



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Official Report

MEETING OF THE PARLIAMENT

Wednesday 9 June 2010

Session 3

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Scottish Parliament

Wednesday 9 June 2010

[The Presiding Officer *opened the meeting at 14:00*]

Time for Reflection

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson):

Good afternoon. The first item of business this afternoon is time for reflection. Our time for reflection leader is Bob Holman, who is one of the founders of Family Action in Rogerfield and Easterhouse.

Bob Holman (Family Action in Rogerfield and Easterhouse): Last September. A phone call from the hospital: “Come in first thing in the morning.” Next day, the consultant said, “I’m sorry, Mr Holman, the biopsy shows you have cancer.” The cancer had spread from the lymph glands to other organs and I was at stage four, the most serious stage. I started six months’ chemotherapy. Its side effects are sickness, exhaustion, mouth ulcers, nails dropping off and hair loss. My grandsons called me baldy Bob.

Less recognised are the social effects. To avoid infection, I was instructed not to attend meetings or use public transport. I could attend church once a fortnight if I sat at the back, wore gloves and declined hugs and kisses. Yet there are always positives. First, I felt embraced by the love of my family and the care of Annette, who earned the title of matron. Second, I received many letters and visits. In Easterhouse, I was the visitor; now I became the visited. Two young men who had been terrors at our youth club in Easterhouse came to see me. One was now a residential social worker. The other was in the army and due for Afghanistan. They wanted to tell me that the club had diverted them from gangs and trouble—that cheered me. Third, my faith in God was strengthened. I realised that, whatever happened, I did believe. After a scan, I was feeling a bit lonely and the radiographer came to chat. I asked her what was the best thing that had happened to her in the past 10 years. She replied, “I found God.” I realised that I was never alone.

The chemo stopped in March, and the tests suggested that it had been mainly successful. Last month, I saw a consultant and we chatted football. I am for West Ham—don’t laugh—and he was for Celtic. He paused, then said that he was cautiously optimistic. Optimistic about Celtic? No, he had changed the subject and was talking about my cancer. He is cautiously optimistic about my future. I am recovering, and next month I am determined to attend a camp, to which

Easterhouse youngsters go, for my 35th successive year.

I have just published a book on Keir Hardie, the great Christian socialist. He suffered severe illnesses. He could not afford the treatment, which was paid for by his working-class colleagues. Hardie foresaw a free health service. I remember the creation of the national health service in 1948. My parents, who were not political people, rejoiced. I thank God for it, and I will always strive to preserve it as a public national health service.

Business Motion

14:04

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson): Our next item of business is consideration of business motion S3M-6517, in the name of Bruce Crawford, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, setting out a timetable for stage 3 consideration of the Scottish Parliamentary Commissions and Commissioners etc Bill.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees that, during Stage 3 of the Scottish Parliamentary Commissions and Commissioners etc. Bill, debate on groups of amendments shall, subject to Rule 9.8.4A, be brought to a conclusion by the time limit indicated, that time limit being calculated from when the Stage begins and excluding any periods when other business is under consideration or when a meeting of the Parliament is suspended (other than a suspension following the first division in the Stage being called) or otherwise not in progress:

Groups 1 and 2: 10 minutes.—[Bruce Crawford.]

Motion agreed to.

William Simpson's Home (Transfer of Property etc) (Scotland) Bill

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson): The next item of business is a debate on motion S3M-6450, in the name of Shirley-Anne Somerville, on the William Simpson's Home (Transfer of Property etc) (Scotland) Bill.

14:05

Shirley-Anne Somerville (Lothians) (SNP): I am delighted that the William Simpson's Home (Transfer of Property etc) (Scotland) Bill has reached the final stage in the legislative process. As convener of the bill committee, I am pleased to open the final stage debate on the bill.

Perhaps it will be helpful if I set out briefly some of the background to the bill. In 1829, Francis Simpson of Plean gifted his estate to trustees to establish an asylum for indigent men of advanced age—to be called the William Simpson's asylum—in memory of his son William, who was lost at sea. The trustees sought and were granted incorporation under a private act of Parliament—the Simpson's Asylum Act 1864, which received royal assent on 23 June 1864. The home was established at Plean and it continues to be located there.

The home provides specialist residential accommodation for up to 44 service users with alcohol-related brain damage and mental health problems, and placements are arranged by local authorities. The home also provides respite and day care services for a further 16 people. Local authorities throughout central Scotland use the service, with Falkirk Council and Stirling Council being the home's principal customers.

The trustees wished to change the home's constitution to provide better governance arrangements and to develop its work to provide services to a wider and larger group of people, but they considered that such developments were not possible given the restrictions that were placed on the home and the trustees by the 1864 act. After investigating a number of alternatives including the use of charity law, the trustees concluded that, given the statutory nature of the charity, the only way in which to achieve their objectives was to introduce legislation through the private bill procedure to transfer the existing property, rights, duties, interests, employees and liabilities to a new charitable company and to dissolve the existing home. A bill was therefore introduced to the Parliament on 28 January 2010.

The role of the bill committee was to examine the bill at the preliminary and consideration

stages. Our objective was to scrutinise the bill, consider its general principles and whether it should proceed as a private bill, and to consider any admissible amendments. In considering the general principles of the bill, the committee considered, among other things, whether a bill was necessary to achieve the trustees' objectives, whether the trustees had adequately explained why they had chosen to create a new charitable company rather than use an alternative model, how the trustees had consulted users, their families and employees, and what effect the proposed changes would have on users, their families and employees.

A key issue for the committee throughout its consideration of the bill was the extent to which the new home would further reflect the original intentions and ethos of its founder, Francis Simpson. Francis Simpson was a ship's captain with the Honourable East India Company. He had only one son, William, who had served in the Royal Navy in the early 1800s and had become acutely aware of the needs of ex-servicemen who had come from serving in various wars and conflicts and had no fixed abode. Unfortunately, William died in 1809 while he was on a voyage to Malta.

Francis Simpson left everything in trust in memory of his son, including the William Simpson's asylum, which he specified should have a preference for former soldiers and sailors. Jean Lyon, the home's chief executive, explained in her evidence to the committee:

"Care was at the heart of Francis Simpson's setting up of the trust. He realised the dream of his son, William, who had, like his father, served in the navy and had seen men coming home and living rough after serving their country. His vision was that there should be a place of all-encompassing holistic care for their physical, mental, emotional and spiritual health."—[*Official Report, William Simpson's Home (Transfer of Property etc) (Scotland) Bill Committee, 27 April 2010; c 17.*]

Although the trustees are keen to preserve Francis Simpson's intentions in establishing the asylum, they seek changes to its constitution to enable the home to provide its services to a wider and larger number of individuals. The trustees pointed out that changes in society have led to a change in the profile of potential clients. Witnesses said that, sadly, there is a growing number of cases of alcohol-related dementia, which notably includes younger men and women. Such individuals are currently precluded from using the full service that the home provides under the 1864 act.

In her evidence to the committee, Shiona Strachan from Stirling Council, which is one of the main local authorities that refer service users to the home, advised that there are very few facilities for women or younger men in such circumstances.

She said that the council found that, if there was no specialist unit,

"younger people with a certain level of cognitive impairment and physical disability will be placed inappropriately in older people's care provision. That means that they do not get the level of stimulus that they require, and they certainly do not get the level of rehabilitation services that William Simpson's home can offer. It is a unique provider in the current market."

That was confirmed by Marion Robinson from Forth Advocacy, who has direct contact with users of the home. She pointed out:

"The home is a unique setting, which is greatly in demand. The tragedy is that there are not enough beds."

Witnesses explained that although they wished the home to be expanded, they were keen for it to retain its original ethos. As Jean Lyon highlighted,

"The central focus of any change in the organisation must remain the vision of our founder, who had care in his heart. We have continued and will continue with that ethos."—[*Official Report, William Simpson's Home (Transfer of Property etc) (Scotland) Bill Committee, 27 April 2010; c 31, 22, 17.*]

The main charitable purposes of the new charity, as set out in the company's memorandum of association, are

"the relief of those in need by reason of age, ill-health, financial hardship or other disadvantage by providing accommodation and care."

The committee learned that in furtherance of those objectives, the company will provide accommodation and care, respite care and related facilities, and any other facilities that support the charitable purposes of the company, but we were pleased to note that the home maintains an extremely strong service link. In general, ex-servicemen make up around 50 per cent of the residency. The trustees advised that that emphasis on supporting service personnel will be maintained in the new constitution.

Having considered all the evidence, the committee accepted that the restrictions that are placed on the trustees and the home are considerable. We learned that apart from the restriction on people who can benefit from the home's services, the 1864 act places restrictions on those who can become trustees of the home and on the ability of the trustees to enter into contractual relationships that are necessary for its development. As a result, the committee concluded that the bill is necessary to allow the home to introduce modern governance arrangements and to expand the service that the home provides to a wider range of users.

A few weeks ago, the Parliament debated the committee's preliminary stage report and agreed to the bill's general principles. The committee then dealt with amendments at the consideration stage. In this case, just two amendments were lodged,

which simply sought to amend the bill to reflect the fact that the new charitable company had been incorporated. The committee agreed to them unanimously.

Today will complete the committee's involvement with this short but important bill. I consider it a privilege for the Parliament to have the opportunity to help to ensure the continued existence of the home and the valuable services that it provides to its service users, and to make possible its expansion.

I express my thanks to all those who have been involved with the bill. In particular, I thank my fellow committee members for their helpful and thoughtful comments, and the promoters for their assistance throughout the process. I also thank the clerks for supporting us in our work and all the witnesses for taking the time to contribute to our consideration of the bill.

I urge members to support the bill at decision time to ensure that a larger and wider group of individuals can benefit from the unique services that the home provides, and to enable it to continue the wishes of its founder.

I move,

That the Parliament agrees that the William Simpson's Home (Transfer of Property etc.) (Scotland) Bill be passed.

The Presiding Officer: I call on Nanette Milne to wind up on behalf of the committee.

14:13

Nanette Milne (North East Scotland) (Con): I am very pleased to speak in the final stage debate of the William Simpson's Home (Transfer of Property etc.) (Scotland) Bill. The committee recognised the bill's importance to the future operation of William Simpson's home, and I am delighted that it has reached the final stage.

There are two key elements to what the bill will mean to William Simpson's home. First, as we have heard, it will allow the home to become a charitable company and to put in place modern governance arrangements. Secondly, as the committee's convener has explained, it will allow the home to provide its services to a wider group of people across Scotland.

The committee was struck by the commitment to supporting vulnerable ex-servicemen that was demonstrated by Francis Simpson of Plean when he gifted a substantial part of his estate to establish the home in his son's name. Francis Simpson's vision was that there should be a place of all-encompassing holistic care for those men.

The chief executive of William Simpson's pointed out that the home provides

"care for men who are very vulnerable and who are at risk if they are in the community, because of their alcohol-related dementia, which affects their short-term memory."

The chair of the trustees, the Rev Gary McIntyre, feels that the home is in many ways unique and that it will continue to be so. He said:

"I have always been greatly impressed by the care that is shown to the clients, a number of whom I do not think would be included in another kind of home."—[*Official Report, William Simpson's Home (Transfer of Property etc) (Scotland) Bill Committee, 27 April 2010; c 17.*]

The committee is content with the assurances that were given by the trustees that the original intention and ethos of the home will be kept. The Rev Gary McIntyre put it well when he explained that the intention was to protect the "DNA" of the home.

However, as the convener has highlighted, the committee also heard evidence about the widening demand for the home's services and the wish of the trustees and the chief executive to provide services for men and women of all ages. That has been a key component in the promoter's wish to bring forward the bill for the Parliament's approval.

Unfortunately, alcohol-related dementia is a growing problem in Scotland and current social trends mean that the home's facilities are required by a much younger age group than is allowed by the home's current constitution. Now, men and women as young as in their 30s need the facilities that the home provides.

We heard how the bill will help the home to meet the demand from client groups that councils have had extreme difficulty in placing—particularly women, who are still in the minority but who are increasingly becoming a demand area for the services offered by the home.

The home has made an excellent job of using its current facilities to serve its residents, but its care manager felt that it could do even better

"with more modern facilities for the future." [Official Report, William Simpson's Home (Transfer of Property etc) (Scotland) Bill Committee, 27 April 2010; c 21.]

One further positive outcome to be achieved by the home's future development that was welcomed by the local authorities from which we took evidence is the development of the home's outreach and rehabilitation services.

We were pleased to find out that placement at William Simpson's home is made on the basis of social need and does not have any geographical constrictions.

Should the bill be passed today, William Simpson's home will become a charitable company with a very different management structure from that which was established by the

1864 act. During its evidence taking, the committee examined how that would work in practice and how it would impact on the work and ethos of the home. The patron of the home, Dennis Canavan, felt that the restructuring to a charitable company would allow for “more of a link” between the local community, the families of service users and the home. It is felt that that development will mean that people will have more of a sense of ownership of the home.

The convener has set out the home’s continuing commitment to ex-servicemen and women. She has also set out the early principles and ethos of the home. In summing up, I will turn our attention to the future of the home and what the bill means for its current and future residents.

We are aware that robust financial management is required to support the home’s development programme and that restructuring to a charitable company supports that. That was drawn to our attention by a family member of a service user who pointed out that bringing the constitution up to date will help the home

“to maintain financial viability and stability for the future.”

He said that if that was established

“the organisation will continue to be very well run on a day to day basis ... this will give me and my family great comfort.”

We heard from an advocate who has represented particularly vulnerable users of the home and she informed us that

“there is a positive feeling about the future”.—[*Official Report, William Simpson’s Home (Transfer of Property etc) (Scotland) Bill Committee, 27 April 2010; c 22.*]

The bill will support the future of William Simpson’s home and we wish the promoter every success in developing such an important service.

I ask the Parliament to support the motion at decision time.

Scottish Parliamentary Commissions and Commissioners etc Bill: Stage 3

14:19

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson): The next item of business is stage 3 proceedings on the Scottish Parliamentary Commissions and Commissioners etc Bill. In dealing with amendments, members should have the bill as amended at stage 2, which is SP bill 39A, the marshalled list, which is SP bill 39A-ML, and the groupings, which I, as Presiding Officer, have agreed.

Schedule 7—Transfer of staff, property and liabilities and transitional and saving provisions

The Presiding Officer: We go straight to group 1. Amendment 1, in the name of Trish Godman, is the only amendment in the group.

Trish Godman (West Renfrewshire) (Lab): The purpose of amendment 1 is to make transitional arrangements for assessors who are currently appointed by the Commissioner for Public Appointments in Scotland at the time when the bill comes into force. Under the terms of the bill, the Office of the Commissioner for Public Appointments in Scotland will be abolished and its functions transferred to the new public appointments commissioner for Scotland, which will be one of the posts making up membership of the commission for ethical standards in public life in Scotland. The commission is given a power to appoint assessors under section 18. It is the intention that assessors who are currently appointed by the commissioner at the time when the bill comes into force should, in effect, be transferred to the new commission on the same terms and conditions. Amendment 1 gives effect to that intention and ensures that any work that they are undertaking will not be affected by changes of governance.

I move amendment 1

Amendment 1 agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: We come to group 2. Amendment 2, in the name of Trish Godman, is the only amendment in the group.

Trish Godman: Paragraph 8 of schedule 7 makes transitional provisions for the appointment of the public appointments commissioner for Scotland. The paragraph enables the current Commissioner for Public Appointments in Scotland to become the new commissioner. In such a case, subparagraph 8(7) specifies an end date for the appointment of that individual. That date should

reflect the end date of the appointment of the current office-holder. The effect of amendment 2 is to correct a drafting error and to insert 31 May 2012 as the end date for the appointment of the new commissioner should the existing public appointments commissioner continue into that office.

I move amendment 2.

Amendment 2 agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes consideration of stage 3 amendments.

Scottish Parliamentary Commissions and Commissioners etc Bill

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson): The next item of business is a debate on motion S3M-6256, in the name of Trish Godman, on the Scottish Parliamentary Commissions and Commissioners etc Bill. We do not have a lot of time to spare in the debate.

14:22

Trish Godman (West Renfrewshire) (Lab): It is with great pleasure that I return to the front bench to ask the Parliament to pass the Scottish Parliamentary Commissions and Commissioners etc Bill later today. That will, I hope, see the conclusion of an 18-month journey from the Review of SPCB Supported Bodies Committee's first meeting in mid-November 2008, after which we received numerous submissions providing many helpful and interesting suggestions.

That we have reached today is down to the hard work and assistance of a number of people, not least the original committee and the clerks from the non-Executive bills unit, ably assisted by the lawyers. Particular mention should be given to one of the legal team, Rachael McLean, who somehow found time during the process of assisting us not only to get married but, recently, to welcome baby Emily into the world. But then, Rachael is a woman and multitasking is no problem for her. Thanks are also due to the Finance Committee and its clerks for assistance with consideration of the bill at stage 2.

This is the third debate on the committee's proposals in less than a year. I will later briefly cover what the bill does, but I start with a history lesson covering how we arrived here today. We have developed a habit of approving new commissioners and commissions to protect and enhance services and to keep them independent of Government by putting them under the Parliament's control. That started in 2000, when the Standards Commission for Scotland and the chief investigating officer arrived under the Ethical Standards in Public Life etc (Scotland) Act 2000, although those two organisations were under Government control.

In 2002, the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body was given a new, statutory role to support independent office-holders. The first to be established was the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman, closely followed by the Scottish Information Commissioner and our own Scottish Parliamentary Standards Commissioner. In 2003, the corporate body's portfolio of office-holders increased to include Scotland's Commissioner for

Children and Young People and the Office of the Commissioner for Public Appointments in Scotland. Finally, in 2006, the Scottish Human Rights Commission came into being. When those bodies were created, much of the focus was on their functions; less and variable attention was paid to their governance arrangements, although their combined cost last year was more than £8.5 million. That initial lack of focus quickly changed and, in particular, the Finance Committee showed great interest in budgetary and governance matters.

Without statutory powers to approve budgets, the corporate body had a difficult role in trying to balance budgetary control with the office-holders' functional independence. It is worth noting that the office-holders confirmed that the corporate body had achieved an effective balance. Over the years, Audit Scotland has inquired into and reported on the issues that are involved in this area, as did the Finance Committee in 2006. Further, the Crerar report examined public bodies in general, and one of its offshoots led to the Sinclair report. All those pieces of work had in common a desire to improve our public services for the benefit of the public who engage with them. They also recognised that we need to keep a close eye on costs and ensure that each public service delivers effectively and efficiently, providing value for money while adopting best practices.

To complement the work of Crerar and focus specifically on the parliamentary bodies, the Review of SPCB Supported Bodies Committee was established in 2008 to examine terms and conditions, structures and support arrangements. Its work also included consideration of possible mergers, none of which was externally or internally unanimously agreed, straightforward or free from controversy. We were lobbied hard, as members can imagine, and had to consider a great deal of evidence for and against all ideas. In the end, we came to our own conclusions—which is how it should be—and they are reflected in the bill.

One aspect that we did not consider, because it was not within our remit, was that of the functions of the bodies concerned. Those remain as they were originally agreed by the Parliament, and nothing in our bill impinges directly on the discharge of statutory functions, although that might not remain the position into the future. It is right and proper that functions are reviewed, but that is not what we are here for today.

The bill creates a new commission by amalgamating three existing commissioners and the posts of the chief investigating officer and the parliamentary standards commissioner into a single post. The holder of that post, along with the Commissioner for Public Appointments, will form

the commission for ethical standards in public life in Scotland. That body will do what its name suggests—monitor standards in public life in Scotland—in relation to appointments to public posts and the conduct of the holders of various public positions.

We agreed that the functions of the prisons complaints commissioner for Scotland should be transferred to the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman. In addition to simplifying the complaints landscape, such a move will show a significant financial saving of an estimated £163,000 in a full year, in the context of continuous improvements to the service.

No other structural changes are made in the bill. The remainder of the provisions concentrate on improving and tightening governance arrangements. We have striven to produce a consistent approach to governance, which entails significant change for some bodies, and not quite as much change for the newer bodies. The differences in approach were entirely historical, reflecting thinking when legislation was originally passed.

The most significant changes are the move to a single term of office of no more than eight years; the placing of restrictions on other employment, to ensure that the office-holders' main focus is on their posts; and the adoption of a consistent approach to future activities on demitting office, to avoid any perceptions of conflicts of interest. A requirement for strategic plans has been added, along with an enhancement of the role of the SPCB in relation to financial governance, including the power to approve budgets and the sharing of services.

We took the opportunity to make some minor changes to assist the SPSO operationally, addressing issues that have arisen in practice.

One other recommendation that I want to commend to the chamber, although it is not in the bill, is the suggestion that committees be much more proactive in working with the office-holders, and scrutinising their work. They would welcome such an approach, and the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee has been asked to consider whether changes to standing orders might support that.

This bill is, in many ways, unique to Scotland, in that it is the product of a committee inquiry that the committee itself has brought to Parliament. We should be proud of our ability to do that and of the fact that our committees can operate independently of Government in a consensual, cross-party way. It has been a pleasure and a privilege to see at first hand that power in action, and I commend the procedure, as well as the bill, to the Parliament.

I ask members to support the motion in my name at 5 o'clock tonight.

I move,

That the Parliament agrees that the Scottish Parliamentary Commissions and Commissioners etc. Bill be passed.

14:29

The Minister for Parliamentary Business (Bruce Crawford): It was good and useful to hear a summary of the background to the bill from Trish Godman. I hope that baby Emily is doing well. I have no envious DNA when it comes to the deal that nature has handed out to us men, with no requirement to go through childbirth; in those circumstances, may women always be the best multitaskers.

As members might expect, the Scottish Government continues to support the Scottish Parliamentary Commission and Commissioners etc Bill. The Government has consistently highlighted the close links between the bill and the Public Services Reform (Scotland) Act 2010. We are pleased with, and supportive of, the work on improving the landscape of parliamentary bodies and enhancing the Parliament's relationship with those bodies.

The Government has already taken a range of actions to simplify the public sector landscape and improve approaches to public services in Scotland. Our wider public services reform agenda, which the First Minister announced two years ago, has focused on simplifying and integrating public services. It is also focused on promoting the sharing of services through closer collaboration on matters such as procurement. The Government remains committed to reviewing and simplifying Scotland's complex landscape of national public bodies. The provisions in the bill are therefore very much aligned with the Government's aims.

As members have noted in previous debates, there is to be no dilution or diminution of the services that the affected bodies provide. The operational independence of all parliamentary commissioners will remain unchanged among a series of provisions that actively enhance their status and effectiveness. In fact, the bill should significantly enhance the effectiveness of the parliamentary commissioners. Not only will it enable support services to be shared, but it will enable for the first time a consistent approach to be taken to accountability for all the Parliament's commissions and commissioners.

The changes to the handling of prisoner complaints that the bill introduces are part of a wider set of changes that are linked to provisions in the Public Services Reform (Scotland) Act 2010.

In the debate on the original Review of SPCB Supported Bodies Committee report in June last year, the Scottish Government welcomed the proposal that the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman should take on the new role of designing and implementing a single set of principles for complaints procedures. The 2010 act delivers on the commitments that the Government and the Parliament gave to take forward recommendations that arose from the Sinclair report, which examined complaints handling across the public services.

The 2010 act gives the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman the complaints standards authority role, which enables the SPSO to carry out the role that Sinclair suggested. The SPSO can now set out principles and good practice on complaints handling across all Scottish public services. Appropriately, those complaints handling principles must first be endorsed by the Parliament.

The bill will transfer some responsibility from the Government to certain bodies. That will not represent a saving for the Government, as the Parliament will simply top-slice the necessary costs for those bodies from the consolidated Scottish block, which will have the effect of reducing the overall pot before it can be distributed to Scottish public services.

As with all actions that we have undertaken that impact on public services—even before these straitened times—we will look for savings and efficiencies to be delivered, taking advantage of the changes that we make. The financial memorandum to the bill shows some of the transition costs in moving to the new structures as they are currently proposed. It is clear that the reduction in the number of bodies and the potential for greater sharing of resources between parliamentary commissioners that the bill introduces provide welcome scope for future savings. The bill gives the Parliament, through the SPCB, increased powers to scrutinise office-holders' budgets and their draft strategic plans.

All of us in the chamber recognise the implications of the financial pressures that we now face. The need is now even greater than it was when the bill was first introduced for us all to work together to deliver effective and efficient public services that reflect our shared priorities and ambitions.

I reiterate the Government's support for the bill, which is a key milestone in a shared journey towards reforming Scotland's public sector landscape that started in 2006 and has been taken forward by the current Government. Since the bill was first envisaged, the financial challenge facing Scotland's public services has changed, and it is now even more essential that we continue to work

together not only to deliver for the people of Scotland positive outcomes with regard to their engagement with the public services on which we all depend, but to ensure that we who provide those services are as efficient and effective as we can be and can be held to account.

Depending on the outcome of the comprehensive spending review, it might be necessary—indeed, unavoidable—for the Parliament to undertake a fresh review of the architecture of the commissioners and commissions to see whether any further efficiencies and savings can be gained to help us to deal with the stark financial challenges of the future. I look forward to hearing other members' views in the debate.

The Presiding Officer: From now on, speeches should be no more than four minutes.

14:35

Paul Martin (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab): On behalf of the Scottish Labour Party, I welcome the opportunity to speak in this debate and record that we will support the passing of the bill at decision time. During the stage 1 debate, we agreed that the public gallery would probably not be crammed full of members of the public to view the bill's successful passage, but I assure the school party that has just arrived and taken the trouble to attend this afternoon that the bill will have some impact on their lives, albeit at some point in the future.

The minister referred to the new mechanisms for parliamentary accountability, and the bill's benefits come from the Parliament's ability to ensure, for the first time, that consistent standards apply to all parliamentary bodies. This legislation is being developed for the right reasons and in our constituents' best interests. Indeed, in this Parliament we do not revise legislation as often as we should, and we should take that fact into consideration.

We have heard in recent days, and will no doubt hear more in future, about the economic challenges that face us. Given that the SPCB-supported bodies are responsible for expenditure of more than £7.5 million, we should take every step to improve their governance arrangements, and the bill provides for that.

Although, as Trish Godman said in the stage 1 debate, the start-up costs for the new commission for ethical standards in public life in Scotland, for example, will be considerable, there will in future years be savings compared with the cost of running three separate bodies. Also, I noted that in that debate it was estimated that accommodation costs would fall by between £18,000 and £25,000, and that a further £10,000 in savings would be

made by merging the chief investigating officer and the Scottish Parliamentary Standards Commissioner. I also believe that, in the first full year, other savings will amount to £163,000. Given the current economic climate, we should welcome that, and I welcome the minister's commitment to ensure not only that we deliver effective services but that we are open to considering how best our Scottish commissions and commissioners might deliver those services. However, we must ensure that at every step along the way the Parliament is involved in discussing and interrogating the whole process.

Finally, I pay tribute to the hard work of Trish Godman and the other members of the Review of SPCB Supported Bodies Committee. Members of such committees realise that their work is not always the subject of headlines or mentioned in the Press Association cuttings that we all receive, but I am sure that I speak for every member in paying tribute to Trish Godman and the members of such committees. Their work is important in the Parliament and it should continue.

On behalf of the Labour Party, I call on the Parliament to support the passage of the Scottish Parliamentary Commissions and Commissioners etc Bill.

14:39

Jackson Carlaw (West of Scotland) (Con): Presiding Officer, you rarely take me aback, but you astonished me when you said that we would be pressed for time in this debate. I was tempted to offer to surrender my opportunities, such as they are, to the army of colleagues who are bursting to speak.

To members who are familiar—I think that they are, by necessity of being a certain age—with the “Blue Peter” expression, I say, “Here's one I baked earlier,” or, as is sometimes said in Parliaments elsewhere, “I refer my honourable friend to the answer that I gave some moments ago.” At this stage in proceedings, much of what we might want to say has been said comprehensively in the parliamentary proceedings that we have already enjoyed. For my colleague Alex Johnstone and I, only the prospect of the forthcoming one-and-a-half-hour debate on cycling marks out today as an event in the Parliament's history and in our lifetime on which we will look back with enormous affection and enthusiasm.

I, too, pay tribute to Trish Godman. Normally, such occasions are something of a reunion for all the colleagues who were members of committees. I see Jamie Hepburn, the Review of SPCB Supported Bodies Committee's deputy convener, but—sadly—some of our other colleagues appear to have been detained elsewhere and to be unable

to join us. Collectively, we all pay tribute to Trish Godman's work as our convener in steering us through what Paul Martin described accurately as proceedings that would not necessarily generate headlines, although controversies were attached to them, particularly in relation to the various commissioners whose responsibilities and future designations we discussed.

We have said before, and I am happy to repeat, that the Conservative party supports the bill—we are happy to support it tonight. Many sensible suggestions have been made. Although they are dry, minor and mechanical, as I have said, they will improve how Scotland is governed. We support the merger of various functions and the wider access and changes to the SPSO.

The issue that I have tended to dwell upon was also raised by Des McNulty in a prescient speech in the debate on the committee's bill proposal last June. Subsequent events mean that the issue that he raised—whether further consolidation will have to take place, in view of the financial position in which we find ourselves—is even more important today.

I see in the chamber Mr McCabe, who expressed to the committee trenchant views on commissioneritis. I very much enjoyed his contributions. He knows that I was slightly surprised that the saliva of enthusiasm had hardly had time to drip off the end of his tie when I noticed that his name was attached to a colleague's motion calling for another commissioner to be appointed. That was an extraordinary volte-face in just 48 hours. He explained to me that such are the conflicts of loyalty between one's conscience and one's colleagues, so I forgive him that indiscretion.

I will avoid making any partisan political point, but we all recognise that financial pressures exist and that we as a Parliament and the Government or any future Government could be asked to consider all manner of questions that members of the public who look at the structure of commissions after our reforms might feel need further examination. I end by leaving that thought with members.

14:43

Jeremy Purvis (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD): Jackson Carlaw said that everything had been said, but not everyone has yet said it—several more speeches have to be made.

I was nominated to speak in the debate as the Liberal Democrats' finance spokesman, because the Finance Committee considered the bill in part. I reread our committee report as I thought that it would give me ample material to make a speech

this afternoon. However, one conclusion in the report's summary of evidence is:

“No issues of real substance were raised”.

That did not give me much material.

I will reflect on one aspect to which the minister referred. The bill is the result of one consequence of devolution—the establishment of commissioners. It is worth noting the significance of those commissioners not only to public debate in Scotland but to citizens' rights in Scotland.

In 2002, the Parliament had a busy year legislating on reforms. We set up the Scottish Parliamentary Standards Commissioner, who is concerned with the probity and transparency of the operations of members of the Scottish Parliament. We also had the introduction of the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman—I am sure that all MSPs have interacted with the SPSO either directly or on behalf of constituents. Perhaps of greatest significance was the setting up of the Scottish Information Commissioner under the Freedom of Information (Scotland) Act 2002. All that legislation affected in some way community groups or individual citizens, so it is right that we consider how to reform the bodies and ensure that they are fit for purpose.

The essence of all the bodies is that they respond to and are funded by and accountable to the Parliament, through its corporate body, and not the Government. The bodies are wholly and absolutely independent of the Government and rightly so. In fact, the delivery of their functions is, critically, reliant on their being independent of the Government and being seen to be so.

I want to refer to the Public Services Reform (Scotland) Act 2010 and the concerns that I and my Liberal Democrat colleagues raised during its passage, as they should give us slight moment to pause in considering the bill. The bill should have been unnecessary, because under part 2 of the 2010 act the Parliament created new procedures—unsatisfactory ones, I believe—that in effect give the corporate body a new role to ask the Government to introduce legislative proposals on its behalf.

Trish Godman mentioned the value of the current process of legislation being introduced by parliamentary committees, which are answerable to the Parliament. That could be sidestepped by the corporate body asking the Government to produce a statutory instrument to reform all the commissioners and, critically, their functions. Although such an instrument could come into force only with the agreement of the Parliament, the Parliament would not have the ability to amend it. The fact that we had about a dozen amendments during the bill process, many of which were lodged by the member in charge of the bill, highlights the

benefits of having a three-stage scrutiny process for considering important issues such as the functions of the Scottish Information Commissioner. That process will not be gone through for a statutory instrument, which gives us concern.

Although we absolutely support the bill and the commonsense approach of the committee that has been in charge of it, we have concerns about the operation of the Public Services Reform (Scotland) Act 2010. Interestingly, the minister gave over the vast majority of his speech to that act, rather than to the bill that we are debating.

14:48

Jamie Hepburn (Central Scotland) (SNP): I remind colleagues that, in the debate on the committee's report, and in the stage 1 debate on the bill, I suggested that fresh faces would be required for further consideration of the issues. It is clear that my purchase with my party hierarchy is no greater than it was previously. Gratifyingly, it is obviously no greater than Jackson Carlaw's purchase with his party hierarchy, given his similar return to the subject matter. Against that backdrop, I say that I speak with considerable relish.

I echo Trish Godman's comments and thank committee colleagues, the clerks and the witnesses who contributed to the committee's work. I echo Jackson Carlaw's tribute to the convener. She kept us in order and we were all glad that she bore the burden of dealing with the bill, although I was slightly concerned when she informed me that, if she fell under a bus, it would fall to me as deputy convener to deal with the bill. I am glad that she has taken care of herself.

The proposals that are before us were considered in microscopic detail. I cannot quite say that it will be a lifetime achievement if the bill is passed today, although the committee deliberations often felt as though they took a lifetime. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Mr Hepburn, I would be grateful if you would turn off whatever it is that is switched on.

Jamie Hepburn: I do not think that it is my BlackBerry. I believe that it is off—I thought that it was off, anyway.

It is important to emphasise that the suggested changes in the bill do not threaten the quality of service that is delivered by the bodies that we considered and they do not compromise the bodies' independence. The various office-holders to whom we spoke were content with the current arrangements and confirmed to the committee that the SPCB's measures protect office-holders' functional independence and ensure that proper

accountability does not encroach on their operational independence or cause any problems. The committee was content with that approach. However, we ensured that the bill provided for adequate parliamentary scrutiny and recommended that SPCB-supported bodies should be subject to monitoring by committees, to increase their transparency. The creation of the new commission for ethical standards in public life in Scotland will ensure the on-going accountability of elected representatives, that is, MSPs and councillors.

Given the limited time available, I will focus briefly on the proposals to secure better value for money, which is imperative, as the Minister for Parliamentary Business said. The committee's remit was not particularly to achieve financial savings, but we managed to do so through, for example, the early transfer of prisoner complaints to the SPSO, with anticipated savings in the region of £37,000 this year and considerably more thereafter. We will also see expected initial savings of around £10,000 a year through the creation of the commission for ethical standards in public life in Scotland and, in due course, there might be further savings for the Scottish Government.

Like Trish Godman, I commend the bill to the Parliament. It simplifies the public bodies landscape, making it more readily understandable by the public. A key point is that it protects the functions and independence of the affected bodies while improving this elected Parliament's scrutiny of their work. It will also lead to public moneys being saved. I am sure that those objectives are shared by all members.

The Presiding Officer: I have just been informed of the withdrawal of a speaker, so I do not have to be quite so draconian on time, as Mr Whitton will be pleased to know.

14:52

David Whitton (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Lab): I am delighted to take part in this debate, not least because it allows me the opportunity to welcome the school party from Lenzie academy in my constituency who are here today as students of modern studies. What on earth they will make of this debate I am not sure, but I believe that they should regard it as an important part of the democratic process.

As we have heard, the driving force behind the Scottish Parliamentary Commissions and Commissioners etc Bill is the desire to create one new body out of two and to transfer the functions of the Scottish Prisons Complaints Commission to the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman. There are two compelling reasons for Parliament to

agree to the measures. First, there will be one fewer office, and secondly, rationalisation should eventually save money, although not initially, as the financial memorandum observes bleakly.

I have to confess that when we debated the Public Services Reform (Scotland) Bill, which is now an act, we opposed the idea that ministers should have the right to dispose of public bodies at will, and that is still the case. It is the Parliament's role to consider such action, because that which it creates it should be able to unmake. I was disappointed that there were no proposals in the bill to cut further the number of commissioners, but we heard what Trish Godman had to say about that.

Brian Adam (Aberdeen North) (SNP): Would the member care to share with the Parliament which other commissioners he thinks could be disposed of effectively?

David Whitton: I will be more than happy to do so if Mr Adam can contain himself for a minute or two until I get to that point.

I pose the simple question: do we really need a separate Scottish Information Commissioner, based in St Andrews, when functions of that office and office-holder could be placed under the authority of the SPSO? For that matter, do we need a separate Scottish Human Rights Commission? I stress that those are my personal views and not those of my party. That is probably a debate for another day. However, if the predictions of slash and burn from the Conservative chancellor at Westminster are anything to go by, we will be facing up to questions such as those sooner rather than later.

As we have heard, the bill proposes that the posts of the Scottish Parliamentary Standards Commissioner and the chief investigating officer be combined into one new post and given an even longer title than the previous two, of public standards commissioner for Scotland. Benefits and potentially savings will come from the merger of those posts plus the merging of administrative support.

Before I go into detail on the level of savings that could be made through the bill, I want to pose another question, which Mr Adam might be willing to listen to. Why does each of our parliamentary commissioners have someone dealing with human resources and someone else dealing with the finance function? Surely both services could be centralised with consequent cost savings without needing primary legislation, perhaps under the office of the SPSO.

The explanatory notes to the bill state that savings of around £37,000 will be made in 2010-11 when Scottish Prisons Complaints Commission functions move to the SPSO. Mr Martin has

already mentioned that. The figure will rise to £163,000 in 2011-12 and £174,000 in future years. Those savings are welcome. The explanatory notes go on to say:

"It is possible that other savings could arise should the Parliamentary corporation determine to utilise the power in the Bill to rationalise the number of premises occupied by the various officeholders and bodies covered by the Bill. In that event other savings could accrue through the sharing of services or the central provision of services such as human resources, payroll, finance or procurement. Such actions and opportunities will require to be considered should rationalisation of premises occur."

As I have mentioned previously, the age of austerity is upon us, and we are waiting to see where the financial axe will fall. With that in mind, I was pleased to hear Mr Crawford mention the financial challenges that the Parliament will face. If I took down what he said correctly, he said that there might be a fresh review of the number of parliamentary commissioners. I am sure that he will confirm what he meant by that and perhaps even answer Mr Adam's question. Which other commissioners would the Scottish National Party Government like to see got rid of in future years? I respectfully suggest to the corporate body that if it is not already doing so, it should re-examine the costs of all the parliamentary commissioners, consider shared services and even look to bring services together under one roof.

However, those matters are not included in the bill that we are discussing. We are deciding on a merger and a transfer that should perhaps be regarded as just the start. I commend the bill to members.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Alasdair Morgan): We move to the wind-up speeches, such as they are. I call Jackson Carlaw, if he has anything to say.

14:57

Jackson Carlaw: This is unexpected, Presiding Officer, but I thank you for the further opportunity to speak. I am reminded of a question that I asked a lady who had invited me to speak at a lunch. I asked her how long I had. She said, "You can speak for as long as you like, Mr Carlaw. We'll all be getting the bus at quarter past 2." I suspect that the invitation to speak that I have just been given is not quite as open as that.

Mr Whitton's speech has been by far the biggest bull-in-a-china-shop speech in the debate so far. He tackled in detail an issue that Des McNulty, I think, raised back in June last year, and which I have also raised on previous occasions—that of the additional commissioners. I think that most members of the committee understood that issue in our deliberations. It will have to be considered further. I will directly answer the point that Mr

Whitton made. My party has canvassed the notion that it may be appropriate at some point to have a rights commissioner in whom all the potential responsibilities in question could be housed. The distinction for the committee was the relative youth of the Scottish Human Rights Commission. Proportionately, one would almost have expected it to be the father of the wider rights commission but, in budgetary terms, it has very much less money. I think that it has a couple of hundred thousand pounds, compared with more than £1 million for Scotland's Commissioner For Children and Young People. There was a belief that it made sense for that arrangement to be allowed to establish itself. It was also clear that the ways in which both commissions and their respective commissioners understood their responsibilities and the approach that they took to their functions were incompatible with a merger at this stage, but we will have to return to the issue.

David Whitton: The debate needs to be had on the number and function of commissioners, albeit that the bigger debate is on shared services. Every commissioner has a role to play, but do they need all the backroom staff that each of them has?

Jackson Carlaw: The committee considered the point. I am sure that the convener will return to it in her summing up.

Exercising judgment on such matters was hard. We acknowledge that, if the Parliament were to decide in future to establish additional commissioners, each with a separate infrastructure, huge costs would result. The issue is not one of cost alone, however. We took the view that, if a victims' commissioner or older person's rights commissioner were to be established, the correct thing to do may be not to establish an additional commissioner but have a rights commission per se, that monitors all the areas. That said, in considering the merger of two commissions, we were, at times, looking to make only marginal savings. I think that we will return to the matter. In any event, having responded to the point that was raised in the debate, I am happy to confirm once more that the Conservatives will support the bill at decision time. Again, I thank Trish Godman and the clerks and colleagues who made the experience of progressing the bill painless.

15:01

Paul Martin: This short debate has provoked very little disagreement. Many members may say that that is a new form of coalition in the debating chamber, although I am not sure why Mr Purvis did not want to contribute in that spirit, given his party's history in coalitions.

One thing on which we have agreed is our aim of increased efficiency. As I said in the previous debate, we need to be cautious in our approach to that. Efficiency should not be sought at the cost of the service that we wish to deliver. That is the challenge that faces many of us as we try to ensure that the services that our commissioners deliver are accessible and transparent. There is absolutely no point in having the sort of one-stop shop that we have debated today when no one understands what it is or even realises its existence. How then can it help them in their everyday lives? It would be a problem for us all if the bodies that deal with complaints responded only to those who shouted the loudest or articulated their complaint most efficiently. We cannot empower only some people. Doing that would result in those who lack confidence failing to make their views known to commissioners.

As Jamie Hepburn said, there are issues for commissioners to consider in looking at how to communicate with our local communities. For example, I am not convinced that the constituents in the Blackhill area of my constituency know exactly what the commissioner for children and young people or the Scottish Human Rights Commission can do for them. Members of the Scottish Parliament have a role to play in ensuring that the commissioners are supported to do their job properly in our local communities and that their roles are understood beyond the debating chamber. As members have said during the three stages of the bill, it is important that the Parliament has the opportunity to scrutinise the commissioners, but also to look at how we can work closely with the commissioners on behalf of our constituents.

I have to be fair to the commissioners. In my experience, they have shown a genuine willingness to work with the committees of the Parliament. Indeed, their input has been invaluable to the committees over the years. At times, I have disagreed with their contribution, but their relationship with the Parliament during the passage of the bill has ensured clarity; there is goodwill on the part of commissioners in that relationship. The passing of the bill will draw a line in the sand. It will ensure that we provide absolute clarity on the process.

The debate has been reasonable, albeit that it has lacked the sort of turbulence that we see in chamber debates at times, although that is to be welcomed. On behalf of the Scottish Labour party, I commend the passage of the Scottish Parliamentary Commissions and Commissioners etc Bill.

15:04

Bruce Crawford: It is customary for Jackson Carlaw to provide the chamber with some of the more light-hearted moments in debate. That said, he also made some important comments on the process that is before us today. I was reminded of his opening speech when we debated the bill at stage 1, in which he said:

“I hope that you will permit me to begin by saying that Trish Godman’s opening speech and the contribution from Labour’s front bench are without exception the finest that I have yet witnessed in my time in this Parliament”.—[*Official Report*, 24 March 2010; c 24859.]

What an accolade, and what a thing to say about the fantastic Labour front bench. I wish Trish Godman well with Jackson Carlaw’s recommendation of her for debater of the year. It is obvious where that will go.

Jeremy Purvis took a slightly more curmudgeonly approach. I point out to him that the Parliament supported the arrangements that we proposed in the Public Services Reform (Scotland) Bill, which put a double lock into the system. Not only do suggestions for reform need to come from the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body, but the Parliament must have a chance to debate any instrument that is laid before it. It is erroneous to say that the Parliament will have no role, as David Whitton suggested, and that ministers have unfettered powers. Sometimes I wish that that were the case.

Jeremy Purvis: I am grateful to the minister for taking another curmudgeonly intervention. Although the Parliament passed the Public Services Reform (Scotland) Bill—Mr Whitton reminded us that it did so by one vote, but one vote is important in this place, as in other places—does the minister accept that statutory instruments cannot be amended by members and that, consequently, any Government will have to give proper care and attention to statutory instruments that reform the functions of commissioners that the Parliament has established?

Bruce Crawford: The Government always tries to ensure that it lays instruments that the Parliament can support. Any proposals to reform the functions of commissioners will need to be initiated by the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body. If the Parliament does not support those proposals, it will have the power to say no to any instrument that the Government lays before it. As David Whitton indicated in his speech, the current environment is completely different from that in which consideration of the bill started. If we began the debate today, the end result might be different from what it has turned out to be, given the reality that we face. As I said in my opening speech, it is inevitable that in the next couple of years we will need to re-examine not just this area but many

parts of the architecture of the Scottish public sector.

I hope that Jeremy Purvis will forgive me for referring to the Public Services Reform (Scotland) Act 2010 on so many occasions in my opening speech, because there are substantial and material links between the 2010 act and the bill, not least with regard to prisoner complaints, Waterwatch Scotland and the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman.

As all members know, it is ultimately for the Parliament to take a view on its various commissioner roles and their performance. However, work on the bill so far and today’s debate have shown that consideration of the topic is not a matter for the Parliament and the Government alone. All parliamentarians have a contribution to make; I was interested to hear David Whitton’s comments on that point. The process includes not only the commissioners but the vulnerable groups that can and, sometimes, do look to the commissioners for help and guidance. The bill harmonises the way in which commissioners will work, which can only help to improve the service that they offer. It also helps MSPs to ensure, via the SPCB, that continuous improvement takes place in all the bodies that the Parliament supports and for which it is responsible.

As I said in my opening speech, we are acutely aware of the challenging financial times and the hard decisions that must be made collectively. The financial memorandum to the bill contains a key message for these difficult and challenging times. It states:

“This Bill will not initially deliver substantial financial savings ... However in due course, through in particular the new powers given to the Parliamentary corporation to direct in relation to office accommodation and the sharing of services, it is anticipated savings could emerge.”

David Whitton made a good point about the number of services that could come together. The Scottish Parliament information centre briefing that accompanies the bill suggests savings of around £66,000 between 2009-10 and 2012-13. As we all know, we might ultimately be required to consider savings beyond that. However, it is vital that the Parliament ensures that the opportunities that are presented in the bill—and any further opportunities that might be required to be taken—are for the sake of those whom the commissioners ultimately serve: the people of Scotland. I am happy, on behalf of the Government, to support the bill.

15:10

Trish Godman: I thank members for their contributions to the debate. I will start with a couple of comments in response to Jackson Carlaw and David Whitton. The Scottish

Parliamentary Commissions and Commissioners etc Bill gives the corporate body the power to issue a direction to any of the office holders as to the location of their office, or to make them share one with another office holder or public body. That applies in the combining of the chief investigating officer with other posts, and there will be a sharing of staff in that case.

David Whitton has asked me to point out that pupils from Lenzie academy are now sitting behind him—now I know why he volunteered to speak in the debate.

I say to Jeremy Purvis that I cannot comment about what corporate bodies might do in the future, but I expect that, should a corporate body make any proposals that would have a material impact on the bodies that are supported, those proposals would first be raised with the Parliament, before any request was made of the Government.

Bruce Crawford said that we are in difficult financial straits and that things will not get any easier, but there has been continuing dialogue between the corporate body and office-holders over future provisions. A working group has been established, with representatives of each of the office-holders, including the Standards Commission for Scotland. The corporate body will consider the potential sharing of services and co-location, and will identify areas of potential savings as well as other approaches to collaborative working. The working group is meeting as I speak.

What will the bill mean to the people of Scotland? There will be no change in the functions that will be delivered to them. Although the number of bodies that are supported by the corporate body remains unchanged, at six, the functions that are delivered will be increased. There will be a reduction in costs, which we have discussed. An ethical standards in public life commission will be created, resulting in a centralisation of expertise on standards issues relating to elected members. There will be enhanced and improved governance arrangements, leading to potential future savings. There will be a maximum term of eight years for office-holders. There will be restrictions on outside employment and on employment after leaving a post.

Since coming into the Parliament in 1999, I have always been a convener. I was the convener of the Local Government Committee. Then I went into the Deputy Presiding Officer's job, and I am the convener of the Conveners Group. Convening the Review of SPCB Supported Bodies Committee was an interesting experience. It has been a technical committee, in some ways, but the support of my colleagues helped me through it and

allowed me to carry out the task in a way that I would not have been able to envisage otherwise.

The experience underlined the fact that the Scottish Parliamentary Commissions and Commissioners etc Bill is a committee bill. Part of my job as a Deputy Presiding Officer is to show elected members from other countries round this place. If there is one thing that they are very interested in, it is the fact that committees can instigate legislation. I will say again what I said in my opening speech: we do not use that facility enough. The bill before us might not be the best example, but there have been other good examples: the Protection from Abuse (Scotland) Act 2001, the Commissioner for Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2003, the Scottish Parliamentary Standards Commissioner Act 2002, the Interests of Members of the Scottish Parliament Act 2006 and the Scottish Parliamentary Pensions Act 2009. We could use the committee system more in that way. Bruce Crawford is smiling—obviously, that would mean more legislation.

I thank my committee colleagues sincerely, as they helped me to get through things that, at some moments, I found difficult. What can we say about the clerks from the non-Executive bills unit, and the lawyers? What could we do without clerks? Nothing. If we did not have clerks supporting and helping us here, the legislation would not get through the Parliament.

I am not feeling very lucky this week. The first ball of the world cup is about to be kicked, and I have just lifted my team out of the Labour sweepstake. It is Paraguay. I do not think that I am going anywhere fast with that.

I commend the bill to the Parliament, and I ask members to support it.

Active Travel

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Alasdair Morgan): The next item of business is a debate on motion S3M-6476, in the name of Patrick Harvie, on the Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change Committee's report on its inquiry into active travel.

15:15

Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): I stand here as a case study in active travel. The early commencement of the debate meant that I had to run here from my previous appointment. Not only that, but the additional health benefit of not having been able to consume the pie that I intended to have on the way back means that I have no doubt improved the health statistics.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Order. For the sake of other members who might be misled, I point out that the debate did not really start early. It was timetabled to start when the previous one finished.

Patrick Harvie: Clearly, the time indication that I was given was purely informal and I should be more careful in future.

I thank my fellow committee members, the clerks and colleagues from the Scottish Parliament information centre who contributed to the production of the report, as well as the witnesses—the many people who gave us written evidence as well as those who came to give oral evidence to the committee.

Why did we begin the inquiry into active travel when we did? It was partly because the cycling action plan for Scotland is a continuing piece of work in the Scottish Government and we felt that it was important that the Parliament have the opportunity to contribute to that. However, even before that work got under way, there was widespread recognition that active travel, or walking and cycling—I was correctly chided by one of our witnesses not to use the jargon—is a good thing, with a capital G and a capital T.

Everybody agrees that active travel is a good thing and that we should have more of it. The evidence is increasingly robust that it contributes to many Government policy objectives that are shared across political parties. It has health benefits—including mental health benefits, the evidence for which has become increasingly clear over recent years. Obviously, it also contributes towards achieving the necessary reductions in CO₂ emissions and in transport pollution, which continues to be a problem.

Active travel would provide economic benefits and opportunities for the economy if we were to

spend relatively small amounts of money on relatively affordable infrastructure improvements and softer measures. It has the ability to reduce congestion and save money for businesses, individuals and households. In addition, well-used public space leads to better communities and a sense of shared ownership of that space through its shared use. Active travel—walking and cycling—can also improve independence, especially for young people. Moreover, as energy issues increasingly come up the agenda and political parties are willing to speak the words “peak oil” openly in a way that did not happen only a few years ago, it can contribute to an energy descent path for Scotland.

This is the first time that a committee of the Scottish Parliament has carried out a major inquiry into active travel. Every other travel mode has received significant attention—rightly so—but active travel has not. We must acknowledge the current situation: we have shared aspirations but there is a lack of delivery and provision is patchy at best. We have a great, admirable record to examine in comparable countries—even countries with similar weather—but have not reproduced it in Scotland. There is also a consistent lack of funding. Repeatedly, when scrutinising Scottish budgets over recent years, the committee agreed unanimous recommendations that active travel must come up the Government's agenda as a share of transport spending but that has not happened. The inquiry sought to address many of those issues.

It is also important to recognise that people are not defined by their last, or even most frequent, journey. Almost everybody walks. Drivers walk, train passengers walk, cyclists use the ferry and wheelchair users take the bus. Some walkers even pile their bikes on top of a four-by-four and drive about the country looking for somewhere unspoiled by congestion by other four-by-fours. We all share public space—roads, pavements, crossings, shopping centres and routes to school—and have a common interest in resolving any conflicts appropriately. There will always be competing pressure for that public space. At any one time, each of us probably sees the world from the perspective of our immediate transport journeys when we think about our rights and responsibilities.

So, what themes came out of the inquiry? Many of the cultural attitudes to walking and cycling featured in our evidence sessions. I have already mentioned the weather in that regard, which is sometimes perceived as a barrier to increasing walking and cycling. However, that is not the case in countries with comparable weather patterns. There is also an issue about peer reinforcement and how we perceive other walkers and cyclists. That was mentioned particularly in relation to

cycling. For example, the contrast between Lycra-clad warriors and ordinary regular commuters was seen as a barrier that makes people feel that they do not want to be a cyclist or to be seen as one. Gender and age issues also came out of the inquiry. It is important to ditch some of the stereotyping in that regard, which unfortunately clouded some of our evidence, and recognise the real factors. For example, who makes decisions about children's travel to school? As well as mums, many dads do that. However, we all recognise that domestic decisions and domestic work are not equally shared between men and women.

There are workplace issues around the provision of showers and changing facilities, and bike parking. There are also questions about motivation. Just as many people are not necessarily going to respond to a climate change argument that is phrased in terms of parts per million of CO₂, many people will not think about the environment as their first reason for wanting to walk or cycle more. Health, fitness and independence are the kind of benefits that need to be stressed.

On education, we found that it was crucial that young people gain an experience of cycling early on so that they build up the confidence and knowledge to use a bike and cycle routes, and establish a cycling habit early on. That training does not currently appear to be adequate, because insufficient numbers of young people receive it. We need all young people to receive cycle training at school as a matter of course. We have asked the Government to consider a more centrally managed scheme that allows for common standards.

There were questions about safety and the perception of safety. A large amount of evidence suggested that reducing speed limits on the roads would have a real impact in promoting walking and cycling, as a result of both real safety statistics and the perception of safety, which is important. The wider adoption of 20 mile per hour zones would be very much welcomed.

Planning and the built environment must have walking and cycling at their very heart. We hear often that there is a hierarchy, but what we see in reality are developments taking place that lock in high carbon options for people. We have recommended that the cycling action plan for Scotland sets out specifically how it proposes to increase awareness and understanding among transport planners and engineers of the needs of walking and cycling.

Improvements in infrastructure are also essential. We need both dedicated cycling routes—by dedicated I mean both integrated with the road space and segregated, because different

solutions will be appropriate in different contexts—and well-designed and maintained pavements. Some of the discussion that we had during the cold snap about the maintenance of, and damage to, pavements and the lack of gritting is just one example. While individual improvement schemes to the infrastructure as part of the trunk road upgrade can be welcome, they often stand in isolation and are not well linked to other cycle routes in the surrounding area. Having one or two cycle routes is no compensation for having access to the whole transport network. There are also issues around localisation, making better use of the planning system and thinking about where we deliver housing and public services so that people do not have to travel as much and the roads are safer.

I have to say something about funding. Overwhelmingly, we received strong evidence on the lack of adequate funding, even to reach the Government's 10 per cent target for modal share for cycling. Repeatedly, our committee has recommended along those lines in our budget reports, but those recommendations appear to have fallen on deaf ears. Currently, less than 1 per cent—some say less than 1 per cent, while the Government says it is slightly more than 1 per cent, but it is in that region—of the Scottish Government's transport budget is spent on walking and cycling. A representative of the cycle campaign group Spokes told us that they had put together research showing that all the main sources of funding, whether in transport or other budget headings, put us somewhere between £3 and £3.50 per head across Scotland.

It is not easy to identify a single figure for other European countries, but the range of figures goes from £5 to £25 per head. We are clearly way below that level. Cycling Scotland estimates that the figure in Scotland is £3.30 per capita compared with nearly £23 in Denmark and nearly £27 in Amsterdam.

Several witnesses argued that the per capita approach should be taken here. Others argued that 10 per cent of the transport budget should be spent on walking and cycling. The committee has not taken a view on which of those two options—the per capita approach or the percentage share of the transport budget—is the right one. If we examine them, they both result in similar, substantial increases in funding for walking and cycling. The committee considers that the 10 per cent target for modal share for cycling will be meaningless if the Scottish Government fails to match its ambition with a realistic level of funding that is proportionate to the improvements that it expects to be delivered throughout Scotland. The target is a good aspiration, but it will not be met by magic.

The committee has also expressed concern that local authorities will not make active travel a sufficiently high priority, particularly during what might be a prolonged period of economic constraint. If targets for increasing walking and cycling are to be met during such a period, the issue has to be addressed by the Scottish Government. The minister has noted the widespread variation in spending by local authorities. Instead of accepting that as an unavoidable trend, the committee believes that the Scottish Government must find ways in which to address it.

Strong leadership is vital at both ministerial and other levels in Government. We also argue that the role of agency leadership should be considered. Cycling England appears to have had some success in co-ordinating its role and we wonder whether the Scottish Government should consider a similar approach for Scotland. It is crucial to recognise that, if the issue is to become a real priority for the first time ever, compared with other, more expensive and more polluting transport projects that only serve to lock in the existing, unhealthy transport patterns, a fundamental change of mindset will be required. A radical and truly 21st century approach could be transformational in our communities, for our health, for our local economies, and for our ambition to turn our long-term ambitions on climate change into a reality.

I move,

That the Parliament notes the conclusions and recommendations contained in the Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change Committee's 4th Report, 2010 (Session 3): *Report on the Inquiry into Active Travel* (SP Paper 413).

15:27

The Minister for Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change (Stewart Stevenson): Patrick Harvie opened his speech by referring to the health benefits of his rather speedier-than-expected journey to the chamber.

As you might already have guessed, Presiding Officer, if I am seen to be masticating before you, it is not because I am eating, but because I am chewing a Fisherman's Friend. I hope that the smell of menthol does not unduly distract members from this important debate.

I welcome this afternoon's debate on active travel. It comes at a significant time because we are about to publish the first-ever cycling action plan for Scotland. The debate is a welcome and timely final check on the contents of that plan. We will, of course, listen carefully to what is said today and consider it in finalising the plan. To adumbrate what our plan will contain, I say that it will set out an ambitious vision, it will present continuing

investment in the national cycle network and it will see the Government looking to work in partnership on cycle networks throughout the country. It continues our partnership working on road safety for cyclists, which the convener of the Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change Committee mentioned in his opening remarks. It will seek to facilitate the co-ordinating role of Government in working with local authorities because, at the end of the day, if there is no local commitment to action, it is unlikely that there will be successful local delivery. We will also seek and identify opportunities to include active travel in planning guidance, and we will continue to invest in community cycling initiatives. I will return to a number of those themes later in my speech.

As members will know, the Scottish Government has been working in partnership with all stakeholders to identify ways in which we can encourage more people to walk, cycle and use public transport instead of private vehicles more often, particularly for shorter trips. The ambitious targets that the Parliament adopted on climate change a year ago, and our vision for bikes to achieve a 10 per cent modal share by 2020, mean that the making of short trips by bike or on foot—by walking or, in the convener's case, running—should be encouraged.

Let us be clear about the scale of the task: if we were to switch a third of all journeys of less than 5km that are made by car to bikes, we would achieve the 10 per cent vision in the cycling action plan for Scotland. If we switched to bike half of all the journeys of less than 3km that are made by car, we would achieve an 11 per cent modal share for cycling. However, if that is the approach that is taken, it is clear that delivery on those numbers would not happen overnight. We must work in partnership to change travel behaviours for the greater good of Scotland.

Jeremy Purvis (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD): I intervene if for no other reason than to allow the minister to do some more masticating.

The minister referred to modal shift, but does he recognise that in some areas mixed-use travel is necessary? In my constituency, we need to allow people to use public transport for part of the journey and to be able to cycle along the cycle routes in the Borders. When I have put that to bus companies, they have said that from an engineering point of view, it is difficult to put bike racks on buses. What is the Government doing with the wider public sector to ensure that when contracts for bus services are put out to tender, part of the process involves consideration of the use of bike racks and other means that would make it easier for people to use public transport in

combination with the cycle routes in which we are investing?

Stewart Stevenson: Jeremy Purvis has touched on an important issue. It is worth saying that the Traveline Scotland website provides information about bus services that already have the capability to carry cycles, and about how cyclists can access that capacity—which is, in fairness, relatively limited both in its geographical spread and in the amount of space that is provided. From memory, I think that such provision is largely available in the Highlands rather than in the Borders.

Jeremy Purvis asked what role the Government can play. Our role has been to encourage and persuade. Support for mixed-use travel increases bus companies' opportunities to cater for commuters, to support tourist traffic and to access new revenue streams. There is good practice that shows that it is possible to provide for cycles, either in a basic way by allowing bikes to be put in the hold of buses, or by providing specific facilities on board buses. I have seen such capability only this week.

We will work in partnership on that issue and more generally to change travel behaviours for the greater good of Scotland. We need to provide communities and individuals with the right information to help them to decide to use active travel for shorter journeys, or as part of the mixed-mode journeys to which Jeremy Purvis referred.

As part of our national performance framework, we have outcomes and targets that will help local authorities to meet their single outcome agreement targets, which will enable Scotland to achieve economic sustainable growth and health and environmental benefits across the country. It is vital that local authorities play their part in delivering change. I am pleased that throughout the development of policies on active travel—such as smarter choices, smarter places and the soon-to-be-published cycling action plan for Scotland—the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities has been a supportive partner.

I want to expand on the policy areas in which the Scottish Government agrees with the committee's recommendations. We will, of course, ensure that the committee receives an advance copy of the CAPS document ahead of publication.

At the inquiry into active travel, I gave assurances that the committee's recommendations—and those from this debate—would be considered for inclusion in the final plan. I believe that we will succeed in meeting that commitment and I will expand on the recommendations that the Scottish Government will take forward.

First, on cycle training, the committee asked for a carefully co-ordinated and managed scheme with national standards. That will be taken forward and managed centrally by Cycling Scotland, in partnership with key delivery agencies such as Road Safety Scotland and the active schools network. The new approach will integrate the three levels of cycle training and will offer cycle training for children starting in primary 3 through to second year at secondary school. Training and support for volunteers will also be part of that. Cycling Scotland and partners will also develop a delivery plan for, in particular, delivering more on-road cycle training, which will be formulated by the end of 2010.

Secondly, on planning, the committee sought for active travel to be at the heart of new developments. The action plan will promote existing guidance to achieve more well-designed and accessible cycling facilities throughout Scotland. I await with interest the output of the inquiry, in which the committee is currently engaged, on the relationship between transport in general and land use.

I was pleased this morning to see published the document, "Cycling By Design", which provides a comprehensive guide to contemporary examples of best practice in cycling design. Its primary focus is the establishment of guidance for practitioners throughout Scotland to ensure consistent and appropriate design. Transport Scotland currently requires consultants and contractors who are working on trunk road projects to follow that guidance. That will help raise the game of everyone involved.

Thirdly, on leadership, in integrating cycling with public transport we will strengthen partnerships, lead on investigating how other countries achieve traffic-management measures to integrate active travel, and seek opportunities to ensure that active travel is an integral part of planning decisions, which of course will help to improve health, regenerate communities and make roads safe for all.

Patrick Harvie: The minister mentioned leadership and attempts to reproduce the success that other countries have achieved. Will he have time in the rest of his speech to address the central question of funding? We have heard time and again from many witnesses that if we do not address that with rather more than a 16 per cent increase in funding from such a low starting point, we will not have a chance of reaching the targets that the Government is setting itself.

Stewart Stevenson: Funding is certainly an important issue, which is why we have seen the budgets for cycling across Scotland rise year on year during the time of this Administration. I recognise that the budgets have risen, not the

expenditure. The expenditure saw a one-time diversion from a cancelled scheme, but the budgets have been rising and continue to do so. I will comment further on that in my concluding remarks at the end of the debate.

We are in a period of financial constraint and we are keen to hear at all budget debates suggestions from members on which policy areas should be given priority.

I observe once again that I see quite different outcomes in different parts of the country where the expenditure is similar. It is perfectly possible to get much more for some of the money that is spent.

I look forward to a productive discussion on how we can increase active travel and improve the health and wellbeing of the people of Scotland. Who knows—it might even address my throat.

15:38

Charlie Gordon (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab): I congratulate the Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change Committee on the thoroughness of its inquiry and the clarity of its report on active travel—cycling and walking. I am a member of the committee, so I hasten to add that I am not being self-congratulatory. For the avoidance of doubt, I congratulate all other members here present on at least actively travelling to the chamber, even if it was only from another part of the Parliament building.

The committee considered progress in delivering active travel and barriers to progress, and sought to identify further actions by Government, councils and other relevant bodies that would make further progress. We received 175 written submissions and held five oral evidence sessions.

Some committee members visited Copenhagen, and others visited Dumfries. I went to Dumfries. I do not know what privations my colleagues suffered in Copenhagen, but notwithstanding the driving rain and the one-way traffic system in Dumfries, I had a very informative visit.

Stewart Stevenson: Given that the member visited Dumfries, and in the light of the intervention during my speech, does he wish to know that the number 81 bus between Lockerbie and Dumfries is capable of carrying bicycles?

Charlie Gordon: I am delighted by that intervention. Allowing for the fact that the minister is clearly unwell today, I missed his usual self-congratulatory tone. I am delighted to hear that the germs have not yet laid him quite that low. I take note and will try to make that bus journey some day.

Around 2 per cent of Scots who commute do so by bicycle and around 1 per cent of Scottish school children cycle to school. Those figures are, comparatively speaking, not much to write home about and represent a decline from previous generations. As we have heard, the Scottish Government has an ambitious target of raising the modal share for bicycle travel to 10 per cent among commuters. I would have presumed that the cycling action plan would be at the heart of that agenda, but it is not ready yet. Let us hope that that target is not another broken promise in the making.

On the reasons why people do not cycle, it is interesting that the evidence says that the weather is not much of a factor. There are cultural issues, to which the convener of the Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change Committee referred. Not everyone fancies being a Lycra-clad warrior; looking around the chamber, I think that very few of us would look good in Lycra at the best of times. By far the most compelling reason that was given by witnesses, who referred to survey evidence over the years, is the fact that although many people have bicycles, they are fearful of using them regularly because they do not feel safe on the roads alongside the other traffic. That is at the heart of the matter and raises the question of providing the funding to retrofit our roads infrastructure in order to create the perception that cycling is a safe option.

In committee and again today, the minister has been quick to say that councils have a big part to play in this agenda. He said that the effectiveness of council expenditure has been variable and drew the committee's attention to the fact that one council apparently spends as little as 8p per head on active travel. Frankly, it is hard to expect much in the way of progress from that expenditure—it sounds like a box-ticking exercise on the part of that council, which the minister has not yet named and shamed. The minister implied that it is about bangs for bucks, and the convener cited the figure of around £3 to £3.50 per head as our general median spend on the agenda and compared that to some rather arresting continental-Europe figures. However, I do not want us to get hung up on the notion that our being seen to spend more money necessarily means that we are getting somewhere. The minister has a point when he says that the money needs to be spent effectively and on the right measures.

Leadership has been mentioned, and I note that the minister—probably because he is not feeling well today—did not give us his usual list of how far he has walked and how many steps he has taken as part of this agenda. My natural modesty impels me to refrain from that type of thing, but it is relevant to mention in this context that, most days, I walk my four-year-old son to nursery school. I do

not do that in order to give political leadership on this issue; I do it as a parent. However, I am equally sure that, if I decided to start driving him to the nursery school, the public reaction would be against me as a politician rather than just as another commuting parent doing the school run.

Leadership is important, at national and local levels. People are fed up with politicians who do not practice what they preach. This agenda in particular hammers home that message. On infrastructure, we need more of the right sort of physical provision. Another example of the tick-box approach that was brought to our attention involved the trunk roads authority—the Scottish Government’s agents—which had built a section of road and plonked beside it a section of cycle path that did not connect up with anything in the way of active travel infrastructure at either end. That is an example of money not being spent effectively.

I would like to focus on an issue that emerged in evidence and which is particularly close to my heart. Michael McDonnell of Road Safety Scotland, whose work I first became aware of many years ago when I was part of Strathclyde Regional Council, told the committee that

“in many parts of Scotland the final stage of on-road training very often does not take place either because the education authority, the roads authority, the road safety unit or even the headteacher does not want to do it, or because the parents are not prepared to allow it.”—[*Official Report, Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change Committee*, 8 December 2009; c 2413.]

That is why I would strongly commend to the chamber the committee’s suggestion that it is extremely important that we salvage cycle training in Scotland for future generations by moving towards a national scheme.

15:47

Alex Johnstone (North East Scotland) (Con):

My intended opening to my speech was similar to Charlie Gordon’s, as I was going to thank a lot of people who were involved in the preparation of the report. I would like to thank Patrick Harvie, in particular, for driving the issue forward. Patrick Harvie, as one of the Parliament’s two Green members, has a mandate to take forward such matters in the parliamentary context. I think that he has done the right thing in using the opportunity that was afforded him by his convenership of the Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change Committee to bring forward the issue and put it on the parliamentary record.

I also want to thank the clerks and the other members of the committee. I should also confess that the reason why I am making this extended thank you is that I was not always present during the taking of evidence. That was partially due to

the fact that I was paying particular attention to another project at the time. However, we must take account of the fact that a great deal of work was done.

I was present at a couple of evidence-taking sessions and was particularly impressed by the organisations that represent the interests of cyclists and walkers, but particularly of cyclists, in the Scottish context.

This is certainly an issue that is of some concern to a lot of people. However, I can make the brash claim that active travel, as an economic driver, is something that the Conservatives invented and brought into policy. In support of that position, I quote Norman Tebbit, who said that, when his father was out of a job, he

“got on his bike and looked for work”.

As we hit the depths of another economic recession—perhaps the biggest since the 1930s, when Norman Tebbit’s father got on his bike—we should perhaps take account of the opportunities to save money that active travel delivers for many people, in addition to the opportunities that it gives Government to spend more, which is why I want to talk about the issue of cost, in particular. Perhaps one of the biggest changes that has taken place since the inquiry began is that we now know exactly how bad the state of the country’s finances is and the damage that will be done to the spending power of the Scottish Government over the next two or three years. As a consequence, we understand that there is a significant and serious need to consider how we spend money. If we spend on anything, we must get value for money.

Although it is important that we support active travel, we must remember that we cannot afford to devote resources to it if there are people in Scotland who are without homes or jobs. I am not prepared to put forward the “Let them eat cake” argument. It is up to the active travel lobbying group to make proposals and to lobby strongly for them against competing financial interests.

Patrick Harvie: Would Alex Johnstone, as a good Conservative, be interested in comparing other major elements of the Scottish Government’s transport spend over the next few years? Does he believe, for example, that the Forth road bridge compares favourably with comparable bridges elsewhere in the world, or does he think that the money could be freed up for other priorities?

Alex Johnstone: I have recently had the opportunity to debate that matter in the chamber, and I believe that the proposals for the replacement Forth crossing are financially appropriate and acceptable. However, a case can be made for investing in the roads in Scotland that are in a desperately poor state of repair—some

are so bad, in fact, that many cyclists cannot ride on them. There are also sound arguments for concentrating investment on new rail opportunities, which may benefit us equally, if not more.

That is why I suggest that the cycling lobby must take the opportunity to continue to argue its case fluently and consistently, to ensure that it gets the hearing that it deserves.

One thing that has impressed me about the inquiry and the report is that there are opportunities out there that need not cost huge amounts of money. We must promote the ways in which we can improve the environment to encourage cyclists to feel safer and to take greater opportunities to use bikes to cut the amount of travel by motorised means. Leadership, through the Scottish Government and local authorities, is the way to achieve that.

I know that I am getting on in years when I hear Charlie Gordon talking about taking his four-year-old child to school. He makes me feel really old, because I am a grandfather. I remember that from the age of eight I used to cycle 3 miles to Glenbervie primary school and home again at the end of the day. I would be reluctant for any child to cycle to the same school today, given the massive vehicles that drop off children outside the gates because the parents are too afraid to let their children cycle to school. It is a vicious circle.

Christopher Harvie (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP): Now that Alex Johnstone's party is in Government in Westminster and is responsible for the Post Office, what is his view on the Post Office's decision to pension off its bicycle fleet and replace it with vans?

Alex Johnstone: I will not express any opinion on that, other than to say that if I get the opportunity to discourage that change, I will take it. We must take into account, however, the fact that many of our postmen have to cover very large areas on very poor quality roads. I am not entirely sure that I would be willing to volunteer to do that job by bike.

The report is important, but I am concerned that we do not make the mistake of asking for huge additional resources to be ploughed into active travel when that has not been judged fairly and accurately against alternative uses for limited finance. I give the report the benefit of the doubt, and I welcome the forthcoming publication of the Government's cycling action plan. We can achieve a lot, and we should, in these difficult times, take the pragmatic approach to ensure that active travel—cycling and walking—is on the increase in years to come, rather than perpetually decreasing, as seems to be the case.

15:54

Alison McInnes (North East Scotland) (LD): From the outset, the Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change Committee has taken an active interest in active travel and during the annual round of budget scrutiny we returned repeatedly to the need to allocate a greater share of the transport budget to active travel. As a result, I was pleased when we agreed to conduct an inquiry into active travel. Like others, I thank the clerks and fellow committee members for their work. Most of all, though, I thank those who gave evidence for providing us with a wealth of knowledge and for bringing such enthusiasm and optimism to the subject. Indeed, I think that all committee members have been infected by that enthusiasm—although Alex Johnstone was not present often enough to get infected by it. I am less sure that the minister has succumbed, but perhaps this afternoon we can persuade him that something really good can be done in Scotland.

I do not really need to rehearse the reasons why we should encourage active travel, although I could mention health and wellbeing benefits, sustainability, beating congestion, independence and financial savings—in fact, all those and more. Our inquiry focused on active travel not as a leisure pursuit but as a transport choice; in other words, instead of being an end in itself, it was about travelling with a purpose, be it to go to work, school or college, the local library, the shops, the brownies, the scouts or the sports pitch. Of course, any improvements will also benefit people who wish to walk and cycle just for the fun of it.

Where are we starting from? As Charlie Gordon pointed out, at the moment only 2 per cent of people cycle, only 1 per cent of children cycle to school and 12.5 per cent of people walk to work. The Sustainable Development Commission has said that

“Transport is the poorest performing area for sustainable development”

and that within that poorly performing area

“active travel is in relative decline”.

That is not a very good starting point.

Our report focuses mainly on why Scotland is performing so poorly and, more important, on what can be done to improve matters. However, first of all, we had a quick reality check. Was there something distinct about Scotland that meant that we should not aspire to a more active travel style? What about the hills, the weather or the Scottish temperament? I reassure the chamber that we concluded that Scotland has the potential to embrace active travel.

What are the barriers? As Charlie Gordon pointed out, the widespread perception is that

cycling is unsafe. SPOKES, the Edinburgh cycle group, told us:

“It is a prerequisite for extensive cycle use for everyday journeys by a wide spectrum of the population that the road system looks, feels and is safe and welcoming for using a bike.”

That can be achieved only through investment in infrastructure in order to deal with particular pinch points and difficult junctions, to provide dedicated cycle lanes where necessary and to reduce speed limits in residential areas. I certainly think that 20 mph should now be the norm in such areas. In the longer term, the planning process must pay heed to the needs of walkers and cyclists.

It is also worth noting that there is safety in numbers. The more cyclists and pedestrians who are out and about on our streets, the safer the streets become. Road safety must also be addressed through a more co-ordinated package of cycle training, and I welcome the comments that the minister made on that subject this afternoon.

With regard to increasing uptake in walking, Elaine Sheerin spoke with great zest about the Gorbals healthy living network and highlighted walking’s social and safety aspects, while the Scottish Association for Mental Health pointed out that

“there is a growing recognition that being physically active is strongly associated with mental wellbeing”.

I emphasise that point, because I think that it has been overlooked in the past. Having more people out and about on our streets has a positive impact on personal and community wellbeing, and we need to find some way of factoring the less-tangible benefits into our spending decisions.

Walking is human-scale activity. It is not only active but interactive: it allows us to relate to our communities in a way that is impossible if we simply drive everywhere. Walking is a sociable pursuit that gives us time to pay attention to our companions and to meet and greet neighbours. We notice more of what is going on around us and we feel better connected to our community. If the school walk replaces the school run, we will have the time to listen to our children’s achievements of the day and to hear about their worries. Children, teenagers and the elderly all rely heavily on walking; surely they deserve to have a good environment in which to go about their business.

Our committee concluded that the two most significant barriers to improving our record are lack of leadership and inadequate budgets. Leadership is needed at local and national level. Recently, I attended a walking and cycling conference and encountered a room full of exceptional people who day in, day out champion active travel but who are often not supported enough by political commitment from either their councils or national

Government. Those people know what needs to be done and have the enthusiasm to make a difference. I want us to harness that enthusiasm for everyone’s benefit. One of those people was Mark Kiehlmann of East Dunbartonshire’s Cycle Co-op, who was recently given the Scottish and United Kingdom volunteer of the year 2009 award by the Cyclists’ Touring Club. He is now organising the inaugural Bishopbriggs cycle festival, which will take place this Sunday. I wish him well with that.

However, enthusiasm alone will not bring about the changes that we want. We cannot escape the fact that a fairer share of funding is required. Sadly, since the Scottish National Party took over, total cycling investment has fallen each year. The minister’s response is disappointing because it appears to be complacent. It is incredible that he thinks that his vision of a 10 per cent modal share for cycling by 2020 can be delivered with funding at the current level—he is kidding himself. The SNP is a serial offender in promising big but not always delivering. Surely the SNP has by now cottoned on to the fact that achievements do not happen by aspiration alone.

To improve take-up of active travel, we will need an investment programme that is sustained for many years. After the next spending review, I would like the funding that is available to the Government’s sustainable transport team to increase steadily. A shift in priorities in the existing transport budget would mean that many people would opt to travel actively. The minister must match his ambition with the investment that is needed to bring about results.

16:00

Aileen Campbell (South of Scotland) (SNP):

As has been said, walking and cycling are the most effective and efficient methods of recreation, exercise and transport. Both activities can fulfil all three of those purposes at the same time—a walk to work is a form of transport, but it is also exercise and can be much more relaxing than ending up stuck in a traffic jam.

The committee’s report notes early on the evidence from one witness who said:

“Active travel ticks almost every policy box that Government would like to see ticked.”—[*Official Report, Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change Committee*, 1 December 2009; c 2343.]

That much is certainly clear from the rest of the report and from the experience of many of us in our daily lives.

If we want Scotland to be greener, active travel cuts down carbon emissions. If we want Scotland to be wealthier and fairer, active travel is a social leveller, and fit and healthy workforces are more

economically productive. If Scotland is to be safer and stronger, huge community benefits will come from having more pedestrians and cyclists out and about. We can create a smarter Scotland if people learn more about the environment and the world around them as they travel by bike or on foot. There is no doubt in anyone's mind that more people cycling and walking will help to deliver a healthier Scotland.

Consensus exists about the many and varied benefits of active travel, but it is clear from the report that good words and intentions are not enough. Practical action that is backed by leadership and appropriate funding needs to be taken to get more people walking and cycling. It is agreed that the Scottish Government's proposed target of a 10 per cent modal share for cycling in Scotland's transport profile is ambitious but worth aiming for. An ambitious target helps to focus minds and reminds us of the importance of getting this right.

It is clear that we need a better culture that translates general awareness that walking is good for people into a habit that allows individuals to make a positive choice for active travel that is not swayed by the vagaries of Scotland's weather, which we have perhaps experienced in the past few days. I welcome the submission from NHS Ayrshire and Arran, which covers a large part of the South of Scotland region. It said:

"High levels of walking and cycling can only be achieved when the nation views walking and cycling as the foremost means of local transport playing a central role in everyday travel activity."

The wider population are willing to become more active travellers but, as the committee outlines, that needs to be supported properly. The right infrastructure and support could help us to reach a critical mass of individuals who are seen and keen, which makes involvement all the more easy for others.

Throughout the South of Scotland, I have worked with constituents who want to become more active travellers but who find barriers in their way. Often, imagination and political will are needed more than hard cash is to overcome those barriers. For example, cyclists who want to travel between Biggar, Symington and Thankerton face a dilemma. They can choose to cycle on the main road, which is heavy with fast-moving traffic, or they can take the designated cycle route, which is longer, narrow, twisty, more remote and often poorly maintained. In effect, they must choose between the worst of both worlds.

I was struck by the committee's finding that mothers have an important role to play in encouraging their children to walk or cycle to school. A Thankerton mother raised the cycle route issue with me, just as a mother in Lanark

raised with me South Lanarkshire Council's decision to remove lollipop people, which acts as a disincentive to walk to school. Many children travel between the communities that I mentioned to go to and from school and many end up in cars because neither route for cycling is acceptable to their parents.

The committee's report talks of the need to join up policies and to take proper account of active travel in planning statements and decisions. Sorting out such issues throughout the country, for which a more joined-up policy approach can be effective, does not have to take extra funding—just common sense and imagination.

Innovative use of existing or third-party resources can make a difference. Just a few weeks ago, the Heritage Lottery Fund gave a first-round pass to a £2 million bid for funding by South Lanarkshire Council and a range of partners for a project to conserve the area of great landscape value designation from Chatelherault to New Lanark, following the Clyde valley national tourist route and the Clyde walkway. I wish that partnership success in securing the funding in the final round. Maintaining and developing areas that might be used for recreational walking can provide an inspiration for people to walk more regularly as part of an active lifestyle. I certainly found that when I joined Biggar ramblers on one of their organised walks a year or so ago and when I walked the west Highland way and Perthshire's cateran trail.

Building active travel considerations into policy decisions at an early stage can save on the need for costly investments later or the appearance of barriers that could otherwise have been avoided. The minister might be aware of concerns that new rolling stock on the North Berwick line, which runs through East Lothian in the South of Scotland region, has insufficient space for bikes. That problem is not dissimilar to the one that was discussed previously in relation to buses, and it probably affects train routes other than the North Berwick line. Some people would argue, probably with some legitimacy, that space for bikes on trains has been a problem ever since guard's vans were done away with in Scotland. However, that is not the fault of the current Scottish Government; sadly, nor can it be tackled without full control over all aspects of our railway system.

The Cyclists Touring Club Scotland noted in evidence to the Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change Committee that the main barrier to cycling has been the lack of finance over many years. The problem is historical. The report recognises that funding must be secure for the long term and targeted at measures that produce results. We live in difficult economic times. Nowhere does the report suggest that growing the

Parliament's fiscal responsibility and powers might help to provide some of the financial flexibility that is needed for investment in issues such as active travel. The report cites international examples such as the Netherlands and Denmark. I remind members that those are both independent countries and, dare I say it, free to prioritise walking over nuclear weapons, or cycling over servicing massive public finance initiative debts.

That aside, active travel ticks all the boxes. The committee is right to say that it deserves support and a joined-up approach. I welcome the Scottish Government's commitment to encouraging people in our communities to walk or cycle wherever and whenever they can and I am sure that it will take on board many of the committee's recommendations. The issue is also about giving the Parliament power—we need to go the extra mile by transforming the control that we have over our resources. That is the best way in which to transform travel in this country.

16:07

Marlyn Glen (North East Scotland) (Lab): As a member of the Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change Committee, I am pleased to take part in this debate on active travel. The committee's report brings together a great deal of evidence about walking and cycling. It restates what some might see as being rather obvious, but that restatement is necessary to underline the importance of the actions that are recommended in the conclusions.

Transform Scotland, among other bodies, welcomed the inquiry and its conclusion that

"active travel has huge potential to benefit the health of the people of Scotland as well as contributing to meeting Scotland's ambitious climate change targets",

but—and it is a big but—that will not be achieved without "ambitious increases in resources" and

"Stronger, more effective and sustained leadership"

from the Scottish Government.

It is agreed that active travel has positive impacts on a wide variety of policy areas, including the environment, social inclusion, public health and even local regeneration. It crosses over many portfolios and therefore should have a much greater profile in Government planning. However, attitudes to active travel will change only if walking and cycling are viewed as safe and convenient alternatives to other transport modes. The committee's report recommends a variety of measures that could increase participation in walking and cycling, including improvements to infrastructure and a new, nationally co-ordinated cycle training scheme.

I briefly pay tribute to the organisers of the big fit walk. On Friday, some members joined school pupils from Falkirk at lunch time in a walk around Holyrood. The walk is only half an hour—it does not have to be something huge—but it is really important. Almost 12,000 people from throughout Scotland are already registered for the big fit walk. That is a great effort on a tiny budget. However, the scheme relies on active schools co-ordinators to help bring it together and to launch it.

As has been said, the Scottish Government has set a target of 10 per cent modal share for cycling in its draft cycling action plan, but currently only 2 per cent of people cycle to work and only 1 per cent of children cycle to school. By contrast, in the Netherlands and Denmark the share for cycle journeys is 27 per cent and 13 per cent respectively. We have a long way to go.

I read the equality impact assessment consultation on the cycling action plan for Scotland with great interest. It makes the connection well between cycling and health—physical as well as mental. However, it does not yet mention gender—I presume that Engender and others have not yet had the opportunity to reply. As Aileen Campbell said, it is women, and mothers in particular, who make most of the choices about how children travel. That cannot be ignored if the 10 per cent vision is to be achieved. I look forward to seeing a comprehensive equality impact assessment.

As has been said, fear about road safety is probably the most significant factor that discourages people from participating in active travel. One way to address the problem is through education and the training of cyclists and other road users. In Scotland, cycle training is provided by a volunteer network, supported by road safety officers, active schools co-ordinators and school travel co-ordinators. I welcome the promise that work will be done on a co-ordinated approach to training but, sadly, far too many young people still grow up receiving no practical cycle training. It is crucial that young people gain experience of cycling to build up confidence and establish a cycling habit early in their lives. An agreed minimum standard of training has to be given to all young people, both girls and boys.

As in other places, we have a range of initiatives to promote cycling in Dundee. In addition to every school having a travel plan, there is the sustainable travel in Dundee east project, which has received funding from the climate change challenge fund to develop sustainable transport. Along with the Dundee travel active project, it encourages Dundonians to walk or cycle more to improve their health and environment. However, the project is concentrated only in the city centre, Hilltown, Stobswell and West Park. I welcome the

allocation of half a day a week to the remit of a cycle officer. However, I am keen to see more action, not just from Dundee City Council, but throughout Scotland. If we are to have a really effective national campaign, it must be led nationally in the way that transport safety campaigns have been. We need a much more co-ordinated and joined-up partnership approach.

A witness from Sustrans told the committee that there was

“almost an acceptance that although we will have plans and policies, there will not be any funding to take them forward”, and

“a sense of contributing to a library of excellent policies that would not have the funding to see them through.”—[*Official Report, Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change Committee*, 1 December 2009; c 2344.]

The promises have to be delivered on, both for our health and for our environment. As the report says, the target of 10 per cent modal share for cycling is excellent, but it is “meaningless” without the necessary resources and leadership.

Stewart Stevenson: Is the member aware that Sustrans will receive nearly £1 million extra this year compared with last year?

Marlyn Glen: I will comment on funding if I have time.

Active travel must be at the heart of new planning developments, rather than an afterthought. People’s attitudes to walking would improve if paths, streets and public spaces were improved.

We have to consider seriously supporting and resourcing active travel, and I welcome the 16 per cent increase in funding this year. However, with proper cost benefit analysis, active travel is the direction in which we must move in the future. After all, even with that increase in funding—it is an overall increase; it is not just for Sustrans—the figure is still less than 1 per cent of the total transport budget.

I commend the report and look forward to the minister taking action on its recommendations.

16:14

Rob Gibson (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): As an active member of the Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change Committee who took part in much of the inquiry, I, too, thank those who made the inquiry possible. I welcome my being able to visit, during the climate change conference in Copenhagen, cycling organisations and the organisation that promotes cycling in that city. Copenhagen has a lead of nearly 70 years on us. For a long time, people have made decisions in Denmark and the Netherlands about improving

cycleways and making it easier for people to use cycles; indeed, they have made the use of bicycles possible to the extent that around a third of people in the city of Copenhagen travel to work or school by bicycle. If we could have the amount of investment that has been made there over the years, that would make up for those 70 years and would be an admirable target for us to aim at.

It is always interesting to hear people demanding that more money be spent, especially members of parties who not long ago talked about having vast cuts in total budgets. We are likely to see such cuts, so there is the question of rebalancing budgets. What would money be taken away from? Patrick Harvie might say in response to that question that we should stop building a motorway and spend the money that would be saved in a way that would allow us to see a better bang for our buck. That is a possibility, but there are many things that we can do to move forward in these difficult times, and I will concentrate on two or three of them.

It is clear that national co-ordination of cycle training is most likely to get things started again. I will use my village of Evanton as an example. As members have said, schools used to do cycle training, but headteachers and parents preferred that to start in the upper primary. In Copenhagen, we found that, because many families cycle for fun, cycle training had to be provided only for the children of immigrants who had no experience of cycling. That suggests to me that cycle training must start at a much earlier age so that, by the time children are in mid-primary, they are confident enough to be able to cycle to and from school in a reasonably safe environment.

At the beginning of this decade, there was the safer routes to school programme. In my village, there were discussions about how we might facilitate walking and cycling. However, an issue was raised in the committee that I will bore my fellow committee members with again: how can cyclists who are doing a right turn be prioritised over on-coming vehicular traffic? Councils and Transport Scotland must find some way of reducing speeds or putting in the means by which cyclists can get a chance to cross lines of traffic. In our case, that is needed so that parents are confident that their children can cycle to school.

Although walking and cycling issues are not unknown, when I go on my bicycle at the weekends for newspapers and the messages from our local store, I do not see many cyclists. There was an old gentleman—sadly, he passed on two or three years ago—who cycled all the time, but I do not see as many youngsters or their parents cycling regularly. A hilly environment—part of our village is on a hill—is a disincentive to cycling, but

somehow or other, we must get through to people the health benefits of cycling.

I will make a suggestion that members may agree with. Just as we have had transition towns for environmental purposes and fair trade towns, we could have active travel or walking and cycling villages and towns as a means to get people to discuss in their local communities how they might go about making the advances that can be made without a massive amount of physical investment being required. I hope that that idea is taken seriously. If it has legs—or wheels—it is possible that the organisations that are always after us for more investment might be able in a practical way to engage people in parts of the country other than the big cities in the process of becoming part of the active travel movement. There might be considerable interest in doing that in Scotland.

I will talk a little bit about people being able to get their bicycle to where they want it to be. In some cases, that involves taking it on a train and using it at the other end. In my part of the Highlands, people want to commute into the large centre of Inverness, and it would be wonderful if they could do that by train. The committee heard evidence from the Highlands and Islands strategic transport partnership's railway development officer. When he was asked about the need for more bike space on trains, I was appalled to hear him say that that was not physically possible and that we just need more trains. In our area, single-track provision and a lack of passing places means that the railway would be completely unable to accommodate more trains. If someone books a bike space to travel the length of the far north rail line—a very long journey of four hours over 120 or 130 miles—there is less space for others to do that over the piece. In the next round of the ScotRail franchise negotiations, we should try to ensure that more bicycles can be carried on the rail network. If we are not to get new rolling stock, one of the simplest possible things would be for carriages to be redesigned so that they can take double the number of bicycles that can be carried at present.

Having made those few points, I pass on to another member who might have other fresh ideas.

16:21

Jim Tolson (Dunfermline West) (LD): It has been an interesting debate. I am sure that we all aspire to promote active travel in Scotland, although whether we do so in practice is a different matter. There is no doubt that, in helping to promote a healthier lifestyle, we need to encourage more people to walk and cycle. That is something that many of us in Scotland need to do. Having read the report, I think that it is a good one.

Like others, I congratulate the members who were involved and the clerks and other officials.

The Government claims that it is including the majority of the committee's recommendations in its active travel plans, where practicable. I am concerned slightly about the "where practicable" bit of that. I am also concerned about the Government's statement that

"funding beyond this financial year will be dependent on the UK Budget".

I ask the minister to give the strong reassurance that the money will be found to take forward at least some of the committee's key recommendations. If it does not do that, we will see further deterioration in Scotland's health.

I noted recently that the Spokes annual funding survey shows that the two years in which the greatest investment in cycling was made were the last two years of the previous Lib-Dem Labour Administration, when Tavish Scott was the Minister for Transport, due to the big boost that was given to funding for Sustrans. Since the SNP came in, total cycling investment has fallen each year, thanks in part to the cut in funding for Sustrans and the transfer of regional transport partnership capital funding to councils. Although the Government put money into smarter choices, the result was a net loss of funding for cycling and walking, because the money that went into smarter choices was cut from the funding for Sustrans. Basically, smarter choices was really a transfer of funding for walking and cycling to funding for walking, cycling, public transport and car sharing—not exactly what I call an investment.

As the minister stated, the cycling action plan for Scotland aims to deliver the Government's vision for cycling by 2020. However, it does not take 20:20 vision to see that, without any secure funding, that is a blind statement.

Other members have referred to key points in the committee's report. The key recommendation relates to funding. The committee called on the Government to reverse the recent decline in funding and asked for an increase in funding to help the achievement of the targets that have been set. The committee heard strong evidence about the lack of funding for active travel. Patrick Harvie put the figure at less than 1 per cent of the transport budget—other members have referred to that. We need only compare the per capita figures to show the Government's poor actions in that regard. As Charlie Gordon said, the figure of between £3 and £3.50 per head is a lot less than many other countries that promote cycling more effectively and efficiently put into active travel. Alison McInnes said that investment has fallen each year. Some of the figures that I have highlighted seem to bear that out.

I am concerned by the minister's responses. To some extent, he is avoiding the funding issue and not giving the Parliament the clear details that it needs.

Another key issue to which many members have referred is planning. The committee noted that the CAPS document sets out in specific terms how to increase awareness and understanding of active travel among planners and engineers. Patrick Harvie was right to say that cycle routes are not well enough linked to existing routes and destinations. The minister set out an ambitious vision in that regard, which should include provision of a network, safety, a co-ordinator role and planning guidance. Appropriate design guidance is required. A vision is all well and good, but where is the funding to back it up?

Speaking of funding and of the minister, another key subject is leadership. If the Government is serious about meeting its 10 per cent target for cycling, it must not leave it to local government to provide clear leadership but must help to provide such leadership itself. I was interested in Patrick Harvie's image of the Lycra-clad warrior. I would like to see the minister cycle to work as a Lycra-clad warrior—that would be quite a sight.

Safety is another key area that has been touched on significantly. Patrick Harvie referred to safety and the perception of safety. Many fair points have been made, especially on the issue of how today's busy roads affect children cycling to school or other places.

Many of us must try much harder to practise what we preach. I take myself as an example. As part of my journey to work in the Parliament, I regularly walk to and from the railway station, which gives me at least an hour's walking each day. That is not a lot but, according to my doctor, it is a reasonable start. Mr Johnstone did a lot of walking as part of the recent project to which he referred. I was helping with a similar project, during which I happened to mislay 5kg somewhere about my person. That is not a bad start, and I hope that the decline will continue.

Yesterday evening, I had an interesting chat with a constituent of mine, Maureen Wrightston. She is a retired lady who takes a group of, sometimes, 18 people—from a membership of nearly double that—on various bus trips, with a walk at the end and, no doubt, a pub stop on the way back. That is an active and able way of ensuring that people use public transport, their bus pass and their walking boots to maintain a healthy and active lifestyle in their retirement. I hope that the minister, too, will consider using his bus pass to meet and walk with friends. I used to cycle miles in each direction to work both at Rosyth dockyard and at Sky Subscriber Services.

It is essential that we take forward some of the report's key recommendations. My main concern is that the finances are not in place to do that. I ask the minister, when he sums up, to give us stronger reassurances that some of those recommendations will be taken forward and brought to fruition.

16:28

Jackson Carlaw (West of Scotland) (Con): I thank my colleague Alex Johnstone, who has led on the subject of transport infrastructure and climate change in this session to date, for all the work that he has done. I know that he will continue occasionally to contribute on the issue in the chamber. I look forward to enjoying in more detail the minister's contributions. I have heard much about the minister from other people and look forward to seeing whether even half of it can be true.

I also look forward to participating in debates with Charlie Gordon. My first experience of Mr Gordon was in October 2007, when he hurried into the chamber rather excitedly and transfixed Conservative members by telling us that he had just been at the Labour Party conference and that we were going to get a drubbing in the general election. Since then, we have occasionally traded insults and whatever else across the chamber. However, I am a former Glaswegian businessman, and one of the things that I most respect about Glasgow City Council—irrespective of the political complexion that it has had—is that it has always understood the commercial beating heart of the city and the need for transport and other issues of that character to be dealt with effectively on a practical basis.

Charlie Gordon: Does the member accept that there is no such thing as a former Glaswegian? Once a Glaswegian, always a Glaswegian.

Jackson Carlaw: It was the "businessman" aspect to which I was attaching the word "former"—I absolutely agree with Mr Gordon.

I come to the debate as someone who enjoys walking. My holiday this year will in part be spent in the Swiss Alps, where I like to go trudging around. I see lots of people who cycle when I am in Switzerland—they tend to take their bikes up to the top of the cable-car and then enjoy the ride back down.

I am slightly agnostic, however, when it comes to a legislative drive, with a substantial budget behind it, to encourage something that I think is common sense. I will return to that point in more detail later.

I come to the debate after several years of speaking within the health portfolio. Not on one

occasion but on several, we have had debates on the demographic time bomb and on the huge issues to do with dementia and obesity that will affect us. When I see the minister's target of 10 per cent for 2020, and as I approach being a pensioner myself at that time, I am confronted with the image of bewildered, overweight elderly people—in an environment that, by that time, Patrick Harvie tells us, will be riddled with hurricanes and buffeting winds—battling the elements as they seek to cycle about, no doubt then having to be fished out of the canals into which we are also putting a considerable amount of investment.

Patrick Harvie laid out the terms of the committee report, and he noted something that I was not aware of: that this is the first time that the Parliament has given significant attention to, or debated, cycling. He drew attention to the fact that per capita investment on cycling in Scotland was about £3.30. As he was speaking, I looked down and noted that my copy of the report on the subject costs £8.10, which I suppose is some sort of relative reflection on the matter.

I have to suggest that the minister's masticating habits are something that he might better confine to the privacy of his diary. In his speech, however, he drew attention to the smarter choices, smarter places programme, which was also mentioned in his letter to the Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change Committee. Seven councils are participating in the programme: Dumfries and Galloway, Dundee, East Dunbartonshire, East Renfrewshire, Falkirk, Glasgow and Orkney.

This is where I have some difficulty. In East Renfrewshire, the money is being used to employ a number of individuals who are wandering around the town of Barrhead knocking on doors to discuss public transport options with residents. When people see how money is being spent by the council that has the worst record in Scotland for investment in the infrastructure of roads and pavements, the wish of the public at large to encourage cycling or walking more broadly can be undermined by a perception that it is not actually a priority use for the cash in hand.

I largely agreed with Charlie Gordon's central point, whereby he drew attention to the elephant not in the room: the Government's cycling action plan for Scotland, which we have to see and understand before we can really appreciate whether the report's recommendations, many of which are commonsensical, are going to have the required drive and leadership behind them. Marlyn Glen spoke about that issue of leadership in her speech, and much depends on it. A lot can be achieved through leadership, co-ordination and partnership, even if the financial resources to

support the project are not as others would wish them to be.

Alex Johnstone drew attention, perhaps unwisely, I thought, to Norman Tebbit.

Alex Johnstone: Never unwisely.

Jackson Carlaw: Well, perhaps not. It reminded me of a debate that I was involved in many years ago with Labour Party members. My colleague stood up and said, "I can see you think I've never got my hands dirty, but I have—working on my daddy's building site." That was not necessarily the most helpful contribution to add to our side of the argument. Anyway, Alex Johnstone made an important point when he said that the cycling lobby must argue its case.

Christopher Harvie made the apposite point that, while we are talking about the subject, practical actions are being taken by parties elsewhere that are going in completely the opposite direction. We should be aware of that as we proceed.

I understand Rob Gibson's point about training in school. My sons went through this. It was a choice between being trained in cycling proficiency for an afternoon in the playground in the summer term and spending the time in class doing other work. It is not a big surprise which of the two options they took, but did that encourage them to become lifelong cyclists thereafter? No, it did not. We must be measured in our belief that, simply because we offer training to individuals, they will, as a matter of course, choose to cycle. The social trends among many young people have changed and they do not cycle as a matter of course in the way that I remember our generation doing.

We are happy to note the report. Our Liberal Democrat coalition partners were almost the most enthusiastic—if not a bit too enthusiastic—in wanting more money to be spent on active travel. I will have to have a word with Nick Clegg about that. We look forward to the plan that the minister will produce, but we must be realistic. We are trying to encourage people to travel actively as a personal choice. We should not say that the lack of investment underpins an excuse for people to avoid doing so.

16:35

Charlie Gordon: It has been a good debate. The convener comprehensively outlined the committee's deliberations and recommendations. He nearly succeeded in sticking to that, apart from one sally about the Forth bridge.

It was remiss of me not to mention in my opening speech the excellent support that the committee had—and always has—from its

estimable clerks. I hope that they will forgive me for that initial omission.

The minister is clearly not well—I am talking about his physical health—but, even allowing for that, he has not convinced us today that he is doing enough to achieve his ambitious 10 per cent target for cycling.

Alex Johnstone confessed to having been distracted during the committee inquiry. He may have been unsuccessful in his effort to reach another place, but I presume that he now feels that it is no loss what a friend gets.

Alison McInnes was her usual reasonable and emollient self for most of her speech but, in the last two minutes, she fair perked me up when she started to slash and burn the Scottish Government's track record on active travel. She came over all British.

Marlyn Glen told us some interesting and, to me, new information about what is going on with the active travel agenda in Dundee. I found that helpful.

Rob Gibson transported us to the city of Copenhagen and the village of Evanton. I have been to Copenhagen, albeit not on parliamentary business; I have never been to Evanton, but there is time enough yet. He made an interesting suggestion about designating some towns as active travel towns. That would be similar to the current pilot project under the smarter choices, smarter places agenda. There may be some merit in that suggestion. He also has a valid point about rolling stock design in Scotland. We are locked into rather too rigid and narrow an agenda in that regard. At the next opportunity, we really must revisit that matter for the reasons that he described.

Jackson Carlaw made an interesting and arresting point about my alleged statements in the chamber in October 2007 when, apparently, I returned from the British Labour Party conference. I have never been to the British Labour Party conference in my life, although I have often been to the Scottish Labour Party conference. He may well be mixing me up with an equally good-looking member of the Labour team, who apparently predicted that the Tories would not win the general election. Well, of course, they didnae really win the general election, but we have already heard today about how they managed to take office at Westminster virtually by default.

I take issue with Jackson Carlaw on a more serious point, when he criticised work that was clearly associated with smarter choices, smarter places. He described door knocking in Barrhead.

On my glamorous visit with Shirley-Anne Somerville to Dumfries as part of the committee

inquiry, we were told about the work on smarter choices, smarter places in that town. Frankly, knocking on doors is a part of the work. There are many people out there who vaguely feel, "Well, I would maybe travel by public transport, or maybe walk or cycle, but I'm pretty sure it's not possible because I'm not sure about X, Y and Z." Frankly, I think that many people need information that is tailored in great detail to their individual needs and aspirations. That is of course very resource-intensive work, and no one pretends that it is the only way forward, but it certainly must be one of the shots in the locker. However, the report's recommendations make it clear that there are also issues to do with funding, retrofitting infrastructure and designing new infrastructure, and training the next generation of cyclists, which is important.

Jackson Carlaw talked about cycling as something culturally that we might do when we are younger but stop doing when we get older and perhaps wealthier, though certainly not wiser. I feel that the roads are palpably more congested these days. They feel less safe to most people, so we must drill down into that issue to try to remove the barriers to people taking to the bike again. However, I am like many others who have spoken in the debate in that, when I was a young man, I used to cycle to work. No, I probably would not do it nowadays. However, as Alex Johnstone was kind enough to point out, I am still young enough to succeed at other things.

16:41

Stewart Stevenson: Four Fishermen's Friends in, we come to the end of a very engaging and interesting debate. As Patrick Harvie pointed out, the inquiry was the first committee inquiry into active travel, and, as such, it is very much welcome. He picked up a theme that we heard in a number of contributions to the debate, which is that safety and the perception of safety—in other words, the perception of a lack of safety—are clear inhibitors to people moving on to cycling from other modes of travel. That is certainly something of which we will take tent.

Patrick Harvie also talked about active travel not being a high enough priority in local authorities, so central Government should dictate to them what they should do. Actually, I think that there is quite an effective relationship with local authorities. We must foster that and ensure that good experience is shared around the local authority system, because local delivery is crucial to what will work.

Charlie Gordon developed further the barriers to people going into cycling. I have temporarily forgotten who suggested that seeing the minister in Lycra was not necessarily an outcome to be greatly desired, but I agree with whoever said that. Frankly, when I cycle—I do more walking than

cycling—I do not tend to wear Lycra. There are many other ways. I am of the old bicycle-clip brigade, which is my standard uniform. I am quite content with that.

Charlie Gordon also talked about leadership and the minister's personal travel. I am happy to tell him that I have already used the train and the bus today, and I will be walking to the station at the end of today's parliamentary business. I am slightly puzzled by Jim Tolson's suggestion that he gets an hour's exercise between here and Waverley. He must be doing it more often than me. *[Interruption.]* Ah! I have had the explanation. Apparently, Dunfermline is getting the benefit of his delicate little feet as well. Would that we all took the approach that Jim Tolson does.

Charlie Gordon also talked about infrastructure, and there is a very important point in that. I spoke yesterday to a conference for disabled people about getting access to our systems. A survey that has just been completed has discovered that there are 35,000 barriers across Scotland to allowing people in wheelchairs and with other disabilities to make use of our network on foot or by wheels. We face a formidable challenge in that regard that has existed for a long time and which every Administration has a duty to do something about.

Alex Johnstone said that walking and cycling are of interest to a great many people. He unwisely referenced Norman Tebbit. I was pleased to hear that Alex Johnstone used to cycle 3 miles to school. I will speak to his wife, Linda, to ensure that he returns to that so that we see less of Alex Johnstone in future. He knows what I mean.

Alison McInnes made the valid point that active travel is best when there is a purpose to it rather than when it is simply a recreation. In other words, it is best when it is embedded in normal life and behaviour. That is a good point. She mentioned the Gorbals Healthy Living Network, which spoke to the committee, and told us that the Scottish Association for Mental Health said that exercise is a huge contributor to ensuring good mental health. I echo that.

Let me nail a few points on investment. There was reference to the extra money that Tavish Scott provided. That was correct, but the money was a one-off £10 million that came when the yellow bus pilot did not proceed and the money was diverted into cycling. I absolutely support that, but I would say that, under this Government, the budgets for cycling have risen from £10.78 million in 2008-09 to £11.53 million in 2009-10, and by 16 per cent in the current year to £13.35 million. Yes, more could be done, but we should not pretend that we have neglected this area of policy.

Patrick Harvie: I am grateful to the minister for giving way to me a second time on that point. I do

not think that any of us imagines that, if the Government suddenly provided even a six or eight-fold increase, that would be the most sensible way forward. We need to increase investment in the area at a reasonable pace. However, does he accept in general or in principle that a sustained increase in investment substantially beyond the low level that we have at present is the only way in which long-term progress will be made?

Stewart Stevenson: I think that a 16 per cent increase in the current year gives the answer to that question.

Aileen Campbell, like others, talked about rail rolling stock. In the refitting of the 158 fleet on the rail network, we have improved bicycle accommodation, although it is still more limited than it was in the days of the guard's van—that is true. We will certainly take every opportunity to look at that.

Rob Gibson mentioned safer routes to school and the issue of right turns. He was correct to do so.

Jim Tolson confused or conflated efficient and effective. Effective is doing the right things. Efficient is doing things right. They are not in conflict. They both have to be done.

I belatedly welcome Jackson Carlaw to his new brief. Some Tory spokesmen have set high standards. Bill Aitken once said of me—it was in October 2006—that Stewart Stevenson is a very special person. I look forward to hearing that sort of thing again. He went on to say, "He can trace his ancestry all the way back to his mother." Presiding Officer, I am sure that that falls within parliamentary language, but only just.

In closing, and to preserve what remains of my voice for the next debate, when I will appear for the Government again, I remind everybody that cycling is fun and healthy. It is an activity that is virtually free for those who have access to a bike. Walking is fun. It is a social activity, as we heard, because we can chat to people. We can meet people in the street and chat to them as well. Learning to cycle safely can help young people to become confident, independent teenagers and adults. Designing our communities to make walking and cycling safe and easy leads to increased visibility of cyclists and pedestrians and helps to drive the dynamic. That is why the publication of "Cycling by Design" today is so important.

Finally, I reiterate the Scottish Government's commitment to active travel in all its various forms in the present difficult economic climate. Unlike Jim Tolson, I do not yet know what money will be available to us next year. I thank members for a

well-informed and welcome debate, to which we will listen very carefully indeed.

16:50

Cathy Peattie (Falkirk East) (Lab): I welcome today's debate on the committee's report on active travel. I thank everyone who gave evidence to the committee, the committee's clerks for their support and patience throughout the inquiry, and the convener for his opening speech. I am pleased that the minister welcomed our inquiry, gave us an assurance that its findings and recommendations would be considered as part of the work on the cycling action plan and was happy to confirm that the majority of those recommendations would be included in it. The committee looks forward to discussing the plan.

I promise not to mention Lycra or pink bikes, which we heard about during the inquiry. I do not plan to repeat the committee's recommendations, but I want to highlight a few key issues that have been raised by our report and during the debate.

As others have said, the committee has maintained an interest in active travel over the years and has repeatedly called for increased funding for active travel. A number of members have highlighted the benefits of increased participation in active travel in a wide range of areas such as health, the environment, social inclusion and local regeneration, and the committee understands all those potential benefits.

I was glad to see the number of MSPs who joined the young Falkirk walkers earlier today, and I am pleased that on Friday 12,000 people will take part in the big fit walk—an event that started in Grangemouth—which will make it the biggest fit walk ever. Seven years since the event started, it is still growing stronger, and is a good way of promoting active travel and encouraging children to walk.

The committee's report focuses on the practicalities of delivering increased participation in active travel, which will not happen without proper funding. I note that the minister said there has been a 16 per cent increase in such funding in 2010-11, but we need to go further. As Marlyn Glen said, less than 1 per cent of the Government's transport budget is spent on active travel. I agree with Alison McInnes, who said that more money is necessary if things are to happen. She is absolutely right.

In his response to the committee's report, the minister stated:

"Planning for active travel—to be at the heart of future development and that professionals may need additional training; We will aim to improve active travel education

across Scotland, focusing on teachers, developers, planners, engineers and designers."

He also said that "Cycling by Design"—which was published by Transport Scotland today—

"will provide a comprehensive guide to contemporary examples of best practice in cycling design."

Projects that have been proven to work must be taken further. The committee considers that the 10 per cent target will be meaningless if the Scottish Government fails to match its stated ambition with proper resources.

The committee heard that safety issues were a huge factor in people's decisions about whether to use walking or cycling as opposed to other modes of transport as a way of getting about. Safety is an issue for women in Scotland, in particular, who, proportionately, are less likely than men to cycle. They are the ones who usually take travel decisions in households. The committee heard evidence that 80 per cent of transport decisions for children are taken by women—their mothers. Witnesses told the committee that we must address the fear of road danger in a way that speaks to parents, so that they will encourage their kids to cycle.

Charlie Gordon mentioned the small number of children who cycle to school. I understand that Cycling Scotland will lead work to formulate a plan, by the end of 2010, to deliver a co-ordinated approach to training and to increase the number of children who receive on-road cycling training, which is extremely important. Until that is progressed, parents will be reluctant to allow their children to cycle to school. The low rate that Charlie Gordon mentioned will never change unless such training takes place. The committee received 175 written submissions, many of which were from individual members of the public who were concerned about road safety in their neighbourhoods.

The committee made a number of recommendations to the Scottish Government on the issue of road safety, including encouraging the wider adoption of 20mph speed limits in locations such as around schools and in residential areas and making improvements to the physical infrastructure of our streets. I welcome the Scottish Government's proposal to extend the 20mph limit.

It is essential that walkers and cyclists can make a complete journey in an environment in which they are unhindered by physical barriers and respected by other road users. I agree absolutely with the minister's comments about disabled people, who face increased barriers. Likewise, Rob Gibson's suggestion of active travel towns makes sense.

Jeremy Purvis and Aileen Campbell spoke about the need for mixed travel use. Anyone who has tried to get a buggy or a bike on to a train or bus will agree that it is very difficult. People should be able to leave home by bike, get on to a bus or a train and continue on to their workplace.

Jim Tolson and Jackson Carlaw talked about leadership. The committee also believes that strong leadership is vital if the Scottish Government wants to achieve increased participation in active travel and its ambitious cycling targets. The committee argued that leadership and drive at ministerial level are essential. In addition, the Government must send a clear message to local authorities and transport agencies that they will be expected to provide leadership at a local level. It is clear that working in partnership across the board will be important, as the minister suggested earlier.

The committee's role will now be to scrutinise the work of the Scottish Government to ensure that it demonstrates stronger, more effective and sustained leadership. Participation in active travel must be increased. The Scottish Government must do more to realise the many benefits of walking and cycling, not least their important health benefits and their contribution to tackling climate change. The Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change Committee will continue to monitor that after the cycling action plan is published. I commend the committee's recommendations to the Parliament.

In its report, the committee sets out a vision for active travel, in which walking and cycling are used as safe and convenient alternatives to other modes of transport. The debate has highlighted the action that needs to be taken to increase participation in active travel. I believe that it is vital that the Government acts on the committee's report and produces a cycling action plan for Scotland that is ambitious and contains proposals that are targeted properly, resourced and effective.

I welcome the minister's response and I hope that members will look forward to participating in and promoting active travel in their communities.

Business Motion

16:58

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson): The next item of business is consideration of business motion S3M-6523, in the name of Bruce Crawford, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, setting out a business programme.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees the following programme of business—

Wednesday 16 June 2010

2.15 pm Time for Reflection
followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions
followed by SPCB Question Time
 2.35 pm Stage 1 Debate: Children's Hearings (Scotland) Bill
followed by Business Motion
followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions
 5.00 pm Decision Time
followed by Members' Business

Thursday 17 June 2010

9.15 am Parliamentary Bureau Motions
followed by Scottish Labour Party Business
 11.40 am General Question Time
 12 noon First Minister's Question Time
 2.15 pm Themed Question Time; Europe, External Affairs and Culture Education and Lifelong Learning
 2.55 pm Ministerial Statement: Supporting Young People in the Context of the Economic Climate
 3.25 pm Scottish Government Debate: Poverty Framework
 5.00 pm Decision Time
followed by Members' Business

Wednesday 23 June 2010

2.30 pm Time for Reflection
followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions
followed by Scottish Government Business
followed by Business Motion
followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions
 5.00 pm Decision Time
followed by Members' Business

Thursday 24 June 2010

9.15 am Parliamentary Bureau Motions
followed by Scottish Government Business
 11.40 am General Question Time

12 noon First Minister's Question Time
 2.15 pm Themed Question Time
 Health and Wellbeing
 2.55 pm Scottish Government Business
followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions
 5.00 pm Decision Time—[Bruce Crawford.]

Motion agreed to.

Parliamentary Bureau Motions

16:59

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson): The next item of business is consideration of five Parliamentary Bureau motions. I ask Bruce Crawford to move motions S3M-6524 to S3M-6528, on the designation of lead committees for members' bills, en bloc.

Motions moved,

That the Parliament agrees that the Justice Committee be designated as the lead committee in consideration of the Criminal Sentencing (Equity Fines) (Scotland) Bill at Stage 1.

That the Parliament agrees that the Justice Committee be designated as the lead committee in consideration of the Domestic Abuse (Scotland) Bill at Stage 1.

That the Parliament agrees that the Local Government and Communities Committee be designated as the lead committee in consideration of the Property Factors (Scotland) Bill at Stage 1.

That the Parliament agrees that the Economy, Energy and Tourism Committee be designated as the lead committee in consideration of the Protection of Workers (Scotland) Bill at Stage 1.

That the Parliament agrees that the Justice Committee be designated as the lead committee in consideration of the Commissioner for Victims and Witnesses (Scotland) Bill at Stage 1.—[Bruce Crawford.]

The Presiding Officer: The question on those motions will be put at decision time.

Decision Time

17:00

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson):

There are four questions to be put as a result of today's business. The first question is, that motion S3M-6450, in the name of Shirley-Anne Somerville, that the William Simpson's Home (Transfer of Property etc) (Scotland) Bill be passed, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that the William Simpson's Home (Transfer of Property etc.) (Scotland) Bill be passed.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S3M-6256, in the name of Trish Godman, that the Scottish Parliamentary Commissions and Commissioners etc Bill be passed, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that the Scottish Parliamentary Commissions and Commissioners etc. Bill be passed.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S3M-6476, in the name of Patrick Harvie, on the Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change Committee's "Report on the Inquiry into Active Travel", be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament notes the conclusions and recommendations contained in the Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change Committee's 4th Report, 2010 (Session 3): *Report on the Inquiry into Active Travel* (SP Paper 413).

The Presiding Officer: I propose to put a single question on motions S3M-6524 to S3M-6528, on the designation of lead committees for members' bills. If any member objects to a single question being put, they should please say so now.

As no one objects, the next question is, that motions S3M-6524 to S3M-6528, in the name of Bruce Crawford, on the designation of lead committees, be agreed to.

Motions agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that the Justice Committee be designated as the lead committee in consideration of the Criminal Sentencing (Equity Fines) (Scotland) Bill at Stage 1.

That the Parliament agrees that the Justice Committee be designated as the lead committee in consideration of the Domestic Abuse (Scotland) Bill at Stage 1.

That the Parliament agrees that the Local Government and Communities Committee be designated as the lead committee in consideration of the Property Factors (Scotland) Bill at Stage 1.

That the Parliament agrees that the Economy, Energy

and Tourism Committee be designated as the lead committee in consideration of the Protection of Workers (Scotland) Bill at Stage 1.

That the Parliament agrees that the Justice Committee be designated as the lead committee in consideration of the Commissioner for Victims and Witnesses (Scotland) Bill at Stage 1.

Hill Tracks (Scottish Uplands)

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Trish Godman): The final item of business is a members' business debate on motion S3M-6227, in the name of Peter Peacock, on hill tracks in the Scottish uplands. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament notes with concern the number of engineered hill tracks appearing in the Scottish uplands, particularly in the Highlands; notes that such tracks can be constructed without planning consent when justified as being for agricultural, forestry or repair purposes; further notes the growing number of concerns from hill walkers, rambles and mountaineers and members of the wider public about the intrusion of these tracks into the natural landscape and the impact on otherwise wild land; considers that, given the importance of the Scottish uplands for current and future generations, this warrants greater scrutiny of proposals for such tracks within the planning system; recognises the legitimate rights of farmers and crofters to continue to construct tracks for their purposes on what will generally be lower-lying land than considered to be a problem in this context; notes that Heriot-Watt University reported on these issues in March 2007, and would welcome the urgent mapping of tracks by reviewing current knowledge of track location and control provisions and consideration of future possibilities for greater control of developing hill tracks and the criteria under which any greater controls might operate.

17:02

Peter Peacock (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): I am grateful for the opportunity to have this debate on a topic that is of great importance to many thousands of people throughout Scotland. I am grateful, too, for the cross-party support for the motion, which has allowed the debate to happen.

As a young man, not so many years ago, I moved to the Highlands to pursue my love of climbing, although children and, principally, politics intervened. Therefore, I have a strong appreciation of why thousands of Scots head to the mountains every weekend or on weekdays in increasing numbers to enjoy the beauty and wildness of our mountains. My intention in this debate is to gain greater recognition of developments that threaten the mountain environment that so many people appreciate. I hope that, as a result of the debate, the Government will move to ensure that there will be greater public scrutiny of proposed hill tracks in the future and that the land will have greater protection than it has today.

Over the years, as a representative of the Highlands and Islands, I have received a lot of representations from concerned constituents about the sudden and unannounced appearance of hill tracks intruding into the scenery that they enjoy or the mountain environment that they regularly explore. About a year ago, the

Mountaineering Council of Scotland made clear to me what it perceives to be an increasing incidence of bulldozed hill tracks and expressed the growing and deep concern of its members. The John Muir Trust, the Ramblers Association Scotland, the North East Mountain Trust and others have supported the campaign that Sarah Boyack and I started with the Mountaineering Council of Scotland. Between them, those organisations represent many thousands of Scots who visit our mountains regularly, and it is good to have representatives of those organisations in the public gallery tonight. Their briefings for the debate, which members will have received, testify to the significance and scale of some of the developments that are now scarring our wild land.

I know of Scottish Natural Heritage's concern about what it has described as the proliferation of such tracks and the decline in the amount of Scottish land that is not intruded into in some way by development. There is evidence from the Scottish Environment Protection Agency that poorly constructed tracks can have adverse impacts on our water courses and water quality. There are clear examples of that having happened.

Because of the availability of modern earthmoving machinery, modern hill tracks are not small or narrow creations; they are wide—many of them are wider than the single-track roads that are common in the Highlands and Islands—and can be cut extremely deeply into the hillside. As a result of our changing climate, there can be much more heavy and intense rainfalls from time to time, which scour out those tracks and the hillside around them, causing more damage than the tracks alone have already caused.

To date, almost 2,500 people have signed the online petition that was set up to call for greater planning controls on the development of unregulated vehicle tracks. That is a clear signal of the depth of feeling that exists across Scotland on this issue. I know that members have received e-mails from many people who have signed that petition, asking them to take an interest in the issue, and I am glad that many members have done so. Tonight's debate is about whether the Government and the Parliament will listen and act to better protect our wild land for future generations.

The issue of hill tracks and planning law is complex. Currently, hill tracks can be constructed without gaining planning consent or notifying the local authority when it can be argued that they are for purposes relating to agriculture, forestry or repair—all of which fall under the category of permitted development rights in the Town and Country Planning (General Permitted Development) (Scotland) Order 1992. Rightly,

there are restrictions on development within national scenic areas, special areas of conservation, special protected areas and sites of special scientific interest. However, there is an astonishing anomaly: national park status does not confer those same restrictions. It is quite possible for hill tracks to appear in national park areas without any public scrutiny of the process whatsoever. Permissions might be required for quite small developments in those parks and elsewhere in our country, but not for those large and intrusive developments.

There is also the issue of people who are not engaged in genuine agricultural work, but who use that as a convenient label. I make it clear that I have no interest in pursuing an agenda that places an additional legislative burden upon the many farmers who predominantly work our lower ground and hill farms. My concern is for our uplands and our higher and highest ground, and we need to address immediately the situation whereby a landowner can use permitted development rights to construct a track on such ground simply by claiming agricultural usage. Why would a landowner approach a local planning authority for permission to build a vehicle track to enhance the experience of their sporting clients when they can argue that the track is for agricultural use?

Within the current operational frameworks, there is an ambiguity and a lack of clarity in definitions surrounding hill tracks. That was raised in Heriot-Watt University's report on its review of the general permitted development order, which was commissioned by the previous Scottish Executive. The report, which was published in March 2007, made a number of observations about permitted development in general and about hill tracks in Scotland. It said that the definitions of hill tracks and private ways and of what constituted agricultural use were unclear. It suggested that hill tracks should be subject to planning applications, although some smaller tracks might be allowed to be created under the permitted development order. It stated that there was a need to distinguish between the maintenance and repair of tracks and the improvement of tracks. It also recommended that all national parks should be given the higher protection of national scenic area status.

It is clear that the report's recommendations are worthy of consideration. What is less clear is the Government's response to the report and to the wider issues. Three years have passed since the report was published, but my colleagues and I have not forgotten it.

A year or so ago, the minister and I corresponded about when the review of permitted development rights would be under way. He said that he hoped that it would take place in 2009, and that he would decide at that point whether hill

tracks would be included in the review. In January this year, in a parliamentary answer, he told me that he had pushed that into 2010. I hope that he can assure me tonight that there will be no further delay, and that it is now time for action on this issue. I also hope that we will be able to find a cross-party consensus on the importance of the issue.

It is imperative that the Government concludes the review of permitted development rights, including how they relate to hill tracks, and takes seriously the Heriot-Watt recommendations. The Government should act to require those highly intrusive tracks to be the subject of full and proper public scrutiny within the planning system. I look forward to what the minister has to say about that in his response to this debate.

17:09

Rob Gibson (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): I congratulate Peter Peacock on bringing the debate to the chamber. I was concerned when he raised the issue in the fashion that he did that his argument was going to concern wild land only, and his speech emphasised that to some extent. I am conscious that many economic activities that took place in the past and which will exist in the future cross or use wild land.

Overgrazing by sheep and deer is a form of upland usage that I hope we are now getting in hand. When questions about the use of and access to land for activities such as shooting are debated, I hark back to the halcyon days when shooting parties travelled on sturdy Highland garrons and did not need the deep rutted tracks that have been created. However, I recognise that farmers and crofters need to have access to the land.

My concern in this debate is to consider the ecosystem services to which the John Muir Trust has referred. As some members will know, I have been active in examining the preservation and the wetting and rewetting of peat. The type of tracks that we are discussing often involve the destruction of peatlands on a large scale. Given that we are talking about including the targets for peat conservation in our climate change targets, we must ensure that that argument is brought to bear when we discuss the cutting of large tracks into the hills and beyond.

The planning permissions that Peter Peacock mentioned need to be reviewed. I hope that the minister will help us in that regard. It seems surprising that that aspect was not addressed when the national parks legislation was being put together. I hope that that can be done. I am just sorry that members who have an interest in that aspect did not seek to address it when the orders

were going through Parliament to extend the Cairngorms national park, which most members welcomed. Perhaps the national parks can be included in planning permissions in some way through secondary legislation.

If we are to value land, we must come together on a land use strategy—most members agree on that. We must recognise that some people's view of what is wild land is not acceptable to those of us who live in the countryside. Although many people use wild land for recreation, we should not confuse wild land with land that has not been affected by the hand of humans—and most land in Scotland has been affected by human hands, however far away it is from a road. On that point, I depart from the John Muir Trust's view of wild land, and I recognise that we need a balanced land use policy that takes into account all legitimate needs.

I hope that the debate maintains that balance, because if we are to value land, we should allow for some means by which the people who use it can contribute. Given the demise of shooting rates under the Tory Government in 1996, perhaps some type of valuation of land for users of that sort could be reintroduced to help with the planning process and to help us to ensure that there is balanced land use in the future.

Thank you, Presiding Officer, for the opportunity to take part in this debate, and if I may I will excuse myself before it ends.

17:14

Jamie McGrigor (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I refer members to my agricultural interests in the register of members' interests.

The Scottish Conservatives recognise that in recent years there has been an increase in the demand for new tracks in the Scottish uplands. Some of the demand is due to traditional activities, but additional demand is often associated with the development of wind farms and telecommunications infrastructure, including mobile phone networks.

From a personal angle, I have to say that after I constructed a new hill road on my hill sheep farm in 1985, the management of livestock improved dramatically and the death rate for livestock fell considerably. Nobody complained about it.

As the average age of farmers increases, it becomes more important that they have vehicle access to the hills.

I have the honour of being president of Highland Disabled Ramblers. Hill roads afford disabled and elderly people the chance to go into the hills that they love and that they should surely be allowed to appreciate just as much as do fit hillwalkers and mountaineers. I agree that huge scars on

mountainsides are very unsightly, but I grew up on Loch Awe directly opposite the Cruachan dam, and I tell members that the huge road to the dam, which was complained about avidly during its construction, is now difficult to see. Nature heals scars just as a body heals wounds. I am sure that we all share the desire to have a thriving rural economy, and, as a result, I believe that an overriding principle should be a recognition of the needs of farmers and land managers and an aversion to placing on them yet more red tape and bureaucracy unless every option has been exhausted.

Many of the original tracks were pony tracks for bringing in cut peats and venisons, and as technology has advanced the tracks have been widened to allow access for quad bikes and vehicles. That is just progress. I see no reason why that should affect the flora and fauna of a hill region any more than does quad bikes or Argocats taking different routes across the same area. Originally, the tracks were hand dug at a time when there were plenty of people to carry out that work, but they still left scars.

Maureen Watt (North East Scotland) (SNP): Will the member give way?

Jamie McGrigor: I ask the member to hold on a minute.

In its briefing, NFU Scotland urges MSPs to recognise the importance of hill tracks to land management, especially in getting feed to starving animals in hard winters, such as the one that we have just had. There is no doubt that hill roads saved the lives of many farm animals last winter. Access is vital not only for feeding but for gathering, especially in an age in which it is getting more and more difficult to find enough manpower and good sheepdogs to perform such operations. The NFUS also makes the point that hill tracks are in the public interest, as they enable land managers to manage more efficiently. If we take that into account, the benefits to the environment and local economy become clear.

Dr Richard Simpson (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): Will the member give way?

Jamie McGrigor: If the member does not mind, I would rather not at the moment.

Upland tracks serve a combination of purposes, including the management and welfare of upland grazing livestock, forestry work, deerstalking, angling, habitat management, adventure tourism, muirburn and mountain rescue. Hill tracks are also immensely useful for transporting people to the myriad hill lochs in Scotland for brown trout fishing. Indeed, that underused facility could be used far more.

Given that the purpose of many of the bulldozed tracks relates to telecommunications and windfarms, they are already covered by the planning system. In addition, with good construction methods, the look of new tracks can dramatically improve within months.

We recognise that the uplands are a sensitive and valued part of Scotland's natural heritage. No one loves being in the hills more than I do—preferably at the top of them, and I believe that the tracks can help in that respect. As a result, we support the current approach to the management of hill tracks, including observing codes of good practice, such as SNH's "Constructed tracks in the Scottish Uplands", which, as its name suggests, aims to reduce the impact of tracks on the natural heritage of the Scottish uplands. Indeed, that is the aim of all sensible farmers and land managers.

Maureen Watt: Will the member give way?

Jamie McGrigor: May I take an intervention, Presiding Officer?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You are running out of time, Mr McGrigor.

Jamie McGrigor: I will come to an end, then.

I very much respect Peter Peacock's concern for our wild places, but I am interested to know which particular tracks concern him. When I drove from Caithness to Edinburgh the other day, only one ugly scar, near Drumochter, caught my eye. The Scottish Government itself is supporting the development of new and improved tracks through a number of its rural support schemes. Except in the case of major projects, we do not feel that planning permission should be required for what are basically farm tracks.

17:19

Alison McInnes (North East Scotland) (LD): First, I congratulate Peter Peacock on securing the debate. His motion addresses an important issue and I am happy to speak in support of it.

I am privileged to represent an area that includes part of the Cairngorms. Many of my constituents are keen hillwalkers; indeed, the North East Mountain Trust represents more than 1,000 hillwalkers and climbers in the north-east of Scotland, and I am grateful to those who have taken the time to write to me with their concerns about hill tracks.

Scotland is indeed blessed. We have magnificent wild land that is valued by many people—locals and tourists alike. However, it is under threat. SNH has reported that the extent of Scotland that is unaffected by any visual influence declined from 41 per cent to 31 per cent between 2002 and 2008. In the north-east, one threat is the

proliferation of bulldozed hill tracks. The bulldozing of tracks for agriculture, forestry and, in particular, sport has led to scars across the hills that are often visible over a wide area. They are also prone to erosion. I query whether the continuation of such unrestricted development is in the best interests of the environment. As the John Muir Trust has said, because hill tracks fall into the category of permitted development, no record is kept of their number, total distance, location, purpose, condition or rate of change. Surely that should not be sustained.

I do not suggest that hill tracks are not needed. They are, of course, important for essential land management and they allow ease of access for farmers. Farmers, crofters and foresters have a legitimate need to construct, maintain and develop tracks for their land management purposes. However, such tracks are usually on lower-lying ground, as Peter Peacock said. Concern is felt that loopholes in the current system are being exploited to the detriment of our special environment.

Tracks must be designed to fit into the landscape in which they are needed; they should not obliterate existing paths or historic trackways, and their design should minimise the need for engineering and road-related earthworks. Drawing hill tracks into a more affirmative planning approval system would assist with that. A scheme should be developed that takes a light-touch approach to the obvious necessities of agriculture, but which tightens rules that we think are being abused.

In some areas that have special designations, such as national scenic areas, special areas of conservation and SSSIs, the planning authority's prior approval should be sought. However, even now, the hill tracks campaign has identified several areas in which that does not seem to have been done appropriately. I share Peter Peacock's concern and bewilderment that national parks are not drawn into that system.

I do not doubt that a review of permitted development rights for hill tracks is overdue. I agree that the suggestion of developing a register of existing hill tracks has merit. I hope that cross-party agreement will be achieved tonight on the need to undertake that review and to have the discussion to protect our wild land for future generations.

17:22

Christopher Harvie (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP): I thank Peter Peacock for lodging the motion. I suppose that I have an interest to declare, in that I wrote the entry in the "Oxford Dictionary of National Biography" on the historian

James Bryce, who was the first to propose an Access to Mountains (Scotland) Bill. That bill was defeated in the 1880s by deerstalking interests, but was the forerunner of the access that we now enjoy, and of what could be called the overaccess that some tracks provide.

About 25 years ago, I crossed the pass in Wester Ross that separates Achnashellach from Torridon. I remember that, when I was at the summit, I strayed 100yd eastwards to escape the midges. That was not difficult, as the surface is of great stone slabs of almost billiard-table smoothness. There, I discovered something that amazed and still amazes me. At the centre of one slab was an indentation, and at its centre was a spherical boulder that was a bit smaller than a football. It was possible—only just—to lift it, and if it had been allowed to trundle down the rest of the slabs, something that had been there since at least the last great ice age and for possibly 10,000 to 30,000 years would have been disturbed. That gives a sense of how remote the Scottish Highlands are and how much they are an empty quarter, as John Buchan would have called it, of the human mind.

However, such isolation is breaking down. As Alison McInnes said, the quarter has dropped in size by a quarter in the past decade. That is partly because of wind farms but also because of our prioritisation of mobility, from the trail biker to the quad biker and the four-by-four. A track that is blasted and bulldozed to allow for the power of all-terrain vehicles will be unsurfaced and, in that sense, temporary. I have seen—I speak more from experience in the Alps—heavy rains erode a surface so that it becomes a watercourse and its floods accumulate in ditches. Over time, such a track becomes as impassable and as subject to landslips as are the whin and heather around it—indeed, far more so.

The additional traffic that hill roads generate is passed on to our inheritance of common roads, whose condition is frequently near catastrophic through overuse, as members remarked in the earlier debate on cycling. The hill tracks campaign has rightly expressed concern about the increased construction of tracks, particularly for vehicular use. Those concerns are by no means aimed against the legitimate rights of crofters, farmers and forestry workers. The issue becomes problematic when uplands are involved with no restriction or control over the nature of the construction.

Way back at the beginning of the last century, the Liberal politician Charles Masterman called the United Kingdom “landlords’ country”, whereas much of the continent over it was peasant country that confronted the visitor. There was a dense network of routes between farms, crofts and the

like that could easily be turned over to use by cyclists and pedestrians. There is a need for more byway construction in the Highlands. That takes up the point that was made in the earlier debate on active travel about access for bicycles and pedestrians when main roads are often congested and dangerous. We should follow the example of the continental countries that accommodate cyclists, riders and walkers on such field ways. There is a network of those between France and Germany and in the alpine areas.

It is not only the construction of such paths or more careful regulation that we ought to bear in mind. We must also remember that, within a decade, we might have to live with oil at \$200 a barrel, when in 2000 it was \$10. As with this afternoon’s debate on active travel, that ought to concentrate the mind wonderfully on the country that we want to live in, and if possible move in, in a decade or so.

17:27

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I congratulate Peter Peacock on his motion on what is an interesting and important subject. As somebody who is still on occasion an active hillwalker and who has climbed just over half the Munros—I will get there eventually, I hope, if I am spared and well—I share many of the concerns that Peter Peacock raises about intrusions in the Scottish landscape. We should be concerned when there are intrusions of that nature into our wild land, which is a precious asset to us in Scotland. The Highlands of Scotland represent the last wilderness, certainly in western Europe, and perhaps further afield.

We must recognise that people who come to Scotland and the Highlands come predominantly because they want to see our landscape. We need to remember that the tourism industry in Scotland, particularly in the Highlands, is our most important one. People come to see an unspoiled landscape—they do not come for the weather and, despite the fact that we have some very good restaurants, they do not come for the food. They do not come because it is cheap. They come because we offer landscape and heritage, so we should be careful not to put either of those at risk.

I share many of the concerns that have been raised about intrusions into the landscape, but I will qualify that in two ways. First, there must be a balance, because, just as there is a legitimate concern on the part of recreational and landscape groups about intrusions into the rural landscape, those who derive a living from the land also have a legitimate interest in being able to do so without being unduly hampered by legislation. In that respect, I agree with many of the comments of my colleague Sir Jamie McGrigor. I read with interest

the briefing notes that were provided by NFU Scotland and the Scottish Rural Property and Business Association.

We must remember that the economies of many of our upland areas are fragile. Hill farming is in a precarious state and the economies of many of our sporting estates are not much better. Our sporting estates, for all that they are viewed as a rich man's paradise, sustain a level of employment in many remote and rural areas that would not otherwise be possible. We should be careful not to put up barriers to people deriving an economic living from those remote areas.

Maureen Watt: Does Murdo Fraser accept that some estates agree that there should be no hill tracks over 2,000ft, where regeneration is virtually impossible after however many decades? Does he further agree that the scree left at the side of the bulldozed tracks does not allow for fast regeneration?

Murdo Fraser: Maureen Watt makes a perfectly reasonable point. As I said a moment ago, it is a question of balance and trying to ensure that one set of interests does not override another.

My second and final point is about perspective. Although it is true that hill roads intrude on the rural landscape, there are much greater intrusions. I refer to the proliferation of the industrial structures—the wind turbines and associated pylons—that are being constructed all over upland Scotland. Members will know of my interest in that subject, which I have spoken about over many years, not least in relation to the consent given to the Beaully to Denny power line. It seems to me that those who complain vociferously about hill tracks without having too much to say about wind turbines or pylons are disobeying the biblical injunction not to strain at gnats while swallowing camels. When most people look at our rural landscape, they find 400ft-high wind turbines on our hills far more intrusive than the odd hill track at ground level, which is probably not visible from terribly far away. Indeed, as Jamie McGrigor pointed out, many of the wind turbine and pylon construction projects require hill tracks to be constructed, albeit with planning permission. Those projects are responsible for many of the hill tracks that cause offence.

With those qualifications in mind, I say to Peter Peacock that I would be nervous about supporting his call to bring all hill tracks within the remit of planning permission but, nevertheless, I welcome his giving us the opportunity to discuss these important subjects this evening.

17:32

Sarah Boyack (Edinburgh Central) (Lab): I congratulate Peter Peacock on securing tonight's

debate. The debate so far shows that hill tracks can be an issue. Peter Peacock and I have taken the opportunity during the summer recess to look at some of the areas where one can see the impact of badly designed hill tracks. I understand absolutely, and take the point from several colleagues, that we need a system that farmers and crofters can live with. They have to be able to manage their land effectively and support the economic activity that they carry out.

Christopher Harvie's analysis of the situation was spot on: it is a question of balance. In response to Murdo Fraser's final point about wind farms, I say that the whole point is that hill tracks should be brought under the planning system, which would provide an opportunity for democratic accountability and to say, "No, we don't accept this development," as has happened with many wind farm proposals. Where new tracks are accepted, there will be the potential to mitigate their impact in relation to issues such as peat and access. That is at the heart of the discussion.

We need to look at the cumulative impact, which has been raised by several organisations, because there is not sufficient monitoring of the situation. As Alison McInnes pointed out, we are losing the features that make people want to holiday in the Highlands and Islands. There is a lack of enforcement—that point was put very well by the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds. This is not a new issue. It has not just popped on to our agenda; it has been out there for several years, which is one of the reasons why it came up in the Heriot-Watt study, and it needs to be addressed.

Let us look at the recommendations from Heriot-Watt. There are ways of managing the situation that would not be excessively onerous on land managers. One recommendation is to develop a comprehensive register of hill tracks so that we can monitor and evaluate the impact on the landscape, as well as the ecological condition of hill tracks. That point was well made by Maureen Watt. We should have a system of prior notification—

Jamie McGrigor: Will the member give way?

Sarah Boyack: I ask Jamie McGrigor to let me continue. He did not take any interventions in his speech and I have a pile to get through.

Let us look at the recommendations and examine what opportunities could come from them. To deal with the impact of mobile phone masts, we use a system of prior notification, which is a way of bringing a development into the planning system without automatically introducing onerous requirements. That is a balanced approach that should be considered for hill tracks. Another recommendation is to have a voluntary

code of conduct that would reflect the best techniques and practice out there. We would look at what SNH recommends and encourage people to follow that best practice.

Therefore, there are ways of looking for best practice. The John Muir Trust has made the point that it is a landowner and it is aware of the opportunities for good land management. There is a lot of best practice that we could consider.

Peter Peacock outlined the problems that have been raised with us. I emphasise that issues such as erosion and impacts particularly in the higher altitudes where biodiversity is fragile and takes years to recover are important and need to be considered. Ramblers Scotland has considered fencing and its impact on access. The debate lets us consider really difficult issues. There are balances to be struck, and some of the issues are controversial, but that should not mean that we should not examine them. I hope that the minister will say when he will put in place the review that was suggested three years ago. The issue has been on the go for a long time. We have had a members' business debate on it and there is a live petition on it. That should lead to action.

There are no hill tracks in my constituency, but members would be amazed by how many thousands of people go from our cities to our rural communities because they love our rural landscapes. People love our wild land and landscapes that are not quite as wild but are still exciting. Such things are a fantastic release from the city, which is why hundreds of thousands of tourists visit Scotland. If we do not value and monitor our landscapes, we could lose a fantastic part of Scotland's character. We should be concerned about that.

It is a pity that Rob Gibson, who spoke about national parks, has left the chamber. The point of the last ministerial commitment to a national parks review was that we could pick up precisely such issues and have a proper look at their impact on the national parks.

The issue has been raised and a warning has been sounded. I hope that ministers will listen and act.

17:36

The Minister for Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change (Stewart Stevenson): I join other members in thanking Peter Peacock for bringing the important issue of hill tracks in the Scottish uplands to Parliament. Several members have said that the issue has been around for a few years. It may be worth making the point that, as long ago as 1984, a study by Watson demonstrated that there were 1,151km of new

vehicle tracks in the Grampians alone between 1960 and 1982.

The achievement of the appropriate balance between aesthetics, environmental impacts and the economic needs of those who live and work in our remote and upland areas has run through the debate. It is right that those things should be focused on. Sarah Boyack in particular rightly left open the option of dealing with the issue in a range of ways. Some of us thought that Arthur's Seat lies in her constituency, although we are open to correction if we have not properly understood where the boundaries are. The topic can be relevant even in areas in the centres of our cities. We should not think that we are talking simply about the top of the Cairngorms, west Sutherland or our remote areas.

Peter Peacock rightly referred to the substantial alliance of interests—the Mountaineering Council of Scotland, the John Muir Trust, Ramblers Scotland and others—that value our open country. Of course, a balance must be struck even there. The proportion of Scotland that is now within reach of vehicular transport is much greater than it used to be. That is a benefit for those who exercise access rights in our countryside, but it potentially comes at a cost, of course.

Peter Peacock said that there is ambiguity in the current arrangements. That is absolutely correct. The issue is not simply a planning and permitted development rights issue. It is not particularly well known that, by law, most hill tracks should be subject to environmental impact assessments.

One thing that the Government is seeking to do is to engage with the owners of land where such tracks have been constructed to ensure that they have a better understanding of the legal requirements. Confusingly, depending on the use to which land is put, two separate regimes apply—the effect is similar, but the regimes are different. In essence, any track of over 1km requires an environmental impact assessment. It is fair to say that that is neither as widely known about nor as widely implemented as it should be. That is why we are looking for that engagement.

Jamie McGrigor suggested that nature heals scars. As Maureen Watt said—the point was acknowledged by Sarah Boyack—the higher up into the hills we go, the harder the healing process. We are talking about land that is essentially sub-arctic territory, which is fragile indeed. The scars of many years back will remain for a long time into the future. We need to ensure that we protect that landscape.

Like other members, Alison McInnes spoke about national park powers. It is fair to say that no direct reference is made in the national parks legislation to the subject of debate, but that does

not exclude in any sense whatever the designation of land in our national parks as scenic areas. Designation gives us the ability to achieve the protection that we seek by bringing land back inside the planning system. In the short term, designation is an option for national park areas. I am not promoting that approach as a substitute for a more systematic look at the issue, but it means that things can be done in the short term.

As ever, Christopher Harvie was truly eccentric. I suspect that the stone that he found on top of the hill was, in geological terms, precisely that—an eccentric brought from one place to another by the actions of the last ice age. Of course, I was not there; I did not see his stone.

Murdo Fraser made the point that hill roads are obtrusive. I find it passing strange that he continues to have concerns about a project that will reduce the number of pylons between Beaully and Denny and replace the existing pylons with those that are designed to be more unobtrusive—

Murdo Fraser: They will be higher.

Stewart Stevenson: —albeit that they will, of course, be higher. Colour, placing and design are important in the process. That opens up the general point about the need to achieve balance.

Sarah Boyack suggested that a voluntary code of conduct could be of some interest. It is one of a range of ways in which we might seek to improve the situation.

I turn to what the Government is going to do. We are working on permitted development rights. In light of the considerable correspondence and discussion that Ms Boyack and I have had on extending them to microgeneration, I know that she is in principle in favour of them. They are intrinsically a good intervention in the planning system. We are looking at a range of ways in which to regularise, systematise and simplify the operation of permitted development rights in relation to hill tracks. We also want to ensure a wider understanding of the need for environmental impact assessments and a consistent way of applying them to sites of special scientific interest, Natura sites and our remote areas in general. There are also issues in relation to scheduled ancient monuments on our hills, in which Historic Scotland would be involved. Finally, Scottish Natural Heritage is about to make further efforts to promote guidance to land managers and contractors. We expect to bring forward our next thoughts on the subject immediately after the summer recess. We are working on that.

Again, I thank Peter Peacock for giving the chamber the opportunity to debate in a quite consensual and informed way a very important subject for people right across Scotland.

Meeting closed at 17:44.

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