentage terms, the contribution from the Health Department is now higher. The figures that he quotes also indicate that not every portfolio in the Scottish Executive starts from the same position, and we recognise that. The programme of public service reform is one of continuous improvement in which dialogue between individual portfolios continues. I assure the chamber that that dialogue and the challenge process are vigorous and continuing and that they will produce further savings in future.

Planning (Rights of Appeal)

2. Mr Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): To ask the Scottish Executive whether it intends to reduce community rights of appeal through its proposed reform of the planning system. (S2O-8832)

The Minister for Communities (Malcolm Chisholm): The Planning etc (Scotland) Bill contains a range of measures that will enhance community participation in the planning system. Current planning law does not include community rights of appeal, and that will not change.

Mr Ruskell: Is the minister aware that, under section 13 of the Zetland County Council Act 1974, a right of appeal has operated in Shetland for more than 30 years? Will he ensure that the planning proposals that he is bringing forward will not reduce that community right of appeal? Does he agree that that right of appeal has operated well, that appeals have been few and far between and reasonable and that, far from hampering Shetland's aquaculture industry, that system has led to the very successful development of that industry in the Shetland islands?

Malcolm Chisholm: Mark Ruskell is quite right. Last year, there were three appeals under the Zetland County Council Act 1974 in relation to marine fish farming, which does not come under planning legislation at the moment, although it will be brought under it. In that sense, therefore, the same rights would not have applied in the three cases in question. However, given the scale of all the other reforms that we are introducing to enhance community participation, that system, with all due respect to Orkney and Shetland, pales into insignificance.

Ms Sandra White (Glasgow) (SNP): I hear what the minister says, but if he went out to communities, he would find that they do not feel that the Planning etc (Scotland) Bill will enhance their right of appeal; instead, it is filling them with real dread and frustration. Is he aware of that

frustration that communities feel on planning matters? For example, in Hyndland in the west end of Glasgow, 800 objections to a proposed development were lodged through a petition, as well as 100 individual letters, yet no site visit took place and the reporter refused to take the objections into account in the decision. Does he agree that that is absolutely unacceptable? Will he look into the application and meet the residents concerned?

Malcolm Chisholm: I will not get involved in any particular planning application given that we might ultimately have to consider it. However, I am the first to accept that the current planning system has problems, which is precisely why we have introduced the most radical package of reforms to it since 1947. We accept that community engagement in the planning system is not adequate, which is why we have introduced a raft of proposals to enhance communities' rights. I recognise that people have genuine concerns, but I believe that our proposals will go a long way towards addressing them.

Efficient Government Fund

3. Jim Mather (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Executive what impact the reduction by 98 per cent of the planned spend on the efficient government fund in 2005-06 will have on the achievement of efficient government targets and where the residual £200,000 will be allocated. (S2O-8772)

The Minister for Finance and Public Service Reform (Mr Tom McCabe): The efficient government fund received an agreed three-year budget from the spending review process, which runs until 2006-07. There has been no reduction in the planned spend on the programme.

Jim Mather: We have a situation in which efficiency claims are not measured against outcomes, no meaningful measurement mechanisms or baselines are in place and there is now slippage in the spend to save. What is efficient about not getting resources in place and utilised? Can we expect a corresponding slippage in the savings?

Mr McCabe: As Mr Mather follows such matters, I thought that he would be aware that the bulk of the planned expenditure of £10 million for 2005-06 was parked temporarily in the central unallocated provision. A further £1 million was used to assist in the delivery of the wider efficient government agenda and a residual £200,000 was available for the administration of the efficient government fund. Of the temporarily relocated funds, £4.484 million was allocated during the spring budget revision, which leaves in excess of £51 million for future efficient government fund use.

Regeneration

4. Mr Duncan McNeil (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive when it will make its regeneration statement. (S2O-8812)

The Minister for Communities (Malcolm Chisholm): The Executive's regeneration policy statement will be published shortly.

Mr McNeil: Does the minister agree that, if we are to take advantage of the opportunity to regenerate my constituency, there is no time to lose? Will he assure me that, when the statement is made, it will underline the Executive's commitment to areas such as Inverclyde, include the long-awaited announcement of an urban regeneration company for the area and designate industrial zones, as well as residential, leisure and retail developments, on our waterfront?

Malcolm Chisholm: I acknowledge Duncan McNeil's consistent lobbying on the issues, particularly that of an urban regeneration company. I can make only limited comments in advance of the statement, but I underline the Executive's commitment to give priority to areas of clear need and economic opportunity. The areas will be announced in the regeneration policy statement. As I said, I cannot pre-empt that, but we are well aware of the situation in Inverclyde and we are reflecting on it in the context of the statement. We are in discussion with partners in Inverclyde about the challenge of regenerating that area.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Murray Tosh): In the absence of John Farquhar Munro, who was to ask question 5, we will proceed to question 6.

Planning (Inquiries)

6. Donald Gorrie (Central Scotland) (LD): To ask the Scottish Executive what consideration it has given to changing the format of public planning inquiries by giving reporters an inquisitorial role and excluding paid advocates. (S2O-8778)

The Minister for Communities (Malcolm Chisholm): Our proposed reforms are based on the consultation paper "Modernising Public Local Inquiries". Although many of the proposals should reduce the adversarial nature of inquiries, we do not propose to prevent anybody who is involved in an inquiry from having paid representation.

Donald Gorrie: That is a pity. In the Planning etc (Scotland) Bill, there are provisions for greater use of hearings conducted by councils before a planning decision is made. Will the minister consider making a rule for the hearings that people should make their own case and not have paid advocates? Otherwise, the time and cost of

those hearings will be extended, as happens with public inquiries.

Malcolm Chisholm: We do not expect people to have paid advocates but if they were to do so, that would still be within the framework of hearings and not the adversarial system that Donald Gorrie has concerns about. There will be two kinds of hearing. There will be far more hearings before council planning committees but there will also be far more use of an informal hearing process involving reporters. One of the key changes that we will make is that people will not have an automatic right to a full inquiry. There will be more informal proceedings before inquiries take place. In general terms, even in a full inquiry there will be more use of the informal hearing procedure for bits of that inquiry. People tend to think of highly-paid advocates but, as any community group can ask someone to speak on their behalf, we think that it would be difficult in principle to exclude people from having advocates within the inquiry framework.

Fergus Ewing (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP): The minister is considering proposed changes to the format of public planning inquiries and giving reporters inquisitorial powers. Does he agree that those powers should extend to enabling reporters to consider issues such as whether a local monopoly may be established by the likes of Tesco, which has three stores in Inverness and is applying for a fourth? The reporter's role in such inquiries should extend to considering whether a local monopoly would be created that would be extremely damaging to smaller independent retailers. In Inverness, their future seems to me to be under serious threat.

Malcolm Chisholm: In any such situation, the reporter would have to follow planning guidance. I cannot talk about any particular planning application, but the general issue to which Fergus Ewing refers may be to do with out-of-town shopping centres. The new planning policy guidance on town centres and retailing would be the fundamental benchmark when decisions are taken in relation to that issue.

Argyll and Bute Council (Meetings)

7. Mr Jamie McGrigor (Highlands and Islands) (Con): To ask the Scottish Executive when it last met the leader of Argyll and Bute Council. (S2O-8766)

The Deputy Minister for Finance, Public Service Reform and Parliamentary Business (George Lyon): Scottish Executive officials and I hold regular meetings with local councils in Scotland on a wide range of issues. I am aware that the Minister for Health and Community Care met the leader of Argyll and Bute Council on 14 December 2005. I met the council's leader on 12 December in Oban.

Mr McGrigor: I am sure that the minister will be aware that Argyll and Bute's population of 91,306 is spread over the second-largest council area in Scotland. Argyll and Bute is the third most sparsely populated council area in Scotland and has 25 inhabited islands. Around 16 per cent of the area's population live on islands, from which access to the mainland is dependent on a ferry or a personal vessel. What discussions has he held with Argyll and Bute Council about whether the area should qualify for special islands needs allowance? What is the Executive's position on that at the moment?

George Lyon: I would have thought that the member would have been aware that, following a review of SINA by the Executive, £1.2 million was allocated to Argyll and Bute Council in respect of SINA payments, because it was recognised that there was a case that had to be addressed. Money has been forthcoming since that settlement. I remind the member that, since 1999, aggregate external finance support, including the SINA payment, for Argyll and Bute Council has risen by £66 million to £176 million for the year 2006-07, which is a 60 per cent rise in central support.

Central Heating Programme

8. Margaret Smith (Edinburgh West) (LD): To ask the Scottish Executive whether it will meet its target of completing all parts of its central heating programme by March 2006. (S2O-8786)

The Minister for Communities (Malcolm Chisholm): The promised public sector targets for local authorities and housing associations were met in 2004. The target that was agreed with Glasgow Housing Association is that the programme will be completed during 2007. The private sector targets have been met or exceeded each year since the start of the programme. By the end of March 2006, we expect to have installed about 46,000 systems.

The target number of installations for the over-80s was 4,000—that target was set in May 2004—but the estimated outturn by March 2006 is 6,000 systems, which represents an increase of 50 per cent.

Margaret Smith: Is the minister content with the steps that the Executive has taken to ensure that as many eligible people as possible are aware that they can apply for the central heating programme? Those who live in the poorest areas are often the least aware of what they are entitled to receive. What steps have been taken to ensure that people are aware of their entitlement?

Malcolm Chisholm: We continue to advertise the programme and we will make an announcement soon about its next phase, which will begin later this year. All the evidence that we

have suggests that the programme has been of particular benefit to people in low-income households. For example, nine out of 10 of those who lived in fuel poverty but have had central heating installed have been lifted out of fuel poverty by the programme. Without being in any way complacent, we think that the programme has been successful. In the next phase, we will focus particularly on poorer pensioners. An announcement about that will be made fairly soon.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: In Adam Ingram's absence, I move to question 10.

Public Sector Job Relocations

10. Susan Deacon (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what proportion of public sector jobs it intends to relocate outwith Edinburgh. (S2O-8796)

The Deputy Minister for Finance, Public Service Reform and Parliamentary Business (George Lyon): The Scottish Executive has no prescribed target for relocating a proportion of public sector jobs outwith Edinburgh.

Susan Deacon: The minister will be aware that the world has changed dramatically since the relocation policy was introduced. We have moved from a situation in which the majority of public sector jobs were located in the capital towards a situation in which the minority of those jobs are located here. Does he agree that it is important to consider how the appropriate critical mass of public sector jobs can be retained in the capital, which is also the seat of Scottish Government? Does he agree that, logically, there must come a point at which the presumption in favour of relocating jobs to areas outside the capital comes to an end? Will he give some thought to the matter and consider when that point might be reached?

George Lyon: First, I reassure the member that public sector employment accounts for 25 per cent of jobs in Scotland and 22 per cent of jobs in Edinburgh, so there is still a pretty big critical mass of such jobs in Edinburgh. The policy is clear. Its objective is to spread the benefits of devolution and Government jobs by targeting areas of social or economic need throughout Scotland. That process should not be limited by the setting of targets.

Mary Scanlon (Highlands and Islands) (Con): Moray has one of the lowest average wage rates in Scotland. When the minister considers further relocations, will he consider relocating jobs to Moray to give people who live there more career choice and opportunities?

George Lyon: As the member might be aware, we asked local authorities and enterprise companies to propose areas that are suitable for relocations. I am sure that Moray Council will have

responded to that request. Any areas that have been identified by Moray Council will be considered when opportunities for relocation arise.

Alasdair Morgan (South of Scotland) (SNP): I thank the minister for saying that the point at which the policy should be re-examined has certainly not been reached. The number of jobs that have been relocated to Dumfries and Galloway is tiny and it is exceeded by the number of jobs that have moved out of the area due to changes at the Department for Work and Pensions. The minister is not prepared to set targets, but is he happy with the situation in Dumfries and Galloway?

George Lyon: As I said, our new approach, which has involved asking councils throughout Scotland to propose locations—500 have been identified for job relocations—provides us with the benefit of seeing where each part of the country has sites that are available and ready. In turn, that gives us a much better opportunity of ensuring that every part of Scotland benefits from the policy.

Education and Young People, Tourism, Culture and Sport

Sport Strategy

1. Margo MacDonald (Lothians) (Ind): To ask the Scottish Executive whether its strategy to improve Scotland's sporting achievements is directed towards achieving successful performances at the European championships rather than the Commonwealth games. (S20-8759)

The Minister for Tourism, Culture and Sport (Patricia Ferguson): The Executive is committed to working with its partners to achieve target 7 of sport 21, which aims to have more than 250 Scots as medallists on the world stage by 2007. Success is measured in a number of ways, including performance in the European championships, the Commonwealth games, the Olympic games and the paralympic games.

Margo MacDonald: I support almost every syllable of the minister's reply. I ask the question because of my surprise and disappointment at, and disapproval of, the advice given to athletes by Dave Collins, the United Kingdom athletics performance director, that they should gear their training towards the European championships rather than the Commonwealth games. If the current performance director's views are supported by ministers with responsibility for sport, the implication for all athletes in Scotland who hope to compete internationally is that they may do what Andrew Lemoncello has done and withdraw from the Commonwealth games. It should be remembered that the performance

director decides which athletes should receive financial support. Will the minister disassociate herself from his remarks and assure me that she will apply whatever pressure she can to ensure that the application of such pressure on athletes does not become standard practice?

Patricia Ferguson: Athletes occasionally have difficulties in balancing their various commitments. I understand that that is what happened in the case of Andrew Lemoncello, whose educational situation had to be taken into account. I want as many competitors as possible to compete for Scotland in the Commonwealth games and am pleased that between 170 and 175 Scots will go to Melbourne in a week or two. The importance of the Commonwealth games cannot be underestimated. However, for many athletes, they occur outwith the normal cycle of events, which means that some of them will make decisions with which Margo MacDonald and I will perhaps not agree. They will make their decisions in the light of their commitment to their career and of their particular situation.

Donald Gorrie (Central Scotland) (LD): If many of our people win medals—which we hope they will—will the minister try to ensure that there is a proper follow-up? When we achieved great success in curling, there was a blip of enthusiasm, but resources were not available and there has been no lasting improvement in curling. Will the minister try to ensure that any successes that we achieve will create a lasting improvement in the sports in which they have been achieved?

Patricia Ferguson: We want to capitalise on any successes that we achieve. The success of our curlers at the previous winter Olympics has led to an upsurge of interest in winter sports more generally, rather than curling specifically, which is interesting. We are considering ways of capitalising on our successes and I have been encouraged not least by the work that the members of our winning Olympic women's curling team have undertaken as sporting ambassadors. They have visited our schools and worked with active schools co-ordinators to encourage young people to become involved in sport.

Tourism (Ayrshire)

2. Irene Oldfather (Cunninghame South) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what discussions it has had with VisitScotland in respect of promoting Ayrshire as a tourist destination. (S20-8819)

The Minister for Tourism, Culture and Sport (Patricia Ferguson): VisitScotland promotes Ayrshire as a tourist destination using a wide range of marketing campaigns and activities to highlight specific tourism products, themes and events in the area, in other areas of Scotland and further afield.

Irene Oldfather: The minister will be aware of the importance of the year of homecoming in 2009 to the communities of Ayrshire, and particularly to the communities that I represent. How will the minister work with national and local agencies to ensure that the Ayrshire tourism economy is prepared for that year and will derive maximum benefit from its associations with Robert Burns?

Patricia Ferguson: As I think the member is aware, I have been very interested in the development of that project. We have now established an advisory committee that works to ensure a range of events and other opportunities to encourage tourists to come to Scotland and, specifically, to those areas associated with Robert Burns. Some of the members of the advisory committee are drawn from EventScotland and VisitScotland. By developing their work, which is at an early stage, with the full co-operation of local authorities and other agencies in Ayrshire and in other parts of the country that are associated with Burns, we can make 2009 a success.

John Scott (Ayr) (Con): The minister will be aware of the new airline that operates between Prestwick airport and three Polish destinations. Has she had or does she intend to have any discussions with the Ayrshire and Arran Tourist Board about how she might help to develop that opportunity for in-bound tourism?

Patricia Ferguson: I work closely with my colleague Tavish Scott to consider how we can support airlines coming into this country. We are aware of the benefits that accrue from direct European flights that come into particular parts of the country. It has been reassuring to see the benefits that have come from direct flights from Sweden, for example, which have increased by 200 per cent the number of golf tourists who come to our country, usually but not exclusively through Ayrshire. I am always happy to work with my colleagues in tourism as well as my colleague in transport to ensure that we maximise all those opportunities.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I see that Jamie McGrigor wants to ask a question. Is it about Ayrshire, Mr McGrigor?

Mr Jamie McGrigor (Highlands and Islands) (Con): It is about tourism, Presiding Officer.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Is it specifically about tourism in Ayrshire?

Mr McGrigor: Not in Ayrshire—or possibly in Ayrshire. Yes, in fact it is.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: No. I am afraid that that was the wrong answer. I move to question 3.

Arts (Fife)

3. Mr Ted Brocklebank (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): To ask the Scottish Executive what implications the ministerial statement on the Cultural Commission will have for the arts in Fife. (S2O-8765)

The Minister for Tourism, Culture and Sport (Patricia Ferguson): “Scotland’s Culture”, the Executive’s response to the cultural review, sets out a new vision for cultural policy that will deliver more and better cultural opportunities throughout Scotland. We are committed to providing additional support to the arts at local as well as national level. I have no doubt that Fife Council and local arts organisations in the area will want to take full advantage of the opportunities that my statement presents.

Mr Brocklebank: I declare an interest as a member of the board of the Byre Theatre in St Andrews.

Fife has 7 per cent of the population of Scotland but, I remind the minister, receives less than 2 per cent of arts funding. Will she tell us what comfort struggling regional theatres, such as the Byre, can look for in the proposed restructuring of drama funding in Scotland?

Patricia Ferguson: As Mr Brocklebank no doubt knows, the Byre Theatre in St Andrews has been in deficit for several years. In 2005-06, it received £443,000 from the Scottish Arts Council and I understand that the SAC has committed to giving it a further £454,000 in 2006-07. It is not for me to pre-empt the decisions of the Scottish Arts Council or its successor body, but I hope that it will work with local authorities and other agencies in the area to try to safeguard as far as possible facilities that are of that kind of importance.

Michael Matheson (Central Scotland) (SNP): Last week, the minister stated that she intends to make legislative provision for cultural entitlements at a local level. I am sure that the minister appreciates that, often, local authorities’ cultural budgets are viewed as a soft target when budget settlements are tight. How does the minister intend to ensure that local authorities provide good-quality cultural programmes at a local level to ensure that residents in Fife communities, for example, are able to take up their new entitlements?

Patricia Ferguson: If I may say so, that was a very creative question from Mr Matheson.

A number of points are important for local arts provision. I hope that with my statement last week and the central place that it now occupies in Executive policy, we send out a signal to the rest of Scotland and to our local authorities that culture and the arts must be at the heart of everything that

they do. I said that explicitly in my statement last week and we intend to develop it.

I will work with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and the Voice of Chief Officers for Cultural, Community and Leisure Services to ensure that we are able to put in place a range of entitlements that will respond best to particular local circumstances.

We will also make a point of ensuring that minimum standards apply to ensure that provision throughout the country is as equitable as possible, although we realise that different localities will require and be able to support different activities. In addition, I will consider ways in which to fund pilot schemes for local authorities to implement the agenda. I will also consider how to incentivise local authorities to keep up with the agenda.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: If the question is about Fife, the next questioner will be Susan Deacon.

Susan Deacon (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (Lab): Does the minister agree that the poorest communities in Fife and elsewhere in Scotland have a great deal to offer to, and gain from, her work on implementing last week's statement on culture? I seek an assurance that the minister is working with her colleague, the Minister for Communities, to ensure that, in his work on regeneration, the poorest communities in Fife and elsewhere in the country are given the support that they need and deserve?

Patricia Ferguson: The answer to that question is yes, and I expect that the Minister for Communities will make a tangible contribution to that debate when he releases his statement on regeneration in the near future.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Question 4 has been withdrawn.

Arts (Funding)

5. Rob Gibson (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Executive whether major events in the Scottish artistic calendar such as Celtic connections can be assured of development funding from the Executive in order to build an innovative, artistic and financially secure future. (S2O-8787)

The Minister for Tourism, Culture and Sport (Patricia Ferguson): The Scottish Executive fully recognises the importance of staging major sporting and cultural events, as witnessed by the publication of "Scotland's Major Events Strategy 2003-2015: 'Competing on an international stage'" in 2002. As members know, that strategy led to the formation of EventScotland in May 2003. EventScotland's role is to attract, develop and create events that generate economic benefit to

Scotland. In carrying out that role, EventScotland works in partnership with others to provide significant investment in events.

Rob Gibson: I am mindful of the minister's statement to Parliament last week on her plans for the arts and culture. I recognise that EventScotland has a specific role. Events and festivals, such as Celtic connections, that started in local centres and have now become national and international showcases, require the support that has not been made explicit by the Executive. I note the recent remarks of the director of the British Council Scotland, Roy Cross, on the vitality of our national music. Will the minister make a specific budget line for events such as Celtic connections, to ensure that their success is built upon? We should attract not just people from abroad but people in Scotland who have not yet heard about these events.

Patricia Ferguson: EventScotland has a role in working with festivals such as Celtic connections, and will continue to do so, as too will the proposed new body creative Scotland. The Scottish Arts Council already funds Celtic connections, and that will continue if the festival meets the criteria that the council has in place. The same arrangement will continue with creative Scotland. I want to ensure that organisations such as EventScotland and creative Scotland work together more closely in supporting organisations and events that are of cultural significance to our country.

Mr Jamie McGrigor (Highlands and Islands) (Con): Does the minister agree with me about the importance for Scottish tourism of events such as Celtic connections having exposure on film and television abroad? Why do some foreign film companies choose Ireland as a film location instead of Scotland, even when the film's stories are by Scottish authors and are set in Scotland?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That was another rather creative question, but I am sure that the minister is equal to it.

Patricia Ferguson: However, I do not think that I will qualify for a grant.

Film makers have all sorts of reasons for choosing one location over another. In any event, if a film is about a Scottish subject, people presume that it has been filmed in Scotland and the resulting impact on our tourism economy is good rather than negative. We want to encourage as much film making in Scotland as possible, as with all the creative arts. We hope that the proposed new body creative Scotland will have responsibility for elements of work that are undertaken by Scottish Screen, with an extra emphasis on development to make inroads in this area.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Alasdair Morrison is not here to ask question 6. He is the third missing member this afternoon.

Child Protection

7. Maureen Macmillan (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what measures it is taking to improve child protection. (S2O-8806)

The Minister for Education and Young People (Peter Peacock): Under our child protection reform programme we have introduced a wide range of measures to improve child protection. For example, we have introduced the children's charter, the framework for standards and multi-agency inspections of children's services. Among other things, we have legislated on the management of offenders, protection from grooming, sexual harm orders and new powers for joint inspection of child protection. In response to the Bichard inquiry recommendations, I will also introduce a bill to establish a new vetting and barring scheme for those who want to work with children and vulnerable adults. I will give more information to Parliament on our plans in due course.

Maureen Macmillan: Will the minister assure me that he will use the forthcoming bill on the Bichard recommendations to close any loopholes in current legislation and to streamline bureaucracy? Will such legislation enable private employers, such as parents who want to employ tutors for their children, to access relevant information on child protection issues?

Peter Peacock: The simple answer to Maureen Macmillan's first question is yes. We want to use the opportunity afforded by the proposed bill that will implement the Bichard recommendations to address not just the specific questions that he raised but any other questions that have come to our attention in the intervening period. The purpose of the bill will be to strengthen child protection, to streamline the bureaucracy that surrounds it and to ensure that we have a manageable system that will improve child protection.

On Maureen Macmillan's last point, we intend that our response to the Bichard report will address and highlight issues surrounding private employers and their ability to strengthen protection as part of the widening and strengthening of overall child protection provisions.

Donald Gorrie (Central Scotland) (LD): In addition to the proposed legislation that the minister mentioned, what is the Executive doing to provide training, support and assistance to prevent people who have such sexual problems from getting worse and interfering with children? What

sort of educational and training programmes are there? Similarly, what programmes are there to help organisations to stay vigilant about the subject and not to feel that they are okay once they have ticked all the right boxes? It is essential that employers and volunteers in an organisation look after this issue.

Peter Peacock: Donald Gorrie is right to raise the point about personal vigilance and the vigilance of individual organisations. The true guarantee comes when we all conduct ourselves in a way that looks out for such problems and when we have in place all the provisions that we already have and will strengthen further to give organisations information about people they might be about to employ.

On training for organisations, part of the child protection reform programme has been about improving training, setting standards in the system, making it clear what those are and then providing the resources, the back-up and the expertise to widen training substantially.

Donald Gorrie asked about training for perpetrators of offences. One of the features of the reforms is that we get to know when a person offends for the first time. By definition, it is not possible to have intervened before they get to that point. Thereafter, if individuals are convicted and end up in prison for certain sexual offences, there are programmes that will assist them by addressing their offending behaviour.

Special Educational Needs (Mainstreaming)

8. Mary Scanlon (Highlands and Islands) (Con): To ask the Scottish Executive what action it will take to implement the recommendations of the recent report, "Mainstreaming pupils with special educational needs". (S2O-8761)

The Deputy Minister for Education and Young People (Robert Brown): I welcome the report, which will assist the Executive in continuing to ensure that children's needs are met appropriately regardless of where they are educated. The report indicates that the balance between mainstream and special provision is broadly right.

Mary Scanlon: The minister will be aware that the report found that almost half of all local authorities have failed to produce guidelines on how to deal with parental complaints and concerns about the implementation of mainstreaming. Is the Executive's mainstreaming agenda going ahead regardless of whether councils are able to provide adequate and appropriate support for children with additional support needs?

Robert Brown: Because of local government reorganisation, among other things, the mainstreaming agenda was operative before the

formal introduction of the policy in 2003, following the Standards in Scotland's Schools etc Act 2000. As we have said on many occasions in the chamber, the basis of our approach is that provision should be made for an education that is suited to the needs of the individual child. Mainstreaming is a presumption, and it is within the powers of local authorities, and indeed of parents, to look for alternatives—in special needs accommodation or the like—to meet children's specific needs. There is certainly no desire to impose on the structure, or on individual children, an education that is unsuited to children's needs or that would disrupt the education of other children.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Question 9 was not lodged and question 10 was withdrawn. Therefore, that concludes question time.

Points of Order

14:55

Mr John Swinney (North Tayside) (SNP): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I would like to raise a point of order in connection with the item of business that we are about to consider. As you are aware, I submitted what I considered to be a reasoned amendment to the motion lodged by Mr McCabe at stage 1 of the Budget (Scotland) (No 3) Bill, asking ministers to reconsider provisions in the budget. I did so because, as far as I am aware, it is beyond the power of individual members who are not ministers to move amendments to the budget at stage 2 of the Parliament's budget process.

I felt that the only opportunity that I had to consult Parliament about my concerns and to force a vote on issues in the budget provision would be at stage 1. I was therefore rather surprised to hear that my amendment had not been selected for debate this afternoon by the Presiding Officer. Can you give any further explanation of why it was not selected and, if possible, will you reconsider the decision not to select for debate the amendment that would have given Parliament the opportunity to address specific concerns about the contents of the budget? Such concerns cannot be pursued at any other stage in the process by a member who is not a minister.

Margo MacDonald (Lothians) (Ind): On a different point of order, Presiding Officer.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Murray Tosh): I should probably respond to Mr Swinney's point of order before I take a different one.

The amendment in question was admissible. It was not selected and, as Mr Swinney and all members will be aware, the Presiding Officers do not give reasons for the selection or non-selection of specific amendments. By raising his point of order, Mr Swinney has put his point on the record.

Margo MacDonald: Presiding Officer, is it in order for you to take a motion without notice? I propose that all MSPs present in the chamber this afternoon should associate themselves with a motion to the effect that we are disappointed in our colleagues for their showing at question time.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: It is competent for me to accept such a motion, but I exercise my discretion not to do so. Again, your point is on the record. Members are aware that, from time to time, the Presiding Officers have expressed regret and misgiving about attendance—and, in some respects, performance—at question time,

particularly in relation to members who have lodged questions but not turned up to ask them.

Margo MacDonald: In pursuance of my point of order, Presiding Officer, I do not want to deave you, but it is better if it comes from MSPs speaking of their peers than if it comes from the Presiding Officers.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That is a statable opinion, which is now on the record.

Mr Swinney: I return to my point of order. I appreciate the comments that you made in response, but can you shed any further light on the limitations that are placed on members' ability to amend the budget, which is one of our most important responsibilities during the parliamentary year, if we are unable to debate admissible amendments in the stage 1 debate on the bill, inviting ministers to reconsider provisions in the budget, and if we are unable to move any amendment to the budget at stage 2, which the Finance Committee must consider within a matter of days, on Tuesday? Do the Presiding Officers have any advice for members on alternative means by which we can pursue our concerns about the contents of the budget if admissible amendments cannot be considered?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: In deciding not to select an admissible amendment, the Presiding Officer was not attempting to restrain or constrain members; he simply made a decision about a specific amendment on a specific occasion. The reasoned amendment process is not out of order in any sense.

On the second part of Mr Swinney's point, the opportunity to raise those matters exists at committee as well as in the chamber and in the circumstances—

Mr Swinney: But not to amend.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Not to amend, but to raise matters for discussion.

Mr Swinney: I do not want to prolong the discussion, but the issue is important. I have no right to raise an amendment to the budget at any stage in the process. The only opportunity that is available to me is to raise the issue at this stage and invite ministers to reconsider, in the hope that they will bring alternative provisions to the Finance Committee on Tuesday. I am unable to move an amendment, because to do so is outwith my powers as a member. It is important that the Presiding Officers reflect on the fact that, on this occasion, members who are not ministers have been denied the one opportunity that is available to them to amend—or to encourage ministers to amend—the budget bill.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That qualification was important. We have talked about

amendment but the issue is encouragement to amend, because the standing orders expressly prevent amendment of the budget bill other than by the Executive. In raising the matter as he has done, Mr Swinney has encouraged ministers to consider his point. That is as much as he could have done if the amendment had been selected. I cannot offer any further advice, other than to say that the point has now been ventilated.

Budget (Scotland) (No 3) Bill: Stage 1

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Murray Tosh):

The next item of business is a debate on motion S2M-3854, in the name of Tom McCabe, that the Parliament agrees to the general principles of the Budget (Scotland) (No 3) Bill.

15:02

The Minister for Finance and Public Service Reform (Mr Tom McCabe): Today we embark upon the final stage of the 2006-07 budget process. As the Parliament is aware, this is a culmination of seven months of hard work by officials, committee members and ministers to ensure that we spend our money in the right places.

The Finance Committee published its stage 2 report on the draft budget on 14 December last year. We welcome the report's constructive approach to improving the budget process. Our response, which we published this week, makes it clear that we view many of the committee's recommendations favourably. We will continue to work with the committee on several areas that are of concern to it, in particular the presentation of cross-cutting information in the budget documents. I hope that that is a clear indication of our commitment to transparent and rigorous scrutiny of the Scottish budget.

Much has been achieved, but it is important that I indicate clearly that the Scottish Executive readily acknowledges our obligation to work with the committee to further improve the budget process. Of course, although we have made a lot of progress in improving the clarity of the documents, the nature of finance means that there will sometimes be changes in the treatment of our figures. I know that that can be annoying and on occasion even confusing, but regrettably it is an inevitable consequence of the need to keep up to date with accepted accounting and financial practices.

In that context, I want to explain one change that has come into effect in this year's budget bill and which has had an impact on the published figures. The change, which is in the presentation of Scottish Water's budget, has arisen as a result of Audit Scotland's request to present the published budget in a manner that is more closely aligned to the consolidated accounts. The presentational change does not change the scale of Scottish Water's budget. The main elements are the introduction of the cost of capital figure for Scottish Water, which appears in the accounts, and the removal of the loan payment and income figures, which do not appear in the accounts.

As members know, the budget bill is a key part of our parliamentary calendar. It is at the centre of everything that the Executive does: it provides the means to implement all our policies and programmes; it allows the vital institutions that make our society cohesive to flourish as they educate our young, care for our sick, and build and maintain the physical infrastructure that underpins our economy; and, of course, it gives life to the visionary partnership agreement that is doing so much to enhance our society.

The formal subject of the debate is consideration of the general principles of the Budget (Scotland) (No 3) Bill. A fundamental principle in any democratic system is that Parliament should approve the Government's spending plans.

Mr John Swinney (North Tayside) (SNP): I take the minister back to the point that he made about infrastructure. A significant amount of expenditure in the budget is earmarked for Scottish Water's capital programme, to which he referred. Is the minister satisfied that the dispute between Scottish Water and the Water Industry Commission for Scotland will in no way inhibit the Government's ability to ensure that the planned investment in the budget can be delivered to improve water and sewerage infrastructure? Without that improvement, a number of communities—many of which I represent in Perthshire and Angus—will experience severe constraints on their ability to develop, because of the poor water and sewerage infrastructure.

Mr McCabe: I give the Parliament and Mr Swinney the absolute assurance that the Government is determined to ensure that the necessary investment takes place and that any infrastructure constraints that hold back development are removed. If there is any indication that that situation does not prevail, we will not hesitate to take action.

The Scottish budget process is uniquely tailored to ensure that as many people as possible can contribute to the debate, which ensures that our budget is spent transparently and efficiently, with the clear purpose of delivering on our vision for a better Scotland.

The origins of our spending plans for 2006-07 lie in the spending review of September 2004. The 2006-07 budget process began four months ago with the publication of the draft budget, which allowed for consultation of the public and parliamentary committees. Its purpose was to present the Executive's priorities and high-level strategy. The committees' responses were pulled together in the Finance Committee's report, which we debated in December last year. I say to Mr Swinney that that was the time when changes to our spending plans could have been proposed. As

Parliament knows, no changes were proposed, which indicated broad support for our plans.

Mr Swinney: Mr McCabe virtually invited me to intervene. At pages 22 and 23 of its report, the Finance Committee calls on the Executive to use additional resources to rectify several matters, such as the penalising of local authorities through efficiency savings and the inequity of baseline cash reductions, and notes the pre-budget report. Does the minister accept that that suggests that the committee wanted the Government to look again at its provision for local authority budgets? Is that not a fair indication that we are not all dancing in the aisles at the budget and that some of us have substantial concerns about the Government's decisions? I invite the Government to reflect on that.

Mr McCabe: We believe that people are dancing in the aisles, because many people and many institutions will do well from this visionary budget. We think that there has been much rejoicing that the massive investment in our public services will continue. Far be it from me to suggest the language and terminology that should be used in a Finance Committee report. I readily acknowledge some of the concerns that were expressed in the report, but they were not expressed in the terms of an amendment to the draft budget at that time.

Our engagement with individuals and organisations, to which I referred, resulted in the circulation of more than 1,300 copies of our draft budget documents, alongside their internet publication.

Since 1999, we have achieved significant progress in improving the budget process, but I acknowledge that it is still complex. The challenge is to continue to search for ways in which to provide information throughout Scotland and to develop processes that allow meaningful involvement. We have one of the most open budget scrutiny processes of any Parliament but, as I have said, there is no room for complacency. We will continue to work hard to promote transparency and we will do so in conjunction with the Parliament. We will of course continue to seek to involve the people of Scotland in our processes and our decision making.

The budget builds for the future; it will build up our infrastructure, such as our schools, our hospitals and our transport network. We will strive to deliver excellent public services by ensuring that services meet individual needs and that our investment is matched by reform when necessary, so that it delivers returns. Those are the things that people care about and which make a real difference to them. Our initiatives seek not to promote a dependency culture, but to provide people with genuine choices about how they live

their lives. This budget provides a basis for doing just that and I commend it to the Parliament.

I move,

That the Parliament agrees to the general principles of the Budget (Scotland) (No. 3) Bill.

15:10

Mr John Swinney (North Tayside) (SNP): There is much in the budget that the Government has proposed of which we are highly supportive. I encourage the Government to spend the allocations appropriately and to ensure that sufficient progress is made in delivering on the commitments that it has set out in its budget document.

I was a member of the Finance Committee when the Parliament was established in 1999 and returned to the committee this year. The budget process has developed enormously in the intervening years. I commend the Parliament's other committees for the substantial contribution that they make to scrutinising the budget in the policy areas for which they have responsibility, which enhances the Parliament's overall scrutiny process.

Members will not be surprised to hear that the budget issue that I am concerned about is the content of the settlement for local authorities. I raised a point about that with the Presiding Officer a few moments ago, which I will not spend time pursuing now. Mr McCabe may witness much dancing and rejoicing at the Government's budget in various institutions around the country, but there is not much dancing or rejoicing going on in local authority headquarters. I think that Mr McCabe is familiar with the president of the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, Councillor Pat Watters, who certainly did not feel like dancing or rejoicing when he came to this week's meeting of the Finance Committee to express deep reservations about the funding settlement for local authorities and the consequential burden that they will face on issues such as equal pay.

Mr McCabe: I am interested in Mr Swinney's comments about local government finance. He is right that I am well acquainted with the president of COSLA, with whom I have engaged in various discussions in the recent past, most recently on Monday of this week.

Although local authorities are expressing a view about their financial situation—especially the situation that they will face in 2007-08, I stress—they acknowledge explicitly that they can now deliver manifestly different and significantly better services than those that they could deliver even four or five years ago and that that is a direct result of the increased finances that have been made available to them.

Mr Swinney: That may be the case, but on 28 December Mr Watters said that local authorities faced a £400 million black hole in their finances. That does not suggest to me that they will be doing cartwheels about the settlement.

There are financial issues that local authorities must resolve. For example, they have had years in which to come to terms with the equal pay provisions and they should have been making provision to meet them. I find some aspects of the councils' arguments difficult to accept, but the funding gap on current service provision is an issue. To resolve that issue, ministers should reassess the contents of the Finance Committee's report and take action to deal with the funding gap that it identifies.

In the parliamentary debate on 12 January, Mr Lyon mentioned how important it was for local authorities to use their reserves to tackle some of the issues in question. He cited the fact that, according to the Accounts Commission, local authorities had £1.6 billion of reserves. When I checked out that figure, I found that they had only £1 billion of reserves—what is £600 million between friends—and that it was not the Accounts Commission, but Audit Scotland that reached that conclusion. It is misleading to suggest that local authorities have a massive amount of reserves that could deal with all the issues in one go.

I encourage ministers to reflect on the financial settlement for local authorities; I would have forced Parliament into a vote on the matter, if I had been successful in lodging an amendment to the motion. I do so for one very important reason: based on the current financial settlement, I cannot believe that local authorities in Scotland can deliver council tax increases that are within the 2.5 per cent target that ministers have set—a figure that is closely allied to inflation.

Glasgow City Council has a commendable record in that regard. Indeed, Mr Gordon lectured me on that record in Parliament only a couple of weeks ago. Although the council has managed to maintain below-inflation increases, it now says that it will have to abandon its inflation-related target. I am sure that countless other local authorities will have to deliver council tax increases that are higher than the rate of inflation. That will be the direct consequence of one of the budget components—the local authority financial settlement—being not good enough to enable the local authorities to deliver services for the people of our communities.

We face above-inflation council tax increases, which will add to the punishment that council tax payers have suffered over the years as a result of the 55 per cent increase in council tax that we have seen since this Government came to power,

or an assault on the services that vulnerable people in all parts of our communities depend on.

Iain Smith (North East Fife) (LD) rose—

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Trish Godman): You must finish now, Mr Swinney.

Mr Swinney: If Mr Smith had been paying attention earlier, he would have known that I am in my last minute and therefore unable to take an intervention. I am sure that his intervention would have been as pathetic as the one that he made on the same point in a previous debate, which was met with derision in the chamber.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You must finish now, Mr Swinney. You are over your last minute.

Mr Swinney: People in Scotland face either council tax increases or cuts in local authority services. I encourage ministers to reconsider the local government settlement.

15:16

Derek Brownlee (South of Scotland) (Con): Our scrutiny of the Executive budget is one of the more important roles that the Parliament undertakes. Perhaps the relatively poor attendance in the chamber this afternoon is less to do with members dancing in the streets and more to do with them dancing down Dunfermline High Street.

It has been said that, as spending rounds become tighter, the pressures on the Scottish budget will also become tighter and our budget scrutiny will become more important. In reality, budget scrutiny is as important in a relatively generous year as it is in a year in which a tight settlement is made. The point on which I agree with the minister—possibly Mr Swinney agrees, too—is that value for money should be at the core of everything that the Executive does.

It is easy to become fixated on the financial numbers in a budget debate; after all, the numbers are very important. However, we need to look rather more deeply into the budget than at the figures alone. We need to understand not only the way in which the money is spent and how that changes year after year, but what it is delivering. It is important to recognise that what the budget is delivering is not the same as what it is buying. We often hear the Executive boast about its additional spending and sometimes about additional staff. What we ought to be concerned about, however, are the outcomes. Getting that right is very important, although I recognise the difficulties in doing so. However, I think that most people would concede that the Executive is not there as yet.

I will take an example from the education budget. Improving education is a desirable goal,

which may involve increasing teacher numbers or providing better teaching—the two are not necessarily related. Ultimately, it is about raising the overall level of attainment. When we look at the relevant targets in the draft budget, we see that they are for 53,000 teachers by September 2007 and targeted measures to reduce class sizes. We could debate the appropriateness of those measures, but we should focus instead on the fact that they are not in themselves targets to improve education, but targets on measures that may do so—the two are not the same thing. The budget includes one target on improving attainment, but it is set only for the lowest fifth of secondary 4 pupils; the budget says nothing about the rest of the school population.

I could have taken an example from any of the budget headings, but the education targets illustrate the importance of getting the measures absolutely right to enable us to measure value for money.

The minister did not refer to the work of the independent budget review group. Perhaps he will update us on its work in his closing speech.

Mr McCabe: Mr Brownlee's comments on education are pertinent. However, when we talk about 53,000 teachers and our other investments in education, it is important to note that more than 50 per cent of our young people now go on to further and higher education. More of our people are graduating than at any other time in our history. That would seem to be an outcome for the investment that we are making in education.

Derek Brownlee: It is, to some extent, an outcome. However, we would be going down a very long and winding road if we were to accept that point.

Mr Swinney and the minister alluded to the Finance Committee report, which made much about the difference in treatment between local authorities and Executive departments. In its response to the committee's challenge on the different efficiency targets, which members of the committee received today, the Executive said:

"we chose not to apply a straight percentage efficiency target across the board since this assumes that everyone is as efficient or as inefficient as the next one".

That is a very reasonable principle, but when it comes to applying efficiency targets to local government the Executive does not seem to be going down that route. Instead, it seems to be applying the same percentage across the board. In a recent answer to my colleague David Davidson, the minister confirmed that efficiency savings that were deducted at source were not allocated to individual local authorities. Where is the internal logic?

There is a great deal of scope for making the budget process more transparent and the documentation more useful. I am grateful to the minister for his comments on that issue. We need to have a much better debate not just about how much we spend, but about where we spend the money and what real, definable outcomes it delivers.

15:20

Mr Andrew Arbuckle (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD): This budget marks another important step in delivering Liberal Democrat policies within the coalition. The detail in the spending of some £28 billion is bound to provoke criticism, especially from those who take a different political view, but the impartial onlooker can now see positive changes in education, support for transport and the environment—indeed, in almost every part of Scottish life.

Within the budget year, increased numbers of teachers will be working at the proverbial chalk face. That can only underline the coalition's commitment to a better-educated Scotland. In transport, many major capital projects are under way, despite lengthy delays in getting them on the road or rail track. In my area, the reopening of the Stirling-Alloa-Kincardine railway line is moving ahead, and there are other projects that will help the train to take the strain. The arrival in April of the concessionary travel scheme may be seen by some as a burden on the public purse, but the consequential benefits for health of increased take-up under such a scheme are far reaching and difficult to quantify. If members ask anyone who partakes of the scheme about it, they will hear positive comments.

I know that there is concern about the local government settlement, but the percentage increase in funding is above inflation, coming in at 3.2 per cent above last year's levels.

Brian Adam (Aberdeen North) (SNP): Will the member give way?

Mr Arbuckle: No—I have only four minutes.

Earlier this week, along with colleagues on the Finance Committee, I heard the pleas from COSLA and council officials regarding the added burden that they will face as a result of dealing at long last with the issue of equal pay. They will face the added financial burden of introducing single status, which, we may remember, was supposed to be cost neutral. From information that the Finance Committee gathered from the chief executive of COSLA, it was apparent that that may not happen for three years and that there will be pressure on council budgets until then.

As I said during last week's debate on council tax, this is a challenging period for local government. However, I believe that many councils are now bringing fresh thinking into the services that they run and to how they will meet their financial targets. Some of the old work practices are being binned and councils are more focused on how best they can deliver all-important services.

As a Liberal Democrat, I would like the financial rigour that councils are experiencing to be carried over to all other parts of government. As a member of the Finance Committee, I shall play my part in examining parts of government to ensure that we are getting the due outcomes from taxpayers' cash investment. As I stated at the beginning of my speech, in the short lifetime of the Parliament most services have received extra financial support. Now we should be seeking positive results from that investment. Inevitably, if the planned efficiency savings come through as planned, that will include pruning back expenditure in areas that will not affect the public, provided that that has no impact on front-line services.

We must ensure that the public sector in Scotland is as alert to financial efficiency as private businesses are. We must also ensure that the current view that life in the public sector is somewhat cushioned compared with working in private business is eradicated. In my view and that of the Liberal Democrats, the budget settlement is a good one for Scotland. I believe that it is also a good settlement for the people of Scotland. I support the motion.

15:24

Brian Adam (Aberdeen North) (SNP): Like Mr Swinney, I have taken part in many budget debates since the Parliament was established, and I readily acknowledge that there have been helpful changes in the process. One of the remaining weaknesses was highlighted by Mr Swinney in a point of order. There are regular complaints from the Executive parties that the Opposition does not lodge amendments. We are attempting to do that, but we need to find a better method that will enable us to have a genuine political debate around the choices that must be made and our priorities.

Des McNulty (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab): Does Mr Adam remember that, three years ago, Nicola Sturgeon went about the process in the right way and the matter was dealt with? The issue is not that the Opposition does not have the capacity to move amendments but that, on this occasion, it is not doing it at the right time or at the right stage in the process.

Brian Adam: I do not accept Mr McNulty's point. I acknowledge that the only previous budget bill amendment that we could debate was lodged by Nicola Sturgeon. However, if we are genuine about democracy, we should make it simpler to have a genuine debate about alternative budgets. The current process does not allow that.

I would like to move on and to deal with some of the issues, particularly those relating to the local government settlement. I was intrigued by Mr Arbuckle's speech, which seemed to run counter to what the Executive says in that he suggested that we face a problem. I will be interested to hear Mr Arbuckle's colleague's winding-up speech because I want to see whether the Liberal Democrat minister will say the same as the Liberal Democrat finance spokesperson.

As well as there being a tight local Government settlement for the current year, some significant costs will have to be borne by local authorities in relation to the single status agreement and on-going equal-pay cases. Some of the money for that—and the associated retrospective payments—might have to be found in the budget for the coming year. A variety of figures have been bandied around in relation to those retrospective payments: figures as high as £1.2 billion have been mentioned, which is not an amount that can be found from current revenue.

As far as I can see, three options are open to councils to deal with the problem. The first is to increase council tax, but if all of the costs were to be met that way, the increase in council tax would be not 2.5 per cent or even 12.5 per cent; it would be a lot higher than that, so it is not a realistic option. Secondly, there might be council reserves that could—and perhaps should—be used to deal with the costs, but it would be irresponsible and imprudent of councils not to keep at least some reserves, which would mean that not all the reserves could be used.

The third option—which I believe is most likely—is that there will have to be the biggest fire sale of council property since the end of the regions. When the regions were being wound up, many industrial estates and other property holdings were sold off to sweeten the elections for the new authorities and to ensure that assets in one area could be used in an area that they could not otherwise be used in following reorganisation. I understand that South Ayrshire Council is talking about selling off golf courses and that the City of Edinburgh Council is thinking about selling its holding in its own development company in order to raise £40 million. We are not talking about small sums of money. The city in which I live and which I represent faces a potential bill of tens of millions of pounds. I want to know which of the three options

that I set out will be recommended by the minister in order to enable the council to meet that cost.

I do not think that the argument that the issue is only to do with COSLA and the unions stands up. Although it is true to say that there have been increases in the budgets of local authorities over the years, there have also been increases in burdens. No matter how often ministers are asked to separate out the new burdens in terms of the increases that are available, silence is the usual response.

Mr McCabe: Will the member give way?

Brian Adam: I will give way if the minister is prepared to supply that information.

Mr McCabe: I point out that, over and above the core revenue for local government, there is in excess of £1 billion in other funding streams, many of which address the new burdens that the member is talking about. Let us not talk only about the core revenue local government settlement; let us talk about all the taxpayers' money that heads in that direction—a not inconsiderable sum of money.

Brian Adam: I note that I did not get an answer about what proportion of the increase in the local government settlement covers new burdens. I hope that, during his winding-up speech, Mr Lyon will make a commitment to provide that in the future.

Some arrangements lead to significant differences in uplift. The Executive has put a floor on that uplift to even out some of the differences that result from the formulae that it uses. That minimum level is 2 per cent. Aberdeen City Council has been bumping along at the bottom, on the minimum uplift, for a very long time and it currently has the third-lowest aggregate external finance per head of population in Scotland.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You should be finishing now, Mr Adam.

Brian Adam: That amount is way below the mean, as a consequence of which we face very significant cuts in council services, as well as a large rise in council tax. My colleague, Mr Swinney, suggested that the general approach to local government finance needs to be reconsidered. We need seriously to look in particular at what to do at Executive level about the back pay that will have to be paid at some point, and that we will have to pay—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You must finish, Mr Adam.

Brian Adam: I will.

15:32

Des McNulty (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab): Three years ago, Donald MacRae of Lloyds TSB told the Finance Committee that there was a risk that the increases in public spending in the budget would

“make Scotland’s overall economy more dependent on the public sector.”—[*Official Report, Finance Committee*, 28 October 2003; c 370.]

Peter Wood of DTZ Pieda Consulting felt that the political priority that had been given to growing the economy was not reflected in budget allocations, and expressed his concern about the lack of a rationale for the increases in different portfolios. Our experts were not arguing at that time against more public spending. They were saying, first, that if growing the economy was the top priority, then that should be reflected in the budget allocations, not just to the enterprise portfolio but across other portfolios that contribute directly or indirectly to economic developments, which would include roads and the water infrastructure.

Secondly, they were arguing that we must ensure that the way money is spent produces “revenue payback”, as Alf Young puts it, in the form of a more prosperous and vibrant Scottish economy. During the past six years, there have been year-on-year expenditure increases at levels that have been unprecedented in my lifetime, but we need to ensure that the money is well spent.

Thirdly, both our experts felt that the balance between capital and revenue expenditure should be shifted in favour of capital spending because of its importance to economic growth. More money has, of course, been made available for soft services such as health and education, as well as for infrastructure renewal and new projects. Our job in the Finance Committee is to ensure that ministers concentrate investment on securing long-term gains, whether through improving skills, through taking advantage of research and technological change, through upgrading transport, hospital or schools infrastructure or through regeneration projects that deliver transformation in the social and economic circumstances of areas such as Clydebank, in my constituency.

I believe that significant progress has been made since that time. As Jack McConnell pointed out at First Minister’s questions earlier today, two thirds of the jobs that have been created in Scotland since devolution have been in the private sector, and Scotland’s economic performance relative to other parts of the United Kingdom has significantly improved, according to the relevant figures. The allocation of resources is not the sole indicator of priority.

Jim Mather (Highlands and Islands) (SNP):

We must kill off the fallacy that economic growth is higher here than it is elsewhere. Economic growth has been reindexed every year, the date of reindexation currently having been rolled forward to 2003. It is like indexing Tom Farmer's salary against that of his hairdresser so that, one year, his hairdresser will get a proportionately higher increase. That is an absolute fallacy, which has to be shot down. Does Des McNulty agree that reindexing on that rolling basis is not a reasonable way to measure data?

Des McNulty: I would have thought that, as an accountant, Jim Mather would realise that that is more or less standard business practice. It is strange that he takes exception to it.

Progress has been made in progressing major capital projects. The schools regeneration project has been implemented across Scotland, housing in Glasgow has been refurbished under the aegis of the Glasgow Housing Association and progress has been made on the Clyde waterfront project. Those are all steps in the right direction.

As we know, there is a long lead-in time for major capital projects, so we must ensure that we press ahead with projects that are unarguably of benefit to Scotland, such as the upgrading of the M8 and the M74 extension. However, we must be prepared to take hard decisions when necessary so that we can progress urgently required projects—whether or not they are in the current programme—while removing or delaying projects that become increasingly hard to justify if new cost projections and information cast doubts on their benefits. The process of budget management must be a constant re-examination of priorities; it must be about directing resources appropriately.

Over the past three years, the Executive has directed resources towards capital expenditure and longer-term benefits. I have no doubt about the positive impact that capital expenditure on the scale that is envisaged in the budget, and which is projected in the infrastructure plan that was published earlier this year, will have for the Scottish economy. We are moving in the right direction, not just in volumes of expenditure or in the benefits to economic growth and employment, but in our legacy for the future. We need to do that as well as possible; that is the responsibility of ministers and of Parliament.

The Finance Committee raised concerns about some issues; for example, we are concerned about the number of targets that ministers set. Earlier this year, the Finance Committee made a submission to the Public Administration Select Committee at Westminster about the management of change following concerns that arose from evidence that the Finance Committee took. Our view, which coincides with that of the select

committee, is that ministers need to choose and to communicate clear priorities rather than to set too many targets. They should concentrate on key national priorities rather than on micromanagement and they should move from targets to trends as their basis for managing progress. The Finance Committee has said repeatedly that there are too many targets and that some of them obscure rather than clarify what the Scottish Executive is trying to achieve. There is also sometimes too great a focus on activities, rather than on outcomes. The use of targets within portfolios is too frequently an impediment to progress on cross-cutting priorities.

That said, significant progress has been made. The Finance Committee does not argue that there is no place for targets but that they must, where they are used, be properly quantified to ensure not only that spending departments meet their targets but that the targets improve public services. We could thereby assess whether better outcomes were being secured.

I am keen that effort be concentrated on areas in which progress is possible now; for example, linking allocations to output in areas such as teaching staff numbers—on which the Executive made a welcome recent announcement—housing completions and other positive measures. The Executive should concentrate on meeting its strategic targets rather than focus on developmental activity measures or ticking off partnership commitments. I am a wee bit disappointed by the Executive's response to that section of the Finance Committee's report. The Executive claims to be informed by best practices—the Finance Committee was impressed by how the Prime Minister's delivery unit focused on particular issues and got them sorted out—but the committee is not entirely clear that the Executive has quite the same tight focus as the Prime Minister's delivery unit. The Executive's view might need to be refreshed.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You should be finishing, Mr McNulty.

Des McNulty: I hope that ministers will consider that more seriously.

The minister is absolutely right that the big issue in local government finance will be next year, particularly when we consider the forward projections and the uplift against inflation. Ultimately, the test of the minister is what he will bring forward for next year. I hope that he can find ways of resolving some of the problems that local government faces this year. Let us be clear that given the issues of equal pay, the single status agreement and the uplift, there will be a real financial issue next year. We can see that already.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You must finish now, Mr McNulty.

Des McNulty: I hope that ministers will pay attention to that in considering future budgets.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I am trying to be as even-handed as possible with time but, if I say that a member's time is up, that is what I mean. Members are running over their times hugely. If they read the *Official Report* tomorrow, they will find that they have all been getting a minute or two extra. If we continue like that, somebody will have to fall off the end.

15:40

Iain Smith (North East Fife) (LD): I will try not to fall off any ends, Presiding Officer.

To comment on Jim Mather's rather strange intervention, I say that it is odd that, when statistics come out that support the SNP's case, it rushes out a press release, but when the statistics do not support its case, it rubbishes them. There is no consistency in how the SNP deals with issues. I am afraid that I do not agree with a word that Mr Mather said.

I agree with Derek Brownlee on one issue—only one: we should consider what the budget is supposed to deliver and not just the raw figures. It is important to bear in mind that the budget is delivering the Liberal Democrat-Labour partnership agreement priorities. We now have more doctors, nurses and health professionals than ever in our hospitals and communities. It was announced this week that record numbers of people are now employed in the health service.

By 2007, 53,000 teachers will be in post, which will lead to smaller class sizes and improvement in attainment as the years go by. We have more police on the streets, record crime clear-up rates and a better environmental record. The budget will deliver free eye and dental checks and new investment in the dental profession in the national health service, if dentists will take up the money that is available.

Funding for colleges and universities is to increase by almost a third, which is significant, and we are extending vocational education training to 14 to 16-year-olds. We have made record investment in transport—£1 billion by 2006, 70 per cent of which will go into public transport. We have abolished the tolls on the Skye bridge and, from April, we will extend free off-peak bus travel for older people from local services to national services. There is also to be a significant investment of £1.2 billion in affordable housing in the next three years.

All those substantial investments are delivering our programmes, which are on issues that are

important to communities. I am delighted with the significant investment in the rail network in Fife, which has brought improvements to a system that is under strain. The additional investment that will come in the next few years will bring further improvements, particularly at Waverley station. The provision of additional carriages and platform extensions have significantly improved public transport in Fife.

We must consider whether the extra money delivers what it is meant to deliver. In yesterday's members' business debate, I expressed concerns about whether the money that is being put into cancer treatment in Fife is delivering. It is important for the Executive to ensure that the bodies that are charged with delivering policies actually deliver and make use of the money that we give them. For example, in the NHS, we must ensure that cancer care is improved through the additional money that we put in.

In education, money has been going to local government to help it to reach the target of 53,000 teachers, but we must ensure that teachers are employed. In Fife, the record on educational attainment is not as good as it should be. The quality of education that Fife Council's Labour administration has provided has let down our children—last year, the council did not employ the additional 93 teachers for which the Executive gave it funding. Let us try to ensure that this year the council's budget, which will be announced in a couple of weeks, provides the extra teachers for which it has received extra money.

I want to scotch the myth, which we hear from the Conservatives and the SNP every time we have a debate about local government, that the council tax has increased by 55 per cent since the Executive came to power. It has not; it has increased by 55 per cent since 1997, although 10 per cent of that increase came in April 1997, when the Conservatives were still in Government. Since the present Administration in Scotland came to power in 1999, the council tax has increased by only 28 per cent.

Mr Swinney: What has the rate of inflation been?

Iain Smith: I do not deny that the increase has been greater than inflation, but it has certainly not been 55 per cent, as the SNP and the Conservatives claim; it has been nearly half that, which is significantly less than they claim. It is important to get those facts right and on the record.

Significant additional funding has gone to local government from central Government. In fact, since 2002-03, funding from the Scottish Executive to local government has increased by £1.6 billion; it is 25 per cent higher than it was in

2002-03. That significant increase has enabled local government to improve on many services. It is important that we deliver improvements to our services, which is why we are trying to ensure that—as the budget document says—local government continues to deliver additional support in education, significant increases in care for the elderly, additional investment in police services, extra resources for road maintenance, additional provision for environmental programmes—that basically means recycling—and protection for existing services. All those areas are being funded by additional money.

I know that the local government settlement will be tight, but it would be even tighter under the Scottish National Party because the SNP wants to cap local government spending. It has a policy of capping. I do not know exactly how capping will solve the problems in local government spending. The final question for the SNP—

Mr Swinney: Will the member give way?

Iain Smith: I am sorry—I am over time already.

I have a final question for the SNP, which I hope it will answer in its response to the debate. The SNP says that it wants to give more money to local government, but where will that money come from? What services is the SNP planning to cut in the budget in order to provide that additional money to local government? It is important that the SNP tell us that because the people need to know.

15:46

Frances Curran (West of Scotland) (SSP): I support the points that have been made by John Swinney and Brian Adam on the equal pay settlement. It is the biggest issue in the budget and in the debate. A number of members have mentioned the need to assess the outcomes of financial decisions that are taken in Parliament. The minister has said that it is nothing to do with him and that he has increased the allocation to local authorities. I accept that there has been an increase, but the anticipated bill for equal pay over several years—wages that 50,000 low-paid workers, mainly women, are entitled to—is £700 million. It would be ridiculous for Parliament to tell local authorities to find that. Parliament should play a role in ensuring that the outcome is equality. What is the point in increasing the promoting equality budget from £8 million to £13 million? We do not need glossy leaflets—it is not that type of campaign—but outcome-based equality.

I agree with Des McNulty that one of the problems is the question of what will be proposed. I ask the minister whether there is to be any attempt to put money in contingency funds. Different councils will pay out the settlement over

different periods. The outcome at the moment is that councils are trying to batter down the expectations of the women who are entitled to those wages and back pay. They are trying to force down the settlements that women workers are receiving and to make them as low as possible. That is not equality. The budget is supposed to lead to political priorities; instead, nobody wants to settle the matter and women workers will have to accept that the councils cannot afford equal pay. I and other members urge the minister to reconsider the matter. I am not suggesting that the Scottish Executive should pay the whole £700 million, but let us not have the outcomes that we have at the moment.

I agree with Brian Adam that if we do not go in that direction, there will be a need for crisis management down the line—we know that it is coming and we understand what the crisis will be. In 1995-96, the Tories made huge budget cuts in local authority allocations, which was one of the biggest crises in Scottish local government in the 1990s. I do not know whether members remember, but there were wholesale withdrawals of vital services: schools were closed, minibuses were withdrawn and there were no drivers for disabled clubs. There was a load of cuts, not just in jobs—or in not filling vacancies—but through actual closure of services. As well as an asset sell-off, that is what we face. It is short-sighted not to get involved in a meaningful discussion with the local authorities on how they will pay the £700 million.

Parliament believes in equality. We set the national framework, which I agree with and with which ministers have said they agree, so the Executive has to take some responsibility for funding it. I urge the minister to reconsider his decision; I urge him not to allow the women who have been due the money for decades to be scapegoated yet again by the Executive and local authorities and to be the losers. They should not be held to ransom by being told that, if they insist on getting the money that they are entitled to, some services will have to close. How did we end up in this situation?

Brian Adam: Does Frances Curran agree that the last thing we need is for lawyers to intervene? Does she share my concern that 2,500 cases have been lodged in the courts, more than 1,000 of which are in Glasgow and 100 of which are in the north-east?

Frances Curran: I agree absolutely. It is ludicrous that women are having to go to lawyers to try to get a fair settlement instead of being offered it by local authorities and the Scottish Executive.

I ask the minister to reconsider—otherwise, there will be a crisis. There will be all sorts of

campaigning; the unions and local authorities will be up in arms and the minister will be forced back to the drawing board. We should show some maturity and make contingency plans before that happens.

15:51

Mark Ballard (Lothians) (Green): Another day, another budget debate—and there is another one to come in a couple of weeks' time. The budget underpins everything that the Government in Scotland does. Whatever the rhetoric of Government, what matters is where the money goes. It is in the spending that we see the truth that lies behind the statements of ministers and others, so this is a vital debate.

I am disappointed that we will not have a chance today to vote on the amendment that was lodged by John Swinney, which highlighted a key point that has also been made by the SNP in one of its debates and by the Finance Committee in its report. It is vital for ministers to address the issues that John Swinney and the Finance Committee have laid out.

Frances Curran highlighted the fact that we are putting burdens on local authorities without providing the finance to pay for them. Local authorities will have two options: to increase council tax or cut services. Neither option is desirable and each would hit the poorest and most disadvantaged the hardest. I ask the minister, when he responds to the debate, to come forward at last with some succour for those who will be affected by the local authority settlement.

I move on to a subject that has not been discussed in the debate. As ever, the budget document contains a lot of nice platitudes about sustainable development, which is one of the key priorities at the heart of public policy. I reiterate the concerns that have been raised by the Finance Committee and by me in previous debates about the way in which the priority of sustainable development is related to spending. I reiterate my disappointment that the minister refuses to set out information that ties the priorities to spending decisions. However, this debate is about the numbers and it is worth talking about what has happened in the budget in the past and about what is projected to happen in the future.

In the transport budget, we see big increases in real terms in spending on rail, ferries and bus services in 2002-03 and 2003-04, but no change in 2005-06, 2006-07 and 2007-08. In the environment and rural development budget, we see big increases in the budget for the strategic waste fund in 2002-03, 2003-04 and 2004-05, but after that the budget is at a standstill. The Executive has made strides in opening new

stations. That has not happened in England and Wales. Andrew Arbuckle, among others, mentioned the opening of new railway lines in Scotland. That shows a welcome commitment to sustainable development, but will it continue?

When the Scottish Parliament was established in 1999, Scotland's recycling rate was the worst in Europe. It was abysmal. Things have improved dramatically since then. Our recycling rate is no longer abysmal and the worst in Europe—it is below average. Our performance has gone from abysmal to poor. Can we hope that such a rate of improvement will continue? We are not seeing the appropriate increases in the budget figures.

I am worried by the evidence that the Finance Committee heard on 10 January when it considered the 2005-06 budget revisions. Some £48 million had been cut from the money for rail services in Scotland—the figure was down to £212 million from £260 million. The minister said that a large part of that cut was because of delays in such things as track access grants and that the money would be spent later from the central unallocated provision. I seek a reassurance from the minister that that will happen. In the meantime, at least some of the money that was allocated to rail services in last year's budget is being spent on roads. It is much the same story with the strategic waste fund, which is down by £30 million to £82 million. The flood and coast protection fund is down by £9 million to £6.5 million.

Revisions will always be needed because unexpected problems will occur when money is being spent and there are demand-led programmes that rely on local authorities and other bodies applying to the Scottish Executive for funding. If they do not apply for that funding, the money cannot be spent. However, as the convener of the Finance Committee said,

“there is a pattern of making commitments to spend money on rail and not following through on them. We find that there is an underspend on the rail budget, whereas there seems to be a persistent overspend on the roads budget. There is a budgeting issue in respect of the management of rail expenditure versus the management of roads expenditure.”—[*Official Report, Finance Committee*, 10 January 2006; c 3261.]

We have a problem when there is a move from revision to a pattern of revision and when promises have been made in the budget and lovely words have been spoken about the future sustainable development of Scotland but spending patterns and revisions show that cash is not in fact being made available.

Fundamentally, there is a problem with the Executive's priorities. The Executive can produce sustainable development strategies until it is blue in the face, but until it moves away from its obsession with increasing gross domestic product,

those strategies will not be properly reflected in budgets and those budgets will not result in real spending. The Executive has said in its latest sustainable development strategy that it does not believe in growth at any cost. Like the promises that it makes in budgets that tend not to be met as fully as we would hope, that statement must still be tested.

The budget contains many good things. I hope that some of them will be achieved and that money will be spent where the Executive promised to spend it. I look to the ministers to reassure us that the budget will be implemented.

15:58

Mr Ted Brocklebank (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): As we know, the Finance Committee produced a critical report on the budget process. The report highlighted particular failings in the Executive's efficiency savings and local government finance proposals. When he gave evidence, the minister told the committee that it was impossible to state how much was being spent on the Executive's three cross-cutting themes—economic growth, equal opportunities and sustainable development. Nobody seems to know how the money is being spent in the Executive, so Conservatives are entitled to ask whether the Scottish people are being offered value for the money for all the additional millions of pounds that are being poured into services.

Despite the huge surges in spending, the delivery of public services appears to be getting worse. Each year, £1,400 more—24 per cent more—is spent on every Scot than is spent on every person who lives south of the border. The Executive's per capita levels of spending on all the key services—health, education, housing and transport—are higher than those in England and Wales, but what about the quality of delivery? Despite all Iain Smith's fine words and all the extra bodies that he said are being recruited, 22,000 more people are on waiting lists than were on waiting lists in 1999 and some 7,000 out-patients wait more than a year for treatment. There are 1,100 more senior bureaucrats in the health service than there were in 1999, which is a 40 per cent increase.

Criminal offences have increased by 15 per cent. Drug crime has increased by 40 per cent and fire raising and vandalism have increased by 60 per cent in the past six years.

Attacks on school staff are up by 124 per cent, and exam results for the lowest 20 per cent of students—the key group that needs most help—remain consistently low.

The one area where the Executive could make a big difference is business rates. However, instead

of cutting rates, as its colleagues in the National Assembly for Wales have done, it has chosen to keep rates above the level in England and thereby put Scotland at a competitive disadvantage. We hear that the uniform business rate will be established next year—guess when—just before the election. Surprise, surprise.

It is a fact that the biggest growth industry in Scotland is Government, this at a time when there are continuing job haemorrhages in manufacturing. The recent redundancies at Lexmark are only the latest in a catalogue of nearly 2,000 job losses in the first 26 days of this year alone.

Of course we need appropriate numbers of policemen, teachers and nurses, but with the public sector now accounting for something like 54 per cent of Scottish GDP, Tom McCabe must look at the 12 per cent increase in Scottish Government staff since 1999 and the 40 per cent increase in the number of full-time staff employed by the quangos.

The Deputy Minister for Finance, Public Service Reform and Parliamentary Business (George Lyon): Can Mr Brocklebank confirm that the Conservative policy is to cut £1 billion from the budget?

Mr Brocklebank: I do not know where on earth the minister got that. I always like to let the Lib Dems intervene, especially these days when every day we get another refreshing revelation from them, but that one was hardly a work of genius.

If economic growth really is the Executive's top priority, the minister has to understand that the staggering growth of the public sector is stifling the ability of private business to generate wealth. Moreover, the differing approaches to dealing with targets—whereby some departments can keep what they save while others have had their baselines reduced and the money reallocated elsewhere—are simply not consistent with the overarching commitment to improve efficiency.

The Executive has spent six years pouring more and more money into public services, yet all that Scotland has to show for that is more people on waiting lists, more crime, no improvement in educational attainment, a faltering economy and an army of more bureaucrats. That is not a budget strategy to bring any comfort; it is a strategy for spend, spend, spend, with little reference to value for money.

In another context, when financial disaster was staring him in the face, Burns wrote:

"But, Och! I backward cast my e'e,
On prospects drear!
An' forward, tho' I canna see,
I guess an' fear!"

That could have been written to describe this budget strategy.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We go now to the closing speeches. I call Elaine Murray to close for the Labour Party.

16:02

Dr Elaine Murray (Dumfries) (Lab): How long do I have, Presiding Officer?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Officially four minutes, but I can probably allow a degree of latitude in this closing round—let us call it five minutes.

Dr Murray: Thanks very much.

I thought that we had had this debate on 21 December and it was only on reflection that I realised that that was the debate on the Finance Committee report at stage 1. Perhaps the case could be made for bringing the two debates together to deal with some of the problems that John Swinney referred to about who can make amendments at what time. It is a little confusing to have a group of budget debates together because it is difficult to know who is discussing what at what time. That is especially the case today because the motion seeks approval for spending plans that have already been announced and discussed. Indeed, there have been plenty of opportunities over the past year to question ministers after ministerial statements and during Executive debates about the way in which the Executive structures its expenditure.

The minister was right to flag up the transparency of the process. When the committee met in Elgin, transparency was one of the points raised during the public session. There is a lack of understanding among the general public—possibly even in the Parliament—of how transparent the budget process is in Scotland compared with how it is elsewhere.

I will comment briefly on Ted Brocklebank's totally selective and suspect use of figures. Attainment in education in Scotland is increasing. I do not deny that there is a problem with the bottom 20 per cent and the Executive has policies to address that, but it is not the case that attainment in education is not increasing.

I was grateful to the Executive for its response to the Finance Committee's report. I flag up one or two points to which I appreciate the minister might not be able to respond immediately although they have arisen from the way in which the Executive responded. I am grateful to the Executive for agreeing to continue to investigate the way in which health boards' allocations are presented to make them more transparent and for agreeing to review the presentation of the cross-cutting

information—to which Ted Brocklebank referred—to make it much clearer how portfolios contribute financially to the Executive's cross-cutting objectives.

However, there are one or two things about which I would like to know more. For example, ministers stated in their response that the health board savings of at least 1 per cent are not being deducted "from any existing plans". Does that mean that they are not being deducted at source from the baseline budget before any increases are added for spending pressures or specific projects? That is not exactly the same thing.

Des McNulty mentioned the mechanisms for monitoring the delivery of the partnership agreement and the fact that they are being informed by the approach of the Prime Minister's delivery unit. The Finance Committee took fairly detailed evidence from Professor Barber about the focused way in which progress towards particular targets is being monitored and overseen by the Prime Minister himself in England and Wales, and I wondered how that informing was being translated into practice in the Executive's monitoring of its progress towards implementing the partnership agreement.

It has been clarified that pay provision in education is excluded from efficiency savings, but that is not the same thing as education being excluded from them. At one point, the Finance Committee thought that education itself was excluded. There are issues with making efficiency savings in education, because some councils—including Dumfries and Galloway Council—are making proposals that would reduce the education services that they provide, such as the support for children with additional support needs. We need to monitor that and ensure that cuts in councils' services do not run counter to the Scottish Executive's intentions.

It is still the case that councils are treated differently from Executive departments in having to find the £197 million of efficiency savings from their budgets by 2007-08. The Finance Committee is conducting a short-term inquiry into the effects of the single status agreement and retrospective equal pay claims and I assure the ministers that all members of the committee will be just as rigorous in interrogating council officials and councillors as we are in interrogating ministers. We will not roll over and say that councils should be paid all the money that they demand, but there is definitely an issue with their ability to afford the equal pay claims. COSLA has agreed that the single status agreement is the responsibility of the individual councils, but the councils have a problem in finding what could be larger than anticipated amounts of money for equal pay claims. I call on the ministers and COSLA to have realistic

discussions about that. There is no point in councils presenting the Executive with a huge bill and, without substantiating that bill, demanding that it pay up, but it is necessary to continue to have realistic dialogue about how that might be resolved.

16:08

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con):

To be frank, although the debate has been worthy, it has been rather dull. I was even looking back with some nostalgia to this morning's lively exchanges until my good friend Ted Brocklebank injected some life into this debate, for which I am grateful.

It is only fair to acknowledge that in this and previous budgets public spending has reached not high but record levels. Scotland is now attaining, if not surpassing, Scandinavian levels of public expenditure. Unfortunately, Scotland is not matching that with Scandinavian levels of service.

Although I accept that health spending has risen by 70 per cent since devolution, the reality for people on the ground is different. We now have NHS 24 in place of GPs providing 24-hour cover. Throughout the country, local accident and emergency units have closed. Access to NHS dentists, which was available seven years ago, is now lacking. People's experience is that increases in public expenditure are simply not matched with improvements in service.

Derek Brownlee acknowledged the imbalance between inputs and outputs. That is a serious issue for the Executive. We must ensure that public money is spent as appropriately and as wisely as it can be. However, from the evidence available, it seems that we are not seeing the benefits of the additional sums spent. That is important because, during the past few years, we have enjoyed very large budget increases and that will not go on for ever. Whoever the Chancellor of the Exchequer is in years to come, finances will start to contract. If we have not been able to improve the services for people in Scotland when we have had huge budget increases, how will we do it when the budget inevitably contracts?

During the past six or seven years under devolution we have missed the opportunity to use the additional sums to invest in long-term infrastructure, particularly transport projects. Perhaps we missed the opportunity in the first three or four years of devolution to make such key decisions and investments. We will regret that.

Ted Brocklebank referred to the growth in public sector employment. The Tories have no problem with employing people to fill important front-line jobs. We all want there to be more nurses, teachers and policemen. The sad thing is that too

many of those jobs are non-productive. Ted Brocklebank referred to the 40 per cent increase in staff working for quangos such as the Scottish Environment Protection Agency and other regulatory bodies. The fear is that such bodies have grown like Topsy; they are increasing the burden of bureaucracy and stifling the private sector. We hear farmers complaining about the SEPA regulations, as Mr Lyon will know, and private businesses complaining about the level of regulation coming from other quangos. We have to ensure that if we increase employment in the public sector, we do so in productive areas and we do not allow people just to fill in forms and become watchdogs, which is an additional and unnecessary burden on the private sector.

I turn to the question of the local government grant settlement. We are all well aware of the concerns about the rise in the council tax and we could bandy statistics around endlessly. The fact is that council tax has gone up, is going up and will continue to go up by more than the rate of inflation. That will continue to be a burden on people whose incomes are not going up at the same rate.

Iain Smith: On that basis, and notwithstanding how fast the council tax went up under the Conservatives, would the member support an income-based system for local government finance?

Murdo Fraser: No, I would not, although I dare say we could have a debate on that that would go on for the rest of the afternoon. Most western democracies have some kind of property-based taxation; there is nothing unusual in that. The problem with an income-based system is that it simply shifts the burden of taxation from those who are paying at the moment to hard-working families. I am not surprised that Mr Smith's Liberal Democrat colleagues down south are now revising their policy on local income tax, if they can find a leader to take that on after today's events. I think that they will find that a local income tax creates more problems than it solves.

There is scope for more savings to be made in local government. South Ayrshire Council, where the Conservatives have just taken over the administration, has already been able to save £4 million by axing the enterprise and infrastructure department. The council has not cut services; it has simply ordered the delivery of services in a different way.

Council chief executives are paid tremendous salaries. The average chief executive salary in the councils in Glasgow, Edinburgh, Fife, North Lanarkshire and South Lanarkshire—our five largest councils—is £138,000. That is more than the First Minister is paid. I do not deny that those people do important jobs, but should they be paid

more than the First Minister? That seems to be very strange.

I could go on, Prime Minister—I am sorry, Presiding Officer; I was promoting you for a second there. I could go on, but time will not allow me to talk about efficiency savings. If the Executive is determined to use its money as efficiently as possible, it will have our support.

16:14

Jim Mather (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): I will take up the point about efficient government in due course, but first I record my permanent misgivings about an expenditure-only budget. I hanker for a budget that raises its own revenue. In my experience, the only budget that works is one in which people are spending to save on costs, to maximise revenue and to bolster the balance sheet. None of that happens in Scotland so we have no basis for effective financial management.

We have heard another self-congratulatory budget speech from the minister. It is not consistent with the messages that we are getting from local authorities or with the ramifications of the local government financial settlement. We have the prospect of a double whammy of council tax rises going beyond 2.5 per cent—for Iain Smith's benefit, I ask what a 2.5 per cent target is if it is not capping—and service cuts. And that is before equal pay and single status descend on the shoulders of the local authorities.

The thing that exposes the weakness in the Executive's approach is the efficient government process. I recently submitted a question to the Minister for Finance and Public Service Reform, which said:

"To ask the Scottish Executive whether all savings listed in the Efficiency Technical Notes in support of the Efficient Government Programme are net of redundancy payments and the cost of capital and/or other spend-to-save disbursements."

The answer was:

"Where investment was justified to enhance or sustain service delivery, and not solely in order to secure efficiency gains, capital costs and redundancy payments are not taken into account when calculating the efficiency saving. In any project where efficiency improvement was the primary rationale, the treatment of development and redundancy payment costs will be considered on a case-by-case basis, and will be reflected in future iterations of the Efficiency Technical Notes."—[*Official Report, Written Answers*, 20 January 2006; S2W-21967.]

Well I never. In the business community, where I come from, that would never be acceptable. Any efficient business will carry out an accurate cost allocation. In no other way can proper efficiency be achieved. In business, to consider the costs and projections of savings in retrospect is so laughable as not to justify consideration. Further

down the line, businesses would also do a post-implementation audit. We are talking here, however, about the governance of our country. The efficiency savings are a joke and they will be what we always said they would be—what the Minister for Finance and Public Service Reform claims them to be—and no audit will disprove that. It is murky, it is messy and it is not what we see in other places.

We had the minister and the permanent secretary in front of the committee, and I took them through the process that others have used in order to achieve proper savings. It is simply a three-stage exercise. First, one sets worthy outcomes, framed in outcome terms that everyone clearly understands. Then, there is a process of achieving those savings under strict statistical and accounting control, down to recording the costs even beforehand. Finally, it must be open to the involvement of all stakeholders, including council tax payers and councils. None of that is happening. Is that why we are not achieving our true priorities? Is that why we are not achieving growth? I wear as a badge of pride Iain Smith's disagreement with my assertion that reindexation is designed to knock out the comparability of our economy with economies elsewhere, because that is exactly what it does. It makes our economy a closed economy and it makes us a banana republic, as long as it is managed by the current Scottish Executive. It creates a false feedback loop, designed to fool the people of Scotland.

Other statistics on the spending of its money have been produced by the Executive, but the labour participation statistics ignore the migration of people out of Scotland to other parts of the UK economy. There may be high levels of employment, but we should look at the incomes that people are earning. A third of the people in this country are earning less than £6.50 an hour. That is 820,000 people, all of whom are now about to come under greater pressure from the remorseless, above-inflation rises in council tax, thanks to the Executive's mismanagement of the budget.

Earlier, Derek Brownlee made the effective point that the way in which the savings have been applied—and we have it in writing today—has not been a "straight percentage efficiency target" because, the Executive tells us, that

"assumes that everyone is as efficient or as inefficient as the next one"

and it

"penalises those who have worked hard".

However, the Executive puts all local authorities in exactly that position, and that is utterly outrageous. In a moment, the Deputy Minister for Finance, Public Service Reform and Parliamentary

Business is going to stand up and defend the Executive, when he could also be defending Argyll and Bute Council, whose frugality, honesty and hard work differentiate it from many of the other 31 councils whose record he will be justifying in the same basket and with the same burden. *[Laughter.]* Laughter from the Labour benches just reinforces the whole nonsense of the Executive's existence, shored up by people who are willing to see data distorted and local authorities put under pressure. Local authorities are now under pressure to sell their very assets, which proves that there is no balance sheet mentality.

Iain Smith asked where the money was going to come from. The money comes from growth and from the fact that this is not a zero-sum game. The money comes from the approach advocated by Charlie McCreevy, not 20 years ago or 10 years ago but right now. He talks about making his economy more competitive and about doing that through the vehicle of getting more people into work, getting more skills in place and building infrastructure, and doing so because his country knows how to run both sides of the profit-and-loss account and its balance sheet. The Irish run their whole economy to make it competitive. We cannot do that until we do the same, and members of the Executive parties can laugh all they like, because when we reach that day they will be gone.

16:20

The Deputy Minister for Finance, Public Service Reform and Parliamentary Business (George Lyon): Today's debate has been about agreeing the principles of the Budget (Scotland) (No 3) Bill. Once again I am pleased to see that no one has proposed that we could operate without such a bill, which underpins everything that we intend to do in the coming year.

A number of colleagues have made suggestions about the bill's contents, which I will address. Despite those suggestions, no amendments were proposed to the budgets at the appropriate time back in December—I recognise that Mr Swinney wished to move an amendment today.

Mr Swinney: For Mr Lyon to be comprehensive in his comments about the fact that no amendments to the bill were submitted during the Finance Committee's consideration of it, it would be fair to acknowledge—this relates to the point that Mr McNulty made—that we raised issues in the Finance Committee report and looked for the Government to respond positively to the genuine concerns that were shared by members of five political parties on the Finance Committee. To say that no alternative was put forward at the time of the Finance Committee report is inadvertently to mislead members of Parliament.

George Lyon: I will deal with that point later. I recognise that there are concerns. The SNP, in particular, has consistently raised genuine concerns that we have debated previously.

I was going to say that it appears that not only are we all agreed on the need for the bill and on the principles that have been set out by my colleague Tom McCabe, but there also seems to be agreement on some of the detailed contents of the budget. Mr Swinney was generous enough to recognise that.

I will pick up on one or two of the issues that have been raised in the debate this afternoon. Mr Swinney raised concerns about balances. I confirm for him that figures taken from local authorities' audited accounts for 2004-05 show that, in total, councils had more than £1.5 billion held in usable reserves and balances as at 1 April 2005. When ring-fenced funds are excluded, the accounts still show that more than £1 billion in usable reserves are available to them. As I understand it, the chief executive of the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities confirmed in evidence to the Finance Committee that significant sums from that amount were available to address some of the pressures that councils face.

Mr Swinney: Will the minister give way?

George Lyon: I want to make progress.

Brian Adam wanted to know what proportion of the local government settlement was for new burdens. That is another fair point. No new burdens were imposed on local government for core services as a result of the settlement. As Mr McCabe mentioned, new burdens for local government as a result of specific Executive initiatives were funded through the £1 billion of other grants that we provide to local authorities.

It has been said on many occasions that we have been less than generous to local government in our spending plans. We believe that that is not the case. Local government has enjoyed big increases in recent years. By March 2008, core funding through aggregate external finance will have increased by 55 per cent since 1999-2000. Total funding of £30 billion over the next three years will enable local authorities to increase their spending on services to record levels.

We were also pleased to announce last month that the Improvement Service had reported to the finance ministers that councils are on course to deliver £122 million in efficiency savings in 2005-06. I believe that everyone in the chamber would wish to congratulate councils on their progress, which puts them well on course to deliver the efficiency targets that we set them.

That substantial sum can, of course, be redeployed to meet current pressures. I expect councils not only to sustain those efficiency savings, but to build on them in the coming years. In some ways that addresses the point that Murdo Fraser rightly made: that we must ensure that the resources that we put in deliver more and better front-line services. Our plans on efficient government aim to target resources so that we derive better outcomes from the money that we spend.

It is worth stressing that the budget is important because of the impact that it will have, which several members—in particular Iain Smith—mentioned. The budget will allow us to continue to invest in our schools, our health service and our transport infrastructure. That is vital to improving the lives of ordinary Scots.

The budget is a key part of the plans that were announced in the spending review of 2004. As we have said many times, growing the economy is our top priority. The budget will help to deliver on that promise. It will deliver excellent public services, support stronger, safer communities and develop a confident, democratic Scotland. It is a budget for enterprise, opportunity and fairness and I am sure that it will command the Parliament's support.

“Forests for Scotland”

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Murray Tosh):

The next item of business is a statement by Rhona Brankin on “Forests for Scotland: The Scottish Forestry Strategy”. As usual, the minister will take questions at the end of her statement, so no interventions should be made.

16:26

The Deputy Minister for Environment and Rural Development (Rhona Brankin):

We all depend on forests in one way or another. I am pleased to make a statement to bring members up to date with what has happened in forestry, as it affects and will affect the economy, the environment and the people of Scotland. I will make specific announcements and describe some current and forthcoming work.

Trees, woods and forests provide a broad range of benefits, not just products such as wood, paper, pharmaceuticals, foodstuffs, dyestuffs, heat and power, but environmental benefits such as habitats, and environmental services such as helping to alleviate floods and mitigating the effects of climate change. Woods and forests also provide benefits for people and communities, such as places to go, activities to take part in, attractive environments to help tourism or to regenerate brownfield sites in our towns and cities and settings in which to enjoy healthy recreation and opportunities for outdoors learning.

Members will be aware that one of the priorities that we have pursued in implementing “Forests for Scotland: The Scottish Forestry Strategy”, which was published in 2000, is that of delivering benefits closer to where people live. That should radically improve the quality and setting of some of our urban areas and provide networks of woodland and open space in which people of all ages can benefit from greater access and more opportunities for woodland recreation.

To boost that, I am pleased to announce that we are awarding a further £2 million to 30 projects through our initiative on woods in and around towns. Those projects are proposed by local authorities, communities, non-Government organisations and partnerships. The latest round of awards covers projects in places such as McDonald park woodlands in Ellon in Aberdeenshire and Kinnoull hill woodland park in Perth; funding for the Forest Education Initiative to establish forest schools in Edinburgh, for further work at Craigmillar castle park and for a full-time ranger; projects at seven woods around Falkirk; and a project at Carmunnock woods in Glasgow, which involves a contribution from trainees of the Coach House Trust and the Castlemilk

environmental trust, who will work to improve the woodlands that Glasgow City Council owns.

Serving as our forestry department, the Forestry Commission Scotland manages the national forest estate and has gained considerable experience in working with communities—more than 110 partnership projects of one kind or another are in place. Earlier this year, I was pleased to visit the highly successful community project at Bellsbank in Ayrshire. The Forestry Commission has also produced a suite of publications to show what can be done in the national forest estate by the private sector and to outline the commitment to working in partnership.

Of course, as well as working to deliver benefits close to where most people live, forestry fulfils a crucial role in rural areas. In some areas, it is vital to support the social and economic fabric of communities, through jobs in forestry and related activities, including tourism. Forestry is key to employment in many rural areas. It is important that, from 1999 to 2003, employment in forestry and its related businesses increased in rural areas and in Scotland as a whole. We support woods other than those in the national forest estate through the Scottish forestry grants scheme and we are now working out the detail of how to integrate the support mechanisms for agriculture, forestry and other activities in our land management contracts to ensure that adequate measures are in place.

Over the years, increasing recognition by local authorities of the value of forestry has resulted in woodland strategies to encourage the right forestry in the right place to meet the needs of communities. Across many parts of Scotland—from Grampian to Ayrshire and from the Western Isles to the Borders—we already have locational premiums to boost the grants to reflect those aspirations.

I am pleased to announce that through the Highland locational premium we have earmarked £1.5 million for communities, farmers, crofters and landowners in many parts of the Highlands to establish well-designed woodland to provide a range of timbers for local use, a targeted expansion of forest habitat networks and measures to increase community benefits from woodlands.

Affordable housing is in short supply in some rural areas of Scotland and the Forestry Commission has been working with Communities Scotland to make national forest land available for affordable housing in rural areas in which there are recognised shortages. The national forest land scheme allows registered social landlords and other appropriate housing bodies that are endorsed by Communities Scotland to purchase land for affordable housing at a reduced price. I

am pleased to say that, through the Forestry Commission, we sold 30 house plots to affordable housing bodies last year and expect to sell up to a further 200 of those plots over the next two to three years.

Given that such a range of benefits is being generated, it is important that our young people are fully aware of the role of trees, woods and forests. The Forestry Commission recently launched its education strategy, “Woods for Learning”, which it developed with the support of colleagues in the education sector. I have asked the Forestry Commission to send a copy of the strategy to each MSP and have placed copies of it in the Scottish Parliament information centre because I am convinced that it will make a major contribution, not least to our sustainable development strategy. I am sure that members will wish to lend their support.

Members should not underestimate the difference that they can make by encouraging our young people to use woods for learning out of doors. Using woods, young people can study any topic one cares to name, from art to zoology, they can learn how to work as individuals and in teams and, crucially, they can find out about sustainable development. Evidence from parents and teachers and from studies suggests that increased self-esteem is one of the results of closer contact with woods and of learning in an outdoor setting.

Through the strategy, we are focusing initially on the 250 schools within 1km of woods in the national forest estate, through local woods for learning. Woods provide settings that can convert the rhetoric of sustainable development into something more tangible. By learning about biodiversity and the many species that live in forests and about how plants and animals depend on natural resources and interact with the forest, our young people will learn how everything is interlinked and how some of the principles of sustainable development work in practice.

Climate change is the greatest environmental challenge that we face. Everyone, including Scotland’s young people, should be aware of the threats that it poses and should be making small changes to their lifestyle to reduce their contribution to the problem. Forestry can make a major contribution to tackling climate change through its role as a carbon sink, whereby it absorbs emissions of carbon dioxide, and by providing a renewable source of fuel that can displace more polluting fossil fuels.

I encourage communities and schools to consider making more use of wood-fuel heating. The Executive will continue to take steps to encourage such activity. The revised Scottish climate change programme, which is due to be published shortly, will recognise the vital role that

forestry can play in delivering emissions savings. It will include a commitment to develop a biomass action plan for Scotland and will set an ambitious emissions savings target for the whole of the forestry sector. That is the first time that that has been done.

Choosing to use wood more often and substituting wood, a renewable material, for some of the other, less environmentally friendly materials that are used in construction is another way in which we can reduce our ecological footprint. The use of wood warms buildings. We are working with partners to promote the utility, beauty and versatility of timber to architects and other specifiers.

Sustainable development is not just about ensuring that we leave choices for our children and for future generations; it is also about ensuring an equitable distribution of environmental benefits and justice now. Forests have an important part to play in delivering environmental benefits. We have continued to expand forest cover in Scotland, which is now at some 17 per cent of the land area. Forests provide a blend of economic, environmental and social benefits.

Recent coverage of the relative lack of physical activity among our youngsters and of the worrying rise in obesity levels requires concerted action across a number of fronts. Woodlands have a part to play, too. Bringing more of our urban woodlands into management and creating more opportunities for recreation through the woods in and around towns initiative will provide more opportunities in the places where they are required.

I am pleased to announce that the Forestry Commission is about to appoint a health co-ordinator to work with NHS Health Scotland in order to make the most of the opportunities that woodlands in the central belt of Scotland can provide. The experience of children who have participated in forest schools has shown that not only physical, but mental and emotional health is improved by contact with woods.

The greatest benefits will accrue from encouraging the least active to become more active by taking part in walking, cycling and playing in woods. The national forest estate and the woods in and around towns initiative provide links and extend networks of paths that give people greater access to the countryside, whether to enjoy watching wildlife or a walk in the company of friends and family. Those activities make people feel good, advance health and promote well-being.

Physical activity in woods and forests provides not only health benefits, but great enjoyment. It also brings benefit through tourism spending, such as that which is gained from the development of Scotland as a world-class destination for mountain

biking across southern Scotland through the 7stanes project and further north through the attraction of the mountain bike world cup events. I was pleased to see that Scotland was recently accorded global superstar status by the International Mountain Bicycling Association. The Forestry Commission has done much to foster the sport of mountain biking in its work with mountain-bike enthusiasts and colleagues who are concerned with promoting tourism. Forest-related tourism spending is estimated to bring in more than £160 million each year.

In conclusion, forestry can do a great deal of good for Scotland. I encourage members to respond to the forthcoming second consultation on the review of our forestry strategy, "Forests for Scotland" to ensure that it delivers the benefits that the people of Scotland desire.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The minister will take questions on her statement.

Richard Lochhead (North East Scotland) (SNP): I thank the minister for the advance copy of her statement. The Scottish National Party welcomes many of the steps that are outlined in the statement, particularly those that will enhance the educational role of our forests and promote the biomass sector.

However, when it comes to making the most of our nation's forestry potential to provide jobs, tackle climate change and meet our energy needs, the SNP holds the view that ministers are dragging their feet. First, in urging schools to make more use of wood fuel, the minister is out of touch. We are six years into devolution, but schools that are built under public-private partnerships face enormous obstacles in doing exactly that. How does she square her statement with reality?

Secondly, if the minister is intent on expanding forestry cover in Scotland, why is the new planting rate so pitiful? We have seen a 50 per cent decrease since 2001. What is she doing to halt the decline of new planting in Scotland?

Finally, is the minister aware that, according to Parliament researchers, Ireland's forestry budget is greater than Scotland's and yet Scotland has twice as much forestry as Ireland and more jobs that are dependent on the sector? Is there not a good case for greater investment in a sector that has the potential to deliver so much for Scotland?

Rhona Brankin: Obviously, the development of the biomass sector is hugely important. There are already some good examples of small and large-scale developments in that respect including schools in Motherwell and Shotts, three hotels in Skye and housing developments in Oban, Lochgilphead and Campbeltown. We need to and we are keen to do much more. We need to ensure that, where guidance exists, it is followed. I am

meeting ministerial colleagues to look at procurement issues around schools and other public buildings.

Although we need to and we plan to do much more, there have already been significant developments. We are reviewing the national forestry strategy and will examine the extent to which we have met targets for new planting. As part of the process of developing new targets for combating climate change, we are looking at significant targets for planting in Scotland. More information will be forthcoming when the revised climate change strategy appears.

We recognise absolutely the importance of forestry sector jobs to Scotland, especially to the more fragile rural areas. In the forthcoming review of the forestry strategy, we will examine how we can develop jobs in the sector. The climate change strategy and developments in biomass have huge potential for increasing employment in forestry in Scotland. We are aware of that and intend to make the most of it in future.

Alex Fergusson (Galloway and Upper Nithsdale) (Con): Like the SNP, we acknowledge the positive aspects of the statement and welcome the steps to which the minister drew attention. In particular, I applaud the way in which the Forestry Commission has completely opened up to community and leisure use the asset of forestry in Scotland, through projects such as the 7stanes project in my constituency, which the minister mentioned. Being awarded superstar status has had an enormous effect. I am not sure what it will do to the quality of our timber, but it must mean that the Forestry Commission is doing something right.

However, I cannot help but feel that the minister has missed a massive opportunity to address some of the real concerns that exist in the forestry industry. Does she realise that current new plantings are less than 5,000 hectares a year, when in order to meet the Scottish Executive's target of 25 per cent coverage they should be nearer 14,000 hectares a year? Richard Lochhead referred to that. Does she acknowledge or even understand that, when the support mechanisms for forestry are merged within the Scottish Executive Environment and Rural Affairs Department—she mentioned that in her statement—current restocking grants will disappear? That is an important development, because much of the high-quality restocking that is the commendable hallmark of our second generation of forests—including open spaces, far more use of broad-leaved trees and better-quality commercial trees—is largely dependent on such grants. I wonder whether she has taken that in. Without the grants, restocking is likely to be of less environmental benefit, to produce poorer-quality

timber and to be of less long-term economic benefit to the rural economy. I acknowledge the key role that forestry has to play in that economy.

The minister had the option of telling us how she will accelerate new planting to meet strategic targets and how she will maintain high-quality restocking. I hope that she will tell us when she answers my question. She has also announced £2 million to be spent on 30 projects. Over what period will that money be spent?

Rhona Brankin: As I said, the current review of the forestry strategy will examine restocking. I made that clear in my statement—in the detail that I gave about the development of biomass and in what I said about the development and maintenance of forestry to support essential tourism developments in areas such as the south of Scotland.

We have recognised the importance of forestry and have been working with the private sector on stocking levels, which are being examined in the context of the review of the forestry strategy. We will be looking to set new targets, although I am not able to tell the chamber what those targets will be. We have not met some of the targets that we announced in 2000. As the minister who launched that ambitious forestry strategy, I accept that we need to examine why that has happened. The key point is that we need to be able to match supply and demand. There will be considerably increased demand in future. As we move to develop our biomass sector, we need to ensure that we have the forestry supply to meet that demand. Work is under way to do that. I look forward to working with both the private sector and the Forestry Commission to ensure that we match the two accurately in the new forestry strategy.

Nora Radcliffe (Gordon) (LD): There was a tremendous amount in the minister's statement. In the interests of brevity, I will zero in on only one element.

As Alex Fergusson said, the Forestry Commission has done a huge amount to open up its land by creating paths through it. What is the minister doing to encourage other landowners and path providers to collaborate and make interconnections? Crucially, what is being done to develop coherent, consistent and widely recognised signage for all paths across Scotland so that the public can recognise them and have the confidence to use them?

Rhona Brankin: As the largest landowner in Scotland, the Forestry Commission has a critical role to play in developing access to the countryside in rural Scotland and, importantly, in and around towns. In many parts of Scotland, the Forestry Commission is working in partnership with local authorities and is involved in local

access forums. I expect the Forestry Commission to work through those partnerships to develop core path networks. Of course, signage will be a vital part of the core path network in each local authority area. Nora Radcliffe has already spoken to me about the importance of signage. When we debated access in the Parliament, there was a lot of discussion about ensuring that everyone has access to the countryside and the importance of signage in that regard.

Again, I point out that the Forestry Commission works in partnership with local councils. For example, it works with Glasgow City Council to develop its woodland strategy. With regard to forestry that is beside urban areas, the information that is given out about access to land has to be clear. The Forestry Commission will continue to work in partnership with a range of partners throughout Scotland.

Mr John Home Robertson (East Lothian) (Lab): I commend the minister's enthusiasm for forestry education. Can we expect a project under that initiative for Edinburgh and the Lothians, perhaps somewhere in East Lothian?

Does the minister share my concern about the persistent failure of the Forestry Commission to fulfil the target of more than 10,000 hectares a year of new planting that has been set by successive ministers with responsibility for forestry, including me and her? Will she tell the Forestry Commission to do what it is told?

Rhona Brankin: The issue of targets has already been raised. As the member used to have ministerial responsibility for forestry, he will know as well as I do that we have to examine the issue of targets closely. This is increasingly a time when we have to think seriously about targets. The inclusion of a target in our climate change programme for the first time will be hugely important.

We need to think about increasing targets for native woodland coverage. In developing forestry, we need to be aware of the issue of biomass and the important role that forestry is going to play in carbon sequestration, which is important in relation to reducing carbon emissions in Scotland. We need to examine a range of targets for forestry, which is exactly what we are doing through our revised climate change programme and our revised forestry strategy.

I welcome John Home Robertson's interest in education and forestry education initiatives. Today's announcement covers schools in the Edinburgh area. If East Lothian Council is interested in taking that work forward, I would be pleased to facilitate discussion between the Forestry Commission and the council.

Mr Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): There is a deep sense of disappointment in Aberfeldy that there is still no acceptable funding mechanism for the introduction of biomass heating in new schools, such as Breadalbane academy. When will there be progress on that issue?

As a mountain biker, I welcome the Executive's recognition of mountain biking as part of a forest economy. Given the fact that the Executive is establishing a health co-ordinator for central Scotland, can the minister ensure that we do not develop new mountain-bike centres only outside the central belt but that we also develop centres that are closer to our populations? I am thinking, in particular, about the Carron valley near Stirling and the potential for any development there to link up with the Commonwealth games bid.

Rhona Brankin: As I have already said, there are examples of small and large-scale developments that use biomass as an energy source. Schools in Motherwell and Shotts do so, for example, as do housing developments in Oban, Lochgilphead and Campbeltown. We are aware that that issue presents us with a massive opportunity. I and other Executive ministers have to ensure that we match the supply and demand, that we have the necessary guidance and that the architecture policy is in place for developing schools projects. That will mean that we can deliver such projects on the ground and will demonstrate commitment. We intend to take those steps; we already support such projects through the provision of advice, information and grants. The biomass action plan that we are developing will give us further opportunities to ensure that wood is used as a renewable energy source in a range of public and private buildings.

I very much welcome the member's interest in tourism development in relation to mountain biking specifically, which is a welcome form of exercise. Large numbers of people, sometimes in families, now take part in mountain biking. The huge success of mountain biking venues such as Glentworth is also to be welcomed. I agree with the point that, if we are to get more people more active more often, we need to increase the opportunities in and around woods and in areas such as Stirling.

Ms Rosemary Byrne (South of Scotland) (SSP): I am delighted that communities and, in particular, schools and children and young people will benefit through better access and that environmental measures are being encouraged. However, current estimates indicate that forest traffic generates 5.6 million vehicle miles annually on rural roads in Scotland, creating massive pollution problems. The timber harvest is forecast to increase to 10,000,000m³ per year by 2020.

When is the Executive going to invest in freight railway lines in Dumfries and Galloway to counteract that pollution and to deliver genuine community and environmental benefits?

Rhona Brankin: As the member is aware, the freight facilities grant is available to support the establishment of new railheads at either the forest or the receiving locations, and moneys may also be available to support any road infrastructure elements that are not eligible for support through that grant.

I am happy to discuss specific issues with the member in relation to the specific area that she mentions and to facilitate meetings with the Forestry Commission. Timber transport is, of course, hugely important. Scotland has a huge amount of timber that will be quite difficult to access. That is why we need to give support through the freight facilities grant as well as through the specific grant for strategic timber transport.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I have now been round all the parties, so I ask for single questions from this point onwards.

Dr Elaine Murray (Dumfries) (Lab): Forests and forestry products are extremely important in Dumfries and Galloway—I include timber industries for biomass power production and the use of forests for leisure. I should mention that the 7stanes project is located in my constituency as well as in that of Alex Ferguson.

My question relates to Rosemary Byrne's question. Much of the correspondence that I receive is about timber transportation. Is the Executive able to report on the success of the first year of operation of the strategic timber transport fund or to advise whether demand for funding exceeds supply with respect to the proposed routes?

Rhona Brankin: I am aware of the issues in the member's constituency, particularly in the village of Eskdalemuir, where there have been accidents involving timber lorries. We need to get the timber transport scheme under way. We are waiting for state aid approval, and expect to receive it shortly. The commitment of £13 million to timber transport measures remains secure, and the money will be disbursed to appropriate projects. We need, however, to resolve state aid issues on the strategic timber transport fund.

Rob Gibson (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): I welcome the Highland locational premium, but wonder whether it will create more bureaucracy. In particular, is the existing budget that is used for new planting—particularly the commercial planting of species such as Douglas fir for use in the construction of buildings—going to be reduced to pay for the proposals that the minister has put

forward today in relation to the cosmetic, modest approaches that she has suggested for involving more people in forests?

Rhona Brankin: We need to be able to secure a balance between straightforward commercial planting and the social benefits that I have been talking about. In addition, the new forestry strategy needs to be able to tie in with what is happening in sustainable development and the benefits that can be derived from that, in which forestry has a role. We need to work towards a balance between those three elements. I am sure that the member welcomes the additional moneys that were announced today for the Highland locational premium.

Dr Sylvia Jackson (Stirling) (Lab): I thank the minister for the strategy that she outlined today.

Has the minister considered the role of the Forestry Commission in flood prevention? Some flood prevention measures, such as those that are being trialled around Callander, are simple but extremely effective.

Rhona Brankin: Yes. I mentioned the role of the Forestry Commission and the importance of forest and woodland in dealing with flood pressure. As part of strengthening flood prevention measures, we are looking at the best possible environmental practice, which has to be taken into consideration. Woodlands can play a hugely important role in flood prevention. Each local authority that is looking at flood prevention schemes will be encouraged by the range of measures that can be taken to reduce flood risk.

Alex Johnstone (North East Scotland) (Con): Is the Scottish Executive doing any work to assess the potential value of including afforestation in any future European carbon trading mechanism? Given its pre-eminent position in forestry in the United Kingdom, is it in a position to make representations on that matter to Her Majesty's Government?

Rhona Brankin: We are considering the issue as part of the commitment that we announced today to develop a biomass action plan as part of our revised climate change strategy. The member will be aware that there is a Europe-wide biomass action plan. Afforestation is exactly the kind of issue that we will be looking at as part of developing a biomass action plan for the future.

Maureen Macmillan (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): I thank the minister for the Highland locational premium, which will go a fair way towards raising the profile of biomass and the need to create an industry based on it in the Highlands. Such an industry would allow us to develop our own little businesses growing, chipping and pelletising biomass. I hope that we can get the engineering industry to create devices

in which to burn it. That would involve a great deal of cross-cutting work.

When the minister was considering her proposals, did she have discussions with Highlands and Islands Enterprise or with the planning authorities about the kind of houses that might be built of wood?

Rhona Brankin: As I have already said, forestry plays a hugely important role in the economy of the Highlands and Islands. I have already had discussions with Maureen Macmillan about the importance of biomass and the need for facilities such as chipping to ensure that timber can be produced and used locally. It is important that we match the supply of local timber with demand. I know that there have been discussions involving the Forestry Commission, Highlands and Islands Enterprise and the Highland Council about achieving such a match. A privately funded study is being carried out at the moment to look at producing just the right match between supply and demand in Scotland. There is absolutely no doubt that biomass has huge potential in Scotland as a fuel and that it can make a massive contribution to mitigating the effects of climate change. I am more than happy to work with Maureen Macmillan and to meet her to discuss those issues.

Fergus Ewing (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP): Given that production in the timber industry in Scotland will increase from about 6,000,000m³ to 8,000,000m³ or 9,000,000m³ per annum, does the minister agree that that will require a far greater supply of suitably qualified and skilled people in harvesting, saw-milling and processing? Does she further agree that the Scottish School of Forestry, which is situated at Balloch near Inverness, can provide those skills, but that it needs more resources? How much, if any, of the £1.5 million that has been described as a Highland locational premium will be made available to the Scottish School of Forestry to enable it to take on more students and provide more skills training, which will demonstrably be needed and which we all wish it to do? Finally, will she join me in meeting the staff and having a pleasant day out at the School of Forestry at Balloch?

Rhona Brankin: I have visited the School of Forestry in recent months. I agree absolutely with Fergus Ewing that, given the development of forestry in Scotland and given the ambitious targets that we are to set, training is hugely important. I recognise the important work that the Scottish School of Forestry does in Inverness. However, I cannot at this stage predict whether the school will benefit from the Highland locational premium, which I announced today. I am sure that Fergus Ewing will agree that the funding that has been announced is hugely important for the

Highlands. I am delighted to have made that announcement.

Point of Order

17:01

The Presiding Officer (Mr George Reid): There may be a point of order.

The Deputy Minister for Enterprise and Lifelong Learning (Allan Wilson): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. It has been brought to my attention by colleagues that some of the remarks that I made in this morning's energy debate may have been taken out of context and misinterpreted. The reference that I made was not literal, but metaphorical. People who know me will know that I had no intention of causing offence but, if anyone was genuinely offended, I unreservedly withdraw the remark and apologise to members and to people outside the Parliament.

The Presiding Officer: I am grateful to Mr Wilson for addressing the issue so quickly. I hope, however, that we shall have no similar analogies or metaphors in the chamber in future.

Decision Time

17:02

The Presiding Officer (Mr George Reid): There are up to seven questions to be put as a result of today's business. In relation to this morning's debate on the economy of the east of Scotland, if the amendment in the name of Tavish Scott is agreed to, the amendment in the name of Bruce Crawford will fall. In relation to the debate on future energy policy, if the amendment in the name of Allan Wilson is agreed to, the amendment in the name of Richard Lochhead will fall.

The first question is, that amendment S2M-3863.2, in the name of Tavish Scott, which seeks to amend motion S2M-3863, in the name of Murdo Fraser, on the economy of the east of Scotland, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

FOR

Arbuckle, Mr Andrew (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baird, Shiona (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Baker, Richard (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Ballance, Chris (South of Scotland) (Green)
 Ballard, Mark (Lothians) (Green)
 Barrie, Scott (Dunfermline West) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Edinburgh Central) (Lab)
 Brankin, Rhona (Midlothian) (Lab)
 Brown, Robert (Glasgow) (LD)
 Butler, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab)
 Canavan, Dennis (Falkirk West) (Ind)
 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, Marlyn (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Godman, Trish (West Renfrewshire) (Lab)
 Gordon, Mr Charlie (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab)
 Gorrie, Donald (Central Scotland) (LD)
 Harper, Robin (Lothians) (Green)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 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, Cathy (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (Lab)
 Jamieson, Margaret (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (Lab)
 Kerr, Mr Andy (East Kilbride) (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)
 McNulty, Des (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab)
 Morrison, Mr Alasdair (Western Isles) (Lab)
 Muldoon, Bristow (Livingston) (Lab)
 Mulligan, Mrs Mary (Linlithgow) (Lab)
 Murray, Dr Elaine (Dumfries) (Lab)
 Oldfather, Irene (Cunninghame South) (Lab)
 Peacock, Peter (Highlands and Islands) (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)
 Ruskell, Mr Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Scott, Eleanor (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Scott, Tavish (Shetland) (LD)
 Smith, Elaine (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab)
 Smith, Iain (North East Fife) (LD)
 Smith, Margaret (Edinburgh West) (LD)
 Stephen, Nicol (Aberdeen South) (LD)
 Stone, Mr Jamie (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)
 Wallace, Mr Jim (Orkney) (LD)
 Whitefield, Karen (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab)
 Wilson, Allan (Cunninghame North) (Lab)

AGAINST

Adam, Brian (Aberdeen North) (SNP)
 Brocklebank, Mr Ted (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Brownlee, Derek (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Byrne, Ms Rosemary (South of Scotland) (SSP)
 Crawford, Bruce (Mid Scotland and Fife) (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)
 Fergusson, Alex (Galloway and Upper Nithsdale) (Con)
 Fox, Colin (Lothians) (SSP)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gallie, Phil (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Gibson, Rob (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Goldie, Miss Annabel (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Johnstone, Alex (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Leckie, Carolyn (Central Scotland) (SSP)
 Lochhead, Richard (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 Martin, Campbell (West of Scotland) (Ind)
 Mather, Jim (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Maxwell, Mr Stewart (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 McFee, Mr Bruce (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 McGrigor, Mr Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 McLetchie, David (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Con)
 Milne, Mrs Nanette (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Morgan, Alasdair (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Neil, Alex (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Scanlon, Mary (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)
 Sheridan, Tommy (Glasgow) (SSP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Swinney, Mr John (North Tayside) (SNP)
 Tosh, Murray (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Turner, Dr Jean (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Ind)
 Welsh, Mr Andrew (Angus) (SNP)
 White, Ms Sandra (Glasgow) (SNP)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 70, Against 38, Abstentions 0.

Amendment agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: Therefore, amendment S2M-3863.1 falls. The next question is, that motion S2M-3863, in the name of Murdo Fraser, on the economy of the east of Scotland, as amended, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

FOR

Arbuckle, Mr Andrew (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baird, Shiona (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Baker, Richard (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Ballance, Chris (South of Scotland) (Green)
 Ballard, Mark (Lothians) (Green)
 Barrie, Scott (Dunfermline West) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Edinburgh Central) (Lab)
 Brankin, Rhona (Midlothian) (Lab)
 Brown, Robert (Glasgow) (LD)
 Butler, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab)
 Canavan, Dennis (Falkirk West) (Ind)
 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, Marlyn (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Godman, Trish (West Renfrewshire) (Lab)
 Gordon, Mr Charlie (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab)
 Gorrie, Donald (Central Scotland) (LD)
 Harper, Robin (Lothians) (Green)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 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, Cathy (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (Lab)
 Jamieson, Margaret (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (Lab)
 Kerr, Mr Andy (East Kilbride) (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)
 McNulty, Des (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab)
 Morrison, Mr Alasdair (Western Isles) (Lab)
 Muldoon, Bristow (Livingston) (Lab)
 Mulligan, Mrs Mary (Linlithgow) (Lab)
 Murray, Dr Elaine (Dumfries) (Lab)
 Oldfather, Irene (Cunninghame South) (Lab)
 Peacock, Peter (Highlands and Islands) (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)
 Ruskell, Mr Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Scott, Eleanor (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Scott, Tavish (Shetland) (LD)
 Smith, Elaine (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab)
 Smith, Iain (North East Fife) (LD)
 Smith, Margaret (Edinburgh West) (LD)
 Stephen, Nicol (Aberdeen South) (LD)
 Stone, Mr Jamie (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)
 Wallace, Mr Jim (Orkney) (LD)
 Whitefield, Karen (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab)
 Wilson, Allan (Cunninghame North) (Lab)

AGAINST

Adam, Brian (Aberdeen North) (SNP)
 Brocklebank, Mr Ted (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Brownlee, Derek (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Byrne, Ms Rosemary (South of Scotland) (SSP)
 Crawford, Bruce (Mid Scotland and Fife) (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)
 Fergusson, Alex (Galloway and Upper Nithsdale) (Con)
 Fox, Colin (Lothians) (SSP)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gallie, Phil (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Gibson, Rob (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Goldie, Miss Annabel (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Johnstone, Alex (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Leckie, Carolyn (Central Scotland) (SSP)
 Lochhead, Richard (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 Martin, Campbell (West of Scotland) (Ind)
 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)
 McLetchie, David (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Con)
 Milne, Mrs Nanette (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Morgan, Alasdair (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Neil, Alex (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Scanlon, Mary (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)
 Sheridan, Tommy (Glasgow) (SSP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Swinney, Mr John (North Tayside) (SNP)
 Tosh, Murray (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Turner, Dr Jean (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Ind)
 Welsh, Mr Andrew (Angus) (SNP)
 White, Ms Sandra (Glasgow) (SNP)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 70, Against 39, Abstentions 0.

Motion, as amended, agreed to.

Resolved,

That the Parliament notes the record of successive Conservative governments in approving tolling regimes on bridges, and further notes that the Scottish Government believes that a Forth road crossing is essential for the Fife economy and that it will make its decision on the FETA toll application after examination of the condition of the current bridge and the need for any replacement.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S2M-3870.4, in the name of Allan Wilson, which seeks to amend motion S2M-3870,

in the name of Alex Johnstone, on future energy policy, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The 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)
 Canavan, Dennis (Falkirk West) (Ind)
 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, Marlyn (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, Cathy (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (Lab)
 Jamieson, Margaret (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (Lab)
 Kerr, Mr Andy (East Kilbride) (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)
 McNulty, Des (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab)
 Morrison, Mr Alasdair (Western Isles) (Lab)
 Muldoon, Bristow (Livingston) (Lab)
 Mulligan, Mrs Mary (Linlithgow) (Lab)
 Murray, Dr Elaine (Dumfries) (Lab)
 Oldfather, Irene (Cunninghame South) (Lab)
 Peacock, Peter (Highlands and Islands) (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)
 Stephen, Nicol (Aberdeen South) (LD)
 Stone, Mr Jamie (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)
 Wallace, Mr Jim (Orkney) (LD)
 Whitefield, Karen (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab)
 Wilson, Allan (Cunninghame North) (Lab)

AGAINST

Adam, Brian (Aberdeen North) (SNP)
 Brocklebank, Mr Ted (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Brownlee, Derek (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Byrne, Ms Rosemary (South of Scotland) (SSP)
 Crawford, Bruce (Mid Scotland and Fife) (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)
 Fergusson, Alex (Galloway and Upper Nithsdale) (Con)
 Fox, Colin (Lothians) (SSP)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gallie, Phil (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Gibson, Rob (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Goldie, Miss Annabel (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Johnstone, Alex (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Leckie, Carolyn (Central Scotland) (SSP)
 Lochhead, Richard (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 Martin, Campbell (West of Scotland) (Ind)
 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)
 McLetchie, David (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Con)
 Milne, Mrs Nanette (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Morgan, Alasdair (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Neil, Alex (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Scanlon, Mary (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)
 Sheridan, Tommy (Glasgow) (SSP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Swinney, Mr John (North Tayside) (SNP)
 Tosh, Murray (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Welsh, Mr Andrew (Angus) (SNP)
 White, Ms Sandra (Glasgow) (SNP)

ABSTENTIONS

Baird, Shiona (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Ballance, Chris (South of Scotland) (Green)
 Ballard, Mark (Lothians) (Green)
 Harper, Robin (Lothians) (Green)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Ruskell, Mr Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Scott, Eleanor (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Turner, Dr Jean (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Ind)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 63, Against 38, Abstentions 8.

Amendment agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: Therefore, the amendment in the name of Richard Lochhead falls.

The next question is, that motion S2M-3870, in the name of Alex Johnstone, on future energy policy, as amended, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The 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)
 Canavan, Dennis (Falkirk West) (Ind)
 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, Marlyn (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, Cathy (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (Lab)
 Jamieson, Margaret (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (Lab)
 Kerr, Mr Andy (East Kilbride) (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)
 McNulty, Des (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab)
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Morrison, Mr Alasdair (Western Isles) (Lab)
 Muldoon, Bristow (Livingston) (Lab)
 Mulligan, Mrs Mary (Linlithgow) (Lab)
 Murray, Dr Elaine (Dumfries) (Lab)
 Oldfather, Irene (Cunninghame South) (Lab)
 Peacock, Peter (Highlands and Islands) (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)
 Stephen, Nicol (Aberdeen South) (LD)
 Stone, Mr Jamie (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)
 Wallace, Mr Jim (Orkney) (LD)
 Whitefield, Karen (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab)
 Wilson, Allan (Cunninghame North) (Lab)

AGAINST

Adam, Brian (Aberdeen North) (SNP)
 Brocklebank, Mr Ted (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Brownlee, Derek (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Byrne, Ms Rosemary (South of Scotland) (SSP)
 Crawford, Bruce (Mid Scotland and Fife) (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)
 Fergusson, Alex (Galloway and Upper Nithsdale) (Con)
 Fox, Colin (Lothians) (SSP)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gallie, Phil (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Gibson, Rob (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Goldie, Miss Annabel (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Johnstone, Alex (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Leckie, Carolyn (Central Scotland) (SSP)
 Lochhead, Richard (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 Martin, Campbell (West of Scotland) (Ind)
 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)
 McLetchie, David (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Con)
 Milne, Mrs Nanette (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Morgan, Alasdair (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Neil, Alex (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Scanlon, Mary (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)
 Sheridan, Tommy (Glasgow) (SSP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Swinney, Mr John (North Tayside) (SNP)
 Tosh, Murray (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Turner, Dr Jean (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Ind)
 Welsh, Mr Andrew (Angus) (SNP)
 White, Ms Sandra (Glasgow) (SNP)

ABSTENTIONS

Baird, Shiona (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Ballance, Chris (South of Scotland) (Green)
 Ballard, Mark (Lothians) (Green)
 Harper, Robin (Lothians) (Green)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Ruskell, Mr Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Scott, Eleanor (Highlands and Islands) (Green)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 64, Against 38, Abstentions 7.

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 target that 40% of electricity generated in Scotland by 2020 should come from renewable sources; 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; endorses the Executive's commitment to tackling fuel poverty; acknowledges the Executive's commitment to not support further development of nuclear power stations while waste management issues remain unresolved; welcomes the forthcoming release of the first two volumes of the Scottish Energy Study; recognises the importance of the UK energy review, and supports the Executive's engagement with the UK Government, Ofgem and the energy industry to ensure that the future energy supply needs of Scotland are met.

The Presiding Officer: The final question is, that motion S2M-3854, in the name of Tom McCabe, on the general principles of the Budget (Scotland) (No 3) Bill, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The 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)
 Canavan, Dennis (Falkirk West) (Ind)
 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, Marlyn (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, Cathy (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (Lab)
 Jamieson, Margaret (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (Lab)
 Kerr, Mr Andy (East Kilbride) (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)
 McMahan, Michael (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab)
 McNeil, Mr Duncan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab)
 McNulty, Des (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab)
 Morrison, Mr Alasdair (Western Isles) (Lab)
 Muldoon, Bristow (Livingston) (Lab)
 Mulligan, Mrs Mary (Linlithgow) (Lab)
 Murray, Dr Elaine (Dumfries) (Lab)
 Oldfather, Irene (Cunninghame South) (Lab)
 Peacock, Peter (Highlands and Islands) (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)
 Stephen, Nicol (Aberdeen South) (LD)
 Stone, Mr Jamie (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)
 Wallace, Mr Jim (Orkney) (LD)
 Whitefield, Karen (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab)
 Wilson, Allan (Cunninghame North) (Lab)

AGAINST

Byrne, Ms Rosemary (South of Scotland) (SSP)
 Curran, Frances (West of Scotland) (SSP)

Fox, Colin (Lothians) (SSP)
 Leckie, Carolyn (Central Scotland) (SSP)
 Sheridan, Tommy (Glasgow) (SSP)

ABSTENTIONS

Adam, Brian (Aberdeen North) (SNP)
 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)
 Crawford, Bruce (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Douglas-Hamilton, Lord James (Lothians) (Con)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP)
 Ewing, Mrs Margaret (Moray) (SNP)
 Fabiani, Linda (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Fergusson, Alex (Galloway and Upper Nithsdale) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gallie, Phil (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Gibson, Rob (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Goldie, Miss Annabel (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Harper, Robin (Lothians) (Green)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Johnstone, Alex (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Lochhead, Richard (North East Scotland) (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)
 McLetchie, David (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Con)
 Milne, Mrs Nanette (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Morgan, Alasdair (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Neil, Alex (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Ruskell, Mr Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Scanlon, Mary (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Scott, Eleanor (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Swinney, Mr John (North Tayside) (SNP)
 Tosh, Murray (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Turner, Dr Jean (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Ind)
 Welsh, Mr Andrew (Angus) (SNP)
 White, Ms Sandra (Glasgow) (SNP)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 62, Against 5, Abstentions 40.

Motion agreed to.

That the Parliament agrees to the general principles of the Budget (Scotland) (No. 3) Bill.

Thistle Travel Card Scheme

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Trish Godman): The final item of business today is a members' business debate on motion S2M-3553, in the name of Jackie Baillie, on the thistle travel card scheme. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament congratulates Enable, together with a consortium of Scottish charities including Down's Syndrome Scotland and Alzheimer Scotland, for its work to introduce the Thistle Travel Card; welcomes the support of the Scottish Executive and transport companies for the implementation of the scheme, including in Dumbarton, Vale of Leven and Helensburgh; acknowledges that many people with learning or physical disabilities, as well as those with dementia and epilepsy, may experience some difficulty in using public transport; considers that the Thistle Travel Card provides them with additional assistance by alerting travel staff to their particular needs; notes that awareness of the scheme is limited, and considers that the Scottish Executive and transport companies should actively promote awareness and uptake of the Thistle Travel Card.

17:10

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): I welcome this opportunity to raise awareness of the thistle travel card scheme. Before I do so, I welcome to Parliament representatives from Enable Scotland, which led the development of the card. Equally, I welcome Joan Mulroy from the Dumbarton advocacy group, members of which—members who have learning disabilities—first raised the issue with me at constituency level. Last, but by no means least, I welcome John Feehan, who is a member of Enable's advisory committee. As well as having shaped the thistle travel card scheme, he continues to play a valuable role on the Mobility and Access Committee for Scotland.

Deputy Presiding Officer, I also acknowledge your keen interest in the issue. I remind members that Trish Godman is a member of the cross-party group on learning disability. Unusually, she will be silent on the issue tonight because she is presiding over the meeting, but on other occasions she is vocal in her support of people who have learning disabilities. That is equally true of many colleagues who could not stay for the debate, but who have asked me to mention their commitment and said that they will be happy to raise awareness of the scheme locally. Those members include Margaret Jamieson, Cathie Craigie, Janis Hughes, Susan Deacon, Johann Lamont and many more.

I will give some background information on how the thistle travel card scheme came about, how it has progressed and what I want the Executive to do next. The beauty of the thistle travel card lies in its simplicity. It is free, it is easy to use and it is

designed to help people who might face difficulties in using public transport. It tells the bus driver, the ticket collector and other transport staff that the card-holder might need just a little bit of extra help, perhaps because they have a disability or an illness or perhaps just because of age, which will affect us all. The things that people most often need help with are knowing which bus to get on and where to get off, counting out the right fare, understanding timetables and understanding travel announcements—which can be a challenge to us all.

The thistle travel card scheme started in 1997, when Enable's advisory committee established that people who have learning disabilities were having problems accessing public transport without the assistance of a friend or carer. The committee launched a pilot transport project to examine the problem and come up with imaginative solutions. In the first phase of the project, a survey was carried out among people who have learning disabilities throughout Scotland. The overwhelming evidence was that the problems relate mainly to communication.

The second phase involved the trial of a system to alert transport operators to individuals' needs and to provide information on how to deal with those needs. Support was secured from two of the major bus companies in Scotland, which operated a pilot scheme. The scheme was operated by FirstBus in West Lothian and by Stagecoach Western in Ayr and Kilmarnock. Not surprisingly, they found that the scheme had the potential to make a considerable impact on the confidence and freedom of a large number of people. The scheme gained the support of the bus drivers and staff at FirstBus and Stagecoach, who welcomed the initiative because it helped them to offer an enhanced customer service. The scheme got the thumbs-up all round.

It was recognised that the thistle travel card had potential not only for people who have learning disabilities but for others. A number of organisations thought likewise—among others the Carers National Association, Down's Syndrome Scotland and Capability Scotland. I am pleased to say that the idea was supported by the Executive and the thistle travel card scheme was launched in September 2002 by the then Deputy Minister for Enterprise, Transport and Lifelong Learning, Lewis Macdonald. Some 200,000 cards were distributed throughout Scotland and 8,000 copies of the staff guidelines were supplied to 42 transport providers.

In March 2004, a reprint of 80,000 cards and thistle logo stickers was needed to help to promote the scheme. Local authorities have helped to distribute the card widely. It has been targeted at health centres, day centres, sheltered employment projects and travel offices. Information and

guidance packs were issued to all transport staff who are responsible for customer care and who are in daily contact with the public so that they would know what difficulties might arise and about the easy ways in which those difficulties can be overcome. The scheme is practical and low maintenance and—surprise, surprise—it works. What more can we ask for? I will tell the minister what I would like the Executive to do.

First, I would like the Executive to work with, and actively to encourage, transport providers to provide training to their staff on the thistle travel card. We know that there are problems relating to transport staff not recognising the card. Information was originally sent to train companies, but it has never really been taken up by them, so the focus has been mainly on bus services. The scheme's success relies heavily on the support of transport providers, some of which have been supportive and have told us that they have embraced the scheme, but there are still frequent reports of bus drivers' not knowing what the card is when a person shows one to them. That is a general problem rather than a problem with any particular bus company. We acknowledge that transport providers face complex issues in training their staff, but I know that Enable and other organisations would be willing to work alongside them to address the problem. The issue is partly a training and marketing issue, but resources—which would have to come from the Executive—are needed.

Secondly, the Executive must ensure that the scheme is extended and is truly comprehensive. At the very least, trains must be covered but, ideally, taxis should also be covered.

Thirdly, we must evaluate the scheme. There was a proposal to evaluate it in 2002 at a minor cost of £19,000, but no funding has been secured for that. Evaluation would help us to identify the barriers that transport providers face in implementing the scheme and how we can work to overcome them. It would also help us to find out exactly how people are using the card and to find out about the help that they need in order that they can use public transport. The minister believes in evidence-based policy making; I therefore wonder whether the Executive would agree to fund such an evaluation.

Finally, if the scheme works—as it clearly does—will the Executive raise awareness of it and help to promote it much more widely?

The thistle travel card has undoubtedly been successful among transport users, who have said that they feel more confident about making independent journeys. Even if people do not use the card, knowing that they can use it if they need to gives them confidence. The scheme's simplicity—which requires merely that the holder

show the card—has been popular. The card is easy to use and to carry. The widening of the scheme to include a variety of groups means that it works for people with a wide range of needs—people with learning disabilities, elderly travellers, people with memory difficulties and people with physical disabilities.

Transport providers also like the scheme and some of them have included information about the travel card in their staff induction and disability awareness training. Thistle logo stickers are displayed on FirstBus vehicles—FirstBus likes the scheme's simplicity and its help in providing an improved service.

In conclusion, I urge the minister to support the thistle travel card, which will encourage greater use of public transport and give greater independence to a range of people for whom travel might occasionally prove to be a little difficult, and I hope that he will signal the Executive's commitment to maximising its potential.

17:18

Fergus Ewing (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP): I warmly congratulate Jackie Baillie on securing the debate. I also congratulate—as she does in her motion—Enable and a consortium of other charities in Scotland, including Down's Syndrome Scotland and Alzheimer Scotland, on the work that has been carried out to introduce the thistle travel card scheme.

That work has been completed in a relatively short time. According to the information that I have, approximately 280,000 thistle travel cards have been distributed. That figure shows how successful the scheme has become, but I cannot help but note that although the figure is substantial, it must represent a fairly small fraction of the total number of people who may wish to have, and would benefit from, a thistle travel card to help them to get about and perhaps to have more confidence about getting on public transport and enjoying the liberties and benefits that access to public transport can bring.

There is not much point in repeating what Jackie Baillie said, although I would underscore the points that she made. I will make some supplementary points. First, there is a lack of awareness in rural communities of schemes such as the thistle travel card scheme. I hope that all reasonable and sensible steps can be taken by the minister to help that scheme to be further promoted in rural areas.

Secondly, there is a lack of access to public transport in rural areas and that is a serious problem. My third and principal point concerns

how the thistle travel card scheme will interrelate with the national concessionary travel scheme and, in particular, with the smart-card technology that is intended to be used when the national scheme is introduced on 1 April this year.

Ideally, the scheme should combine the smart card with the thistle card. It seems to be logical that the smart card should have the thistle card logo on it as well as the data capture that is contained in the smart card. Otherwise, people who have disabilities and who will qualify under the national concessionary scheme will have to produce two cards—a smart card and the thistle card.

I know from the material that I obtained from the Scottish Executive under the Freedom of Information Act 2000—I know that the minister will not mind my saying this—that the Executive was a bit slow in getting off the mark to deal with the practical nitty-gritty problems that arise. Although the announcement that there was to be a national concessionary travel scheme was made in December 2004, it was not until 24 March 2005 that Debbie Sheldon, the project manager of the scheme, asked local authorities for details of the up-to-date scheme. It is odd that the Executive did not have, for example, details of the local authorities' current disabled eligibility criteria when the national concessionary travel scheme details were announced.

The task of producing smart cards for 1.2 million pensioners and hundreds of thousands of people who have disabilities—whether it is a learning, mental or physical disability—is massive. There are concerns that that task will not be completed to its optimum level by 1 April.

I hope that the minister agrees that it would be desirable to have one card and I would be grateful if he would address that point in his closing remarks, if possible.

The debate will help to promote awareness of the scheme. Perhaps that, more than anything else, is the important benefit that Jackie Baillie has secured for all those who could benefit from the scheme in the future. I congratulate her on introducing the debate.

17:23

Donald Gorrie (Central Scotland) (LD): I am extremely jealous of the thistle card travel scheme. It has worked as democracy should work but usually does not. The people at the sharp end have worked out what was wanted and spoken to other people who helped them. They have evolved and put in place a good system to which the Executive has responded.

It might be a defect of mine, but when I operate in a similar manner, I tend to meet a brick wall or a sponge or something, and I do not get anything done. Jackie Baillie obviously has secrets to teach me. This is a good example of how we should be doing things.

I am not sure about Fergus Ewing's single card proposal, because some people need the thistle card and others will qualify for the concessionary card. I am sure that the minister has given thought to how the thistle card scheme will integrate with the national concessionary travel card. Perhaps there has been progress on this front of which I am not aware, but although the thistle card is meant to enable people to go on the buses with confidence and to get the help they want, some people need more help. I hope that whatever concessionary systems we use will cover carers or helpers to enable those with more serious difficulties to travel.

To be strictly personal, I was hoping that I could get a card that I could give to my motor car, because it is programmed to go on certain routes. I sometimes find that I am driving along one of them when I am supposed to be going somewhere else and I have to say to the car, "Come on, this is wrong." If I had a thistle card, I could give it to the car and it would know to ask me whether I really wanted to go to A rather than to B, so I hope I can get hold of one.

I hope that the thistle travel card scheme can be extended to trains. If we get some of those famous trams, it might even extend to them. The idea behind the scheme is excellent. It would be helpful to implement the points that Jackie Baillie made and those that are made in the briefing paper from Enable, especially those on evaluation. We do not evaluate enough. We have excellent schemes, but nobody ever discovers whether they deliver what they are meant to deliver. Studying the scheme to find out how it delivers would help the minister to evolve similar schemes knowing what worked and what did not work.

Today is a good news day, and I hope that we can do even better in future.

17:26

Mary Scanlon (Highlands and Islands) (Con):

Like others, I congratulate Jackie Baillie on securing this debate. Fergus Ewing referred to awareness raising. I must admit that I, like others, was wholly unaware of the thistle travel card scheme. The more I read of the scheme, the more I realise what a wonderful idea it is. As Donald Gorrie said, it is a model of how national and local government can best work with the voluntary and private sectors in delivering real, practical and

effective assistance to those with special needs or disabilities.

The scheme's great strength is that it is a partnership administered by local authorities and the voluntary sector, which, in turn, engage with private transport operators that deliver the service. It is then backed up with financial support from central Government. That the voluntary sector has a lead role is particularly important.

Enable, the initial recipient of the start-up grant from the Executive, is the largest voluntary sector organisation that works specifically with people who have learning difficulties. It understands exactly what is meant by social exclusion. Bodies such as Enable are well placed to take the lead in projects such as the thistle travel card scheme, as they offer uniquely tailored solutions to problems in ways that cannot be replicated by Government bodies.

That is not to say that the role of the Government is unimportant. On the contrary, the enthusiastic backing that the scheme has received from the Executive has been crucial to its success. Although I am accustomed to opposing most of the Executive's proposals, I welcome its commitment to the travel card scheme.

Many voluntary bodies carry out sterling work in their communities, but their activities can be suddenly curtailed because central or local government support is cut off after three years, much to the detriment of the communities they serve. I congratulate the Executive on awarding the initial £50,000 start-up grant to Enable in 2001. Along with Jackie Baillie and others, I urge the minister to ensure on-going and long-term support for such projects.

The scheme's success lies in its practical solution to a real and specific need: the difficulties that people with disabilities may face in utilising basic public transport services that most of us take for granted. The travel card works well because it can easily be identified by transport staff, who can then offer additional assistance without fear of causing offence or embarrassment to the passenger concerned.

In light of the undoubted success of the thistle card, I hope that more projects will be administered this way, with proven and experienced voluntary bodies delivering specific schemes. The thistle card is a tribute to the ability of Enable and the other charities and I therefore trust that the scheme will pave the way for an ever-expanding role for the voluntary sector in delivering simple, focused and effective solutions that make a huge difference to people's lives.

As Fergus Ewing said, I hope that the scheme will be evaluated—if lessons have to be learned, they should be—and, after the evaluation, made

available throughout Scotland, particularly in the Highlands and Islands, where public transport is crucial.

17:31

Mrs Mary Mulligan (Linlithgow) (Lab): I join others in congratulating Jackie Baillie on securing the debate. I am also very grateful for the briefing from Enable. I found it particularly helpful and informative. It was also quite embarrassing, because it told me that West Lothian was one of the pilot areas for the scheme, and I did not know that. My constituency is part of West Lothian, so I have learnt something from taking part in the debate.

Having heard about the scheme, I decided to investigate whether I was alone in my embarrassment or whether others shared it, so I spoke to a few local people. First, I spoke to a local councillor. As we all know, councillors are very knowledgeable and know a lot about everything. Unfortunately, this councillor—who is in that group—did not know a great deal about the scheme either. However, he was redeemed by his council official who knew the scheme very well and was very supportive of it. He told me that, since the pilot scheme and the 2002 launch, the number of applications has reduced significantly, and he thought that that was quite worrying. That lends support to Jackie Baillie's suggestion that we need to republicise the scheme. He suggested that we should look at relaunching the scheme in some way, perhaps alongside the introduction of free bus passes in April.

Yesterday, I met Gordon Dewar from First Scotrail about a local issue. However, I thought I would take the opportunity to question him about his knowledge of the thistle travel card scheme. He was, to his credit, very aware of it from his time at FirstBus, but he also recognised that people had become less aware of it than they were in the past. He also took the opportunity to remind me that First Scotrail has appointed someone to look at access and disability issues. One of their first roles could be to promote the thistle travel card scheme across the rail network. He welcomed the promotion of the thistle travel card scheme on the railways. That would be a further enhancement if it could be done.

We all recognise how access to public transport can provide access to work or training, to services such as the doctor or the dentist, or to social interaction. If someone has a disability, use of public transport can be particularly challenging. A scheme such as the thistle travel card scheme, which discreetly enables people to alert transport staff to their special needs, is to be welcomed.

I also believe that the scheme benefits transport staff. They work in pressured circumstances. Many customers and passengers ask for assistance, or have to be channelled through buses or trains. Anything that helps the staff to understand an individual's needs will allow them to do their job more effectively, which they will welcome. The scheme is in everybody's interests.

It would be helpful, as Jackie Baillie, Enable and others have suggested, to evaluate the scheme so far. If we find, as I am confident we will, that the scheme is of extremely high value, and if we are able to iron out any glitches that have arisen over the past few years, we should relaunch the scheme and shout to the world that it is available. I agree with Fergus Ewing that there must be many other people who would benefit from taking up the scheme, and I hope that, in his response, the minister will encourage us to promote the scheme in future.

17:35

Ms Sandra White (Glasgow) (SNP): I congratulate Jackie Baillie on securing this evening's important debate. I also welcome representatives from Enable and other providers. I know from experience that Enable and other voluntary organisations are always in the forefront of any scheme that will help people with disabilities, as well as those with none.

I must admit that, were it not for my role as SNP spokesperson on equal opportunities and disability issues, I would not have heard of the thistle scheme either. It is only through my work in this area over the past three or four years that I have discovered the thistle scheme. As other members have said, awareness has decreased rather than increased.

When he first announced the thistle card scheme in 2002, Lewis Macdonald said that it would make a huge difference to the thousands of people who are disabled and may not have the confidence to use public transport. We welcomed with open arms the scheme and the £50,000 the Executive gave to it, but awareness of the scheme, among users and providers, has waned since then. As Fergus Ewing said, simply holding today's debate will raise awareness of the scheme, and I am grateful for that.

I worry that, although the scheme was successful at first, it seems to be waning. Providers and users must come together and produce some figures. As Jackie Baillie said, evaluation is important. The scheme must be evaluated, not just from the users' point of view but from the providers' point of view. We need to know how many providers are still aware of the scheme, so that it can be rolled out to all transport

systems in Scotland to give people with disabilities, or elderly people who are unsure and perhaps not so confident about using public transport, a bit of the equality and fairness that we take for granted. Evaluation is certainly important, as is awareness, and that theme has been raised umpteen times by everyone who has contributed to the debate.

Perhaps we could raise awareness using posters, or even a radio or television campaign.

Fergus Ewing: And on buses.

Ms White: We need more advertising on buses too, as Fergus Ewing says. Perhaps there can be advertisements on buses, on the underground and on trains. We need a rolling programme of awareness-raising measures. Perhaps a questionnaire could also be sent out to voluntary groups and to transport providers, asking how aware they are of the scheme. We have all seen advertisements for various schemes that have Executive backing, and they are very successful, so I think that we should consider having another pilot scheme to raise awareness for the thistle scheme.

I know that the thistle card is helpful and I have spoken to a number of people in Enable and in Capability Scotland who had high hopes for the scheme when it was rolled out in 2002. I think that there is still hope for it yet, but the providers must be aware of it, not just so that they can provide the scheme and advertise it but so that they can train their staff. Unfortunately, as Jackie Baillie said, elderly people and people with disabilities or learning disabilities who are asking about the fare on the bus do not always get the treatment we would expect them to get.

Training must also be part of the evaluation and awareness-raising process. I hope that the minister and the Executive will take that on board and actively promote an awareness training day or an advertising appeal to let people know that the thistle scheme exists and that it works well. We need more people to be aware of the scheme and to use it.

17:39

Robin Harper (Lothians) (Green): We have heard a lot of good ideas, so my contribution will be extremely brief. First, I congratulate Jackie Baillie on bringing the motion to the chamber. As Fergus Ewing said, it will raise awareness of the scheme, which is a good thing.

Sandra White made important points about training, what will be needed in the future and how to take the scheme further and roll it out. Good points were also made about voluntary organisations. Donald Gorrie made a point about

carers. When we debate the needs of people who require carers, the needs of the carers should, where appropriate, always be considered.

The scheme is exciting and will definitely be life changing for all the people who are able to take advantage of it. I congratulate Jackie Baillie on securing the debate and I look forward to what I hope will be a positive response from the minister.

17:40

The Minister for Transport and Telecommunications (Tavish Scott): Parliament sometimes affords publicity to issues that need it; at times it affords publicity to issues that arguably do not need it. This debate is certainly a good example of our ability—in particular, Jackie Baillie's ability—to use Parliament to bring an important issue to the chamber and, I suspect, to a wider audience. I thank her for giving us that opportunity and congratulate her on her motion on the thistle travel card scheme. I will respond on behalf of the Government.

I warmly welcome the thistle travel card scheme. Like other members, I congratulate Enable and the range of partners that have been mentioned in the debate on the work that they have done in introducing the card. Transport operators are embracing the use of the thistle travel card. I pay tribute to them and in particular to bus companies for their continued support of the scheme. I encourage transport operators of all types—including rail operators, as Mary Mulligan rightly said—to work harder to participate in a scheme that is making a difference to the lives of many people across Scotland. More could be done.

It is encouraging to see disabled people taking a more active role in society and enjoying a fuller and more independent life in their community. We remain committed to ensuring that transport is accessible to disabled people, although I recognise that that is not always the case. Progress has been made, but the purpose of a debate such as this is to take the matter forward.

The thistle travel card is an excellent example of how support can be given to older and disabled people to make their travel experience easier. That must be at the core of our proposals. By the summer we will have, for the first time, a national transport strategy for Scotland. The strategy will provide a long-term framework for all Scottish transport developments in all modes of transport. It will build on the transport white paper "Scotland's transport future" by showing how transport can contribute to our five key objectives.

One of those objectives is to promote social inclusion by connecting remote and disadvantaged communities and increasing the accessibility of the transport network. Members have mentioned

different aspects of the objective: Mary Scanlon and Fergus Ewing mentioned the rural aspect. Others have discussed different perspectives on the objective. The important point is that in the consultation on the national transport strategy, which I hope to publish shortly, there will be further opportunities to make such arguments.

My officials plan future consultation with transport users, including older and disabled people, once the consultative draft of the strategy has been published. I would welcome any other ideas that members have about how we can promote the particular issues that have been raised in the debate.

The debate is timely as we move towards the introduction on 1 April of the Scotland-wide free bus travel scheme for older and disabled people. The thistle travel card scheme gives disabled and older people who need special help as they get on and off a bus the comfort that the driver will recognise that they need help. I therefore very much encourage the use of the thistle card and encourage people to obtain one if they feel that it will be of benefit to them.

I will give further thought to the comments on the national travel concessionary card, although Donald Gorrie made a fair point about the separate issues that arise. It is important to recognise that there is guidance in the concessionary scheme that covers disability access in particular. Many people who travel with concessionary cards will have a thistle card, but we need to do more to ensure the safety of the older and disabled people who travel under the new scheme. Drivers have a duty to take steps to ensure the safety of all passengers.

In the run-up to the launch of the Scotland-wide concessionary scheme, we will issue guidance for bus drivers that insists that they look after the well-being of people who travel under that scheme.

We strongly supported the introduction of the thistle travel card scheme and will continue to support it. I will do my best to respond to the three challenges that Jackie Baillie set us—she always has a few challenges for us. Like other members, I welcome the briefing paper that Enable provided to members and I strongly support its three key priorities, on which Jackie Baillie asked for action.

I confirm that we will work with Enable and its partners to evaluate the scheme's impact and that we will fund that evaluation, which will be used to refine the scheme. We will also support the publication of revised material for the thistle travel card scheme, to promote awareness of it among travellers and transport operators. I am happy to play any role that I can in doing what we can to ensure the scheme's continued success in the years to come.

Meeting closed at 17:46.

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