

MEETING OF THE PARLIAMENT

Thursday 24 April 2008

Session 3

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Scottish Parliament

Thursday 24 April 2008

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

National Qualifications

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson): Good morning. The first item of business is a statement by Fiona Hyslop on national qualifications. As the cabinet secretary will take questions at the end of her statement, there should be no interventions.

09:15

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning (Fiona Hyslop): I welcome this opportunity to make a statement on my intentions with regard to future arrangements for national qualifications.

During the parliamentary debate on the curriculum for excellence on 19 March, I outlined our vision for the programme and the considerable progress that was being made towards its implementation. I also indicated that I would be announcing further details on our plans for national qualifications, and I am pleased to be in a position to do so this morning.

The curriculum for excellence's vision is for transformational change in Scottish education to provide better attainment and attendance and improved outcomes for all our children and young people, including those who are not achieving their potential and those who need to be challenged more. We will also place greater emphasis on developing and recognising young people's literacy and numeracy skills. We intend the curriculum for excellence to be a curriculum for all Scotland's young people.

To meet our ambition of creating an education system that raises the bar for all, not only in what is being learned but in how learning is applied and used, we will need a robust qualifications system that meets the curriculum for excellence's aspirations. After reflecting on the current shape of qualifications, we have decided that, in general, our current system works well for many young people. Indeed, at a time when so many young people are preparing to take their exams, we should all acknowledge the hard work and application that it demands. Our best wishes go to those students.

As the Government wants a qualifications system that works for all young people, including those who are less likely to realise their full

potential, we must have a next-generation system that not only meets the next generation's needs but equips individuals with the skills that are required to meet today's needs and tomorrow's demands.

As a result, we need a coherent system of curriculum and assessment from three to 18 and a qualifications system that reinforces the curriculum for excellence's values, purposes and principles. Moreover, some aspects of the current qualifications system need to be improved. All of that demands change.

I intend to hold a consultation on a number of proposals for the next generation of qualifications for Scotland's young people and have set some broad objectives to underpin that. The qualifications system must meet 21st century Scotland's needs by progressing the Scottish Government's principal purpose of achieving sustainable economic development and our five overarching strategic objectives.

We want to let all young people have the opportunity to experience and enjoy a broad general curriculum to the end of secondary 3, reflecting the traditional strengths of the Scottish education system. We must develop an assessment system that supports rather than leads the curriculum and ensures that young people have a smooth transition into qualifications. There should be no need for young people to take examinations prior to S4. We also want to promote a fuller recognition of each young person's achievements, including those beyond qualifications.

Our final objective is to ensure that teaching and learning strike a better balance between equipping our young people with the skills for passing exams and equipping them with skills for learning, skills for life and skills for work. In particular, assessment must be used to support, motivate and challenge young people, and I want the new system to have a sharper focus on literacy, numeracy and other life and work skills.

The revised qualifications system should reduce current complexity particularly at Scottish credit and qualifications framework levels 4 and 5, where the two different qualifications that are available—standard grade and intermediate—have different structures and grading systems. It should also provide a range of opportunities to meet all young people's needs.

We also need to explore options for increasing flexibility in the time that is taken to achieve qualifications, including, for example, tackling the so-called two-term dash to higher level that can present such a barrier to some young people. Moreover, with so many young people staying on

at school, we must look to enhance the S6 experience.

I intend to consult on a number of detailed proposals to achieve those objectives. In line with our priorities, my first main proposal is to introduce new awards in literacy and numeracy. The draft experiences and outcomes in numeracy and literacy in the curriculum for excellence provide a shared, modern definition of our expectations of learning and teaching in those areas. The fact that all teachers have a role in developing those skills is testament to the importance that we attach to them.

Indeed, one of the differences of the new curriculum is that, for the first time, all teaching in all subjects will be expected to embed literacy and numeracy. To sharpen that focus, I propose the introduction of two new separate awards—the Scottish certificate for literacy and the Scottish certificate for numeracy—to accredit young people's literacy and numeracy skills. Those skills will be assessed in S4.

We will have to consider the most appropriate way of recognising and evaluating such skills. As I favour providing the opportunity to certify all our young people, wherever they are learning, I propose that the awards be made available at SCQF levels 3 to 5.

The awards should not only draw on evidence from young people's work across the curriculum but be assessed externally through an examination. As part of lifelong learning, they should also be made available to adult learners in colleges. However, I will ensure that we have an open consultation on the details of implementation.

My second major proposal relates to standard grade and intermediate qualifications. Although these qualifications are good, the system is complex and must be simplified. The time is also right to consider whether in their current form they best meet the needs of tomorrow's young people, employers and other users of qualifications. Although both qualifications have served us well, education has moved on. For instance, standard grade is no longer the exit qualification that it used to be and, although originally designed for S5 and S6 pupils, intermediate examinations are being taken more and more by younger pupils. We need a next-generation qualification. Although each is valuable in its own right, neither of those two qualifications reflects the curriculum for excellence's values, purposes and principles, so we need to adapt the system to meet new challenges and circumstances. The consultation will propose a definite way forward while being open to ideas about structures and implementation.

We propose to replace both standard grade at general and credit level and intermediate 1 and 2 with a new general qualification at SCQF levels 4 and 5 that will nevertheless reflect the best features of the present arrangements. The real strength of the standard grade qualification is generally felt to be its inclusivity; it provides certification for all. The best feature of intermediate qualifications is considered to be their unit structure, which provides flexibility and motivation for young people. I expect the new general qualification at SCQF levels 4 and 5 to deliver as many of the best features of the present arrangements as possible. At SCQF level 3, standard grade foundation level will be removed, with access 3 providing an appropriate replacement.

That leads me to my third proposal. It will be necessary to ensure that the other parts of the qualifications framework reflect the changes proposed at SCQF levels 4 and 5 and the curriculum for excellence's aspirations. Scottish qualifications are held in high national and international regard, and I propose to build on the present system's success. Access, higher and advanced higher qualifications will be retained as valued qualifications and points of stability. Highers, in particular, will remain the gold standard of the Scottish education system. However, the content of all qualifications will be updated in line with the curriculum for excellence, and some aspects of their structure will be reviewed.

As the children who are currently in primary 6 are likely to be the first to experience the new secondary curriculum in full, they will be the first to require access to the next generation of qualifications. We therefore plan to have revised qualifications in place from 2012-13 onwards.

Of course, local authorities and schools will determine which subjects they offer and at what level. However, I underline my commitment to the future of advanced highers. Along with highers, those valuable qualifications are rightly held in high regard by universities, and they will continue to play an important role both in ensuring that our most able learners have an appropriate level of challenge and in securing the status of S6. As a result, we will make them an essential element of our science and languages baccalaureates, further details of which I will announce later this session.

I turn now to other elements of the consultation. In addition to the main proposals, I plan to use the consultation to investigate ways in which we can increase flexibility so that we are better able to meet the needs of young people. We will suggest a number of options and ideas. For example, we will promote opportunities to bypass lower-level qualifications and we will consult on how we can encourage our most able young people—the ones

who are likely to attain more advanced levels of qualifications such as highers—not to take the lower levels. Those who are clearly capable of doing so could begin studying for highers in S4. That would be in keeping with our wider objective of ensuring that qualifications support and reflect individual learning, rather than having learning determined by qualifications.

I want to test the opportunities for taking qualifications over a variable timeframe. The pressures of the two-term dash to higher have been a long-standing concern in the education system. To address it, I want to explore the possibility of giving young people the opportunity to study for qualifications over an extended timeframe—for example, over a period of 18 months or even two years, as well as the present one year.

I come now to the final element on which we wish to consult. I want to explore the possibility of introducing a winter diet of examinations. I believe that a winter diet will provide opportunities for greater choice and flexibility, as it could facilitate courses of study over 18 months.

The consultation concerns everyone. Qualifications have implications for our economy, our society and our future. For that reason, we will be holding the consultation over a more extended period than usual, so that we can gather views from as broad a range of stakeholders as possible. I expect the consultation to be launched in June and to take views until the end of October 2008. Its launch will coincide with the release of another key document, “Building the Curriculum—A Framework for Learning and Teaching”. The document will set out our expectations for young people’s entitlements as they experience a broad general education, and it will help those involved in planning the three-to-18 curriculum. In keeping with our concordat with local government, education authorities will be key partners in taking forward the further development and implementation of policy in these areas.

I acknowledge the importance of ensuring that the qualifications system builds on the rich general educational experience to the end of S3, with its emphasis on helping our young people to build skills for learning, skills for work and skills for life; to follow an active, healthy and environmentally sustainable lifestyle; and to develop an appreciation of Scotland and its place in the world. That will extend to age 18.

As a key element of our education system, the shape of our future qualifications system will be crucial for Scotland’s young people and for Scotland as a nation. There is clear evidence that Scotland has a good education system. However, it can be better; indeed, it needs to be better. It needs to help all Scotland’s young people to

develop their skills, talents and ambitions to the full. It needs to help Scotland to become smarter, wealthier and fairer, safer and stronger, healthier and greener. The curriculum for excellence presents us with a tremendous opportunity to create a truly world-class education system. Let us take that opportunity. This generation of young people and future generations deserve it.

The Presiding Officer: The minister will now take questions on the issues raised in her statement. I will allow around 30 minutes for questions, after which we will move to the next item of business. It would be helpful if all members who wish to ask questions would press their request-to-speak buttons now.

Rhona Brankin (Midlothian) (Lab): I thank the cabinet secretary for the prompt delivery of the statement, and I thank teachers who work so hard throughout Scotland on behalf of their pupils. I would also like to wish Scottish pupils all the best in the forthcoming examinations.

I broadly welcome the statement. There is widespread recognition that change is needed in our system of national qualifications. I will start by thanking the Scottish National Party for taking up Labour’s manifesto commitment on certification in literacy and numeracy. We do not believe that Labour has a monopoly on good ideas, but we certainly believe that that was a good one.

We welcome the SNP’s conversion. However, introducing new awards in literacy and numeracy does not, in itself, ensure that young people become literate and numerate. It does not ensure that Scotland will eradicate illiteracy, as Labour believes we should. Will the minister ensure that functional literacy is taught and assessed at both primary and secondary level? Will she ensure that the literacy outcomes in the curriculum for excellence reflect functional literacy? Currently, they fail to do so.

The minister will know that currently the S1 and S2 experience does not stretch all pupils adequately. Will she reassure the chamber that the S1 to S3 educational experience will not hold pupils back? She will also know that the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development report recommended that all pupils experience vocational education. Does she intend to implement that very important recommendation?

The minister referred to baccalaureates in science and language. Will the minister tell the chamber where the demand for baccalaureates comes from, other than from the SNP manifesto? Is she aware that the introduction of a Welsh baccalaureate has been extremely problematic?

Fiona Hyslop: I thank the member for her welcome and broad recognition of the need to

improve our qualifications system. I hope that members will acknowledge that Scottish education needs all political parties to work together. This is a long-term project for the next generation of Scotland's examination system and for future generations of Scotland's pupils. It is most important that we build a broad cross-party consensus in taking that forward.

We are introducing certificates in literacy and numeracy. They are not leaving certificates, as the Labour Party proposed—given that the Labour Party also wanted to extend the leaving age to 18, they would have been leaving certificates at age 18. What we are proposing is certification for literacy and numeracy that will involve teacher assessment in the early years and be subject to examination in S4. The timing of the examination in literacy and numeracy in S4 will be set out in the document that I mentioned.

I recognise the importance of embedding literacy and numeracy throughout the curriculum. That is why I said that the curriculum for excellence's literacy and numeracy outcomes are ensuring that literacy and numeracy will be embedded in all subjects. That has not been the case to date.

It is important that we do not wait until secondary school to improve the literacy and numeracy of young people, which is why driving down class sizes in the early years is essential. For example, the early intervention programme on literacy in West Dunbartonshire is based not on one narrow definition of functional literacy but on early intervention in the earliest years. Today's statement is primarily about the qualifications system, which focuses on S4 to S6 in particular.

The question about stretching pupils in S1 and S2 is relevant. However, we should recall that one of the drivers for changing the curriculum is to ensure that we have a more exciting, invigorating and motivating educational experience in S1 and S2. That is why we have to free up the system to ensure, for example, that there is far more vocational experience, especially in S3 and S4. I accept the OECD's recommendations that all young people should have vocational experience. The SNP has supported that for some time and the Government wants to take it forward. The OECD did not recommend separate skills academies with testing for who should receive vocational education. I am pleased that the OECD reflects the Government's position.

The concern about the baccalaureates was not reflected in my discussions with employers and universities. It is recognised that we do not want to see pupils in S6 treading water and that it is essential that we stretch those pupils. Support for the science baccalaureate in particular was expressed at the national economic forum, as we need to ensure that we are stimulating and

rewarding those who take more science subjects. We need to move in this direction because it is evident that if a young person takes more than one science subject at standard grade, he or she is more likely to take more than one science subject at higher level; and if he or she takes more than one science subject at higher level, he or she is more likely to take science at university. That is clearly a logical step forward, as we want to encourage more people to take science at university.

The member referred to the Welsh baccalaureate, which is quite a different qualification, as it is based more on vocational experience. When I make my announcement about the Scottish baccalaureate, it will be clear that it is distinct from the Welsh baccalaureate. I hope that I have identified and addressed the range of questions that the member asked.

Elizabeth Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I thank the cabinet secretary for early sight of the information. I warmly welcome the announcement that there are to be changes in the Scottish Qualifications Authority examination structure and that there will be full consultation with the relevant stakeholders. I was pleased to hear on the radio that the cabinet secretary will be listening to teachers.

The current system is only fit for purpose, especially in the context of the changing economic and educational climate. It is failing far too many pupils, particularly at the bottom and top ends of the academic spectrum.

I want to concentrate on the baccalaureate. I am interested in what the cabinet secretary has said in that regard, but there are some other questions to be answered. The baccalaureate, if it is on an international scale, has an interesting dimension to it. As a Scottish baccalaureate is being proposed, I would be grateful if the minister could answer two specific questions.

What is the reasoning behind having a baccalaureate standing alongside highers and advanced highers? Further, what is the reason for having a baccalaureate that deals only with science and with modern languages? Why are baccalaureates in arts and social sciences not being considered at this stage?

I welcome the proposals regarding S4, particularly in relation to literacy and numeracy. However, I would like the minister to clarify whether the exams in S4 that she is proposing are national exams and to confirm that any internal assessment that might take place in S3 will be part of the process that builds up to S4 examinations.

Fiona Hyslop: I thank the member for her questions but, if the chamber will bear with me, today's statement deals with the national

qualifications system. I will provide further details of the baccalaureate later in the session. However, I can say that the baccalaureate will be based on highers and advanced highers which, as I said in my statement, I intend to retain, and that it will include an interpretative project that will involve interdisciplinary work. The chief executives of life sciences companies, with whom I have had discussions, have said that that will provide a great opportunity to engage pupils, particularly those in S6, in work with local employers that will develop their experience not only of a workplace but of the current application of science in the community and in companies.

I am open to persuasion with regard to the extension of the baccalaureate concept to other areas; I simply think that, because of the needs of the economy and the drivers of economic growth, it would be appropriate to start with science and languages.

On S4, I welcome the member's support for Scottish certificates in literacy and numeracy. Those will be national examinations, but there will also be an element of assessment, which will be based on teachers' assessments throughout the period. Therefore, the assessment process between S1 and S3 is helpful in the development of literacy and numeracy national examinations. The importance of embedding literacy and numeracy in the curriculum and the priority that employers place on having those skills demonstrated in certificate form is part of the thinking behind the proposal. Teachers will welcome the fact that their professional assessment will be part of the assessment process, but the qualifications will be subject to national examination.

Jeremy Purvis (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD): I thank the cabinet secretary for the advance notice of her statement. The Liberal Democrats support reform and the case for changes to and the updating of materials for examinations in Scotland. However, there needs to be greater clarity about what the cabinet secretary said this morning. She indicated that there is no need to take exams prior to S4 but that, at the same time, she is looking for new ways to provide flexibility in the system so that some students can take exams before S4 or take their highers earlier. Greater clarity is required on that matter.

The cabinet secretary proposes to abolish standard grades and replace them with a wider general qualification, but the Government wants to immediately add to that by introducing additional qualifications in literacy and numeracy. However, those qualifications will be below the standard of the new qualification. It is unclear, still, where in the child's progression the exams relating to those

qualifications will be taken. Indeed, it is unclear whether all pupils will be required to get those qualifications. I would like the cabinet secretary to clarify those matters.

On the baccalaureates and highers, the cabinet secretary said that further statements will be made. However, on 19 March, the Minister for Schools and Skills assured Liz Smith that

"the baccalaureate is not an extra exam but a batch of advanced highers."—[*Official Report*, 19 March 2008; c 7101.]

I think that that matter needs urgent clarification from the cabinet secretary, rather than clarification later in the year.

Finally, we heard no mention of skills-for-work courses or qualifications, which were introduced by Liberal Democrats in government and were funded fully. The question of how they fit in with the proposed framework is important, so I would welcome a clarification of that matter.

Fiona Hyslop: The focus of my statement was on qualifications from S4 to S6. I welcome the support of the Liberal Democrats for our determination to update the qualifications system and the materials to support the qualifications. As I said, we will be updating the content of the material relating to the qualifications that we are retaining.

Mr Purvis asked for more clarity about examination prior to S4. If the curriculum for excellence is to work in the way in which it was intended to work when it was introduced—at which time there was a Liberal Democrat Deputy Minister for Education and Young People—we need to ensure that the period from S1 to S3 is far more stimulating than it has been to date. We also need to reduce the overassessment that takes place in that period, in order to allow greater opportunities for teachers to exercise their professional abilities, make links between subjects and ensure that the context and content of learning are focused on the individual. We think that we can do that if we have a stimulating period from S1 to S3. Early presentations were designed to provide greater stimulation to young people and to stretch them further. However, the curriculum should be stretching young people; we do not need the qualifications system to do the stretching. The Liberal Democrats might not agree with that view, but we can explore that during the debate on the consultation.

The skills-for-work concept is important. I have been impressed by what I have heard from pupils, colleges and employers around the country about how they have found the courses and qualifications. We should celebrate what has been done in this area, and acknowledge the recent report about the success of the skills-for-work

concept. The skills-for-work courses will certainly continue in S3 and S4.

We are simplifying the system, as our system of standard grade and intermediate 1 and 2 qualifications is too complex. We expect all pupils to take the Scottish certificates for literacy and numeracy, but that will be in S4 and will mark the start of the formal examination and qualification process.

The baccalaureates will be based on highers and advanced highers. The system will stimulate the taking of more than one science or language subject, and the qualification will be subject to an interpretative project. I thought that I made that clear in the debate on 19 March on the curriculum for excellence. However, we are not bringing in a new examination for the baccalaureate, which is why it is not the subject of the statement today.

The Presiding Officer: We come now to questions from back benchers. As ever, brevity is encouraged—indeed, it is essential if we are to get through them all.

Christina McKelvie (Central Scotland) (SNP): I welcome the cabinet secretary's commitment to ensuring flexibility for pupils with high academic achievement. What measures will she take to ensure that there is similar flexibility for pupils who wish to pursue vocational qualifications?

Fiona Hyslop: We have a great strength in our Scottish credit and qualifications framework, which is one of the few such frameworks in the world that has both vocational and academic qualifications. It is important that we see our school education and qualifications system in the round as part of a single system of lifelong learning. The experience that young people need to have of vocational education is important. We have to have parity of esteem. Indeed, a challenge to the country is whether we are outdated when we talk about vocational qualifications and academic qualifications. Our university colleagues often remind us that many of the qualifications that are pursued at university level are vocational qualifications. That is why, as part of our promotion of the curriculum for excellence, we need to be pursuing skills for learning, skills for life and skills for work. There will be a combination of what would have been traditionally vocational and academic courses. Certainly, the improvement of school-college links is part of the concordat with local government. Indeed, improving vocational education for school pupils is one of the 15 commitments in that document.

Ken Macintosh (Eastwood) (Lab): I thank the minister for her statement and echo the broad welcome that it has been given by colleagues.

Because of the looming implementation of the curriculum for excellence, parents, pupils and

teachers will be looking to see the influence that this statement will have on the shape of the curriculum. I appreciate that the proposals are out for consultation, but I would like the minister to tell us what she believes their impact will be on pupils, particularly those in S2 and S3. Will the subject options that are currently open to pupils who are going into S3 now be postponed until S4? Will most pupils now study a general or core curriculum for the first three years of secondary school, as opposed to the first two, and will that curriculum be subject based?

Fiona Hyslop: I thank the member for his general support.

The member referred to the looming implementation of the curriculum for excellence, but it might be helpful to embrace the reality, which is that we are already implementing the curriculum for excellence in many schools. If his question was about how the curriculum will be implemented in secondary schools in particular, the implication perhaps is that today's statement on national qualifications will be a key driver in helping to take that forward. Whether the qualifications system should be seen as the pinnacle of the curriculum is a matter for debate, but most educationists and teachers recognise that the curriculum should be the driver and that the qualifications should fit in around that.

On the issue of subject choices, a general criticism that has been made, particularly of the early years of secondary education, is that overassessment—this is a particular concern of teachers—limits and reduces young people's educational experience. As I said in the debate on the curriculum for excellence on 19 March, we want the Scottish education system to provide a broad general education, and I am firm in my commitment to that. The strength of the Scottish education system has been that it provides a broad general experience that gives young people more choice and opportunity in deciding which subjects to study at higher or advanced higher level and, in future, at the new general qualification level. The idea is to provide young people with more choice and opportunity and a wider educational experience that will not just enable them to pass exams but equip them for later life in a world where the ability to learn will be as important as the content and subject that they have studied. Learning to learn is a key element of the curriculum for excellence that needs to be taken forward. Young people will have choices as they go through the educational system, but they will also have the opportunity to have a broader experience.

I am also keen that we do not see everything in terms of what happens between S1 and S3. The curriculum for excellence is also about ensuring an

effective transition from P7 to S1 by providing a continuity that is based around individuals rather than on the school in which they operate. We must see things within the context of a curriculum for ages three to 18, which is the essence of the curriculum for excellence; to segment things using a much narrower definition of what happens between ages 12 and 15 undermines the curriculum for excellence, which should be perceived as being a run-through from three to 18. The curriculum for excellence should provide for a broad general education system. If anything, we are providing more space and opportunity for teachers and pupils in S1 to S3 to experience a stimulating, invigorating education system.

I am happy to take on the baton from the previous Government in driving forward the curriculum for excellence. The previous Government believed that we had to provide a stimulating curriculum, particularly in S1 and S2; my proposals today will take forward the ethos that was started by the previous Government.

Rob Gibson (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): My question follows on from the previous comments. Today's announcement focuses on the structure of assessment rather than on subject content, but the Government has given a significant commitment to integrate Scottish history into the school curriculum. That is due to take place at about the time the new qualifications will be introduced. Will elements of Scottish history be included in the Scottish certificate for literacy, in the general qualifications at SCQF levels 4 and 5 and in the assessment streams at higher level?

Fiona Hyslop: The Government is committed to ensuring that Scottish history, heritage and culture are experienced by all young people throughout our education system. However, as Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning, I am reluctant to dictate the content of an examination process. If I were to do so, there would be an outcry from many people, including key educationists and teachers. However, I can say that I expect that the content of the examinations in the qualifications system will reflect the curriculum. From the draft curriculum outcomes, it is clear that an understanding of the Scottish perspective is embedded in the curriculum. That is probably as much detail as I can give.

Karen Whitefield (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab): I am grateful to the cabinet secretary for her comments on vocational education, but can she provide further details on how she intends that skills for life and skills for work will be accredited? She will be aware of the excellent vocational education that is provided in North Lanarkshire and was recognised in the OECD report. However, local authorities are anxious about developing

vocational education further without a guarantee that it will have accreditation that sits within the national qualifications framework. Will vocational education be fully recognised and accredited within the framework? That will not only provide the necessary parity of esteem, but will guarantee the confidence of young people, parents, pupils and further and higher education establishments.

Fiona Hyslop: As I said, I want to see skills for learning, skills for life and skills for work. Those terms cover vocational education in the traditional sense and academic experience. Karen Whitefield raised an important point about vocational education, which is one of the big challenges that Scotland faces and was identified in the OECD report as being a key element. As anyone who has heard me speak about the issue will know, I am passionate about the fact that the Scottish credit and qualifications framework is one of the gems of the Scottish education system, which is renowned worldwide—although we need to make it work harder.

It is essential that vocational education be recognised, but one of the framework's strengths is that we can do that. I certainly want to ensure that the new qualifications are embedded in the Scottish credit and qualifications framework. I certainly see the need for parity of esteem between traditional vocational education and academic education, which is an issue that the Government can drive forward. I thank the member for her question and for her continuing interest.

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I welcome the new emphasis on literacy and numeracy and, in particular, the proposed new qualifications for S4, which will, in the light of the statistics that emerged this week, be very important. The cabinet secretary mentioned the continuous assessments in S1 to S3. Will she clarify whether those will be determining factors in the S4 exams on literacy and numeracy or whether those will be stand-alone exams?

Fiona Hyslop: In answering Murdo Fraser's question, I should reflect that we see the curriculum as applying to ages three to 18, with literacy and numeracy being embedded throughout. Teachers' assessments of literacy and numeracy levels, including in primary school and in the early years of secondary, are important.

In the consultation, we will tease out and reflect on the content of the question that Murdo Fraser has asked. The Scottish certificate for literacy and the Scottish certificate for numeracy will include a combination of national examination and assessment, but whether—as both he and his colleague Elizabeth Smith have asked—the assessments from S1 to S3, rather than just the assessment in S4, should count towards the

certificate is a matter on which we will listen to teachers' views when we request responses. I know that teachers have already expressed concerns about whether the certificate should be based only on the examination or whether it should include the teacher's assessments. I have committed to listen to teachers' views on that. I know that, for teachers, a key driver is that their assessments should form part of the certificate. I have said yes to that, but the form and detail will clearly be subject to the discussion on the consultation.

Hugh O'Donnell (Central Scotland) (LD): I thank the cabinet secretary for advance sight of her statement.

The Liberal Democrats believe that, if our young people are to have all their achievements recognised, the system of education and examination must be transparent and have clarity. Therefore, we welcome the proposals and consultation. What specific steps does the cabinet secretary intend to take to involve young people, parents, commerce and industry and the tertiary education sector in developing the new framework?

If highers are regarded as the gold standard, where does the advanced higher fit in? Within a new framework, how will the Government sell the quality of the advanced higher to potential employers?

Fiona Hyslop: Hugh O'Donnell raises an important point about Scotland's general engagement with the education system. Clearly, young people have been, and will continue to be, involved in the development of the curriculum for excellence. It is important that education reform is not seen as a matter that interests only teachers and parents. Commerce and business obviously have a clear interest in such reform, which is why I spent a considerable time raising curriculum reform with outside interest groups—businesses in particular. I have met all 25 chief executives of the United Kingdom sector skills councils. At every one of those meetings, I have ensured that they are aware of the particular Scottish direction of the curriculum for excellence and the experiences that we are having in that context. I have also ensured that they are aware of their need not just to engage with colleges, as they are currently doing—I was delighted this week that a collaboration agreement has been signed between the sector skills councils and colleges on the qualifications, which I was instrumental in making happen—but to have greater involvement with employers to ensure that they take an interest in what is happening in schools.

The problem that we have had until now is that the complexity of the system has not made it easy for employers to use standard and intermediate

grades. Employers themselves must also contribute to the education system.

Teachers are the professionals who will help, guide, develop and draw out the talents of our young people. However, we must have a community in which valuing education—which has always been valued highly in Scotland—is developed further. As I said when I chaired the life sciences session at the business in the Parliament event, I want to challenge employers about what they are doing to provide opportunities for young people, particularly those who are studying at higher grade level, to undertake work experience. We need to stimulate S6 in particular: the involvement of employers with pupils at that level is increasingly important.

In universities, as part of my on-going regular discussions, I have met—even in the past week—just about every principal in Scotland. I have told them that they need to be prepared for young people coming from schools with a different emphasis on individual, personalised learning. I want universities to open themselves up more and to have more involvement with schools, particularly at the advanced higher level.

Mary Mulligan (Linlithgow) (Lab): I, too, welcome the opportunity to consider the national qualifications system. The minister acknowledges the disadvantages of the two-term dash to highers. However, does she not think that introducing a winter diet could be unsettling for pupils and difficult for schools to manage? In underlining her commitment to advanced highers, can the minister say how she will address the concern that there is not a sufficient range of advanced highers partly because of unavailability of teachers? Increased provision of advanced highers might make them more valued and recognised. Finally, will the minister answer the specific question that my colleague, Ken Macintosh, asked: when will pupils make choices about the exams that they will take, which may replace standard and intermediate grades?

Fiona Hyslop: On the last question, the consultation will run from June through to October. The opportunity for choices will be when pupils choose which subjects to take going forward. Some may start to study for their highers in S4 and will therefore make choices about their highers earlier than they would previously have done.

As far as the winter diet is concerned, if things were too difficult and ambitious, some students might not do anything. The status quo is always a comfort factor for many people. Of course, any implementation would have to be carefully planned, and it is something that the Scottish Qualifications Authority has been thinking about and developing for some time. However, if we are

truly focused on individual learning and on ensuring that the needs of the individual are paramount, the flexibility to offer different opportunities for taking examinations should be welcomed. It could allow pupils to take two diets of highers over 18 months, rather than face a two-term dash for highers in S5 and another two-term dash for highers in S6. Such flexibility will provide more opportunities for in-depth learning and a better learning opportunity.

We should embrace opportunity, change and development—that is what the curriculum for excellence and the qualifications system are about. We should consider carefully the SQA's suggestions about a winter diet. I accept that they are subject to consultation and would need to be implemented very carefully, but let us not close our eyes to opportunities for the future.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Alasdair Morgan): There is time for one more question if both question and answer are short.

Aileen Campbell (South of Scotland) (SNP): What impact will the proposals have on the colleges and universities that are training the teachers of the future, and when is the impact of the Government's proposals likely to kick in?

Fiona Hyslop: I am delighted to say that there will be 20,000 new teachers in training between 2007 and 2011. Every one of them will be enmeshed in the curriculum for excellence as part of their initial teacher training and will be well prepared to take forward the new qualifications system.

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson): There is just time for a final question from John Park.

John Park (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): Thank you, Presiding Officer. You caught me out, there.

Fiona Hyslop: He did not expect that.

John Park: I was just heading back to my office.

The Presiding Officer: Very briefly, please.

John Park: I welcome the cabinet secretary's comments on consultation. I hope that she accepts, as I do, that it is important in building confidence in the system not just to consult businesses and others but to recognise the important role that trade unions play. I mean not just trade unions in the education sector, but trade unions in wider society, especially those that organise in the private and public sectors and that represent not just the workers but the views of wider society.

Fiona Hyslop: The member will be aware of my personal commitment—and the First Minister's commitment—to the Scottish Trades Union

Congress this week to extend and embrace a social partnership arrangement between Scotland, the trade unions and employers generally. I will move forward in that spirit.

The Presiding Officer: That brings us to the end of the ministerial statement and questions. Before we move to the next item of business, I inform members that I have received a request from the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth to make an urgent ministerial statement on the industrial action at the Grangemouth refinery. I am of the opinion that the matter is of sufficient urgency for a statement to be made. After consultation with business managers, it is my intention to take that item of business at 5 o'clock this afternoon. As a consequence, decision time will be moved to 5.30. The cabinet secretary will make a 10-minute statement, after which I will allow 20 minutes for questions. The necessary alterations to the daily business will be made and all members will be notified.

International Education

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson): The next item of business is a debate on motion S3M-1768, in the name of Maureen Watt, on international education.

10:01

The Minister for Schools and Skills (Maureen Watt): I am delighted to be able to introduce this debate on international education. As members know, the Government is ambitious for Scotland's young people. Part of building a smarter Scotland and a thriving economy is giving our next generation the skills for learning, skills for work and skills for life to succeed in the globalised economy in which we now live. I am sure that that is something on which all members can agree.

One of our aims within the smarter Scotland objectives is to ensure that all our young people are outward looking and confident about themselves and their nation, and that they have a modern and enterprising world view. In order to achieve that aim, our education system needs to provide them with knowledge and understanding of the world and Scotland's place in it—which is a thread that runs through the curriculum for excellence for all young people at all stages of their learning.

We must ensure that our young people understand, and can respond to, the challenges that are presented by globalisation. If the curriculum is to be excellent, it must incorporate an international perspective; if it does not, our society and economy will be poorer. The Government is, therefore, committed to ensuring that an international education is part of the experience for young people in all our schools.

We are taking action on three main fronts. First, we are changing learning and teaching. International education is not an add-on, and the curriculum for excellence is the ideal vehicle to deliver international education in schools and to equip young people with a modern and enterprising Scottish world view. The experiences and outcomes that are currently the subject of engagement and trialling in schools have been written such that they will provide ample opportunity for learning and teaching from an international perspective. For example, one of the draft social studies outcomes is that

“Having explored the globalisation of trade,”

the young person will be able to

“explain the interdependence of different parts of the world and assess the impacts for providers, consumers and the environment.”

That provides opportunities galore to examine the scientific, ethical and human issues that are

connected with global trade and sustainable development.

Jeremy Purvis (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD): My question is also relevant to the ministerial statement that we just heard. Part of studies for standard grade history is the international perspective and how Scotland fits in with it, especially in industry and the economy. Will the minister ensure that that continues, whatever the Government introduces as a successor to standard grades, so that we do not throw the baby out with the bath water?

Maureen Watt: I am sure that the baby will not be thrown out with the bath water.

An understanding of linguistic diversity is an integral part of what we mean by an international education. It is not just about learning modern languages in a traditional sense although, as our commitment to the introduction of a Scottish baccalaureate in languages demonstrates, we want young Scottish people to be ambitious in that regard. If we do not prepare our young people to cope with linguistic diversity, they will be at a disadvantage if they want to make the positive transition to working in the international arena. I hope that the new curriculum will enthuse young people and teachers alike to explore the riches of languages and to use them as a tool to understand the world better.

On the reference in the Liberal Democrats' amendment to a national languages strategy, I hope that they see that language learning will be embedded as an outcome of the languages strategy. It will be up to schools to decide how best to develop teaching of languages. Last Friday, I attended the launch of the report on the effective provision of pre-school education project at Walker Road primary school in Torry. The lessons that have been learned from that project will be applied throughout Scotland.

Secondly, we are simplifying the institutional and policy landscape. We want to ensure that coherent and concise advice is provided to schools and teachers, instead of schools receiving myriad competing messages from different bodies, which causes confusion. We are making explicit the linkages between international education, education for sustainable development, citizenship and modern languages.

Thirdly, we want to see partnership working. Many bodies are involved in education: we want to ensure that they work together in partnership. The Government has charged Learning and Teaching Scotland with taking the lead on that. It has key responsibilities for developing and supporting the curriculum for excellence and it runs the Scottish continuing international professional development scheme. LTS works in partnership with the

Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education, the General Teaching Council for Scotland and the Scottish Qualifications Authority, as well as with the British Council and the Scottish Centre for Information on Language Teaching and Research, to deliver that vision.

Jack McConnell (Motherwell and Wishaw)

(Lab): On that point, the minister will be aware that a scheme is in place in partnership with Voluntary Service Overseas to ensure that public funding is available in Scotland to pay the pension contributions of medical staff who volunteer overseas in a way that contributes to their work back in Scotland as well as to the country in which they volunteer, and that there was a plan to extend that scheme to education staff at all levels in Scotland, following the end of the pilot in March this year. Is that scheme still under consideration? The partnership with VSO can contribute to the knowledge that our teachers and lecturers have here, as well as contribute to countries in the developing world.

Maureen Watt: I assure Jack McConnell that we are aware of the concerns that he has raised already with my colleagues and that work is continuing on trying to come to a suitable arrangement.

On the Labour Party amendment that has been lodged by Ken Macintosh, I say to him that we are not completely clear that Scotland has received the Barnett consequential to which he refers in his amendment. He will know that the curriculum in Scotland is not prescribed, as it is down south. It is the responsibility of each and every local authority and school to consider how study opportunities such as a visit to Auschwitz concentration camp—to which the Labour amendment refers—might contribute to meeting the agreed national outcomes. A number of schools have visited Auschwitz; last year, I was invited to join one such trip, but was unfortunately asked too late in the day and had other commitments. However, I have committed to going on any further trip to Auschwitz with school pupils that might be arranged.

No one can doubt the importance of China in today's world and I am pleased to say that Learning and Teaching Scotland recently signed an agreement with Hanban, the Office of Chinese Language Council International, which includes the setting up of eight Confucius classrooms or hubs, serving 14 local authorities. Those will enable Scottish pupils to gain a greater appreciation of Chinese heritage, language and culture, thereby enhancing their capacity to become international citizens.

Yester primary school in East Lothian has links with Kuvansin koulu primary school in central

Finland. The pupils discuss health, eating, leisure and climate change through a blog and through discussions with their Finnish friends. In one particular case, a Yester pupil who has additional support needs was motivated to write long comments to the Finnish class, something that he would not have attempted before.

Grantown grammar school in the Highlands has started joint curriculum projects with Xinying middle school in Kunming, China. They have chosen to concentrate on music, art and English, as those are subjects in which both schools have an interest, and it means that they do not rely too heavily on written communication.

Fintry primary school in Stirling has established a school link with the Gambia, and uses cross-curricular learning to enrich learning and teaching. When asked the difference between us and the African children, a primary 7 pupil responded that African children were

“rich in happiness but poor in money, whereas we are rich in money but poor in happiness.”

I am sure that members are aware of many other inspiring examples of links and international education in schools in their constituencies. However, it is essential that that happens in all our schools; all young people deserve those opportunities, not just some of them. As Jack McConnell indicated, Scotland has prominent links with Malawi, and many Scottish schools—more than were expected—have taken up the challenge to link with schools in Malawi.

The world in which our young people are growing up is very different from the world when we were at school. It is essential that young people have opportunities to develop an international perspective in their education and to develop the cultural insight, confidence and linguistic skills that will help them to understand and respect other peoples, and to seize opportunities in a rapidly changing world.

We strongly believe that the curriculum for excellence is the ideal vehicle to enable teachers to use international education to enrich young people's learning. Pupils are inspired and interested in the issues: they are regarded as enjoyable, different, stimulating and cool. If they are engaged, they will be more likely to prosper and become the effective contributors, responsible citizens, confident individuals and successful learners that we want them to be.

We need that if we are to achieve a smarter Scotland. However, more important, young people deserve it for themselves in order to improve their self-esteem, life chances and opportunities in this globalised world.

I move,

That the Parliament recognises the importance of preparing young people for life in today's increasingly globalised society; agrees that all our young people should have an international education with opportunities to develop a knowledge and understanding of the world and Scotland's place in it; congratulates the many schools across Scotland that have made and continue to make links with schools across the world, and agrees that the Curriculum for Excellence is the ideal vehicle to deliver international education in schools and equip young people with an understanding of, and the skills for, the modern world.

10:12

Ken Macintosh (Eastwood) (Lab): I find myself torn. One part of me warmly welcomes the debate and the opportunity that it offers us to reinforce our support for international education. Labour's record on this subject and on sustainable development generally is one that I am certainly proud of. I believe that few members will be unable to sign up to the motion. Given that level of support and apparent good will, why did most of us groan when we saw the motion? The answer is simple: I suspect that the motion is not so much an attempt to build consensus as it is an attempt to avoid difficult parliamentary discussion of more pressing education matters.

I do not want to shatter the minister's illusions, but I am not sure that any member actually believes that international education is top of her, or the Cabinet's, political agenda. Of course, many of the rest of us are asking ourselves why we are not discussing, for example, new school buildings. Given the evidence that has been heard by the Education, Lifelong Learning and Culture Committee over the past few weeks, why is the Scottish Government not commenting on a new school buildings strategy? Why is the minister not standing before members telling us exactly what she will do to ensure that our probationer teachers have a job to go to at the end of their induction year?

Earlier this morning, we heard a ministerial statement on qualifications and examinations, and the motion that is before us mentions the importance of the curriculum for excellence. However, I do not detect any feeling from either the earlier statement or this debate that we will get further clarification on the many questions that teachers and parents have about the structure and implementation of the new curriculum, particularly in the secondary school.

I believe that by holding this debate the Government runs the risk of demeaning the motion. Lodging a motion not because of its political importance but as an attempt to avoid more controversial subjects, damages the consensus. That is not the way to treat as important a subject as international education. The primacy of Parliament suddenly becomes less

important when the Scottish National Party's agenda is under scrutiny.

In an attempt to give the debate more purpose, I have offered the Scottish Government the opportunity to address one aspect of international education and to put right what I hope it recognises is a serious misjudgment. The Scottish Government has been given funding to support visits to Auschwitz-Birkenau by senior school pupils, but it has not passed that on. The minister can set that right today.

On the broad subject of the motion, as I have said I am proud of my party's internationalism. As the minister said, we can all be proud of the Parliament's support for closer ties with Malawi, and of the local and national support for fair trade. We can be pleased that the political support that every party has given has moved international education up the academic pecking order. It is now taken more seriously by Learning and Teaching Scotland and enjoys a higher profile in teacher education.

There is consensus, but I am slightly worried by some of the language in the motion. The motion talks of the importance of links between schools in our country and in the developing world. Those links need to be set in context if they are not to reinforce negative stereotypes and are to allow us genuinely to reflect on our place in the world. It can be easy for all of us—young and old—to regard our relationship with poorer countries as charitable or paternalistic rather than as one through which all can learn. However, plenty of good practice exists—the minister referred to some examples—in which the relationship between schools here and abroad is one of mutual learning and understanding.

I hope that the minister agrees with that general point. Likewise, I have no difficulty in agreeing with her that the curriculum for excellence is an ideal vehicle for delivering the agenda. What will that mean in practice? Given how little clarity exists about the curriculum for excellence, I asked someone who works in the field what they would look for. She said that the impact should be measured not in exams—I think we all agree with that—but in international education's influence on a school's ethos. She said that the real indicator would be that barriers between subjects had been broken down.

Only a few weeks ago, the SNP Government lodged a motion on Scottish history. In that debate and after it, the minister went out of her way to emphasise not that barriers would be broken down, but that subject specialisms would remain—that history would be taught by history teachers and that the place of other subject specialists would be protected and secured. It is no wonder that people are confused about the new curriculum

when the minister says that international education is vital and that we must have greater intersubject working, but also reassures history teachers by saying, "Don't worry—your subject will be all right and will in fact be promoted." Will she say in winding up which it is to be? Is it to be protection of subject specialists such as history teachers or greater intersubject working?

Anyway—that is enough consensus and praise for the Scottish Government's record on international education. I will now strike a more critical note. Labour's amendment is on the importance of Holocaust education and funded support for visits to Auschwitz-Birkenau. As members may know, my Westminster colleague for East Renfrewshire, Jim Murphy MP, and I organised our first visit for senior Scottish pupils to Auschwitz some years ago. I assure members that that visit made a tremendous impact on me and on the pupils.

On 4 February, the United Kingdom Government announced funding of £4.65 million over the next three years to allow senior pupils—two from each school throughout England—to visit Auschwitz. I will quote the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families and I will give the minister the quotation, as it is available in *Hansard*. In reply to a question from Gordon Banks MP—the member for Ochil and South Perthshire—the secretary of state said:

"The £4.65 million for England clearly has Barnett consequentials in this area for the devolved countries. I hope and expect that they will ensure that such visits are available for all young people across the four constituent parts of the UK."—[*Official Report, House of Commons, 4 February 2008; Vol 471, c 646.*]

That we have been given that money could not be clearer. The United Kingdom £4.65 million over three years is roughly £1.5 million each year, which means about £150,000 a year for Scotland.

Bob Doris (Glasgow) (SNP): I have relatively recently returned from my first trip to Poland, where I visited Auschwitz-Birkenau, which made a deep impact on me.

Does Ken Macintosh think that every time that England decides to act on something, we should be bound by a direct Barnett consequential? The amendment is well meant, but does it play politics with a serious matter?

Ken Macintosh: Far from it. I whole-heartedly agree that we do not have to allocate money automatically; the decision is ours. I assure Bob Doris that I was awaiting an announcement from the Scottish Government—I assumed that it was only a matter of time. As he said, the matter is very important. We can make up our own mind on it. I hope that we will make the right decision.

I lodged a series of parliamentary questions about the trips to Auschwitz and the updating of

Holocaust education materials. Fellow Opposition members will not be surprised to hear that the minister's replies did not answer my questions, so I wrote a letter to her. I was grateful for her reply to that, which—surprisingly—tackled the question. However, what is even more surprising is that she said:

"So the answer to your question is no".

That is unacceptable. Supporting those visits would cost the Executive a mere £150,000 a year.

Maureen Watt: Will the member accept that a visit to Auschwitz and other concentration camps by one or two pupils from a school is not the only way in which pupils can learn about the Holocaust, and that through the curriculum for excellence and various strands of the curriculum, more pupils can learn about the Holocaust's consequences? In their activities weeks, many schools provide trips to Germany that include visits to concentration camps, which also allow more pupils to learn about the Holocaust.

Ken Macintosh: It is clear that a visit is not the only way to learn about concentration camps, but the minister needs to make up her mind. I was quite impressed when she said that she wants to go to Auschwitz-Birkenau. She recognises the benefit of that for herself and others, but she is unwilling to extend that benefit to pupils.

The Scottish Government seems to say that it is okay for UK ministers and local authorities to decide to allocate funding to such trips, but that it is not okay for Scottish ministers. What is the minister's job? If she wants Scottish pupils to have the same choices as others have, she should commit to providing such funding today.

I will conclude with a quotation from a concentration camp survivor that is often used to stimulate discussion among teachers. His request to teachers was this:

"Help your students become human. Your efforts must never produce learned monsters, skilled psychopaths, educated Eichmanns."

If the minister fails to understand that injunction, that merely reveals the contrast between the warm words that are at the heart of the motion and real support, which is measured in action.

I move amendment S3M-1768.2, to insert after "across the world":

"; believes that Holocaust education, including visits to the Auschwitz concentration camp, is an important part of lessons on citizenship and international education; agrees that the Scottish Government should ensure that the Barnett consequentials of the £4.65 million in funding announced by the UK Government for visits to Auschwitz are used specifically to support Scottish pupils for this same purpose".

10:22

Hugh O'Donnell (Central Scotland) (LD): I was surprised that the minister did not, in relation to the international context, regale us with tales of the visit by the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning to China, but perhaps we can look forward to revisiting that, as we did with the First Minister's holiday stories from America.

I had been tempted to start my speech in Greek, but aside from terrifying the clerks to death, I realised that if recent claims that only 30 per cent of Scots have a firm grasp of a language other than English are accurate, not too many members would have been likely to understand. In fairness, given my poor command of the Greek language, I am not sure how well I would have done anyway.

It is regrettable that most people in Scotland have—to put it mildly—a poor command of foreign languages. I am sure that we have all seen the consequences of that failing. We shout slowly in English in the faint hope of being understood; smile bravely as the waiter serves a plate that is heaped with heaven knows what from a menu that did not have pictures; or struggle with the inane and patronising grin that belies our lack of comprehension as we try to refuse yet another blooming donkey.

We might smile in recognising that picture, but it generally reflects our national incompetence and—I suspect—our fear of language learning. We need to address that in a comprehensive and considered way. That is why the Liberal Democrats have lodged their amendment and why we welcome the opportunity that the debate provides to reflect on the ways in which we can ensure that our schools contribute to our understanding of and participation in global trade, culture and social exchanges.

I take note of the serious nature of Mr Macintosh's amendment. Although I am not sure that it fits tightly with the Government's motion, we do not oppose it.

We cannot afford to be complacent about the need to improve our engagement with the wider world. From an economic and social perspective, we ignore such a shortcoming at our peril. Members do not need to take my word for that. A number of sources are giving us clear warnings that things are not about to get better.

Back in 1976, there were almost 16,000 presentations in Scotland for the main modern languages: French, German, Italian, Russian and Spanish. In 2006, there were fewer than 7,000 presentations. That is a frighteningly serious decline. The number of undergraduates studying languages in Scottish universities is also apparently declining—the number fell from 2,425 in 2002-03 to 2,150 in 2005-06. A University and

College Union study found that, from 1998 to 2007, the number of French language courses being taught at Scottish universities had dropped by 10 per cent, and the number of German courses being taught had decreased by 20 per cent.

The Scottish centre for information on language teaching and research has said that there is an urgent need to promote and develop provision for language learning across all sectors—indeed, the Scottish National Party's manifesto contains a commitment on that. The centre's director, Joanna McPake, has said:

“Scotland is not currently in a good position to take advantage of the economic, cultural, social and democratic opportunities which a greater national competence in languages other than English would bring”.

That is a sad indictment.

Further figures show that, since the 1970s, the number of school pupils who take modern language highers has slumped by nearly 60 per cent.

Liberalism is a profoundly international philosophy, and Liberal Democrats believe that international education should be central to the Scottish curriculum. By learning more about others, we can better understand ourselves. Scotland has a proud tradition of, and reputation for, being international in outlook. We must consider how we embed that approach in our school framework in a consistent and strategic way.

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I share many of the member's concerns about the decline in the numbers of Scottish pupils and students who study foreign languages. However, does he agree that there is perhaps an overemphasis on teaching French, which is a traditional language to teach, in our schools? Perhaps other languages such as Spanish and Mandarin, which might be more important in responding to future opportunities in the world, should be taught more.

Hugh O'Donnell: Indeed. Mr Fraser makes a good point. I would have dealt with that matter in detail if I had enough time. Perhaps there is a superabundance of French language teachers. I think that the availability of those teachers drives the direction of the curriculum. That ties in with the point that I made about the decline in the teaching of other languages, including at universities.

We have no great issues with the tone and content of the Government's motion, but the truth is that, like many other debates and motions that the Government has brought to the chamber, it is so full of warm words and platitudes that it is difficult to take issue with any of it. Like many Government motions, it is as short on detail and

delivery mechanisms as we have—sadly—come to expect. It is significant that it does not mention how such a vague set of aspirations will be delivered or, indeed, how teachers and schools will be expected to deliver. We need a plan of action from the Government and the minister that clearly addresses international education and ensures that we progress language teaching in Scotland's curriculum.

I move amendment S3M-1768.1, to insert at end:

"and calls for the Scottish Government to bring forward a comprehensive national languages strategy including a rolling programme to introduce a second language early into primary education and to secure economic benefit from the diverse language skills in a multicultural Scotland".

10:29

Elizabeth Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife)

(Con): I suspect that many teachers and members of the public will be a little surprised by the SNP's insistence that there is a need to debate international education, given that there has always been, and always will be, a whole-hearted commitment in Scotland to international education.

I agree with Mr Macintosh, who said that those people will be a bit surprised and probably a bit irritated that good-quality parliamentary time is being devoted to a motion on which we can all agree—Mr O'Donnell mentioned that—when there are far more pressing educational issues on the agenda. I add school discipline to the topics to which Mr Macintosh referred. Perhaps the decision to hold this debate was to do with the fact that the Government has been taken to task via the *Daily Mail* by the Scottish Association of Teachers of History for apparently thinking that history teaching, with all its international aspects, is being taught in a rather boring, dry and old-fashioned manner. Who knows? However, I will say something constructive.

If there was a single reason why Scottish education made such an impact throughout the world in the days when it first established its reputation, it would be its concern for the international community and the role that Scotland had played in the economic, social, political and philosophical development of many nations around the world. The 18th century Scottish enlightenment was remarkable for its outpouring of intellectual and scientific accomplishments, which rivalled those of any other nation at any time in history. It was made even more remarkable because it took place in a country that was considered to be one of the more backward nations in western Europe. The achievements in philosophy, economics, engineering, architecture, law and so on of people such as Francis Hutcheson, Adam Smith, Thomas Reid, Robert Burns and Adam Ferguson speak for themselves.

The effects of the Scottish enlightenment went far beyond Scotland. It was one of the most important forces in ensuring that Scottish education has always been underpinned by a strong international commitment. That commitment, especially in respect of the breadth of interest, has always been a cornerstone of our education system, and there is no question but that it must be maintained and enhanced. If pupils are to become well-educated, rounded human beings, part of the process must be their acquisition of a full awareness and understanding of the global community, and tolerance and respect for the many and varied cultures around the world.

I turn to Mr Macintosh's amendment. One of the most moving presentations that I heard during my former career as a teacher was on Auschwitz. Many people think that educating youngsters about Auschwitz is extremely important. We have no problem in supporting that principle, but we have a problem with the Labour amendment, because we do not believe that it is up to any Government to decide to ring fence the money that is involved, and we think that it is up to headteachers to make decisions about best experiences. However, I repeat that educating youngsters about Auschwitz can play an important part in their education.

We have many opportunities to learn from experiences in other parts of the world, which can only be good, whether the Government says that we should learn from China, Malawi or France. Indeed, the Conservatives urge members of the Government to undertake their next international trip to Scandinavia. In Sweden, they will see what happens when headteachers and parents, rather than the Government, are put in control of schools, and in Finland, they might be able to study a system in which pupils start school at seven years old. Such an approach would end the headache that has resulted from dealing with P1 to P3 class sizes.

Jeremy Purvis: I am not sure whether my remarks on the Labour amendment will help or hinder Mr Macintosh's argument, but my understanding is that it would have the effect of continuing Scottish funding to the educational trust to which schools can apply to fund visits. Schools would not be instructed in any way to make visits—the amendment would simply facilitate visits. That is not ring fencing; rather, schools would be given capacity to make visits. I hope that consensus exists in the chamber on such an approach.

Elizabeth Smith: I leave it to Mr Macintosh to defend his amendment. The key point is that it should be up to headteachers to decide the best extracurricular and core curricular items for their pupils.

On a day on which we have considered the Scottish qualifications system, the other key point of interest at this stage is consideration of a worthy debate on the baccalaureate system. Today, the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning made a firm commitment on a Scottish baccalaureate; she will explain the details of what will happen in S5 and S6 later. Perhaps there could be a worthy debate on the international baccalaureate. Many of the things that underlie the principles behind the curriculum for excellence are developed in the examination system for that baccalaureate, which has clearly taken on board exactly what the Government is trying to say in this debate. The Government ought to consider that.

Internationalism has always been at the centre of Scottish education, and I am sure that no member hopes that it will not be in the future. We have no intention of opposing the Government's motion, but we object to the fact that it has taken time away from debating other, more pressing, educational issues. However, international education is important, so we will support the motion.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Trish Godman): To ensure that I am able to call all back benchers who wish to speak in the debate, I will reduce the time available for speeches to five and a half minutes. For the sake of fairness, Mr Bill Wilson will have six minutes. That will allow other members to get rid of 30 seconds from their speeches.

10:35

Bill Wilson (West of Scotland) (SNP): That is very fair.

It was a dark and stormy night. Actually, that is not true—it was a dark but otherwise calm evening in Ecuador. A companion and I were trekking along a muddy track by a large river somewhere in one of the many blank areas on our map—*[Interruption.]* Give it time. It had been a long day's walk, and in the gathering gloom my trekking companion and I were seeking somewhere to pitch our tent. A figure loomed large on the road ahead of us. His clothes were simple, and he looked poor; we were wearing expensive boots and carrying rucksacks stuffed with clothes and equipment.

The man greeted us in a friendly way and engaged us in conversation. A little later, we were sitting in his home, which was sparsely furnished but clean and dry. His wife offered us food and drink, although the family clearly had little to spare. We were grateful for the hospitality of those extremely poor people and wanted to give them something in return. My friend reached into his

rucksack and pulled out a small torch. He gave it to their young child, showing him how to use the torch. Later in the evening, when the boy was asleep, the father came up to us with the torch in his hand; he wanted to know whether it needed batteries. We realised that he was too poor to be able to afford to purchase replacement batteries and that he was concerned about the great disappointment that the child would suffer when the batteries ran out.

Some members—including, perhaps, Hugh O'Donnell—are wondering why I have started my speech with an anecdote that is apparently unrelated to the motion. I have had the enormous privilege of travelling extensively and meeting people the world over. My travels have left me with the conviction that humans—wherever they are, regardless of colour, religion or culture—are all fundamentally the same. They have the same basic needs, hopes and fears. They love their children and want them to grow up healthy and happy. They are capable, however poor, of the greatest kindness and consideration. The human species, for all its flaws, is a wonderful thing.

The appreciation that we are all the same—one species, out of Africa—is essential if we are to build a better world. Will people care about the effects of global warming and the misery and despair that are caused by the resultant floods and droughts if they regard those who suffer as being apart from them—as being different? Can we challenge unfair trade policies and relieve the misery of exploitation if we cannot imagine ourselves in the place of the exploited? How can we find the energy to struggle against war and tyranny if we place a lower value on the lives of those who are being gassed or drugged and dropped from aeroplanes? To make the world a better place, we must understand that we are all the same under the skin.

How do we reach such an understanding? We can reach it through travel, but if we do not have the time or means to travel, we can reach it through education. That is why international education is vital. Without it, we cannot build the compassion, tolerance and understanding that should lie at the very heart of any civilised society. With the interconnectedness of the world highlighted only yesterday by the coverage in *The Scotsman* of the biofuels issue, it is clear that international education should not be an optional add-on—it can and should be central to what goes on in our schools. It is an excellent vehicle for teaching languages, the arts, the sciences and, not least, ethics. It also fits naturally within the curriculum for excellence framework. I shall attempt to illustrate that.

The curriculum for excellence website reports that the curriculum review group has stated:

“One of the prime purposes of education is to make our young people aware of the values on which Scottish society is based and so help them to establish their own stances on matters of social justice and personal and collective responsibility. Young people therefore need to learn about and develop these values. The curriculum is an important means through which this personal development should be encouraged.”

The website further states:

“Wisdom, justice, compassion and integrity are the words inscribed on the mace of the Scottish Parliament. These words have helped to define values for Scottish society.”

What better way for young people in Scotland to develop compassion than for them to learn about and interact with people in other countries? If they do that, a sense of justice will surely be encouraged. Research has shown that learning is most effective when it engages the emotions. Caring passionately about other people—their pain, hopes, fears, dilemmas and joys—will surely encourage youngsters to acquire further knowledge and understanding, which are the building blocks of wisdom. Furthermore, learning about the connectedness of things in general and of people specifically, and caring about those people, can only promote personal integrity. Thus we have wisdom, justice, compassion and integrity.

The curriculum for excellence seeks to encourage more learning through experience and to build four capacities: successful learning, confidence, responsible citizenship and effective contribution. An excellent way of doing that is to foster the interaction of Scottish pupils with youngsters in other countries. In Renfrewshire, global citizenship projects partner local schools with schools overseas. Trinity high school works with the Association of People with Disability in India. Another good example is the pairing of Rashielea primary school with Tianjin experimental primary school in China. The two schools have agreed to develop long-term education programmes through exchange visits, curriculum enrichment for language learning, electronic communication and the sharing of best practice.

I will visit Rashielea primary school on Friday and look forward to hearing the stories behind the pupils’ China-inspired letters and artwork. I hope to learn more about the Scotland-China education network pupil conference, at which Rashielea pupils presented a talk describing their links with the school in Tianjin. Although during my visit I shall not raise the issue of human rights abuses in China, I am confident that, throughout their lives, the pupils will take a real interest in the wellbeing of the people of that country. That alone justifies our supporting the motion.

10:41

Karen Whitefield (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab): I welcome the opportunity to speak in this morning’s debate on a subject that is important not just to Scotland but around the world. Scottish Labour has always rejected narrow nationalism. We have a proud internationalist record and a long-lasting commitment to international solidarity.

Aileen Campbell (South of Scotland) (SNP): Will the member explain what she means by “narrow nationalism”?

Karen Whitefield: I mean that we are an internationalist party and that, when we were in government, we delivered on that aspiration in all that we did.

The previous Government promoted internationalist values, introducing numerous initiatives to promote international education in Scotland’s schools, including co-operation agreements between Scotland and France, Malawi and China. In an increasingly global society, fostering international links between children is vital to our future peace and security, as is encouraging greater understanding of different cultures and the different lives that children lead across the world. Scotland has been successful at doing that. In particular, I highlight the successful promotion of partnership with schools in developing countries through the global teachers programme.

The programme is part of Link Community Development and its aim is to improve the educational opportunities that are available to children in developing rural communities in five African countries. Since 2003, 68 Scottish teachers and headteachers have taken part in the programme, which has taken them on working placements to Malawi, Ghana, Uganda and South Africa. It has been a life-changing experience for those involved and has made a valuable and long-lasting contribution to the lives of thousands of young people both here in Scotland and in the countries concerned, encouraging a real sense of global citizenship and solidarity.

In January, a group of 16 Scottish teachers who had worked in Malawi as part of the programme were awarded professional recognition in global education by the General Teaching Council for Scotland. I am sure that all members congratulate those teachers on their hard work and commitment and on the value that they have added to their schools back in Scotland.

One of the teachers who received an award was Sharon MacDonald, who is the assistant or deputy principal of Clarkston primary school in my constituency. I have been able not only to discuss her experiences with her but to see first hand how her participation in the scheme has impacted on

children at Clarkston primary and on school life. The school now has firm links with Kapiri primary in Malawi and is involved in shared curricular projects. There have been school assemblies and specific projects on life in Malawi. People at Kapiri primary believe that the attendance and punctuality of teachers and other staff have improved, along with the confidence and self-esteem of pupils. Staff at the school believe that that is due in no small part to the skills that Sharon MacDonald imparted and to the co-operative learning and group work assessment techniques that she discussed and taught when she visited Malawi. I am sure that everyone in the chamber supports those initiatives.

In our debates on the future of our education system in Scotland, we often lose sight of the fact that about 72 million children around the world still do not have access to primary education. We need only consider countries such as Malawi—where life expectancy is only 37 and children who are lucky enough to be at school are taught in classes of 100 to 200—to see the stark contrast that exists in the life chances of children around the world. That is why the international education links that Scotland is forging and developing with such countries are so important. The curriculum for excellence is a valuable tool to help achieve that goal. It will instil a global sense of community in our young people and equip them with the knowledge, skills and understanding that they need to play an active part in the global economy.

However, international education is about more than exchanges and cultural awareness activities. It needs to be mainstreamed throughout the curriculum and backed up not just by words of support but by practical action. The Scottish Government claims to support the curriculum for excellence, but I wonder whether we needed this debate or whether it would have been better to talk about whether HMIE will acknowledge schools' work on international education in its inspection reports. When I visit schools, headteachers express to me the fear that HMIE will not recognise that work.

Perhaps it would have been better for ministers to show the leadership that they talk about rather than to allow policy drift. Ministers should confirm to schools that resources will be available to allow full implementation of the curriculum for excellence.

We can agree about much in Scottish education, particularly in relation to global education. However, the Parliament has missed an opportunity to discuss the real issues that face Scottish education—in particular, school buildings and class sizes. We need to discuss those issues more urgently than we need to discuss international education.

10:47

Bashir Ahmad (Glasgow) (SNP): When I came to this country more than four decades ago, I came with minimal education. At that time, the important thing was not education but financial security for loved ones back home. Times have changed, and today, the importance of education is recognised.

At the moment, Scotland is home to just under 15,000 students from India and China, and we host almost 17,000 students from the European Union. Scotland is a welcoming and flexible country. Our universities and colleges have worldwide reputations for excellence. That is why overseas students are willing to invest not only their time but their money in our higher education institutions. There is no doubt that Scotland has gained considerably from the fresh ideas and new thinking that students from all continents have brought with them.

The economic advantages of being open and flexible cannot be ignored. The economic benefits are gained not only from students but from their visiting families. That is evident in relation to students who come here to study from the far east and the subcontinent, whose families often visit Scotland more than once. Their positive impact is felt in local businesses and services and in our tourism industry. It is clear that international students benefit not just the institutions but the country in which they study.

Overseas students also contribute to the success of our higher education institutions. Research shows that, on average, students from abroad who study in our universities finish with higher level degrees. That undoubtedly motivates Scottish students to compete at the same level.

That said, Scotland has one of the worst records in Europe for sending students overseas. The benefits of sending students abroad are, for some, more difficult to understand, but students who have experienced a truly international education testify to that extraordinary experience. When we send our students overseas, many of them return with fresh thinking and new skills that enhance society and benefit us all.

We cannot underestimate the importance of forging worldwide cultural ties. That is why I am delighted that the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning spent time in China to strengthen our educational exchange there. The challenge is for us to continue to welcome and accommodate our international students while encouraging Scottish students to reap the benefits of an international education. I am delighted that the Government has taken up the challenge and is working towards an even smarter and more skilled Scotland.

10:52

Iain Smith (North East Fife) (LD): I recognise the concerns that members have expressed about whether the subject of this debate is the priority issue in the education sector and the one that we should be debating, but the subject is important and I welcome the opportunity to discuss it. It would be better if we had a bit more discussion than we have had so far about the content of international education and what we want to get from it. Perhaps the minister will tell us when she sums up what the Government thinks we should be doing in international education.

Internationalism should be at the heart of our moving forward in the third millennium. That is why I welcome the international education project in our schools. Internationalism is about looking forward and outward, breaking down barriers and increasing understanding and mutual respect, which we hope will lead to a much more peaceful, prosperous and fair global society. It is important that we in Scotland do those things. We have a reputation as an outward-looking country, and it is important that we continue to look outward rather than look at the inward nationalism of the past centuries.

International education is a crucial part of the curriculum for excellence. It encapsulates just about everything that the curriculum for excellence is about. International education is about developing successful learners who think creatively and independently; confident individuals who develop and communicate their beliefs and their view of the world; responsible citizens who develop their knowledge and understanding of the world and Scotland's place in it; and effective contributors who can apply critical thinking in new contexts. Those are all key principles and purposes of the curriculum for excellence and they are all part of what international education is about.

We have to be careful, though, because there is a danger that we will fall into the trap of doing what we think is right in development education even though it is not right. The sustainable development education policy network's policy briefing warns that

"school links, exchanges and visits with economically-favoured nations and charitable links with poor nations do not necessarily make for good quality International Education as they can reinforce stereotypical images of poorer nations"

and

"leave unquestioned the sustainability of our own lifestyles".

It is important that we acknowledge that fact.

There are well-intentioned schemes to link schools, as part of which a school might send its old computers to a school in a developing country,

without realising that that school might not have a reliable power source and that, even if it did, it might not have a computer engineer who could make the computers work. We must ensure that whatever we do is sustainable. Even sending pencils and jotters to schools in developing countries might not be the right thing to do because, by doing so, we will not help to sustain the industries that produce pencils and jotters in those countries. We must ensure that the work that we do is not only well intentioned but produces the right results.

However, a number of valuable development schemes already operate in our schools, two of which I will highlight. The first is the eco-schools project, which schools in my constituency of North East Fife have been at the forefront of for many years. In fact, there are now so many eco-schools in my constituency that I do not have time to name them all. One nursery, 25 primary schools and one secondary school have received eco-awards. Pittenweem primary school and Guardbridge primary school have received a third green flag, and Dunino primary school, which was at the forefront of the programme's development, has gained a permanent green flag.

The eco-schools programme is about developing children's understanding of their wider place in the world. The children who participate do not consider only environmental issues—an important element of the programme is that they are involved in developing the projects that they pursue. There is an international aspect to the work that is done as part of the eco-schools programme, which deserves continuing support.

I turn to the second scheme. Recently, I had the opportunity to go with the minister's colleague Adam Ingram to Westfield nursery school and St Columba's primary school in Cupar in my constituency, which are involved in the United Nations Children's Fund's extremely valuable rights respecting school programme, a key aspect of which is developing children's understanding not just of their rights but of their responsibilities.

Two important principles of the programme are:

"If every child, regardless of their sex, ethnic origin, social status, language, age, nationality or religion has these rights, then they also have a responsibility to respect each other"

and

"If children have a right to be protected from conflict, cruelty, exploitation and neglect, then they also have a responsibility not to bully or harm each other."

Those are important aspects of internationalism and international education. We sometimes underestimate the ability of children to take on concepts such as justice, fairness and responsibility. At St Columba's primary school, I

saw a fantastic presentation on UNICEF's rights respecting school programme, which showed that the children understand the idea of rights and responsibilities not just in an international context but in the context of their own lives and situations.

The eco-schools project and UNICEF's rights respecting school programme are extremely valuable and I hope that the Scottish Government will continue to support them.

10:58

Des McNulty (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab): As I listened to the minister talk about the impact of globalisation on the curriculum and the need for international education, I began to think that what was missing from the motion and the debate was how we should handle the most obvious impact of globalisation on education in Scotland—the presence in our schools of numerous children from other countries, who come from different cultures and use different languages. Given that those pupils carry with them their own understandings, family experiences and distinct cultural identities, they are a valuable resource as we seek to develop the process of international education and integration in Scotland.

My two boys went to Hillhead high school, the entrants to which are among the most diverse in Scotland in terms of the number of countries from which they come and the different languages that they use. In that school and in primary school, my sons not only learned about those other languages, customs and cultures but gained an appreciation of the richness of that cultural diversity and of the contribution that the families of those other pupils made to Scotland.

Hillhead high school placed a strong emphasis on tolerance. Not just in cities such as Edinburgh and Glasgow but all over Scotland, schools are becoming increasingly diverse. In many parts of the country, pupils come from backgrounds and cultures that were not represented 10 or 15 years ago. How we resource our education system and think about the curriculum must change if we are to adapt to the new diversity. I hope that that will be acknowledged by the Scottish Government and by all the professional bodies that provide teacher education, support teachers in schools and develop the various educational materials that are used. That has an important resource implication, because it costs more to provide specialist language teaching—whether in the Chinese languages, Urdu, other Asian languages or the increasingly important eastern European languages—and to provide the additional cultural support that is often required for early integration of pupils from such backgrounds and their families into the education system.

Education can provide an extremely important route for drawing in families who come here from other countries, many of whom are keen for their children to get on and succeed through the education system. Parents in those families devote a great deal of attention to supporting their sons and daughters through the education system, which can be a valuable resource not just for the pupil but from the point of view of integration and drawing in the contribution that such families can make to our society. It is important that we focus on what the experience and values of those families can contribute to the process, rather than just view international education as being about us teaching pupils about what goes on in other societies.

That said, a hugely valuable role can be played not just by teachers in schools but by many of the organisations that are actively engaged in international development activities. I am thinking of organisations such as Oxfam and the Scottish Catholic International Aid Fund, which have produced fantastic materials and can make fantastic inputs by drawing in people who have active experience of what is going on in developing countries. I am not sure that we make adequate use of what organisations such as SCIAF and Oxfam have to offer, which could make an even greater contribution than they are already making.

Organisations such as the International Development Education Association of Scotland have helped with curriculum development by providing packages that teachers can use. I would like more of such work to be done and more resources to be provided for it. We need to draw in experience and understanding of what is happening in developing countries, but let us not forget the contribution that those people who come to Scotland can make to the process. We need to be a richer society, and we will be a richer society when we recognise and embrace the diversity that exists here.

11:03

Aileen Campbell (South of Scotland) (SNP): The topic of international education should unite everyone in the Parliament as we grow to realise that Scotland has an important international role to play in the global arena and that, in a fast-changing and interdependent world, education can help young people to meet the challenges that they will confront now and in the future. I welcome the Government's commitment to ensuring that Scotland's children are equipped to understand the world around them.

I want to concentrate on the benefits of school linking. I have been amazed by the results that such a simple exercise seems to have on the kids

who take part in it. The school links that I have learned about and seen at first hand show that the process helps to build a degree of confidence, self-esteem, wellbeing, knowledge and understanding that might not be attained through the use of text books alone. That is in line with the Government's key objective of making our country smarter and fairer, and with the curriculum for excellence's aims of making children confident individuals, successful learners and effective contributors, and of building capacity so that they can develop their critical thinking.

Learning about the world and Scotland's place in it by linking in partnership with schools around the globe is not just about learning the geography or the poverty statistics of countries in the developing world; it can be fun. Importantly, international education should be about respecting different cultures, traditions and languages, and it should be made relevant to all areas of the curriculum and all ages and abilities, not taught as an additional subject for teachers to tutor. It should also be about sustainability, with the premise being that the school is in a partnership and that learning from each other is a reciprocal process. In short, international education should be part of the school's ethos.

My parliamentary assistant spent a year working in Malawi. As I said in a previous debate on Malawi, he told me that when young Malawians come to Scotland or young Scots go to Malawi, the remarkable thing is that they notice not the material differences in their lives but the similarities of their experience. Typically, we say that youngsters do not like doing homework or are on the lookout for romance. From that, we know that genuine partnership and understanding can work both ways, and that young Scots will come to realise that, regardless of where someone comes from in the world, when we scratch the surface we are not that different one from the other.

What makes a good school link? According to Oxfam, it means educating children about

"social justice ... diversity ... interdependence ... peace and conflict ... critical thinking ... respect"

and the "Ability to challenge injustice", and about having

"empathy ... Commitment to social justice and equity ... Concern for the environment."

I will share a couple of anecdotes to highlight good examples of school linking. The first concerns my first encounter of school linking, which was at the Scottish Storytelling Centre up the road on the Royal Mile. I attended an event that was co-hosted by the British Council, where stalls were laid out by schools that were involved in a partnership. I visited each one and was particularly taken by one stall. The pupils were so

eager to tell me about what they were learning that they dragged me over to it, their eyes glistening. Their work was outstanding.

I told their teacher that they were a credit to their school. She went on to tell me of one wee boy who had brought to school the bull marble from his marble set. He told her that he wanted to send it as a present to a political prisoner whom he had been learning about because his father was in prison and he knew what prison was like. The story sums up everything that is good about school linking. The young boy's thought processes had led him to feel tremendous empathy and respect for someone who was fighting for justice thousands of miles away. I found it incredible that, all by himself, the boy had made a link between the political prisoner's situation and his personal circumstances.

The second anecdote concerns a visit to the Parliament by a South African school that is linked to a Scottish school and which I hosted. The pupils were members of a choir and were so pleased to share their traditional song that they gave an impromptu performance for us in the chamber. For me, that proved the tremendous cultural benefit to all the pupils and teachers involved.

Those are fine examples of school links. If the Government is to increase the roll-out of such links, I urge it to ensure that that is the type of school linking that Scotland follows.

In the briefings that we received for the debate, charities such as Oxfam, SCIAF, IDEAS and the sustainable development education policy network highlighted examples of poor school linkings that do nothing to broaden young people's horizons or promote understanding between them. If those concerns are prevalent, the topic is worthy of debate today. As Kenneth Macintosh and Iain Smith said, schools—admittedly with the best of intentions—can believe their role to be that of fundraiser and donor, which serves only to perpetuate and reinforce the stereotypical myth that the role of the developed world is to fundraise for the poor and for charity.

We need to ensure that school links are partnerships that are based on equality. As a country, we must understand that we do not know it all and we have much to learn from those around us. However, teachers need support for that. They need guidance on how to achieve the best for their school and students and how to ensure that the children who leave their school and care grow into adults who know the difference between justice and injustice and right and wrong, and participate in the wider community to make it a fairer and equitable place—one that respects diversity.

That approach raises challenges. I believe that the principles of being a good citizen and a good

global citizen should be embedded at every opportunity in the curriculum for excellence. The new curriculum provides a good opportunity to ensure that we in Scotland get global citizenship right. We all agree that Scotland has a great role to play in the world, albeit that we may not agree on the level at which we should play it. However, we must all work together to ensure that today's children and students are well equipped to make them confident and able to go forward into work. We must ensure that they realise that co-operation and respect should triumph over prejudice and stereotyping.

11:09

Mr Frank McAveety (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab): Students from Eastbank academy in my constituency are in the public gallery and I welcome them to the debate. My dilemma in welcoming them is that they are here by sheer coincidence, not because of any fantastic planning on my part. Part of their role as future citizens of Scotland, the UK, Europe and the world is to make a contribution, first in their school environment and then as young adults as they make their way through the journey of life. I hope that they listen to the debate, reflect on some of the speeches and benefit from the discussion.

As we have heard, members are concerned that other pressing Scottish education issues have not been brought to the chamber, although that is not to diminish the importance of international education. The quality of the speeches has indicated the passion that members feel about the subject and, importantly, that they have thought critically about how we should contribute.

Labour members have a slightly different starting point from that of members on the Government benches. In contrast to those who prefer Scotland not to be part of the United Kingdom, we believe that Scots can make just as valuable a contribution as part of the United Kingdom. Those different views are honestly held, but our common agenda should be to ensure that people accept our mutual obligations.

Whether or not schools get it right in fundraising and other activities, the nugget of the debate is the fundamental belief that the individual can make a genuine difference to the world. Thinking about the global consequences of what we do as we live our lives is as important as ensuring that we give assistance where appropriate.

Only a matter of weeks ago, we heard a fantastic time for reflection contribution from young Claire Martin. Claire attends another school in my constituency, Holyrood secondary school on the south side of Glasgow. I taught in that school, which increasingly reflects the ethnic diversity of

the south side of Glasgow. I am talking not only of the historic legacy of the Irish and Asian communities. Today, the area is home to Polish, Slovakian and Romanian communities, and to others who now form part of the school community. In that regard, I welcome Des McNulty's contribution.

Holyrood secondary school raises a considerable amount of money. It also works in partnership with schools in Malawi where—incredibly—a small school can have 2,500 pupils and a high school 6,500 pupils. Recently, the minister paid a visit to Holyrood secondary. I could not manage along that morning, but I think that she was impressed by the school's commitment. What is important about the school, as with Eastbank and other schools in my constituency, is the contribution that they make in their fundraising activities and generosity of commitment. Embedded in the curriculum at Holyrood is a commitment to address the fundamental issue of an unequal world—of a rich north and a poor south. More critically, importantly and effectively, pupils are learning how to make a difference at our end by way of partnerships, through which they learn how people in other parts of the world want their concerns to be addressed. That is important.

My colleague Kenneth Macintosh has touched on an important issue in his amendment. I hope that the minister will say how the Government will ensure that youngsters experience the challenge of Auschwitz, if they want to and can do it. Youngsters should be able to experience how an advanced European nation can volte-face and assume a different identity. I say that even though it was a minority of folk who ensured a Nazi victory in the early 1930s, thereby diminishing that great nation for a period in history. I welcome the Government saying how it will use some of the UK Government's resource allocation to bring about that experience.

Fourteen years ago, I took a group of youngsters from Easterhouse and Craigmillar to Los Angeles. One of our key visits was to the Holocaust museum. The youngsters were not politically aware, but the journey that they took in the hour that they spent there was emotional and life changing. They were confronted by the reality of what can happen to people's life experience.

I ask the Government to say how it will address the Labour amendment. Also, and more important in terms of the curriculum, how will it track how well we do in terms of international development, sustainable development and young people's awareness of those issues? If we do well, Scotland and Britain will be a better nation. We need to tackle the issue of our co-responsibility. We need to ensure that we have a nation where

people feel comfortable in their own skin, whatever the colour.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Alasdair Morgan): We move to winding-up speeches.

11:14

Jeremy Purvis (Tweeddale, Etrick and Lauderdale) (LD): When the Minister for Schools and Skills talked about children in Gambia considering the difference between children in Scotland and Africa, I recalled that, when the former Deputy First Minister Nicol Stephen visited a school in India, the children remarked that the main difference that they saw was that he talked like Shrek. I think that the kids in Gambia are a little more profound than those in that school in India.

The Liberal Democrats disagree with nothing in the minister's speech. However, we are disappointed that the Government will not embrace our constructive addendum on a comprehensive Scottish strategy for languages. The reason that the Government has given for opposing that shows an unfortunate lack of ambition from the SNP. The minister said that there is no need for a strategy because the modern languages outcomes in the curriculum for excellence will suffice. The draft outcomes, which are good, state:

"At early and at first levels, children will be developing generic skills in their first language. These include taking part in conversation, developing listening, reading and writing skills and knowledge about language. All of these are relevant to learning other languages.

An early start to language learning should be a positive, stimulating experience that motivates pupils through exciting contexts and meaningful, accessible content."

That is all to be welcomed, but we want to go much further. An early start should be made in schools, but we want the process to continue through to college, university and our business economy, which should all be part of a co-ordinated approach to language skills to allow us to improve and build on the current situation.

Hugh O'Donnell talked about the long-term decline in the number of presentations for language qualifications in Scotland under many Governments. That highlights the need for reforms. We now have a more complex world economic environment and a more multicultural Scotland, as Des McNulty and Frank McAveety highlighted. Those aspects can potentially benefit Scotland, but our approach should be co-ordinated. We hope that the Government does not have a closed mind and will consider our proposals further.

When I was in India two years ago, I met representatives of chambers of commerce who

have no doubt that they want an economy that is more open, just, and transparent than China's, and larger. They see skills in English as critical. They respect our education system and our approach to justice, the rule of law and human rights. They wish their economy to be the largest part of the world economy, and English is a critical part of that. We must consider Scotland's role in a much bigger world trading environment and the languages that our young people and businesses can exploit.

The Minister for Schools and Skills said nothing about China. When I saw the subject of the debate, I thought that it was on the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning's visit to China during the Easter recess. I am disappointed that we have not had a chance to debate that visit, its consequences and our relationship with China, which is of huge significance to Scotland. I thought that the timing of the visit was wrong.

Pupils in Scotland do not only want to learn about other countries; they want to get to know people from other countries and understand their cultures and political systems. Projects such as the outstanding international programme in Peebles high school in my constituency are involved with just that issue—getting to know and understand other cultures. We cannot separate politics from learning about other countries, so human rights and civil liberties issues are relevant. The actions of Government ministers in meeting other officials—even when those ministers raise human rights issues—and the timing of visits at a time of international concern are relevant issues. Young people are receptive to such issues. So whether we talk about views on the war in Iraq or ministers' visits at a time of concern about human rights abuses against citizens in Tibet, those are relevant issues.

The people of Tibet are citizens of the world. Liz Smith and Iain Smith rightly commented that Scots have always been citizens of the world, and a Government motion today will not make that any more or less the case. For three years, I have chaired the launch of the Peebles high school international programme for S4 pupils in the Scottish Parliament, together with the consular corps in Edinburgh. The pupils set the agenda on how they want to understand, work with and get to know young people from other countries. They are at the centre of best practice in international studying.

The ability to communicate and understand is universal. If we do not take a more co-ordinated and better approach to developing that ability, we will fall back, which is not the best way of giving our young people the opportunities in the world environment that we all want them to have.

11:20

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): During the debate, we have been from Ecuador to the Gambia and from Malawi to India, but I am surprised that Poland has not been mentioned more, except in the context of Auschwitz. On Friday, I visited St Columba's high school in Perth, which is a Roman Catholic secondary school that has a large complement of Polish students as a result of the major influx of people from eastern Europe to Scotland. That has enriched the school and presented challenges. If we are considering international education and countries with which we can develop links, surely Poland should be high on the agenda, given the large Polish population not only in Perth, but in other parts of Scotland.

I have a great deal of sympathy with Ken Macintosh's comments and with the wording of his amendment. I think that we all agree on the importance of Holocaust education. I have not visited Poland or Auschwitz, but friends who were there recently came away deeply moved by the experience. I have no doubt that young people's educational experience would be enriched by going there, so I have no difficulty with the first part of Mr Macintosh's amendment, but I am slightly concerned about the implications of the suggestion in the second part that just because the UK Government comes up with an initiative in a devolved area and commits funding, that procedure should be followed automatically in Scotland. I am concerned that a precedent might be set.

Ken Macintosh: Does the minister accept—sorry, the member is not one yet. Will the member accept my reassurance that I worded the amendment specifically to allow as much flexibility as possible for the minister to earmark the money in whatever way she wishes? As Mr Purvis pointed out, the UK Government gives the money to the Holocaust Education Trust, which organises the trips and makes them available. It is certainly not compulsory for anybody to use the service.

Murdo Fraser: I shall reflect on Mr Macintosh's point, but I say to him as gently as I can that his party was in office in Scotland for 10 years and, while it was in power in the devolved Parliament, held the education brief, so it had time to introduce such a measure if it thought that it was important, but it did not.

Ken Macintosh: The money—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Order. The member cannot intervene unless Murdo Fraser accepts an intervention.

Murdo Fraser: Come on, then.

Ken Macintosh: Previously, the money was available and was not ring fenced for England, or at least the matter was rather unclear. The Holocaust Education Trust has been used to support trips from Scotland before. The tranche of money that I mention in my amendment has been earmarked for the purpose.

Murdo Fraser: The argument is getting rather tortuous. My point is that the substantial education budget in previous years could have been used to fund such trips if it was so important to Mr Macintosh and his colleagues. However, on the general point, I endorse much of what Mr Macintosh said.

On the Liberal Democrat amendment, I have sympathy with Hugh O'Donnell's points and his arguments on the need to improve the teaching of second languages in secondary and primary schools. However, the Conservatives have a difficulty with talk of a national strategy. As I am sure Mr O'Donnell will know, we prefer local decision making and we do not like top-down national strategies. In that respect, I welcome the minister's comments on the amendment.

On the motion, we all accept that, as the curriculum for excellence says, pupils should have an understanding of the world and that international education is important for that reason. There is nothing particularly new in that. I remember being at school many years ago when we were all encouraged to have pen-pals in exotic locations such as France and the Netherlands. Pupils today have much wider horizons than we had. A group of pupils from Blairgowrie high school in my constituency recently went on a trip to Malawi, as many other pupils from throughout Scotland have done. Clearly, the world has got a lot smaller in the past 30 or so years. There are huge advantages in promoting such trips.

Through co-operation agreements, the Scottish Government has encouraged links with countries such as France, Malawi and China. We have much to learn from those countries, particularly China. Like Jeremy Purvis, I am sorry that we have not heard more about the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning's trip to China. I would be interested to hear what she made of the Chinese education system, particularly its emphasis on vocational education, which I feel we should echo.

I agree with Ken Macintosh and Elizabeth Smith about the subject matter for today's debate on education. I find it hard to believe that this is the burning issue in education. We could have debated one of many other key areas of concern. We are told this week that a third of 14-year-olds are failing the basic standard in reading and numeracy, and that half are failing the basic standard in writing. Surely there are other, more

vital areas that we could be debating. Nevertheless, I end on a note of consensus by saying that international education is important and that the Conservatives will support the rather bland motion.

11:25

Mary Mulligan (Linlithgow) (Lab): I support international education. As a member of the Labour Party, I have always been proud of my party's strong international traditions. Education has a clear role to play in equipping children and young people to understand the world we live in and prepare them for work in a global economy. However, like Mr Fraser, I sense real frustration that because there is so much agreement, the debate was unnecessary.

Maureen Watt: Does the member accept that the debate has been one of a series on the curriculum for excellence? Given the sea change that we want the curriculum for excellence to bring about in our education system, it is vital that all of us become ambassadors for the curriculum for excellence, including its international aspect.

Mary Mulligan: It is a series of debates that we perhaps could have done without.

The cabinet secretary has a wide-ranging portfolio, and many issues needed to be explored, some of which have been mentioned this morning. For example, is the minister aware that after almost 12 months of the new session of Parliament, we still have not had a debate on social work? Have all the challenges for our social work services been resolved?

I will try to concentrate on the debate, although given that there is so much agreement, it is difficult not to repeat what other members have said. The minister is correct to say that the curriculum for excellence will be a sound vehicle to deliver a comprehensive international education. On 19 March this year, members debated the curriculum for excellence. Although there was much agreement, there were concerns. I heard that progress may be stalling. There were concerns about how much information was available. There was a clear demand for the Scottish National Party Government to show leadership and to ensure that stakeholders such as teachers, pupils and parents—to name but three—are fully informed and signed up. Is the minister saying that all those concerns have gone away? Maybe she would like to update us in her closing statement.

The motion encourages young people to develop knowledge and understanding of the world. Members will have received a helpful briefing for today's debate from IDEAS for global citizenship and the sustainable development education policy network. I thank them for their

briefing. I agree with them that international education should include measures to ensure that schools move beyond cultural awareness activities, links and study visits to ensure that all learning opportunities develop young people's understanding of the world and its complexities. That approach has been supported by many members today, particularly Karen Whitefield.

Like other members, I take the opportunity to recognise the work of schools in my constituency to develop their international education. St Kentigern's academy and its feeder primary have developed a strong link with a village in Malawi. The pupils fundraised to contribute to a new school but, probably more important, they learned about the lives of the Malawian children and their families and built strong, long-distance relationships with them. Some of the teachers took part in exchanges to Malawi and on their return were able to share their experiences with their pupils. I am sure that all of us would want to support that and the many other such examples that we have heard about today.

In her opening speech, the minister spoke of how we should be promoting languages. I hope that that means that she will support Hugh O'Donnell's amendment, as Labour members will. Mr O'Donnell's speech ably supported his amendment, which stressed the importance of learning a language. A couple of years back, I opened a conference in West Lothian for senior pupils, aimed at encouraging them to choose to study languages. At the conference, one of the issues raised was how we teach languages, which does not seem to have changed that much over the past 20 or more years. Do we spend enough time giving children and young people the confidence to speak a foreign language? We are often very timid about doing that. Do we spend too much time stressing the technical skills? Maybe the minister has a view on that and will share it with us later.

To respond to the comments on my colleague Ken Macintosh's amendment, I understand that members may not want slavishly to follow decisions taken in another place, but I suggest that neither should we disregard those opportunities just because they are being taken up in another place. I hope that members will feel able to support Ken Macintosh's amendment. I reassure Mr Fraser that visits to places such as Auschwitz did take place before—in fact Ken Macintosh took part in one just last year. It is not a case of the Labour Party coming late to this—such visits were taking place when the Labour Party held the education portfolio.

Although the debate has been consensual, the minister missed an opportunity to give us concrete examples of how the Government will encourage

international education and increase the learning of foreign languages. In her statement this morning on national qualifications, the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning followed Labour's lead in stressing the importance of literacy and numeracy. On the basis that imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, I suggest that the SNP Government may like to take up another couple of suggestions from Labour's manifesto: first, the promise that language tuition would commence from primary 3 onwards—that was referred to by Jeremy Purvis; and secondly, that 500 extra modern language teachers and assistants would be made available. Yes, Mr Fraser, those languages should include Spanish and Mandarin. Minister, the time for warm words has passed. MSPs want to hear concrete proposals.

11:32

The Minister for Europe, External Affairs and Culture (Linda Fabiani): We sat here for eight years waiting for concrete proposals. There have been far more in the past year than anyone expected.

This morning we have discussed how essential it is in today's world that our young people develop an international outlook. We have heard about how the Government is taking forward international education through the curriculum for excellence, by simplifying the landscape and promoting partnership working. We have also heard about excellent examples—too many to mention—of international education throughout the country. Frank McAveety, in his usual style, beat us all by ensuring that there were some school pupils in the gallery during his speech.

In addition to ensuring that our young people have an international education and outlook, the Government is determined to be outward looking in everything that it does. We regularly look at the rest of the world to see what is excellent out there—ideas that could be good for us too, and for the aspirations that we have for modern Scotland. Elizabeth Smith has obviously been doing a bit of that as well, when she considered the Scandinavian models of education. In doing that, we are determined to take the opportunity to promote what we are good at to others. We want to promote our vision of a smarter Scotland—as a place to learn as well as to live, visit, work, do business and invest. Telling Scotland's story and letting people know what we are good at is central to delivering the Government's economic strategy. That is why the international framework that the Scottish Government published on Tuesday identifies how our activities contribute to meeting targets on population growth and closing the gross

domestic product gap by attracting inward investment and promoting international business.

Working in partnership is crucial. Building links and exchanges is a key part of delivering our policies. For example, the Scottish Qualifications Authority promotes Scottish qualifications and products and supports Scottish universities and colleges to attract overseas students to our excellent institutions. Learning and Teaching Scotland's approach to Confucius classrooms was promoted to Hanban, which described the initiative as world leading and a model for others to follow. The Chinese authorities will be visiting Scotland next month to learn more about those developments. I am sure that the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning will be delighted to hear that Mr Jeremy Purvis and Mr Murdo Fraser are looking forward to hearing all about her recent trip to China.

Hugh O'Donnell: With photographs.

Linda Fabiani: "With photographs," says Mr Hugh O'Donnell. The cabinet secretary will be even more pleased now. In the next few days, the Government will be publishing the China plan, as part of the strategic international framework, and it has been very much informed by the cabinet secretary's experiences in China.

There has been discussion of language education, which is the subject of Hugh O'Donnell's amendment. An understanding of linguistic diversity is an integral part of what we mean by international education. It is not just about learning modern languages in the traditional sense—although, as our commitment to introducing a Scottish baccalaureate in languages demonstrates, we want Scottish young people to be ambitious in that regard. That ties in with what Bashir Ahmad was saying about how few pupils over the years have been able to go on to work in Europe—and indeed further afield—and to benefit from the advantages of being part of the European Union. Such ambitions are important to us, and we are moving ahead in that regard. Mr Ahmad was absolutely right in what he said.

Understandably, there has been a lot of discussion about the Labour amendment, in the name of Mr Ken Macintosh, and about how important Holocaust education is. I do not believe that anyone in the chamber doubts that. It forms part of European and world history. Elizabeth Smith emphasised Scottish history, which she was keen for us not to leave out of the equation, referring to the Scottish enlightenment in particular, but pupils can have many experiences to inform them about all those things and to give them a greater understanding, and Holocaust education is one of those. The fact is that the £152,000 came over as a Barnett consequential in 2006-07, when the Labour Party and the Liberal

Democrats were in power. I point out to Mr Macintosh that they did not hand that money over to any trust. They simply said that the money went into the Scottish block. It is for Scottish ministers to decide how to spend Barnett consequentials.

Ken Macintosh: May I intervene to clarify the matter?

Linda Fabiani: No. Just like it wants to be prescriptive and to ring fence everything going to local authorities, the Labour Party seems to think that Westminster should ring fence and be prescriptive about everything that comes to us. That will not happen under this Government. It is the responsibility of each local authority and school to consider the contribution that study opportunities, such as visits to Auschwitz, might make to meeting the agreed national outcomes. That is as it should be.

Ken Macintosh: The reason for the change is that Scotland was getting the money twice. The UK Government was funding the Holocaust Education Trust, which was supporting trips from Scotland; in addition, we were getting the Barnett consequential. The matter has been clarified. It is up to us to give the money through whatever mechanism—but, through the Holocaust Education Trust—

Linda Fabiani: Presiding Officer—

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson): Could we hear a question, please?

Ken Macintosh: It is up to us to make a decision.

Linda Fabiani: Exactly: it is up to us to make the decisions, and we have faith in our education authorities and teachers to make the best decisions for our pupils.

Presiding Officer, the world in which our young people are growing up is very different from the one when you and I were at school. As Des McNulty suggested, it is essential that we recognise, learn from and capitalise on the opportunities that are brought by the diversity of cultures in our schools now.

It is essential for education to contain an international perspective to inform every aspect of life. We strongly believe that the curriculum for excellence is the ideal vehicle to enable teachers to use international education to enrich young people's learning. As we have all seen on school visits in our constituencies, pupils are inspired by and interested in international issues, which can be enjoyable, different and stimulating. If pupils are engaged in international education, they are more likely to prosper and to become effective and confident.

I will finish by responding to some comments that were made earlier about nationalism and internationalism. I leave members with this: how on earth can someone be an internationalist without first being a nationalist? One is part of the other.

Question Time

SCOTTISH EXECUTIVE

General Questions

11:40

Scottish Ambulance Service

1. Mary Scanlon (Highlands and Islands)

(Con): To ask the Scottish Executive what plans it has to review the Scottish Ambulance Service. (S3O-2966)

The Minister for Public Health (Shona Robison): The Scottish Ambulance Service is the subject of continuous review and performance management by the Scottish Government. The process involves the weekly reporting of information on category A performance and on other key operational indicators. All national health service boards are subject to a public annual review, which provides an opportunity for the Scottish Government to scrutinise, challenge and hold the board to account.

Mary Scanlon: Given that 15 Highland ambulance stations are staffed by just one person for periods of at least 24 hours over weekends, and that single-manned ambulances are becoming a regular feature, will the minister ensure that there are sufficient trained staff in the Highland ambulance service to respond to patient needs, and that ambulance staff are supported and valued for the important service that they provide?

Shona Robison: Of course we very much value the work of our ambulance service. The Scottish Ambulance Service has been allocated £183.4 million for 2008-09, which represents a significant increase on previous years. For that resource, we expect the service to invest. In the north, 141 more front-line staff—they are very hard working—have been taken on in recent years. The policy is that accident and emergency ambulances should be double crewed, with at least one crew member being a paramedic, apart from exceptional circumstances such as short-notice sickness absence or leave in which cover cannot be secured.

We are working hard with the Scottish Ambulance Service, through the performance support team that has been allocated by the health directorates, to ensure that we drive forward continuous service improvement, especially in relation to category A performance. We will continue to do that.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): I recognise the honest intent

behind what the minister is saying, but the fact is that north-west Sutherland has, in effect, had single manning for far too long. But for the grace of God, we could have had a tragedy on our hands by now. Will the minister—with the best intentions in her heart—come and examine the specific problem in north-west Sutherland, before something goes very badly wrong?

Shona Robison: Of course, I am always willing to consider cases that are raised in the chamber, by Jamie Stone or anyone else. I will do that. Wherever possible, call handlers and managers of emergency medical dispatch centres dispatch the emergency ambulance resource that will best meet the needs of the patient, based on an assessment of the information that is provided by the caller. In that way, the service always seeks to avoid dispatching a single-manned resource to an incident when the primary need is for an ambulance-supported transfer to hospital.

As I said, I am very willing to look at the cases that Jamie Stone has raised. We expect the Scottish Ambulance Service also to examine any incidents that have been raised. If Jamie Stone has not already done so, I ask him to pass on his information to the service.

Rob Gibson (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): Is the minister happy that there is sufficient funding available for the Scottish Ambulance Service, not just for its notional staff complement to meet the needs of remote areas, but to ensure that there are staff for the emergency call-outs that often seem to happen when only one person is available?

Shona Robison: As I said, the Scottish Ambulance Service has been allocated an increase in resource of 78 per cent on the resource that it had back in 2001-02. As I also said, the service has invested in the north, with 141 more front-line staff being taken on in recent years. I am of course willing to hear more from Rob Gibson on the matter. If he wishes to write to me about his specific concerns, I will get back to him.

Scottish Ambulance Service (Meetings)

2. Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands)

(Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive when the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing last met the Scottish Ambulance Service and what issues were discussed. (S3O-2988)

The Minister for Public Health (Shona Robison): The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing met the board of the Scottish Ambulance Service on 30 January 2008. A range of issues was discussed. In addition, the cabinet secretary and I meet all national health service

board chairs regularly. We did so most recently on 25 February.

Rhoda Grant: The minister is aware that volunteer drivers are paid a mileage rate that is lower than that which is calculated by HM Revenue and Customs as the true cost of running a car. Does she agree that it is therefore no surprise that there is a shortage of such volunteers? That shortage means that the service no longer meets demands and patients are being forced to make alternative arrangements. Where that is impossible, the service uses taxis. That is a false economy. What will the minister do about that problem?

Shona Robison: Volunteer drivers are of course important and valued by the Scottish Ambulance Service. The service has recently reviewed the mileage allowance as part of its annual budget-setting process and has said that it has no plans to increase the rate payable. However, I am aware of the concerns raised by Rhoda Grant and other members about the issue and I have asked that the Scottish Ambulance Service look again at the matter.

Liam McArthur (Orkney) (LD): When the minister next meets the Scottish Ambulance Service, will she raise the deeply concerning events of 30 March in my constituency, when an air ambulance flight that was due to pick up a baby with suspected meningitis was left stranded at Glasgow airport awaiting refuelling? Does the minister agree that that situation was utterly unacceptable, given that with meningitis every minute can be critical? When does she expect a full report on the incident from the SAS? Will she take steps to ensure that such a situation cannot happen again at any airport in Scotland? Does she accept that the case adds further weight to the calls from my constituents for a locally based air ambulance?

Shona Robison: We are well aware of the issues that the member raises. We have been in communication with Kevin Doran, the chief executive of the Scottish Ambulance Service, about the case. As the member pointed out, we are awaiting a full report. When we get it, I will be happy to write to the member with our response to the concerns that he raises.

Christine Grahame (South of Scotland) (SNP): A constituent of mine has drawn to my attention the substantial difficulty for Borderers in accessing routine ambulance transport when they require to attend essential radiotherapy at the Western general hospital in Edinburgh because such treatment is not available at the Borders general hospital. In her meetings with the Scottish Ambulance Service and NHS boards, will the minister make general inquiries about that situation, which exacerbates the stress to families

and patients who are already dealing with cancer and the treatment that ensues?

Shona Robison: I am happy to raise the issue of patient transfers with the Scottish Ambulance Service. It is one of the issues that is discussed regularly with the service. I am happy to take forward the concerns that Christine Grahame has raised. She might like to write to me about them in more detail.

Private Rented Accommodation (Students and Young People)

3. Mike Pringle (Edinburgh South) (LD): To ask the Scottish Executive what action it can take to alleviate the impact of rising rental prices and living costs on students and young people seeking to live in private rental accommodation. (S30-3048)

The Minister for Communities and Sport (Stewart Maxwell): The Government is committed to supporting students. We have significantly reduced their debt burden by removing the graduate endowment fee; we have increased support for part-time learners; and we have continued the young students bursary, disabled students allowance and lone parents grants.

We would encourage any students who are in financial hardship to talk to their university or college to see whether they may be eligible for discretionary funds. Other young people who are struggling with rent and living costs should talk to their local authority to find out whether they are eligible for housing benefit and council tax benefit.

Mike Pringle: As the minister knows, the majority of students and young people who live in private rented accommodation live in houses in multiple occupation. The Government consultation on Scottish planning policy 3 says that councils should apply planning control over HMOs in a particular geographic area or demonstrate why control is not needed in that area. Does the minister agree that before the planning system is used to restrict further the availability of HMO accommodation in communities, research should be undertaken in conjunction with local authorities to show what impact the high concentration of HMOs is having in an area, as well as the consequences of restricting the availability of such accommodation?

Stewart Maxwell: The Scottish Government recognises the importance of HMO accommodation and does not intend to restrict supply. In the draft planning guidance on HMOs, we have said that local authorities should consider adopting planning policies on HMOs where they feel that there is a need to protect the integrity of communities. However, the guidance also makes it clear that local authorities need to balance the

concerns of local residents with considering how to meet future demand for HMO accommodation. The consultation on the draft planning guidance finished recently and planning colleagues are considering the responses to it.

We said in draft SPP 3 that local authorities should work closely with universities and other agencies in their area in order that they can plan how best to meet the future demand for student accommodation and accommodation for others who want to live in houses in multiple occupation. Migrant workers and other young people also use HMO accommodation.

Sarah Boyack (Edinburgh Central) (Lab): Does the minister share the concerns of around 1,000 of my constituents who have contacted me in the past 10 days or so to say that they are worried about the way that the draft planning guidance might be interpreted by local authorities and that it is vital that he rules out reductions in HMO properties? The minister is absolutely right to state that it is not just students who use such properties; a range of other people rely on rented accommodation.

In the minister's discussions with the universities, will he consider putting on the table cash to enable them to build the new accommodation that they need urgently, given that there are more than 60,000 students in Edinburgh alone and that the house-building rates have not kept up with the demand for affordable housing? My question is partly about sensitivity towards HMOs, but will the minister please look at the housing supply issue, too?

Stewart Maxwell: As the member is aware, there was a consultation process. I am aware of the campaign that has been running on this issue. I, like every other member, have had a large number of e-mails on the subject. The consultation is now closed and the planning minister and officials are discussing how to take it forward. The best way forward for us is to wait and see the results of the consultation process. I am sure that the planning minister will respond to the consultation in due course.

Hydro Power

4. Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): To ask the Scottish Executive how it is encouraging the development of hydro power schemes. (S30-2969)

The Minister for Enterprise, Energy and Tourism (Jim Mather): Through the forum for renewable energy development in Scotland—FREDS—we have commissioned a Scottish hydro resource study, which will examine the potential for future hydro development, any possible constraints, and how such constraints could be

removed. The study is due for completion in June, with the forum expected to report to ministers later in the summer. Meanwhile, new hydro schemes remain eligible to claim renewables obligation certificates.

Murdo Fraser: Is the minister aware that developers of small-scale hydro schemes are experiencing extreme delays in obtaining consent from the Scottish Environment Protection Agency for licences under the Water Environment (Controlled Activities) (Scotland) Regulations 2005—or CAR—regime? Will he undertake to investigate that matter and encourage SEPA to speed up the process, which is undoubtedly hindering the development of hydro power throughout Scotland and therefore holding us back in meeting our targets for renewable energy?

Jim Mather: The member will find that SEPA is engaging increasingly with the hydro sector to provide the clearest possible guidance. I expect that to be a further by-product of the study. I am sure that both he and I will monitor that.

Lewis Macdonald (Aberdeen Central) (Lab): Does the minister agree that developing Scotland's potential in hydro power and other renewables will depend on acknowledging the importance of social and economic development in remote rural communities? Does he acknowledge the widespread concern about his recent decision that in Lewis

"there is no basis on which to consider the test of imperative reasons of over-riding public interest"?

Does he believe that that judgment might risk creating no-go areas for hydro, wind and marine renewables across large parts of Scotland?

Jim Mather: I note the member's comments, but I refer him to the activity in which we engaged last year. We brought together communities, councils, developers, environmentalists and renewables campaigners to get a new consensus about how to take forward the issue. We are carrying out a study in the Western Isles and I will be there in August to ensure that we drive things forward and find the appropriate role for renewables in the Western Isles to benefit communities, their economy and their environment and to address the social issues that they face.

Criminal Justice System (Child Protection)

5. Duncan McNeil (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive how the criminal justice system will ensure that children of drug-addicted parents receive the correct support. (S30-3001)

The Minister for Community Safety (Fergus Ewing): The Scottish Government's plans for working with partners to support children who are

affected by parental substance misuse will be set out as part of the new national drugs strategy to be published before the summer recess. That will focus on improving outcomes through prevention, early intervention and building the capacity and quality of support services, as well as effective responses to children who are at immediate risk. Underpinning that will be a commitment to strengthened partnership working, which includes those working in the criminal justice system, along with other sectors engaging with vulnerable children and families.

Duncan McNeil: On 6 September, the Cabinet Secretary for Justice, in his closing speech in the debate on drugs misuse, assured me that he would discuss child protection points with other ministers who have responsibility in that area. When on 27 September I asked him how those discussions had gone, he was not able to report any practical progress or action. When do ministers intend to report to Parliament on the actions that they have taken on this matter and to set out their proper co-ordinated response for protecting those children?

Fergus Ewing: I am aware of the work that has been done over the years by Duncan McNeil—and, indeed, by members of all parties—on this most serious issue. As the minister responsible for the draft strategy, I assure him that I have had numerous meetings with my ministerial colleagues on the matter. In fact, they have probably seen far more of me than they might have wished.

I am extremely excited by the challenge of ensuring that more and more people whose lives have been plagued by drugs succeed in getting rid of that scourge. That is what Scotland wants. On Monday in Glasgow, I was delighted to hand out 12 certificates to young people who had been abstinent from drugs for a year. Those young people, and those who helped them get off drugs, are the pride of Scotland, and we should all congratulate them on their excellent work.

Family Contact Centres (Glasgow)

6. David Whitton (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive when it last met the sheriff principal of Glasgow and what matters were discussed. (S3O-3014)

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice (Kenny MacAskill): Scottish Government officials frequently meet the sheriff principal of Glasgow and Strathkelvin to discuss a range of matters.

David Whitton: As the cabinet secretary knows, I have been asking about the operation of family contact centres. In response to my questions, his colleague Adam Ingram said that he had

“not yet had the opportunity to visit”—[*Official Report, Written Answers*, 15 April 2008; S3W-11215.]

such a centre—which, I must admit, I found somewhat surprising. Mr Ingram also told me that he was meeting justice officials to discuss problems caused by children not being brought to contact centres, and that this was a problem not just in Glasgow but elsewhere. At their next meeting, will the cabinet secretary ask the sheriff principal what steps are being taken to reinforce contact orders?

Kenny MacAskill: I am happy to discuss the issue with not only the sheriff principal of Glasgow and Strathkelvin, but sheriffs elsewhere. After all, this is a problem the length and breadth of Scotland and not only in one urban area.

The last time that Mr Whitton raised the issue—and he has been right to do so—I said that under the law of Scotland the child’s interests have been and remain paramount. Clearly, significant difficulties have occurred and, in certain cases, fathers who are separated from their children have in particular faced great hardship. There is no simple solution to such issues, although the provision of contact centres and the proper enforcement of contact orders form an appropriate course of action.

As the Cabinet Secretary for Justice, I assure the member that sheriffs are aware of those problems. Indeed, as someone who practised for 20 years in this area of law, I know that such issues have caused and continue to cause difficulties. The member is right that we have to do more and do it better, but I assure him that the child’s interests will remain paramount.

Scottish Business in the Community (Funding)

7. Jeremy Purvis (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD): To ask the Scottish Executive how much funding will be provided in 2008-09 to continue Scottish Business in the Community’s senior executive programme for volunteering. (S3O-3049)

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth (John Swinney): Government support for Scottish Business in the Community’s senior executive programme was due to come to an end in March 2008. However, the organisation has accepted our offer of a three-month extension to that grant of up to £23,750 to allow it to seek additional funding from other sources or to rearrange its business model.

Jeremy Purvis: The cabinet secretary is aware that 250 retired business and professional volunteers have taken part in the programme, which has provided 23,000 hours of professional support per annum to volunteering groups. Moreover, the programme has generated more than £1 million of professional support for charities and community groups throughout Scotland and

has encouraged volunteering and support for the voluntary sector in a very cost-efficient way. Why is the Scottish National Party Government asking Scottish Business in the Community to secure separate funding for it? As any party in the chamber can see, surely its case is well made.

John Swinney: As Mr Purvis will understand, it is specified to organisations that financial support will be offered to particular projects for a particular period of time. That has been the case with this project. The Government has provided additional support to allow the project to find additional sources of funding and to review how it undertakes its activities.

The Government welcomes the third sector's involvement. Indeed, this morning, I had the privilege of addressing the Lloyds TSB Foundation for Scotland's annual forum, which was celebrating the third sector's achievements and recording its formidable contributions to the Scottish economy and Scottish public policy. I warmly endorse such sentiments.

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson): I am sure that members will wish to join me in welcoming Ms Conny Seoposengwe MPL, the Speaker of the Northern Cape Provincial Legislature, who has joined us in the Presiding Officer's gallery for First Minister's question time. Madam Speaker, you are most welcome. *[Applause.]*

First Minister's Question Time

12:00

Engagements

1. Ms Wendy Alexander (Paisley North) (Lab):

To ask the First Minister what engagements he has planned for the rest of the day. (S3F-698)

The First Minister (Alex Salmond):

Immediately after First Minister's questions, I will attend a meeting of SEER, the Scottish Government's response unit, to ensure that all the consequences of the Grangemouth industrial action are considered so that the impact on the economy and people of Scotland is minimised.

Ms Alexander: I think that we will all welcome the statement that will be made in the chamber later this afternoon, after relevant meetings have taken place during the day.

Under the First Minister's Government, some people seem to matter more than others: the Trump Organization, Macdonald Hotels and Mr Brian Souter seem to have a special pass to the corridors of power. Is the First Minister running a special access Government?

The First Minister: It is not for me to determine the subject matter of the leader of the Opposition's questions, but just occasionally Wendy Alexander would be wise to rise to the event and occasion that is occupying the interest of the people of Scotland. Perhaps she will get to asking about the Grangemouth dispute in her fourth question, if she bothers to ask one today.

The people Wendy Alexander mentioned have no special access to the Government; the Government operates in the best interests of the Scottish people. In the speech that I made to the Scottish Trades Union Congress on Tuesday—a speech that I think was pretty well received—I could have mentioned that I have met the Scottish Trades Union Congress and its representatives on more occasions than I have met all the organisations that she mentioned put together.

Ms Alexander: I am not surprised that the First Minister dodged the question. As he knows, the chamber will return to these matters this afternoon, but he has chosen not to speak.

New concerns emerge all the time about what is happening behind closed doors. The recent extension of the contract for the ScotRail franchise involves more than £800 million of taxpayers' money, yet the most basic levels of transparency, scrutiny and accountability were ignored, as was Audit Scotland. This is one of the largest contracts that the First Minister's Government will let, so does he now regret how it was done? Yes or no?

The First Minister: I do not know whether Wendy Alexander was a member of the previous Administration when it negotiated the contract, within which was the means of extension. That extension clause was invoked. As she will be well aware, it was both price and market sensitive, and ministers acted on the basis of advice. I am certain that if they had not operated on the basis of advice, Wendy Alexander would have been the first to come to the chamber and find yet another thing to gripe about.

Ms Alexander: This week, John Swinney told the unions that he regrets how it was done, but it appears that the First Minister does not. What troubles people is that ministers' justification for the secrecy was that it was to protect FirstGroup's share price. The word that the First Minister just used was "price", but the term that he used last week was "share price".

I know that the First Minister is not a regular user of ScotRail services, as many of the rest of us are, but does he agree—[*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson): Order.

Ms Alexander:—that the relevant consideration, when £800 million of taxpayers' money is at stake, is the service to passengers, not the return to shareholders?

The First Minister: Wendy Alexander might travel first class, but that wisnae a first-class question.

Does Wendy Alexander regret the clear passenger benefits that the additional £70 million of additional investment in Scotland's rail network will bring, the ability to cap profits and the ability to extend the franchise on much better terms, in the public interest, than those that were negotiated by the previous Administration? Did it ever occur to Wendy Alexander that if her colleagues had done their job when the contract was negotiated, there would have been no need to renegotiate the terms?

Ms Alexander: We are used to the First Minister going for the insult when all else fails. He knows that the extension of the franchise does not start until November 2011, which is after the next Scottish Parliament elections. Some £800 million of taxpayers' money has been handed over and still we have none of the data that would allow a proper assessment of whether that represents a good deal for the taxpayer. That brings us to the heart of the matter, which involves the unacceptability of the First Minister's cavalier attitude to government. Under his stewardship, we are getting used to the special access, the lack of data, the superficial consultations and the refusal to answer questions.

Scotland does not want a special access Government in which the First Minister is his own judge and jury. The proper mechanism for reviewing ministerial conduct is the ministerial code. It is a necessity for good government. Parliament had demanded a review of the code, which the behaviour of this Administration makes urgent. Why, then, one year after the First Minister came to office, are we still waiting for a review?

The First Minister: I was going to congratulate Wendy Alexander on getting to her fourth question, but, given the nature of it, I do not think that I will bother.

The ministerial code under which we are operating is the code that we inherited from our predecessor Administration. When, in the eight years in which Labour and the Liberal Democrats formed that Administration and Wendy Alexander was a member of the Scottish Parliament, did she make any suggestions about changes to the ministerial code? Not once.

When it comes to obeying terms of reference and codes of conduct, I think that my track record is a lot better than Wendy Alexander's.

Prime Minister (Meetings)

2. Annabel Goldie (West of Scotland) (Con): To ask the First Minister when he will next meet the Prime Minister. (S3F-699)

Not everyone seeks special access to the First Minister, Presiding Officer. I can assure you and him that that is a matter of personal taste.

The First Minister (Alex Salmond): I have no plans at present to meet the Prime Minister, who has no special access to me.

Annabel Goldie: The Grangemouth oil refinery is a pivotal part of Scotland's economy, and I am sure that everyone shares a deep disappointment at the fact that the Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service talks have broken down. The issue has immense national implications for Scotland. Can the First Minister assure us that the emergency provisions that are in place are sufficient to allow Scotland to operate normally? If not, can he specify where the impact of the strike will hit, to what extent and at what cost?

The First Minister: I thank Annabel Goldie for giving me the opportunity to say some words about the dispute that is occupying the attention of the vast majority of people in Scotland.

At 12.30, there will be a statement from John Hutton, the Secretary of State for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform in Westminster. At 5 o'clock, there will be a statement in this chamber from John Swinney, which will go into the detailed points of analysis.

Basically, the position is that there are substantial and ample stocks of every variety of fuel, and stocks across the range of available ranges. That is an important factor for people to bear in mind. Those stocks will last well into May, and there is the provision to import more stocks if they are required. Therefore, assuming that consumer behaviour is responsible, there should be limited difficulties in terms of inconvenience and disruption.

We clearly need the public's co-operation in not engaging in repeat buying and we need everyone to behave sensibly and responsibly by cutting out non-essential trips and using public transport. That is wise advice for people in Scotland to take at the present moment. The central message is that stocks of the available range of fuels will stretch into May and that there is the capacity to import more if required.

Over the course of this week, I have spoken many times to management and unions. One thing on which they agreed this morning is that it is not their intention, they insist, either as unions or as management at the plant to impose disruption on the broader community and industry in Scotland. Therefore, in the chamber, we should appeal for responsible behaviour and non-escalation of the dispute. In those circumstances, I think that Scotland can cope with this difficulty.

Annabel Goldie: I thank the First Minister for what I realise is a very considered response.

While accepting that the dispute is not about the right to strike, more and more of the public are now questioning whether the strike is right, given its immense potential—I emphasise potential—for damage to our economy and disruption to essential transport, whatever the intentions of the respective parties. Will the First Minister therefore join me in sending a message from the Parliament that everyone involved in the dispute should calm down, sit down, get back round the table and, in the meantime, call the strike off?

The First Minister: I am sure that that sentiment is shared universally across the Scottish community. [*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Order.

The First Minister: One outcome of the ACAS talks that should be welcomed is that the management and trade unions agreed to ensure the safe operation of the plant in a condition that enables it to be restarted as quickly as possible.

Having spoken to the ACAS negotiators on several occasions over the past two days, I say to all members that the relationships between the management and unions in the dispute are clearly very difficult indeed. Unfortunately, over the past two days, a huge amount of time in the

negotiations has been occupied not with enabling people to tackle the substantive central issues in the dispute but with who said what to whom, what was on which website, writs and legal action and the consequences of that.

My appeal to members and to the wider community is that, as well as ensuring the provision of essential services such as public transport, which enable Scotland's industry and community to go about their business, no one outwith the dispute should say anything that exacerbates the relationships within the dispute. It is really important that we appeal for calm and for substantial negotiations. We should ask that unions and management use ACAS's facilities to return to the negotiating table as quickly as possible.

Cabinet (Meetings)

3. Nicol Stephen (Aberdeen South) (LD): To ask the First Minister what issues will be discussed at the next meeting of the Cabinet. (S3F-700)

The First Minister (Alex Salmond): The next meeting of Cabinet will discuss issues of substantial concern and interest to the people of Scotland.

Nicol Stephen: Some petrol stations in Scotland are now restricting supplies and charging more than £1.30 per litre. Does the First Minister agree that that is unacceptable? What will he do about it?

The First Minister: Everyone agrees that any sign of profiteering in times of difficulty is unacceptable. We have looked at the issue in some detail. Price control powers are held under the Energy Act 1976, which comes within the province of the Secretary of State for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform. It should be said that the detailed evidence suggests that such practices are not as widespread as some press reports might suggest, but I am perfectly willing to discuss the issue in the many discussions that we are having with the secretary of state. From what he told me this morning, he does not see the requirement to use any of his range of emergency powers because the stocks position is adequate at present. However, if we receive substantive evidence of widespread profiteering, I am perfectly willing to put to him the point that he should use the powers that he holds.

Nicol Stephen: People throughout Scotland are dismayed and angry at the crisis and the profiteering. The First Minister has just said that there is ample fuel and has called for normal purchasing. Does he not know that that stopped several days ago? There are now long queues, empty fuel tanks and high prices. The situation is

anything but normal. Will ministers stop saying that they have it all under control? Has the First Minister driven home the case to get prices capped, as I asked him to do on Monday? Will he stop ministers pretending that they have secured ample supplies? People want real action from the Government, not empty promises that everything is normal. People are genuinely worried. What is the First Minister doing to stop the rip-off and to keep Scotland moving?

The First Minister: The first thing that I would do is not behave as Nicol Stephen has just behaved. The second thing that I would do is listen to the answer to his first question. The powers that he talks about are held under the Energy Act 1976. A little bit of research before he asked his first question might have been helpful, and a little bit of listening before he asked his second question might have been helpful.

If evidence emerges, I am prepared to discuss the matters that Nicol Stephen has raised. Everyone in the chamber would attack and deprecate profiteering. I hope that people will look at the situation that we face together, as a community, as the impacts of such a dispute will be felt by the entire community. I hope that we can also welcome the limited progress that has been made by the management and the union regarding the condition and safety of the plant, which is crucial if it is to be brought back into production in days rather than weeks.

We should acknowledge the fact that provision has already been made to supply and support fuel stocks throughout Scotland and we should appeal for calm and responsibility across the Scottish community rather than add to people's concerns.

The Presiding Officer: I will take a question from Cathy Peattie, within whose constituency Grangemouth lies.

Cathy Peattie (Falkirk East) (Lab): Given the fact that the BP/Ineos workforce has always shown great commitment to the future of Grangemouth and the fact that there has not been a strike for 70 years, will the First Minister join me in supporting the 1,200 workers who, despite their reluctance, have voted by an overwhelming majority to take action to safeguard the pensions of future employees in the face of a company that has singled out the site and is aggressively pursuing confrontation? I spoke to the trade union that is involved in the ACAS discussions this morning. It is the company that keeps refusing to discuss matters. Will the First Minister stand up for Scotland and for the workers of Grangemouth?

The First Minister: I have spoken to the union and its representatives on several occasions this week. They were pleased with and supportive of the Scottish Government's offer of the services of

the president of the Faculty of Actuaries to assist with conciliation in order to take some of the heat out of the dispute and to introduce the opportunity for substantive discussions. Making such offers is the responsible way for a Government to behave.

We could all list a range of press statements, assumed writs, attacks and things that appear extraordinary that have exacerbated the situation. We, as politicians, should be trying to get an honourable settlement and to ensure that the Scottish economy can work effectively and as normal.

Grangemouth Oil Refinery

4. Jamie Hepburn (Central Scotland) (SNP): To ask the First Minister what discussions the Scottish Government is having with management and unions at the Grangemouth oil refinery. (S3F-703)

The First Minister (Alex Salmond): The Scottish Government has spoken with representatives of Ineos and Unite at various stages over the past few days—most recently, within the past two hours—to encourage the management and the union to resolve their disagreement urgently and constructively.

Jamie Hepburn: I thank the First Minister for his answers to my question and to those that have been asked before. I also thank him for the efforts of the Scottish Government in recent days to bring the parties in the dispute together and to allay the concerns of the people of Scotland.

The First Minister has confirmed that the constructive offer of the services of Stewart Ritchie, the president of the Faculty of Actuaries, remains on the table. How will the Government encourage the management and unions at Grangemouth to take up that offer?

The First Minister: As I mentioned a few minutes ago, I have spoken to the ACAS conciliators—they do an excellent job and we should all applaud their efforts—who were highly frustrated that only very late in yesterday's discussions, after two days of discussions, were the two sides able to move on to the substantive issue because so much time and energy had been taken up with a range of extraneous material. I hope and believe that if we can prevent the escalation of this dispute and if the atmosphere can cool down, the variety of initiatives and suggestions that ACAS has made, of which our offer of the services of the president of the Faculty of Actuaries is one, will help management and unions to come together and find an honourable settlement.

Jack McConnell (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab): The First Minister and I had a minor disagreement last summer about the way in which

he kept Opposition parties informed during the emergency services' work following the terrorist activity at Glasgow airport. That was early in his Administration and I understand that the procedures might not have been understood. I ask him today for his assurance that Opposition parties, through their leaders, will be kept informed of developments as the work of the emergency room and emergency team continues over the next few days.

The First Minister: I am happy to give that assurance. After last Sunday's meeting of the emergency committee, all the leaders of the Opposition parties were written to and offered talks on the Government's contingency planning provisions. That offer was taken up by Iain Gray, and it may well have been taken up by others. The offer will stand throughout the difficulty and the potential disruption. I agree with my predecessor that it is important that a Government, when managing emergencies, opens that facility to the Opposition parties.

Student Hardship

5. Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): To ask the First Minister what measures the Scottish Executive is taking to tackle student hardship. (S3F-710)

The First Minister (Alex Salmond): As Claire Baker knows, the Scottish Government has put in place a number of policies to help students and tackle student hardship. We have introduced a £38 million package of grants for part-time learners in higher education, thus removing the need for them to rely exclusively on student loans. We are increasing the threshold for the non-medical personal helpers element of the disabled students allowance by 60 per cent. We are providing £12 million per annum to institutions to alleviate student hardship. We have introduced a fairer means test in further and higher education to ensure that support is targeted where it is needed most. We have made £30 million available for 2010-11 to support students further, which is part of the consultation that is taking place. In addition, of course, and in the teeth of opposition from the Labour and Conservative parties acting in concert, the Scottish Government has removed the graduation tax—the tax on learning—and reintroduced the concept of free education in Scotland.

Claire Baker: In reality, the First Minister's Government has done little to boost levels of support for today's students while they are studying. Bursaries have stalled under this Government, and now we see that its flagship policy of a local income tax would make working students worse off. That policy would hit the least well-off the hardest.

Last week, the First Minister did not seem clear on the point that students are exempt from council tax. While that does not inspire confidence in his preparation for a local income tax, can the First Minister explain why he feels students should pay his local income tax when they are exempt from council tax?

The First Minister: Claire Baker should be aware that the vast, overwhelming majority of students in Scotland—some 400,000—are liable for the council tax. Of those who are not, around 160,000—the vast majority—do not earn enough to have to pay the local income tax. We should consider for a second what would happen to someone who had to pay in council tax the £2,300 that they have saved on the graduation fee, which was supported by Claire Baker. They would have to earn almost £100,000 in a year to make up for that. I do not know many students in Scotland who earn £100,000, but maybe Claire Baker does.

Ian McKee (Lothians) (SNP): How does the financial burden on students in Scotland compare with that in other areas of the United Kingdom?

The First Minister: The list of measures that the Government has introduced to support students is so long that I could tell that the Presiding Officer was becoming restive as I went through it. None of those measures is available to students south of the border, which is why I suspect that if any students in the town of Berwick took part in the local television poll there, that was one factor in why the whole town wanted to return to Scotland.

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Will the First Minister confirm that current legislation, which a Conservative Government introduced, says that students are exempt from the council tax?

The First Minister: No—I cannot confirm that. The member does not know his own Government's legislation. I have just said that the vast majority of students in Scotland are liable for the council tax.

Members: No.

The First Minister: Oh yes they are. Perhaps the Conservative party overlooked that in the pantomime of its Governments.

Jeremy Purvis (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD): The First Minister mentioned changes to the eligibility criteria for bursaries for students in further education and higher education, which were announced without consultation. In written answers, the Government has said that it did not model the impact of those changes, but a Government question and answer document and ministerial lines to take, which were released under freedom of information legislation, highlight that the change would adversely affect

three cohorts of students—students in single-parent families, students with cohabitee partners and lone-parent students.

The Presiding Officer: Briefly, please.

Jeremy Purvis: I will quote the Q and A briefly. It says:

“Introducing the means test in a ‘Big-bang’ approach will result in more savings over the medium term.”

In paragraph 14—

The Presiding Officer: Very briefly, please, Mr Purvis.

Jeremy Purvis:—it says:

“There could therefore be an increase in the number of applications to the Hardship Funds in these ... circumstances.”

Will the First Minister ensure that students who have started their university degree or college qualification course will not be affected mid-term by the changes? Should not the changes have been consulted on?

The First Minister: We have put in place hardship funds to deal with exactly that contingency. Despite all his criticisms, the member found it in himself to vote in favour of abolishing the graduate endowment, so perhaps—in that constructive mode for which the Liberal Democrats are famed—he might also find it in himself to welcome all the other measures to support the hard-pressed students of Scotland.

Energy Strategy

6. Liam McArthur (Orkney) (LD): I ask this question in a constructive mode.

To ask the First Minister when the Scottish Government will produce a comprehensive energy strategy for Scotland. (S3F-705)

The First Minister (Alex Salmond): In a constructive mode, I say that the Scottish Government’s focus on sustainable economic growth provides a clear framework for our approach to energy, which is to reduce carbon emissions and contribute to Scotland’s wealth.

We have taken action to promote clean, green energy and reduced consumption. The Government’s actions have produced, for example, a commitment from the Office of Gas and Electricity Markets and the National Grid to a review of transmission charging, 13 determinations for energy-generation developments, the saltire prize for marine renewables and the tripling of funding for community generation and microgeneration. When Jim Mather sets out our strategy in the coming weeks, he will have a great deal to talk about—

achievements not just in the future, but in the present.

Liam McArthur: I welcome several of the initiatives that the First Minister has mentioned, but does he acknowledge that the Royal Society of Edinburgh said that a Scottish energy strategy was needed by the end of 2007? Does he agree with Liz Cameron of the Scottish Chambers of Commerce that businesses throughout Scotland are questioning the coherence of the Scottish Government’s position on energy? Will he concede that his colleague, Alyn Smith MEP—taking a break from threatening lifeline ferry services to my constituency—was right to call for a coherent energy strategy? Does he realise that although he has shed light on what he is against, without a comprehensive energy strategy we all remain in the dark about how the Government intends to address the serious energy challenges that we face?

The First Minister: As Liam McArthur is interested in such things, I am sure that he has read the energy policy document that Stephen Salter compiled for the Scottish National Party in the run-up to the elections. On such important matters, we decided to be prepared to fight the campaign on substantive policy initiatives, which is why we have managed to introduce the many measures that Liam McArthur welcomed.

Because we have so fundamentally accelerated—by a factor of four—the previous Administration’s rate of acceptance and determination of energy projects, I can be extremely confident that the Government will more than match its targets of 31 per cent renewable electricity generation by 2011 and 50 per cent by 2020. Those targets are ambitious but, in light of the policies that I have outlined, achievable for Scotland.

12:30

Meeting suspended until 14:15.

14:15

On resuming—

Question Time

SCOTTISH EXECUTIVE

Europe, External Affairs and Culture

Summer Time

1. Peter Peacock (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what representations the Minister for Europe, External Affairs and Culture has made to the United Kingdom Government regarding the impact on matters within its responsibilities of summer time across Europe corresponding more closely. (S3O-3008)

The Minister for Europe, External Affairs and Culture (Linda Fabiani): Any change would have implications across a wide range of areas, including road safety, climate change and agriculture, and would require careful consideration and analysis. No representations have been made to the UK Government on the issue at this stage.

Peter Peacock: The Government often commends the Scandinavian countries for their approach to public policy. Is the minister aware that a number of Scandinavian countries have adopted central European time, despite their more northerly latitude? Is she aware that the *West Highland Free Press* is urging more research on the effects of the policy in those countries on, for example, school pupils' safety? Will she support research on the experience and on the wider impact of those countries' policies on the range of issues for which the Scottish Government has responsibility, so that further debate on the matter can be fully informed?

Linda Fabiani: As Mr Peacock said, many issues must be considered. Research on road safety is being undertaken by the UK Government and the Scottish Government, and research is also being carried out in relation to climate change. We will, of course, consider examples and listen to the debate.

Members who are old enough will remember the approach being tried out—I think it was around about the late 1960s. I remember going to school in a transparent vest—[*Laughter.*] Excuse the memory—

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning (Fiona Hyslop): I think that the minister meant to say “translucent”.

Linda Fabiani: Oh!

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson): I think that appropriate language is called for at this point.

Linda Fabiani: I wonder whether my remark could be struck from the *Official Report*.

The Presiding Officer: It is more likely to be highlighted, minister.

Linda Fabiani: I was talking about those shiny vests that shone in the dark. [*Laughter.*]

The experiment was stopped after three years—that had nothing at all to do with my attire—because it was not thought to be advantageous to Scotland.

The Presiding Officer: We move swiftly on to question 2.

Zambia (Sustainable Development)

2. Aileen Campbell (South of Scotland) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what support it is providing to help promote sustainable development in Zambia. (S3O-3019)

The Minister for Europe, External Affairs and Culture (Linda Fabiani): I thank Aileen Campbell for bringing us all back down to earth.

The Scottish Government's engagement with Zambia has primarily focused on health, particularly concerning issues around HIV/AIDS awareness and prevention.

Aileen Campbell: I recently returned from a trip to Zambia with Oxfam Scotland, where I viewed projects that the agency and its partners run, which promote sustainability. Does the minister agree that Scotland's historic links with countries such as Zambia provide us with a unique opportunity to build on those connections and allow Scotland's input into international development to have a tangible and positive impact, not only on the country that benefits but on Scotland? Does she agree that the expertise of agencies such as Oxfam and the Scottish Catholic International Aid Fund should be used to inform Government?

Linda Fabiani: Yes. Of course we should use Scotland's historic links with countries such as Zambia to try to inform us, where possible, about what we can best do to contribute to the international development agenda. One thing that we can do is take on board the advice and experience of agencies such as Oxfam and SCIAF, which have worked on the issues for many years.

I think that all members understand that our international development policy, which is in addition to the Department for International Development's policy, to which Scotland

contributes, is focused and targeted on what we can achieve. We must be realistic about our goals. I will publish our international development plan shortly and I hope that we can reach broad agreement that Scotland is moving in the right direction.

Ted Brocklebank (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): We are aware of Scotland's links with Malawi through David Livingstone, but we are perhaps less familiar with Livingstone's strong links with Zambia—indeed, he died by Lake Bangweulu in that country.

Can the minister provide an assurance that any involvement in Zambia will not mean that aid is diverted from Malawi? Does she agree that Malawi should remain our immediate and urgent priority?

Linda Fabiani: I am delighted to reconfirm that, for the first time, international development funding for Malawi of at least £3 million a year for the next three years has been confirmed and ring fenced. Malawi has the comfort of knowing that a pot of money is there for the unique partnership that exists between Scotland and Malawi.

Music and Drama

3. Hugh O'Donnell (Central Scotland) (LD): To ask the Scottish Executive what plans it has to make Scotland a world leader in music and drama. (S3O-3047)

The Minister for Europe, External Affairs and Culture (Linda Fabiani): Scotland's diverse and vibrant cultural life is a defining feature of our successful and confident nation. In music and drama, and across all art forms, our artists are recognised across the world, and we are committed to providing support to help develop our international reputation for cultural excellence.

Hugh O'Donnell: Given the minister's answer, will she pay particular attention to the situation of the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama, which has expressed concern about its financial situation? What steps is the Government taking to ease the situation for the academy?

Linda Fabiani: Decisions on staffing issues at Scottish higher education institutions are the responsibility of their management teams, and the RSAMD is no different. As a fully autonomous body that is independent of Government, the academy alone must judge the best decisions to take if it is to achieve its strategic objectives. That said, I expect it to discuss its restructuring plans in full consultation with staff and the unions that represent staff. My colleague, the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning, is assured that it is doing that.

Rob Gibson (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): Will the minister tell us what steps she is taking to

allow Scottish music and drama to be exported around the world in order to attract visitors to Scotland in 2009, which is the year of homecoming?

Linda Fabiani: One of the steps that we have taken is the establishment of the new expo fund, from which £2 million a year will be used during the next three years to promote the Scottish excellence that we all care so much about. That funding will enable Scotland-based productions to flourish through the Edinburgh festivals and then to tour overseas. I hope that that injection of new funding will bring Scotland many benefits.

Malcolm Chisholm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab): Returning to the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama, do the minister and her colleague, the cabinet secretary—who is sitting beside her—recognise that the RSAMD is a world-class institution that depends to a large extent on one-to-one tuition? Are they therefore concerned about the new contracts that are being offered to teachers? The RSAMD appears to be at risk of losing staff because of the greatly reduced salaries that are being offered for fewer hours of work.

Does the minister accept that the Scottish Government has a responsibility because the drama courses in particular are not funded at conservatoire level and have to cross-subsidise the music courses? Will she intervene with the Scottish Further and Higher Education Funding Council to try to rectify the underlying problem?

Linda Fabiani: We respect and value the work of the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama and its contribution to the arts in Scotland. However, I can only reiterate that decisions on the strategic direction of individual institutions are the responsibility of the management of those institutions. Of course, as I said earlier, we expect management to consult both staff and unions.

I must put on the record the fact that there was a 4.8 per cent uplift in the funding of the RSAMD this year.

Ian McKee (Lothians) (SNP): I appreciate the support that the Scottish Government gives to traditional Scottish music, but will the minister confirm that the Government also supports international classical music and our world-class national orchestras? Will she further confirm that our national orchestras will be maintained and enhanced?

Linda Fabiani: We have two national orchestras: the Royal Scottish National Orchestra and the Scottish Chamber Orchestra, whose work is indeed world class. That is proved over and over again by the touring that they do and the reception that they get worldwide. The national orchestras are funded directly by the Government,

and this year they have had a settlement that will enable them to carry on their very good work.

Pauline McNeill (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab): Is the minister not at all concerned that the RSAMD, a leading institution in the area of drama and music, is facing such a crisis that the quality of its teaching will definitely suffer?

Given that the Government has stepped in on other situations, such as that involving the Crichton campus in Dumfries, does the minister agree that she should discuss with the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning the fact that they should do the right thing and step in and save the quality of teaching and reputation of the RSAMD?

The products of the academy—such as James McAvoy and Robert Carlyle—show the work that the institution has done. I urge the minister to think again about what interventions she should make.

Linda Fabiani: As has already been stated, the issue is one for the funding council.

My colleague the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning wrote to the funding council to lay out her priorities for the university sector, one of which was:

“growth in undergraduate and taught post-graduate numbers (for excellence in the performing arts, including dance)”.

This Government cares about the culture of this country.

Creative Scotland

4. Cathie Craigie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what extra funding it will provide to creative Scotland for its new responsibilities. (S3O-2980)

The Minister for Europe, External Affairs and Culture (Linda Fabiani): Over the next three years, creative Scotland and the bodies that we propose that it replace have been allocated nearly £150 million to invest in Scotland’s culture.

Cathie Craigie: The minister will be aware that committees of the Parliament are, at present, considering the Creative Scotland Bill. Members of the Finance Committee have raised concerns about the cost estimates of £700,000 for the creation of the new arts body. The committee convener, Andrew Welsh—a Scottish National Party MSP—said:

“It is the most unreliable estimate that I have seen in my life.”

Alex Neil, another committee member, said to a Government official who appeared before the committee:

“It seems as if you have stuck your thumb in the air and

plucked out a figure.”—[*Official Report, Finance Committee*, 22 April 2008; c 397-8.]

Who is right? The committee members who are scrutinising the bill’s financial memorandum, or the minister who approved it?

Linda Fabiani: I have undertaken to write to the Finance Committee about the detail of the financial memorandum and the Creative Scotland Bill. I will do so by 30 April.

Christina McKelvie (Central Scotland) (SNP): Can the minister tell us whether the spending that was mentioned will allow efficiencies to be factored in? Will that cohesive spending deliver longer-term benefits?

Linda Fabiani: I am absolutely convinced that creative Scotland will be a successful body and that we will all see the benefits of that in the years to come.

Malcolm Chisholm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab): Over and above the debacle of the financial memorandum, will the minister comment on the fact that the budget lines for the Scottish Arts Council and Scottish Screen are declining over the next three years? How on earth will creative Scotland be able to fulfil the new and extra functions that it will have in relation to the creative industries?

Linda Fabiani: I do not accept that the budget lines are declining.

Cuba (Links)

5. Elaine Smith (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what cultural and other links Scotland has with Cuba. (S3O-3011)

The Minister for Europe, External Affairs and Culture (Linda Fabiani): The Scottish Government has no current plans to establish cultural or other links with Cuba. We would, however, be glad to consider opportunities to engage with Cuba where those are in line with the objectives that are set out in the Scottish Government’s international framework, which I published on 22 April 2008.

Elaine Smith: Does the minister share my concern about the visits by Caleb McCarry, the United States of America’s Cuba transition co-ordinator, to several European countries, including Britain, given that they look very like another attempt by the USA to pressure Europe into adopting the USA’s aggressive anti-Cuba policy at a time when there is a favourable European Union rapprochement towards Cuba and a likelihood of the complete elimination of the temporarily suspended sanctions?

Will the minister join me in commending Spain, France and Italy for the huge strides that they have made in cementing more normal trading, scientific and cultural exchanges with Cuba? Given the United Kingdom's stated policy of constructive engagement with the island, will she commit to improving engagement between Scotland and Cuba, where she can?

The Presiding Officer: I am not convinced that there is much that is of a devolved nature in that question, but it is up to the minister how she wishes to reply.

Linda Fabiani: Everyone is aware of the cultural links between Scotland and Cuba. Indeed, Glasgow was twinned with the city of Havana in 2002, and there have been several trade missions to Cuba since then, with representation from the Scottish business community. The Royal Society of Edinburgh has an informal agreement with the Academy of Sciences of Cuba. Many links exist between Scotland and Cuba, and many people in Scotland care deeply about Cuba and wish that United Nations resolutions were properly upheld.

Community Music Festivals (Support)

6. John Farquhar Munro (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD): To ask the Scottish Executive what support it gives community music festivals in rural areas. (S3O-3046)

The Minister for Europe, External Affairs and Culture (Linda Fabiani): Our support for community music festivals in rural areas across Scotland is provided mainly through the Scottish Arts Council and EventScotland, with additional assistance from bodies such as Bòrd Na Gàidhlig.

John Farquhar Munro: I am sure that the cabinet secretary will be aware of the tremendous efforts and hard work of local communities to provide music festivals in rural areas. This year's Isle of Skye music festival had to be cancelled due to escalating costs. Will she consider giving further support and funding to local music festivals?

Linda Fabiani: I understand the disappointment of many people at the demise of the Isle of Skye music festival. However, the Scottish Arts Council did not receive an application for funding for the 2007 festival, and it has confirmed that it has not had a funding relationship with the festival in the past. The SAC held informal discussions with the festival but advised the organisers that it was not able to underwrite the deficit.

National Industrial Museums (Investment)

7. Rhona Brankin (Midlothian) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive whether it will deliver the £3 million capital investment promised by the previous Administration for national industrial museums. (S3O-2977)

The Minister for Europe, External Affairs and Culture (Linda Fabiani): I have been asked that question before by Malcolm Chisholm. He talked about £3 million being earmarked, and now Rhona Brankin is asking me about £3 million that was "promised". I am afraid that I can find no such promise of capital funding in any of the grant offer letters that were issued by the previous Administration. Indeed, the previous Administration's limited-term revenue funding made it difficult for those museums to attract capital investment.

As part of our 2007 spending review, ministers, for the first time, made budgetary provision to allow consideration of the capital needs of non-national museums. I will meet the chairs and chief executives of the three industrial museums during May to discuss their business cases.

Rhona Brankin: I thank the minister for that disappointing reply.

From correspondence that the minister has exchanged with me and the board of the Scottish Mining Museum, she will know that the Lady Victoria colliery is in urgent need of work to preserve the fabric of its internationally significant grade-A listed buildings. Will the Scottish National Party Government finally show some respect for Scotland's industrial past and take urgent action to ensure that no parts of Europe's best preserved 19th century colliery complex end up facing demolition? Will she also clarify which Heritage Lottery Fund report she referred to in her recent letter to me? My understanding is that no such report is due.

Linda Fabiani: Will the previous Administration admit that it made no promises and earmarked no money for the three industrial museums? None of those museums received grant offer letters beyond those for 2007-08. I repeat: the first time that such funds were provisionally allocated to the non-national museums budget was as part of the 2007 spending review, under current ministers.

Scots Language (Promotion)

8. Dave Thompson (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what plans it has for the promotion of the Scots language under the European charter for regional or minority languages. (S3O-3037)

The Minister for Europe, External Affairs and Culture (Linda Fabiani): As part of our undertakings for Scots under the European charter for regional or minority languages, this month the Scottish Government will write to local authorities and public bodies to remind them of their responsibilities and to ask what activities and initiatives have been introduced and are taking place in their area of operation. We are also in the

process of commissioning an audit of Scots language provision in Scotland, which will take account of current provision in the context of the charter. I am looking forward to the outcome of the audit, and our future plans for Scots will be guided by its findings.

Dave Thompson: As the minister has said, she is carrying out an audit at the minute. How much progress has been made by the audit, and how will the next step be after the outcome of the audit?

Linda Fabiani: I will shortly announce who will carry out the audit, which I hope will be completed around about October. I will consider the findings, which will largely dictate what we will do next. I reiterate the Government's commitment to valuing the Scots language.

Elaine Smith (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I was a tad bemused by your advice to the minister that my question about Cuba might not have dealt with devolved issues. I wonder whether you can look into why, under the standing orders, the question was allowed into the *Business Bulletin* in the first place and what exactly European and external affairs comprises in relation to the Parliament and devolved issues.

The Presiding Officer: The question was about culture, Ms Smith, but a lot of your supplementary question seemed to be about trade links. Nevertheless, I will look into the matter and will provide you with a more substantive answer in writing.

Education and Lifelong Learning

Education (Aberdeen)

1. Nanette Milne (North East Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Executive what it is doing to help increase educational choices for pupils in Aberdeen. (S30-2959)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning (Fiona Hyslop): The spending review delivered a record level of funding for Scotland's local authorities and the historic concordat with local government set out the various ways in which we are working in partnership with Scotland's councils, including Aberdeen City Council, to improve opportunities for Scotland's school pupils. The proposed improvements in the curriculum will increase the educational choices that are available. Our measures to reduce student debt and support students at college, alongside increased opportunities for vocational learning, will present the school pupils of Aberdeen and Scotland with increased opportunity to make positive education choices that are based on their talents rather than their financial situation.

Nanette Milne: As the cabinet secretary is probably aware, Aberdeen is likely to lose 80 teaching posts and there is real concern among parents and pupils that subject choice will be limited, particularly at secondary school level. Will the Scottish Government monitor the situation in Aberdeen? What, if anything, can it do to reassure parents and pupils that pupils will be able to access the full range of courses for their individual subject choices?

Fiona Hyslop: The education authority in Aberdeen is responsible for the provision of education in the city. However, I will shortly meet directors of education from throughout Scotland and I will impress on them the importance of ensuring that subject choices are available, particularly at higher and advanced higher level, so that the educational choices that pupils and their parents expect are available for our young people.

Lewis Macdonald (Aberdeen Central) (Lab): Does the cabinet secretary believe that Aberdeen City Council's ability to deliver choice and quality to school pupils is helped or undermined by the fact that it, as an education authority, has no department of education, no education committee and no democratically accountable convener of education?

Fiona Hyslop: I emphasise the fact that this Government is not about micromanaging local government. We recognise that councils will determine what departments they have.

The previous Administration encouraged local authorities to have integrated children's and education departments, which was very much part of the joint working that the previous Administration suggested would benefit youngsters, not least in the context of child protection issues. We share concerns about child protection throughout the country, and there are differences in performance in child protection in different authorities. The move to integrated departments was one way of addressing that. There are some successful integrated departments—Mary Mulligan, who is sitting beside Lewis Macdonald, may be familiar with that approach working across the Lothians. However, it is not the responsibility of national Government to micromanage what committees local government sets up to scrutinise its affairs.

Elizabeth Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Will the Scottish Executive, through the concordat with local government, ask the education officials in Aberdeen City Council and Aberdeenshire Council to meet officials from the Educational Institute of Scotland who, in a recent statement, have expressed grave concern about the reduction in the availability of advanced highers in the area?

Fiona Hyslop: I reiterate that it is up to Aberdeen City Council, as an education authority, to engage with staff and, particularly, unions. I am sure that it will do that. It is important to record that national Government's contribution to Aberdeen City Council for 2008-09 is of the order of 4.7 per cent of core revenue funding, which is a very adequate settlement—indeed, it is above the percentage given to other local authorities. I respect the fact that Aberdeen City Council, as an education authority, must administer its own affairs. Nevertheless, I encourage it to engage with the EIS, in particular, to address the concerns that Elizabeth Smith and Nanette Milne have raised.

Local Government Concordat (Education)

2. Richard Baker (North East Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive whether every local authority, including Aberdeen City Council, is meeting the terms of the Scottish Government's concordat with local government with regard to educational provision. (S3O-2974)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning (Fiona Hyslop): All 32 local authorities in Scotland have submitted draft single outcome agreements that set out how they will contribute to the agreed national outcomes in relation to education provision. Those drafts are currently the subject of discussion. We aim to complete the process of finalising all the agreements for 2008-09 by 30 June. Subject to agreement with the authorities, all the finalised single outcome agreements will be made publicly available shortly thereafter.

Richard Baker: How can the commitment to smaller class sizes be fulfilled in Aberdeen when, as other members have pointed out, schools are being closed and teaching posts are being cut? If that is in line with the Scottish Government's concordat with local government, how on earth can the concordat be used as a vehicle to fulfil Government pledges on education? Will the cabinet secretary report back to Parliament following her meeting with directors of education to tell us if impressing on them the importance of those issues will result in those pledges being fulfilled?

Fiona Hyslop: I understand that Richard Baker was part of the cross-party delegation that met the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth yesterday to explore some of the issues that are particular to Aberdeen City Council. I understand that Aberdeen City Council has yet to make decisions about its school provision, for which it is responsible. However, it is important to consider that there are provisions for falling school rolls in different parts of the country that will

enable the reprovision of education and a reduction in class sizes.

The Convention of Scottish Local Authorities has given a commitment that it will deliver class size reductions year on year throughout Scotland, and we expect every local authority, including Aberdeen City Council, to make progress and reduce class sizes over the spending review period.

The Presiding Officer: Question 3 has been withdrawn.

Modern Apprenticeships

4. Gil Paterson (West of Scotland) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what changes have been introduced to modern apprenticeship placements. (S3O-3035)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning (Fiona Hyslop): On 31 March, we announced a package of changes to the modern apprenticeship programme to ensure that public money supports the Government economic strategy. Those included the development of a new life science modern apprenticeship framework, an increase in the number of construction and engineering-related modern apprenticeships by providing 1,000 additional opportunities, and the provision of an additional 6,500 level 2 modern apprenticeships through reform of the skillseekers programme.

The package amounts to substantial change and illustrates our commitment to target support to the construction and engineering-related sectors, in which we know our investment delivers results. That growth equates to increasing the number of adult modern apprenticeships by 50 per cent and increasing the number of 16 to 19-year-old modern apprenticeships by 10 per cent, which will support individuals in industries that face particular training pressures. We also announced that we will continue to support the get ready for work and training for work programmes, which will ensure that those who are in most need of support continue to receive it.

Gil Paterson: Does the cabinet secretary agree that changing the types of apprenticeships is positive in two ways: first, it ensures that we will be able to fill the skills gap in Scotland and, secondly, the apprentices will be in a better position to gain employment in the field in which they have been trained to work?

Fiona Hyslop: Yes. As the Government has promised a 40 per cent increase in new build in future years, it is essential that we train people to carry out the construction, engineering and other aspects to help the economy and show that our country is making progress. It is essential that any programme that is funded by the public purse

helps to support the Government's overarching purpose of sustainable economic growth. The changes in modern apprenticeships will allow us to do that.

Rhona Brankin (Midlothian) (Lab): How will the Scottish National Party's scrapping of adult modern apprenticeships in the tourism, travel and hospitality sectors improve placement opportunities in those increasingly important sectors of the Scottish economy?

Fiona Hyslop: The revision of the modern apprenticeship scheme, which will allow for an extra 1,000 modern apprenticeships in construction and engineering, was part of the redirection of the training programmes. Skills development Scotland is being restructured to ensure that we have more space and scope in the future to develop training opportunities where they are needed. I know that the food and drink industry, in which we have a particular interest with regard to helping domestic industry, is pleased at the provision of level 2 modern apprenticeships, which will help that sector.

I want support to be provided in the tourism industry and I will engage with my enterprise colleagues on how that might best be done. We can do that because we have reprofiled the modern apprenticeship scheme. If we had not done that, such support might not be possible.

The Presiding Officer: Question 5 has been withdrawn.

School Building Programme

6. Andy Kerr (East Kilbride) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive how many schools it plans to build by 2011. (S3O-2993)

The Minister for Schools and Skills (Maureen Watt): Local authorities are responsible for the detail of decisions on capital investment in school buildings. As our recently published infrastructure investment plan said, we expect the funding and rebuilding or refurbishment of about 250 schools to be delivered or secured in the current parliamentary session.

Andy Kerr: The minister is ever the optimist. I am sure that, like all Scottish National Party MSPs, she has read and understood the SNP's proposals for the Scottish futures trust, which is to involve a management board. Is she satisfied with the role of such an unelected, appointed board, which will decide which schools are built, which are not built and when? Is she satisfied that local communities will have no impact on the design of those schools? I remind her to be careful in her answer, as it may find her in court later.

Maureen Watt: I hoped that the member would welcome the number of schools that will be built

under the Government. I leave his reference to the Scottish futures trust to the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth.

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Mr Kerr is right to highlight the confusion about the Scottish futures trust. I apologise to Christina McKelvie, who diplomatically is absent from the chamber, but her contribution to "Newsnight Scotland" last night did not assist the situation. When will we have clarity on the funding mechanism for new schools? Until we have that, the hiatus in the school building programme will continue.

Maureen Watt: As I have said, there are methods other than the Scottish futures trust for building schools. The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth, John Swinney, launched a consultation paper on the Scottish futures trust on 20 December. The aim of the consultation, which ended on 14 March, was to set out the Scottish Government's thinking on the Scottish futures trust, so that we can deliver a better deal for taxpayers than does the costly private finance initiative.

School Building Programme

7. Jackson Carlaw (West of Scotland) (Con): That exchange was illuminating.

To ask the Scottish Executive whether it will provide an update on its school building programme. (S3O-2965)

The Minister for Schools and Skills (Maureen Watt): The Scottish Government is matching and funding the previous Administration's school building programme brick for brick. We expect to deliver about 250 new or refurbished schools in this parliamentary session through a range of funding mechanisms.

Since May 2007, we have signed off funding for seven local authority projects that involve rebuilding or refurbishing 45 schools, and 14 of the schools are part of projects that are based on the non-profit-distributing model. [*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Order.

Maureen Watt: Four further projects will take the total to more than 50. The local government settlement provides for significant growth in the capital resources for schools and other forms of local authority infrastructure—almost £3 billion over the next three years, including an additional £115 million in 2008-09.

Jackson Carlaw: I am sorry to tell the minister that the impression of dithering in government is not confined to Westminster. Councils throughout Scotland, and particularly East Renfrewshire Council in the west, stand ready to make urgent and vital investment in new school building

projects and are frustrated at the lack of clear advice on the proposed Scottish futures trust. Andrew Welsh asserted in committee on 26 March:

"We have come a long way from using mobile huts in schools."—[*Official Report, Audit Committee, 26 March 2008; c 487.*]

However, such huts are being used at Eastwood high school.

Twenty-five per cent of the Government's time in office is gone. How much longer will Scotland's local authorities, schools, teachers, parents and pupils have to wait before they can proceed with definitive advice and a definitive scheme, instead of being expected to welcome a phantom promise of 250 schools in the next four years?

Maureen Watt: Forty-five schools in 10 months is fairly good, and we will get 14 schools in the next few months. That does not include the other schools that will be built because of the £3 billion that has been given to local government, which it has warmly welcomed, to refurbish and build schools and other local authority infrastructure.

Andy Kerr (East Kilbride) (Lab): All the schools that the minister referred to are, of course, covered by contracts that were under negotiation prior to her party coming into government on 3 May. She said that the Government is matching the previous Administration's plans "brick for brick". Labour promised to deliver 100 new schools by the end of 2009. In that context, is she prepared to continue to assert that the Government will match Labour's programme "brick for brick"?

Maureen Watt: The previous Administration's contracts were negotiated under the private finance initiative model. We agreed to continue them because many of the projects were too far down the road to get away from that expensive model, but no funding was in place for further projects or schools. We will ensure that the previous Labour Administration's commitment on schools will be not only met but exceeded.

Primary School Teacher Places

8. Iain Smith (North East Fife) (LD): To ask the Scottish Executive how many new primary school teacher places will be available from August 2008. (S3O-3052)

The Minister for Schools and Skills (Maureen Watt): We have agreed an historic concordat with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities that enables local authorities to maintain teacher numbers at a time of falling school rolls. Under that concordat, local government has agreed to make year-on-year progress on reducing primary 1 to primary 3 class sizes to a maximum of 18

pupils, which will increase employment opportunities for primary teachers. Local authorities must take account of such factors when they recruit teachers.

Iain Smith: I will take the answer to my question as being none.

I am sure that the minister will accept that additional teachers need to be employed in order to drive down school rolls. Will she finally accept that the local government interpretation of the much-vaunted concordat is that there will not be a single extra penny to employ a single extra teacher next year—

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): Why did the councils sign up to it, then?

The Presiding Officer: Order, Mr Gibson.

Iain Smith: Will the minister finally accept that many probationary teachers in my constituency and elsewhere are concerned that, having gone through teacher training and spent a year as a probationary teacher, they have no prospect of getting permanent employment in August? What will she do to reverse that situation?

Maureen Watt: As the member will be aware, we inherited a situation in which newly trained teachers were finding it difficult to find employment, which is why we took early action by providing an additional £9 million for 2007-08. Local authority returns show that 245 full-time equivalent teachers were employed as a result of those extra funds. The Government supports Scotland's schools and its education system, which is why, in a tight financial climate, we have increased local government's budget by 5 per cent, 4.1 per cent and 3.4 per cent over the next three years.

The Presiding Officer: Question 9 has been withdrawn, for understandable reasons. That gives me the rare opportunity to invite a member to ask the 10th question.

Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama (Reorganisation)

10. Pauline McNeill (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive whether it supports the use of compulsory redundancy as part of the proposed reorganisation of the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama. (S3O-3002)

I am shocked that I have had the opportunity to ask the 10th question.

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning (Fiona Hyslop): I congratulate the member, as she is probably the first member to ask the 10th question at question time. Her question is important.

Decisions on staffing issues at Scottish higher education institutions are the responsibility of the management teams of those institutions. The RSAMD is no different. As a fully autonomous body that is independent of the Government, it alone must judge what decisions it must take to achieve its strategic objectives. That said, I expect it to discuss its restructuring plans in full consultation with staff and the unions. I have been assured that it is doing so.

Pauline McNeill: Does the cabinet secretary acknowledge that the RSAMD is a leading institution not only in Scotland and the United Kingdom but in the world? Given that the Government previously stepped in with respect to the Crichton campus, for example, will the cabinet secretary save Scotland's future in drama, dance and music by taking action to ensure that in Scotland we continue to have a world-class institution for our drama and music students?

Fiona Hyslop: The member will be aware that Parliament passed legislation, which she supported, to establish the Scottish Further and Higher Education Funding Council. That legislation makes it clear that as a minister, I cannot direct independent institutions. However, in a letter that I sent to the chair of the funding council, John McClelland, on 25 January 2008, setting out strategic guidance—I am allowed to do that under the legislation—I stated:

"My priorities for the university sector are:

- growth in undergraduate and taught post-graduate numbers (for excellence in the performing arts, including dance; Crichton; and rural healthcare)".

I also provided for a 4.8 per cent increase in funding for the academy in 2008-09, which is greater than both the inflation rate and the 3.4 per cent increase in funding for the university sector as a whole. That shows that we are supporting the academy. I recognise the tributes that the member has paid to it, but we must respect the right of individual institutions to carry out restructuring. That is a matter for institutions to explore, but they must do so in consultation with staff and unions.

Planning Application Processes (Menie Estate)

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Alasdair Morgan): The next item of business is a debate on motion S3M-1712, in the name of Duncan McNeil, on behalf of the Local Government and Communities Committee, on its report on planning application processes in relation to Menie estate.

14:56

Duncan McNeil (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab): I thank the clerks and officials who supported us in our work for their support and patience throughout the process.

The uneducated observer might be surprised to learn that much that is contained in the committee's report is uncontroversial and unanimous. The first 138 paragraphs of the report set out uncontested fact. Where the committee disagreed was on how those facts should be interpreted. I will attempt—manfully—to set out the facts and allow the chamber to reach its own conclusions.

We are familiar with the circumstances that led to the inquiry. I will set those out as briefly as I can. On Thursday 29 November 2007, Aberdeenshire Council's infrastructure services committee refused consent for the Trump Organization's planned development at Menie estate. On Monday 3 December, the First Minister met representatives of the Trump Organization, at their request. At 2.20 pm on Tuesday 4 December, the chief planner met representatives of the Trump Organization, at their request. At 3.45 on the same day, the chief planner phoned the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth recommending that the application be called in; the cabinet secretary agreed. At 5 pm on the same day, the application was called in. Cynics might say that Trump said, "Jump!" and the First Minister of Scotland said, "How high?"

The committee's task was to examine how and why the decisions that I have described were taken. We examined, to quote our inquiry's remit,

"the decision-making process of ministers and officials, the legal advice relied upon and the transparency of their actions."

As controversial as the application was, the decision to hold the inquiry was not—it was supported by the whole committee, various experts and even the First Minister. Only when scrutiny started to bite and committee members started to ask hard questions did the spin machine launch its campaign to denigrate the committee and its work, in a way that was unprecedented in

the history of the Scottish Parliament. I am confident that we will hear more of that today.

We had the First Minister negotiating with the committee about when, how and for how long he would give evidence. He even tried to vet the questions that we would be allowed to ask. We exchanged letters with the Trump Organization's lawyers about whether its representatives would appear to give evidence. Civil servants sent the permanent secretary to try to restrict what we could ask officials and how officials would answer. The Freedom of Information (Scotland) Act 2002 even had to be used to compel the release of certain documents. Two hundred and forty pieces of information were provided to the committee only after it had reported.

Against that backdrop, the report nonetheless sets out what we managed to discover. What evidence did we finally hear about how the application was called in? We heard that the call-in decision was taken on the back of two short telephone calls between the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth, John Swinney, and the chief planner. John Swinney is notable by his absence today.

The Minister for Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change (Stewart Stevenson): Is the member aware of what is going on at Grangemouth and the pivotal role of the cabinet secretary in that? That is a real issue that affects the people of Scotland. [*Interruption.*]

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Order.

Duncan McNeil: I wish the cabinet secretary every success in his efforts there. I hope that he is serious in his efforts and that he tells the American bosses to get their act together and get the dispute settled.

We heard that the cabinet secretary did not obtain legal advice or written official advice before he made his decision. The minute that recommended the call-in was not seen by the cabinet secretary until after his decision had been made. We heard that the cabinet secretary's decision to call in the application before the decision letter was issued might not have been illegal but was unprecedented. We heard that there was disparity between the reasons that were given for calling in the application and the real reasons. For example, there was a claim that the application had to be called in to maintain the integrity of the planning system, but the appeal mechanism, had the Trump Organization decided to use it, provides ample checks and balances. It was also claimed that there was fear over legal costs being awarded against Aberdeenshire Council, but contrary to the smears that were peddled about the council being in a shambles, it was plain that its decisions were fully competent

and that there were substantial planning grounds for refusal.

I ask members what conclusions they would draw from those facts. Would they conclude that ministers acted hastily, that their reasons were not as they stated, and that the cabinet secretary's actions were concerning, surprising and out of the ordinary?

Alasdair Allan (Western Isles) (SNP): Might the objective observer draw the conclusion, which the report also states, that no minister or official was guilty of breaking the law or the ministerial code?

Duncan McNeil: Alasdair Allan will have his time. He has had a number of weeks in which to set out his alternative conclusions on the evidence and the facts, but he has failed to do so. I will return to that.

When we consider the actions of the First Minister, we find a similar position. He said—this is not in dispute—that he was bound to meet the Trump Organization's representatives as a local MSP, but he was under no obligation to meet them under the code of conduct for MSPs. He told us that he acted within the ministerial code, but we were unable to investigate that as the ministerial code is outwith our remit. The one person to whom he did not speak in that regard was the custodian of the code, who is the permanent secretary.

The First Minister claimed that the Trump Organization did not understand the process, but it had the best planning lawyers that money could buy, whereas he had no special expertise in the matter. Indeed, in its evidence, the Trump Organization roundly rebutted the idea that it was in any way confused about the process. Again, what conclusion should we draw from those agreed facts? Should we conclude that they are hardly in line with a "precautionary approach" and that it is not a wise move for a First Minister to leave himself and his Government open to accusations of irregular practice? Should we conclude that he was acting in a First Ministerial capacity and that the ministerial code needs to be revisited?

We found that, far from taking a precautionary approach, the First Minister was cavalier in his actions. The committee's report states that he

"displayed, at best, exceptionally poor judgement and a worrying lack of awareness about the consequence of his actions."

It might be that an alternative conclusion can be drawn, but we are still waiting to hear it. The Scottish National Party minority on the committee rejected everyone else's conclusions but has been unable to come up with any alternative conclusions in a minority report.

In conclusion, the Government's only defence may be that the ends justify the means, but even that is questionable. Yes, it has succeeded in keeping the development alive, but at some cost—the planning process has been compromised, and the Trump development faces further delay and possible court challenge. If the Government had acted within its powers at an early stage, it could undoubtedly have secured the investment for Aberdeenshire and Scotland.

Stewart Stevenson: Will the member take an intervention?

Duncan McNeil: No—you had your chance and you blew it on Grangemouth.

If the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth had been here and had not been busy elsewhere, he would have had an opportunity, which the Government's representative, Stewart Stevenson, now has—*[Interruption.]*

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Order.

Duncan McNeil: Today, the minister has an opportunity to address the committee's concerns and to act on the report's recommendations.

What is the minister's response to the call for ministers, particularly when they exercise their planning functions, to take significant decisions only on the basis of proper written advice from officials? Will a full audit trail, including full minutes of meetings, be available for decisions involving planning applications?

When ministers intervene in the ministerial decision-making process on planning applications, will they be particularly mindful of the ministerial code? Will they consider how particular actions might affect public perceptions and whether action by ministers or officials has the potential to imperil the decision that is taken?

The ministers' attitude to date has been dismissive, at best, and I look forward to receiving serious responses from ministers to the concerns and recommendations of the Local Government and Communities Committee.

I move,

That the Parliament notes the conclusions and recommendations contained in the Local Government and Communities Committee's 5th Report, 2008 (Session 3): *Planning Application Processes (Menie Estate)* (SP Paper 73).

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I point out to members that because of the debate's capacity to generate some heat, I will keep every speaker strictly to their time limit. I must also ask members not to use the second person, as that tends to add to the heat rather than reduce it.

15:07

The Minister for Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change (Stewart Stevenson): The Scottish Government never accepted the need for an inquiry into the call-in of the Menie estate planning application, for we were clear all along that ministers and officials had at all times acted properly, objectively and in full accordance with planning legislation, the Scottish ministerial code and all other requirements. Nevertheless, an inquiry by the Local Government and Communities Committee was initiated and, of course, we co-operated with it willingly, comprehensively and constructively.

Duncan McNeil: I am glad that you have clarified the situation. The First Minister welcomed the inquiry, as did all the members of the committee. To suggest that ministers and officials appeared before the committee willingly is simply not true, and the evidence bears that out.

Stewart Stevenson: The Government supplied extensive evidence about our actions in relation to the planning application. Indeed, for the very first time, a First Minister appeared before a parliamentary committee. He enjoyed it so much that he went back the following week.

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth gave evidence, as did the Government's chief planner and the head of planning decisions. Evidence was also provided by Aberdeenshire Council, the Royal Town Planning Institute in Scotland and the Trump Organization.

The Government was open and forthcoming on an unprecedented scale. We answered almost 200 parliamentary questions on the issue and replied to dozens of FOI requests, a process that occupied planning officials for hundreds of hours at substantial cost to the public purse.

Whereas we have been open and clear about our actions, by contrast the Local Government and Communities Committee's report is an exercise in confusion, contradiction, speculation and innuendo. It is a report that is lacking in hard facts and meaningful, evidence-based conclusions.

In his speech, the convener of the committee suggested that the Government acted outwith its powers.

Members: No.

Stewart Stevenson: He did—I wrote it down.

That said, the report contains one robust and concrete finding. At paragraph 182, the report says that ministers and officials

“acted in accordance with planning laws when issuing the decision to call in the application.”

I have been asked about a minority report. The minority report is contained entirely in paragraph 182. It is a shame that with 138 paragraphs of agreement, as Duncan McNeil, the committee convener, drew to our attention, we find ourselves with a difference of interpretation.

Johann Lamont (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab): One question that you did not answer in the whole inquiry process is why you discovered a conflict of interest only in November and not in May when you were elected. The issue that you must address is the fact that the members who opposed the recommendations did not come to any conclusion at all—they simply said that they did not agree with the rest of us. They have given no alternative explanation.

Stewart Stevenson: I note the use of the word “you”, Presiding Officer, and I will respond in the appropriate terms. I do not make the planning decision, because of the rules that govern such decisions. There is therefore no conflict of interest for the “you” to whom the member referred.

I repeat: the report says that ministers and officials

“acted in accordance with planning laws when issuing the decision to call in the application.”

There was no disagreement from any member of the committee on that key issue. The committee may have split along party lines on many questions, but—as paragraph 182 makes clear—there was unanimity on that fundamental point. No one is challenging the legitimacy and correctness of the call-in.

Robert Brown (Glasgow) (LD): Will the minister take an intervention?

Stewart Stevenson: No. I have dealt with the point.

The result of this lengthy and drawn-out inquiry process is confirmation that the Government did absolutely nothing wrong. We did our job—we did what we were there to do. We acted properly and decisively and wholly in line with planning legislation and all—all—other requirements.

That is not to say that the report does not contain any criticisms. It was inevitable that it would, given that the inquiry was partisan and politically motivated; yet the criticisms in the report are without foundation. They are based on innuendo and accusation and contain inaccuracies that betray a misunderstanding of the planning process and an inability to comprehend and utilise the evidence that was supplied.

Cathie Craigie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab): Will the minister give way?

Stewart Stevenson: One more paragraph and I will come to you.

We are not alone in thinking that. The Royal Town Planning Institute in Scotland wrote to the committee to clarify comments in the report that seriously misrepresent the evidence that it provided.

Cathie Craigie: It is shocking to hear a Government minister accuse a committee of the Parliament of being unable to scrutinise the evidence and draw conclusions. I have one simple question, which the Government has failed to answer throughout all of this. We are all agreed that the project is a major one for the whole of Scotland. Why did the Government not use planning legislation to call in the application before Aberdeenshire Council took its decision? Why?

Stewart Stevenson: The Government used planning legislation to call in the application at an appropriate point. [*Interruption.*]

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Order.

Stewart Stevenson: I congratulate the committee on moving forward with an inquiry into child poverty, which I understand that it is to undertake. I am sure that it will deliver a very good result; one that will be of rather greater value than the report that is the subject of the debate.

The cabinet secretary wrote to the committee to put the record straight on some of the major shortcomings in the report. Sadly, on the basis of what the chamber has heard thus far, the message does not seem to have got through.

David McLetchie (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Con): In his response, the cabinet secretary accused the committee of failing to understand the planning regime or, indeed, the appropriate terminology. The cabinet secretary has a cheek. The person who confused the terminology first was the cabinet secretary in his evidence to the committee. If he were to read the report thoroughly, he would find a careful analysis of all the terms that are used in the planning legislation—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Your question is a bit long, Mr McLetchie.

David McLetchie: He will find them in paragraphs 36 to 42 of the report, which this minister, ill informed though he is—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr McLetchie.

David McLetchie: The minister would be well advised to read those paragraphs before he says anything else.

Stewart Stevenson: I assure members that, as the 11th planning minister since the resumption of the Scottish Parliament, I take my responsibilities in that regard very seriously and I am fully informed on the relevant matters.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You have one minute remaining.

Stewart Stevenson: The report is simply a diatribe that is not grounded in evidence. For example, paragraph 181 totally misrepresents the evidence that was given by the chief planner—

David McLetchie *rose*—

Stewart Stevenson: I have no time—sorry.

It confuses the point about definitions. If members do not believe me, they should ask the Economy, Energy and Tourism Committee, which agreed. There cannot be a national development at Menie estate, because the term “national development” will not be used until the national planning framework is finalised and approved. Further, the chief planner did not say that the Menie estate application deserved one-in-a-million treatment. He explained that he had never witnessed a situation in which a local authority resolved to refuse planning permission but several councillors who had been excluded from the decision-making process demanded that the decision be reversed—that was the one-in-a-million occurrence.

In those circumstances, we proceeded in the way—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I am sorry, minister, but we must move on.

15:16

Andy Kerr (East Kilbride) (Lab): That was a shameful and tawdry performance by the minister that showed flagrant disregard for the Local Government and Communities Committee’s work. The report, for which I commend the committee, is a forensic piece of work and a damning indictment of the Government’s handling of the Menie estate application and, just as important, of the Government’s approach to the integrity and independence of the planning system more generally.

I will begin by speaking about that latter context. The SNP started by welcoming the inquiry—superficially at least—but now, as we have heard, its members ritually condemn anyone who dares to question the party’s actions and say that they are anti-business or engaged in a political witch hunt. Throughout the inquiry process, the SNP tried to justify its actions by saying basically that the end justifies the means. The end of securing the Trump inward investment was deemed to be worth compromising the integrity of our planning system and risking the charge that political influence was more important than the merits of the application.

Although that argument might work at a certain level, the one area in which it does not work is in relation to the planning system, which above all else must be impartial and fair to all parties that have an interest in the outcome—protester as well as developer, environmentalist as well as economist. Crucially, the system must also be seen to be fair and impartial because, in planning, perception is as important as reality. The potential for a judicial review of a case must never be far from the minds of the ministers who are charged with the responsibility of taking such important decisions. In that context, the primary consideration is that all ministers’ actions must not only be fair and impartial, but be perceived to be fair and impartial by the general public. There must be openness and transparency as well as impartiality and integrity, or else the decision is imperilled, as we have seen.

Stewart Stevenson: I put on record that I have not disagreed with a word that the member has said so far.

Andy Kerr: The member will not have to wait too long.

As we have heard, the committee’s report, in its condemnation of the “cavalier” and “inappropriate” actions of the First Minister and his cabinet secretary, shows that ministers undoubtedly failed that test. That was not the only test that they failed, but it was the most important. SNP members of the committee did not reach a different conclusion, chiefly because the one in the report is true and indisputable. For all the protestations from the SNP members on the committee, and despite their dissension, they decided not to produce a minority report. Although they were at pains not to criticise their ministers, they could not find an alternative narrative that fitted with the facts and avoided that criticism. They could mount only an incoherent defence of the charges.

How could they find an alternative, when the charges were true? The local constituency MSP rolled up to a five-star hotel in a ministerial limo to meet the Trump team and then handed them the telephone to speak to the chief planner. Is that the conduct of a constituency MSP? He risked the integrity of the planning system and its independence.

Alasdair Allan *rose*—

Andy Kerr: Like a latter-day Mississippi gambler, he was prepared to risk it all on the call. If Alex Salmond was the maverick of the piece, John Swinney was the man chosen to sort it out all out: “Got a problem, Donald? Don’t worry, John’ll fix it.”

Of course, that was not the only Donald involved in planning matters.

Stewart Stevenson *rose*—

Andy Kerr: Sit down.

As the committee took evidence, it became clear that the Government was simultaneously embroiled in another live planning application, this time in Aviemore.

Stewart Stevenson: On a point of order, Presiding Officer. Do you agree that an accusation has been made that there was a conversation that was inappropriate under law and that therefore that should not be covered by the member?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I do not quite take the point, but I remind members to observe the rules of courtesy at all times.

Andy Kerr: I was simply making the point that the planning system has to be seen to be fair. In my view, handing the phone over to the developer does not make that system look fair.

We come to Aviemore—a little £80 million local difficulty for another Donald, Donald Macdonald. This Donald was apparently aggrieved that the upstart Mr Trump was getting all the ministerial attention and fast-tracking, while his application allegedly languished in the planning process. On this occasion, no fewer than five ministers were involved.

The Minister for Environment (Michael Russell): Will the member take an intervention?

Andy Kerr: I would love to, but I am in my last minute.

Mr Russell and I appeared on television together and he knows that he was more than economical with the truth that day. He claimed that the First Minister's involvement was triggered by a request from a cross-party group of MSPs. However, his involvement and that of others pre-dated that request by several months. Donald Macdonald contacted Jim Mather on 26 October 2007 and various meetings have occurred. It is all in the responses to FOI requests. The Government said that it was intervening on behalf of jobs, but all the e-mails from Mr Macdonald saying that jobs were at risk were ignored by the SNP Government.

The committee report is hard hitting and evidence based and contains fair comment. It deserves better than the derisory response of the Government. Alex Salmond has talked this week about jigs and reels, but we must never again be in a position in which a Donald is calling the tune, Alex is on the fiddle and the SNP is reeling in the cash.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Some of the member's remarks bordered on discourtesy. I ask him and other members to think carefully before they use that kind of terminology.

15:22

Mary Scanlon (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I will do my best to be courteous, as usual.

I commend the work of the Local Government and Communities Committee in compiling its report into the planning application process for the Menie estate. The Government may not welcome the report into the Trump development, but we can be sure that if it was Labour, the Liberal Democrats or the Conservatives who were allegedly indulging, manipulating and interfering in the planning process, the SNP would be first in the queue for—at the very least—a committee inquiry and report to Parliament.

The Planning etc (Scotland) Act 2006 reviewed existing legislation and, just as important, set out a new culture and approach to the planning process. While many aspects of the act are not yet in force, there is still plenty of scope for all of us to change our approach to planning, for example by moving to consensual working and away from the adversarial approach of the past; by moving to upfront, positive and proactive consultation rather than reactive, niggling and negative consultation; by making local authorities an attractive place for newly qualified planners; and by ensuring that every development plan in the country is up to date. It is the responsibility of every elected member and councillor to adhere to and support the 2006 act and the forthcoming guidelines. Like other members, I have been critical of supermarkets and wind farms. In a democratic country, we can express our views on those matters. The structures and processes are in place for an open, accountable and impartial planning system in this country.

Scotland has a commitment to enterprise. This might be the time to remind developers that Scotland is the birthplace of enterprise and the free market. The division of labour, comparative advantage, the natural order, and truck, barter and exchange were all written about here in Scotland in 1776, in Adam Smith's "An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations". We do not need lectures on enterprise, planning or the democratic system of local and national Government. All that that leaves is trust in the process.

The ministers met the developers but did not meet

"all parties with an interest in the decision",

as is clearly stated in the Scottish ministerial code. As paragraph 93 of the committee report says,

"The Chief Planner told the Committee that the circumstances of the application were 'one in a million.'"

He was not speaking about Donald Trump's chances.

Alex Neil (Central Scotland) (SNP): The member said that the minister did not meet all parties who requested a meeting. Can she name a party that was not granted a meeting?

Mary Scanlon: I wish to correct Mr Neil. I said that the minister did not meet

“all parties with an interest in the decision”.

That is clearly stated in the ministerial code.

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth gave different reasons for the call-in. It seems clear that the call-in by ministers was not only based on the refusal by the council; it was more to do with the desire to take credit for the development. A more constructive approach by the Scottish Government would have been to make the conduct of the appeals process known to the Trump Organization and to explain

“how this would not necessarily be any longer or more expensive than a call-in process”.

That is acknowledged by the committee in paragraph 175. I support the committee’s view that

“The appeal mechanism provides the checks and balances required”

in our planning system, as is recorded in paragraph 178.

I found it incredible that the SNP committee members—many of whom, Mr Kenneth Gibson for example, are known to have good judgment—dissented even on paragraphs of factual evidence. How can someone disagree with a factual statement by the Royal Town Planning Institute in Scotland? Members might not agree with the points that were made, but they cannot disagree with the fact that the statement concerned was recorded.

Paragraphs 226 to 231, 268 and 269 refer to the Aviemore case, of which I have personal experience. I was asked to attend an urgent meeting of great national importance regarding the development of the Aviemore centre. If I am told that one of Scotland’s premier conference centres and 300 jobs are at risk, with Aviemore facing another setback, I do not hesitate to attend.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You have one minute left.

Mary Scanlon: Even if I had known that Mr Macdonald contributed to the SNP, I would still have attended the meeting, given my local commitment and support. When I was asked to write to Alex Salmond, John Swinney, Stewart Stevenson, Richard Lochhead, the Cairngorms National Park Authority, Highland Council, the Scottish Environment Protection Agency and others within 24 hours, I did so—on time and as promised. I am very pleased that the intervention

by me and Rhoda Grant was so successful in removing the planning logjam for the development.

However, I was infuriated that, while I was gathering all the correspondence and seeking advice from Macdonald Hotels and the Parliament in order to release information as requested, and while my colleague Rhoda Grant was attending a family funeral, the Scottish Government was busy instructing David Thompson MSP to submit a motion calling on us to provide the information. Even when MSPs across parties—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You must close.

Mary Scanlon:—do all the right things for business and jobs—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I am afraid that I must call the next member to speak.

15:28

Robert Brown (Glasgow) (LD): The Local Government and Communities Committee has done what parliamentary committees ought to do, which is cast light on the difficult issues that are the subject of their investigations. Their job, and ours, is to hold Government to account for its actions. The attitude that the Minister for Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change has taken this afternoon is extremely regrettable, given the serious issues that are before the Parliament and covered in the report.

Even since the committee reported, new information has continued to drip out. Freedom of information requests have now elicited the information that Alex Salmond’s briefing meeting with the Trump Organization in September 2007 was set up not by his constituency staff but by Geoff Aberdein, his Government special adviser.

Government is about checks and balances. A democratic election process gives Government an authority far beyond that of unelected dictators and despots, but a democratic Government does not have a mandate to do what it likes. It operates within the rule of law and the interplay of institutions. It involves an accountable process of decision making. That was a sophistication too far for Government ministers in their approach to the Menie estate planning application. Flushed with the newly acquired authority of office and believing that the long-awaited SNP millennium had come, they thought that they could do what they liked.

There was a simple scenario as they saw it: a rural council had made a mess of a planning application by a super-wealthy international tycoon—the sort of person whom the First Minister wants to attract to Scotland. Scotland was giving out a message that it was closed for business. Goodness—the SNP’s Scotland might be seen as parochial. They thought, “We are not having that.”

The SNP Government would show the smack of firm government. With barely a pause, one breathless decision followed another. Alex Salmond, surrounded by the trappings of ministerial power and, of course, in his constituency capacity, met the Trump people.

Alasdair Allan: Will the member give way?

Robert Brown: Give me a second, please.

Alex Salmond meets the Trump people; talks to the chief planner; hands his phone to the Trump people who, despite having batteries of lawyers and consultants, do not fully understand the Scottish planning system. Within 24 hours, they are in the cosy bowels of St Andrew's house meeting Scotland's top planning officials and, within 45 minutes of that, a decision has been made to call in the application for decision by ministers—a procedure described memorably by David McLetchie as a “wizard wheeze”, which itself lands Scottish ministers in the position of appearing partisan. As it happens, there is no discernable difference of timescale or procedure between a call-in and an appeal. It is no wonder that there were concerns about all that, even though the details were unknown at the beginning.

Brian Adam (Aberdeen North) (SNP): Earlier, Mr Brown suggested that the rule of law might not have been adhered to in this case. Is there any evidence in the report—or does he have any new evidence—to suggest that the rule of law was broken?

Robert Brown: Brian Adam should be very careful about his phraseology. The report uses phrases about ministers such as “cavalier”, “unwise”, “worrying”, “lack of awareness” and “poor judgement”. That sort of thing, rather than the issue of the rule of law, is the charge.

Two vignettes in particular stick in my mind. The first is the picture of the First Minister of Scotland—who, by the way, was not trying to influence anyone—phoning the chief planner and then handing the phone to George A Sorial of the Trump Organization. The idea of the First Minister of Scotland acting as some sort of junior aide to Mr Sorial is not particularly appealing.

The second was the First Minister saying to the committee convener, “haud yer wheesht”. That is symptomatic of the arrogant approach that the First Minister took and, dare I say it, the Minister for Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change is taking to the committee inquiry, which I remind the Parliament had been agreed by all the parties, including the minister's.

As Duncan McNeil said quite rightly, the committee was agreed unanimously on all the key facts in the report. That is hugely significant, because the report included a whole series of

interesting facts that were obfuscated or had to be dragged out of ministers bit by bit, as we saw right through the inquiry.

What does the committee say? It has no fewer than 46 substantial criticisms of the SNP Government. In particular, it had serious concerns about the Scottish Government's decision-making process leading to the ministerial call-in.

The committee was particularly unhappy with the First Minister's actions. Facilitating the meeting between the Trump representatives and the chief planner was “extremely unwise”. The committee rejected comprehensively the First Minister's explanations—it was not his “bounden duty” to meet the Trump people. He had no particular expertise in planning law. The committee stated:

“far from taking a precautionary approach”—

as he would have us believe—

“the First Minister was cavalier in his actions and displayed, at best, exceptionally poor judgement and a worrying lack of awareness of the consequence of his actions.”

He behaved in

“an unwise and inappropriate way.”

It is not our job to debate the merits of the Trump application; it is our job to consider the procedures. The overall picture of the current Scottish Government is not inspiring; it is one of breathtaking arrogance combined with staggering ineptitude, which could—and did—imperil the application. Not for the Government the restrictions on lesser men; not for it the proper balance between competing interests required by the due process of the planning system and by the ministerial code. The Parliament is entitled—indeed, to coin a phrase, it is our “bounden duty”—to hold ministers to account for their actions; check any tendencies to megalomania; protect the integrity of our institutions and, in this instance, of our independent planning procedures; and suggest and require changes in the machinery of government if they are necessary.

It is appropriate to consider the contributions to the debate today. When my colleague Mike Rumbles sums up, he will draw out some of the lessons that come from it. They will undoubtedly include the need for an audit trail for significant ministerial decisions—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We must move on to the open debate.

Robert Brown:—and independent oversight of the ministerial code—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Brown, sit down, please.

Robert Brown: I trust that this matter has been a salutary experience for this Government.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Order.

15:35

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): Last night, I saw the highly enjoyable Dario Fo farce "Trumpets and Raspberries" at the Royal Lyceum theatre but, from what I have heard, this premature debate outdoes the play, given the ludicrous nature of the plot, in which a dastardly First Minister and his henchman Mr Swinney secretly plot to undermine the integrity of Scotland's planning system for their own nefarious ends.

I realise that Opposition politicians are excited at the prospect of creating a hazy perception of wrongdoing in the Scottish Government, even if no hard evidence is available to support such a belief. It would have been better to have awaited the Scottish Government's response to the committee report before forging ahead with the debate.

Johann Lamont: Will the member give way?

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

Kenneth Gibson: I am deputy convener of the Local Government and Communities Committee, so I had hoped to close the debate for the committee, with the aim of covering the many areas of the report on which there was genuine consensus. However, committee colleagues thought that I should be freed up to make my partisan comments, so the politically more neutral David McLetchie—if members can believe that—will close for the committee.

I will focus on areas of consensus in the report, but first I am happy to allow Sarah Boyack to make an intervention.

Sarah Boyack: My understanding is that the letter of 27 March to the committee convener is indeed the Scottish Government's response to the report. That is what it says in the letter, which I have with me.

Kenneth Gibson: The decision to request a debate was made before the response was given. The committee should have decided whether to go forward after receiving the response.

In paragraph 182 of the report, the committee said:

"The Committee notes that the Chief Planner and the Planning Minister (Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth, John Swinney) acted in accordance with planning laws when issuing the decision to call in the application. The Committee notes the evidence of the Chief Planner that he had decided over the weekend of 1-2 December that call-in would be the simplest solution for all parties. The Committee notes that there are no definitive criteria for call-in and that each case is decided on its own merits ... The Committee notes the evidence that the

planning minister took advice from the Chief Planner in reaching his decision."

In paragraph 208, the committee said:

"The Committee notes the evidence of the Cabinet Secretary that the First Minister had made no representations to him on the merits of the planning application even although it was permissible for the First Minister to do so in terms of ... the Code."

I draw Mary Scanlon's attention to paragraph 214, in which the committee noted that Mr Salmond made it clear that

"he had met people from all sides of the debate",

and went on to quote the First Minister, who said:

"Each and every one of those answers made my role as a constituency MSP crystal clear and emphasised that as a minister I am debarred from decision making on a planning application in my constituency."

David McLetchie: Will the member take an intervention?

Kenneth Gibson: I would have liked to take an intervention from the Liberal member of the committee, Jim Tolson, but he hasnae bothered to show up for the debate.

The report quotes Mr Salmond as saying:

"In every single phone call and meeting, I have gone through the limits that are placed on me by being the constituency MSP. No one can be in any doubt about that whatsoever."

In paragraph 216, the committee said:

"The Chief Executive of Aberdeenshire told the Committee that Alex Salmond always made it clear that he was talking as local MSP and not as First Minister. He did not express an opinion to the Chief Executive about the merits and outcome of the application."

In paragraph 232, the committee said:

"The Committee entirely accepts the right of Alex Salmond MSP in his constituency capacity to meet with anyone he chooses about an issue in his constituency."

In paragraph 241, the committee said:

"The Committee notes the efforts made by Mr Salmond to ensure all stakeholders were clear that he was acting as Constituency MSP for Gordon and not as First Minister. The Committee notes that stakeholders have made it clear they were aware that Mr Salmond was acting as Constituency MSP for Gordon and not as First Minister at all times."

On paragraph 268, there is nothing in the report to suggest that ministers were anything other than fully mindful of and compliant with the Scottish ministerial code. Ministers will continue to operate in that way.

CBI Scotland's director, Iain McMillan, who is no supporter of the SNP, backed the First Minister. He said on 14 March:

"I said previously that this parliamentary inquiry appeared to be little more than a fishing expedition, and this report is

not likely to change my mind. No evidence of wrong-doing appears to have been found, despite those involved scrambling around looking for reasons to criticise."

As Duncan McNeil said on the same day, "No laws were broken."

During the debate Mr Kerr was asked to reflect on his comments about fiddling—

Robert Brown: On a point of order, Presiding Officer.

Kenneth Gibson: Maybe Mr Kerr was confusing Mr Salmond with his own, floundering party leader—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Gibson. A point of order has been made.

Robert Brown: Mr Gibson referred in his comments to paragraph 268 of the report. He tried to suggest that that in some way backed up the minister's position. What it in fact does, is recommend—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Order. Sit down. That is a point of debate, not a point of order.

Kenneth Gibson: Not every minister is as circumspect in his dealings with Mr Trump as Mr Salmond has been. Freedom of information requests have revealed the extent of former First Minister Jack McConnell's involvement with Mr Trump.

Andy Kerr: In an active planning application? I think not.

Kenneth Gibson: Jack McConnell's personal assistant wrote:

"He thinks he should have a telephone call with Trump."

Touchingly, Mr McConnell even sent Mr Trump a birthday card and said that Mr Trump

"is our most famous Global Scot and that we should continue to court him."

On the call-in, Alex Johnstone said:

"This is absolutely the right decision and I can only hope it is not too late. Last week's decision was, quite simply, the wrong one and does not reflect public opinion. I am delighted by tonight's developments"

from the SNP.

The *Evening Express* stated:

"First Minister Alex Salmond is spot on in his assessment of yesterday's sleaze row as a descent into gutter politics"

by Nicol Stephen. It continued:

"It is tiresome that Nicol Stephen is hijacking attempts to get the Trump bid back on course to score cheap political points. As a North-east MSP we expect him to represent the interests of his constituents, not sling mud at the expense of efforts to rescue the Menie proposals. Mr Stephen is hardly the one to indulge in such heckling."

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Gibson's time is up.

Kenneth Gibson: Excuse me, Presiding Officer, but I had a point of order in the middle of my speech.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Gibson, I make it clear that members are all being kept to a strict time limit. I also point out that I curtailed the point of order. It would be better if you sat down.

Kenneth Gibson: On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I could not take interventions that I would have liked to take because time was taken up by a spurious point of order. In such cases time should be added, should it not?

Duncan McNeil: Leave the chamber.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I can conduct business without advice from members.

I say to Mr Gibson that the decision on the length of speeches is in the hands of the chair. I have decided to limit all members to the time limits decided by the Presiding Officer.

15:42

Johann Lamont (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab): I shall try and restore some calm to the chamber, because there are significant issues to address. I shall do that by starting with a concession to the SNP back benchers: the committee does not believe that there is evidence that Alex Salmond should be hucked off to the pokey. I do not know whether that is a terribly strong position for the Government to be in, but no one is pretending that the law has been broken. The issue is the quality of the judgment of the ministers involved in the process and the consequences that that has had. Members can rubbish the debate as much as they wish, but the fact is that serious people outside the chamber regard these matters as being of national significance and as having serious consequences. We must listen to those people.

It was important for the committee to take on this job. We know that we have a First Minister who plays the person rather than the ball. We also know that we have a First Minister who resists answering any questions and is keen to blame everyone else for everything that happens on his watch. However, it is deeply depressing that that now seems to be elevated to a Government strategy. The role of committees in scrutinising the work of the Executive is a crucial part of Parliament's work and ought not to be rubbished as a waste of time. The day may come when SNP back benchers find themselves a spine and discover that a committee is a place to hold the Executive to account, even if it is their own Government. Can members imagine the hyper-outrage of the SNP if, in previous years, there had

been any suggestion that we ought not to ask questions or hold inquiries? However, that was then, and this is now.

The reality is that the public are interested in the inquiry. Kenny Gibson welcomed it, and who could forget Alex Salmond bouncing into the committee to claim how delighted he was to be there? He was slightly less delighted when we suggested that perhaps his judgment was being called into question and he is slightly less happy now that he has discovered that he has to respond to a serious report about his behaviour.

The Government likes administrative devolution and hates parliamentary scrutiny; it does what it can without accountability to the Parliament. It refuses to make statements, even when instructed to do so by the chamber. Government ministers are serial offenders, but I say to them that accountability goes with the territory. The performance by the Minister for Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change in responding to a serious report gives me grave cause for concern.

The central charges of the report are that the actions of the First Minister were “unwise and inappropriate” and that the actions of Mr Swinney were in danger of imperilling the development. Taken together, their actions send out the message to big business that it can have preferential access, that planning is for the little people and that the normal rules do not apply to it.

I will not allow others in the chamber to misrepresent this issue as a divide between those who are pro-development and those who are against it or between those who are pro-business and those who are not. It is about how our planning system works and how it can support, develop and acknowledge the role of local communities in shaping those developments, which is clearly not easy.

The key issue, which the First Minister himself accepted, is that the action of ministers has to pass the perception test. The feature of the challenges that the First Minister accepted was about the perception of his role. As has been alluded to already, our former First Minister was challenged on the perception of his role in this development—indeed, he was challenged on the perception of who he chose to go on holiday with. Everyone accepts that the perception test applies, so let us apply the perception test, as proposed by Nicola Sturgeon in the past.

Imagine a First Minister—who accepts that he has never done such a thing in his life before, and who was not on ministerial business and was not in his constituency—arriving somewhere in a ministerial car to meet, at short notice, following a decision of the local authority, representatives of

the Trump Organization. He discusses matters with them, phones the chief planner and hands the phone over. A meeting is set up and, subsequently, a “one in a million” decision is made. I have to say that, by this point in the imaginative exercise, Nicola Sturgeon would have been in the stratosphere. However, that was then; this is now.

The First Minister’s defence is that he was taking a precautionary approach. If that is the First Minister being cautious, heaven help us when the day comes when he decides to be reckless.

Everyone on the Government benches says that that is okay, because we are open for business. However, it is plain that the First Minister was acting without thinking of the consequences and, terrified that Trump was going to walk, pulled out all the stops and helped a group of developers who would not use the powers and routes that were available to them.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: One minute.

Johann Lamont: In the past, SNP back benchers chided us for not supporting the third-party right of appeal. Indeed, Jim Mather chided me during the passage of the Planning etc (Scotland) Bill, saying that, by not supporting a third-party right of appeal, we were not supporting communities. We resisted the third-party right of appeal because of its consequences for development. However, now we have a Government that thinks that people do not even need to exercise the first-party right of appeal. How far have we come? Where is the balance now?

John Swinney told us that the issue was of national significance, which was not an argument that was deployed later. The one thing that he did not do—this man who knew everything about the planning system—was act before the decision was made, when the process that resulted in that decision was on-going. That would have solved the problem. Instead, however, he chose to do it later.

I urge everybody—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The member’s time is up, I am afraid.

15:48

Alex Neil (Central Scotland) (SNP): At the start of her speech, Johann Lamont said that the issue was quality of judgment. I think that the quality of judgment of the unionist majority on the committee is what needs to be called into question. They are the people who have given an inquiry into child

poverty in Scotland a much lower priority than this spurious inquiry.

Duncan McNeil: Will the member give way?

Alex Neil: I will later.

Placing child poverty as a poor secondary issue behind this blown-up nonsense is an incredible feat. As someone who served as a committee convener for eight years, I believe that this inquiry is in danger of bringing the whole committee system into disrepute. The role of a committee is to act as a watchdog on the Government, not to engage in a witch hunt, which is what this committee has very clearly done.

Johann Lamont talks about the perception test. The perception out there in the country is that this inquiry is completely spurious, is a waste of time and presents entirely the wrong image about Scotland being open for international business.

I find it amazing that the only charge that there seems to be against the First Minister is that he was acting in a "cavalier" fashion. Can anyone imagine Mike Rumbles accusing someone else of being cavalier? Andy Kerr was cavalier with life and limb when he wanted to close the accident and emergency departments at Monklands and Ayr. That was not just cavalier; it was reckless. Those members have a cheek accusing anyone of being cavalier.

Mike Rumbles (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD): Will the member take an intervention?

Alex Neil: I will take a short intervention from the cavalier Mr Rumbles.

Karen Gillon (Clydesdale) (Lab): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. Will Mr Neil reflect on his comments and lack of courtesy when he suggests that a member might have placed the lives of others in danger?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I am sure that Mr Neil has heard what has been said.

Mike Rumbles: Is Alex Neil's defence of the First Minister in this case simply that he has not broken the law and is therefore not a criminal?

Alex Neil: My defence is that the First Minister has acted on behalf of his constituents as he is supposed to. According to the parliamentary code, all members are under the obligation to stand up for their constituents' interests. As the committee said, the First Minister has done nothing wrong under the law or the ministerial code. The only charge that I have heard today is that he has been cavalier.

Robert Brown: Will the member take an intervention?

Alex Neil: I do not have time.

As the cabinet secretary pointed out in his response to the committee, the report is full of inaccuracies.

David McLetchie: Name one.

Duncan McNeil: Name one.

Alex Neil: The report says that the chief planner endorsed the suggestion that the development is not of national significance, which is a misinterpretation. Also, despite what the committee alleges, the chief planner did not say that the Menie estate application required "one in a million" treatment".

Those are just two examples.

We heard my good friend Mary Scanlon say that the First Minister refused to talk to all the stakeholders, but the whole point is that the First Minister, acting as the MSP for the area, spoke to everyone who had a declared interest in the project.

The Opposition goes on about access. If the First Minister was at the Scottish Trades Union Congress and happened to take the same position on an issue as the STUC did, would that make him cavalier or guilty of some misdemeanour?

Let us look at the Lib-Lab planning record and at the article in the Sunday papers about a planning decision that was made by Johann Lamont when she was a minister. In order to defend a public-private partnership project, she rejected her officials' advice to call in the application—a very cavalier decision indeed. She then refused to release the information and even got to the point of going to the Court of Session to avoid transparency and to keep the matter secret.

We will be taking no lessons from these unionist chancers on any aspect of the report, which is not worth the paper that it is written on. It is entirely a unionist plot to undermine the Scottish National Party Government. The reason why we are at 40 per cent in the polls and the Opposition is trailing is because the people know a scam when they see one, and this report is one.

15:54

Patricia Ferguson (Glasgow Maryhill) (Lab): In opening, as a precaution, I must declare an interest as I am a member of the cross-party group on golf.

It is fair to say that we know that we have rattled their cages when Alex Neil starts to talk about unionist plots when all there is is a consensual committee report. His party's members could only disagree with the recommendations but did not have the gumption to put forward an alternative

view of the recommendations and evidence that we took.

When the Local Government and Communities Committee decided to undertake its inquiry, I presumed that we would find merely that the SNP Government had been a little bit foolhardy or that its inexperience had led it to make some foolish but minor mistakes. I felt sure that there would be little of substance in its actions to criticise. The first evidence session, however, put paid to that idea, as it quickly became clear that that was not the case—something that gave me and other committee members pause for thought.

The discrepancies in the evidence sessions were perhaps the most revealing aspects of the evidence that we received. For example, Alex Salmond said that, at his meeting with the Trump representatives, those representatives were unclear as to the routes ahead and the bulk of the meeting was taken up with Mr Salmond indicating his opinion of what he

“detected about Aberdeenshire Council’s wish to revisit the decision that the infrastructure services committee had made.”—[*Official Report, Local Government and Communities Committee*, 16 January 2008; c 512.]

Mr Salmond also indicated that the Trump Organization was

“uncertain about the process of appeals.”—[*Official Report, Local Government and Communities Committee*, 23 January 2008; c 552.]

However, in his oral evidence to the committee, George Sorial, representing the Trump Organization, by contrast confirmed that the Trump Organization had been given a wide spectrum of advice on the issues that might arise. He said:

“There was never any issue relating to our not understanding our options ... We were aware of the possibility of appealing from the outset.”—[*Official Report, Local Government and Communities Committee*, 6 February 2008; c 655-6.]

Mr Swinney advised the committee that he thought that the planning system was in danger of falling into disrepute because of the contradictory positions that were being adopted within Aberdeenshire Council. Yet, in a statement that was issued on 20 December, Mr Swinney stated:

“The purpose of call in on this occasion is to provide enhanced scrutiny of a planning application which raises issues of national importance and has been the subject of widespread public interest.”

That, however, was further contradicted by the chief planner, who said in his evidence that he wanted to end the “uncertainty” that the situation had caused in the planning process. Who are we to believe?

The First Minister described in great detail how he had taken a precautionary approach in all his

activities around the issue, yet he took advice on the protocol that he should follow from the chief planner, not from the permanent secretary—the one civil servant who might be expected to give authoritative advice on that issue.

I want to correct a point that was made by an SNP member earlier. We did not investigate the actions of ministers in relation to the ministerial code because we do not, as a Parliament or as a committee, have that ability. The sole responsibility for ensuring that ministers adhere to the ministerial code rests with the First Minister.

Perhaps the most damning evidence that the committee received was that of the chief planner, who admitted under questioning that the cabinet secretary made the final decision on the matter without a minute in front of him, with no paper trail—that appeared only after the decision had been made—with no legal advice and on the basis of two five-minute phone calls. The Government made much of the fact that this was an important development proposal—it is: no one would disagree with that. Surely, then, it was important enough to justify at least an advice note setting out the pros and cons of the arguments for call-in, yet it did not get even that.

Indeed, on the day when the decision was made, on the afternoon of 4 December, the chief planner—who one might have expected to have been writing a definitive briefing for the cabinet secretary—managed, between 2.20 pm and 3.45 pm to have a meeting with Mr Sorial and his colleagues; to speak on the telephone with Ann Faulds, the solicitor acting for the Trump Organization; to call Aberdeenshire Council for an update; to reconvene the meeting with Mr Sorial; to call Mr Salmond to tell him that the meeting had taken place; to make the decision, following a discussion with his colleague, Mr Ferguson; to call Aberdeenshire Council again; and, finally, to call Mr Swinney to have the conversation that resulted in the call-in. All of that happened between 2.20 pm and 3.45 pm. That is how much concern and interest the Government showed regarding what was described as a “one in a million” application and decision.

A lot of heat but not a lot of light has been generated by SNP members this afternoon. Many of us feel that problems have arisen for the planning system as a result of the activities of the SNP ministers. I say that more in sorrow than in anger. It would have behoved the SNP members of the committee at least to come forward with an alternative report if they could not sign up to the complete committee report. The fact that they did not do that suggests that they had no justification to give.

16:00

Alison McInnes (North East Scotland) (LD):

The debate is about not the merits of a planning application, but the conduct of Government ministers in their dealings with the applicant. The Local Government and Communities Committee's report deserves careful consideration.

From the outset, the Trump application generated a great deal of interest across the region; there were strongly held and often opposing views in the north-east. At the beginning of December, quite a fevered atmosphere prevailed in the north-east, particularly following the meeting of Aberdeenshire Council's infrastructure services committee, when—perhaps understandably—feelings were running high.

At times like that, it is the responsibility of our most senior members of Government to keep a cool head. Surely we can look to the First Minister and his cabinet secretary to be circumspect in their dealings on such a matter. Surely, given the likelihood of their own involvement as the matter unfolds, we can rely on them to do nothing precipitate, to seek counsel and to consider that advice carefully. Unfortunately, we cannot rely on the Government to do that—quite the opposite. When ministers should have been cool, they were cavalier; when they should have been unbiased, they were unwise; and when they should have been prudent, they displayed poor judgment.

The committee report reveals an ungainly scramble by the First Minister to be seen as Mr Fix-it. Our First Minister jumped in at the deep end without a thought to the consequences, and what a splash he made. The new SNP Government has been hungry to make its mark, and to be seen to make changes and cut through red tape. What happened in December demonstrated the dangerous combination that inexperience and arrogance can be. Many commentators have highlighted how that disregard for the proper process put the whole project at risk. The meddling of ministers that the committee's report exposed not only jeopardised the proper assessment of the application, but might have imperilled the legal validity of the outcome.

The committee's report confirms that view at paragraph 242:

"it seems astonishing to accept that the First Minister did not perceive there might be a risk in his actions, that his actions might be open to question and that as a consequence the decision might be open to legal action."

The Royal Town Planning Institute in Scotland commented recently:

"This has been a testing time for the planning system and for those involved."

The institute continued that it had

"provided evidence to the Scottish Parliament's Communities Committee and noted the importance of the scrutiny of all planning cases being politically impartial and according to planning law and planning policy".

I have long championed the role that land use planning plays in delivering more sustainable communities, and I have always believed that we should encourage greater public involvement in the planning process. However, getting more people involved is a slow process. The first steps include building up trust and understanding of the system, and unfortunately the actions of the ministers last December could well have set that back. Our planning system must command trust and commitment and it must be seen to operate without fear or favour. The committee states in conclusion at paragraph 269 of its report:

"The Committee is concerned by Ministerial action which reinforces the view that there is preferential access for some developers and some developments over others and this clearly will undermine confidence in the balance of the planning system."

Finally, I turn to the evidence that the past chair of the Royal Town Planning Institute, Mr Alistair Stark, gave in committee:

"In one sense, we were stating the blindingly obvious to ourselves: if the system is to survive, planning decisions must be open and in the public eye. The minute that we find that decisions are taken for obscure reasons and behind closed doors, we lose the public's confidence in the system. As I said, we were simply stating the obvious".— [Official Report, Local Government and Communities Committee, 30 January 2008; c 644.]

So far, the Government has shown a demonstrable lack of regard for any kind of proper process. It has been willing to take major decisions behind a smokescreen of evasions, and without an accountable process or audit trail. I invite the First Minister to acknowledge the "blindingly obvious" and undertake to learn the lessons that are outlined in the committee report. It is crucial that the Government acknowledges the importance of acting impartially, and from here on demonstrates that impartiality beyond any doubt in all its actions on planning matters.

16:04

Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): Whenever I or members of other parties attempted to amend the Planning etc (Scotland) Bill in the previous session to empower communities and restrain the worst behaviour of some arrogant developers, we were told that we needed not to change the bill, but to have culture change in the planning system to stop some developers misusing the special privileges that they enjoyed.

Culture change was promised, but what culture change have we seen? We have seen more

centralisation, more attempts to override environmental protection measures and—to be frank—more crawling to the super-rich. When I see a First Minister—Labour or SNP—setting his sights on one of the more tacky and arrogant members of the super-rich and following that person around like a schoolboy with a crush, the only word to describe my feeling is “nausea”.

As if that were not bad enough, the justification for how the process has been handled was that ministers were seeking to protect the planning system’s integrity. They have achieved precisely the opposite—the planning system has been brought into not just disrepute, but further disrepute. I will give just one example of that. John Swinney cited the

“potential impact on important natural heritage resources”

as a justification for the ministerial call-in of an application that had been refused, but there would be no potential impact on natural resources without the call-in, so that explanation is not credible.

How many developers will be tempted to copy the Trump Organization’s appalling tactics now that they have seen how successful they can be? Never mind respect for the local democratic process, participating in the planning system or appealing against a decision, as was the developer’s right. Instead, a developer can just issue an ultimatum—give us what we want or we will walk away—safe in the knowledge that the Scottish Government will capitulate within 30 hours, because when big money talks, Scotland’s Government comes running. I level that accusation at both sides in the Parliament, because when I hear one party accuse another of allowing special access to big business, all that I see is a chamber full of pots and kettles.

However, I welcome the report and its recommendations—particularly the call, which I and others have made for years, for a review of the ministerial code. It is crucial that that review leads to independent scrutiny. MSPs are held to a code. When breaches of that code are alleged, they are scrutinised by someone who is independent of Parliament and of party politics. The same arrangement should apply to the ministerial code. That would not be difficult or controversial to achieve. All parties, including the party in government, should accept that principle. If we want the planning system to regain a shred of the public confidence that we all say we would like it to have, that should be the first and most urgent task.

I will end, as I have no wish to repeat my points. The process has been appalling. The first and most urgent action that we need to take is to review the ministerial code and establish

independent scrutiny, to repair some of the damage that has been done.

16:08

Brian Adam (Aberdeen North) (SNP): It is undoubted that many members’ views are coloured by their opinion of the planning application and not the process, which the debate is about. I might have to plead guilty to that. Many of us have been involved as protagonists in favour or otherwise of the development.

My colleague Alex Neil said that he was very concerned about the status of committees as a consequence of the partial, rather than impartial, way in which the report has been dealt with. His point was well made.

Robert Brown: Will Brian Adam and the other SNP apologists in the chamber accept that a bit of an issue exists when every other party criticises the Government’s actions? Will he address the criticisms in the report?

Brian Adam: That is almost certainly the issue that I am trying to raise. It has been suggested that the SNP members of the Local Government and Communities Committee have not provided an alternative narrative and that that is somehow a failing, but I am aware of no other committee that has produced an alternative narrative when a minority view has been held. In fact, I am slightly concerned about the idea that a narrative is needed—that might well be a story, which is exactly what we have. What is presented is not facts or evidence, but opinion.

Johann Lamont: First, facts have been presented upon which all members of the committee agreed. Secondly, SNP members of the committee made no attempt to explain those agreed facts. Thirdly, does the member accept that the committee made it clear that it was not making a judgment on a development? Indeed, there was probably a range of views in the committee on the development. It is entirely legitimate for a committee of the Parliament to hold ministers to account.

Brian Adam: It is indeed legitimate and proper for committees of the Parliament to hold ministers to account, but the manner in which that is done is important. The conclusions that have been drawn represent an interpretation of events. Connotations have been put on the actions and words of ministers and officials that the evidence does not support. I do not see any requirement whatsoever for three members of the Local Government and Communities Committee to produce an alternative fiction, which is what the report represents.

We have heard that external people are concerned about the process. That is true. The great weight of external evidence on people's opinions of the process is that the inquiry has been a fishing expedition that has caught nothing and has damaged only those who went fishing.

Duncan McNeil: Chasing away business was an issue. Does the member share my disappointment that, despite comments from the sidelines, the Confederation of British Industry, the Institute of Directors and the Scottish Chambers of Commerce gave no response to the committee about failings in the planning system? Does he concede that the Trump Organization had no complaint about or issue with the planning process in Aberdeenshire Council?

Brian Adam: There is no doubt at all about the views of the organisations that Mr McNeil mentions. They believe that the committee inquiry was about petty and partial political point scoring and not about improving the planning process. The report would have been rather more credible if there had been a little more caution in the approach that was taken.

Karen Gillon: Will the member give way?

Brian Adam: I have given way quite a lot.

The Royal Town Planning Institute in Scotland expressed considerable concern about the interpretation that committee members put on its evidence, and it disputed the material that appeared in the final report. That certainly does much to damage the credibility of the process and of members who were involved in it.

David McLetchie: The Royal Town Planning Institute in Scotland said in evidence to the committee that it would not have been beyond the professional capabilities of its members to justify a decision to refuse an application that contravened a local plan and a structure plan. It also said that it was not possible to make an award of expenses against the council where there was reasonable justification for such a refusal by reference to local plans and structure plans. Any suggestion that its evidence was distorted is absolute nonsense. We have a clear demonstration of an organisation that has been got at after the event.

Brian Adam: The Royal Town Planning Institute in Scotland wrote to us and expressed its concerns. That is almost unprecedented.

In light of the fact that we are tight for time, I will be brief. We should simply note the report. What is noteworthy about it is that it is not worthy of any committee of the Parliament.

16:14

Lewis Macdonald (Aberdeen Central) (Lab): It is clear that this debate has implications for how Scottish ministers should deal with major development proposals in sensitive locations in the future. If Scotland is to benefit from the controversy surrounding the application to develop a world-class golf resort on the Menie estate, the lessons that we have learned must be applied to any future reform of the land use planning system and to the actions of the current ministers with responsibility for the operation of the system.

I am a supporter of the proposed development—that is my starting point. In November last year, I lodged a parliamentary motion welcoming the support of Aberdeenshire Council's Formartine area committee for the Trump development. On 4 December, I lodged a further motion in which I took issue with the decision of Aberdeenshire Council's infrastructure services committee to reject the Trump application. It was entirely in order for me to express those views as a member of the Parliament. It would not have been appropriate for me to do so when I had ministerial responsibility for planning, and the same applies to any minister.

As a constituency member, I had no problem with the decision on 4 December to call in the application when it was announced. At the time, there appeared to be some prospect that the call-in would lead to an early decision by ministers. Sadly, any hopes of an early decision soon unravelled, for the reasons that have been properly investigated and explained in detail by the Local Government and Communities Committee in its report. In the event, it took ministers 85 days to get round to announcing that there would be a public local inquiry into the called-in application—a decision that, according to Aberdeenshire Council, could readily have been made before Christmas. It is a simple matter of fact that ministers' intervention failed to achieve a quick decision. Instead, they got into a state of indecision. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the process following the call-in will prove just as time consuming as an appeal by the developers would have been.

Ministers should acknowledge such issues in the context of the objectives that they say they set themselves. If they do so, they can hope to command some respect when making future decisions and avoid the impression that they are making things up as they go along. As the committee showed clearly, Alex Salmond's enthusiasm for the project caused him to act in ways that imperilled its progress. As First Minister, he would have known how important it was to avoid any actions that might give rise to controversy or concern about the integrity of the

planning process, but he failed to take the necessary precautionary approach. I say that in the light of subsequent developments, which were entirely predictable given the controversy that already existed around the local authority's previous decision. Alex Salmond's personal intervention was bound to add to that controversy, which made essential the committee's thorough scrutiny of the planning process and how it operated in this case.

The right response from ministers would be for them to acknowledge positively the criticisms and recommendations that are contained in the committee's report. If ministers really want to strengthen Scotland's reputation as a good place in which to do business, they should not appear to regard parliamentary scrutiny of ministerial actions as irrelevant or partisan. They should be willing to recognise the conclusions of that scrutiny and should resolve to seek to do better next time. It is concerning that Brian Adam, who is the Government chief whip, has pursued the argument that parliamentary scrutiny of ministerial actions is in some way a waste of public money or pursued for partisan ends. That argument carries with it a logic that all parties represented in the chamber should reject out of hand.

Brian Adam: I suggested that the weight of questions that were asked in the inquiry was a waste of money. It has taken a lot of time and money to deliver the committee's report. Does the member acknowledge that more than a whole year of planning officials' time has been taken up dealing with this matter, when it could have been spent much more usefully dealing with planning applications? The committee's time could also have been spent more usefully.

Lewis Macdonald: Mr Adam has confirmed that he regards the committee's scrutiny as a waste of public money and time. That is deeply to be regretted.

In the manner and content of what he said this afternoon in response to the committee's report, Stewart Stevenson provided no reassurance. It is one thing to defend or justify the actions of colleagues but quite another to disparage the legitimate concerns and conclusions of a parliamentary committee. If ministers in a parliamentary democracy have one bounden duty above all others, it is to respect the roles and responsibilities of Parliament and its committees. They should accept the committee's recommendations and respond to them positively and in detail. They should acknowledge that the consequences of their action, unintended as those may have been, have done Scotland's reputation no good, and should seek to ensure that their confusion of roles and responsibilities never again impacts on the planning system.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Trish Godman): I call Bob Doris. You have four minutes, Mr Doris.

16:19

Bob Doris (Glasgow) (SNP): As a member of the Local Government and Communities Committee, I participated in the Menie estate inquiry. During the inquiry, I asked the chief executive of Aberdeenshire Council whether the council had the power, at the beginning of the planning application process, to vary the council's scheme of delegation. In other words, could the full council consider the planning application? Mr Campbell said:

"Yes. With the benefit of hindsight—which is always 20:20—we could have changed the scheme of delegation at the outset. We have now changed it so that matters of regional or national significance are reserved to the whole council."—[*Official Report, Local Government and Communities Committee*, 16 January 2008; c 446.]

Based on that response, I suggested that the committee might wish to consider the conclusion that Aberdeenshire Council had since changed its scheme of delegation in the light of its perceived shortcomings following the Trump application. However, not even that uncontentious suggestion was approved by the highly politicised majority of the committee. Partisanship was apparent right from the start and it badly let down our committee.

Patricia Ferguson: Will the member take an intervention?

Bob Doris: No. The member had six minutes. I have only got four. Please sit down.

I and the two other SNP members of the committee made the fatal mistake of drawing conclusions that were based on facts and evidence. If only the other committee members had attempted to do likewise.

I asked the First Minister what would have happened if the Menie estate application had been approved and he had been contacted by objectors to the plan. Would he have treated the objectors in the same way as he treated the Trump Organization? Mr Salmond said, "Yes, I would." He gave details of previous meetings with objectors, and he went on to say:

"it is my job to help people on all sides of a debate"—[*Official Report, Local Government and Communities Committee*, 23 January 2008; c 535.]

It is clear that there was no favouritism, no preferential treatment and no wrongdoing. Every witness that was called before the committee was clear that they were dealing with Alex Salmond as the constituency MSP for Gordon and not as the First Minister. Why is that not fully reflected in the report?

Everyone who was involved in drafting the report accepts that the call-in decision was competent, that no rules were broken and that there is no evidence of wrongdoing. Other conclusions that appear in the report seem to have been drafted for future Labour and Lib Dem press releases. Those conclusions bear no relation to the evidence that was taken. *[Interruption.]*

I and my SNP colleagues on the committee could not accept conclusions that were not evidence based. To do so would be to do the committee a disservice. Committees should scrutinise—they should not fantasise. When I entered the Parliament last May, the good reputation and strength—

Karen Gillon: Will the member give way?

Bob Doris: You are fantasising if you think that you are getting in.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Excuse me. Mr Doris, you are in your final minute, and I will decide when someone sits down. Ms Gillon, would you keep your voice down, please?

Bob Doris: The inquiry was a fishing exercise, and what a bunch of anglers we have on the Opposition benches today. I say to them that the inquiry was more about politicking and point scoring. They should not drag down our Parliament's committee system with those things—that is simply not acceptable.

The length of time that the committee took is appalling. The investigation took 22 hours of committee time. That is not acceptable, given that we spent only four hours on fuel poverty and delayed our inquiry into child poverty. That use of time does not reflect the priorities for which I came into politics.

I would like us, as a committee, to move on together. We should put away the politicisation, bury the hatchet and help the people whom I and the SNP went into politics to help.

16:23

Mike Rumbles (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD): Some MSPs have been uncomfortable with this important debate, including Stewart Stevenson, Bob Doris and Brian Adam. They are so uncomfortable with what the committee's inquiry revealed that they seek to denigrate the work of MSPs on the committee and they say that the inquiry was a waste of time and money.

The committee's report makes it clear that there are major criticisms of ministers' actions in dealing with the Trump application. As we heard, there are 46 such criticisms of their role—

Stewart Stevenson: Not a shred of evidence.

Mike Rumbles: The minister will not listen to the debate. That is the problem. He should listen.

The most important point that the committee makes in the report is that, when ministers deal with planning applications, they should not only act appropriately but be seen to act appropriately. Why is it so important that ministers are seen to act without fear or favour? Because if they do not, they risk undermining public support for a fair and open system, and there is a real danger that the planning system will be seen as having been corrupted.

We cannot have a situation in which people are granted special privileges because they are international celebrities, as is the case with Mr Trump. The committee report makes it clear that special privileges were, indeed, accorded to Mr Trump's application. Of that there is no doubt.

I would like members to imagine the scene. The First Minister is in a room at the extremely plush Marcliffe Hotel, which is not in his constituency. He takes out his mobile phone and rings Jim Mackinnon, our nation's chief planning officer. The conversation goes something like this, "Hello, Jim, it's the First Minister here. Yes, yes, I know I'm the boss, but I'm ringing you as the MSP for Gordon. The Trump team would like to have a meeting with you tomorrow for a briefing on the application process. Yes, I know they've got the best lawyers and the best advice money can buy, but they still want to meet you. No, Jim, it won't be difficult to reach them at such short notice. Hang on—George Sorial is with me now. Stay on the phone and I'll pass you over to him."

I leave it to others to judge whether the First Minister was doing his bounden duty.

Alex Neil: Will the member tell us about the phone calls between Nicol Stephen and Tavish Scott about the Aberdeen western peripheral route?

Mike Rumbles: Desperation. *[Interruption.]*

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Order.

Mike Rumbles: I can only guess that if it had been Nigel Don—God forgive me—or another MSP who represents the north-east who had rung the chief planner, they would not have received quite the same response.

The First Minister's response that, by helping out the Trump team in that way, he was only doing his bounden duty is seen for what it is—a nonsense.

I represent the First Minister's neighbouring constituency, where consideration of two planning applications for golf resorts is nearing completion; indeed, the Blairs application was successful today.

Alasdair Allan: Will the member give way?

Mike Rumbles: Listen to this, please.

Between them, those applications involve proposals to build two hotels, two resorts and more than 500 houses in my constituency. Why has there not been the same fuss? First, because both developers have worked with the council and have not taken the take-it-or-leave-it stance that was adopted by Mr Trump's team. Secondly, neither I, as the constituency MSP for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine, nor any of the MSPs for the North East Scotland region, have intervened citing a bounden duty to do so. [*Interruption.*] No such duty exists. [*Interruption.*] Quite the reverse—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: One moment, please. There are far too many sedentary comments coming from the front bench.

Mike Rumbles: Such intervention is both unwise and, as is evident from Mr Salmond's cavalier approach to planning, completely counterproductive.

Unfortunately, the Trump debacle is not the only case of inappropriate ministerial intervention in the planning process. As Andy Kerr said, five ministers, including the First Minister and Mike Russell—who is present—intervened to ensure that nothing went wrong with the Aviemore application. Incidentally, Mike Russell came to my clinic to make it absolutely clear that he had not intervened in the process, despite the fact that his press release said that he had.

Thanks to the way in which the Government has handled the issue, the perception of developers up and down the land will be clear. They will believe that it is helpful to an application to get an international celebrity on board, or to donate money to a political party. They will also feel that they will certainly be able to get special treatment from this Government. The Lewis wind farm developers might feel that that is where they went wrong and that they will not make the same mistake again.

If ministers have learned anything from this sorry experience, surely they have learned not to give special treatment to anyone. By the way, they must also learn to take heed of the Parliament. They should take heed of the recent resolution—the SNP opposed the motion, but it was carried—that the best way to investigate complaints about the actions of ministers is not to leave things to the First Minister, but for him to appoint an independent person to investigate them. The people of Scotland expect the First Minister to fulfil the wishes of the Parliament on the matter and to do it soon.

16:30

Alex Johnstone (North East Scotland) (Con): I welcome the opportunity that the debate presents to conclude this episode on the planning application at the Menie estate. I will not try to influence the opinion of SNP members. Given that it has wheeled out the Rottweilers, I suspect that the Government's intention is not to change its mind.

However, we have to take into account some comments from SNP members, in particular Bob Doris, who mentioned the actions of Aberdeenshire Council and its committees that led to this event. His attempt to muddy the waters by trying to inject controversy about the nature of the decision is not what the debate is about. Essentially, the report that we are debating is on the Government's handling of the matter.

Bob Doris: If that is not what we are here to debate, why is it mentioned in the report's conclusions—not just our version of it?

Alex Johnstone: Not in your version of it?

As an individual, I was one of the people who was very supportive of the application. I avoided—quite deliberately—accepting any invitation from the applicants in order that I could take the opportunity, wherever possible, to support the investment in principle. I did that because I believe that it is of significant regional importance. Once the Aberdeenshire Council committee had made its decision, I welcomed the First Minister's decision to move forward as he did. However, evidence was brought before me that caused me to review that position.

I welcome the Local Government and Communities Committee report, which has opened up in detail the facts that surrounded the actions that the First Minister, and ministers who operate under him, took. Their actions have done more to put at risk this potential investment than they have done to bring it closer to fruition. Furthermore, instead of giving the impression that Scotland is open for business, their actions have given the impression that Scotland is a dark, third-world economy where who someone knows is more important than what they know. It is therefore my pleasure to welcome the report.

Looking at the facts, it is particularly alarming that the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth, having decided to call in the Trump application after two short phone calls with the chief planner, obtained no further legal advice or advice from officials before making the call-in decision, which he took within five days of the application being refused by Aberdeenshire Council. On the other hand, the decision to call a public inquiry has taken 85 days, and the inquiry will not commence until 10 June, which is 210

days from the date of the original decision. That makes a mockery of the sense of urgency that the First Minister appeared to show at the outset.

The unprecedented nature of the call-in, following Aberdeenshire Council's refusal of the application, suggests strongly that ministers' motivation was that they simply did not like the council's decision. They were prepared to compromise the planning system by calling in the application on a legal technicality instead of insisting that the applicant proceed by way of an appeal. As the committee stated, if the development was of "national importance", surely that was the case before the council took its decision. The application should have been called in earlier.

The Government's actions run contrary to the terms of the Planning etc (Scotland) Act 2006, which are that the planning system must be development-led. The act sets out the clear procedures that are to be followed to ensure that all parties—developers and communities—have their cases heard.

Johann Lamont: Is the member aware that, in the advice from planning officials to the cabinet secretary, the position was made explicit. The advice sets out:

"We had previously expected that the council would resolve to grant consent, thereby triggering notification".

Clearly, John Swinney's response was to the fact that the application had been refused. That is shown in the advice that he received.

Alex Johnstone: I thank Johann Lamont for pointing that out.

The Conservative members support the committee's conclusion that,

"far from taking a precautionary approach, the First Minister was cavalier in his actions and displayed, at best, exceptionally poor judgement and a worrying lack of awareness"

about the potential consequences of his actions. Furthermore, we support the committee's recommendation that the review of the ministerial code that the First Minister is carrying out should examine the

"appropriateness of Ministerial contact with senior officials in the context of planning applications".

We in Scotland value the fact that our planning system is quasi-judicial and free of political interference. As politicians, we rightly express opinions outside the decision-making process so that policy can be informed and developed over time. The actions of the Executive and, in particular, the First Minister have thrown that previous definition out of context and into question.

16:36

Sarah Boyack (Edinburgh Central) (Lab): At the start of the debate, Duncan McNeil set out calmly and succinctly why the committee became involved in the issue and he then took us through the recommendations extremely effectively. I was deeply disappointed by the minister's aggressive stance, which was unusual for a minister in speaking in a committee debate. It is not up to ministers to decide whether a committee has set itself the right agenda or to dispute whether it can legitimately engage in ministers' activities. That is parliamentary accountability. Anyone who has been a minister will have had tough questions put to them—it goes with the job.

We must deal with the hard facts. The committee members signed up to the evidence that was before them, although they disputed the conclusions that could be drawn. I would have liked the minister to engage seriously with the committee's conclusions, but he did not and does not seem to have taken on board any of the committee's points. That is an outstanding issue. I would like Mike Russell to confirm in his summing-up speech that the response to the report that John Swinney wrote on 27 March is the Scottish Government's full response to the committee. It is patronising and it fails to give the committee credit for understanding the planning system. We expected a more detailed and considered response to such a lengthy inquiry report from a committee. Such reports should not be disregarded just because they are inconvenient to ministers.

The core issue is about the perceptions of how ministers acted—Patricia Ferguson made that point extremely effectively and other members made it time and again. That is a tough test, but there are major issues at stake, including the fundamental integrity of our planning system and Parliament's ability to scrutinise ministers' work. It is vital that, in any planning decision, all parties can be confident that due process has been observed. They may not like the outcome—anyone who has been a minister or been involved in a planning decision will know that unanimity is never reached on the outcome of a planning decision, but people must know that their views were listened to and considered and that the system is fair.

When planning decisions and issues come to ministers' desks, they will by definition never be easy, which is why we must ensure that the process is robust and taken seriously. Local councillors and the Scottish ministers must be politically accountable, because the decisions that are taken affect our communities. The entire planning system is based on the principle that the outcomes, mediated by development plans and

guided by national planning guidance, must be in the public interest. The crucial point is that the planning system works on the basis of trust that evidence that members of the public and developers give is considered properly against the policy framework. People must have confidence in the system.

Patrick Harvie: Does Sarah Boyack agree that one consequence that has not received much attention is that we now have a system in which a councillor can be sacked for reaching what others regard as the wrong conclusion? Does she agree that that situation endorses her comments on local decision making?

Sarah Boyack: I agree that there have been a number of unfortunate consequences. Local councillors should have the right to take decisions. If their constituents do not like those decisions, they know precisely what to do with those representatives. The key thing is that decisions should not be taken on party-political grounds. It is entirely appropriate for ministers to take political decisions once they have considered all the evidence from their officials—there is a lengthy process for that in the Scottish Government. It is important that the recommendations of officials are considered. Ministers do not have to agree with them, but they must consider them and be responsible and accountable for their decisions. All parties have to know that the evidence has been properly considered and that the process is robust.

I found Mary Scanlon's analysis and insight into the Aviemore planning application process fascinating and disturbing in equal measure. We would all agree that there are issues about the speed of the process, and that there is always scope for improving the performance of local authorities and statutory consultees—and indeed the Scottish Government. However, the rules and process exist and people have to know that the rules are being abided by at every stage of the process.

Ministers cannot cut corners. The checks and balances exist to protect the process. The ministerial code exists not just to protect the integrity of the planning process but to protect ministers from universal criticism such as they are experiencing today. If they ignore the ministerial code, they do so at their peril. I do not believe that ministers deliberately set out to undermine the planning system, but I urge them to reflect on the unanimity of criticism in the chamber. When Patrick Harvie is on board in respect of a criticism, it is not a unionist plot. I ask ministers to take the criticisms and consider them in more depth.

Alex Salmond's plea that he was acting as a local member and not the First Minister would have had more credibility if he had done what the

ministerial code suggests and not got a special adviser involved to fix up his meetings. The code is clear: it is subjective—that is the point of it. If there is any interpretation that the Government has failed the code, it is that it has failed it in planning terms. I am not expecting Mike Russell to eat humble pie—the mood from the SNP will not let us go there—but I ask ministers to reflect on the criticisms and ensure that their future decisions cannot be challenged by members and by thousands of people throughout Scotland. That is the core issue today.

16:42

The Minister for Environment (Michael Russell): I reiterate something that Stewart Stevenson said at the beginning of his speech. He said:

“we were clear all along that ministers and officials had at all times acted properly, objectively and in full accordance with planning legislation, the Scottish ministerial code and all other requirements.”

That was our view at the start of the process, it was our view during the process, and it is our view now. Not a single thing we have heard this afternoon contradicts that view.

I will come to scrutiny in a moment, because I welcome scrutiny. Alas, however, the committee inquiry was not scrutiny. The problem that we have been faced with this afternoon has been the fatal intermingling of opinion and fact. It has not been an edifying debate. As I will say later, it is a debate that will have damaged Parliament, just as the report damages Parliament. Why? It is because of the way in which facts—there is virtually no disagreement about facts—became opinion, which became innuendo. Johann Lamont made that admission during the debate. She started in her inimitable way by saying that she accepted that the First Minister would not go to pokey because of the report and went on to admit that the report is about opinion. Essentially, the report is about style rather than substance; it is subjective, not objective. That is where we have the problem.

Johann Lamont: Will the minister take an intervention?

Michael Russell: No, I want to make progress, because there are facts that need to be dealt with.

Paragraph 149 says that

“it has taken 85 days for Scottish Ministers to come to a different conclusion.”

That is innuendo. Here are the facts that lie behind it. First, Aberdeenshire Council had been dealing with the application for a considerable time and was well aware of the issues that it raised. The comparison was between Government decision

making and Aberdeenshire Council decision making. Secondly, the council needed only to consider and request its own preferred method for dealing with the application. Thirdly, the Government needed to become familiar with all relevant issues. Fourthly, the Government needed to ensure that the process would be legally competent. Finally—if those four facts are not strong enough—no one should underestimate the impact that the committee's inquiry, the 175 parliamentary questions and the 130 freedom of information requests had on the amount of time that was available.

Andy Kerr: In a television interview with me on the BBC, Mr Russell said that the Government got involved in the Aviemore case only as a result of cross-party intervention by Mary Scanlon and other members. However, the responses to parliamentary questions tell us that the Government was involved in the case six months earlier than that.

Michael Russell: I will come to Aviemore shortly—although of course I reject what Mr Kerr has said. I am surprised that he wants to revisit the matter, following the comprehensive rebuttal that he got in that interview. I will be happy to rerun it for anybody who wants to see it.

Let me deal now with an issue that Mr Rumbles raised—again, it is the difference between fact and opinion. The inference that Mr Rumbles made was that no MSP is able to consult the chief planner, but this very day, Jackie Baillie met the chief planner to discuss a planning issue in her constituency. There is an issue for members to consider—it is about fact versus opinion.

Patricia Ferguson said, obviously referring to paragraph 238, that there is some strangeness in the fact that the First Minister had consulted the chief planner, rather than the permanent secretary. The issue is presented in the report as if there is something odd about that. Who else would the First Minister consult? The chief planner has the clearest understanding of the operation of the planning system and, through years of experience, he can advise on the operation of the ministerial code in the context of planning applications. That point is one of innuendo and opinion, not fact. That is where the problem lies.

Patricia Ferguson: Will the minister take an intervention?

Michael Russell: No, I will not.

Scrutiny is not damaging: scrutiny is to be welcomed. However, when scrutiny becomes prejudice and is no longer about fact, but is merely about opinion, it damages Parliament. Alas, that is what we have seen today.

The debate is about something very simple: it is the outward and visible sign of the inward and disabling chaos in Labour. I am sorry that the Tories and the Liberals have been sucked into it, but the reality is that Labour is in a dreadful state, and the committee's report is an attack on the people of Scotland's decision to reject the Labour Party. *[Interruption.]*

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Order.

Michael Russell: The leader of the Labour Party, in one of her many launches—she has been launched more often than most Scottish lifeboats, and there is a connection there too—claimed that she often considered what she called “a Buddhist mantra” when considering what to say. She quoted a short version of the actual quotation, which is:

“Before you speak, think—Is it necessary? Is it true? Is it kind? Will it hurt anyone? Will it improve on the silence?”

Presiding Officer, as you probably know, that is not a Buddhist mantra; it is a saying of Sri Sathya Sai Baba, who is the guru of the Hard Rock Cafe. Putting that aside, I ask these questions in conclusion. Was the inquiry kind? No, it was not. I do not just mean to the First Minister; we know that Labour members do not like the First Minister, because he is successful. The inquiry was unkind, to developers—*[Interruption.]*

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Order.

Michael Russell: The First Minister is among my closest friends, because he has led my party and this country—

Karen Gillon: Will the minister take an intervention?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Ms Gillon, resume your seat.

Michael Russell: The First Minister has led my party and this country to unprecedented success.

Is the report kind? No, and it is unkind not just to the First Minister or to me; it is unkind to officials, developers, planners and civil servants, and it is unkind to Parliament and the country.

Is the report true? No it is not. Those who signed the report fatally confused opinion and fact.

Is it necessary? We welcome the opportunity for scrutiny, but that scrutiny was a fishing expedition, which became ultra vires when it looked at the Aviemore planning application.

Finally, on the Wendy test, will it hurt anyone? It has already hurt somebody. It has hurt the reputation of Scotland. If this process—this triumph of the partisan over the parliamentary—goes on and is carried to its ultimate end, it will damage jobs and families in Scotland. It is

damaging the Parliament of Scotland. The silence has not been improved on.

I recommend another conclusion to the Labour Party. Sri Sathya Sai Baba had another thought. He said that discipline trains us to put up with disappointment. This report is about the disappointment of the Labour Party. It is a travesty. Scotland should now move on.

16:51

David McLetchie (Edinburgh Pentlands)
(Con): Sarah Boyack said in her winding-up speech that, fundamentally, the inquiry is about the integrity of the planning system in Scotland. It is about the balance that is to be struck by Government ministers between, on one hand, promoting and encouraging economic development and inward investment in our country and, on the other hand, considering how to deal with the consequential planning applications.

No one disputes the fact that the First Minister or any minister of any Scottish Government of any political complexion have key roles and responsibilities in relation to economic development. Of course major investors have to be encouraged, informed and even assisted to make their proposals reality. However, there comes a point at which a line is crossed. That point is when a site for development is identified and the proposal enters the planning process as an application for consideration by the council or, in some instances, the Government. At that stage, the politicians who are involved in consideration of it, be they local councillors or ministers, must be not only above reproach but seen to be above reproach, because the planning system is a quasi-judicial process.

Applications have to be considered by reference to local plans and national guidelines. Judgments have to be made by reference to a complex mix of factors, which are often difficult to reconcile but are grounded in a process that allows everyone to have their say, make their points and feel that their views will be considered properly. We stray from those principles at our peril.

The question that has to be asked in relation to the Trump application is whether, on balance, the decisions by Government ministers compromised the integrity of the system by giving the impression that the Government's overwhelming desire was to facilitate approval, as opposed to consideration, of the application.

Public reaction to the call-in shows that it was popular. However, the reason for the high approval ratings was that it was perceived that the Government had stepped in to save the project and ensure that the Trump Organization would not up sticks and take its money elsewhere. In other

words, public approval was based on the public's assumption and perception that the development was now a shoo-in and would now be approved by the Government, and that the bold Alex had stepped in and saved the day. The creation of that perception might make for good politics, but it makes for a poor planning process.

If people think beyond the merits and demerits of the Trump application and look at the wider context, they will be very concerned. The situation should be as much of a concern to the business community, which sometimes takes a rather gung-ho approach to planning, as it is to residents of a community who might well have an unwelcome development landed on their doorstep without their objections being given fair consideration.

I single out the business community, because, as we have seen in other cases, there are often competing development proposals in an area. Such competition needs to be encouraged, but it will not be encouraged if the impression is given that a particular developer finds special favour and is given special treatment or special access.

Let us examine the actions of Government ministers in this context, based on the evidence. The first question in relation to the First Minister is the propriety of his privately meeting representatives of the Trump Organization. We know that Mr Salmond is the constituency member and that he met the Trump representatives in that capacity, despite arriving with all the trappings of ministerial office. However, if we are considering perception, was it really in order for the constituency MSP, who happened to be the First Minister, to meet only the applicant at that time? Mr Salmond was not a councillor, he allegedly had no role in the planning process and, by his own admission in evidence to the committee, he was no expert on Scottish planning. Why was he involving himself in the process at such a sensitive time and acting as a facilitator on behalf of the applicant? I will put the question in another way. Let us imagine that the good people of Gordon did not elect Alex Salmond as their constituency MSP last May. Does any member seriously think that the Trump Organization would have rushed to meet Nora Radcliffe?

Let us consider John Swinney's actions. The decision to call in the application at such a stage was unprecedented in the annals of Scottish planning history, but Mr Swinney took that decision on the advice of the chief planner, not after due and careful consideration of the implications, but on the strength of two five-minute telephone conversations, as we heard in evidence. We were asked to believe that the decision had to be made in that timescale, because there was a serious risk that a decision letter would be signed and the option would be closed off. The pen was

poised, the clock was ticking—it was a race against time. What nonsense. On being pressed, the chief planner admitted that the decision could have waited at least another 24 hours, and the chief executive of Aberdeenshire Council said in evidence that it could have taken up to a fortnight to issue the decision letter.

What was the rush? The rush was, of course, created by the Trump Organization, which, in pursuit of its legitimate interests as a developer, had mounted an expert public relations campaign in which it had threatened to pull out of Scotland unless matters were resolved to its satisfaction within 30 days. To put it simply, Mr Swinney and the SNP Government were conned. The Trump Organization was bluffing in a high-stakes game of poker, to get the cabinet secretary to call in the application so that it would not have to appeal against refusal of the application. Instead of calling the Trump Organization's bluff, the cabinet secretary folded his cards. That was a good result for the Trump Organization but a bad result for the Scottish planning system.

The official reason for the call-in was that the application raised issues of national importance. As members pointed out, if the application raised issues of national importance after the council's infrastructure services committee's decision, it certainly raised them beforehand, so why was it not called in earlier? There has been a series of spurious *ex post facto* justifications and rationalisations for the decision, none of which held up before scrutiny in the committee's inquiries. If members doubt what I say, they should read the facts, examine the evidence and judge for themselves whether the committee's conclusions are fair and valid.

In any inquiry, evidence must be assessed, conclusions drawn and recommendations made. In the case that we are debating, we are asked by the Scottish Government to believe that the actions and interventions of the First Minister, in whatever capacity, had no bearing on the outcome. We are asked to believe that it is reasonable for a planning minister to take a wholly unprecedented decision on the basis of a couple of telephone calls. We are asked to believe that a call-in was justified because it raised issues of national importance after 29 November, although apparently it did not do so before 29 November. We are asked to believe that the Trump Organization's statements that they would not appeal the infrastructure services committee's decision but would withdraw from investing in Scotland unless matters were sorted to their satisfaction had no bearing on the decision to call in the application, because all had been carefully decided by Mr Mackinnon a few days earlier, over the weekend.

Whenever we Scots are presented with a series of spurious justifications and explanations, which stretch the bounds of credulity to breaking point, we make a terse and succinct response: "Aye, right." That, in a nutshell, is the committee's conclusion on the Government's conduct.

Grangemouth Refinery (Industrial Action)

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson): The next item of business is a statement by John Swinney on industrial action at Grangemouth. The minister will take questions at the end of his statement and therefore there should be no interventions.

17:00

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth (John Swinney): I am grateful for the opportunity to provide Parliament with further information on the industrial action that is planned on Sunday and Monday at the INEOS refinery at Grangemouth. The First Minister wrote to the Presiding Officer and the other party leaders on Sunday to outline the action that is being taken by the Government and our key partners.

It is not acceptable to the Scottish Government for the dispute to go unresolved. We urge INEOS and Unite to make every effort to resolve their differences. We therefore hope that the matter will be resolved by constructive and urgent dialogue.

To support such dialogue, at various stages over the past few days the First Minister and I have encouraged the management and the unions to take part in talks to resolve their disagreements. The Government has also taken the initiative of offering both parties a constructive intervention to assist discussions between the management and the unions.

We arranged for an independent pensions expert—Stewart Ritchie, who is president of the Faculty of Actuaries—to carry out a study to clarify the issues that are in dispute regarding proposals for the future of the INEOS pension fund. As president of the faculty, he is uniquely placed to provide independent and quality advice of the sort that is required to help the parties find a resolution to the issues. That proposal has been made available to the Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service, where both parties have been involved in talks, and it remains on offer to help resolve the issue.

Given the possibility that industrial action will take place, INEOS has initiated a process of shutting down the plant ahead of the planned action this weekend. That work started last Friday. Following any action, it will take time for the plant to return to full production. As a result of agreements that were reached at ACAS, we expect that the resumption of fuel production should take place within a matter of days.

The strike has the potential to affect all sectors of Scottish society and the Scottish economy. We

are therefore taking the issue extremely seriously. United Kingdom ministers—with whom we are in regular contact—have powers in relation to continuity of fuel supplies under energy legislation. We are responsible for consequence management in Scotland.

Ministers first discussed the potential strike at a routine meeting last Wednesday of the Cabinet sub-committee on emergencies, which was chaired by the Cabinet Secretary for Justice. Ministers have now met in the emergency committee eight times, and will continue to meet as necessary.

We have activated the Scottish Government emergency room and our wider contingency planning arrangements to ensure that urgent and prudent actions are taken at local and national levels and across key sectors. That work is focusing on three main aspects: assessing the potential impact of any disruption to fuel production at the refinery; making every effort to source alternative fuel supplies in the event that the action goes ahead; and ensuring that appropriate contingency arrangements are in place to mitigate any possible impact on key services and on people across Scotland.

On the potential consequences of a temporary loss of fuel production at Grangemouth, a great deal of work is in hand to manage existing stocks to meet demand. BP has distributed additional supplies to forecourts in advance of the proposed action. Work is also in hand to source alternative fuel stocks from elsewhere in the UK to continue to meet demand across Scotland.

We are confident that, with good will on all sides, there will be enough fuel to keep Scotland moving. Ample supplies of fuel are available in Scotland into May, and we anticipate that stocks can be maintained.

An important message, however, is that people should not change their normal fuel buying patterns. We therefore urge the people of Scotland to be sensible and only to buy the fuel that they need. We encourage people to make the journeys that they require to make and to use public transport.

We will continue to monitor demand and to work with fuel retailers to manage the situation. It would clearly be unacceptable if any retailer were to take advantage of the potential of localised fuel shortages to increase prices. I call on all retailers to ensure that increased prices are avoided at all costs.

A wide range of activity is under way to assess the potential consequences of any temporary reduction in fuel supplies. INEOS, BP, transport operators and others are working to ensure that we have provision of fuel supplies. Scottish

ministers and Scottish Government officials are meeting regularly to liaise with the oil industry and local responders to monitor the situation and to consider the potential impacts of fuel disruption on key public services. All eight of Scotland's strategic co-ordinating groups, which comprise local emergency services, local authorities and other key groups, are considering the potential regional issues and contingency arrangements. Those issues are being relayed back to Government through our emergency room, to ensure that our activity is driven not only nationally but by the potential issues on the ground.

Scottish Government officials are also in direct contact with individual operators and agencies—for example, those in the transport industry—to ensure that issues are considered across every part of Scottish life.

The issue of upstream production will not, of course, affect consumer supply. However, during the day, it has become clear that there might be an impact on the BP Kinneil plant, which controls the Forties pipeline system. Although that plant would be ready to operate soon after the end of any industrial action, there remains the possibility of disruption to production, which currently stands at 725,000 barrels of crude oil and 80 million cubic metres of gas a day. That could place a substantial penalty on upstream production, and could affect almost a third of oil producers in Scotland, none of which is party to the current dispute between INEOS and Unite.

Should any shortages arise, the local, regional and national arrangements that I referred to a moment ago are in place to ensure that prudent contingency measures to prepare for potential scenarios are taken. Those measures will vary across areas and sectors, but all will focus on maintaining essential services, minimising any impact on the public and ensuring that there is a speedy return to normality.

Within that activity, the Scottish Government will work to ensure that essential services operate as normal. We will ensure that any key supply issues for public transport, food deliveries and the emergency services are addressed.

Although we hope that the dispute can be settled to the satisfaction of all concerned, the Scottish Government will continue to take proactive and thorough contingency measures to secure fuel supplies and to prepare for the consequences of any action.

Parliament can be assured that we are continuing to liaise with the UK Government, INEOS, BP and key responders, and that we are monitoring the situation closely. Ministers and officials are meeting as required to monitor

developments and provide a national overview and direction.

While the situation continues, the Scottish Government's emergency room will remain in operation to support the activity of Scottish ministers and officials. It is also co-ordinating the detailed activity of the Government across the potentially affected areas and is responding to national issues that are raised by local responders.

We will, of course, keep Parliament updated on the situation as it develops.

The Presiding Officer: As I indicated earlier, the minister will now take questions. We have around 20 minutes for those questions, after which we will move to the next item of business.

Ms Wendy Alexander (Paisley North) (Lab): My front-bench colleague, Iain Gray, who has been liaising with Mr Swinney on these matters, apologises for not being with us—he is at a family funeral today.

Is the minister aware of claims in newspaper reports in the north-east of Scotland that security guards are now on duty on at least one petrol station forecourt and that some petrol stations are now limiting the amount of fuel that motorists can buy? What assurances can he give that contingency measures are now in place to ensure that such shortages do not become commonplace if the situation continues to deteriorate?

In the advance paper copy of the statement that was provided to Opposition parties, there was no mention of the potential disruption to supplies from the Forties pipeline, but I noted that, in the oral version of the statement, the minister referred to that issue. What action does the Scottish Government plan to take to minimise the impact of industrial action on oil production in Scotland as a result of disruption affecting the Forties pipeline?

Does the minister agree with Labour's members that it was inappropriate for INEOS management to initiate legal action against Unite while the ACAS talks were under way, and that the ACAS process would be best assisted if there were no resort to legal action?

John Swinney: I will, of course, be delighted to update Iain Gray on developments during the next few days, as we discussed earlier this week.

On the press reports about fuel shortages, I am certain that some filling stations will run out of fuel during the period that lies ahead. Petrol stations run out of fuel when there is no petrol shortage, or any threat of one; it just happens. We have to be responsible about the way in which we deal with those issues publicly. Ministers will certainly do that, and we will take action where we possibly can to encourage the fuel suppliers to guarantee

that, across the country, there will be continuity of supply.

On that point, we are in active and regular discussions with the United Kingdom Government, which carries responsibility under the devolution settlement for the continuity of fuel supply.

On Ms Alexander's second question about the Forties pipeline, production in the North Sea is obviously very important to the Scottish and UK economies. Ensuring continuity in relation to the Forties pipeline depends on whether and for how long the BP Kinneil plant can receive steam from the Grangemouth plant. If disruption is kept to a minimum, any disruption to the Forties pipeline will be minimised into the bargain. Obviously, we are encouraging co-operation between the unions and management to ensure that such interruptions are kept to a minimum.

On the actions of INEOS and the ACAS talks, the Government is clear that the way to sort out the issue is by discussions around the table at ACAS. We offered the management and the unions a constructive solution on Monday when we offered to provide specialist actuarial support to assess the pensions dispute that lies at the heart of the problem. We encourage the parties to get around the table and talk. I suspect that, when we are trying to bring the parties together to resolve the problem, the less commentary given by everyone concerned, the better.

Derek Brownlee (South of Scotland) (Con): I also thank the cabinet secretary for his statement, and for his comments about fuel supplies for the public and public services.

I agree with the cabinet secretary that it is unacceptable that the dispute remains unresolved. The issue is too important to Scotland for the situation to be allowed to drag on, and the signal that the dispute is in danger of sending out about Scotland as a place in which to do business could have severe and damaging consequences beyond what is currently being suggested.

On the point that the cabinet secretary made about oil and gas production, he will be aware of the statement made by Oil and Gas UK today, in which the organisation makes the fair point that if production has to be stopped, it cannot simply be restarted. If the dispute rallies and continues beyond one stoppage, it could have a significant adverse impact, not just on oil and gas production on the UK continental shelf, but on the Scottish economy and on all the contractors and associated businesses that are dependent on the sector. What, specifically, is the Scottish Government—along with the UK Government—able to do to ensure that that sector is not penalised by a dispute, which, as the cabinet secretary said, it has nothing to do with?

John Swinney: Those issues are material to the potential impact of a prolonged dispute on the Scottish economy. We will certainly continue to encourage a dialogue at ACAS to resolve the dispute because that is how the matter can be properly addressed.

The First Minister has been in touch with ACAS regularly during the past few days to encourage that discussion. We were all disappointed that the talks did not reach a successful conclusion yesterday, but we are reassured by ACAS's enthusiasm for continuing to pursue the issue. It has made it clear that it will be in contact with both parties every day to encourage further dialogue and discussion. That is the best way to resolve the problem.

On the impact on the Scottish economy, a resolution of the dispute is the quickest way to avoid any negative impact, and ministers will continue to argue that that is the best solution.

Tavish Scott (Shetland) (LD): I thank the cabinet secretary for the advance copy of his statement. I also agree with his sentiments on ending the dispute as quickly as possible.

The First Minister said earlier that there is a "substantial and ample" stock of fuel to cope. The cabinet secretary said in his statement that the Government needs to "mitigate any possible impact" and that, should any shortage arise, the Government will act. Does the Government realise that the impact is being felt now and that there are shortages?

If, as ministers say, fuel stocks are "substantial and ample", why are petrol stations on the A9 without fuel today—in April, not in May? From Evanton north, there are shortages of diesel; stocks do not exist in many rural areas; and speculation is pushing up prices. In the Borders, the local NFU Scotland representatives have told Jeremy Purvis that there is no red diesel available because of the situation at Grangemouth. Even the Shell petrol station that is close to the Parliament has run out of diesel and, this afternoon, increased its petrol prices by 1p a litre.

The First Minister told Parliament earlier that fuel would last well into May; yet, just an hour later, Lothian Buses reported that there would be no buses from Sunday onwards. Will the cabinet secretary confirm that, this afternoon, the Minister for Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change telephoned Lothian Buses to guarantee supplies for Edinburgh? If that is the case, does that guarantee from Scottish ministers extend to every bus operator in Scotland?

Is the cabinet secretary also aware that 130p a litre is normal in my constituency, where the price of fuel is still rising? Why is 130p a litre now the reality elsewhere as well?

As people drive home tonight and see the reality, who will they believe: the Automobile Association, the Royal Automobile Club and business organisations, which are reporting restrictions, closures, queues and rising prices; or the ministers who say that they will monitor any impact? Is the Government not out of touch with what is happening across Scotland?

John Swinney: I would have thought that, after the total fiasco of Nicol Stephen's questioning at First Minister's question time today, the Liberal Democrats would have learned a lesson about how to handle statements of this importance. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Order.

John Swinney: My goodness—when they ask the wrong questions, they mutter about the answers that they get.

Let me address the issue of Lothian Buses. Lothian Buses was assured this afternoon that it will receive diesel from BP. There had been some form of miscommunication between BP and Lothian Buses in the earlier part of today during, as I understand it, a normal dialogue about fuel supplies. That miscommunication was addressed once we became aware of the issue. I encourage a sense of responsibility in everyone in the circumstances, and that extends to members on the Liberal Democrat front bench.

There are ample supplies of fuel to last into May; the key issue is the distribution of those supplies to all parts of the country to meet consumer demand. Operational decisions on that are being taken by the fuel distributors and we are monitoring the situation carefully and encouraging the fuel distributors to get the balance of distribution around the country correct.

I am fully aware of the significance of fuel prices in the Shetland Islands. I saw them myself the other week, when I was in the islands. As I said in my statement, it is wholly unacceptable to the Government that fuel distributors should try to make any form of capital out of the situation that we face. Everyone should act responsibly, and I encourage everybody to do so.

The Presiding Officer: We come to questions from back benchers. Members know the form by now. If they are kept short, we will get them all in—although I am not confident that we will be able to do so, as there are quite a few.

Michael Matheson (Falkirk West) (SNP): The cabinet secretary will recognise that safety and security at the INEOS site in Grangemouth is of great importance to residents in the local area. He will be aware that the central Scotland strategic co-ordinating group has been working with INEOS to address those issues. Will he ensure that the

Government's officials continue to work closely with the co-ordinating group and that, if local services need additional specific support from central Government, that will be made available at the earliest opportunity?

John Swinney: We took the decision at the end of last week to activate the strategic co-ordinating groups to ensure that preparations could be undertaken in different parts of the country. Those groups are considering any possible implications for supply at the local level. The Government has been in regular touch with the groups, and we will continue that dialogue. Close co-operation between the Government and the strategic co-ordinating groups is essential to ensure that we properly address any issues that arise.

Cathy Peattie (Falkirk East) (Lab): INEOS has singled out workers at Grangemouth with this attack on their pension rights. I do not want the workers at Runcorn and elsewhere to get the same treatment. Does the minister agree that Grangemouth workers have, grossly unfairly and against their wishes, been pushed into the front line of a wider battle in defence of pension rights? Will the Government stand up for Scottish workers and ensure that they have the same pension rights as English workers in the same company?

John Swinney: As my colleagues in the United Kingdom Labour Government acknowledge, this is a private dispute between INEOS and Unite. It is for those two parties to resolve their pensions issues. The Government has—*[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Order.

John Swinney: The Government has offered constructive intervention to try to bring the parties together by arranging for the president of the Faculty of Actuaries, one of Scotland's most distinguished pensions experts, to provide advice to try to resolve some of the issues. The trade unions and the management are best placed to resolve those issues through negotiation and dialogue.

Alasdair Allan (Western Isles) (SNP): I thank the cabinet secretary for his statement and for the effort that he and others in the Scottish Government have put in to bring Unite and INEOS together. Will he say a few words about the operation of Scotland's transport services and reassure residents of Scotland's islands that, as Caledonian MacBrayne has made clear, ferry services will not be affected by the strike action?

John Swinney: In my statement, I made it clear that the Government will take steps to ensure that the interests of public transport are protected, by making arrangements to ensure that public transport is able to operate effectively with adequate fuel supplies. We are in regular contact with the various transport companies in Scotland

to make them aware of the Government's actions and to understand the challenges that they face, and we will continue that dialogue. On Caledonian MacBrayne, island services are essential to provide life-line services to all the Scottish islands, and the Government will work closely with ferry service providers to ensure that there are adequate fuel supplies to enable those services to continue.

John Park (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): I declare an interest as a member of Unite.

As a former official with Unite, I spent some time working in the INEOS chemical plant at Grangemouth. I always found the quality of the industrial relations there to be high, so I must ask: what has happened over the past few years to cause a sudden change? The cabinet secretary assured Parliament that he would liaise with the UK Government, INEOS and BP. Will he also ensure that a clear line of communication exists between the Scottish Government and Unite?

John Swinney: I assure Mr Park that we will do exactly that. The Cabinet Secretary for Justice and I met a group of Unite officials on Sunday; I spoke to Unite officials on Monday morning; and the First Minister spoke to Unite officials this morning. There are clearly established lines of communication, which will continue.

Gavin Brown (Lothians) (Con): What steps is the Government taking to encourage people, where possible, to switch to public transport in the short term to ease some of the demand for fuel on the forecourts?

John Swinney: Quite clearly, I am using the opportunity offered by this statement to encourage members of the public to do that. Ministers will continue to send out that message to people in Scotland. If more people use public transport, it will certainly help us to ensure that the economy and public services keep operating.

Hugh O'Donnell (Central Scotland) (LD): The cabinet secretary wisely recommended that the general public should make the minimum use of fuel and should not change their travel plans. What travel restrictions will those wise words place on members of the Government and Government officials?

John Swinney: Ministers will endeavour to use public transport to deliver the Government's objectives, whenever that is practical and possible. I dare say that we will reconsider our diary commitments to see whether, if they cannot be undertaken using public transport, particular commitments are absolutely required. We will encourage our officials to do the same.

Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): I will pursue the public transport point. Will the minister give an

absolute guarantee that, contrary to the suggestion of Lothian Buses, BP was given no instruction to deprioritise fuel supplies for public transport and to prioritise forecourts? If any such instruction was made, by whom was it made and when was it overturned?

Does the minister agree that this short-term crisis reinforces the long-term need to break the dependency on oil? What is the Government doing about that long-term need?

John Swinney: Any instruction on the supply of public transport could not be issued by the Scottish Government, because we do not have the power to issue such a direction. The United Kingdom Government would have to issue it and it was not issued. The position in respect of Lothian Buses is as I explained in my answer to Tavish Scott.

Mr Harvie talks about the need to change the long-term trend and to encourage more use of public transport. That is the Government's strategy and approach and we will encourage such behaviour. Public transport user numbers are rising and ministers will continue to encourage such a trend.

Dave Thompson (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): Many businesses and industries in the Highlands and Islands rely heavily on fuel. That applies particularly to our hauliers, who already face difficulties from high tax and rising prices. I welcome the reassurance from the cabinet secretary about fuel supplies, but will he comment specifically on the supply of diesel, which is important to our haulage industry?

John Swinney: Ministers will be in contact with the fuel companies, as we have been in the past few days, to ensure that we have an adequate fuel supply in all parts of the country. That is important for the haulage sector. Our officials are in touch with the Road Haulage Association to ensure that we are fully aware of concerns among hauliers, and ministers will ensure that that information is fed properly into the process of discussion with the UK Government and oil companies, so that any action that is needed can be taken.

George Foulkes (Lothians) (Lab): For once, I agree with the cabinet secretary: there has been confusion about the supply of fuel to Lothian Buses, as BP claims that it was directed to deliver fuel to forecourts instead of the bus company. Will he confirm that the UK Government has taken no powers to direct anyone in the dispute? Will he also confirm—

The Presiding Officer: Briefly, please.

George Foulkes: Will the cabinet secretary also confirm that the help that the UK Government has promised and the co-operation between the

Executive and the UK Government show that devolution can work well if there is good will on both sides?

The Presiding Officer: Thank you.

George Foulkes: That also proves the union's value.

John Swinney: How well some individuals can rise to the challenges that we face takes my breath away—my goodness.

George Foulkes's first point was absolutely right. United Kingdom ministers have not taken the powers to direct in any way. I spoke last night with Malcolm Wicks, the Minister for Energy, and the First Minister spoke this morning with John Hutton, the Secretary of State for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform. I can be no clearer than saying that in neither of those conversations did the secretary of state or the minister suggest any necessity in the foreseeable future to contemplate the use of those powers. We agree with that assessment. We are in close dialogue to address the issues.

The Government works closely and carefully with the UK Government on issues that matter to the people of Scotland. At all times in those discussions we will continue to assert the Scottish interest robustly.

Jamie Hepburn (Central Scotland) (SNP): The cabinet secretary will know that employment at the Grangemouth site contributes significantly to the central Scotland economy. Will he confirm that the Government is committed to the Grangemouth area's continued success and that it will support continued talks between the two sides to reach a resolution that ensures that workers are not disadvantaged?

John Swinney: I agree with Jamie Hepburn. It is important that there is discussion to ensure that the dispute is resolved and that the wider process of investing to strengthen the Grangemouth plant, which is critical to the Scottish economy, is taken forward effectively.

The Presiding Officer: I can only apologise to the three members whom I was unable to call.

Decision Time

17:30

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson): There are four questions to be put as a result of today's business. The first question is, that amendment S3M-1768.2, in the name of Ken Macintosh, which seeks to amend motion S3M-1768, in the name of Maureen Watt, on international education, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

FOR

Alexander, Ms Wendy (Paisley North) (Lab)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Baker, Richard (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Edinburgh Central) (Lab)
 Brankin, Rhona (Midlothian) (Lab)
 Brown, Robert (Glasgow) (LD)
 Butler, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab)
 Chisholm, Malcolm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab)
 Craigie, Cathie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab)
 Curran, Margaret (Glasgow Baillieston) (Lab)
 Eadie, Helen (Dunfermline East) (Lab)
 Fergusson, Patricia (Glasgow Maryhill) (Lab)
 Foulkes, George (Lothians) (Lab)
 Gillon, Karen (Clydesdale) (Lab)
 Glen, Marlyn (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Godman, Trish (West Renfrewshire) (Lab)
 Gordon, Charlie (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Henry, Hugh (Paisley South) (Lab)
 Hume, Jim (South of Scotland) (LD)
 Jamieson, Cathy (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (Lab)
 Kelly, James (Glasgow Rutherglen) (Lab)
 Kerr, Andy (East Kilbride) (Lab)
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab)
 Livingstone, Marilyn (Kirkcaldy) (Lab)
 Macdonald, Lewis (Aberdeen Central) (Lab)
 MacDonald, Margo (Lothians) (Ind)
 Macintosh, Ken (Eastwood) (Lab)
 Martin, Paul (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney) (LD)
 McAveety, Mr Frank (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab)
 McCabe, Tom (Hamilton South) (Lab)
 McConnell, Jack (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)
 McInnes, Alison (North East Scotland) (LD)
 McMahan, Michael (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab)
 McNeil, Duncan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab)
 Mulligan, Mary (Linlithgow) (Lab)
 Munro, John Farquhar (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD)
 Murray, Elaine (Dumfries) (Lab)
 O'Donnell, Hugh (Central Scotland) (LD)
 Oldfather, Irene (Cunninghame South) (Lab)
 Park, John (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Peattie, Cathy (Falkirk East) (Lab)
 Pringle, Mike (Edinburgh South) (LD)
 Purvis, Jeremy (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD)
 Rumbles, Mike (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD)
 Scott, Tavish (Shetland) (LD)
 Simpson, Dr Richard (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)

Smith, Elaine (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab)
 Smith, Iain (North East Fife) (LD)
 Stewart, David (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Stone, Jamie (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)
 Tolson, Jim (Dunfermline West) (LD)
 Whitefield, Karen (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab)
 Whitton, David (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Lab)

AGAINST

Adam, Brian (Aberdeen North) (SNP)
 Ahmad, Bashir (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Aitken, Bill (Glasgow) (Con)
 Allan, Alasdair (Western Isles) (SNP)
 Brocklebank, Ted (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Brown, Gavin (Lothians) (Con)
 Brown, Keith (Ochil) (SNP)
 Brownlee, Derek (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Campbell, Aileen (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Carlaw, Jackson (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Livingston) (SNP)
 Crawford, Bruce (Stirling) (SNP)
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perth) (SNP)
 Don, Nigel (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP)
 Fabiani, Linda (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee West) (SNP)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gibson, Rob (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Goldie, Annabel (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Grahame, Christine (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Harper, Robin (Lothians) (Green)
 Harvie, Christopher (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Lothians) (SNP)
 Ingram, Adam (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Johnstone, Alex (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Lamont, John (Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 MacAskill, Kenny (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Marwick, Tricia (Central Fife) (SNP)
 Mather, Jim (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 Maxwell, Stewart (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 McGrigor, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 McKee, Ian (Lothians) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 McLetchie, David (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Con)
 McMillan, Stuart (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Milne, Nanette (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Morgan, Alasdair (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Neil, Alex (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Paterson, Gil (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee East) (SNP)
 Russell, Michael (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Salmond, Alex (Gordon) (SNP)
 Scanlon, Mary (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)
 Smith, Elizabeth (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Lothians) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banff and Buchan) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Govan) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (North Tayside) (SNP)
 Thompson, Dave (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Watt, Maureen (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 Welsh, Andrew (Angus) (SNP)
 White, Sandra (Glasgow) (SNP)

Wilson, Bill (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Wilson, John (Central Scotland) (SNP)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 57, Against 64, Abstentions 0.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The second question is, that amendment S3M-1768.1, in the name of Hugh O'Donnell, which seeks to amend motion S3M-1768, in the name of Maureen Watt, on international education, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

FOR

Alexander, Ms Wendy (Paisley North) (Lab)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Baker, Richard (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Edinburgh Central) (Lab)
 Brankin, Rhona (Midlothian) (Lab)
 Brown, Robert (Glasgow) (LD)
 Butler, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab)
 Chisholm, Malcolm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab)
 Craigie, Cathie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab)
 Curran, Margaret (Glasgow Baillieston) (Lab)
 Eadie, Helen (Dunfermline East) (Lab)
 Ferguson, Patricia (Glasgow Maryhill) (Lab)
 Foulkes, George (Lothians) (Lab)
 Gillon, Karen (Clydesdale) (Lab)
 Glen, Marlyn (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Godman, Trish (West Renfrewshire) (Lab)
 Gordon, Charlie (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Harper, Robin (Lothians) (Green)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Henry, Hugh (Paisley South) (Lab)
 Hume, Jim (South of Scotland) (LD)
 Jamieson, Cathy (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (Lab)
 Kelly, James (Glasgow Rutherglen) (Lab)
 Kerr, Andy (East Kilbride) (Lab)
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab)
 Livingstone, Marilyn (Kirkcaldy) (Lab)
 Macdonald, Lewis (Aberdeen Central) (Lab)
 Macintosh, Ken (Eastwood) (Lab)
 Martin, Paul (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney) (LD)
 McAveety, Mr Frank (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab)
 McCabe, Tom (Hamilton South) (Lab)
 McConnell, Jack (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)
 McInnes, Alison (North East Scotland) (LD)
 McMahan, Michael (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab)
 McNeil, Duncan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab)
 Mulligan, Mary (Linlithgow) (Lab)
 Munro, John Farquhar (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD)
 Murray, Elaine (Dumfries) (Lab)
 O'Donnell, Hugh (Central Scotland) (LD)
 Oldfather, Irene (Cunninghame South) (Lab)
 Park, John (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Peattie, Cathy (Falkirk East) (Lab)
 Pringle, Mike (Edinburgh South) (LD)
 Purvis, Jeremy (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD)
 Rumbles, Mike (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD)
 Scott, Tavish (Shetland) (LD)

Simpson, Dr Richard (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Smith, Elaine (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab)
 Smith, Iain (North East Fife) (LD)
 Stewart, David (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Stone, Jamie (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)
 Tolson, Jim (Dunfermline West) (LD)
 Whitefield, Karen (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab)
 Whitton, David (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Lab)

AGAINST

Aitken, Bill (Glasgow) (Con)
 Brocklebank, Ted (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
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 Brownlee, Derek (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Goldie, Annabel (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Johnstone, Alex (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Lamont, John (Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 McGrigor, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 McLetchie, David (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Con)
 Milne, Nanette (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Scanlon, Mary (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)
 Smith, Elizabeth (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)

ABSTENTIONS

Adam, Brian (Aberdeen North) (SNP)
 Ahmad, Bashir (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Western Isles) (SNP)
 Brown, Keith (Ochil) (SNP)
 Campbell, Aileen (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Livingston) (SNP)
 Crawford, Bruce (Stirling) (SNP)
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perth) (SNP)
 Don, Nigel (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP)
 Fabiani, Linda (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee West) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gibson, Rob (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Christopher (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Lothians) (SNP)
 Ingram, Adam (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow) (SNP)
 MacAskill, Kenny (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Margo (Lothians) (Ind)
 Marwick, Tricia (Central Fife) (SNP)
 Mather, Jim (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 Maxwell, Stewart (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 McKee, Ian (Lothians) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Morgan, Alasdair (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Neil, Alex (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Paterson, Gil (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee East) (SNP)
 Russell, Michael (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Salmond, Alex (Gordon) (SNP)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Lothians) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banff and Buchan) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Govan) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (North Tayside) (SNP)
 Thompson, Dave (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Watt, Maureen (North East Scotland) (SNP)

Welsh, Andrew (Angus) (SNP)
 White, Sandra (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Wilson, Bill (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Wilson, John (Central Scotland) (SNP)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 58, Against 16, Abstentions 47.

Amendment agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The third question is, that motion S3M-1768, in the name of Maureen Watt, on international education, as amended, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

FOR

Adam, Brian (Aberdeen North) (SNP)
 Ahmad, Bashir (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Alexander, Ms Wendy (Paisley North) (Lab)
 Allan, Alasdair (Western Isles) (SNP)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Baker, Richard (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Edinburgh Central) (Lab)
 Brankin, Rhona (Midlothian) (Lab)
 Brown, Keith (Ochil) (SNP)
 Brown, Robert (Glasgow) (LD)
 Butler, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab)
 Campbell, Aileen (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Chisholm, Malcolm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Livingston) (SNP)
 Craigie, Cathie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab)
 Crawford, Bruce (Stirling) (SNP)
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perth) (SNP)
 Curran, Margaret (Glasgow Baillieston) (Lab)
 Don, Nigel (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Eadie, Helen (Dunfermline East) (Lab)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP)
 Fabiani, Linda (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Ferguson, Patricia (Glasgow Maryhill) (Lab)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee West) (SNP)
 Foulkes, George (Lothians) (Lab)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gibson, Rob (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Gillon, Karen (Clydesdale) (Lab)
 Glen, Marlyn (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Godman, Trish (West Renfrewshire) (Lab)
 Gordon, Charlie (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab)
 Grahame, Christine (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Harper, Robin (Lothians) (Green)
 Harvie, Christopher (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Henry, Hugh (Paisley South) (Lab)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Hume, Jim (South of Scotland) (LD)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Lothians) (SNP)
 Ingram, Adam (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Jamieson, Cathy (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (Lab)
 Kelly, James (Glasgow Rutherglen) (Lab)
 Kerr, Andy (East Kilbride) (Lab)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab)
 Livingstone, Marilyn (Kirkcaldy) (Lab)
 MacAskill, Kenny (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Macdonald, Lewis (Aberdeen Central) (Lab)

Macintosh, Ken (Eastwood) (Lab)
 Martin, Paul (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab)
 Marwick, Tricia (Central Fife) (SNP)
 Mather, Jim (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 Maxwell, Stewart (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney) (LD)
 McAveety, Mr Frank (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab)
 McCabe, Tom (Hamilton South) (Lab)
 McConnell, Jack (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)
 McInnes, Alison (North East Scotland) (LD)
 McKee, Ian (Lothians) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 McMahon, Michael (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab)
 McMillan, Stuart (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 McNeil, Duncan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab)
 Morgan, Alasdair (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Mulligan, Mary (Linlithgow) (Lab)
 Munro, John Farquhar (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD)
 Murray, Elaine (Dumfries) (Lab)
 Neil, Alex (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 O'Donnell, Hugh (Central Scotland) (LD)
 Oldfather, Irene (Cunninghame South) (Lab)
 Park, John (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Paterson, Gil (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Peattie, Cathy (Falkirk East) (Lab)
 Pringle, Mike (Edinburgh South) (LD)
 Purvis, Jeremy (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee East) (SNP)
 Rumbles, Mike (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD)
 Russell, Michael (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Salmond, Alex (Gordon) (SNP)
 Scott, Tavish (Shetland) (LD)
 Simpson, Dr Richard (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Smith, Elaine (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab)
 Smith, Iain (North East Fife) (LD)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Lothians) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banff and Buchan) (SNP)
 Stewart, David (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Stone, Jamie (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Govan) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (North Tayside) (SNP)
 Thompson, Dave (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Tolson, Jim (Dunfermline West) (LD)
 Watt, Maureen (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 Welsh, Andrew (Angus) (SNP)
 White, Sandra (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Whitefield, Karen (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab)
 Whitton, David (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Lab)
 Wilson, Bill (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Wilson, John (Central Scotland) (SNP)

AGAINST

Aitken, Bill (Glasgow) (Con)
 Brocklebank, Ted (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Brown, Gavin (Lothians) (Con)
 Brownlee, Derek (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Goldie, Annabel (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Johnstone, Alex (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Lamont, John (Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 McGrigor, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 McLetchie, David (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Con)
 Milne, Nanette (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Scanlon, Mary (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)
 Smith, Elizabeth (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)

ABSTENTIONS

MacDonald, Margo (Lothians) (Ind)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 104, Against 16, Abstentions 1.

Motion, as amended, agreed to.

Resolved,

That the Parliament recognises the importance of preparing young people for life in today's increasingly globalised society; agrees that all our young people should have an international education with opportunities to develop a knowledge and understanding of the world and Scotland's place in it; congratulates the many schools across Scotland that have made and continue to make links with schools across the world; agrees that the Curriculum for Excellence is the ideal vehicle to deliver international education in schools and equip young people with an understanding of, and the skills for, the modern world, and calls for the Scottish Government to bring forward a comprehensive national languages strategy including a rolling programme to introduce a second language early into primary education and to secure economic benefit from the diverse language skills in a multicultural Scotland.

The Presiding Officer: The fourth question is, that motion S3M-1712, in the name of Duncan McNeil, on the Local Government and Communities Committee report on planning application processes in relation to Menie estate, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to.

That the Parliament notes the conclusions and recommendations contained in the Local Government and Communities Committee's 5th Report, 2008 (Session 3): *Planning Application Processes (Menie Estate)* (SP Paper 73).

Leven to Thornton Rail Link

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Alasdair Morgan): The final item of business is a members' business debate on motion S3M-1539, in the name of Tricia Marwick, on the Leven to Thornton rail link. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament notes that the South-East Scotland Transport Partnership commissioned a feasibility study into the reopening of the Leven to Thornton rail link; believes that the reopening of this line to passengers and freight is vital to the regeneration of the Levenmouth area; notes that the reopening of the Leven to Thornton rail link is one of Fife Council's top transport priorities, and believes that those most interested in the regeneration of Levenmouth should contribute to the feasibility study now being carried out.

17:35

Tricia Marwick (Central Fife) (SNP): I am pleased to be able to open this debate on the reopening of the Leven to Thornton rail link, a matter that I have pushed for more than 10 years. I know that Ted Brocklebank and Iain Smith also support the reopening of the line to passengers.

Marilyn Livingstone (Kirkcaldy) (Lab): I am grateful to Tricia Marwick for giving way. As she is aware, I need to leave before the end of the debate to attend a previously arranged constituency engagement: my departure has been hastened by the extension to today's business.

I thank Tricia Marwick for securing this evening's important debate on reinstating a much-needed rail link. Does she agree that it is crucial that the much-needed improvements to the Redhouse roundabout are implemented with equal urgency, as part of the overall mid-Fife transport strategy, to ensure that some of the major inhibitors to economic regeneration in our local communities are addressed?

Tricia Marwick: I thank Marilyn Livingstone for her intervention and support. She knows full well that I both support the reopening of the Leven to Thornton rail link and think that work to improve the Redhouse link is essential. I have no hesitation in supporting that project. However, the two issues need not be taken together.

The proposal to reopen the Leven to Thornton junction branch line to passengers would allow a link to the Fife circle at Kirkcaldy. I welcome people from the Levenmouth area who have joined us in the public gallery to hear tonight's debate. In all my years as an MSP, I have never encountered such a spontaneous response to an issue. I hope that the minister will take note.

For too long, we in Levenmouth have campaigned against things—against pit closures, against job losses and against ship-to-ship oil transfers. By contrast, the campaign to reopen the Leven to Thornton link is a campaign for something.

I am indebted to Jim Corstorphine, who has kindly given me a copy of his book "East of Thornton Junction", which has helped to fill in some of the gaps in my knowledge of the line's history. The line from Leven to Thornton junction was part of the Fife coast line, which stretched around the Fife coast from Thornton to Leuchars. The Thornton to Leven railway was opened in 1854 and was closed to passengers as part of the Beeching cuts, after a long campaign that included a public inquiry at Scoonie hall in Leven. That campaign was in vain, and on 4 October 1969 the line was finally closed.

However, although the rest of the Fife coast line was ripped up and built over, the Leven to Thornton track remained. Until a few years ago, it was used regularly for freight, mostly from the now defunct Methil power station. Importantly, the line has never been decommissioned by Network Rail.

Levenmouth is the largest urban conurbation in Scotland without access to a railway station. It also has poor connections to the road network. The main road through Fife bypasses the area completely, and access to Kirkcaldy is by way of the A915—Standingstone Road—which is notoriously ill-equipped to cope.

Levenmouth was devastated by pit closures, the rundown of Methil docks and the loss of Kvaerner, all of which contributed to its economic depression. The tragedy is that, until fairly recently, no steps were taken to address that economic disadvantage. The results of that long neglect are clear: 41 per cent of the area's population is economically inactive, compared with a Fife average of 34 per cent and a Scottish average of 35 per cent.

The opening of the Leven to Thornton line to passengers would enable people to get to jobs elsewhere in Fife, in Edinburgh and in Dundee, and would attract new businesses into the area. It would also enable people in the east neuk of Fife, in Iain Smith's constituency, to access a train from Leven. Reopening the line is essential for the regeneration of the Levenmouth area.

We also need the line to be upgraded for freight transport. We have long argued that we need to get freight off the roads and on to rail. Diageo, which has a plant at Cameron Bridge, is negotiating with Network Rail on a development that will allow Diageo's products to travel by rail again. However, the negotiations have been

protracted. I urge Network Rail to find an acceptable solution.

In addition to Diageo, we have Fife energy park in Methil, which is one of the Government's top strategic priorities for Scotland. It is essential that, as well as upskilling the workforce in Levenmouth, we attract people with the necessary skills to Methil. To do that, we need transport links. It is self-evident that I also expect the line to be used for freight to and from the energy park.

There have been many campaigns to reopen the line. In 1999, Scott Wilson carried out a feasibility study for Fife Council, which concluded:

"It would be feasible to introduce a passenger train service over this existing single track branch line with a new station constructed at Leven."

The cost at the time would have been between £1.7 million and £3.3 million. The tragedy is that the then Labour-controlled Fife Council refused to support the reopening, and since then Levenmouth has declined even further economically.

What has changed? The Scottish National Party and Liberal-controlled Fife Council has made reopening the line one of its top priorities. The south east of Scotland transport partnership is carrying out a feasibility study. Fife energy park is creating new jobs and Diageo is expanding its operation. The threat remains that the Forth road bridge could be closed to freight before the new bridge is built. In any case, freight needs to find another way in and out of Fife. Most important, the community wants the project to go ahead.

I understand that to make the line fit for passengers it needs to be rerailed, signalling needs to be installed and drainage and telecom issues need to be addressed—that is all. There is no need for the compulsory purchase of land and no need for legislation, unlike with many other rail projects in Scotland since 1999. However, we need the will for the project to happen.

I do not expect a decision from the Minister for Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change today—SEStran is still carrying out its survey—but I would like him to confirm that this financially modest scheme, which would help the whole of Levenmouth and the east neuk, will be given a fair wind by his department.

17:42

Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): I thank Tricia Marwick for securing this evening's debate. I am happy to add my support to the call to reopen the Leven to Thornton rail link. Local community groups and representatives—some of whom I, too, welcome to the chamber this evening—have long recognised the need for better

links to the Levenmouth area. I hope that the time has come for those links to be realised.

There are challenges in introducing a Leven to Thornton rail link into the Fife rail network, but I hope that SEStran's feasibility study will examine those challenges and explore ways to overcome them. The Government needs to strike the right balance between the two priorities for Fife—the need for quick, major connections between towns and cities on the east coast line and the need to extend the local rail network that operates close to where people live.

Work and leisure possibilities have changed dramatically in recent years, and our transport systems often struggle to adapt to our changing needs. Unless people have a car, Fife can be a difficult place to get around quickly. Recently, I opened an office in Methil. For my staff, travelling to Methil from Kelty, Glenrothes or Edinburgh by public transport is not really an option if they need to get to work on time. A Leven to Thornton rail link, along with investment in other public transport infrastructure, would make commuting to and from Levenmouth much more possible and could open up much-needed employment opportunities. If jobs are to be created, the conditions must be right.

Those are the key arguments in favour of reopening the line. Many of them are made by the Levenmouth communities regeneration group in its well-named five miles and five arguments statement, which I fully support.

Previous Administrations and councils have long recognised the benefits of reopening the rail link, but recently the need for it has become all the more pressing. We all recognise that the predicted expansion in housing in the area will place greater demand on public transport. Reopening the line would give us the opportunity to move not just passengers but freight, as Tricia Marwick said. The likely closure of the Forth road bridge to heavy goods vehicles, the increased cost of moving freight by road, and our increased awareness of the environmental impact of our transport decisions all add further weight to the argument.

The importance to national and international companies such as Diageo of having rail links close by should not be underestimated. Equally, improved links could encourage other businesses to relocate to the Levenmouth area and provide a key link for the energy park and, potentially, the Westfield site.

The local transport strategy for Fife identifies a new Leven to Thornton rail link as a priority, but it should not be provided in isolation. It is clear to me that, as Marilyn Livingstone highlighted, Levenmouth and central Fife more generally need

improvements to the key linkages to town centres and to the public transport network as a whole.

The minister has a strategic role and is rightly interested in the national picture, but I hope that, as was the case under the previous Administration, there will be opportunities for a number of more local improvements to take place, such as the reopening of the Leven to Thornton rail link. Such improvements would considerably enhance social mobility and access to employment, reduce traffic congestion and promote sustainable travel as a positive alternative.

Levenmouth needs everyone to work together to continue to promote its regeneration and development. I would greatly welcome the reopening of the Leven to Thornton rail link as part of a package of investment in public and private transport for Levenmouth, and I am more than happy to have been able to help to promote that aim in this evening's debate.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Ted Bracklebonk—my apologies. Ted Brocklebank, to be followed by Iain Smith.

17:46

Ted Brocklebank (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I, too, congratulate Tricia Marwick on securing the debate. She has worked hard to keep the issue in the public eye, and I hope that she manages to persuade her colleague the Minister for Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change of the many merits of reopening the Leven to Thornton rail link.

Tricia Marwick and I gained a certain experience in rail matters when we sat on the committee that considered the reopening of the railway between Waverley and Galashiels. Although that committee decided that there were sound social reasons for reopening the line to the Borders, it is true to say that it was less convinced of the economic case. However, the case for reopening the Levenmouth to Thornton link has a much sounder economic basis. First, we are talking about a line that is only five miles long. Secondly, the alignment and freight rail track are still largely intact. I welcome the feasibility study that SEStran is carrying out in conjunction with Fife Council, the public consultation aspect of which is to be completed by the end of this month.

Passengers in the Levenmouth area would obviously benefit from the reopening of the line, but the industrial revitalisation of the whole area that might result from it is every bit as important. We are all having to relearn a lesson that our forebears understood well—that the ports and harbours around Scotland are seriously undermined if the rail links to them are removed.

Earlier this week, I met officials of Forth Ports, which owns the port of Methil. I was left in no doubt that reopening the rail link to Levenmouth would vastly improve the versatility of Methil, not only as the hub for the energy park but as a niche port for smaller freight vessels. As we have heard, companies such as Diageo, Tullis Russell and the Earlseat coal company could all benefit from fast, efficient rail links to Methil docks. The local road is not good, as has been said, and it would benefit other road users, as well as the companies themselves, if raw materials could be imported and end products exported by means of a direct rail link to and from Levenmouth, which would also provide access to the Fife central line via Thornton junction.

As we have heard, estimates suggest that the main costs involved would relate to signalling and the upgrading of the track, the price of which is estimated to be about £28 million. Unlike with the Waverley to Galashiels line, there do not appear to be housing developments or other encumbrances that require negotiation and compensation—matters that continue to dog the Borders project with ever-spiralling costs.

Perhaps it is too much to hope that one day a restored Levenmouth station might be linked by rail right through the east neuk villages to St Andrews, as it once was, which would provide opportunities for people to stop off and savour fresh fish in places such as St Monans, Pittenweem, Anstruther and Crail, which all had local stations. Sadly, the miners and their families who once came by train to holiday along that coastal strip are no more. One wonders how much longer it will be before the east neuk fishermen and their families follow in their wake—but that is an auld sang of mine and one best left for another day.

Stewart Stevenson is a minister who likes to travel by public transport. He will recall his recent visit to meet me in St Andrews; he might also recall that the seat of Scotland's oldest and, some would argue, best university is still the only university city in the whole of the UK that does not have a direct rail link. It should not be impossible for a man as ingenious and multiskilled as the minister to envisage an appropriate rail solution—such as the development of an electric monorail system, which would cost a fraction of the cost of establishing a traditional rail system—to link St Andrews to the national rail network.

However, first things first: I accept that the immediate priority is restoring the Levenmouth to Thornton rail link and helping to end decades of neglect for the whole mid-Fife area. I am delighted to support Tricia Marwick's motion.

17:50

Iain Smith (North East Fife) (LD): It is always a problem to follow Mr Bracklebonk; he tries to steal most of my lines on matters relating to our area. I add my congratulations to Tricia Marwick on securing the debate. I am pleased to put on record my support for the reopening of the Thornton to Leven line for passengers and freight.

Leven borders my constituency, although it is not in it. I am well aware of the problems that the Levenmouth area has faced over recent decades as a result of the decline in its traditional industries. It remains an area of significant social problems, including, as it does, pockets of generational unemployment. Lack of opportunity in the local economy has been compounded by low levels of mobility. Job opportunities outwith the immediate area are often not seen as attractive or viable options, despite Levenmouth being just a few miles from Glenrothes, within reasonable travel distance of St Andrews, and having access to the rail network at Markinch.

I have no doubt that the reopening of the rail link would produce a significant economic boost for the whole area. It would make the area more attractive to potential investors and to people seeking to escape property hotspots. The area offers a viable commuting destination for people with jobs in Kirkcaldy, Dunfermline, Edinburgh and—northwards—Dundee. Of course, the line would also open up the most isolated part of Fife—the east neuk—which is in my constituency. Provided that the new station at Leven came with effective park-and-ride facilities and good integrated bus links, it would provide an alternative to my constituents who seek access to the rail network. It would provide a significant boost for the economy of the east neuk and better access to employment and education, and it would open up the east neuk to tourists who do not have a car.

My example—opening up access to the Fife coastal path—is slightly more realistic than the example that Ted Brocklebank used. The rail link would make the coastal path more accessible to walkers and cyclists, who could join it at Leven, and make their way round the east neuk—stopping at all the places that Ted Brocklebank mentioned—before returning by train from Leuchars. Of course they could do it the other way round, if they preferred.

I, too, would like to see other enhancements to the rail network in Fife, such as a rail halt at Newburgh on the Perth to Edinburgh line and a park-and-ride halt at Wormit. As Ted Brocklebank mentioned, we should not forget the desire to see the re-establishment of a rail link to St Andrews, which would serve not only the student population but tourists. I support the need for full feasibility studies into those projects.

In addition to the economic arguments in favour of those projects that need to be considered, the strong environmental case needs to be examined. We need urgently to invest in our public transport network to reduce the need for people to use private cars—if people can get petrol to use their car in North East Fife. According to my studies today, that is not all that easy.

Representing a rural constituency, I know that there will always be a need for the car. It will never be possible to provide public transport solutions that meet all the transport needs of local people. However, we must seek to increase the available public transport options for some journeys, and for parts of other journeys. The Leven to Thornton line would do just that. We must also acknowledge that it will not be straightforward to re-link Leven to the rail network. Some technical track and signalling issues need to be resolved. The need to provide rolling stock must also be considered, along with the impact on the timetable, particularly given the already crowded Fife to Edinburgh network.

Sadly, the Government has shown a lack of will to make the big decisions to invest in our network and it is not providing the additional capacity that will be needed to allow enhancements such as Leven to Thornton to proceed. In responding to the debate, perhaps the minister will say what the impact of his decision to scrap the Edinburgh airport rail link will have on the future capacity of the Fife to Edinburgh line. EARL would have created more capacity; no EARL means no more capacity. The extra stops and extra station that are required under the Government's alternative will cut capacity on a line that is already congested, particularly at peak times. The decision will also make it more difficult to deliver the necessary reopening of the Leven to Thornton line.

I hope that the minister will reassure us on those points. I hope that he will also make a commitment at least to consider favourably the reopening of the Leven to Thornton line.

17:54

Christopher Harvie (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP): I remember the glory days of the Levenmouth line. Back in 1952, my family had a holiday at Leven. I remember seeing vast quantities of coal pouring down from the collieries into trains and off down to London or Denmark.

Even today, the strongest case for the reopening of the line is the freight case. That is not to say that one should not pursue the passenger case. However, there is a remarkable redevelopment of freight in Britain, which had dwindled to the point that there was hardly any north of the Forth bridge. I am thinking not only of Diageo at Cameron

Bridge, but the possibilities that arise in terms of opencast coal traffic.

From talking to fruit importers in Fife, I know that, if rail services were accurate and timely enough, international fruit traffic from Spain could come to a depot along the line. Most important of all, with the development of new renewables technology, we have the linkage between firms such as Siemens in Germany, with its factories and electric works, and the energy park in Methil. A flow of dedicated wagonload traffic across Europe, keeping to careful schedules, would develop that linkage.

We must remember that, in Germany, since 2005, rail freight has staged a remarkable recovery and that the amount carried is advancing at more than 10 per cent a year. Next to Germany, in Austria, the railways carry 35 per cent of the country's total freight, compared with the minor amount of less than 12 per cent that is carried in Britain. However, that figure is expected to rise dramatically, given that, in June last year, most railway freight services in Britain were taken over by the German state railway company, when English Welsh & Scottish Railway was bought up by Deutsche Bahn.

We must think about rather more than just the terminal line in Fife; we must also think about having facilities between Fife and the channel tunnel that will enable our freight to move smoothly, so that we do not get those terrible periods of being diverted all over the place because of supposed improvements that are being made to the line somewhere in England. If we get a dedicated and, preferably, Berne gauge—a continental loading gauge—line through England, we could have a real renaissance of rail traffic to Scotland and the Thornton to Leven line would become one of the major terminal areas for international freight into what will be, I trust, a booming Fife.

17:57

John Park (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): I welcome the debate and congratulate Tricia Marwick on securing it. It is good to see so many people in the public gallery from the community in the Levenmouth area. It adds to the Scottish Parliament's relevance that people can come along and hear at first hand, on issues that are close to their hearts, that politicians are taking those issues seriously and trying to make progress on them. I am also pleased to see the minister and I have noticed that he has listened carefully to members' speeches. I am pleased to be involved in the debate and to give my support to the motion.

When I was thinking about the situation in Fife, a story came to mind about the new town of Dalgety Bay. I read some background on the development of the town and found that, at that time, one of its plus points was its close proximity to the new Forth road bridge, which was important because the Fife to Edinburgh rail line was under threat of closure. It is a frightening thought that, only 40 years ago, we were considering that. That story tells us that we should consider future needs much more carefully.

The debate is relevant, as it is about the importance of modal shift. As well as a modal shift for freight, we need to get people out of their cars—not only those who travel from Fife to Edinburgh, but those who travel around Fife. We have had recent success in that with the reopening of parts of the Dunfermline-Alloa-Stirling line. That proves that the Scottish Government can achieve such projects. We can take heart from that project, but there is frustration that much of the original infrastructure of the rail network no longer exists. I am pleased that we have an opportunity to build on the service in Fife.

Ted Brocklebank introduced skilfully the idea that we might want to extend the rail network to St Andrews, so I will indulge myself for a moment and talk about the importance of getting a rail link to the port of Rosyth. At some time, I would like people to be able to travel from the continent on the ferry service to Rosyth and then back home by rail to the Levenmouth area. That would be great. I am hopeful, given the debate that we are having, that that might happen in the not-too-distant future.

17:59

The Minister for Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change (Stewart Stevenson): I join others in thanking Tricia Marwick for securing the debate, which recognises the important role that transport plays in facilitating regeneration and sustainable economic growth.

I found the contributions of all members interesting. As I was brought up in Fife, albeit a wee bit further east, at Cupar, I echo many of the reminiscences of colleagues. My favourite line was when we went to Dundee. We would change at Leuchars and take the Tentsmuir train, which was a little tank engine with two wee coaches. However, enough of the past and more of the future.

I understand Fife Council's aspiration to reopen the Leven to Thornton rail link to and from Levenmouth, to provide travel opportunities for employment, business, leisure and tourism. The line first opened in 1854 and helped Leven to become a tourist resort popular with visitors from the west of Scotland, particularly Glasgow. The

benefits of good transport links are anything but new. I note that the reopening of the Leven to Thornton rail link is one of Fife Council's top transport priorities and is considered to be vital to the regeneration of the Levenmouth area.

Claire Baker commented on housing. I spoke at a transport research conference in Glasgow this morning. One of the professors who spoke suggested that the value of housing that is adjacent to good transport links, particularly rail, can be as much as 20 per cent higher. That shows that there is a valuable link between housing and rail links.

Ted Brocklebank said that St Andrews is the only university city that is without a rail link. I find it slightly ironic that when the Borders rail link opens I will represent the only parliamentary constituency in Scotland that has neither a railway nor an airport. The package of additional money that we receive from the First ScotRail franchise renegotiation will enable us to provide, in the first instance, a virtual rail link to St Andrews from Leuchars. Such a link will be of value to that part of the country.

Iain Smith referred to the Newburgh rail halt. The station is still there, although it is derelict and incapable of use. I recall seeing it as I went past. When the Wormit station was still open, with the little branch up to Tayport, there was a park and ride that many people used. I used it, and I always felt that it was a short-sighted decision, when the main line finally came, not to move the station on to it.

Iain Smith referred to signalling, which is one of the big inhibitions to faster development of the rail network. Signal engineers are booked up throughout Europe. It is not a question of money—it is simply that there are too few signal engineers. Members can be sure that for the many developments that the Government is backing we will ensure that we have the right resources in place.

Fife Council and SEStran are working with Transport Scotland to take the Leven to Thornton proposal forward. It will be assessed using the Scottish transport appraisal guidance methodology. I welcome that approach and look forward with interest to the completion of the Levenmouth sustainable transport study. I commend the partnership working involved and the commissioning and funding of the study by SEStran. Rail developments will have a positive knock-on effect on the people of Fife.

Iain Smith mistakenly referred to the deleterious effects of opening a station at Gogar. The station at Gogar merely replaces the one that would have been underneath Edinburgh airport. Exactly the

same number of additional stations are being provided for the network to Fife.

Iain Smith: Will the minister take an intervention?

Stewart Stevenson: I will in a minute.

The mileage between Edinburgh and Fife via the Gogar station is slightly less than the mileage via Edinburgh airport.

Iain Smith: The Edinburgh airport rail link proposal, which the Government scrapped, would have created additional lines. Trains that stopped at the Edinburgh airport station would have been on a different line from trains that stopped at the Gogar station. The minister's position is therefore incorrect.

Stewart Stevenson: Members can be absolutely sure that I am well aware of the capacity issues. There is capacity on the rail link, and the provision of an additional signal in the middle of the Forth rail crossing will double the number of blocks that are available. That will not double capacity, but it will increase it.

Tricia Marwick: The Leven to Thornton rail link will be a branch line that starts at Leven, comes in through the Thornton junction and goes on to Kirkcaldy. There is no need for additional capacity; there is plenty capacity and it will do the job.

Stewart Stevenson: Let us coalesce—I think that we are capable of doing so—around the idea that continued expansion of the rail network is a good idea. I use rail more frequently than I use any other mode of travel; members therefore have an enthusiast in the minister.

Achieving modal shift of freight is very important, as Chris Harvie said. The opening of the Stirling-Alloa-Kincardine route on 19 May will deliver the benefit of a reduction in rail congestion on the Forth bridge. That will free up paths, making them available for Fife services. Should we find ourselves proceeding with the Leven to Thornton link, the paths would be available.

John Park mentioned the Rosyth rail link. Of course, there is a rail link into Rosyth that goes very close to the ferry terminal. I see the merit in what Mr Park said, and I acknowledge that additional work would have to be done, but the basic infrastructure is present.

In the proposal for the Leven to Thornton link, we have a great advantage: we have a railway that has never been closed in legal terms. The proposal may therefore have particular benefits.

The challenge will be to ensure that the Office of Rail Regulation deals robustly with Network Rail's plans so that, at tier 3 and the high-level output specifications, the money is available for interesting and engaging projects. I look forward to

seeing the results of the studies. On behalf of the people of Fife, I hope that they will show that the link is economically viable. If so, I will consider it with considerable interest.

Meeting closed at 18:07.

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