

MEETING OF THE PARLIAMENT

Thursday 20 December 2007

Session 3

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CONTENTS

Thursday 20 December 2007

Debates

Col.

GRADUATE ENDOWMENT ABOLITION (SCOTLAND) BILL: STAGE 1	4629
<i>Motion moved—[Fiona Hyslop].</i>	
<i>Amendment moved—[Jeremy Purvis].</i>	
The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning (Fiona Hyslop)	4629
Jeremy Purvis (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD)	4634
Karen Whitefield (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab).....	4639
Rhona Brankin (Midlothian) (Lab).....	4643
Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con).....	4646
Rob Gibson (Highlands and Islands) (SNP).....	4649
Mary Mulligan (Linlithgow) (Lab)	4651
Christina McKelvie (Central Scotland) (SNP).....	4653
Ken Macintosh (Eastwood) (Lab)	4655
David McLetchie (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Con)	4658
Aileen Campbell (South of Scotland) (SNP).....	4661
Mike Rumbles (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD)	4663
Dr Richard Simpson (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab).....	4666
Alex Neil (Central Scotland) (SNP).....	4667
Elaine Murray (Dumfries) (Lab)	4669
Hugh O'Donnell (Central Scotland) (LD)	4671
Elizabeth Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)	4673
Richard Baker (North East Scotland) (Lab).....	4676
The Minister for Children and Early Years (Adam Ingram)	4679
QUESTION TIME	4683
FIRST MINISTER'S QUESTION TIME	4691
SUPPORT PROJECT SCOTLAND	4703
<i>Motion debated—[Bill Butler].</i>	
Bill Butler (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab).....	4703
Jackson Carlaw (West of Scotland) (Con)	4706
Jack McConnell (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)	4708
Sandra White (Glasgow) (SNP).....	4710
Mary Mulligan (Linlithgow) (Lab)	4711
Robert Brown (Glasgow) (LD)	4713
The Minister for Enterprise, Energy and Tourism (Jim Mather)	4715
QUESTION TIME	4719
BUSINESS MOTION	4734
<i>Motion moved—[Bruce Crawford]—and agreed to.</i>	
ABOLITION OF BRIDGE TOLLS (SCOTLAND) BILL: STAGE 3	4735
ABOLITION OF BRIDGE TOLLS (SCOTLAND) BILL	4743
<i>Motion moved—[Stewart Stevenson].</i>	
The Minister for Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change (Stewart Stevenson)	4743
Des McNulty (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab)	4744
Alex Johnstone (North East Scotland) (Con)	4745
Alison McInnes (North East Scotland) (LD).....	4747
Tricia Marwick (Central Fife) (SNP).....	4748
Helen Eadie (Dunfermline East) (Lab)	4749
Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green)	4750
John Park (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab).....	4751
Jim Tolson (Dunfermline West) (LD)	4753
Ted Brocklebank (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)	4754
Des McNulty	4756
Stewart Stevenson	4756
CLIMATE CHANGE BILL	4759
<i>Motion moved—[Stewart Stevenson].</i>	

The Minister for Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change (Stewart Stevenson)	4759
David Stewart (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)	4760
Alex Johnstone (North East Scotland) (Con)	4761
Alison McInnes (North East Scotland) (LD)	4763
Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green)	4764
Stewart Stevenson	4766
DECISION TIME	4769

Oral Answers

Col.

QUESTION TIME

SCOTTISH EXECUTIVE	4683
GENERAL QUESTIONS	4683
Affordable Housing	4683
Alcohol Consumption (Young People)	4689
Farming Communities (Borders)	4686
Health Inequalities	4687
National Health Service (VAT)	4688
NHS Borders	4685
Sudden Oak Death	4684
FIRST MINISTER'S QUESTION TIME	4691
British Transport Police	4701
Cabinet (Meetings)	4695
Climate Change	4699
Engagements	4691
Fuel Prices (Rural Areas)	4698
Secretary of State for Scotland (Meetings)	4694

QUESTION TIME

SCOTTISH EXECUTIVE	4719
FINANCE AND SUSTAINABLE GROWTH	4719
A90 (Laurencekirk)	4722
Council Tax Freeze	4728
Domestic Energy Efficiency	4720
Economic Strategy and Budget (Gender Equality)	4731
Energy Strategy (Hunterston B)	4721
Local Authorities (Finance and Sustainable Growth)	4730
Local Government (Redundancies)	4732
Local Government Settlement and Concordat (Aberdeen)	4725
Local Government Settlement (Class Size Reductions)	4723
Public Sector Contracts (Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises)	4719
Single Outcome Agreements	4726
Social Return on Investment	4733

Scottish Parliament

Thursday 20 December 2007

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

Graduate Endowment Abolition (Scotland) Bill: Stage 1

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson): Good morning. The first item of business is a debate on motion S3M-964, in the name of Fiona Hyslop, that the Parliament agrees to the general principles of the Graduate Endowment Abolition (Scotland) Bill.

09:15

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning (Fiona Hyslop): I begin by thanking the people who have been involved in the bill's process so far: the members of the Education, Lifelong Learning and Culture Committee, the Finance Committee and all those who provided oral and written evidence. I also thank the organisations and individuals who took the time to respond to the consultation on the bill during the summer.

Although I am grateful to the Education, Lifelong Learning and Culture Committee for its efforts in producing the report, it has disappointed many members who are present today and it has sorely let down 50,000 Scottish students and their hard-working families. The committee's conclusion, on the casting vote of the convener, means that it has rejected the general principles of the bill and voted to keep the graduate endowment fee.

This Government believes in a return to free education, in which access to education is based on ability to learn, not on ability to pay, so it is sad to see beneficiaries of free education being so desperate to keep it from the next generation. Two thirds of students cannot afford the graduate endowment fee and so simply add it to their student debt. Despite the fact that debt, and the fear of debt, is known to be a barrier that prevents people from going to university, the Labour and Conservative members of the committee failed to see the obvious link.

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I am grateful to the cabinet secretary for giving way.

If student debt is so important to the Scottish National Party, and as it promised in its manifesto to wipe out student debt, where are the Government's proposals to do just that, and fulfil its obligations to Scotland's students?

Fiona Hyslop: Today, Parliament can vote to wipe out £2,000 of graduate debt for many of our students. Members think that it is right and proper for us to tackle some of our wider graduate debt issues—we have some agreement among the other parties that we should abolish the graduate endowment fee—but if Parliament and the committee vote against this proposal, would not it be rather difficult to progress with some of the other proposals?

The bill is intended to fulfil our manifesto commitment to abolish the graduate endowment fee and it is the first step in tackling the problem of student and graduate debt. Currently, the average student leaves university with a student loan debt of around £11,000. Removal of the unfair fee will help some students, and relieve others of the financial pressures that face graduates as they start their working lives, but some MSPs want to keep them held back at a time when those young people want to get on with their lives.

The committee suggested that there is no clear evidence that abolition of the graduate endowment fee will, in itself, widen access, but the policy memorandum clearly states that the measure is a "first step" in our plans, and it will contribute to our overall aims of widening access.

We will reduce debt through our proposals to abolish the graduate endowment fee and to reintroduce student grants to replace loans, starting with the £500 grant for part-time students—a £38 million package that was announced earlier this month, which will benefit 20,000 students.

Rhona Brankin (Midlothian) (Lab): The SNP very often talks about Ireland and the Celtic tiger. The cabinet secretary will be aware that in 1996, the Irish Government abolished student tuition fees. Is she aware that Professor Patrick Clancy of University College Dublin says that there has, despite the abolition of tuition fees, been no improvement in working-class participation in higher education and that in some deprived areas of Dublin participation rates have in fact fallen? Is she aware that Irish heads of universities and the funding council there met this week to consider some form of graduate contribution?

Fiona Hyslop: If she wants to tackle deprivation, Rhona Brankin should read the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development report—sustained levels of poverty have not been relieved by the previous Government or, indeed, by 10 years of Labour rule. Perhaps she might want to look at that.

The original intention of the Education (Graduate Endowment and Student Support) (Scotland) Act 2001 was to widen access. The committee may believe that there is no evidence that abolishing

the fee will widen access, but it could not find any evidence that the graduate endowment fee in itself actually achieved its policy intention.

Richard Baker (North East Scotland) (Lab): Will the cabinet secretary take an intervention?

Fiona Hyslop: I want to move on.

From the evidence that we have, it is clear that there has been at best minimal progress in widening access in the past four years. Between 2002 and 2006, entrants to higher education from Scotland's most deprived areas increased by just 1 per cent. That is not just my view: it is shared by the overwhelming majority of people who responded to our consultation and to the committee's call for evidence. We have years of evidence that the status quo is not working, weeks of evidence that the fee should be scrapped, and widespread support for that from consultees. A casting vote has undermined all that.

Before the election, the Labour Party set out in its manifesto its opposition to top-up tuition fees. In seeking to apply graduate endowment income to university funding, as the Labour members of the committee suggest, they are asking us to implement top-up tuition fees by the back door.

In May 1999, along with 13 other student presidents, Richard Baker told *The Herald*:

"in answer to the simple question, 'Are you in favour of the early abolition of tuition fees?' we can speak with one, resounding voice. The answer is 'Yes'."

It now seems that Mr Baker—who is cosily ensconced on Labour's front bench—and his colleagues support top-up tuition fees.

Richard Baker: That is nonsense. The graduate endowment is about student support and not about tuition fees, as the cabinet secretary knows. Why will she not accept that addressing student hardship would be far better done by increasing student bursaries? The bill will do nothing to tackle student debt. The way to address that is by increasing bursaries, which the cabinet secretary is not proposing.

Fiona Hyslop: I look forward to Labour's support for the SNP Government's budget bill, which includes provision for increasing grants and student support.

The fee has proved to be an extremely inefficient way of providing funds. It has not raised the predicted levels of income and, as much of the graduate endowment fee is added to student loans, the taxpayer loses about a third of the income. Given Labour's record in government, it does not surprise me that Labour members are happy with a situation in which so much money is, in effect, frittered away. However, I am surprised that Conservative members do not realise that a

two-thirds return for the taxpayer is not good value for money. Should we not cut out the middleman and fund student support directly?

To those who think that, rather than forgo £17 million of income, we should direct the money to universities, I say that the 2001 act made it clear that the income should be used for student support. If any minister was to state—as I am being asked to do—that they were willing to apply the money to support universities, they would leave themselves open to judicial review. What the Conservatives and the Labour Party suggest is an up-front transfer from existing student support to university funding under the 2001 act. Let us be clear that that is not a competent option that is available to Parliament.

Rhona Brankin: Will the cabinet secretary give way?

Fiona Hyslop: I have already given way to the member.

As David McLetchie pointed out on 31 January 2001, when Parliament debated the bill that introduced the endowment,

"it is a sly tax of dubious technical competence."—[*Official Report*, 31 January 2001; c 766.]

If a charity lost 31p in the pound in administration and other charges, we would all ask questions, but apparently we do not do that in the case of the flawed graduate endowment fee.

The nature of the income from the graduate endowment means that it cannot be baselined or treated as guaranteed funding. Not only is it far simpler to fund student support direct from the Scottish budget and not from graduates, it is also more efficient for the taxpayer and more transparent.

Jeremy Purvis and others seek assurances in law that student support will be paid. I refer them to part 4 of schedule 2 to the Budget (Scotland) Act 2007, in which the provision of student support funding from the graduate endowment income is set out, as it has been set out in law each year since 2005—hundreds of millions of pounds and not just the £17 million for student support. However, I am open to considering how we can give effect to the Liberal Democrats' amendment, which seeks to place on Scottish ministers a statutory duty to provide wider student support.

Why are the Conservatives sticking to the flawed and unfair graduate endowment fee? I find that surprising, given that they opposed the scheme when it was introduced. On 31 January 2001, David McLetchie said:

"Whatever it is called, the Executive has simply substituted one tax on learning for another. No amount of sophistry, euphemism or weasel words can disguise the

fact that the so-called endowment is, purely and simply, a tax ... We are opposed to this bill".

Annabel Goldie said:

"The truth is that in the bill, we have a penal tax. It is a thorn, which pricks and draws blood. That is why, in principle, the Conservatives cannot support the bill; it would be patent dishonesty to do so."—[*Official Report*, 31 January 2001; c 756-7, 766.]

The graduate endowment will be more than an electoral thorn in the Conservatives' side if they vote to keep it today.

Richard Baker: The cabinet secretary talks about "weasel words". Were they not weasel words that promised all graduates that the SNP would wipe out their loan repayments, when it will not do that in government?

Fiona Hyslop: Let us be clear: Labour is not supporting us even to abolish £2,000 of debt, let alone to service £11,000 of debt.

Most important, what do the universities and students say? In written evidence to the Education, Lifelong Learning and Culture Committee, Universities Scotland said:

"Universities Scotland supports the abolition of the graduate endowment fee, which will benefit the majority of our full-time undergraduate students."

Giving evidence to the committee, the president of the National Union of Students, James Alexander, said:

"We welcome the bill as being the start of a host of measures. It will make education completely free for students in Scotland—we believe that education is a right. People should not be barred access to education because of financial burdens and debt. The bill is a positive step towards making education accessible for people from all backgrounds and all walks of life".—[*Official Report, Education, Lifelong Learning and Culture Committee*, 14 November 2007; c 306.]

In presenting the bill, we have made a compelling argument why abolishing the graduate endowment fee will provide a number of benefits for Scotland, including for 50,000 students and graduates. Graduates from summer this year will benefit if Parliament votes to abolish the graduate endowment fee. Their families and the Scottish taxpayer will also benefit.

It is clear that some members of the Education, Lifelong Learning and Culture Committee have not been convinced of the arguments and continue to cling to the wreckage of a failed policy. It has failed students by not achieving its stated aim of widening access, it has failed the taxpayer by proving to be worst value for the public purse and it has failed our graduates by placing an unnecessary financial burden on them when they leave university.

Those who vote to keep the unwanted and unfair graduate endowment fee—the ghost of

Government past—will be the Scrooge of Christmas present for students and their families. Some 10,000 students who graduated this year are waiting to see whether Labour and the Conservatives will vote to make them pay a fee of almost £2,300 when we have the chance to scrap it. Some 40,000 others in our universities are waiting and watching—we will remind them time and again of how members vote today.

I challenge any of those who oppose the bill to defend the graduate endowment fee, which has been flawed since its introduction.

On the day when Parliament can vote to abolish both bridge tolls and fees for students, I move,

That the Parliament agrees to the general principles of the Graduate Endowment Abolition (Scotland) Bill.

09:28

Jeremy Purvis (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD): Only the SNP could make the ghost of Christmas future seem more threatening than the ghost of Christmas past.

In 1999, the Liberal Democrats were committed to ending tuition fees in Scotland and, subsequently with Labour, we legislated to abolish tuition fees—up front or back end—for Scotland-domiciled students who attend Scottish universities for their first degree. Since the legislation came into force, nearly 200,000 Scottish students entering Scottish institutions have not paid the English-style tuition fees. The average fee in England now is approximately £7,000 per academic year. On completion of a non-science three-year degree in England, a graduate is likely to have about £18,000 of tuition debt. The equivalent for an eligible Scottish graduate is zero. For a medical degree in England, the graduate tuition debt now stands at £45,000. In Scotland for an eligible graduate the figure is zero. The legislation, which was introduced by the Liberal Democrats and endorsed by Parliament, has meant that in Scotland there is more than £4 billion less debt for graduates—that is £4 billion less personal debt in the Scottish economy.

Liberal Democrats have always argued that tuition should be free, and we have always understood that living costs are a major factor in students' accumulation of debt by the time they graduate. We have argued consistently, with a record of action, for provision of financial support to students from the poorest backgrounds. An illustration of our approach is the package that was brought in six years ago. The devolved Government reintroduced student grants of £2,000 per year—members might recall that that was four times the level that the SNP proposed in its 1999 manifesto. As we know, the Cubie committee argued for changes in how students were

supported and the graduate endowment, as it became known, was established to provide support for students from poorer backgrounds—*[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Order. We do not need conversations in the chamber.

Jeremy Purvis: The payment was not connected with university funding and has never been linked with the cost of student tuition. Only now do the Labour Party and Conservatives want to change that approach.

Rhona Brankin: The Liberal Democrats are disingenuous. We seek, by retaining the graduate endowment, to retain the essential link between the endowment and student support. In addition, we will seek hugely to increase student support. What is wrong with that?

Jeremy Purvis: Not only does the Labour Party want to spend the money twice, which would be a feat in itself, but—*[Interruption.]* I hope that the member will listen to my answer to her question. The Education, Lifelong Learning and Culture Committee's recommendations, which were decided on a Labour vote, included a clear statement that the Labour Party and Conservatives want to use some of the money that is raised through the graduate endowment to fund universities. Indeed, the committee referred in its stage 1 report to investing the money in

“more funding directly for universities”,

although that is prohibited under the law. That is a proposal for a graduate poll tax.

Richard Baker: Will the member give way?

Jeremy Purvis: I will do so later if I have time. Rhona Brankin will recall that the graduate endowment was part of a package. The previous Labour and Liberal Democrat Administration can take credit not only for removing a considerable amount of graduate debt but for reintroducing grants. Although the SNP has attacked the previous Administration's record, the biggest single move towards removal of the burden of debt for graduates in Scotland and adoption of a progressive approach to funding poorer students was brought in during the first session of Parliament.

In 2003 it was too soon to see whether the policy that led to the introduction of the graduate endowment had been effective, so no change was proposed. By 2007 it was possible to review the policy and to ascertain whether its aims had been realised. When the Education (Graduate Endowment and Student Support) (Scotland) Act 2001 came into force, the age participation index in Scotland was 51.5 per cent, which meant that—taken as a proportion of the number of 17-year-olds—more than half of Scots under 21 went to

university. The most recent age participation index, in 2005-06, is 47.1 per cent, but that is a 1 per cent increase on the previous year's index, which represents approximately 650 students.

A change in the number of students leaving school and entering employment, or a minor shift in the number of school leavers who take a gap year, will have an impact on the age participation rate. The age participation index is a blunt tool with which to determine Government policy, but the Government used it as a key argument for introducing the bill. Witnesses, including Government officials and Universities Scotland, told the committee that there are a number of reasons why the age participation rate changes and said that it is not possible to detect a trend.

The evidence that the Government led was in a poor state of readiness and was poorly presented, which was disappointing. It was also inconsistent with the Government's position. Last year Fiona Hyslop said that an SNP Government would dump student debt. The SNP said that it would write off all student debt, which is a millstone round the neck of the Scottish economy. It argued that the graduate endowment is a critical part of that drain on the economy. While the SNP was making those arguments, graduate employment—which had been of concern to the SNP—was increasing at a record rate. The figures that the Government released in October show a 3 per cent increase in graduate employment on 2003-04.

Murdo Fraser: Given that the member seems to be accepting that the introduction of the graduate endowment was a mistake, will the Liberal Democrats apologise for it?

Jeremy Purvis: Murdo Fraser should be clear that the graduate endowment was part of an overall package, the aim of which was to widen access to university. As the cabinet secretary said, there is no evidence that the policy either widened access or did harm in that regard.

When the cabinet secretary gave evidence to the committee she argued that access was the key issue. That is a valid concern, which is more in tune with the original aim of the Education (Graduate Endowment and Student Support) (Scotland) Bill. As I said, the figures that the Government presented to the committee on the number of young people from more deprived backgrounds who go on to higher education show a 1 per cent increase. That is too small a change to discern whether the graduate endowment policy has been a major failure or a major success. However, in its policy memorandum, the Government was surer of itself. Paragraph 12 of the policy memorandum states boldly:

“The policy's failure to contribute to widening access is also clear.”

A 1 per cent increase in the number of students from poorer backgrounds who access higher education might not be a huge improvement, but one could hardly say that it is a clear failure.

There are many reasons why young people who leave school or who begin higher national programmes at school age and who proceed to college and university might be put off studying. The Association of Scotland's Colleges gave powerful evidence on the concerns about living costs that many higher education students at colleges face. As the Government knows, those students do not pay the graduate endowment. The issues are living costs and the need for additional support to cover students' study-time costs.

That is why our amendment focuses on two crucial areas for student support and access, one of which is a statutory duty to provide student support. Such a statutory duty exists in this year's Budget (Scotland) Bill only because of the Education (Graduate Endowment and Student Support) (Scotland) Act 2001, which states that budget proposals that are made to Parliament must contain proposals for student support. If that provision is removed from section 2 of the 2001 act, as the Government proposes to do in the Graduate Endowment Abolition (Scotland) Bill, the requirement on the budget bill to provide student support will be removed, too.

Fiona Hyslop: Bearing it in mind that the Government provides hundreds of millions of pounds of student support, does Jeremy Purvis have any doubt that this Government—or any future Government—would support students? How important to Mr Purvis is the £17 million that is associated with the graduate endowment? I have said that we will look at his proposals.

Jeremy Purvis: It is quite clear that the Liberal Democrats believe that there should be a statutory duty on Scottish ministers to provide student support. I would have thought that there is a need for debate about that. There is such a duty at the moment: we want it to continue once the budget bill has been passed.

If we remove the ring fencing that the 2001 act put in place, whereby the graduate endowment revenue is to be used for student support, and instead seek to use it for university funding, we will be putting in place a graduate tax.

Richard Baker: The committee's report makes no link between endowment payments and tuition costs. Such retention would free much-needed funds in other parts of the budget for some of those priorities.

Jeremy Purvis: It is disappointing that I must refer another Labour member back to the Labour proposal in the committee report, which the Labour Party ensured was agreed to. Paragraph

70 of the report says that the funding required to abolish the graduate endowment would be better used for

“more funding directly for universities”.

That represents a change from the current statutory position.

Rhona Brankin: That is additional money.

Jeremy Purvis: Rhona Brankin says from a sedentary position that it is additional money, but it is not when the Labour Party says that the money from the graduate endowment should be used to fund the universities. That would amount to a non-progressive graduate tax—in effect, it would be a graduate poll tax.

The Government has not been clear in its position on wiping out student debt. On 13 September, Adam Ingram said:

“Our position was always that we would stand in the shoes of students and service the debt. Obviously, we will have to push forward with our negotiations with the Treasury on the issue of removing the debt altogether.”—[*Official Report*, 13 September 2007; c 1684.]

Only a few weeks later, John Swinney said that there was

“insufficient parliamentary support for student debt servicing or for moving from loans to grants”.—[*Official Report*, 14 November 2007; c 3325.]

There has been an indication that all the parties would provide time to have that debate in Parliament, so the Government should introduce its proposals for wiping out all student debt. Let us test them in Parliament. If the Government can propose expenditure on a national conversation and on a referendum bill, for which there is clearly no majority in Parliament, it can keep its promise to students.

The Presiding Officer: You should close now, please.

Jeremy Purvis: The NUS has argued consistently that the bill should be one part of an overall package, but scant information has been provided on the overall package. I fear that the bill will be the only measure that the Government will introduce. We will support it, but we want it to be better. We think that it should have formed part of an overall package, to give our students hope for the future and our universities a secure funding settlement so that they can retain their competitiveness.

I move amendment S3M-964.1, to insert at end,

“and, in so doing, calls for a statutory duty on Scottish Ministers to provide student support and provision made thereunder to be improved for existing and future students and further calls for more research into the barriers to accessing further and higher education to be undertaken.”

09:39

Karen Whitefield (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab): I welcome the opportunity to speak on behalf of the Education, Lifelong Learning and Culture Committee in the stage 1 debate on the Government's Graduate Endowment Abolition (Scotland) Bill. I thank all the witnesses who provided the committee with written and oral evidence and I thank the committee clerks for their assistance with the committee's stage 1 considerations. As the convener of the committee, I will focus my contribution on the evidence that the committee received and explain why the committee has recommended to the Parliament that the general principles of the bill should not be approved.

The Scottish Government has clearly stated that the purpose of the bill is to widen access to higher education and remove barriers that discourage potential students, particularly those from Scotland's most deprived communities, from entering further education. I am sure that that objective is shared by everyone in the chamber. We all aspire to a Scotland in which every individual has the opportunity to reach their full potential, and in which access to education is based on ability to learn and not on ability to pay. In that context, the committee fully supported the intention of the bill and its objective of removing barriers to higher education. However, the committee did not agree that the abolition of the graduate endowment was the best way of making progress on that vital issue. The committee believes that that policy initiative is based more on ensuring that the Government can tick off an ill-conceived manifesto commitment than on sound research and evidence that it would support young people in obtaining a higher education. Indeed, the Scottish Government's officials told the committee that no alternatives had been considered prior to the introduction of the legislation.

The committee received 25 written submissions in response to its call for evidence and it took oral evidence on the bill over three meetings. Although the majority of those who made submissions said that they had no objection to the abolition of the graduate endowment, many also said that they had serious concerns about what the bill fails to do. The bill fails to do anything to support part-time students; it fails to support students financially while at university; and it fails to address the issue of widening access and getting more students, particularly those from deprived communities, into education. As members will see from the committee's stage 1 report on the bill, we concluded that there was insufficient evidence to demonstrate that the abolition of the graduate endowment would contribute to the aspiration of widening access. There is no hard evidence that the graduate endowment has had a significant

impact on participation in higher education. In fact, as Jeremy Purvis highlighted, there has been a slight increase. The number of entrants to higher education has remained largely static since the endowment was introduced.

Fiona Hyslop: The original policy intention of the graduate endowment fee was to widen access. The member is admitting that it has completely failed. If it is not achieving its intention, and it is resulting in £2,300 of debt for half of our graduates, why keep it?

Karen Whitefield: Student numbers have not reduced, so we cannot say that the graduate endowment has failed. In fact, the percentage of entrants to higher education from deprived areas has risen slightly from 14 per cent in 2002-03 to 15 per cent in 2005-06. Those are the Government's own statistics, as stated in the policy memorandum. To suggest that the policy has failed is a nonsense. That view was shared by many who gave evidence to the committee, such as the Scottish Further and Higher Education Funding Council, which said that it was

"not aware of any clear evidence that the GE itself has been a barrier to access."

The British Medical Association Scotland said that it feared that the abolition of the fee

"will do little to address the issue of widening access to courses such as medicine".

The Royal Society of Edinburgh said:

"A more targeted approach would be preferable".

Robin Harper (Lothians) (Green): Karen Whitefield will recall that the Cubie report recommended that the level of income at which the graduate endowment would be paid was £24,000. Will Karen Whitefield respond to the proposition that setting the level of payment at nearly half that amount has contributed considerably to student resistance to the graduate endowment and is one of the reasons why we want to get rid of it now?

Karen Whitefield: If Mr Harper had read the committee's report, he would know that we recommended that there should be a wide-ranging review of support for students. The point that the committee is making today is that the bill does nothing to support students while they are at university; instead, it helps people in employment who are earning money.

Although the intention of the bill is to remove barriers to accessing higher education, there is no evidence that abolishing the graduate endowment would achieve that goal. Some committee members believe that if the cabinet secretary is really committed to widening access, she could take other, more significant measures, such as increasing funding for student bursaries.

Unfortunately, the bill concentrates on just one issue and fails to consider the wider picture.

As the cabinet secretary highlighted this morning, the policy memorandum accompanying the bill claims that the graduate endowment has failed to achieve its goals. Yet when the committee asked her Government officials to support that claim, not only were they ill prepared, they were unable to provide that evidence. Fiona Hyslop also suggested this morning that using graduate endowment income to support students from deprived communities in higher education in the form of bursaries would somehow fritter away Scotland's resources. If that is frittering away resources, that is the kind of frittering in which we should invest. Although abolishing the graduate endowment would slightly reduce the debt on graduation, the committee found no evidence that its abolition would achieve the Government's aim of widening access.

Financial concerns are not always the main barrier to students from Scotland's most deprived communities going to university. If we want to open the doors of higher education to more Scots, we need a serious review of the barriers that continue to restrict access, so that we can ensure that higher education is accessible to all sections of our communities.

Scrapping the graduate endowment would cost the Government an estimated £17 million a year, about which my colleague Elaine Murray will say more. Surely that £17 million would be better invested in measures to widen access and extend the support that is available to the poorest students through the current bursary system. The Government has given a commitment that the abolition of the endowment will have no effect on the amount of student support that is available. The fact is that income from the graduate endowment was to be channelled back into student support funding and bursaries. That concern is shared by NUS Scotland and other student bodies. I ask the minister to explain how she will ensure that those resources are still channelled to where they are most needed. Will she give a commitment today that the scrapping of the endowment will have no impact on student support payments?

Removing the graduate endowment would do nothing to tackle the most pressing issue for most students and potential students, which is financial hardship while they are at university. It would do nothing to widen access or support students during their studies. Recent Government statistics show that just over 12 per cent of people from the most deprived areas enter higher education compared with 53 per cent of people from the least deprived communities. It is my and the committee's belief that measures to widen access

to students from deprived areas should be a priority and that the bill will do nothing for Scotland's students who are at university right now. Students, especially those from our most deprived communities, require funding. Indeed, the minister cited those two examples when she appeared before the committee. However, the committee failed to see how the proposal before us would do anything to ensure that such individuals are given support, encouragement and opportunities to access the higher education that they need and deserve.

Alex Neil (Central Scotland) (SNP): Will the member make it clear that she is speaking for half of the committee? The other half does not agree with her.

Karen Whitefield: I am well aware of the committee's decision-making process.

We must ensure that all Scotland's young people, whatever their background, are given the chance to realise their potential.

Finally, a major concern of mine and that of the committee is that abolishing the graduate endowment will further widen the gap between support for full-time and part-time students. Although full-time courses will be free, the majority of part-time students will continue to pay tuition fees. That is unfair and unjust and, at a time when we are placing so much emphasis on investment in skills and lifelong learning, it penalises those who want to undertake part-time study.

I believe that, as the bill fails in its purpose, it should not be approved by Parliament. The Government has produced no real evidence to convince us that abolishing the graduate endowment would contribute in any way to widening access. Students need financial support and assistance most during their course, not afterwards, so it would be much better to invest the estimated £17 million annual cost of this proposal in measures to widen access and improve student funding mechanisms such as student bursaries and the young students bursary.

On that basis, I ask Parliament not to support the bill's general principles.

Tricia Marwick (Central Fife) (SNP): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. Is it in order for a committee convener to represent what is, in fact, the decision taken by the committee on her casting vote as the committee's views? She is certainly not representing the views of the committee, half of whose members did not agree with her.

The Presiding Officer: That is a matter for the committee to determine.

I point out that, as we are oversubscribed for this debate, we must have very tight timekeeping from now on.

09:51

Rhona Brankin (Midlothian) (Lab): We have heard repeated claims this morning that abolishing the graduate endowment will improve access to higher education and tackle student hardship. We believe that those claims are not accurate and, indeed, that the cabinet secretary has failed miserably to produce persuasive evidence to support the bill's principles.

As Universities Scotland has recognised, Scotland's record in bringing in students from underrepresented areas is 50 per cent higher than that of the rest of the UK. The age participation index shows that, since 2001, overall participation rates have risen. Given that the bill introducing the graduate endowment was passed in 2001, the case for abolishing it because it impedes access is hardly watertight.

Fiona Hyslop: We need to make it quite clear that, under the previous Administration, participation in education fell from 51 per cent to 47 per cent. There are fewer people in total going to university now than there were when the previous Administration came into power. Surely that is a fall by anyone's measure.

Rhona Brankin: I repeat that, according to the age participation index, participation rates have risen since 2001. Indeed, in a recent parliamentary answer to me, the cabinet secretary acknowledged that the number of students entering higher education from the 20 per cent most deprived areas is rising. We in the Labour Party want the number to rise even more, but we do not share the Government's simplistic view that abolishing the graduate endowment will automatically increase access to higher education. Indeed, as Karen Whitefield has pointed out, the Scottish Further and Higher Education Funding Council told the committee that it is not aware of any clear evidence that the graduate endowment itself has been a barrier to access.

There is just no evidence to suggest that the graduate endowment militates against increased access. Indeed, only half of students pay the endowment, and only when they have graduated. In effect, abolishing the endowment does not tackle problems of access and student poverty. Students from poorer backgrounds do not pay it and have access to student bursaries during their period of study.

The reality is that, by abolishing the graduate endowment, the Government is abolishing its requirement to support students from poorer

backgrounds. Of course, the NUS recognised that in concerns that it raised with the committee.

Labour believes that the endowment should be retained for those who can afford to pay, with the extra funding used to create an expanded system of support for students from less well-off backgrounds. Potentially, we could raise bursaries of up to £1,000 for the least well-off students which, Jeremy, would provide them with extra support while they were studying for degrees. That is social justice—which, of course, is something that the SNP does not believe in.

Alasdair Allan (Western Isles) (SNP): I note the member's concern for the views of the NUS. However, she will concede that the NUS wants her to vote for the bill.

Rhona Brankin: I listen and talk regularly to the NUS, so I can tell you that what is of most concern to the NUS is that you have dumped your £1.9 billion commitment to getting rid of student debt.

We on the Labour benches believe in social justice, which, of course, the SNP Government does not. It talks a lot about the link between deprivation and low attainment, but it fails consistently to target precious resources where they would make the most difference in tackling disadvantage. Of course, SNP members and ministers will not mention it, but the elephant in the room for them today is the massive lie that the SNP told about writing off student debt. Students and their parents were simply conned into voting for the SNP on the basis of a £1.9 billion promise that the party promptly dropped as soon as it was elected.

Alex Neil: Will the member take an intervention?

Rhona Brankin: No, I will not. I can tell you that that simply will not wash.

Ian McKee (Lothians) (SNP): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. Surely the member should address her speech to you. We have heard her say "Jeremy" and "you" and I am getting very confused about who she is talking to.

The Presiding Officer: The matter is one for me to determine. However, I do not disagree with the point. I would be grateful to members if they would speak through the chair.

Rhona Brankin: I am delighted to do that, Presiding Officer.

Attacking other parties for voting to support increased funding for poorer students does not get the SNP Government off the hook for failing to dump the remaining 95 per cent of the debt, as it promised to do.

Of course, the Government has also broken its promise to university principals that abolishing the

graduate endowment would not impact on university funding. Is it just a coincidence that, at the same time that it seeks to abolish the graduate endowment, the Government has produced a £5 million cut in university funding? Having taken £17 million a year of ring-fenced moneys out of the budget by seeking to abolish the graduate endowment, it has failed to find any new funding for student bursaries.

Jeremy Purvis: Will the member give way?

Rhona Brankin: No, I will not. In fact, the Liberal Democrats should be trying to decide on their position. Nicol Stephen said:

“we have accepted the Cubie recommendation that graduates should make a contribution ... so that future generations of disadvantaged students can benefit.”—
[*Official Report*, 31 January 2001; c 734.]

I often ask what the Liberal Democrats stand for.

In evidence to the committee, Universities Scotland said that it could not separate the issues of student support and university funding. It said that if student support comes out of the Scottish block, funding will not be available for other purposes.

The Presiding Officer: One minute.

Rhona Brankin: It is eight years to the day since the Cubie committee reported. Despite Fiona Hyslop's selective quoting of Andrew Cubie, he continues to believe fundamentally that a graduate contribution should be made. I know that he is extremely concerned that no new money has been found to replace the income that the Government has foregone from the graduate endowment.

Scottish universities have just received an appalling settlement, which has met with universal criticism from universities, students and Opposition politicians. The universities know that they will see a real-terms cut of £5 million next year and that thereafter they will receive a flatlining budget. That is simply not good enough.

We on the Labour benches believe passionately in the importance of world-class universities to the Scottish economy and to Scottish students. That is why the previous Government put record amounts of funding into our universities. The Labour Party believes in social justice. We want to create opportunities for students from less well-off backgrounds and for those who come from communities such as mine in Midlothian where there is no tradition of going to university.

Given the flight of unskilled jobs to lower-wage economies, we know that our economy demands an ever-better-qualified workforce. If we are to compete in a global economy, our universities must continue to be among the best in the world.

The Presiding Officer: You must close now.

Rhona Brankin: The current poor funding settlement is causing Scottish university principals to talk about a developing funding gap between Scottish and English universities.

In conclusion, the bill does nothing to address hardship while students are studying. In opposing the general principles of the bill, Labour members will vote instead for the retention of a statutory duty to provide student support and for a large increase in support for students who are most in need.

The Presiding Officer: You must close.

Rhona Brankin: We have also concluded that the time is right for a rigorous independent study into the future funding of Scottish universities and the associated issues of student support and increasing access. The future of our universities is too important to be left to chance.

10:00

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Today, Scotland's universities face a real threat to their future. I am sure that I do not need to remind members of the important role that those historic institutions play. For centuries, Scotland has been renowned for excellence in education. A previous Conservative Government massively expanded student numbers at our universities and created many more institutions. Today, they are not only providers of high-quality education for people from the United Kingdom and large numbers from overseas but, increasingly, drivers of economic growth.

At the same time, our universities face an unprecedented threat to their future. As we know, English universities have additional income from top-up tuition fees of £3,000 per student per year. In 2009, the £3,000 per year cap may well be lifted. There is concern in Scottish universities that there is a growing competitive gap between our institutions and those down south. What a pity that the SNP Government's response to that concern has been to deliver a dismal financial settlement for Scottish universities, which have been given a real-terms cut in funding in the next financial year. However, rather than spend money on supporting our universities, the SNP today proposes to cut £17 million per year from the education budget and use it to abolish the graduate endowment. The Scottish Conservatives cannot support that proposal.

Alex Neil: When did the Tories start taking down the poster that I have here, which says:

“We will abolish tuition fees for all Scottish students at UK universities ... Do something about it. Vote Scottish Conservative”?

Murdo Fraser: It is the height of cheek for Mr Neil to lecture anyone about broken promises when the SNP stood on a manifesto promise of wiping out student debt that it has no intention of delivering. The Scottish Conservatives are no friends of the graduate endowment, which was introduced by the Liberal Democrats and the Labour Party, but politics and government are about hard choices. The Scottish Government's budget is finite and, given a choice of extra funding for our universities and more student support or abolishing the graduate endowment and making our graduates even better off than their English counterparts—who are already burdened with £3,000 per year in top-up tuition fees—our priority is to increase university funding and improve student support right here, right now. That is the choice that we make.

Jeremy Purvis: Will Murdo Fraser confirm whether he wants part—or, indeed, all—of the funds that are raised from the graduate endowment to go directly to universities? Is that the Conservatives' position? His party has been saying for many years that the graduate endowment is a tuition fee in Scotland. It is not, but that is how the Conservatives have campaigned. They now have an opportunity to get rid of the tuition fee that they have sought to get rid of for eight years.

Murdo Fraser: The Liberal Democrats' hypocrisy knows no bounds. They introduced the graduate endowment in the first place, but they try to lecture us on the position that we are taking. We are dealing with the lesser of two evils and, given the dismal financial settlement that the cabinet secretary has delivered to Scottish universities, we reluctantly have to say that now is not the time to scrap the graduate endowment.

The SNP could not even make a convincing case for the bill in front of the Education, Lifelong Learning and Culture Committee. The SNP Government stated that abolishing the graduate endowment would reduce the fear of debt and widen access to higher education. However, as Karen Whitefield said, it was not able to provide the committee with any convincing evidence in support of those claims.

Fiona Hyslop: Will Murdo Fraser give way?

Murdo Fraser: I will not at the moment because I have already taken two interventions and need to make some progress.

The Government produced no compelling evidence that the graduate endowment is a barrier to access. It has simply failed to make the policy case for the bill. If this is the quality of the bills and policy memoranda that the cabinet secretary and her colleagues will introduce over the next three and a half years, heaven help us.

As Rhona Brankin said, we have heard nothing today from the SNP about its promise to write off student debt. The SNP could not have been clearer in the run-up to the election: it would replace student loans with student grants and outstanding debts would be written off. Eight and a half months into the SNP regime, where is the legislation to enact that promise? Where are the detailed proposals and the costings? The SNP has nothing to say on the issue. It is yet another SNP broken promise and a betrayal of Scotland's students.

What a pity it is to see the Liberal Democrats propping up the SNP this morning in a ghastly alliance. Christmas may be coming, but the graduate endowment was not, of course, the outcome of a virgin birth. There was no immaculate conception here. It was the product, rather, of an unholy coupling between Labour and the Liberal Democrats. How sad, and how surprising, to see the Liberal Democrats today seeking to disown their own bastard child. I thought that the Liberal Democrats were supposed to be a party of compassion and committed to removing the stigma of illegitimacy. Even with Christmas round the corner, the Liberal Democrats are voting to eradicate their own offspring. Even King Herod did not kill his own first-born. Even he would be appalled at the callous bloodlust of Nicol Stephen.

Over the past few weeks, Nicol Stephen and others in the Liberal Democrats have made a great deal of noise about the poor funding settlement for Scottish universities. The universities should be given the full £168 million that they asked for, Nicol and his friends have said. However, rather than support a proposal from us to put more money into universities and student support, they will vote with the SNP to take money out of the education budget. It is now perfectly clear that everything that the Liberal Democrats have said about higher education funding over the past few weeks has been empty posturing; when it came to the crunch, they had no intention of doing anything to support our universities. Liberal Democrats will today be dismayed to see their party doing the SNP's dirty work for it and voting through this abolition.

Although we in the Scottish Conservatives have no love for the graduate endowment, which is a measure that was introduced by the Liberal Democrats and their Labour colleagues when they were in government, we must decide today on the lesser of two evils. We cannot allow Scottish universities to be further damaged by the funding cut that is proposed by the SNP Government. For that reason, we will, with a heavy heart, vote against the bill today, and I urge others to join us.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Trish Godman): We now move to the open part of the debate. I ask for tight six-minute speeches.

10:07

Rob Gibson (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): We need to return to the basis of the debate, which is about abolishing the graduate endowment fee. There seems to be a tramline effect at present: there are the people who want to talk about everything else to do with universities, and there is the SNP, which wants to talk about the first increment in removing the barriers to free education. This debate is the start of that road, and I am proud to be speaking in favour of the reintroduction of free education in Scotland, after years of back-door top-up fees imposed by the previous Administration.

It is interesting that, after hearing a weight of evidence at the Education, Lifelong Learning and Culture Committee, which was evenly split, the Liberal Democrats have recognised this opportunity to take a first step towards making a change. No matter what is said in the debate, one of the partners that created the graduate endowment has realised that it was not the right way to go.

If the Graduate Endowment Abolition (Scotland) Bill is passed by Parliament—I certainly hope that it will be—it will remove fees of £2,289 from about 50,000 students. That will help the economy of Scotland, because it will give people a better chance to work and live here. If that is not a good product of a university education, I do not know what is.

A young woman who wrote to me from Argyll said:

"I am currently training to be a primary teacher and have most gratefully received my tuition fees paid in full throughout my course. I hope to graduate in February and intend to teach in Scotland for the majority of my career. Therefore the money paid on my behalf for my tuition fees will be going back into the education of our country.

As I am sure you can imagine, after four and a half years at university, I have very little available cash. While I hope to work during March I do not know where I will find the money to pay Graduate Endowment. There must be a better way.

Please abolish graduate endowment."

She is the kind of person whom we are relying on to come out of our universities and build the economy of Scotland. She is the kind of person who should have given evidence directly to the committee, rather than the vested interests, who have other arguments to make.

Let us remind ourselves that of the 25 submissions, 24 were clearly in favour of getting

rid of the graduate endowment. The bill that we are discussing is an important first step.

Rhona Brankin: The member quoted a young student. Did he ask what her views were on a real-terms cut in university funding, which will affect many thousands of students in Scotland?

Rob Gibson: The assertion that there is a real-terms cut in funding is another part of this tramline debate. I am sorry, but it is quite clear from the figures that this Government has introduced a real-terms increase in funding. Labour members disagree with that, but our figures make it clear that we are telling the truth.

Murdo Fraser: They would say that.

Rob Gibson: We are the Government; the figures are ours.

Hugh O'Donnell (Central Scotland) (LD): So they must be true.

Rob Gibson: So they must be true. Why not? It would be very bad for the Government to use figures that are not true, for heaven's sake.

We have to acknowledge the inefficiency of the graduate endowment system. The Government has received only £57,000 out of the £26.3 million that has been added to student loans. That is a ridiculous return. I would expect the Conservatives to acknowledge that the system is inefficient and to vote to abolish the graduate endowment.

I return to the philosophy of free education: the ability to learn is far more important than the ability to pay. Does Labour not agree with that statement? Obviously not, because it is opposing this opportunity for us to remove part of the debt that students rack up.

I recently spoke to a young student from America who is doing his PhD here under the fresh talent initiative. He told me that he is saving about £30,000 by studying here rather than in the United States of America. I hope that he will contribute to our economy afterwards, given that he is committed to staying in Scotland. Students here do not have to pay such amounts. We are talking about people choosing to live here. Do we not want to ensure that the youngsters who are born and brought up here have opportunities too? Is the bill not the first step towards making that possible? We still have to deal with 95 per cent of student debt. Surely we have to make this start. We also have to acknowledge that, given the financial settlements under devolution, it is not possible to apply the sums that are required to remove student debt at this stage. Therefore, let us kill the nonsense that that is what the debate is about; the debate is about making a start.

Student presidents from around the country have written to us to ask us to vote for the bill. It

would be to the eternal shame of the Labour members who talk about social justice if they deny that the bill has the potential to improve the condition of students. I ask those members to listen to their conscience and support the bill.

10:13

Mary Mulligan (Linlithgow) (Lab): I am pleased to be taking part in the debate. I am grateful to the witnesses who gave evidence to the Education, Lifelong Learning and Culture Committee. Of course, the majority said that they would support the abolition of the graduate endowment on the basis that it would reduce student debt. However, it is fair to say that the majority qualified their support by raising the general issue of university funding and the quality of education that is provided to all students. They also said that student debt is not the only issue for people who decide not to pursue a university education, and that the abolition of the graduate endowment would be only a small move in favour of people who are put off going to university by the fear of debt.

We should reflect on why the Education (Graduate Endowment and Student Support) (Scotland) Act 2001 was introduced. The Parliament agreed that we would abolish up-front tuition fees and introduce a graduate endowment fee that would be paid by certain graduates in recognition of the benefits that they receive from their period of higher education. We agreed that the income from the fee would be used to fund improvements in student support, and so it was; the graduate endowment has provided bursaries for less financially secure students.

Fiona Hyslop: Will the member take an intervention?

Mary Mulligan: No, not yet.

How can abolishing the graduate endowment deliver the stated intention of the bill? It cannot. That is why I cannot support the general principles of the bill.

In trying to justify the bill, the Scottish Government has given us little, if any, hard evidence to support its case. It has made a general claim that fear of debt is putting off poor students. However, anyone who thinks that reducing debt from an average of £11,000 to £9,000 will make a substantial difference has never been poor. The committee has frequently heard Scottish Government ministers offering the Joseph Rowntree Foundation's research as evidence for their view. However, that research was carried out in 2003, before the start of the graduate endowment.

Today, we have heard that the age participation index figures show a reduction in student numbers. However, the reason why the index has gone down is that the total number of young people has increased.

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning was unable to provide clear evidence to persuade the committee to support the bill, which was unusual.

For me, the big question is not simply about increasing the number of young people from poorer backgrounds who attend university; it is also about ensuring that those poorer students for whom university is appropriate—those whose future prospects would be enhanced and who could make a better contribution to the economy if they went to university—are not put off university for any reason. The Liberal Democrat amendment perhaps tries to address that point.

I have said in previous debates that reasons other than cost are to blame for the fact that some people do not go to university. Ambition, aspiration and the views of families and friends are part of the story. However, we do not have the clear evidence to enable us to make decisions about how to combat those deterrents. Perhaps some further research is needed.

As I have said, I will be voting against the general principles of the bill. I recognise that the vote will be close. Should the SNP Government's position be agreed to, perhaps the Liberal Democrat amendment will help. However, I must point out to the Liberal Democrats that it is inconsistent, to say the least, to ask for student support and provision to be improved but not to make any provision for that. In today's debate, I am not permitted to speak about the committee's budget deliberations. However, when the committee publishes its report, people will understand why I think that the Liberal Democrats' call is disingenuous.

Jeremy Purvis: Will the member give way?

Mary Mulligan: No, not just now.

We cannot have this debate without passing comment on university funding. We can only wonder about how universities might have responded to the bill had they known how bad the university settlement would be.

Fiona Hyslop: Will the member give way?

Mary Mulligan: No, I will not.

The poor funding will have a number of consequences that will affect all students, but they could disproportionately affect poorer students.

To save money, universities could reduce student numbers. Labour promised to lift the cap and increase student numbers. Universities could

reduce expensive courses, such as science and engineering courses—the kind of courses that we need to drive the economy. Alternatively, universities could increase the numbers of overseas students to increase income. Although I value the contribution that overseas students make to our learning environment, that has to be balanced against any possible loss of places for students from Scotland.

I want young people to reach their educational potential. The graduate endowment has provided bursaries for some of our poorest students. The loss of £17 million as a result of this bill represents a lost opportunity. I support my colleague Rhona Brankin when she says that that money could be used to provide further bursaries.

The SNP is trying to use the abolition of the graduate endowment to fulfil its manifesto commitment to dump the debt. If the Liberal Democrats vote with the SNP today, they will let the Government off the hook. I am sure that the SNP thought that “dump the debt” was a good soundbite. However, ill-thought-out policies have a habit of returning to bite back. Now, the more frequently used soundbite will be, “the SNP Government dumps the students”.

10:19

Christina McKelvie (Central Scotland) (SNP): We will be

“insisting on smaller classes, an increase in the number of fully qualified teachers, new schools, maintenance for the poorer children, more free places in Secondary Schools and Scholarships to the University.”

That quotation is not from the SNP manifesto but from the Labour manifesto of 1924—a time when the Labour Party was committed to free education.

David McLetchie (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Con): The member has a good memory.

Christina McKelvie: I wasnae born then.

In 1959, the Labour Party said:

“we shall ensure that any student accepted by a university will receive a really adequate State scholarship.”

What a radical idea—the state funding our young people’s studies. Imagine that. Of course, that was before the Labour Party lost its soul. Under Labour since 1997, everything has been available, as long as people can afford it. Higher education is available as long as people can pay for it; there are life opportunities as long as people can afford them; and peerages—well, enough said.

As I am sure our friends in the blue corner will be more than willing to tell us, when the Conservatives lost power in 1997, students in Scotland still received a maintenance grant. It is true that a loan was involved—it was about half

the total amount that could be claimed—but grants were still available to those who needed them. To make it as clear as I can, I say that Margaret Thatcher and John Major both paid student grants and neither imposed blanket tuition fees.

That all changed when Labour came to power. On 14 April 1997, the London *Evening Standard* published questions that it posed to Labour and the answers that it received. Question 6 was:

“Will Labour introduce tuition fees for higher education?”

The answer was:

“Labour has no plans to introduce tuition fees for higher education.”

However, it certainly had plans by July that year—just three months later—and it imposed tuition fees on all Scotland’s students. It also got rid of student maintenance grants and replaced them with student loans, which inhibit our graduates’ life chances. That serves neither the individual nor our society well. Society loses out because the massive debts that graduates carry are a drag on our economy. If those debts were carried by any other group in society, everyone in the Parliament would call for action to address the problem. Why should Scotland’s graduates not receive the same consideration as anyone else would?

What I have said applies to those who reach university, but many do not get there, often because they fail to apply. Individuals are deterred from entering higher and further education by the prospect of ending up with thousands and thousands of pounds of debt that their own Government has forced on them. It is interesting that the people who are least affected by that fear are likely to come from families that have experience of managing debt fairly easily—families with healthy incomes.

Labour’s policy decisions in its early years in government created barriers to higher education for the poorest in society—some difference from its 1924 manifesto.

Jeremy Purvis: My intervention is not about the Labour Party’s 1924 manifesto, although I studied history at university under a Conservative Government that phased out the grants that I was receiving.

In 1999, the SNP proposed the reintroduction of grants at £500, whereas the Lib Dem-Labour Administration established bursaries—grants—of £2,000. If the member is so keen for the SNP to replace loans with grants, why does the SNP’s budget not include the money to replace all loans with grants?

Christina McKelvie: We are taking the first step by abolishing the graduate endowment and we are moving from loans to grants for part-time students.

That is more than the previous Executive did in the past eight years.

The movement from up-front tuition fees to an end-of-course tuition fee in the graduate endowment early in our new democracy's life was a step in the right direction, but we must go further. We must abolish tuition fees altogether—that is what Richard Baker requested in 1999 when he was an NUS activist, before he started chasing a career in the Labour Party.

Getting rid of the graduate endowment fee will not address student poverty and graduate debt by itself, but having a long way to travel does not mean that we should not take the first steps. I am disappointed in those who would do nothing.

I believe, as does the SNP, that access to education should be based on the ability to learn and not on the ability to pay. Committee members heard the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning tell us that she is continuing the programme that will lead to the end of student loans and the introduction of maintenance grants for students. We also heard Howard McKenzie of the Association of Scotland's Colleges tell us on 28 November that changes to the funding packages for students would be far more effective. He said:

"The move from loans to grants will widen access more than putting hundreds of thousands more people through courses will. That sounds odd, but we are more likely to change the type of people who come forward and to get better penetration of the groups of people who we need to get back into the economy that way."—[*Official Report, Education, Lifelong Learning and Culture Committee*, 28 November 2007; c 391.]

Scotland needs a fair deal for her students, who have suffered—and are suffering—because of Labour's mismanagement. Graduates are suffering as a result of the illogical burdens that have been placed on them by Labour policies, and Scotland is suffering because those policies are preventing Scots from entering education, gaining skills and making a valuable contribution to the economy.

Scotland looks to her Parliament and Government to make a difference for her people and improve their lives. We have a duty to take the first steps to establishing a clear, equitable and forward-looking student funding policy for Scotland and to support the general principles of the Graduate Endowment Abolition (Scotland) Bill.

10:25

Ken Macintosh (Eastwood) (Lab): I will focus on wider access and the claims that the minister has made in favour of the bill.

The new Administration's rationale for the bill suggests that abolishing the graduate endowment

can open up access to higher education on a more equitable basis. The bill's policy memorandum also asserts that the graduate endowment has failed to widen access and participation, although it was established in the first place to do so. My colleagues and I would be queuing up to support the bill if either argument held water. However, the Government has failed to provide any evidence to substantiate the latter claim, and the first claim is disingenuous and misleading. The pursuit of social justice, which is the Labour Party's *raison d'être* and can be traced through nearly all Labour Government policy decisions, is but a mask for the bill to hide behind.

SNP members were elected on the simple promise that they would cancel student debt. There is no doubt in my mind that hundreds—if not thousands—of students throughout the country, and probably their families too, were attracted by the unadorned and alluring promise that was made. However, like so many of the SNP's so-called manifesto commitments, that promise has turned out to be worthless and hollow. It is a sham. The election was less than eight months ago, but the new Administration has already walked away from the commitment that was made to Scotland's students. The SNP promised to dump student debt, but it turns out that it has dumped Scotland's students.

It is not only the false prospectus that annoys me most about the way in which the SNP has led students on only to let them down—it is the language that it has used to dress up its claims. The SNP uses the language of social justice. It said that dumping student debt was about widening access to education and increasing the participation of people from non-traditional backgrounds, but student debt and hardship are not being tackled. Instead of making a £2 billion commitment, £17 million has been found to provide a post-graduation benefit for only the 50 per cent or so full-time students who might become liable for the charge, not to tackle up-front living costs for students.

There is no benefit for part-time students in the policy. In fact, the committee heard strong evidence that suggested that part-time students will be further disadvantaged. There is no benefit either for students from non-traditional backgrounds, because they do not pay the graduate endowment. There is no direct benefit for any student from the group for which the policy is supposed to be tailored and the policy removes £17 million from the education budget—money that is used to fund student loans and implement Labour's widening access agenda.

The SNP asserts—I use that word advisedly—in the policy memorandum that the graduate endowment has failed to deliver on the stated aim

of removing barriers to widening access and participation, but it has woefully and embarrassingly failed to provide any evidence to back up that assertion, which has been toe curling. When the committee considered the evidence, it found that participation had increased. I will quote from paragraph 30 of the committee's stage 1 report, as the question whether the number of students from deprived backgrounds has increased has been bandied about:

"The Scottish Domiciled Entrants from Deprived Areas to Higher Education in the UK figures show that the percentage of entrants from deprived areas has risen from 14% in 2002-03 to 15% in 2005-06, which covers the period in which the GE came into effect."

If the Government has £17 million to spend and wants to tackle barriers that students from non-traditional backgrounds face, why does it not direct that money to young students bursaries? Support for students in this country still falls short of the support that they would be entitled to if they lived in England or Wales. Surely that would be a better use of that funding.

The cabinet secretary makes great play of the claim that the bill will somehow make university education free. In fact, SNP members bandy around the word "free" to describe quite a few of their policies. However, as taxpayers well know, education is not free—it is paid for by the taxes of working people. Who exactly benefits from this so-called free policy? The cabinet secretary makes out that those who are in greatest need—people from more deprived backgrounds, who face the greatest barriers—have most to gain. However, as with free school meals, the biggest gainers are not the worst off but the best off. The bill is not about social justice. If the SNP wants to spend our scarce resources in this manner, let us not have any more pretence that the aim is to give the poorest a hand up.

Fiona Hyslop: Has the member taken the trouble to read the London South Bank University, Policy Studies Institute and NOP research that was published by the previous Government in 2005? Forty per cent of those who were questioned in the study said that they had friends who were deterred from going to university because they were worried about the debts that they would build up. There is clear research evidence that debt and the fear of debt put off a sizeable number of people from going to university.

Ken Macintosh: The cabinet secretary makes a lot of assertions about debt, but she uses the term in the context of abolishing £2 billion of student debt. In fact, she plans to use only £17 million to abolish the graduate endowment—that is a post-graduation benefit.

I am grateful to my colleague Richard Baker, who is sitting next to me, for providing a full summary of the research that the cabinet secretary cited selectively. That research found that the majority of those who were questioned—72 per cent—believed that borrowing money to pay for a university education was a good investment. I sat in the right seat this morning.

In the bill, as in so many of its decisions, the new Government has taken the easy option. The bill has the whiff of the populist about it: it is simplistic, headline chasing and short-termist. It is merely a fig leaf behind which the Government hopes to hide the abandonment of its promise to cancel student debt. It is a cheap headline that fails to address any of the long-term anxieties that our universities face or the immediate problems of student hardship. Most galling of all, it is dressed up in the language of widening access, when it does nothing to help students from deprived and non-traditional backgrounds—quite the reverse. I urge the Parliament to support the findings of the committee.

10:32

David McLetchie (Edinburgh Pentlands) **(Con):** Today I invite members to give free rein to their imaginations. I would like them to imagine a world in which there was no graduate endowment and there were no tuition fees, top-up fees, front-end payments or back-end payments, and in which higher education was freely accessible to everyone who had the ability to take advantage of it. I would like members to imagine a world in which there were grants to assist students from lower-income families with their maintenance and living costs during the period of their studies. I would like members to imagine a world in which the number of students in higher and further education doubled and then trebled in less than 20 years, and in which the number of universities in Scotland increased to match the opportunities that were being made available to our young people and mature students.

Jeremy Purvis: Will the member give way?

David McLetchie: Not yet—I am coming to my point.

It is not difficult to imagine such a world—it is easy if you try. Christina McKelvie has managed it. Such a world is not the creation of the vivid imaginations of a J K Rowling or a Terry Pratchett—it is not a Hogwarts or a Discworld. It is the way we were during the 18 years of Conservative Governments. Can it be that it was all so different then? Yes, it was. Today, we should begin by congratulating the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning, Fiona Hyslop, and the SNP Government on

seeking to do for students in Scotland what Mrs Thatcher and John Major did for students in Scotland. It is a noble ambition to want to follow in their footsteps and to try to emulate our achievements in government, before the country was afflicted by the new Labour malaise.

Alex Neil: Will the member give way?

David McLetchie: I am sorry, but Mr Purvis comes first.

Jeremy Purvis: I am seeking purely to help the member. I do not need to imagine the world that he has outlined through rose-tinted spectacles—I lived through it. I started my university course in 1993. My dad is an ambulance driver and my mum was a cleaner, and I received a full grant. In the year in which I graduated—1996—I could get no grant. Which party was in government then?

David McLetchie: Grants during the period that we were the Administration were, like the grants that the member's party introduced, means tested. Obviously, his parents prospered in the intervening period—and that is no surprise, because they were living under a Conservative Government.

I can pay the SNP no higher compliment than the one that I have paid today. In fairness, abolishing the graduate endowment was in the SNP's manifesto, and the SNP is trying to implement it, rather than seeking to ditch it at the first available opportunity, as it has done with so many other policies.

Alex Neil: I thank the member for taking an intervention.

When the member was leader of the Scottish Conservatives, did he approve the campaign poster that I am holding up? It says:

"Y2K? Because they didn't abolish tuition fees. Do something about it. Vote Scottish Conservative."

When did Scottish Conservative policy change on that matter?

David McLetchie: I always think that Mr Neil is at his most eloquent when he quotes my remarks.

The answer to the question is quite simple—one has to devise a policy and make a choice based on the circumstances, as we are doing today, and as Murdo Fraser made clear, the choice is hard. We have to decide whether the finite amount of resource should go into funding our universities and the quality of education that our young people receive, or into funding the abolition of the graduate endowment.

Fiona Hyslop: Will the member give way?

David McLetchie: Sorry—I need to make a little bit of progress.

We note that the Liberal Democrats are supporting the Government today. One might reflect that had they not been so grasping in their desire for office in 1999, there would not be a graduate endowment to abolish eight years later.

I have praised the SNP for seeking to follow in Mrs Thatcher's footsteps. Its members should remember that she was a forward-looking woman, and she would be the first to say that our responsibility is to address today's issues, not the issues of 10, 20 or 30 years ago.

We know that the abolition of the graduate endowment will cost at least £17 million per annum, and that the justification for abolition in terms of access is simply not borne out by the evidence that was given to the committee, as many members have said. The fact of the matter is that the cost of the policy effectively is being extracted from the higher education budget, and that money could be used to finance higher education in Scotland rather than finance student maintenance.

Fiona Hyslop: Will the member give way?

David McLetchie: I am in my last minute—sorry.

I note that the Government has deferred its plans to eliminate all student debt. That is not because there is a lack of a parliamentary majority for it, but because it is the daftest and most irresponsible policy that has ever been advocated by one of the main parties in the Parliament. In essence, it was an encouragement to present students to borrow up to the hilt and spend, spend, spend, on the basis that an SNP Government would come along and relieve them of those liabilities at taxpayers' expense.

Everyone recognises that the main challenge that our universities face is the lack of resources and funding streams to enable them to compete with universities down south that now have the income from tuition fees—the gap is set to grow. If we do not address that fundamental big issue, we will simply fail to compete in higher education on a British and an international stage, because we will be unable to sustain the quality of our teaching and research.

The Government is failing, sadly, to address that big issue. It is addressing the issue incrementally by looking at only one small area that cannot be considered in isolation. I regret to say that the bill is the product of a parochial attitude that betrays the international tradition of Scottish education and wants to limit the horizons of young Scots. For that reason, Parliament should follow the recommendations of its Education, Lifelong Learning and Culture Committee and vote against the bill.

10:39

Aileen Campbell (South of Scotland) (SNP): For the record, I have a large student debt that I am currently repaying. Not many of my parliamentary colleagues can relate to the issue at first hand, because the vast majority were fortunate enough to gain their university education at a time when it was paid for by the state. I am fortunate, too, because at the moment, I receive a salary that means that loan repayments do not place an intolerable burden on me, but the vast majority of my peers, including a great many close friends, have not been so lucky.

This is an important debate, and one that is close to my heart, as I graduated only five years ago. It is also a timely debate because, as MSPs, we have the opportunity to send out a positive Christmas message to Scotland's students who are heading home for the festive period. While we, as parliamentarians, are able to indulge in a little time off over the holiday spell, we should spare a thought for the thousands of students who will have to work to ensure that they have enough money to get by when the new academic term starts.

Rhona Brankin: Will the member take an intervention?

Aileen Campbell: No. I want to make some progress.

The bill is about more than just a populist policy. Free education has been an important principle in our country for centuries. That principle ignored income and background. It allowed Scotland to lead the way internationally and boast some of the highest literacy rates in the world. With literacy came the remarkable achievement of the Scottish enlightenment. Indeed, it was so remarkable that it prompted Voltaire to state that his countrymen should

"look to Scotland for all our ideas of civilization."

I doubt whether he would talk so positively about the actions of the Labour Party and its contribution to developments in the past decade.

Rhona Brankin: The member is on a salary of roughly £52,000. Does she accept that it is right that she should make a contribution to students from poorer backgrounds while they are studying at university?

Aileen Campbell: I already do so through my income tax. However, I note that the vast majority of graduates are not as lucky as I am and are burdened by the debt that Rhona Brankin's party brought in.

Labour systematically destroyed the notion of free education, which was left to the SNP Government to restore. Thankfully, the bill that we

are debating today—if the Parliament has the common sense to vote for it—will help us on the journey back towards a truly free education system.

The vast majority of members benefited from free university education, including some members of the Education, Lifelong Learning and Culture Committee. Astonishingly, the committee voted against the bill in a bizarre move that seemed to put party-political point scoring ahead of the interests of Scotland's student population and the long-term educational needs of future generations. What were the reasons for that mass opposition to abolishing the graduate endowment? According to Labour members, the bill will not widen access and the money would be better spent elsewhere to help ease the financial burden on students. That position is ironic because it ignores the opinions of students and student representatives. Worst of all, the notion that the Labour Party wants to widen access to education is hypocritical, because it comes from the party that burdened students with fees in the first place back in 1998. I should know about that, because I was one of those students.

Ken Macintosh: Will the member take an intervention?

Aileen Campbell: No.

Of course, Labour now supports the graduate endowment. Labour members can call it whatever they like, but it looks like a tuition fee and it works like a tuition fee. In my eyes, that makes it a tuition fee.

Jeremy Purvis: I am with the member in disagreeing with the position of the Labour Party, which now wants to move towards using part of the graduate endowment funds for universities, although that has always been illegal.

The endowment has never been a tuition fee and it does not contribute to tuition. Clear language is important in the debate.

Aileen Campbell: People give a fee for a period of tuition. To me, that makes it a tuition fee.

Mike Rumbles (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD): If someone does not graduate, they do not pay.

Aileen Campbell: The member should let me move on.

Furthermore, the graduate endowment is an ineffective and inefficient tuition fee. The average time that is taken to pay back an income-contingent loan is about 13 years. The associated costs mean that the taxpayer loses about a third of the income that is collected. Of the £26.3 million loan debt that is attributable to the graduate endowment, only £57,000 has been returned to

the taxpayer. That is 0.2 per cent. Therefore, the graduate endowment has not even functioned effectively in relation to its purpose—to fund bursaries for students from poor backgrounds.

The graduate endowment is a tuition fee that puts youngsters off embarking on academic careers. In a letter to MSPs, student leaders state that the graduate endowment is a significant disincentive to students from the poorest backgrounds accessing higher education. Indeed, one of my friends told me about her 15-year-old niece, who is academically bright but had been put off even attempting to apply to go to university because of the fear of debt. However, her attitude changed instantly when her auntie told her that the new Government wanted to get rid of the endowment. If that is not a reason to support the bill, I do not know what is.

I accept that the measure that we are discussing today is only a start in the battle to tackle the harsh and burgeoning financial hardship that students experience, but it is a start. The Parliament must work together to find ways to ensure that the plight of students is reversed. I urge each and every member to support the bill because it will restore fairness and equality to higher education. As the cabinet secretary said, members should not act like Scrooge and vote against this yuletide bill.

It is gross hypocrisy for members who enjoyed the benefits of a free education to retain tuition fees. No doubt some of them masqueraded as socialists on campuses during their radical, carefree and loan-free days. I ask members to spare a thought, before tonight's vote, for the debt-ridden students. They are not gullible and they will see through petty political posturing.

I demonstrated and marched against tuition fees when I was a student and a member of the Federation of Student Nationalists, and I am proud to be in a party that has not lost its principles, that has listened to the voices of students and that will finally, after nearly a decade, start work on the restoration of free education. Education in Scotland should be a right, not a privilege.

10:45

Mike Rumbles (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD): I am delighted that we are debating the abolition of the graduate endowment. There is no question but that it is unfinished business, which is why I was delighted that two years ago the abolition of the graduate endowment was adopted as Liberal Democrat party policy—a policy that we included in our manifesto for the elections earlier this year and a policy that I believe was the most important in that manifesto.

I was immensely proud that we abolished student tuition fees in Scotland. As Jeremy Purvis pointed out, the most important single measure in the first session of Parliament was to tackle student debt, and that measure was driven by the Liberal Democrats. I find it particularly ironic that, at the time, the Tories pilloried us for creating the graduate endowment, and now they want to keep it. That is unbelievable.

Murdo Fraser: Will the member give way?

Mike Rumbles: No. Murdo Fraser has had his say.

The simple fact is that Scottish students have been paying £2,000 at the end of their studies—not for tuition—instead of up to £9,000 per year for tuition. If I were a student, I know which I would prefer to pay, and it would not be the £9,000. We in the Liberal Democrats believe in the principle of free education—free not only at the point of delivery but after delivery. [*Interruption.*] The whole point of coalition Government is compromise.

Talking about compromises, we had compromises with the Labour Party in the first session. I say to Rhona Brankin that, if it had been left to the Labour Party, there is no question but that we would still have tuition fees in Scotland. Labour believes in taxing people just because they attend university.

Rhona Brankin: Does the member accept that abolishing the graduate endowment will take £17 million out of the higher education budget? What will the Liberal Democrats do to replace that money?

Mike Rumbles: Labour wants to reintroduce tuition fees in Scotland—that is clear. We are entirely opposed to the position of both the Labour Party and the Conservatives.

Dr Richard Simpson (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): Answer the question.

Murdo Fraser: Answer the question.

Mike Rumbles: I am delighted to answer the question—it is the SNP Government's job to bring forward the budget. I think that I will oppose the budget in February—I hope that both Labour members and Conservative members will do so as well.

The SNP manifesto stated:

“An SNP government will abolish the Graduate Endowment”.

So far, so good. However, the manifesto went on to say:

“We will remove the burden of debt repayments owed by Scottish domiciled and resident graduates.”

The SNP said that it would dump student debt. Indeed, it said that it was time to dump student

debt. This has been said often before, but I repeat that the only thing that the SNP seems to dump is its commitment. John Swinney says that there is no parliamentary support for the debt proposal, but I say that he should bring it on.

Alex Neil: If such a bill were introduced, would the member vote for it?

Mike Rumbles: I would be delighted if John Swinney introduced a bill to that effect so that it could be debated in the Parliament. Let us see what people's positions are. However, the SNP is afraid to do that.

I am afraid that I do not accept the argument advanced by both the Labour Party and the Conservatives that it is acceptable for students and graduates to contribute—that is a nice word—towards the cost of their education because they will benefit from that education by earning a higher salary in later years. What tosh. Graduates do not necessarily earn larger salaries, but even if they do, we already have a system in place that ensures that those who earn more pay more. It is called income tax. It goes without saying that the Exchequer will benefit from any graduate who earns a higher salary as a result of a university education through their paying more income tax. Income tax is by far the fairest and most progressive form of taxation, because it takes into account the amount that people earn, not the fact that they have attended university.

Dr Simpson: Will the member give way?

Mike Rumbles: I have taken enough interventions.

Funding through income tax is undoubtedly preferable to the graduate endowment, which Labour and the Tories want to keep.

Graduates leave Scottish universities with crippling debts. There is no question but that issues to do with debt deter many people from entering education. The SNP has gone back on its manifesto promise to remove the burden of student debt. It has failed even to try to bring its proposals to the Parliament so that they can be debated and voted on. Alex Salmond told us that there would be a new politics in which he would bring proposals to the Parliament and persuade the other parties. We were to have real debates about the issues, but on student debt Alex Salmond has hidden away.

The removal of the graduate endowment will make a huge difference to students by reducing their debts. In Scotland we have a tremendous opportunity to send a powerful message to the rest of the United Kingdom that education is a right, not a commodity and that access to higher education should be based on the ability to learn, not the ability to pay.

10:51

Dr Richard Simpson (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): I think that the Parliament can agree on one thing: all members are keen that access should be widened and that more people from poor backgrounds should enter higher and further education.

In 1999, along with the associate dean at the University of Glasgow, Dr Lumsden, we established a programme at Glasgow and the University of Stirling to widen access to medical, dental, veterinary and allied health professional training. The UK Government, to give it its due, has put nearly £1 million into the programme. Such practical approaches to widening access are important. Sixty schools in Scotland are involved in the programme. Their pupils' aspirations were often stifled by the schools' failure to realise that those pupils could enter the health professions. We interviewed some of the young people involved and I remember that one person had been told, "Medicine is a bit tough. Perhaps you should consider becoming a nurse or a care assistant."

The big problem in Scotland is denigration of aspiration; it is not money or funding. If members want evidence of that, they should consider a recent social sciences research paper by the University of Kent, which examines the situation not in Scotland but in England since the introduction of tuition fees and finds no evidence of a reduction in access for people from poorer backgrounds—and that is in England, where the fees are much greater. There is no evidence that money is the important determinant. Access is about aspirations.

The Government is profligately giving to the better off. Members should remember that only 50 per cent of graduates pay the endowment. We protected graduates on poor incomes, disabled graduates and people whose aspirations had come late and who entered university as mature students, after having been independent—those people do not pay. People who completed a higher national diploma or higher national certificate course—

The Minister for Children and Early Years (Adam Ingram): Will the member give way?

Dr Simpson: I am in full flow; I will take an intervention from Mr Ingram in a minute.

People who completed their university course after completing an HNC do not pay the endowment—I could go on. We protected 50 per cent of graduates from paying the endowment. That is social justice. Such an approach encourages people to enter higher and further education and safeguards access.

If I were asked how I would spend the money that the Government is profligately giving to the better off, I would reply that I would spend it on nurses and midwives, because an incredible number of people leave nursing and midwifery courses—up to 30 per cent of participants, in some cases. People often leave such courses for reasons to do with finance and child care. We provided and increased bursaries, and that is how we should spend the money.

The SNP has agreed to cut the number of nurses and midwives that we will recruit into training programmes. SNP members may frown, but its documentation says that it will reduce the number of students in nursing and midwifery. It hopes that it will retain more of those students, but it will have to find a way of doing that. I suggest that applying the money that will be needed to abolish the graduate endowment would be one way of doing it.

Access is of fundamental importance, but the future of our universities is also important. This Government is in the business of trying to spend money twice. I was talking to my grandchildren yesterday about what they would like for Christmas. In reply, they asked me what I would like for Christmas. I said that I would like access to Santa Swinney's money tree. This profligate Government is giving money away to the better-off. If members do not believe me, they should look at what is happening.

What will this Government give to a small businessman who has two children at school, who is suffering from a thyroid condition, who has a house in band G and who is due to retire in 2011? He will get £4,600 from the freeze in council tax over the next three years, £200 from free school meals when that is introduced, £170 from free prescriptions and £4,500 from the abolition of business rates. If he happens to live in an area in which he has had to pay tolls, he will no longer have to do so. When his children grow up, he will not have to pay the graduate tax for them, either.

Let us compare that with the situation of a single mother from Fife, whose baby has complex needs and who is waiting to get out of care. What will they get? Fife Council has not allowed them to come out of hospital—they are still there, even though they are fit to come home. They will gain nothing from any of the Government's giveaways that I have mentioned. This Government is a regressive rather than a progressive Government, and the abolition of the graduate endowment tax is part of that regression.

10:57

Alex Neil (Central Scotland) (SNP): Tony Blair told us that education, education, education would

be Labour's priority. Instead, we got tuition fees, tuition fees, tuition fees and debt, debt, debt. This morning we are talking about the problem of student debt, but that pile of debt has been created over the past 10 years under Gordon Brown.

Over the past 10 years, the Labour Government has presided over the redistribution of income and wealth from those who have not to those who have, so we will not take any lessons on egalitarianism from the Labour Party. As Aileen Campbell pointed out, the irony is that every Labour MSP and every member of Brown's Cabinet benefited from not having to pay tuition fees when they were at university. They have the cheek to say that this and future generations will not get the access to free education that every one of them got under previous Labour and Conservative Governments.

Karen Whitefield represents the constituency of Airdrie, Shotts and the surrounding villages. The fact that she voted, not once but twice, to maintain tuition fees for people who cannot afford to pay them will not be forgotten at the next election, especially in the surrounding villages.

Rhona Brankin: I do not want to interrupt you in full flight, but can you tell me whether the people who voted for you will remember your manifesto promise to dump student debt?

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Alasdair Morgan): I remind members not to use the second person.

Alex Neil: We are running at 40 per cent in the opinion polls; Labour is running at 28 per cent. When we get an overall majority in the Parliament, we will be able to do all the things that we want to do in Scotland.

Mary Mulligan derides the reduction in debt that the passing of the bill will bring about. Let us consider the average student debt in Scotland. The impact of the bill will be to reduce student debt by more than 20 per cent. That is a major milestone by any standard and will be good not just for those affected but for the whole of Scottish society.

Of course, we have the problem that only 14 or 15 per cent of people in lower income groups go to university, when the average across income groups is 48 or 49 per cent. Richard Simpson says that that has nothing to do with money. I suggest to him that he talk to the 30-odd per cent in lower income groups who would like to go to university but think that they cannot afford to. I agree that money is not the only barrier—there are many other barriers to such people going to university—but people who say that money is not one of the major barriers are living in cloud-cuckoo-land.

Talking of cloud-cuckoo-land, I will say a word or two about the Conservatives. I quote Annabel Goldie on the graduate endowment:

“The truth is that in the bill, we have a penal tax”—

a penal tax the Conservatives are going to vote to keep. She said:

“It is a thorn, which pricks and draws blood.”

That is why the Tories could not support the graduate endowment.

David McLetchie said:

“There is nothing voluntary about the graduate endowment. It is simply a tax and one that will kick in at a ludicrously low level of income.”—[*Official Report*, 31 January 2001; c 766, 756.]

However, today he is voting to keep it.

When David McLetchie was still the Conservative leader and still one of the best speakers in the Parliament—although usually on the wrong side of the argument—he said:

“At the end of the day, whether the charge is called a fee, an endowment or a tax, it is a liability.”—[*Official Report*, 22 December 2004; c 5109.]

Today, he is going to vote to keep that liability.

In the 2003 election, the Scottish Conservatives made a pledge that they retained for at least a year after. They put up a poster headed “Investing in our future”—although it turned out that Mr McLetchie didnae have one—which said:

“Scottish Conservatives will create a diverse education system which extends opportunity for all.”

There were four action items, one of which was that the Scottish Conservatives would

“abolish the £2,000 graduate tax and guarantee access to our universities and colleges purely on the basis of merit.”

That was a return to the fairy-dust days of Margaret Thatcher and John Major that Mr McLetchie described earlier.

David McLetchie: Will the member give way?

Alex Neil: I am in my last minute.

How can the Tories, along with the Tory Labour Party, betray the future generations of Scotland by voting to keep this penal tax called the graduate endowment?

11:03

Elaine Murray (Dumfries) (Lab): I ought to declare an interest—I have three children at university, all of whom would benefit from the bill. In fact, my family would be some £7,000 better off if the bill is passed. However, that will not make me vote for it. I make it clear to Mr Neil that when I went to university, the taxpayer paid for my tuition and my parents paid for my living costs. I certainly

did not have a free education in Edinburgh in the 1970s. I do not know where the myth comes from that there was some great time of universal free education. At all times, taxpayers paid, and quite often parents paid too.

Alex Neil: I know that the member went to university many years before me but, like me, as well as getting her tuition fees paid by the state, did she not receive a substantial maintenance grant?

Elaine Murray: No, Mr Neil, I did not, because both my parents were in full-time employment. I did not therefore receive much of a maintenance award.

I move to the concerns referred to by Karen Whitefield. The Finance Committee—as Mr Neil knows, because he is a member of it—had a number of concerns about the financial memorandum. In our report, we expressed particular concerns about its quality. Fortunately, the Scottish Parliament information centre produced a detailed and informative report without which it would have been extremely difficult to interpret the financial memorandum at all.

I still have concerns about the accuracy of the estimate that the cost to the Government will be £17 million, because that figure does not include the £1.95 million that was outstanding and awaiting debt recovery on 1 April this year—we presume that some of that will eventually be recovered.

The other issue that concerns me is that the graduate endowment was in operation for only three years and there is no evidence that it had reached a steady state. In 2005, 82 per cent of students who would have been liable to pay the fee in April turned out not liable because they were still in education. The following year that figure was 50 per cent, and in the year after that it was 40 per cent.

Correspondence from the bill team suggests that there could be a further £1 million per annum in liability arising from students who are studying first degree courses of six years or more, such as medical, veterinary and dental students. I still do not know how the number of students who have gone on to study second degrees—masters or PhD courses—and who will not become liable until those courses are complete is captured in that £17 million, which could turn into at least £20 million when we include debt recovery and the students who stay on in education. I am not happy, and the Finance Committee was unanimously not happy, that the margins of cost were adequately reflected in the financial memorandum.

I question whether exempting families such as mine from payment of around £7,000 is the best way to support students. Despite the fact that I or

my children might spend the £7,000 in Scotland, I question whether that would contribute to achieving the Government's overarching purpose of growing the Scottish economy in a sustained way.

Jeremy Purvis: Would the member apply that same principle to tuition costs?

Elaine Murray: I am not sure whether I completely understand the member's question.

Jeremy Purvis: Can I try again?

Elaine Murray: No, because I want to address an issue that I heard Jeremy Purvis raise on the radio in debate earlier with my colleague Richard Baker. It is a bit of a red herring to suggest that the graduate endowment should be used to fund universities. I pursued that matter at the Finance Committee. Paragraphs 23 to 25 of the financial memorandum make it clear that the graduate endowment fee is directly appropriated and releases existing budgets to meet in-year pressures. It is not earmarked for something else such as the Scottish consolidated fund; it comes in to augment end-year flexibility. That was confirmed to me at the Finance Committee meeting on 6 November by Gavin Gray.

Another red herring is the question that the cabinet secretary raised: why did the graduate endowment loan cost 31 per cent of the pound? I also asked about that at the meeting on 6 November. That 31 per cent is not a result of a bad arrangement; it is predominantly made up of a subsidy to the loan to ensure that it has a real interest rate of 0 per cent and increases only with the retail prices index. It costs 31 per cent because it is a subsidised loan, and not because it is a poor or inefficient system.

As with freezing council tax, the Government seeks to be popular and populist by giving everybody a share of the action instead of targeting money to support those who need it most, as argued by my Labour Party colleagues. The money should not be given to everybody; it should not be given to families such as mine. It should be targeted at students in need to widen access.

11:09

Hugh O'Donnell (Central Scotland) (LD): I will start my winding-up speech in this interesting and informative debate by asking a question of the SNP Government: how many different ways are there to break promises? When we look at the Government's track record, we note that it is finding more ways to break promises than the average misanthrope. Police numbers—broken promise. Affordable housing—broken promise. Class sizes, student debt, university funding—

broken promises. Now, we are at last receiving, belatedly, the Christmas present of a welcome attempt by the SNP to redress the balance.

Alex Neil: Will the member give way?

Hugh O'Donnell: Give me a couple of minutes, please.

Regrettably, on its own, this measure will make as much impact on student numbers and student debt as using a water pistol on a forest fire. That is not to say that it is a bad thing—far from it. Indeed, it formed part of the Liberal Democrat commitment on this issue.

Alex Neil: I thank the member for giving way. I did not want to interrupt his expressions of enthusiasm for the bill.

Does the member accept that this measure alone would, on average, reduce student debt by more than 20 per cent?

Hugh O'Donnell: I am quite happy to accept that. Does that surprise the member?

Alex Neil: Is that what you call a water pistol?

Hugh O'Donnell: The fact is that there is slightly less water in the pistol than there would have been if the SNP had implemented its full manifesto commitment.

Compared with the SNP's approach to its manifesto commitment, we costed not just our proposal for dealing with the graduate endowment but a panoply of measures on, for example, housing and living costs. The fact is that after a year, the average medical student in Scotland is £5,000 in debt. That is not tuition debt, but cost of living debt. We need to address that issue.

Dr Simpson: Does the member agree that, as an average junior doctor's first-year salary is £35,000, they are in an entirely appropriate position to repay their debt?

Hugh O'Donnell: From memory and from my limited experience of the income tax system, I believe that an average junior doctor will, like many of us in the Parliament, also have to pay tax at a rate of 40 per cent on some of that salary.

The bill would have minimal impact on widening access. After all, less than 50 per cent of students are liable to pay the graduate endowment fee. Indeed, BMA Scotland has said:

"Whilst we welcome the abolition of the graduate endowment fee, we fear that it will do little to address the issue of widening access to courses such as medicine".

NUS Scotland made similar comments to the Education, Lifelong Learning and Culture Committee, noting that the bill was not the complete answer. I accept that, but it at least represents a small step. I would have been much

happier to discuss the measure in the context of the SNP's manifesto commitment to abolish student debt entirely, but perhaps we will have that debate if the SNP gets round to introducing such legislation.

Rhona Brankin: Will the member give way?

Hugh O'Donnell: I think that I have taken enough interventions.

In 2003, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation found that young people from disadvantaged backgrounds are often deterred from entering full-time education. Apart from Aileen Campbell, I must be the only member in the chamber who carries student debt. I was a mature student and know exactly the kind of difficulties that such students face. I can say that £2,000 makes very little difference in the scheme of things; we need to address the cumulative effect of debt.

Students from disadvantaged backgrounds will have more personal debt because their parents are not able to provide financial support. Indeed, parental contributions to maintenance costs vary markedly by social class; about 54 per cent of students from semi-skilled and unskilled backgrounds rely on bursaries, grants and loans for additional funding. The whole issue of student funding must be addressed, not just tinkered with at the edges. Although this proposal is welcome, we have heard nothing about, for example, the introduction of grants or improvements to the bursary scheme.

With this very small step, the SNP has gone for the cheap and easy option, which we will certainly support, but this matter should not be dealt with in isolation. There is a shortfall on the SNP's commitment, and I want to see and debate its proposals for implementing its full manifesto commitment to dump the debt.

11:15

Elizabeth Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): No fewer than five of Scotland's universities are placed in the top 200 in the world. For a small nation, that is a remarkable achievement—and the universities richly deserve it for their unfailing pursuit of academic excellence and the contribution that they make to our rich social, cultural and economic heritage.

Our universities and colleges, ancient and modern, are an irreplaceable and priceless asset, and it is incumbent on all members of the Scottish Parliament to ensure that they remain so. Our universities and colleges must be capable of delivering the highest possible standards of education and intellectual challenge. Theirs is a proud history that successfully combines strong teaching and research with enterprise, creativity

and an ability to adapt to the changing needs of society.

Universities Scotland's recent claim for £168 million was undoubtedly ambitious. It was impossible for the Government to meet it in full without making punitive cuts in other spending areas, but it was a reflection of the serious predicament in which the university and college sector finds itself—we ignore their argument at our peril.

Mike Rumbles: Will the member take an intervention?

Elizabeth Smith: Not just now.

I refer in particular to the concern that top-up fees in England and the possibility of the removal of the cap on those fees means that there will no longer be a level playing field in the provision of higher education resources.

I hear the charge that university and college funding and student debt are two separate matters. Of course we could debate them separately, but it would be folly to do so. The debate that we should have is on the delivery route for a first-class higher education system that matches the needs of our students. It should be on the supply side of our tertiary education sector, not on a narrow, demand-driven policy that focuses on student numbers rather than on the quantity and quality of places that are available. Frankly, holding one debate without the other serves only to make a nonsense of the approach that we should be taking.

Mike Rumbles: Will the member take an intervention now?

Elizabeth Smith: I will not.

As many members have said, the methodology behind the bill is seriously flawed. Instead of putting money into the sector, the policy that lies behind the bill will take money out. The policy does absolutely nothing to provide a secure strategic funding base to allow our universities and colleges to plan ahead for their long-term future.

Alex Neil *rose*—

Elizabeth Smith: Before Mr Neil reaches into his wonderful supply of Tory posters again—it is nice to see that he cherishes them—I say to him that we might have been persuaded on some of the arguments. The graduate endowment needs reform. However—

Alex Neil *rose*—

Mike Rumbles: Is the member taking any interventions?

Elizabeth Smith: No. I am taking no interventions just now. The point is a serious one.

When it came to producing the evidence for the current proposals, there was not only an absence of convincing facts but no analysis to prove that the policy stands up against other policy means of achieving the same objective.

When the Government team was questioned by none other than Mr Jeremy Purvis at the Education, Lifelong Learning and Culture Committee, its response was that

“no other options have been considered”.—[*Official Report, Education, Lifelong Learning and Culture Committee, 7 November 2007; c 238.*]

I cannot speak for a Liberal interpretation of the English language, but the response was totally unsatisfactory. There is absolutely no compelling evidence that the graduate endowment is a barrier to access—a statement that the Scottish funding council also made strongly in its evidence, and which is endorsed by the fact that, in England, the number of students has increased, despite the heavier fee regime there.

Worse still, the Government seemed naively determined to base its supposition on the findings of just one report—the Rowntree report. Not only was that report commissioned in 2003, which pre-dates the introduction of the graduate endowment, but its findings were not specific to Scotland.

In its conclusions, the Rowntree report said:

“Young people from disadvantaged backgrounds are often deterred from both entering full-time education in the first place and from continuing within higher education ... because of the economic hardships they suffer, in particular debt.”

Let us assume that that is correct. What happens in Scotland? The answer is that the number of applicants from the most deprived fifth of the Scottish student population actually increased. The argument is not persuasive.

I hear the Government's charge that we are somehow traitors to the principle of restoring free education. It can call us traitors if it will—

Mike Rumbles: Traitors!

Elizabeth Smith: I say to Mr Rumbles that however much that principle might be a quick fix for winning votes, it is no longer sustainable for the delivery of modern-day public services—in exactly the same way as we cannot fund a health service entirely from the public purse. Perhaps our policy is less populist, but it is firmly in tune with reality and the needs of modern Scotland.

If the Government is keen to listen to what Andrew Cubie has to say, perhaps we can finish with a quotation from him:

“Each and every Scottish university is equal to the challenge of competition but will not be able to compete without support well beyond that offered by the Scottish Government”.

That is why the bill must be opposed.

11:20

Richard Baker (North East Scotland) (Lab): Today, Parliament has a choice: it can proceed with the Government's bill, which will do nothing to improve higher education in Scotland, or it can back the committee's findings, which mean that the Parliament can vote for greater investment in higher education and funding for students while they study and when they need it. We will vote for better bursaries for students to help them get to university and to enable them to stay there and succeed. Voting against those recommendations will not serve students or higher education in Scotland.

The debate has been polarised between members who realise the strength of their argument and those who support the bill, which is clearly motivated by political expediency rather than a real desire to widen access to higher education. The committee found no evidence that abolishing the graduate endowment would help to widen access—a point that Karen Whitefield and others have made eloquently. Indeed, Jeremy Purvis was diligent and effective at the committee in taking apart the Government's argument that the endowment has been a deterrent to participation. He also took apart the report to which Mr O'Donnell referred. That is why it is surprising that he backs the Government's position.

Mike Rumbles: Will Richard Baker confirm that the Labour Party's position is simply to tax students for attending university? Is that the case?

Richard Baker: Mr Rumbles and I have often been in agreement recently, but on that we are not agreed at all. He misrepresents my party's position entirely and he will find nothing in the committee's report that links the retention of the endowment to tuition and maintenance costs.

Jeremy Purvis: Will Richard Baker give way?

Richard Baker: I have answered the question clearly. We will have a little less mischief on the issue and a little less misrepresentation of our position from Mr Purvis. I agree with him that we need the far wider measures that his amendment mentions, but that is not sufficient and we cannot accept lip service to the wider measures that are required. We agree—as do the Conservatives—that there should be a much broader review of higher education and student funding, but why pre-empt such wider measures with a first step that will help neither students nor universities?

It is no surprise that scrapping the endowment will have no impact on encouraging more people from poorer backgrounds to study because it is not a charge on students, as it has been portrayed as being. It is a contribution that is made by graduates when they are in work and benefiting

from the education that they received. Alex Neil and others fail to recognise that half of students do not become eligible to pay it—I point out to Mr O'Donnell that that also applies to mature students.

Abolition of the graduate endowment is not aimed at helping students; it is a measure that the SNP has calculated will help it politically. We prefer to help students. The endowment was introduced to enable the provision of young students bursaries.

Alex Neil: Does Richard Baker agree that the imposition of the graduate endowment raises the average debt by 20 per cent and that that is a major deterrent to people going to university?

Richard Baker: I do not agree with any of that. What will raise debt is if students get into credit card debt because they do not have enough money—through bursaries, for example—to live on while they study. Believe me—because I know—credit card debt is far more punitive than any constructive system of graduate repayment that we proposed.

Over the previous parliamentary session, bursaries and the number of students who could receive them increased substantially—19,000 students now qualify for a full bursary. In contrast, the Scottish Government, while making its costly commitment on the endowment, has agreed to raise the young students bursary only by the rate of inflation. Continuing to invest income from the endowment in bursaries would mean substantially more generous support, particularly for students from poorer backgrounds.

The Scottish Government's failure to produce such proposals means that the poorest students in Scotland now receive about £2,000 less support every year than their colleagues in England. Even with the previous increases in bursaries, drop-out rates in Scotland are higher than those in other parts of the UK, particularly at universities that have a strong record of attracting students from poorer backgrounds. The proposed abolition of the endowment is a perverse priority, whereas giving students extra support while they study could make the difference between dropping out and successfully completing their degree.

Student organisations have made their views on the graduate endowment clear. They have also made their views on student hardship clear—and that is something on which we have clear proposals while the Government has none. Students have told us about those who struggle financially and get into credit card debt. That debt creates real problems, as the interest rates are far more punitive than those for loan and endowment repayments combined, which might be about £9 a month once someone is earning £15,000.

If we asked students who are struggling financially now, whose studies are being affected now, and who might never become liable for the endowment in any event, whether they would prefer to be let off paying off the endowment, which they pay once they are in work and benefiting from their education, or to have an extra £1,000 bursary now, when they badly need it, the answer would be clear. Abolition of the endowment will do nothing to help students from poorer backgrounds, who should be the priority. It will not give one penny more to one more student while they are studying.

As the committee has established, the paucity of the funding settlement for universities is also relevant to the debate. That was highlighted by Rhona Brankin and Murdo Fraser. Students in Scotland want to study in well-resourced institutions that are competing internationally, but that has been put at risk by the SNP, which has introduced a funding cut for universities next year. That is a £20 million funding gap, we are told by Universities Scotland.

The unfortunate irony is that the funding settlement was announced by John Swinney, who argued in January 2004 that giving a

“funding advantage to universities south of the border”

would be followed by

“a draining of Scotland's academic resources and Scotland's universities put to the financial sword.”

It is the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth's budget settlement that means that, for the first time, a 5 per cent funding gap will emerge between our universities and English institutions. That is a bitter irony indeed.

It is more than ironic that the Labour party is being accused of not doing the right thing for Scotland's students today—and not just because we are doing the right thing. The accusation is remarkable also because it comes from a party that said again and again during the election campaign that it would end not just the endowment but all loan repayments by graduates.

Abolishing the endowment gives students a fraction of what was promised to them. The SNP says that graduate debt is the problem, but it is scrapping only £2,000 of what it says is graduates' £11,000 average debt. For graduates, it is like expecting to get a PlayStation 3 as a Christmas present, only to unwrap it and find socks. A clear manifesto pledge has been dumped; a massive promise has been broken. The student community vilifies the SNP for abusing the trust of so many of its number, who cannot take at face value anything the SNP says ever again. I say that it should not take the SNP at face value on this issue. The abolition of the graduate endowment is not a measure to widen access to university; it is a

fig leaf for the SNP's failure to adhere to its manifesto promise.

I can tell Christina McKelvie that I have been consistent: I supported the endowment as president of the National Union of Students Scotland and, eight years later, I am supporting it today. It took the SNP eight months to break its promise to students. In response to what Alex Neil said, I was going to raise some points about his manifesto, but I cannot find a copy—presumably he has been going around gathering up the remaining copies to destroy them, so that we cannot refer to it.

The bill represents another broken promise—a promise to students broken. Presiding Officer, you shall know this Government by the trail of broken promises. The bill is not about helping poorer students; it is about the political posturing of the SNP. The Parliament should have no truck with it. We should reject this flawed bill and agree with the recommendations in the committee's report, which would make a real and positive difference to higher education in Scotland.

11:29

The Minister for Children and Early Years (Adam Ingram): After the wide-ranging debate that we have just had, it is important, in summing up, for me to get back to the basic intentions of the bill. Let us consider the facts: the fact that abolition of the graduate endowment fee would immediately benefit 50,000 students by allowing them to enter the workforce without an unnecessary, state-sponsored debt burden; the fact that the current policy continues to fail them and their hard-working families; and the fact that the graduate endowment fee is a waste of every taxpayer's money.

Rhona Brankin: Will the minister take an intervention?

Adam Ingram: Not at the moment. I want to make some progress.

The proposal to abolish the endowment is our first step towards a truly free higher education system. We have set out a wide range of measures that will see us improve support for part-time students and extend bursaries as part of our commitment to remove student loans completely. The combination of all those policies will ensure that access to higher education is based on the ability to learn, not the ability to pay.

Dr Simpson: Will the minister take an intervention?

Murdo Fraser: Will the minister take an intervention?

Adam Ingram: Not at the moment. I will answer the questions on our plans for our remaining

manifesto commitments. Not only have we proposed to invest an additional £120 million in student support over three years but, as we said when our programme for government was published in September, we will consult on the other aspects of our manifesto commitments next year. We have been consistent on that from day one.

Richard Baker: Will the minister take an intervention?

Adam Ingram: I will not take an intervention at the moment.

Richard Baker: I am not surprised.

Adam Ingram: In 2001, I opposed the imposition of this unfair fee on our graduates. More than six years later, it is clear that the policy has failed. The evidence is clear and incontrovertible. It has not raised the income that it was claimed it would raise. It has not widened access and the levels of bursary support have been maintained without requiring the income from the endowment. All the endowment has done is place an unnecessary burden on our graduates and created an unnecessary barrier to those who might consider applying to university.

Abolition of the graduate endowment fee is therefore not only an entirely just and justifiable measure but it has wide public support. Even its architect, Andrew Cubie, who a number of members have mentioned, said that he does "not grieve" at its passing.

Rhona Brankin: Will the member take an intervention?

Adam Ingram: I want to finish quoting Mr Cubie. He said:

"The Scottish Government, after all, has helpfully committed to substituting individual graduate contributions to the fund by public contribution—ie, from taxpayers. The target of our original support is, therefore, still addressed."

Given the evidence and the balance of informed opinion in favour of abolition, I find it astonishing that Labour and Conservative members had the temerity to vote against the principles of the bill in committee and have carried that opposition into the chamber today.

Rhona Brankin: Is the minister brave enough to take an intervention yet?

Adam Ingram: Let me say what I think of the Labour Party's approach. There must be many former and current Labour Party supporters who are wondering why Labour members here have turned their back on the principle of free education from which many of them have benefited so much.

Richard Baker covers his embarrassment by claiming that the cash raised by the fee is needed to boost bursaries for the poorest students and to

give a hand-out to the hard-up universities. I remind members that the fee raises a net £17 million, which pales into insignificance compared with the £530 million that this Government will be spending on student support in year 3 of the spending review period. It is a mere drop in the bucket of the billions that we are spending on the higher education sector every year.

Rhona Brankin: I spoke to Andrew Cubie last night. He is very concerned about the selective quoting that ministers are going in for. He agrees with the principle of a graduate contribution and is extremely upset that £17 million has been taken out of the higher education budget.

Adam Ingram: Why, then, did he make the comments that I quoted in his article in *The Scotsman*?

I will return to my critique of the Labour Party's position. We can dismiss the arguments that Richard Baker put forward, especially when Labour's track record is so readily to hand. I think that the reason for its position relates to the prevalence within Labour of an attitude that anyone who can afford to go to university is fair game. I recall John Prescott justifying the introduction of tuition fees south of the border by asking why a bus driver should be asked to subsidise a lawyer's education. It clearly had not occurred to him that the lawyer in question could be the bus driver's son or daughter. Alternatively, perhaps the motivation behind Labour's position is even simpler and uglier: political spite born out of the party's loss of power and the position that Labour members had come to see as theirs as of right.

What are we to make of the curious case of Conservative recanting? As Fiona Hyslop pointed out in her opening speech, people who were vociferous opponents of the graduate endowment six years ago have turned into some of its most steadfast supporters. Try as I might, I cannot detect any principled reason for the U-turn and Conservatives' desire to remove the student-support fig leaf from a back-end tuition fee. I suspect that coming into line with David Cameron's acceptance of tuition fees down south has much to do with it. So much for wrapping themselves in the saltire—nature will out; they cannot resist those tattered old union flags, stained or not.

The bill is about reducing the debt burden for young people and the fear of debt, which puts off students from less-well-off backgrounds. Richard Simpson was incorrect: the graduate endowment is not means tested. Students are not exempted from paying it on the ground of income. That gives the fee a particularly menacing edge. I note that Jeremy Purvis described it as a poll tax on graduates.

Jeremy Purvis: If I may clarify, my point is that if, as the Labour Party and the Conservatives are proposing, part of the funds that are raised are no longer ring fenced for student support but, instead, go straight to universities, it would become a poll tax on graduates.

Adam Ingram: I thank Jeremy Purvis for clarifying his position. As I said, we are giving careful consideration to his amendment.

It is disappointing that, in light of all the evidence and the wide support from across the higher education sector, student bodies, unions and the public at large, some members of the Education, Lifelong Learning and Culture Committee still choose to defend the maintenance of the debt burden on students. Not only that, they want to turn it into a backdoor tuition fee, which is what we always knew the graduate endowment was. The majority of people who have provided evidence to the committee and responded to our consultation supported the intentions of the bill. It is disappointing that the committee failed to recognise that and decided, on a casting vote, to reject the benefits that this bill will clearly bring to Scottish graduates and their hard-working families.

The failure of the graduate endowment fee is clear, as is the need to abolish it. Therefore, I commend the bill to Parliament.

Question Time

SCOTTISH EXECUTIVE

General Questions

11:39

Affordable Housing

1. Hugh O'Donnell (Central Scotland) (LD): To ask the Scottish Executive what plans it has for expenditure on affordable housing over the period of the current spending review. (S3O-1720)

The Minister for Communities and Sport (Stewart Maxwell): The expenditure plans for the current spending review period, which is 2005 to 2008, were set by the previous Administration in the 2004 spending review. Following the 2007 spending review, the Government intends to invest more than £1.5 billion in affordable housing from 2008 to 2011, which is 19 per cent more than the previous Administration planned to invest in 2005 to 2008.

Hugh O'Donnell: The minister has declined to set a target for the number of affordable homes and the number of social rented homes that will be built in the next three years. As far as I can see, he has preferred to criticise the target of 30,000 homes that housing organisations have proposed, which he supported in a parliamentary motion in February, and which is based on the research that is being done on housing need. Will he explain why the target of 30,000 homes was attractive when he was in opposition but is now flawed? Will he give a firm commitment and date to set out the Government's targets for an affordable housing supply against which its ambitions can be judged?

Stewart Maxwell: I did not answer the question that Hugh O'Donnell accuses me of not answering because he did not ask that question. I answered the question that he lodged, rather than the question that he thinks that he lodged.

As for the campaign for 30,000 social rented houses, Hugh O'Donnell will remember that we published in June the Scottish housing market review, which analysed in depth the Scottish housing market and its needs in the future. That provides new and detailed evidence. The information that we have produced since then has been based on detailed research. That is why I support the current position rather than that which is based on a motion and a campaign from several years ago.

Dave Thompson (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): Does the minister agree that Highland Council is severely disadvantaged by the

Westminster Government's refusal to write off its £160 million of housing debt, following the democratic vote of Highland housing tenants to reject the privatisation of Highland housing stock? Will he continue to press Westminster to write off the housing debt of all Scottish councils, so that more social rented housing can be built?

Stewart Maxwell: The member may be aware that the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth, John Swinney, has written to the Treasury about the matter but, as far as I am aware, we await a response. We agree absolutely that it is unfair that some councils were bribed to transfer their houses out of council control, whereas other council areas, in which tenants used their democratic right to reject that bribe, have been disadvantaged. We will continue to press the United Kingdom Government, because we agree that the situation is unfair.

Sudden Oak Death

2. Jamie McGrigor (Highlands and Islands) (Con): To ask the Scottish Executive what action it is taking to prevent the spread of sudden oak death. (S3O-1674)

The Minister for Environment (Michael Russell): Scottish Government inspectors have worked closely with the sites where *Phytophthora ramorum* has been found to manage the outbreaks. Action has included the continuing provision of advice on good hygiene practice and controls to minimise the risk of the disease spreading; overseeing the removal and destruction of infected plants and susceptible host plants within 2m; monitoring the sites to identify any further infection; and conducting surveillance of a 3km zone around each site. The Scottish Government is also conducting a wider survey of established specialist gardens, which will include those that are in the vicinity of the outbreak sites.

Jamie McGrigor: Does the minister acknowledge that the discovery of the disease at Arduaine and Inverewe gardens was due to the vigilance of National Trust for Scotland staff? Will he assure me that the Scottish Government will do all in its power to ensure that the disease, which is lethal to most shrubs and has been called the foot-and-mouth disease of the plant world, is not allowed to take hold in Scotland, not least because of the economic importance of the horticultural and garden tourism sectors and of the plant nursery sector, which is enormous? Might it be necessary to ban imports from infected areas or countries and to have a certificate system to show that plants have a clean bill of health?

Michael Russell: I pay tribute to those who are constantly vigilant—not only staff in the gardens that Jamie McGrigor mentioned, but Scottish Government inspectors.

Jamie McGrigor may wish to note that since the first finding of the disease in Scotland in May 2002, the Scottish Government has conducted nearly 15,000 inspections of host horticultural plants. Inspectors have made 2,344 visits to premises and have increased surveillance. Since 2002, there have been 41 outbreaks of the disease at 30 sites in Scotland. There were no outbreaks in 2006, but there have been nine outbreaks in 2007. We are being vigilant. We work within the European context and we are determined that the disease will not spread.

NHS Borders

3. Christine Grahame (South of Scotland) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Executive when it last spoke to NHS Borders and what issues were discussed. (S3O-1693)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing (Nicola Sturgeon): I meet all chairs of national health service boards monthly, and the Minister for Public Health chaired the annual review of NHS Borders on 24 September. In addition, Scottish Government officials regularly meet NHS Borders representatives to discuss a wide range of issues.

Christine Grahame: The cabinet secretary will be aware of the Parkinson's Disease Society's calls for specialist Parkinson's disease nurses in the NHS Borders area and elsewhere. Recently, I met senior health board managers, who, as a consequence, are considering training and appointing a neurological specialist nurse who would offer specific advice and support to people with Parkinson's disease, multiple sclerosis or motor neurone disease. Will the cabinet secretary discuss that issue at her next meeting with NHS Borders, so that we can move forward and have a neurological specialist nurse for the region?

Nicola Sturgeon: I thank Christine Grahame for that important question.

I recognise the important work that Parkinson's disease specialist nurses do in the areas in which they are in place. NHS Borders does not have a Parkinson's disease specialist nurse, although it has a link nurse with a special interest in Parkinson's disease. That nurse has led and developed services across NHS Borders.

Christine Grahame highlighted the fact that the question whether to have a range of nurse specialists who cover specific conditions—multiple sclerosis, motor neurone disease or Parkinson's disease, for example—or to develop a more generic post is an issue for smaller NHS boards in particular. NHS Borders is looking to explore with the Neurological Alliance of Scotland the possibility of training and appointing a nurse with a special interest in neurology. When I next meet

NHS Borders representatives, I will be more than happy to inquire what progress NHS Borders is making on the matter and to report back to the member.

Jeremy Purvis (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD): The cabinet secretary will be aware of the concerns of NHS Borders about the NHS Scotland national resource allocation committee's report on the review of the Arbutnott formula, which could lead to an £11.7 million differential in investment. That would be a catastrophic difference in the funding that is available to NHS Borders. What is the timing for the cabinet secretary's decision on that report? Is she prepared to meet me, other interested members and the chair of NHS Borders to discuss future funding for the area?

Nicola Sturgeon: As I said, I regularly meet the chair of NHS Borders, and I would be more than happy to meet Jeremy Purvis to discuss the issues further. Obviously, all NHS boards that are in the category that NHS Borders is in are concerned to know the outcome of the report, which I have previously said that I am considering. The Health and Sport Committee has been helpful in providing input in that context, and all NHS boards have an opportunity to provide input. I will decide on the implementation or otherwise of the report early in the new year.

The member will want to note two further matters. If I decide to implement the report, it will not take effect in the next financial year; the earliest that it could take effect would be in the financial year following that.

The second important point, which I have been keen to stress throughout the discussion, is that any implementation would be on a phased basis, and no NHS board will receive less funding than it currently receives. That is an important reassurance to give.

Farming Communities (Borders)

4. John Lamont (Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): To ask the Scottish Executive what it is doing to support farming communities in the Borders. (S3O-1675)

The Minister for Environment (Michael Russell): The Scottish Government—which is often represented on such matters in the person of my friend Mr Lochhead, whom members will note is back from his highly successful negotiations in Brussels—is committed to helping all sectors of rural Scotland to thrive. Direct financial support is provided to farming businesses and community groups in the Borders through a variety of publicly funded measures. We aim to inject some £1.6 billion into rural areas over the seven-year period of the Scotland rural development programme,

and we expect that farming communities will particularly benefit from the measures that are directed towards promoting the competitiveness of agriculture, the quality of life in rural areas and diversification of the rural economy.

John Lamont: The minister will be aware that farmers in the Borders, as elsewhere, remain deeply unhappy about the burden of regulation that they face, not least the number of inspections from the Government's agencies. Can he provide an update on the Government's progress towards meeting its manifesto commitment to establish pilot schemes for single farm visits?

Michael Russell: I am pleased to do so. The single Scottish rural delivery service, which I have the pleasure of overseeing, is being developed and will be launched in 2008. It will undoubtedly make the process of visits by inspectors and officials of various types easier to cope with, because a range of Government agencies will deliver through a single client manager. We are driving the scheme forward with the co-operation of all the staff involved. I am sure that people in the area that Mr Lamont represents will welcome the scheme when it is launched, probably at the Royal Highland show next year.

Health Inequalities

5. Karen Whitefield (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what action it is taking to address inequalities in health. (S30-1768)

The Minister for Public Health (Shona Robison): "Better Health, Better Care" sets out the Scottish Government's key priority of tackling health inequality. We are already providing the keep well programme, which anticipates preventable ill health by strengthening and enhancing primary care services in the most deprived areas of Scotland. The ministerial task force on health inequalities, which I chair, is looking at the wider factors underlying health inequalities and will identify further measures and improvements when it reports in May next year.

Karen Whitefield: Is the minister aware that the Scottish public health observatory community health profile has found that diabetes-related admissions in my constituency of Airdrie and Shotts are up to 70 per cent above the Scottish average? Does she agree that health spending in areas with the poorest health outcomes must be targeted at primary health care? Can she assure me that the uplift for NHS Lanarkshire will guarantee investment in retinopathy screening and services that identify and treat heart disease and poor diabetes control?

Shona Robison: I assure the member that the Government takes health improvement and health

inequalities very seriously. That was reflected in the budget, with an overall investment of more than £100 million extra a year in health improvement and better public health, all of which will help Karen Whitefield's constituents. There will also be £12.5 million a year to strengthen primary health care services in the most deprived areas. All of that adds up to a significant investment in the services to which Karen Whitefield refers.

Mary Scanlon (Highlands and Islands) (Con): Given the significant level of expenditure by local authorities on mental health, drug and alcohol treatment and care of the elderly to address health inequalities, when will the outcome agreements with councils be available for MSPs to scrutinise?

Shona Robison: Single outcome agreements with individual local authorities will be developed over the coming few months. The important point to remember is that local authorities and health boards are jointly accountable for the delivery of many services in mental health and the other areas that Mary Scanlon mentioned, which is crucial. We will ensure that the services that are delivered on the ground are adequate to meet the needs and challenges of the 21st century. For the first time, there are four health improvement, efficiency, access and treatment targets that are directly relevant to mental health services. That is a huge improvement on the previous position and will lead to continued improvement in mental health services on the ground across Scotland.

Alex Neil (Central Scotland) (SNP): I draw the minister's attention to the level of health inequalities in Lanarkshire, which is second only to that in Glasgow. I seek an assurance that, when the options for the future of Monklands accident and emergency department are reviewed, the impact on inequalities will be a key deciding factor in how we go about reversing Labour's daft decision to close Monklands A and E.

Shona Robison: One of the critical reasons for keeping the A and E department open at Monklands was that the department and the hospital serve a highly deprived area and communities. The member makes an important point. The impact on health inequalities will be a key consideration for the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing.

National Health Service (VAT)

6. Ian McKee (Lothians) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what the cost to the national health service was of VAT paid in connection with the employment of agency staff in the latest year for which figures are available. (S30-1698)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing (Nicola Sturgeon): The Scottish Government does not

hold centrally the cost of VAT paid in connection with the employment of agency staff.

Ian McKee: I thank the cabinet secretary for her reply. Is she aware that the Scottish public sector VAT task force—an organisation that was established by NHS senior management—has established that a recent change in practice by Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs means that health boards can no longer claim exemption from VAT on services that are provided by agency doctors and members of professions allied to medicine—an exemption that is granted on services that are provided by agency nurses? That could cost NHS Scotland over £1 million a year—money that could be spent on other services. Will the cabinet secretary take that up with the Chancellor of the Exchequer as a matter of urgency?

Nicola Sturgeon: I thank Ian McKee for that question and note his interest in the issue. He is right to say that HMRC issued revised guidance in January 2007. The position is that NHS bodies are allowed to reclaim VAT on agency nursing and clerical staff under the contracting-out rules, but the recovery of VAT paid on other staff provided by agencies—such as other types of medical personnel, ancillary staff or people working in finance—is not allowed. That is, of course, a matter for HMRC. I am happy to write to that agency to ask about the rationale behind its policy, although I hope that the answer does not get lost in the post. I am also happy to take up the matter with the Chancellor of the Exchequer.

Alcohol Consumption (Young People)

7. Bill Kidd (Glasgow) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government how it intends to target resources and services for raising awareness of the effects of alcohol consumption among young people and for providing rehabilitation services for them. (S30-1695)

The Minister for Public Health (Shona Robison): The Scottish Government provides resources to alcohol and drug action teams, which make decisions on allocations to services, including rehabilitation services, based on local circumstances and identified need.

The Scottish Government has run alcohol awareness-raising campaigns, including the first ever alcohol awareness week in October of this year, which was aimed at increasing understanding of units and the promotion of responsible drinking.

Bill Kidd: I thank the minister for that answer. I am sure that everyone will agree that the first alcohol awareness week was a great success, and that changing people's attitudes to drinking is fundamental to tackling the growing problem—as

was highlighted in this week's report from the Scottish Health Action on Alcohol Problems group. Will the minister consider supporting an alcohol awareness week that is specifically targeted at young people?

Shona Robison: Scotland's first ever alcohol awareness week was a truly groundbreaking initiative that received excellent media coverage. We are happy to consider targeting future campaigns at young people, but we also need to recognise that far too many Scots across all age groups drink far too much. We want a culture change in our relationship with alcohol in Scotland, and that is why we will bring forward a draft strategy for consultation in spring next year. That will be assisted by the £85 million boost in the budget over three years to help tackle alcohol misuse.

Dr Richard Simpson (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): Will the Minister for Public Health join me in welcoming the fact that since the advertising arrangements were changed to prohibit the advertising of alcohol in a number of ways, the number of young people—and I mean very young people—who are not drinking has risen quite considerably, by some 12 per cent? Will she consider following up on the motion that Bill Wilson lodged calling for further pilots and work in universities and colleges on the establishment of normative data, and for the promotion of that data, which encourages people to recognise that the majority of people do not abuse alcohol, rather than using the punitive approach that has been taken up until now?

Shona Robison: I hear what Richard Simpson says. He makes the point that, particularly when we educate young people about substance misuse, we need to ensure that we make the point that the vast majority of young people do not behave in that manner and we need to reinforce good behaviour. However, we need to recognise that Scotland has a particularly unhealthy relationship with alcohol, which filters through to the behaviour of young people in the next generation. It is therefore the responsibility of us all to challenge the public about their drinking. Many people do not recognise that they have a problem. They think that it is someone else's problem and responsibility. We need to ensure that we change that culture and attitude so that the next generation grows up in a different Scotland that has a healthier relationship with alcohol.

First Minister's Question Time

12:00

Engagements

1. Ms Wendy Alexander (Paisley North) (Lab): To ask the First Minister what engagements he has planned for the rest of the day. (S3F-376)

The First Minister (Alex Salmond): Presiding Officer, I am sure that everyone in the chamber will want to join me in expressing condolences to the families of those who were affected by the tragic events of last night on the River Clyde. It is with great regret that I can tell the Parliament that Clyde coastguard has confirmed that, as at an hour ago, the three missing crew have not been found. The search and rescue operation continues. However, it is possible that, given conditions and the limited hope of success, the operation may be scaled down shortly.

It is understood that the one survivor, who was rescued yesterday, is in a stable condition and was transferred to the Western infirmary in Glasgow. The Maritime and Coastguard Agency headquarters is preparing an official update for me and is in touch with my officials. I will be made aware of any further updates as they occur.

In answer to Wendy Alexander's question, later today I will have meetings to take forward the Government's programme for Scotland.

Ms Alexander: I thank the First Minister for his answer. Everyone in the chamber will want to associate themselves with the sentiments that he expressed. [*Applause.*]

It is the season of good will. Regardless of how the First Minister's Government may have mishandled the matter, let me say what he cannot. Personally, I support Donald Trump's application. We in this part of the chamber are determined to keep a proper sense of perspective. We want to send a signal that Scotland is open for business, but we must not send a signal that some are more equal than others.

First Minister, last week you refused to make a statement to the Parliament about Mr Trump's application, claiming that you were a mere constituency MSP. Yet, today, as First Minister, you convened a hastily arranged press conference. Following your meeting with Mr Trump's representatives, why did you call the chief planner—bypassing the rest of the planning directorate—to secure for them a meeting with the chief planner the following morning? Do you still maintain that that was merely the routine action of a constituency MSP, or was it a misuse of the position of First Minister?

The First Minister: First, on the press conference, Mr John Swinney has today answered in record time the 54 parliamentary questions that were lodged by MSPs. I look forward to Wendy Alexander answering one question on the finances of her leadership campaign. [*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson): Order.

The First Minister: I am sure that, in the interests of this season of good will and the fairness and judiciousness that must come, Wendy Alexander will want to mention the letter from the permanent secretary, which makes it clear, first, that no civil servant has acted with anything other than total propriety and, secondly, that no civil servant has been asked to do anything improper. Does she now accept that ministers and civil servants have acted with total propriety?

The Presiding Officer: Ms Alexander, can we have questions through the chair, please?

Ms Alexander: I have here the letter from the permanent secretary, in which he makes it crystal clear that

"Complaints about Ministerial conduct are a matter for him."

By "him", he refers to the First Minister.

I repeat the central question. How many other constituency MSPs can call the chief planner directly, bypassing the planning directorate, and secure a meeting for developers and a call-in within 24 hours?

The First Minister: Wendy Alexander quotes the permanent secretary. He wrote that he has had

"unambiguous confirmation from the Chief Planner that he has, at no time, been instructed by any party to act improperly."

If Wendy Alexander reads the statement from John Swinney, she will find that the chief planner was once requested to participate in a discussion with the Trump Organization. The date was January 2006, the First Minister was Jack McConnell, and the Deputy First Minister was Nicol Stephen.

Ms Alexander: As others have pointed out, there was no live application at that time. [*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Order.

Ms Alexander: I return to the question whether it is routine for a constituency MSP to bypass the planning directorate, go to the chief planner, and secure a meeting for developers in 12 hours and a call-in within 24 hours. I ask that because I want also to know why Mr Salmond's Government has been refusing since August—a period of more than three months—to meet the developers that

are proposing a £1.2 billion development to regenerate the Rosyth naval dockyard.

The First Minister: I am just being told that the chief planner is meeting those developers, as he meets other developers in Scotland, which is also part—

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): Six months later.

The Presiding Officer: Order.

The First Minister: Wendy Alexander should, just occasionally, check her facts before she asks a question.

I am looking at the ministerial code. Not only in the MSP code of conduct are MSPs encouraged to represent their constituents, but the ministerial code says that, on planning decisions, ministers may write to ministers, may advocate a point of view and may lead deputations—I am sure that Duncan McNeil has led a few deputations in his time. All those things are what effective MSPs do. Wendy Alexander should accept that, as detailed in the letter from the permanent secretary, no official in the Government has acted with anything other than total propriety and that no official has been asked to do anything improper. Will she now accept the words of the permanent secretary?

Ms Alexander: The First Minister knows that there is concern in planning circles about the integrity of Scotland's planning system and whether it has been brought into question. It is completely without precedent for the Royal Town Planning Institute to write to ministers to express concern about the manner in which a case has been handled. This is not simply a political issue; it has become a professional issue.

It is widely believed in planning circles that undue pressure has been brought to bear on the Government's chief planner. Does the First Minister believe that Jim Mackinnon, as chief planner, at any stage came under any undue pressure regarding the application?

The First Minister: I am sorry that, in this season of good will, Wendy Alexander has taken to casting aspersions on Government officials as well as Government ministers.

George Foulkes (Lothians) (Lab): Answer the question.

The Presiding Officer: George Foulkes, I ask you to desist.

The First Minister: Wendy Alexander has clearly not read the permanent secretary's letter, so I will read it to her again. The permanent secretary says:

"I have also received unambiguous confirmation from the Chief Planner that he has, at no time, been instructed by any party to act improperly."

That is a comprehensive answer to Wendy Alexander's question.

On the overall context, I was delighted to see that, in response to an opinion poll in the *Sunday Herald* showing support for independence for Scotland surging by 15 per cent, one of Wendy Alexander's campaign managers was able to say:

"The people of Scotland have consistently shown that they are against independence. The SNP must listen to those views and concentrate on the things that really matter to Scots, like tackling crime".

Jackie Baillie should watch what she wishes for at Christmas—that might just happen in the new year.

Secretary of State for Scotland (Meetings)

2. Annabel Goldie (West of Scotland) (Con):

To ask the First Minister when he will next meet the Secretary of State for Scotland. (S3F-377)

The First Minister (Alex Salmond): I will meet the secretary of state in late January to discuss taking forward the recommendations of the Gould report.

Annabel Goldie: The First Minister, who is not a man to shun publicity, has recently been revelling in his political game with Westminster of anything you can do, I can do better—[*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Order.

Annabel Goldie: Bus operators in England were helped with their fuel bills by an increase in their fuel duty rebate last October, and another increase is likely in April. Why has the First Minister refused to give such help to bus operators in Scotland?

The First Minister: As Annabel Goldie well knows, the Government is giving substantial support to the bus industry in Scotland. We must consider extremely carefully the current high fuel prices and what they are doing to the competitive position not just of the bus industry and public transport, but of the haulage industry and rural areas of Scotland. That is why I was delighted to meet the Road Haulage Association yesterday.

The Government will make the strongest representations about what high fuel prices are doing to the competitive position of the Scottish economy. Given the £3 billion of additional Scottish oil revenues, above what was expected in the budget, that are pouring into the London Exchequer, I am sure that all members will want to protect the competitive position of the transport industry in Scotland.

Annabel Goldie: Last week, I said that ignorance was not a condition with which I associated the First Minister. However, having listened to the First Minister's answer I realise that I inadvertently misled the Parliament—[*Laughter.*]

The Presiding Officer: Order.

Annabel Goldie: I was wrong and I apologise.

It is sterile—indeed, it is hypocritical—of the First Minister and his party to bleat about Westminster and how they want more powers, when the First Minister is not even prepared to use the powers that he has. The reality is that the First Minister's refusal to act will put Scottish bus operators at a £7 million disadvantage, with the threat of higher fares to follow—so much for the busman's friend.

The sad truth about the First Minister has been revealed. Far from being a latter-day Celtic Santa Claus, the First Minister is Ebenezer Scrooge in a kilt.

The First Minister: I am not the First Minister who was criticised for his varieties of kilt wearing, if I remember correctly.

I do not claim to be Santa Claus, but I can tell Annabel Goldie that the people of Scotland salute what the Government has been doing over the course of the year—not just at Christmas. As she well remembers, the Government will abolish prescription charges in this session of Parliament. Today is no-toll day, when we will abolish the tolls on the Forth and Tay bridges. It is a pity that Annabel Goldie has made an unholy alliance with the Labour Party to try to keep fees for education in Scotland, but we will abolish fees. However, I am sure that we will have her support to remove the rates burden from small business in Scotland, including businesses in the transport industry—[*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Order.

The First Minister: On top of that, we have the freeze on council tax and yesterday we had John Swinney's magnificent announcement that, after years of prevarication, we will have a new crossing over the Forth, which will secure Scotland's transport infrastructure.

Cabinet (Meetings)

3. Nicol Stephen (Aberdeen South) (LD): To ask the First Minister what issues will be discussed at the next meeting of the Cabinet. (S3F-378)

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

Nicol Stephen: In June, the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing said that she had a

presumption against the centralisation of health services. She said that every proposal from health boards would be subject to rigorous independent scrutiny. Why was there no such scrutiny when she made the decision to end cleft palate surgery in Aberdeen and to centralise the service?

The First Minister: The decision was made in the interests of children across Scotland. Such decisions are always difficult, but the decision in question was made on the recommendation of the best advice available, as ministers do.

Nicol Stephen: Why is it that when health boards want to close something, the health secretary says that there must be independent scrutiny of the proposals, but when she closes something, there is none of that?

Now the First Minister's Government is gearing up to centralise cancer services for children and neurosurgery. Of the 36 medical specialties in Aberdeen, three are already under threat. NHS Grampian says that centralisation of neurosurgery could cost lives. The Government has taken cleft palate surgery away from Aberdeen, against the advice of the local health board. Does the First Minister support the removal from Aberdeen of neurosurgery and cancer services for children, or will he put a stop to his Government's piece-by-piece centralisation?

The First Minister: Those things will be properly considered and announcements will be made at the time. I do not think that the situation will be helped by scaremongering from Nicol Stephen. [*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Order.

The First Minister: I suspect that what Nicol Stephen has been accused of this week in the north-east of Scotland accounts for the change in emphasis of his questioning today. He has been accused—not by me, but by the Aberdeen *Evening Express*—not just of scaremongering, but of “gutter politics”, scoring “cheap political points” and slinging mud. An epic editorial said:

“Mr Stephen is hardly the one to indulge in ... heckling. People in the North-east ... haven't forgiven the way he presided over the bypass farce.”

Given that he has not repeated his allegations against civil servants or his allegation of sleaze in government, I remind him of what sleaze is. Sleaze is taking £3.4 million from a jailed donor, using it to finance election campaigns in England and Scotland, and refusing to get the money back. That is what sleaze is. [*Interruption.*] Happy Christmas.

The Presiding Officer: All questions and answers should be referred through the chair at all times.

I have received a large number of requests to ask supplementary questions and there is no chance that I will fit them all in. I will take a supplementary question from Margaret Curran.

Margaret Curran (Glasgow Baillieston) (Lab): Will the First Minister give me a categorical assurance that the headquarters of the National Theatre of Scotland will not be moved from Easterhouse? Given that it is Christmas, could he for once give a straight answer to a straight question?

The First Minister: I cannot resist Margaret Curran at Christmas or at any other time of the year, so I give her the answer that the National Theatre of Scotland remains committed to its permanent home base at the Bridge in Easterhouse and to building on its links with the community there. I hope that Margaret Curran is satisfied with that answer at Christmas and that she would be satisfied with it at any other time of the year.

Alasdair Allan (Western Isles) (SNP): To ask the First Minister what representations the Scottish Government is making to Her Majesty's Government about the price of fuel in rural areas.

The Presiding Officer: My apologies, Mr Allan. I understood that you had pressed your button to ask a supplementary question. I will come to you in a moment.

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): The First Minister is aware that NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde has completely ignored the recommendations of the independent scrutiny panel's report about the future of health services at the Vale of Leven hospital, much to the anger of local people. I welcome the swift action of the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing.

Is the First Minister aware that NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde has decided to completely usurp the public consultation process and attempt to implement changes on the day of the board meeting? Will he personally intervene to stop NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde pre-empting the cabinet secretary's decision? Will he also personally intervene to help to secure all the services at the Vale of Leven hospital and thereby fulfil his promise to keep health services local?

The First Minister: The minister has already instructed the health board to take no action until the matter can be subject to independent scrutiny. I know that Jackie Baillie and the Labour benches will welcome the process of independent scrutiny. After all, that same process saved Monklands and the Ayr accident and emergency unit, which the Labour Party tried to close.

Jack McConnell (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab): In January 2001, Bill Clinton was given the

traditional opportunity that is afforded to American Presidents and asked by George Bush to nominate one project from his time in office that would be guaranteed by the new President. President Clinton nominated AmeriCorps, and today the number of young Americans volunteering full-time has expanded and passed the half million mark. AmeriCorps helped to inspire ProjectScotland, which was launched here with cross-party support in 2005. Among others, it benefited Amanda Munsey from my constituency, who is here in the gallery.

The Presiding Officer: I must ask you to be brief, please.

Jack McConnell: ProjectScotland has succeeded with less than half the cost per place of its American cousin. The First Minister's decision to stop Government funding for ProjectScotland will deprive thousands of young Scots of an opportunity to change lives. Will the First Minister provide cheer for young Scots? Will he dispel the rumour that he is a Scrooge, and reinstate Government funding for ProjectScotland placements?

The First Minister: Jack McConnell knows that £1.4 million of funding is going into ProjectScotland next year. There is no doubt that the organisation does valuable work. He also knows that funding for voluntary sector projects across Scotland is increasing throughout the comprehensive spending review period. He would accept that the initial estimates of the balance between public money and private money, which looked at a 50:50 split, have not been realised. Although difficult decisions often have to be made about overall voluntary sector support, I accept that Jack McConnell is fully committed to the concept. I know that he will accept that within the increased funding to the voluntary sector, many organisations are doing substantially good work with young people. There are always difficult decisions in resource allocation, to ensure that the public purse gets the best effectiveness in helping young people throughout Scotland.

Fuel Prices (Rural Areas)

The Presiding Officer: We have had the benefit of a dress rehearsal for question 4, which is from Alasdair Allan.

4. Alasdair Allan (Western Isles) (SNP): Without reference to my question, I am tempted to say that at this time of year, all pantomimes have dress rehearsals.

To ask the First Minister what representations the Scottish Government is making to Her Majesty's Government about the price of fuel in rural areas. (S3F-380)

The First Minister (Alex Salmond): The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth has written to the Chancellor of the Exchequer asking that he consider reducing the level of fuel duty in certain rural parts of Scotland. Yesterday, the Minister for Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change and I met the Road Haulage Association to discuss its concerns concerning high fuel prices.

Alasdair Allan: The First Minister is aware from representations by Angus McNeil MP, me and many others that, in parts of my constituency, the price of petrol has reached £1.20 a litre. Does he agree that, particularly in Scotland's island communities, the United Kingdom Government's apparent refusal to consider either a fuel price regulator or any other mechanism to vary the rate of fuel duty in remote areas is hitting people in all income groups hard? Last night, the First Minister spoke at the Sabhal Mòr Ostaig lecture and confirmed the extent of his and the Government's commitment to the island economies. Will the Government impress on Her Majesty's Government that UK policy in that area appears to be working actively against such economic growth in rural areas?

The First Minister: In his letter to the chancellor, the cabinet secretary makes it clear that the single UK rate of fuel duty places an unfair burden on the inhabitants of remote rural areas. For obvious reasons, rural people are more vulnerable to rising fuel prices than people in many other parts of the country are; that is true not just in relation to personal or public transport, but because of their reliance on the Road Haulage Association to transport goods and the price of all goods in every shop.

Given the bumper Christmas windfall that the chancellor is receiving from high and escalating oil prices—an estimated £3 billion extra this year—I hope that he will consider measures that could assist the rural areas of Scotland and the road haulage industry. I hope that he will not allow our rural areas, and the competitive position of our transportation system, to be penalised by high fuel prices when gigantic oil revenues are flooding into the London Exchequer.

Climate Change

5. Sarah Boyack (Edinburgh Central) (Lab): To ask the First Minister how the agreement that was reached at the United Nations climate change conference in Bali will impact on the policy direction of the Scottish Government. (S3F-389)

The First Minister (Alex Salmond): The climate change policy direction of the Scottish Government is broadly in line with the agreement that was reached at the United Nations climate change conference in Bali.

The Scottish Government will issue a consultation paper in January on proposals for a Scottish climate change bill, which will include proposals for a target of reducing emissions by 80 per cent by 2050. That means that Scotland could have—if Parliament so judges—the most demanding statutory targets in the world and therefore be at the front of the global fight against climate change.

We will continue to work with our United Kingdom and international partners to develop our climate change response in line with international agreements.

Sarah Boyack: Does the First Minister agree that we have an obligation to redouble our efforts to drive down our damaging climate change emissions? To that end, will he ensure that the Scottish Government's budget of around £30 billion in each of the next three years will contribute in each of those three years to delivering the 3 per cent year-on-year reductions that the SNP manifesto promised? Will he ask the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth to report back to Parliament and itemise the predicted carbon impact up and down across the entire budget before this Parliament approves it?

The First Minister: I am sure that the carbon secretary—or indeed the cabinet secretary—will be delighted to report to Parliament. One of the substantial changes in this Government compared with the previous Executive is that our strategic objectives—for example, for a greener Scotland that encompasses the most ambitious statutory target in the world in the climate change bill—are shared by all Government representatives and all cabinet secretaries. I am absolutely certain—I see Labour members nodding and smiling—that the cabinet secretary will be delighted to come to the Parliament and explain just why this Government has set the most ambitious international target for meeting our climate change obligations.

Jim Hume (South of Scotland) (LD): In the past four years of the Lib Dem coalition Administration, recycling rates increased from 7 to 25 per cent under the ministerial guidance of Ross Finnie. Recently, the Sustainable Development Commission published a report on recycling levels.

The Presiding Officer: Question, please.

Jim Hume: The Scottish Government's detailed announcements—

The Presiding Officer: I am sorry, but I must insist on a question. We do not have a lot of time left.

Jim Hume: Okay. On the zero waste strategy, will the First Minister advise how his Government

will ensure that Scotland meets its waste reduction targets when there are real-term cuts of £26 million in the total waste funding?

The First Minister: The cabinet secretary will make a statement on waste in the new year. I see some question marks on faces across the chamber, but the statement will reflect on the overall approach to climate change at the conference in Bali and to existing obligations. I am sure that the member will welcome the cabinet secretary's statement.

Jamie Hepburn (Central Scotland) (SNP): At the climate change conference in Bali, the Independent State of Samoa, population 214,000, the Principality of Liechtenstein, population 34,000, and—

The Presiding Officer: Question, please, Mr Hepburn.

Jamie Hepburn:—the Federation of Saint Kitts and Nevis, population 39,000, had their own independent representation. What might the Government of Scotland, population 5 million, have pursued in Bali had it had its own independent representation?

The First Minister: First, we have the most ambitious climate change targets in the world, which will be discussed by this Parliament. Secondly, of course, were it not for the fact that Labour and Conservative members are in an unholy alliance to try to deny free education in Scotland, we would have been able to send a Government minister to Bali to support the UK delegation. Finally, I am certain that when we have international conferences in the future, the whole international community will be delighted to have the representative from an independent Scottish Government debating those issues of huge importance to humanity.

British Transport Police

6. David McLetchie (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Con): To ask the First Minister whether it is the policy of the Scottish Executive to seek operational control over the activities of British Transport Police in Scotland. (S3F-391)

The First Minister (Alex Salmond): We have no intention of taking over operational control of any police force in Scotland. However, it is for ministers to set the framework within which the police in Scotland operate and we want all police in Scotland, including the British Transport Police, to operate in a way that meets the needs of all communities in Scotland. I have the most enormous confidence in the eight police forces of Scotland and the way in which they conduct their operations to ensure our safety as a community.

David McLetchie: I share that confidence, but I extend it to all police forces operating in Scotland, including the British Transport Police, whose primary responsibility is the safety of all members of the travelling public in Scotland. The incident at Glasgow airport demonstrates that there is no room for complacency in Scotland when it comes to public safety. Accordingly, is it not the responsibility of the First Minister's Government to give its full support to all police forces working to protect our citizens rather than, as his Cabinet Secretary for Justice has done, carp and undermine them from the sidelines?

The First Minister: It is very interesting. In the days after the attack on Glasgow airport, when the chief constables of Scotland asked for powers of stop and search under section 44 of the Terrorism Act 2000, there was a great deal of close questioning in meetings in the Scottish Executive emergency room and elsewhere on whether their powers were adequate to protect public safety in Scotland. Their answer was unambiguous: the use of stop and search would be rationed to that emergency and be fully compatible with what they regarded as their obligations to community solidarity in Scotland.

When the eight forces in Scotland—which, I remind David McLetchie, are responsible for ensuring our safety at bus stations, football stadiums, airports, Sauchiehall Street and Princes Street—have a total of 135 uses of section 44 powers and one force operating in Scotland has a total of 16,000, it is entirely appropriate for the Cabinet Secretary for Justice to question those matters in the public interest. What I think is inappropriate, however, is for the cabinet secretary to receive a letter from a United Kingdom minister. Incidentally, the letter is headed:

"PUBLICATION EMBARGOED UNTIL 00:01 HRS

Thursday December 20th".

Some people write press releases and letters, but Tom Harris chooses to put them together. It is inappropriate to conduct debates in that fashion.

To tell the absolute truth, I did not even know that Tom Harris was still a junior minister. I do not know why it has taken him five days to respond to the cabinet secretary's remarks—perhaps we should call him Rip Van Tom. The only time since the election that I have heard from Tom Harris is when he appeared in the papers saying that he had nothing to do with Charlie Gordon's constituency expenses.

Support ProjectScotland

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Alasdair Morgan): The next item of business is a members' business debate on motion S3M-953, in the name of Bill Butler, on support for ProjectScotland. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament expresses its dismay at the decision of the Scottish Government to withdraw funding from Project Scotland, the ground-breaking volunteering project, which since its inception has secured well over 1,000 placements for young people throughout Scotland; recognises the very real and tangible benefits both to local communities and organisations, such as the Temple/Shafton youth project in Glasgow, which have participated in the scheme and wholeheartedly applauds the effort and commitment of the volunteers involved; acknowledges that participants have been able to discover and develop new skills during their time with Project Scotland; notes the cross-party support for motion S3M-695 in the name of Sandra White, which acknowledged the positive role played by Project Scotland in helping "those previously excluded from participating fully in society to realise their true potential and aspirations", and believes that the decision should be reversed and support given to a project which, through the sterling efforts of volunteers, has made a significant contribution to a more inclusive and co-operative Scotland.

12:34

Bill Butler (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab): On behalf of all my colleagues in the chamber, I welcome the many volunteers, staff and supporters of ProjectScotland who are in the gallery for the debate. We are pleased that they have taken the time to join us. We are also grateful to them for the amazing work that they do throughout our constituencies.

As members are aware, ProjectScotland was launched in the spring of 2005, with the backing of Jack McConnell, the former First Minister. Since then, it has been hailed as a revolutionary volunteering organisation for 16 to 25-year-olds—an age group that people traditionally think tends to view volunteering with scepticism. Through the development of appealing and meaningful placements, ProjectScotland has set about transforming and redefining the image of youth volunteering by creating effective partnerships with hundreds of public and voluntary sector organisations. ProjectScotland delivers what young people want: choice, support and the chance of a better future. Participants receive a subsistence allowance that allows them to take up a variety of opportunities and a wide array of placements.

ProjectScotland is designed to change lives. Its structured placements provide for the needs of each participant. Young volunteers are supported

by staff, mentors and peers and are provided with the tools and training to build and develop their skills. They are shown how to set goals and track progress, encouraged to show initiative and learn from mistakes, and to develop leadership and to work in teams. The result of all of that is that the young people build their confidence and raise their aspirations.

To date, more than 2,000 young people have taken part in ProjectScotland to start the process of changing their lives. However, change is not confined to the participants. ProjectScotland delivers a unique double benefit—as volunteers change their lives, they help to improve the lives of those around them. They do so by increasing the capacity of voluntary sector partners and by making a difference to the communities that they serve. They have changed the lives of tens of thousands of Scots.

In recent months, I have met several volunteers at the Temple/Shafton Youth Project in my constituency. On my first visit to the hut where the project is based, I listened to the young people to gain a clearer understanding of how the scheme has boosted their confidence in themselves and their abilities. What struck me most from my conversations with the young people, some of whom have overcome great difficulties in their lives, was their extraordinary passion and commitment. Unfortunately, some time later, I heard that the hut had been subjected to an arson attack in which it sustained serious damage. However, the local community rallied round and—tellingly—so too did ProjectScotland volunteers, who pitched in above and beyond the call of duty. As a result, the hut was up and running again within two weeks of the attack. Paul Smith, the project co-ordinator, told me that without the help of the volunteers such a quick turnaround would not have been possible. Without that quick turnaround, a group that works with more than 200 young people would have remained out of action for a considerable time. That is an example of how ProjectScotland inspires co-operation in communities.

Earlier this year, with the experience of Temple/Shafton Youth Project in mind, I was only too happy to support Sandra White's motion S3M-695, on changing lives. The motion praised ProjectScotland and, in particular, the efforts of Robert Keys, the winner of a ProjectScotland volunteer of the year award. Frankly, I would be much happier if today's debate had been on that motion, and not the one that is before us. It would have meant that we would have been speaking solely in praise of volunteers such as Robert Keys.

The motion arises from the announcement that the ProjectScotland chief executive made on its website on 22 November, that

“The Scottish Government will not be funding our next phase of development. This will come into effect in April 2008.”

We are just a few days from Christmas and yet we are in the chamber not to celebrate the success of the project but to debate its ability to survive. To be candid, I am baffled by the SNP Government's decision to slash ProjectScotland's annual budget from £6.5 million to £1.4million per annum. Even with my poor arithmetic, I can calculate that the cut is more than 75 per cent. The number of young Scots who can take part in the project will fall from 1,500 to 420 a year. How can we even think of undermining all the work that ProjectScotland has done? What sort of message does the cut send out to the volunteers who are sitting in the public gallery or the hundreds of their colleagues who—at this very minute—are carrying out such worthwhile work across Scotland? I say that particularly because the case for providing full support is overwhelming.

For example, a recent economic impact study shows that ProjectScotland brings added value to Scotland's economy. Surely I do not need to remind the minister how much store all parties set by building a stronger Scottish economy. Since 2004, £16.9 million has been invested in ProjectScotland, and the study shows that its total economic value is £21 million per annum—three times the level of investment. In addition, the organisation recently produced a forward business plan with a 33 per cent reduction in the cost per volunteer. Surely that is commendable.

The organisation has also proved to be successful in preventing unemployment. Volunteers who pass through ProjectScotland programmes learn skills that make them more attractive to employers and able to command starting salaries that are, on average, £4,000 a year higher than they might otherwise have expected. ProjectScotland's activities have also resulted in a saving on welfare benefits of £1.47 million a year.

ProjectScotland is an outstanding success. At a time when we should be striving to help young people who are not in training, education or employment, the Government's decision to undermine ProjectScotland—I put it as strongly as that—is short-sighted and illogical. Perhaps the minister can answer that point in his response to the debate. The Government's decision will not only threaten the volunteering opportunities that are open to young people; it will have serious ramifications for the local community groups and charities that have benefited from the work of the young volunteers. It is important to bear in mind the fact that ProjectScotland has contributed £9 million in funding and incremental value to its 300 not-for-profit partners.

In conclusion, I ask the minister to rethink the Government's decision, even given the much less than comforting answer that we got from Mr Salmond at First Minister's question time. If he needs further proof, I suggest that he speak to the young people who are involved in ProjectScotland, who have made it such a Scottish success story. They would tell him—as they have told me—what a difference ProjectScotland has made to their lives. What a difference it has allowed them to make to the lives of others. They will be the Parliament's guests for the next hour following the debate. All members—including the minister—are welcome to come along to committee room 4 to meet them, interact with them and listen to them.

Christmas is a time for giving, when most people like to support worthy causes. I urge the minister to do the brave thing, the right thing and the decent thing by restoring full support for ProjectScotland. [*Applause.*]

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Although the Scottish Parliament always meets in public, contributions from the public gallery are not allowed, and I am afraid that that extends to applause. I am sorry.

12:42

Jackson Carlaw (West of Scotland) (Con): I congratulate Mr Butler not just on his comprehensive motion, but on his sagacity in suggesting that we might like to consider the matter at lunch time, rather than after decision time. On the last Thursday before Christmas, there was a dawning realisation that, notwithstanding the importance of the subject, we may well have found ourselves talking by candlelight, with the last mince pies cold to the touch and even the janitors long gone. I am tempted to say that Bill Butler could have risked being even more radical and he would still have earned my support and gratitude.

I pay tribute to all those who volunteer in thousands of different ways throughout Scotland and the wider United Kingdom. My family volunteers; there is nothing remarkable about that. My wife volunteers for the lifeboats—not, I hasten to add, by donning oilskins and manning the boats, but by helping to ensure that money is raised to keep lifeboats afloat at our local lifeboat station, which is one of Scotland's busiest. My son, who is in full-time education, volunteers at Oxfam. Like many people, he came to volunteering through the Duke of Edinburgh's award scheme, but he continues out of his own sense of commitment, just like members of families everywhere whose efforts are an essential part of what makes life better for many people.

It is important to note that the ethos of volunteering does not stand or fall on the future of

ProjectScotland. Nevertheless, what will be lost is access to volunteering for a section of our young people who had been bypassed before it. In many ways, ProjectScotland has addressed a volunteering access inequality, which makes the action of the Government—which has pledged to address inequality—all the more bewildering.

As I observed a moment ago, the motion is a comprehensive one that speaks to every aspect of the issue. While speaking to it, Bill Butler illuminated his argument magnificently. It seems to me to be an essentially simple matter: we have a scheme that is moving from an admittedly higher start-up cost in its infancy to more efficient organisation in its future. We all agree that encouragement of volunteering should be supported by a national effort. Just weeks ago, as Bill Butler said, Sandra White extolled the virtues of ProjectScotland and was joined in her enthusiastic endorsement by several of her SNP parliamentary colleagues. Surprisingly, they are not in the chamber now.

Why pull the rug out from under ProjectScotland now? It is all too easy to say that something else will turn up—but ProjectScotland is the “something else” that failed to magically materialise before. In its place is the vaguest of hopes, with no timescale and no particular objective or ambition. In its place is the SNP Government’s coldest shoulder.

It is for the Government to say what is the compelling reason for axing the funding for an initiative that has been endorsed by an extraordinary range of not-for-profit organisations in regions and communities throughout Scotland, and which addresses volunteering access inequalities.

Speaking as an employer for some 30 years, I can tell the minister that volunteers who have enjoyed the benefits of placements in ProjectScotland are just the sort of young people that businesses long to recruit. We recognise that they have come through ProjectScotland from potentially difficult circumstances. Business wants to play its part in giving those young people, who have shown courage and commitment, a permanent and hopeful future. That is surely why there have been such positive outcomes from ProjectScotland, with over 90 per cent of participants moving into employment, education or training en route to permanent jobs. They do so more confident, more capable of taking responsibility and more comfortable in their ability to build positive working relationships with others.

Why reinvent the wheel? What are the specific qualifications of ministers that lead them to the conviction that they, rather than ProjectScotland, have the answers? Investment of £1.4 million annually over the next few years is no huge financial matter. It must be comparable to the bill

for free prescriptions that the SNP seems to think even the very wealthiest of Scots need to have picked up for them by the taxpayer over the same period. We will happily support an amendment to the law such that the wealthiest people continue to pay prescription bills if that will allow the minister to support ProjectScotland.

When Charles Dickens wrote “A Christmas Carol”, he defined many of what have since become the essential ingredients of the Christmas celebration: family, turkey, the giving and receiving of presents and civic philanthropy. The eternal strength of his seminal novel is the redemption of Ebenezer Scrooge, from “Bah, humbug” to model philanthropic citizen. The challenge for Ebenezer McMath today is to look at the ghosts of motion supporters past ranked behind him and show them renewed leadership—to be the boy scout leader of the Parliament, to abandon vague platitudes about future potential volunteering schemes and to ensure that ProjectScotland continues to build on the success that it has thus far achieved.

12:47

Jack McConnell (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab): I have deliberately chosen not to make a speech in the chamber since relinquishing the leadership of my party in Parliament back in August but, with sadness, I choose to speak today because I think that Bill Butler’s motion is accurate and inspired, and it is important for Scotland. The Government’s decision, which it announced last month, is wrong, and it will have an impact for many years to come.

I first discussed the concept of ProjectScotland with Julia Ogilvy and Sir Tom Farmer in August 2002. They took me to Columba 1400 in Skye, and they persuaded me that my lifelong commitment to volunteering was important not just for rural communities, such as the one where I grew up, but for youngsters, and particularly disadvantaged youngsters, throughout Scotland, as well as for the Scottish economy and the confidence of our nation.

ProjectScotland was launched in 2005, following detailed consideration, including an assessment of the expensive start-up costs, but recognising the value—and not just the costs—of the opportunities that it would bring. It was launched with cross-party support in Parliament and elsewhere.

ProjectScotland was deliberately made national to ensure that the opportunities were available in all communities and to youngsters from all walks of life. It was deliberately targeted at youngsters from the most disadvantaged backgrounds. It was deliberately new, so that young people across Scotland would be inspired by its creation to take part either in full-time volunteering opportunities or

in other opportunities, if they suited better. It was deliberately based on excellence, so that it could be an example not just in Scotland, but elsewhere in the UK and beyond. As a result of ProjectScotland, young people have developed confidence and skills, and Scotland has the admiration of others for leading the way.

Bill Butler's motion and speech highlighted the success of ProjectScotland, and I wish to mention three case studies. First, Andrew Jasso from Peterhead has explained how his life took a turn for the worse. His girlfriend died, he was made redundant and he became a heroin addict. He had dreamed all his youth of a career at sea, so ProjectScotland gave him a placement volunteering at sea, which has now given him the possibility of a career at sea. He says that the help that he received from ProjectScotland truly helped him turn his life around.

Paula Lowther from Perth said:

"If you had told me a year ago that this is what I'd be doing and that I'd have achieved everything that I have I wouldn't have believed you. If I hadn't heard of ProjectScotland, I would probably still be at home doing absolutely nothing so I'm hugely thankful to everyone who got me involved."

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You have one minute left.

Jack McConnell: I will cut my third example, in view of the lack of time.

The action to end the funding for new placements will lead to ProjectScotland being no longer national. It will also be an indication to private donors that they should not make their contributions and it will be an act of vandalism that the Government will regret. The decision is based either on ignorance or on a politically vindictive streak, which we have occasionally suspected exists. In this case, I genuinely hope that the decision is not based on the latter. If the decision is based on the former, there is an opportunity for the minister and the First Minister to listen and to change it.

I hope that the Presiding Officer will allow me to make this point. I said earlier at First Minister's question time that Bill Clinton asked George Bush to keep the AmeriCorps scheme on when he became President of the United States in 2001. As a result, more than 600,000 young Americans have benefited from a place on it. George Bush did not end the scheme, but expanded it. Young Americans today have benefited from that. If, in the partisan world of American politics, consensus can be reached to put young Americans first, surely we in Scotland, at the start of the 21st century, can do the same. I urge the Government to rethink its decision early in the new year and to give these youngsters a chance.

12:52

Sandra White (Glasgow) (SNP): I welcome Kate Mavor, Robert Keys and others to the gallery, and I thank Bill Butler for securing the debate, which gives me and others the opportunity to pay tribute to the invaluable work of volunteers throughout Scotland. My motion S3M-695 acknowledged the positive work that has been done by ProjectScotland and other voluntary service organisations in helping

"those previously excluded from participating in society to realise their true potential and aspirations."

I sincerely believe that volunteering is a very positive tool that gives great benefit to everyone in society. It must be encouraged and nurtured not just by agencies—Government or otherwise—but by the general public.

I want to talk not just about ProjectScotland but about other projects such as the Bambury centre in Glasgow—although they are too numerous to mention them all. I have visited many such projects, which do a lot of good work. They offer services to their communities and vastly improve the education, skills and employment opportunities of local people, which must be applauded.

Bill Butler: Will the member take an intervention?

Sandra White: I am sorry, but I have only four minutes and I would like to get through my speech.

However, the motion centres specifically on ProjectScotland, so I will address it. ProjectScotland was set up in 2004 and launched in 2005. It has received £16.9 million in Government funding and has helped nearly 2,000 people. I applaud that achievement, but we have to put it in the overall context of the volunteering sector. The cost of each six-month volunteering placement, from the launch until the end of the last tax year, was around £9,000.

Cathy Peattie (Falkirk East) (Lab) rose—

Sandra White: I am sorry, but members have to hear this.

Community Service Volunteers, the United Kingdom's longest running full-time youth volunteering programme, has costs of £9,000 for a full year's placement, including volunteers' accommodation away from home, which is not covered by ProjectScotland.

Cathy Peattie: Will the member take an intervention?

Sandra White: I am sorry, but I have only four minutes.

Cathy Peattie: That is a pity.

Sandra White: Cathy Peattie will have her turn.

I am sure that members will agree that we want to encourage as many people as possible to volunteer and that we want to provide opportunities for all young people who want to volunteer. However, that does not mean that we must ignore the facts that I have just stated or the concerns of other voluntary organisations.

I was disappointed to read that people will suffer as a result of the Government's decision. I for one hope that ProjectScotland will consider ways of continuing to succeed by furthering its original aim of attracting matched funding from individual benefactors or by adopting the model that has been so successfully pursued by CSV, which recoups its costs by charging fees to each placement organisation. Let us not forget that, when ProjectScotland was set up, half its funding came from Government. Now, practically 100 per cent of its funding comes from Government.

I believe that ProjectScotland, with its great staff and the unique vision of its director, can achieve its aims. In an announcement to volunteers, Kate Mavor said:

"we're determined to continue because you say it's good for you, and we see it's good for the country. We already have support from many businesses and local organisations, and our fantastic fundraising team will find more in the coming months."

I wish ProjectScotland every success in that regard.

Tom Leishman, of Clubs for Young People Scotland, says that if the money that has been provided to ProjectScotland were put back into youth work, there would be far greater continuity of programmes, far more could be done for young people and more volunteers could be attracted. It is not only this Government that would describe the amount of money that has gone into ProjectScotland as largesse; other voluntary organisations feel the same way.

Last week, *Third Force News* welcomed

"John Swinney's first ever budget announcement in November in which he revealed a new £93 million package for the voluntary sector".

I believe that that money is good news for the voluntary sector. Like Kate Mavor, I hope that ProjectScotland will continue. I think that the voluntary sector contributes greatly to Scotland and greatly benefits its young people and the economy but other voluntary organisations have a right to a level playing field.

12:56

Mary Mulligan (Linlithgow) (Lab): I congratulate Bill Butler on securing the debate and, like him, welcome our visitors in the public gallery.

The great number of members who have signed the motion shows the level of support that there is in the Parliament for ProjectScotland. That support is based on experience of the project. Like many members, as I go about my constituency, I frequently meet volunteers—people who give their time to help others but who freely admit that they gain from the experience.

On make a difference day this year, I once again spent some time with Barnardo's in Bathgate. Last year, I met a young man who had been placed through ProjectScotland. He had various difficult issues in his life and needed to build his self-esteem, develop his self-confidence and get into the habit of organising his time. The opportunity at Barnardo's was helping him to develop his skills and, at the same time, helping the charity.

An issue that has to be acknowledged is the profile of volunteers. It is wrong to suggest that volunteers are only older, middle-class women—we need only look at the young mums and dads who give of their time for various activities to see that that is not the case. However, it is clear that young people—especially those who might have become a little detached from their communities—are not coming forward in the way that we hope they might and need them to. That is the section of the population that ProjectScotland was established to target. We have to admit that, even where volunteering organisations were well organised—I would be the first to congratulate the volunteer centre in Bathgate—something extra was needed in order to attract those young people. The fresh look that was taken by ProjectScotland was the right approach.

If members read the quotations in the briefing provided by ProjectScotland, for which I thank the organisation, they will see the words of young people who have volunteered with the help of support from ProjectScotland. They are very persuasive and I will be interested to hear why the minister thinks they should not be listened to.

I have already referred to the volunteer centre that is based in Bathgate in my constituency. It is successful in supporting volunteers. However, ProjectScotland was established to complement, not replace or duplicate, the work that it does. ProjectScotland has been successful in placing volunteers in a number of projects in my constituency, such as the advice shop in West Lothian, Home Aid West Lothian, Linlithgow Young Peoples Project and a huge variety of other valuable projects that we would all want to be supported and which would have lost out if they had not had those volunteers. On that point, what would those volunteers have lost if they had not had the support of ProjectScotland to access those opportunities?

Will the minister explain clearly why ProjectScotland is to lose its funding? I address my next point to Sandra White. Volunteering is not and never should be a cheap option. We should value its worth. How will the Scottish Government fill the gap in volunteering that ProjectScotland has addressed? I hope that this is not an example of action by a new Government just to show that it is doing something.

The minister will know that, in general, members' business debates are consensual. I hope that he will understand that our discussion has not been as consensual as usual because of our deep concern about this valuable project's future.

13:00

Robert Brown (Glasgow) (LD): I congratulate Bill Butler on obtaining this important debate and I congratulate the previous speakers who supported ProjectScotland. Like Bill Butler, I have visited projects that the organisation supports, spoken to its volunteers and seen something of the volunteers' work and enthusiasm, which Jackson Carlaw spoke about.

It is perhaps a paradox that the last members' business debate of the year is about the wind-down of a project that has brought hope and inspiration to many young people. ProjectScotland has been a bridge to work, provided a tremendous chance to find a direction in life and given opportunity to people when opportunity has not normally come their way. That is not the most appropriate Yuletide message, for Christmas should be a time of new beginning, rebirth and hope.

In my recent members' business debate on the 100th anniversary of scouting, I raised the benefit to voluntary organisations' work of the input of ProjectScotland volunteers. The ability to use volunteers who can be trained and deployed effectively has been a vital support for organisations and a source of new blood—of youthful and enthusiastic people—because many who become involved through ProjectScotland go on to staff positions or continue to be volunteers. ProjectScotland volunteers have been invaluable at Fordell Firs—the Scottish scouts outdoor centre in Fife—and at the centre that Greater Glasgow Area Scout Council runs at Auchengillan.

The Scottish ministers have said warm words about the voluntary sector, but some of us have grave fears about the effects of the SNP budget on local voluntary sector projects up and down our land. Whatever the merits of withdrawing ProjectScotland's funding, the loss of its volunteers to a series of youth organisations will damage and inhibit those organisations' potential

to develop their good work for the benefit of young people.

Cathy Peattie: Will the member take an intervention?

Margo MacDonald (Lothians) (Ind): Will the member give way?

Robert Brown: I do not have time to do that.

The withdrawal of funding will undermine the aims of the youth work strategy, which we launched only months ago. It is unhelpful to take with one hand and give with the other; that is not the approach to take.

Whether ProjectScotland provides value for money has been debated—Sandra White spoke about that. I say to her in passing that speedily reversing one's position because one has gone into government is not a terribly good idea. That does not enhance one's credibility in Parliament.

I do not dispute that the questions whether ProjectScotland represents value for money and whether the money could be invested in another way to produce different results are genuine. However, I am not overimpressed by the axe falling only two years into the project's existence or by the Government's volunteering action plan, which seems to straitjacket all youth and other volunteering organisations into one format that is locally based and linked to community planning. That provision is important, but the Government must recognise the role of the national youth organisations, which provide most youth work activities and volunteering opportunities.

Establishing an organisation, developing skills and finding out and targeting needs take time. I am not sure whether the Government has formally evaluated ProjectScotland—we have certainly not heard of that—but the report that Bill Butler mentioned speaks volumes about the organisation's merit and the opportunities that it presents.

A perfectly proper issue of process is involved. The Government is entitled to cease funding for bodies and, like others, I am happy to listen to its case with an open mind. However, when flagship issues are concerned, there must be a process, evaluation and sharing of information with Parliament and the public—not a diktat from the Government's headquarters. The minister must answer and tell Parliament what the process has been and what will fill the void that the ending of ProjectScotland will leave.

The Government might well ponder whether there is merit in suspending the decision that has been made—members throughout the chamber have called for that—reconsidering the work of ProjectScotland, and giving continued and growing opportunities to the young people who are served

by it. A parliamentary committee could consider that in a wider context. Please do not proceed in such an offhand way without information. Let us think again about ProjectScotland.

13:05

The Minister for Enterprise, Energy and Tourism (Jim Mather): I congratulate Bill Butler on securing the debate, which has been worth while and passionate, and I welcome the opportunity to make clear the Government's position and to spell out the nature of our support for ProjectScotland.

At the outset, I congratulate the young volunteers who have been involved in the projects that have been mentioned. Those projects engender a community spirit. Members have provided excellent examples that illustrate the benefits of volunteering. There is no doubt that volunteering is at the core of attempts to make our communities stronger and that it can help young people to find themselves and their strengths. It contributes hugely to helping the Government and public services create a more cohesive and better-served country, and it directly supports sustainable economic growth in all of our five strategic objectives.

That is why we have increased investment in the third sector by 37 per cent, to £93 million, over the coming spending period. That funding is not to provide services—it is clearly for improving the capacity and performance of the third sector and for taking its ability to deliver to a higher level. In other words, the objective is to make third sector providers even more attractive and appropriate to those who are looking for service providers.

Margo MacDonald: Will the minister give way?

Jim Mather: I will crack on, as I am keen to make key points and answer questions that have been asked.

We want local commissioners of services, including volunteering opportunities, to recognise the wealth of providers that are available, which includes ProjectScotland.

The third sector is a very wide landscape. It is very dependent on volunteers of all kinds, who are a key component in building strong communities. We value local people being active for their friends and communities, young people being keen to help older folk and older people passing on their life experiences.

Bill Butler: ProjectScotland is undoubtedly a success, so why is the Government punishing it and not rewarding it? How would the minister feel if there was an arbitrary and unfounded 75 per cent cut in his salary? Will the Government rethink its decision?

Jim Mather: We are not punishing ProjectScotland and we do not have a politically vindictive streak—indeed, very much the opposite.

We already support networks such as the councils of voluntary service, which support thousands of voluntary bodies in their areas, and we support the network of volunteer centres, which bring together volunteers and volunteering opportunities for all ages and needs. I looked at the Volunteer Centre Network Scotland website today and found that it is advertising 9,781 opportunities and is looking for 81,000 people.

However, I understand the concerns that have been expressed about our decision on the future funding of ProjectScotland, and I am grateful for the chance to explain to members our thinking behind such a difficult decision.

I am happy to put on record our appreciation of what ProjectScotland has done for young people and of its raising the profile of volunteering overall. Every member knows of a young person who has made a step forward in life as a result of a ProjectScotland placement. We appreciate the benefits that it has generated in raising the profile of volunteering and particularly through offering opportunities to young people in programmes.

Cathy Peattie: I acknowledge what the minister says about ProjectScotland's value to young people. At question time earlier, the Minister for Public Health talked about trying to keep young people off alcohol, and earlier this week, a cabinet secretary talked about violence and young people. Surely ProjectScotland addresses such matters. The minister does not value or understand what volunteering does to young people and the support that organisations such as ProjectScotland provide for them.

Jim Mather: ProjectScotland is not the only organisation that does such work. We must look for effectiveness. As the First Minister said, we have an obligation to focus on what offers best effectiveness, which is exactly what we are doing.

ProjectScotland has been an initiative that has been delivered with verve and panache, and it has proved to be attractive to young people and its placement partners. I commend the highly professional approach of its staff. Equally, I commend Julia Ogilvy's vision in pressing for its establishment. When she did so, she was looking at a model of partnership with private sector involvement that was drawn from the United States of America. From the outset, the operation was based on a presumption that it would attract philanthropic input in cash. Private funds have indeed come forward and there has been input in kind, which has amounted to around £1 million over three years. However, the Government has spent almost £17 million on it to date, and it has benefited fewer than 2,000 young people.

ProjectScotland rightly says that its start-up costs were a major part of the investment and that it is driving down costs per head. Nevertheless, the private sector has yet to come forward in the way that the business model proposed, and ProjectScotland is today basically fully funded by the Government.

Margo MacDonald: Would it cut through this Gordian knot if we were to make an estimate of how much it would have cost in public spending if successful volunteers had been involved with social work, the police and so on?

Jim Mather: Others in the field carry out similar activity and get good results.

We have thought carefully about the outcomes that we seek and have concluded that we have a wider duty to volunteers throughout Scotland. We have decided that our approach should be to facilitate volunteering opportunities for as many people as possible, of all ages and backgrounds, using a wide range of providers. Our decision is that we do not intend to renew the funding for ProjectScotland that will come to its natural end in March. However, we have offered funding in 2008-09 of £1.4 million to ensure that all current commitments to those seeking placements under ProjectScotland's current programme can be fulfilled. To continue funding the organisation at the present level would have cost £6.5 million next year—more than 20 per cent of our total investment in the third sector.

Robert Brown: Will the minister take an intervention?

Jim Mather: No; I want to make some constructive progress.

Members have expressed concern about the number of volunteering opportunities that will be lost. It is important to remember that ProjectScotland did not create volunteering opportunities—bar a handful in its office—but matched volunteers to organisations and provided support. I doubt that those placements will disappear. Many organisations will choose to continue with volunteering placements and to meet their costs, including the cost of subsistence allowances. Those who volunteer with Community Service Volunteers, for example, are often provided with an allowance and accommodation when they are away from home, paid for by the organisation with which the young person is placed.

Many may choose to continue volunteering without an allowance, but that does not necessarily mean that volunteers will be left with no income. Rightly, the Department for Work and Pensions recognises the value of volunteering as a gateway into further training or employment. There is no limit on the number of hours to which a

volunteer may commit, provided that the volunteer remains available for work. That is a compromise that many organisations will be happy to make.

In conclusion, I reiterate our appreciation of ProjectScotland. I commend the organisation on its services, especially to local authorities, which have the funds and outcomes to deliver. Delivering local services locally is a vision that we share with local government, and it is to local government that ProjectScotland should turn its focus. I wish ProjectScotland every success in the future. On 7 January, we are running a major event on the third sector and how it should move forward. I extend a warm invitation to Kate Mavor to come along to that event.

Bill Butler: On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I seek your guidance on whether it would be in order for me to repeat my invitation to the minister to meet in committee room 4 the young people who are here from ProjectScotland. I hope that that will begin to change his mind.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Butler, I suspect that you know as well as I do that it is not in order, but you have made your point.

13:13

Meeting suspended until 14:15.

14:15

On resuming—

Question Time

SCOTTISH EXECUTIVE

Finance and Sustainable Growth

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson): Good afternoon. The entire themed question time session this afternoon will be given over to questions on finance and sustainable growth.

Public Sector Contracts (Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises)

1. John Scott (Ayr) (Con): To ask the Scottish Executive what the value is of public sector contracts currently sourced from small and medium-sized enterprises. (S3O-1681)

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth (John Swinney): Based on the best available data from financial year 2005-06, small and medium-sized enterprises account for approximately 51 per cent of public sector expenditure on goods, services and works from third-party suppliers. That figure is derived from an examination of the expenditure of 127 public sector organisations, including all 32 local authorities, all health boards, all Scottish universities, all Scottish Government core departments and many executive agencies, non-departmental public bodies, emergency services and colleges. There is no central database across all those organisations to enable us to determine the number or value of such public sector contracts.

John Scott: Once a procurement target has been set—which I assume will happen—how will the cabinet secretary monitor and publish progress towards achieving it? Indeed, how will the volume of public contracts that are sourced from SMEs be maintained once the target has been achieved?

John Swinney: I know that Mr Scott has a long-standing interest in ensuring that contracts are given to small and medium-sized enterprises, and I acknowledge the amount of work that he has done in raising the issue. He will understand from that work the difficulty and complexity of pinning down the exact volume and scale of contracts that are undertaken by small and medium-sized enterprises. However, I assure him that, as we advance and give more structure to our procurement agenda, and as we place more emphasis on securing a greater element of contracting with small and medium-sized enterprises, we will also examine the recording

and reporting of that information to try to ensure that we can provide members of the Parliament who have pursued the issue, such as Mr Scott, with more definitive answers on our procurement performance.

I place on record the importance that the Government attaches to procurement. We strongly support the agenda that was advanced by the previous Government and developed by John McClelland, who will be closely involved in our procurement agenda. I look forward to the first meeting of the national procurement board, which I will chair, in the new year. Addressing the issues on SME participation that Mr Scott has raised will be a central issue for the board.

Domestic Energy Efficiency

2. Sarah Boyack (Edinburgh Central) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what initiatives it will pursue to deliver domestic energy efficiency and what reduction in CO₂ emissions those initiatives are intended to deliver. (S3O-1730)

The Minister for Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change (Stewart Stevenson): The Scottish Government is committed to improving domestic energy efficiency and has a range of policies and initiatives in place to reduce domestic carbon emissions.

Since May, we have pursued a number of new initiatives that are aimed at the domestic sector. Those include: the introduction of a one-stop shop for domestic consumers in Scotland to provide advice on energy efficiency, microrenewables and transport; the establishment of an expert panel to advise the Scottish Government on low carbon building standards; and, most important, our commitment to introduce a Scottish climate change bill, which will set a mandatory target of cutting emissions by 80 per cent by 2050. As part of the development work for the bill, we will introduce a robust framework that will allow us to monitor and report on emissions reductions.

Sarah Boyack: I observe that, according to the Scottish Government's own figures, nearly a quarter of Scotland's households cannot afford adequate heating. Will the Government examine fuel poverty and carbon reduction? In particular, will it reconsider the spending review decision to freeze spending on fuel poverty programmes in the light of research? Will it commit to considering reconvening the fuel poverty forum, which brought together independent experts and charities working in the field, and which has not met in the past year? Will the Government take up the major issue of domestic energy efficiency and join up its work on energy efficiency and climate change targets in the light of the fact that there is an urgent problem in Scotland now? The matter is not

about future issues; it is about what the Scottish Government can do now at its own hand.

Stewart Stevenson: The member raises an important point in relation to an issue in Scotland. Through the Sullivan task force, the Government is considering what can be done to address energy efficiency in homes. However, the two major contributors to addressing fuel economy are reserved to Westminster. The first is the cost of the energy that is used in homes. Westminster has responsibility for ensuring that the price of fuel is affordable. Secondly, Westminster has a number of residual powers in relation to energy efficiency in homes. We will talk to Westminster about that to ensure that, between Westminster and the Scottish Government, we can make the progress that was committed to by the previous Administration and is endorsed by the current one.

Energy Strategy (Hunterston B)

3. Lewis Macdonald (Aberdeen Central) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive how its energy strategy will be affected by the decision to extend the operating life of Hunterston B. (S3O-1753)

The Minister for Enterprise, Energy and Tourism (Jim Mather): We always recognised that British Energy might seek to extend the operating life of Hunterston B. However, we also know that Scotland's energy future lies in safer alternatives, and we are clear that Scotland does not need or want new nuclear power.

We support clean coal technology, we have set a target for 50 per cent of electricity to be supplied from renewable sources by 2020, and we are providing grant support to emerging renewables technologies. As a result, the installed capacity of renewable electricity in Scotland is already greater than that of nuclear power.

Lewis Macdonald: I recognise the minister's description of what his energy strategy is, but I did not hear him mention how it has been affected by the important decision on Hunterston B.

The minister will acknowledge that his opposition to nuclear power has been based partly on concerns about the disposal of nuclear waste, and at the same time the SNP's policy has been to advocate the on-site disposal of radioactive waste from nuclear power stations. Does that policy still apply? What are the implications for Hunterston? What work will the Scottish Government do to take those implications into account?

Jim Mather: Policy is as it was. In addition, we have a clear view about building Scotland's energy mix with all the components that we have: clean coal, carbon capture, offshore wind—which was recently endorsed by the Westminster Government—wave, tidal, heat pumps, biomass

and biofuels. A vast amount of capacity is coming forward. People are even moving, as Napier University is, to use timber such as Sitka spruce to produce biofuels in Scotland.

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): As the member for the constituency in which Hunterston B is located, I warmly welcome the minister's public support for extending the life of the plant. Does he agree that, due to a decade of dithering by Westminster, it would not be possible to build a new nuclear facility at Hunterston by 2016 even if that was desirable? What steps will the Scottish Government take to ensure that the jobs and investment that are provided by Hunterston B remain in Cunninghame North when the facility finally closes? Will they involve the renewable energy sector?

Jim Mather: I thank the member for that contribution and tell him that, in driving forward, we recognise the shortcomings of our predecessors and we plan to have the diverse economy that will create many more jobs in south Ayrshire. I plan to run an event in south Ayrshire on 14 January with that objective in mind.

Alex Johnstone (North East Scotland) (Con): I thank the minister for his welcome for the extension to the life of the plant at Hunterston. However, will he acknowledge that the efficiency, reliability, security of supply and safety of the Hunterston site would all be improved if he sanctioned the construction of a replacement nuclear power station on the site?

Jim Mather: Frankly, I cannot agree with that. The situation is that Hunterston was out for most of last year. The member may not like it, but that is the reality.

Scotland's future lies in moving forward to capitalise on renewables. That will create more wealth in Scotland, retain wealth from energy in Scotland, and allow Scotland to export energy expertise and products well into the future. That is a great new opportunity for Scotland. Denigrating it and looking to unnecessary alternatives will not help us to maximise the benefit that can accrue to Scotland's economic future.

A90 (Laurencekirk)

4. Mike Rumbles (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD): To ask the Scottish Executive whether it will provide funding in 2008-09 for a full grade-separated junction on the A90 at Laurencekirk. (S3O-1725)

The Minister for Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change (Stewart Stevenson): The trunk road investment programme for 2008-09 is, as is normal with planning for major improvements, long term, and is largely as inherited from the previous

Administration, which made no provision for that work.

Mike Rumbles: Nicol Stephen, a previous Minister for Transport, implemented short-term measures at the Laurencekirk junction, such as a 50mph speed limit, speed cameras and a new surface. Those were only ever intended to be short-term measures. To save lives and prevent accidents, the solution is to build a grade-separated junction. When will the Scottish Government be in a position to make the necessary funding available? Can the minister give the Parliament a specific date—a year, perhaps—when we might expect a grade-separated junction to be built there?

Stewart Stevenson: I accept that, on 11 January 2005, Nicol Stephen announced the improvements that were made at the junction, to which the member referred, and I supported their introduction.

In answer to a question from Mike Rumbles, on 29 September 2005 Tavish Scott addressed the issue and said:

“The forthcoming Strategic Transport Projects Review will provide the future framework for decisions on competing priorities for investment in schemes to improve the trunk road network, including proposals for grade separation at junctions such as the A90 at Laurencekirk.”—*[Official Report, Written Answers, 29 September 2005; S20-7713.]*

Mike Rumbles can be assured that we shall do at least as well as that, and we will strive to do better. It will not be difficult.

Local Government Settlement (Class Size Reductions)

5. Hugh Henry (Paisley South) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive how much additional revenue is being allocated under the local government finance settlement for 2008-09 to support the reduction in class sizes to 18 in primary 1 to primary 3. (S30-1744)

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth (John Swinney): We have signed an historic concordat with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities that will enable year-on-year progress in reducing primary 1 to primary 3 class sizes to a maximum of 18. Local government will receive £34.8 billion over three years in overall financial support, which is an increase of £1.4 billion. Moreover, if local authorities sign single outcome agreements, ring-fenced funding streams will be reduced and councils will be able to redeploy all efficiency savings. However, the Government does not believe in dictating to local government. It will be the responsibility of each local authority to allocate the total financial resources that are available to it on the basis of local needs and priorities, and the

jointly agreed set of national and local priorities, including class size reduction.

Hugh Henry: I am aware that the education ministers discussed with the cabinet secretary ahead of the budget how much the class size reduction would cost. Will the cabinet secretary confirm that, in August this year, ahead of the budget, ministers collectively knew that the target could not be met by 2011? Will he write to me to indicate when ministers first knew that the money and resources would not be available to deliver the measure by 2011?

John Swinney: Like many members, Mr Henry needs to adjust to the new relationship between national and local government in Scotland today. As a Government minister, it is not my business to dictate how local authorities should go about their business on a variety of different issues. I try to ensure that we agree shared priorities to improve the quality of life of individuals in Scotland. That is what is important about the class size reduction policy, and why I am delighted that it features so centrally in the concordat that we signed with COSLA.

All I can say to Mr Henry about the spending review process is that the Government undertook a colossal amount of work during the summer to ensure that we were adequately prepared to put a strong and ambitious budget programme to Parliament in November. The Government looks forward to further parliamentary consideration of its contents.

Gavin Brown (Lothians) (Con): I have a simple question for the cabinet secretary. How many new classrooms will be required to meet the pledge?

John Swinney: That will vary from local authority to local authority, and it will depend upon the way in which the policy is implemented locally. It is appropriate that local authorities and individual schools should be able to work together within the framework set out by the Government to deliver our commitment in all our communities. I look forward to seeing the educational benefits that will arise from the investment.

Ken Macintosh (Eastwood) (Lab): Will the cabinet secretary clarify his response to my colleague Hugh Henry's question by confirming whether he will write with the information that was requested? Is the cabinet secretary aware that the documentation that COSLA and local government representatives have produced following the concordat shows a zero increase in the class size line? Does that cause the cabinet secretary any concern?

John Swinney: I do not intend to write to Mr Henry, because there are no issues that I need to follow up from the answer that I have just given him.

On Ken Macintosh's other point, in the settlement and the concordat arrangement, local authorities have been given formidable flexibility to design services that suit their localities. It is not the Government's business to set out prescriptively exactly how many pounds will be spent on particular services locally—although that was the business of the previous Government. There is a barrel load of evidence that that was an inefficient way to design public services. The present Government will not preside over inefficient public services, unlike our predecessors.

Local Government Settlement and Concordat (Aberdeen)

6. Brian Adam (Aberdeen North) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Executive what the impact of the recent local government settlement and concordat will be on Aberdeen. (S3O-1684)

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth (John Swinney): The local government finance settlement that I announced the other day will deliver a new and more productive relationship with local government, along with record levels of investment that will benefit all people living and working in Scotland, including those in the city of Aberdeen. The total funding to Aberdeen City Council is £1.15 billion for the three-year period. In that period, the year-on-year increases in core revenue funding to the council will amount to 11.9 per cent.

Brian Adam: I welcome the significant increase in funding for the city of Aberdeen, which is unlike the situation under the previous regime. How and when does the cabinet secretary plan to review the local government funding formula?

John Swinney: I am pleased that Mr Adam welcomes the funding settlement for the city of Aberdeen. I look forward to seeing the funding being deployed sensibly by the partnership in the city between the Scottish National Party and the Liberal Democrats. No wonder Mr Macdonald and Mr Baker are feeling left out of the party as a consequence of that partnership—and no wonder they have been left out, given Labour's leadership of Aberdeen City Council over the years. I am delighted that work is now being done by the joint administration in the city and I am glad that the funding settlement is addressing local needs.

We will continue to have dialogue with local authorities and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities on the funding formula for local authorities. We will keep the issue under consideration.

Richard Baker (North East Scotland) (Lab): I am sure that Mr Macdonald and I are happy to be left out of that rather-less-than-cosy partnership. As the settlement for Aberdeen City Council is

generous, the cabinet secretary will, I presume, believe that there is no need for the council to proceed with plans to remove home care services from those vulnerable pensioners and other adults whom the council assesses as being low or medium priority.

John Swinney: I am sure that the people of Aberdeen are relieved that Mr Baker and Mr Macdonald are out of the leadership of Aberdeen City Council as much as Mr Baker is relieved not to be in it. It shows where aspirations are in the Labour Party when its members want to be out of leadership.

Aberdeen City Council has decisions to take on the design of public services. I am absolutely confident that the arrangements that the Government has put in place to relax ring fencing, to work towards the delivery of outcome agreements and to encourage collaboration between providers at local level to provide integrated services—which undoubtedly will have an effect on those who use home care services—will guarantee effective service provision for vulnerable people in the city of Aberdeen. I look forward to monitoring progress as we develop the single outcome agreement to cover those issues.

The Presiding Officer: As Lewis Macdonald has been named, it is right to call him.

Lewis Macdonald (Aberdeen Central) (Lab): Given the temporary role of the cabinet secretary's party in the administration in the city of Aberdeen, will he kindly tell us whether he anticipates that that role will result in the creation of new classrooms in primary schools—to return to Gavin Brown's question—or is it more likely to result in the closure of primary schools?

John Swinney: Issues to do with the design of classrooms might have absorbed Mr Macdonald when he was a minister, but I think that local people in local authorities are in a much better position to take ownership of the design of public services and of our schools. Mr Macdonald might have spent his ministerial life designing the classrooms of Scotland, but this Government is determined to leave those matters to the people who know what to do at local level. The Government will take the strategic decisions that will provide the leadership for which Scotland has been crying out for such a long time. Thank goodness that it has arrived.

Single Outcome Agreements

7. Dr Richard Simpson (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive when it plans to publish in full the outcome agreements with local authorities. (S3O-1765)

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth (John Swinney): The initial set of single outcome agreements is expected to

be in place across all councils by April 2008. Subject to agreement between the Scottish Government and local authorities, I expect all agreements to be made publicly available once they have been agreed with councils.

As set out in the concordat with local government, a group has been established to oversee the process of moving towards the implementation of single outcome agreements. The group, which includes representation from COSLA and the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives and Senior Managers, is currently agreeing a plan and timetable for the development and implementation of the agreements.

Dr Simpson: I thank the cabinet secretary for his reply, but is he aware that, at the latest count, the number of delayed discharges in Fife has risen fourfold to 140, which far exceeds the usual annual fluctuation? How does he see his concordat stopping the current disgraceful situation, whereby a baby with complex needs is left in hospital for months after that is medically necessary; an adult is unable to move into an adapted house that is left empty; and another adult dies in hospital while waiting for a care package that would have allowed him to die at home? Those are just three of the 140 people who have been left in hospital by a Scottish National Party-Liberal council and that is before the council tax freeze. How will the cabinet secretary's concordat ensure that his Government's target—I am not talking about a local authority target—of zero delayed discharges by March 2008 and thereafter is adhered to? Will the concordat outcome agreements be just warm words—a hope and a prayer—or will they have teeth and be able to protect the most vulnerable people, such as the 140 people who have been hospitalised unnecessarily in Fife?

John Swinney: I point out to Dr Simpson that, this year, local authorities are working under the parameters of the financial allocations that were made by the most recent Administration, of which Dr Simpson could be accused of being a supporter, in the loosest possible sense.

Local authorities are wrestling with difficult issues. The single outcome agreements and the move to relax ring fencing are all about giving local authorities the ability to work collaboratively and co-operatively with other agencies to guarantee that we tackle problems such as delayed discharge. The single outcome agreements and the Government's priorities will structure that approach. I hope that we can all accept that all the players in that area of policy, whether they are in local authorities, health boards or the national Government, have the same willingness and determination to improve the quality of life and the quality of accommodation of some of the most

vulnerable people in our society. That will be the direction that the Government takes in the discussions about single outcome agreements.

Bill Butler (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab): In respect of the resourcing of local authorities, does the cabinet secretary agree that the continuing uncertainty over regeneration funding is causing significant problems for some of Scotland's most deprived communities, and that that uncertainty has only been heightened by the Government's decision not to announce individual allocations from the fairer Scotland fund to community planning partnerships last Thursday? With that in mind, can he tell me why the announcement has been delayed? When will he release that information, so that regeneration-funded projects can obtain some idea of what their future holds?

John Swinney: Not for the first time, Mr Butler raises a serious issue. I assure him that the allocations from the fairer Scotland fund will be made very soon. I hope that the wider question of funding for a variety of different projects has been assisted by the fact that, in announcing the local government funding settlement last week, the Government declared that a greater proportion of the resources will be allocated through local authorities earlier in the year than would normally have been the case. Traditionally, there has been a local government allocation of aggregate external finance in December and subsequent tranches of money are announced later on. We have announced a greater proportion of resources in December than would have been the case in previous years. However, I assure Mr Butler that the allocations from the fairer Scotland fund will be announced shortly. I appreciate that clarity is required for regeneration funding.

Council Tax Freeze

8. Gil Paterson (West of Scotland) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government whether everyone who currently pays council tax will benefit from the council tax freeze. (S30-1701)

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth (John Swinney): I confirm that everyone paying council tax will be better off as a result of the council tax freeze.

Gil Paterson: I thank the cabinet secretary for that short and sweet answer. Is he aware of an article in the *Milngavie and Bearsden Herald* a week or so ago that claimed that some people on a low income will be out of pocket when the council tax is frozen? Will he assure the public that that is patently untrue and that Opposition MSPs are simply out to maliciously misinform and muddle on an excellent proposition?

John Swinney: I may have a reputation for delivering short and sweet answers to

Parliament—I suspect that on occasion the Presiding Officer may disagree with that assessment—but I assure Mr Paterson that muddle is something very much associated with the Opposition on many, many questions. I am not a reader of the *Milngavie and Bearsden Herald*—I am more of a *Blairgowrie Advertiser* man these days—but I am sure that the press cuttings are winging their way to me. I assure Mr Paterson that people on low incomes who are paying the council tax will benefit from the council tax freeze, which is why it is such an immensely popular proposition.

Andy Kerr (East Kilbride) (Lab): While reading those press cuttings, the minister may care to read Professor Bell's report on the matter, in which he addresses the question of who gains and loses from the council tax freeze. He points out some interesting facts about that regressive measure.

First, does the cabinet secretary know whether he is legally entitled to hold back resources from a council that takes a democratic decision to raise its council tax and therefore cannot get access to the council tax freeze fund? Secondly, now that he has announced the funding for South Lanarkshire Council, he should be aware—I have raised it with him before—that, at the previous two elections, the Labour-led council went to the community with a manifesto that said, "We will charge 1 per cent over the rate of inflation in order to fund our primary school building programme." What measures will he take to ensure that that primary school building programme is not lost as a result of the council tax freeze?

John Swinney: From his long experience as a minister, Mr Kerr will be familiar with the practice of ministers to neither confirm nor deny whether they have obtained legal advice on any issue. That is an approach that I intend to maintain in this answer.

I am quite within my rights as a minister to make an order to Parliament setting out how much money is to be allocated to local authorities, which is exactly what I will do in February. I hope that Opposition members will support us in ensuring that local authorities are able to access resources from the Scottish Government. Obviously, I am perfectly able to make a supplementary order to give out even more money, which is what I will do once the local authorities have decided whether they intend to freeze the council tax. As I have said on a number of occasions in Parliament, I do not intend to specify to local authorities the individual decisions that they are to take, although I encourage local authorities to participate actively in the structure of the concordat that we have put in place, which offers all local authorities, including South Lanarkshire, a splendid opportunity to be ever more influential in improving the quality of life of the citizens of Scotland.

Local Authorities (Finance and Sustainable Growth)

9. Jackson Carlaw (West of Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Executive what representations it has made to local authorities about finance and sustainable growth issues since May 2007. (S30-1707)

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth (John Swinney): Under the joint concordat, I now have regular meetings with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities. I have also separately met about 22 local authorities since I became a minister in May. Those meetings have covered a range of issues to do with my finance and sustainable growth portfolio.

Jackson Carlaw: On his tour of local authorities in the summer, the cabinet secretary visited East Renfrewshire Council and gave welcome assurances to the council and local residents that no changes to the council's boundaries would be proposed during this parliamentary session. That laid to rest the undeniably pernicious threat that was previously hanging over East Renfrewshire.

Did the cabinet secretary discuss with East Renfrewshire Council its concern that the current funding formula has consistently made assumptions about local population and other factors that have proved to be wrong? In the past four years, that has led to the council being short-changed by £16 million, which has led to a higher council tax burden on all residents—including many working families with children, of whom there are a greater proportion in East Renfrewshire than in other local authorities. The freeze is welcome but, given that a local income tax would be an unmitigated disaster for such hard-pressed families, can he give any comfort to the council on its desire to see a permanent solution through a fair settlement that is based on accurate information? [*Applause.*]

John Swinney: I am glad that Alex Johnstone is such an enthusiastic supporter of the case.

The funding formula that we utilise and many of the issues with which we wrestle in relation to the distribution of resources have been the subject of a great deal of discussion. When I became a minister, I inherited a report from the three-year settlement group—a group that was established by the previous Administration and which involves local authority representation—which sets out the different suggestions for ways in which the funding formula could be improved.

At the core of the funding formula is an overwhelming range of indicators that are influenced by population movements. The accuracy of those population estimates gets stronger year by year, and year-on-year changes

are reflected into the bargain. I therefore think that adequate account of such issues is taken in the funding formula. Nevertheless, notwithstanding my earlier answer to Brian Adam, there are areas in relation to which we will continue to revisit the contents of the funding formula to ensure that they remain appropriate for local needs.

I am glad that Mr Carlaw recognises the council tax freeze as a measure that will support individuals who were punished by the 60 per cent increase in council tax under the previous Administration. I am sure that many of those individuals will be relieved to see the twin initiatives of the present Administration to freeze council tax and to deliver a fairer local taxation system that is based on income and the ability to pay. I look forward to enthusiastic support from my Liberal Democrat friends when I bring that proposal to Parliament.

Economic Strategy and Budget (Gender Equality)

10. Elaine Smith (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive how the overall economic strategy and spending plans detailed in "Scottish Budget Spending Review 2007" provide for the promotion of gender equality. (S3O-1766)

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth (John Swinney): Together, "The Government Economic Strategy" and "Scottish Budget Spending Review 2007" set out the approach and spending priorities to deliver the Government's overarching purpose of increasing sustainable economic growth. In both documents, we have made it clear that achieving increasing sustainable economic growth must go hand in hand with greater equality. We have set stretching national targets to make that happen.

Elaine Smith: The cabinet secretary will be aware of the gender pay gap and of recent evidence that that gap is widening. Can he provide any reasons for that and can he identify any specific actions that the Scottish Government will take to address it? What assurances can he give that measures that are intended to promote sustainable economic growth will include funding support for enhanced child care provision? What actions within the new proposals for skills development are specifically targeted at tackling gender-based occupational segregation?

John Swinney: As part of the economic strategy, we have established a national solidarity target to increase the overall income that is earned by the three lowest income deciles, as a group, by 2017. That will require a concerted effort by the Government to improve the income levels of women in Scotland. In establishing that framework of ambition, we have to translate that ambition into

the practical realities of policy interventions to make these things possible. I assure the member that the inclusion of that target in the economic strategy will give a focus to the Government's decisions on this matter.

I suspect that the gender pay gap is widening because many women are involved in part-time, low-wage employment. We must ensure that we have higher-quality, better-remunerated jobs in our society and that through the skills and education agendas we equip individuals to access employment. Tackling economic inactivity is one of the major themes at the heart of the economic strategy. I suspect that one of the fundamental reasons why many women are not economically active or are unable to access the labour market is the difficulty in accessing child care. The Government is taking steps through the concordat to expand nursery provision, and I look forward to introducing other measures in that respect.

The Presiding Officer: Question 11. Jamie Stone.

The silence speaks for itself. Mr Stone is not in the chamber.

Members: Oh!

The Presiding Officer: I strongly disapprove of the practice of members lodging questions and not being in the chamber to ask them. [*Applause.*]

Local Government (Redundancies)

12. Richard Baker (North East Scotland) (Lab): I am sure that the chamber is delighted to learn that I am still here, Presiding Officer.

To ask the Scottish Executive how many redundancies there will be in local government as a result of the planned reductions in bureaucracy. (S3O-1728)

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth (John Swinney): For once in my life, I was praying for Jamie Stone to be present so that I could have a little respite.

Notwithstanding that irreverence, staffing levels are a matter for individual local authorities. I am sure that each authority will wish to ensure that it delivers local services in the most efficient and effective way.

Richard Baker: Given the understandable concern about what the efficiency drive and the cuts in bureaucracy will mean with regard to job cuts and reductions in the number of posts, the Scottish Government must surely have a view on the matter. What negotiations will take place with the trade unions, local authorities and agencies that might be affected by such proposals, including in the north-east the Scottish Fisheries Protection Agency and Fisheries Research Services, which are also looking at potential mergers?

John Swinney: I reassure Mr Baker that other ministers and I are having a lot of discussions with local authorities and trade unions about levels of employment in the public sector. Indeed, the First Minister recently met the Scottish Trades Union Congress. That dialogue with trade unions is very important to the Government. Clearly, we need appropriate levels of employment in the public sector to deliver the public services that we think are appropriate. Although what people do might change as a result of the Government's determination to reduce bureaucracy, I am happy to reinforce in Parliament our commitment that there will be no compulsory redundancies under this Administration.

Social Return on Investment

13. Bill Wilson (West of Scotland) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Executive whether it is aware of the social return on investment tool successfully piloted by the New Economics Foundation and Social Economy Scotland. (S3O-1706)

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth (John Swinney): The Scottish Government is a partner in Social Economy Scotland and has engaged directly in the social return on investment pilot. The SROI tool offers a potential mechanism for funders to recognise the monetary value of the social returns on their investments. To support this, we are currently piloting predictive SROI.

Bill Wilson: Does the Scottish Government agree that using the SROI tool would help to advance at least one of the four strategic aims of the Scottish Government's social enterprise strategy, namely to raise the profile of and improve the value of social enterprise? If so, will the Government encourage the tool's wider use?

John Swinney: Most certainly. The Government is determined to ensure that we have a more significant level of social economy activity in Scotland. One of the great privileges that I have had over the past few months is the opportunity to meet a whole range of social enterprises—indeed, Mr Mather has done likewise. Such work provides a tremendous platform for ensuring that the Government can realise its objectives and aims. SROI undoubtedly plays a part in that process and we look forward to continuing our support for it.

Business Motion

14:54

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Alasdair Morgan): The next item of business is consideration of business motion S3M-1058, in the name of Bruce Crawford, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, setting out a timetable for stage 3 consideration of the Abolition of Bridge Tolls (Scotland) Bill.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees that, during Stage 3 of the Abolition of Bridge Tolls (Scotland) 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:

Group 1: 20 minutes.—[Bruce Crawford.]

Motion agreed to.

Abolition of Bridge Tolls (Scotland) Bill: Stage 3

14:55

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Alasdair Morgan): The next item of business is stage 3 proceedings on the Abolition of Bridge Tolls (Scotland) Bill. In dealing with amendments, members should have the bill; the marshalled list, which contains amendments selected for debate; and the groupings.

The division bell will sound and proceedings will be suspended for five minutes for the first division. The period of voting for divisions will be 30 seconds.

Schedule 1

MINOR AND CONSEQUENTIAL AMENDMENTS

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The first group is group 1.

Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): On a point of order, Presiding Officer.

Although I respect the Presiding Officer's right to select amendments for debate at stage 3 as he sees fit, is it in order to ask about the basis on which the amendments have been deemed admissible? The bill is on the abolition of bridge tolls, and it would achieve the abolition of bridge tolls, but the amendments go beyond that and seek to interfere with a completely different policy mechanism: road user charging schemes. It seems to me that the amendments are outwith the scope of the bill. Can I ask for an explanation of the basis on which they have been accepted?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: No. As the member knows, the decision on selecting amendments to bills lies with the Presiding Officer. The Presiding Officers do not discuss the reasons for decisions on matters such as the admissibility of amendments.

Amendment 1, in the name of David McLetchie, is grouped with amendment 2.

David McLetchie (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Con): The bill that the Government has introduced seeks to repeal the legislative framework for the imposition of tolls on the Erskine, Tay and Forth road bridges, by which is meant the fixed tolls payable by motorists for crossing the bridges, which were set, initially, for the purpose of recouping the construction costs and, latterly, for their maintenance costs and allied purposes.

However, those are not the only tolls that can be levied in relation to those bridges. If we were to

pass the bill as it stands, the job would be only half done. The reason for that is that under part 3 of the Transport (Scotland) Act 2001, power is conferred on a local traffic authority, which covers a joint board such as the Forth Estuary Transport Authority, to introduce a charging scheme that could impose fixed or variable tolls for using the road carried by the bridge. Accordingly, amendment 1 seeks to make it clear that no such scheme may be made in the future by any joint board or body responsible for the management and maintenance of a bridge.

Members will be aware that this is no theoretical impost. It is not so long ago that a certain Liberal Democrat Minister for Transport instructed FETA to bring forward a scheme for road user charging under the Transport (Scotland) Act 2001, applicable to the Forth road bridge, as a condition of funding the upgrade of the A8000. If such a scheme had been approved, the tolls being abolished today on the Forth road bridge would not be a flat-rate toll of £1, but a scheme of variable toll charges of up to £4 to cross the bridge. That is unacceptable.

I hope that the Liberal Democrats will support amendment 1, because in the unlikely event of that party ever again being in government in Scotland, and in the even unlikelier event of one of their members being daft enough to agree to take on the transport portfolio, the passage of my amendment today would save them from themselves and avoid the ridiculous pantomime that we witnessed over the FETA tolls plan in the previous session.

Labour members will recall that a variable tolls plan for the Forth road bridge was denounced by no less a person than the current Prime Minister back in February 2006, at the time of the Dunfermline and West Fife by-election.

Members: Oh!

15:00

David McLetchie: Yes, he did. The fact of the matter is that there have been two major tests of public opinion on road user charging in Scotland: the Edinburgh scheme, which was overwhelmingly rejected in a referendum—by a margin of three to one—and the aforementioned Dunfermline and West Fife by-election, which was so deceitfully won by the Liberal Democrats. The lesson is that the public in Scotland will not accept such schemes for existing roads and bridges without at least a substantial recasting of all the taxes and duties that are applicable to motoring in this country.

Amendment 1 is limited to road user charging schemes as they apply to bridges because that is all that can be addressed within the scope of the

bill, which is about tolls on bridges. However, there is undoubtedly a wider debate to be had.

In opposition, the Scottish National Party voted for the Transport (Scotland) Act 2001 in the first instance but, eventually, it saw the Conservative light, as ever. I welcome the fact that the Minister for Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change, Stewart Stevenson, indicated the Government's support for my amendments at stage 1. That support is in line with a commitment that the SNP's then transport spokesman, Fergus Ewing, made earlier this year when the party was in opposition. He said that the SNP would not permit a measure that could result in drivers who use the Forth bridge paying tolls of £4 or more by the back door to remain on the statute book. Mr Ewing's commitment would be fulfilled by the Parliament agreeing to the amendments. I thank him and Mr Stevenson for their support, as I am sure they thank me for my support in implementing their manifesto—on this occasion, at least.

I suspect that Patrick Harvie will have more to say on the amendments—he has already had his tuppenceworth—and on the general principles of the bill. I respect his long-standing commitment to charging tolls on our motorists and will listen with interest to what he says, but before he and others speak, I advise members that I lodged identical amendments for consideration by the Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change Committee at stage 2 of the bill but Mr Harvie rejected them in his role as the convener, which he is entitled to do in exercising his discretion. Accordingly, they were never put to the committee for debate and this is the first opportunity that members have had to consider them.

I hope that I have made the case for the amendments' adoption, and I take much pleasure in moving them.

I move amendment 1.

Patrick Harvie: I am entirely happy to accept that I took the decision that the amendments were outwith the bill's scope. However, we are here now, the Presiding Officer has decided differently and I am happy to debate their substance.

David McLetchie offers to save the Liberal Democrats from themselves. I sincerely hope that it never occurs to him to offer such assistance to me. Whether he wishes to save me from myself or from anyone else, it is the kind of assistance that I can do without.

Road user charging is a fundamentally different policy mechanism from bridge tolls. David McLetchie argued that it is a form of bridge tolling. It has been the Government's position throughout and, with my noted exception, the position of the majority of the committee that bridge tolls were implemented to pay for transport infrastructure,

that that is their only acceptable use and that, on the basis that the infrastructure has been paid for, they should be abolished on the Forth and Tay, as they have been elsewhere. The Government and the committee do not accept that bridge tolls are a valid demand management measure.

The fact that we are debating the issue in the context of a bill on bridge tolls is perhaps disappointing because there is a separate debate to be had about the demand management of road traffic. When the 2001 act was debated in the Parliament seven years ago today, Sarah Boyack, who was Minister for Transport at the time, put the arguments in favour of demand management measures through road user charging. She said:

"We must take action now; we cannot leave it to future generations. We have crippling future congestion levels and alarming traffic growth projections, which will cause long-term damage to our environment. Charging schemes will be one way of addressing those issues effectively. Not only do they offer a robust means of reducing congestion, the revenue raised from charges will be ring-fenced for transport improvements."—[*Official Report*, 20 December 2000; c 1239.]

I would add to those environmental arguments, which were put clearly by Sarah Boyack at the time, the economic impact of congestion, of which we are all aware. We know that congestion will grow as a result of the decision on the bill that the majority of MSPs are likely to take later this afternoon.

I urge Labour and Liberal Democrat members who supported and argued for the principle of demand management on our roads as one measure that we need to get to grips with to consider the matter. I accept that it is politically difficult, but it is unavoidable in the long term. Agreeing amendment 1 does not mean that bridge tolls will be scrapped—that will be done by the bill; it means that at any future time, a multi-road-authority road user charging scheme that includes a bridge will be made impossible. I ask Labour and Liberal Democrat members to think again if they are intending to do anything other than vote against the amendments.

The Minister for Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change (Stewart Stevenson): I am struck that David McLetchie must have all too clearly adumbrated his intentions in relation to comments about the Liberals; I see that there has been a mass cull on their benches—only four are present to hear this exciting debate.

The issue of a bridge authority, specifically the Forth Estuary Transport Authority, having the power to adopt a road user charging scheme in place of bridge tolls was discussed on a number of occasions during the passage of the bill. I am grateful to David McLetchie, and indeed to Alex Johnstone, for raising the matter.

Ministers have considered the position carefully. We see no prospect of the present bridge authorities' promoting such a scheme, at least in the foreseeable future, but we consider it prudent to put the position beyond doubt for the future. I am satisfied that there does not appear to be anything in the amendments that would delay the ending of tolls. Given that, the Government is content to accept them.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call David McLetchie to wind up and to indicate whether he wishes to press amendment 1.

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Keep us on tenterhooks.

David McLetchie: Yes—I will let you know at the end.

This is an exciting moment for me. I have been campaigning on this matter in the Parliament for eight years or more. I respect Patrick Harvie's position in relation to the use of tolls as a demand management mechanism, but on the issue of scope, which he raised, if a motorist comes to the bridge, winds down his window and parts with money, he is not too interested in whether his £1, £2 or £4 is going towards a maintenance cost or is part of a demand management mechanism. The fact is, it is a toll. A toll is a toll is a toll. We can give it as many fancy names as we like, but that is how it is seen by the public. That is the inequity that the bill and amendment 1 seek to remove in relation to the bridges that are under discussion.

Patrick Harvie quite rightly said that the Liberal Democrats and the Labour Party supported the Transport (Scotland) Act 2001 in principle, but the fact is that they rarely support it in practice. That goes to the heart of the debate on the public acceptability of the provisions that we are discussing. It goes to the heart of my argument that it is not acceptable in this country to have such charging schemes while motorists and hauliers are paying the highest fuel taxes in Europe. Until we recast the whole pattern of taxation in that respect, I do not think that additional impositions of the type that Mr Harvie recommends are going to be acceptable.

I conclude by welcoming the Government's support for my amendments. I most certainly wish to press amendment 1.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The question is, that amendment 1 be agreed to. Are we all agreed?

Members: No.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I will suspend the meeting for five minutes prior to the division.

15:09

Meeting suspended.

15:15

On resuming—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We will now proceed with the division.

For

Adam, Brian (Aberdeen North) (SNP)
 Ahmad, Bashir (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Aitken, Bill (Glasgow) (Con)
 Alexander, Ms Wendy (Paisley North) (Lab)
 Allan, Alasdair (Western Isles) (SNP)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Richard (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Edinburgh Central) (Lab)
 Brankin, Rhona (Midlothian) (Lab)
 Brocklebank, Ted (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Brown, Gavin (Lothians) (Con)
 Brown, Keith (Ochil) (SNP)
 Brownlee, Derek (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Butler, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab)
 Campbell, Aileen (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Carlaw, Jackson (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Chisholm, Malcolm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Livingston) (SNP)
 Craigie, Cathie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab)
 Crawford, Bruce (Stirling) (SNP)
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perth) (SNP)
 Curran, Margaret (Glasgow Baillieston) (Lab)
 Don, Nigel (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Eadie, Helen (Dunfermline East) (Lab)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP)
 Fabiani, Linda (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Ferguson, Patricia (Glasgow Maryhill) (Lab)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee West) (SNP)
 Foulkes, George (Lothians) (Lab)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gibson, Rob (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Gillon, Karen (Clydesdale) (Lab)
 Glen, Marlyn (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Goldie, Annabel (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Gordon, Charlie (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab)
 Grahame, Christine (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Gray, Iain (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Harvie, Christopher (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Henry, Hugh (Paisley South) (Lab)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Lothians) (SNP)
 Ingram, Adam (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Jamieson, Cathy (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (Lab)
 Johnstone, Alex (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kelly, James (Glasgow Rutherglen) (Lab)
 Kerr, Andy (East Kilbride) (Lab)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab)
 Lamont, John (Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Livingstone, Marilyn (Kirkcaldy) (Lab)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacAskill, Kenny (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Macdonald, Lewis (Aberdeen Central) (Lab)
 Macintosh, Ken (Eastwood) (Lab)
 Martin, Paul (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab)
 Marwick, Tricia (Central Fife) (SNP)
 Mather, Jim (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 Maxwell, Stewart (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 McAveety, Mr Frank (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab)

McCabe, Tom (Hamilton South) (Lab)
 McConnell, Jack (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)
 McGrigor, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 McKee, Ian (Lothians) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 McLetchie, David (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Con)
 McMahon, Michael (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab)
 McMillan, Stuart (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 McNeil, Duncan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab)
 McNulty, Des (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab)
 Milne, Nanette (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Mulligan, Mary (Linlithgow) (Lab)
 Murray, Elaine (Dumfries) (Lab)
 Neil, Alex (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Oldfather, Irene (Cunninghame South) (Lab)
 Park, John (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Paterson, Gil (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Peacock, Peter (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Peattie, Cathy (Falkirk East) (Lab)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee East) (SNP)
 Russell, Michael (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Salmond, Alex (Gordon) (SNP)
 Scanlon, Mary (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)
 Simpson, Dr Richard (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Smith, Elaine (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab)
 Smith, Elizabeth (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Lothians) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banff and Buchan) (SNP)
 Stewart, David (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Govan) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (North Tayside) (SNP)
 Thompson, Dave (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Watt, Maureen (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 Welsh, Andrew (Angus) (SNP)
 White, Sandra (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Whitefield, Karen (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab)
 Whitton, David (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Lab)
 Wilson, Bill (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Wilson, John (Central Scotland) (SNP)

AGAINST

Harper, Robin (Lothians) (Green)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)

ABSTENTIONS

Brown, Robert (Glasgow) (LD)
 Finnie, Ross (West of Scotland) (LD)
 Godman, Trish (West Renfrewshire) (Lab)
 Hume, Jim (South of Scotland) (LD)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney) (LD)
 McInnes, Alison (North East Scotland) (LD)
 Munro, John Farquhar (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD)
 O'Donnell, Hugh (Central Scotland) (LD)
 Purvis, Jeremy (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD)
 Rumbles, Mike (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD)
 Scott, Tavish (Shetland) (LD)
 Smith, Iain (North East Fife) (LD)
 Smith, Margaret (Edinburgh West) (LD)
 Stephen, Nicol (Aberdeen South) (LD)
 Stone, Jamie (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)
 Tolson, Jim (Dunfermline West) (LD)

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 106, Against 2, Abstentions 16.

Amendment 1 agreed to.

Schedule 2

REPEALS AND REVOCATIONS

Amendment 2 moved—[David McLetchie]—and agreed to.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That ends the consideration of amendments.

Abolition of Bridge Tolls (Scotland) Bill

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Alasdair Morgan): The next item of business is a debate on S3M-992, in the name of Stewart Stevenson, that the Parliament agrees that the Abolition of Bridge Tolls (Scotland) Bill be passed.

15:17

The Minister for Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change (Stewart Stevenson): Tomorrow is the third anniversary of the tolls ending on the Skye bridge. When the previous Administration made that announcement, it set in motion a process that has brought us—perhaps inevitably—to today's debate. By ending the Skye bridge tolls, and the Erskine bridge tolls 15 months later, it highlighted what many of us have believed and argued for many years: that bridge tolls are an unfair and iniquitous way of making a small number of people pay extra for using our roads.

Our commitment to ending that unfairness, particularly for the people of Fife, Tayside and the Lothians, forms the foundation of the Abolition of Bridge Tolls (Scotland) Bill. I am grateful to many members of this Parliament for their support for that principle.

When the bill completed stage 2 consideration on 4 December—in what might well have been record time—Patrick Harvie commented that he had expected his first stage 2 as convener of the Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change Committee to be much “more demanding”. The fact that the bill has proceeded so smoothly and rapidly to this point is perhaps the best indication of the broad support that it has in this Parliament and elsewhere.

However, that does not mean that we have cut corners. I am grateful to all the members of the Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change Committee, as well as the members of the Finance Committee, for their detailed scrutiny of and comments on the bill. We have taken note of the concerns that they have expressed and the issues that have been raised by other members. I also thank the many officials whose work has brought us to this point.

We have worked closely with the two bridge boards over the past six months to ensure that proper traffic management arrangements will be in place so that the transition to toll-free journeys will be made safely and efficiently.

We have also been concerned to ensure that the staff who are affected by the changes have been treated with dignity and respect. I understand that it has been a time of great uncertainty for many of

the people employed at the bridges and I know that the boards have worked hard to keep all staff and the trade unions informed of progress over recent months.

I pay tribute to the management at the bridges and, more importantly, the bridge staff for the work that they have done to help prepare for the future operation of the bridges.

When we debated this bill at stage 1, on 15 November, I said that I would be happy to meet bridge staff to explain the thinking behind the bill and reassure them about their positions. My officials contacted the bridge authorities to offer such a meeting if staff would find it useful. Representatives of Tay bridge employees said that they did not wish to pursue a meeting and I still await a formal reply from Forth bridge staff representatives.

John Park (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): I suggest that the minister contact the transport and general workers section of the trade union Unite. I am sure that that union's representatives would be happy to meet him, as they wrote to him in the summer.

Stewart Stevenson: I take that on board and I will see what I can do.

I reassure members about the Government's commitment to continue to fund the bridges. Both are of an age at which they require constant maintenance and attention, and significant works are to come in the next few years. We have worked closely with the bridge boards to assess their funding requirements over the spending review period and beyond and we are establishing regular monitoring and consultation arrangements to ensure that those funds will be available when they are needed.

I have said that I have understandable satisfaction in bringing the bill to Parliament. Today we fulfil a commitment that was made prior to the election. The first bill from the new Scottish Government ends an injustice to the people of Scotland. It is a short and clear bill. I am delighted to move the motion.

I move,

That the Parliament agrees that the Abolition of Bridge Tolls (Scotland) Bill be passed.

15:21

Des McNulty (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab): The minister made it clear that when tolls were removed from the Skye and Erskine bridges, continuing to charge tolls on the Forth and Tay crossings would become unsustainable, which it has proven to be. People in Fife felt strongly that continuing to impose tolls on the key routes into and out of Fife, but not on other routes, was unfair.

Today, the Parliament will respond to that view by passing legislation to alter the situation.

I accept that the Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change Committee has raised several issues to which ministers have responded, but some outstanding matters are worth putting on the record. Removing the tolls raises questions about traffic management on the Forth road bridge in particular that I am not sure have been adequately addressed. I will proceed by extrapolation. In the two years since tolls were removed from the Erskine bridge, the number of closures of that bridge has been four times higher than it was in the previous five years, because traffic management arrangements do not exist for high-sided vehicles that cross that bridge. I am not sure whether the Government has identified a solution to that problem. Perhaps we should return to it after passing the bill, as it is important.

The potential increase in congestion as a result of removing tolls has been repeatedly mentioned. That possibility emerged from the expert studies. I cannot ignore those studies, because the situation that they described as a result of their modelling is about to become a reality. We need the Government to give us an idea of its proposals for dealing with additional congestion.

Ministers have perhaps sought to slide around, which they cannot do. The minister is responsible not just for transport, but for climate change. The Government has a clear commitment to reduce emissions over the period to 2050 and it must begin by reducing them now. I have reservations about whether the Government will reduce emissions at all between 2007 and 2011, but it can be argued that an increase in emissions by an estimated 8,000 tonnes will have to be pegged back by increased activity elsewhere. Some of what ministers have done on community recycling, for example, will have to be multiplied again and again to pull back the potential emissions impact. Ministers cannot ignore the emissions consequences of removing tolls.

A final issue emerges from yesterday's announcement about a replacement Forth road bridge, which we support. Toll will be removed from the existing bridge and the Government has committed itself to a new bridge, but we need an urgent indication from ministers about what the funding arrangements will be to make the new bridge a reality. I have considered the funding announcements that have been made today. There are serious questions about the Scottish futures fund. Is it different from a private finance initiative? How will it be applied?

15:25

Alex Johnstone (North East Scotland) (Con):
This has been a good week for the economy of the

east of Scotland, and particularly for those of us who know that that economy relies on transport links in the east of Scotland. The decision to make a proposal about the Forth road bridge replacement is probably the more important decision that has been taken this week, but the removal of tolls from the Tay bridge and the Forth road bridge is symbolic and is a key part of what is being done.

The bill will, of course, become the first act in this session of the Scottish Parliament. The new Government has received enthusiastic support from the Conservatives and perhaps grudging support from other members to move forward to this point. As members have said, when the process began with the removal of tolls on the Erskine bridge and the Skye bridge, it was inevitable that the people of Fife would ultimately think that a tax was being exclusively imposed on them. Of course, it is not only Fife that is affected—the economy of the whole of the east of Scotland is affected—but Fifers had a very good argument to make.

I am the first in the debate to congratulate the Dundee *Courier* on the hard work that it has done on the issue—other members will no doubt be keen to congratulate it, too. It took up the campaign at an early stage and had an important role to play in crystallising political opinions across political parties. Let it never be said that that was not a key part of the process.

Of course, the bill will affect not only the Forth road bridge, although many arguments related to the imposition of tolls on it. We should remember that the Tay bridge will be relieved of its tolls and that Dundee will be relieved of the congestion that has been caused by queues of traffic waiting to get through the toll booths on busy evenings.

I thank the staff who support the Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change Committee for their hard work, but I also congratulate the members of that committee. The Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change Committee is one of the most efficient and smooth running committees that I have sat on in the Parliament, largely because a broad range of experienced politicians—they have experience of local government and Westminster as well as of the Scottish Parliament—from various areas sit on it.

I commend Patrick Harvie, who is a man of principle. Despite the fact that he rejected David McLetchie's amendments at stage 2, he handed David the opportunity to grandstand in the chamber today during stage 3. It is an ill wind.

Members have spoken about the concern of staff who may—and inevitably, in some cases, will—lose their job as a result of the removal of tolls. Those staff have my sympathy. I hope that all

the support that the minister has promised will materialise and that, as a consequence, they will not be seriously damaged by the process. However, there is a more short-term issue. We must make it clear that although we are passing a bill that will abolish the tolls, unfortunately they will continue to be collected until the bill receives royal assent. We should remind everyone that they will still be asked to pay their tolls in the Christmas and new year period, and that they should pay them with courtesy. Tolls will be abolished soon, and it is not the fault of staff in the toll booths that people will still have to pay them for a month or two yet. Let us all remember that we should not take things out on the staff.

15:29

Alison McInnes (North East Scotland) (LD): I will speak only briefly, to emphasise issues that I raised both in committee and during the stage 1 debate.

The Scottish Liberal Democrats support the bill, but we believe that measures need to be taken to tackle the problems of more pollution and congestion that will flow from it. It is a priority for the Scottish Liberal Democrats to keep Scotland moving, so I urge the Minister for Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change to deal with the consequences of the bill. He has continued to claim that it is a simple financial measure and nothing more, but the Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change Committee disagreed and outlined a series of recommendations. I ask the minister to take action on those.

I emphasise two points, in particular. First, extra congestion must not be allowed to hamper the successful Ferrytoll services, through less reliable or significantly longer journey times for buses. That means that investment must be made in bus priority measures on the approaches to the Forth bridge. Secondly, effort needs to go into encouraging significant modal shift. Investment now in improved public transport will pay dividends. With major restrictions on the Forth bridge planned for 2009, the Government must grasp the opportunity now to begin to persuade people out of their cars. Innovative solutions for road, rail and even waterborne public transport should be encouraged. For example, the successful hovercraft trial should be thoroughly evaluated and developed.

Like Mr Johnstone, I believe that there will be immediate relief in Dundee city centre traffic flows when the provisions in the bill are implemented. However, I hope that there is a willingness to consider a park-and-ride scheme on the southern approaches to Dundee.

The budget, with its shift in emphasis from public transport to greater investment in roads, does not give comfort that the Government is serious about modal shift. The minister said that he will monitor the situation, but I ask him to do more than that. Early action is the best way forward, so I urge the Government to work closely with major employers, Transport Scotland, local authorities and the south east of Scotland transport partnership on the matter. The Government is about to invest £16 million per annum to abolish the tolls, and the result on the Forth bridge, at least, will be increased congestion. The Government should, therefore, match that investment with an equivalent sum promoting additional public transport initiatives.

15:32

Tricia Marwick (Central Fife) (SNP): This is an historic day in an historic week in what has been an historic year for the SNP and for the people of Fife and Dundee. The removal of tolls is the best ever Christmas present for the people of Fife—it is Christmas time.

This is the first bill introduced by the first ever SNP Government. As the first ever SNP parliamentarian to be elected to serve a Fife constituency, I am proud to speak in today's debate. The parties that have consistently opposed abolishing tolls—the speeches by both Labour and Liberal front benchers were extremely negative—have never grasped the essential point of those of us who have campaigned for abolition. It was never about cost, although that was an issue; it was about removing discrimination against the people of Fife and Tayside and about fairness for Fife.

There are many people who should be thanked today. Members will indulge me for starting on a personal note. I pay a special tribute to my sister, Alice McGarry, the councillor for Inverkeithing, who, like me, has railed against the injustice of tolls since the day they were introduced on the Forth road bridge, and who became a member of the Forth Estuary Transport Authority with the sole purpose of getting rid of them. She will be extremely happy today.

Steve Bargeton, the political editor of *The Courier*, convinced his newspaper to campaign against the tolls. I have no doubt that his personal commitment and *The Courier's* campaign have been instrumental in the decision that will be made tonight. To paraphrase another newspaper, it was *The Courier* wot won it. It is a pity that MSPs based primarily in the west of Scotland were so dismissive of the influence of *The Courier* and the support of its readership. If they had not been, the tolls would have been removed years ago.

The National Alliance Against Tolls has lobbied consistently against tolls. I know that its members, too, will be celebrating tonight.

I thank my SNP colleagues, especially Shona Robison, Bruce Crawford and John Swinney, who, like me, spoke in debate after debate during the long days of opposition in the Parliament. Because they are now ministers, they cannot speak in today's debate, but they have campaigned consistently for the abolition of tolls and I pay tribute to them.

Pre-1964, a ferry conveyed passengers across the Forth for a price, although Queen Margaret probably got over to Queensferry for free. In September 1964, tolls were introduced on the Forth road bridge. In 1967, tolls were introduced on the Tay bridge. When the bill receives royal assent—we hope by the end of January—for the first time in history the people of my beloved kingdom of Fife will travel free across the Forth to Edinburgh and back again.

15:35

Helen Eadie (Dunfermline East) (Lab): I will not seek comfort in trying to identify other people's failings. Instead, I will warmly welcome the bill and congratulate the minister and the Scottish Government on what is an historic day for the people of Fife.

Like others in the Parliament, all my life—well, for the 24 or 25 years that I have lived in Fife, if not quite all my life—I have campaigned to have the bridge tolls removed and I have been identified as having done so. I am pleased that the minister acknowledged that in the stage 1 debate on the bill.

It is absolutely right to say that this is an historic occasion. The debate was never about just the cost of the bridge but about the economic decline of Fife, which now has no coal mines or naval dockyard and little manufacturing industry. The people of Fife felt that they were totally discriminated against because of the tolls. That is why I recognise how momentous today's decision will be for many businesspeople, the people who need to travel to our major hospitals and the people whose day-to-day lives involve travelling to West Lothian or wherever.

However, I hope that members will be generous today in acknowledging that the previous Labour-Liberal Democrat Government delivered on the A8000. Building that road has made a remarkable difference to the people of Fife because it has removed one of the major causes of congestion. My colleagues in the Labour-Liberal Democrat coalition achieved that. We really need to think about the history behind the issues. However, I promised not to seek comfort in other people's

failings—the by-election and other things have already been mentioned by other speakers.

I say to Patrick Harvie that I recognise his commitment, that he is right to argue his corner and that we need the national and global media to tell us why we have to be mindful of the global climate change argument. However, he should not use the tolls as a proxy for congestion charging, as that is what the people in Fife have fought. If he wants to argue for congestion charging, we should have a broader discussion that applies to the whole of Scotland rather than single out Fife. His point about congestion is wasted on the rest of us because, although it is a legitimate argument to make, he should not single out Fife. We have experienced that discrimination—that feeling that no one cares about us and that we are not valued.

I now look forward to the day when the very last toll will be collected, but I want to know when that will be. I know that we must be patient and that, as Alex Johnstone rightly said, we must be mindful of the people who will continue to collect the tolls, but I hope that the minister, in winding up the debate, can tell us exactly when we can expect that joyful day to come.

I thank the minister and again congratulate him.

15:39

Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): During the stage 1 debate on the bill, some members were—perhaps understandably—a little uncomfortable with my role as spokesperson for the Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change Committee, given that I disagreed with the majority of its members. I am glad to say that, this time, I am grateful to my good friends in the Scottish National Party—however wrong-headed they may be—for allowing me one of their speaking slots. I make it clear that I am speaking on my own behalf. Nevertheless, I once again thank the committee, its clerks and all our witnesses. We decided that, as this simple and short bill had complex consequences, we should look into them all, so I thank everyone who made that possible.

Although I am free to say what I really think this afternoon, it is just about possible that MSPs will not be persuaded of the merits of my arguments.

The minister said that the bill is “short and clear”. It is—but it is also bad. It is clear that it is bad for the environment. We all know that, and members expect me to say so. Too often, we are told by ministers and others that it is important to strike a balance between the environment and economic or other considerations. Typically, that phrase is used to justify environmentally destructive measures. Oh for the day when the road lobby, the aviation industry and—goodness knows—even golf resort developers are told that we have to

strike a balance and that they will be the ones to be disappointed.

Stewart Stevenson: Will the member take an intervention?

Patrick Harvie: I am afraid that, because we have short speeches, I do not have time.

Aside from the environmental arguments, the bill is bad for commuters as well. Far from keeping Scotland moving, as Alison McInnes said, the bill will result in more people spending more of their lives stuck in traffic jams. They will probably wish that they could pay £1 to get out of them. It is no good simply having additional public transport. We need to move people from one mode of travel to another. We need alternatives and not just additions. The change from one mode to another will not happen unless we give people the right incentives as well as the transport alternatives.

I am sorry to point out that there is also a contradiction between what we are doing now and what we will do later, in one of the final items of business before we break for the recess, when, I hope, we will agree to the legislative consent motion on the United Kingdom Climate Change Bill. I say to Helen Eadie that it is not enough—and it has not been enough for 20 years or more—to be mindful of climate change. That does not do any good. We need to take action. It is worse than useless to set targets without taking action.

Finally, I reflect on the fact that, at stage 1 and today, there have been a few jokes about lost by-elections. I believe that the tolls are being abolished not for valid and viable reasons of transport policy but for reasons of narrow, short-term, party-political advantage. That is shameful. Being mindful of the need to change is not enough. We need to do it.

15:42

John Park (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): I am pleased to support the bill. The debate gives me an opportunity to raise a number of issues and concerns about the Forth bridge that have been shared with me by the people of Mid Scotland and Fife. Unfortunately, I was unable to ask a question after John Swinney's statement yesterday, but his announcement of a new crossing was welcome, especially just before the Christmas break. I wrote to him on Sunday urging him to make an announcement before the recess. It is safe to say that his response was the fastest that a Labour member has had from the Scottish Government. The record was not difficult to break, mind you, but I am sure that we will raise that in other debates.

We could not debate removing the bridge tolls without highlighting the need to ensure the future safe operation of the crossing and the surrounding

area. The main concern is the condition of the main cables. I have no doubt that the cost of maintaining the bridge will increase significantly in the next few years. I am sure that the Government is considering that, but it would be good to hear a reassurance from the minister that the Scottish Government will ensure that funding is available for the bridge to remain in operation until the new crossing opens. It might have to remain in operation until 2019.

My view is that, even with the construction of what is being described as a replacement crossing, the existing crossing might require to be recommissioned at some point. We have a similar situation at Kincardine. It would be interesting to know whether the minister has given that any thought. That is where the debate will go next, along with other issues such as ferries and other ways of getting across the Forth.

The minister will have heard yesterday many comments on the need for a Rosyth bypass. I have been pursuing the matter since I was elected to the Parliament. Waiting until 2011 to find out whether the dehumidification of the cables has been successful is a bit of a gamble and I am not the only one who thinks that. Hundreds of people in Rosyth have signed a petition that calls for a bypass to be constructed. I would appreciate it if the minister could confirm whether he has had any discussions with Fife Council councillors or officials on that matter; it would be useful to know what deliberations are taking place.

I have also written to ask the minister to come and take a drive through the Rosyth area, to get a feel for what it is like to drive a heavy goods vehicle there. It is not just about the A985 that goes through Rosyth; the A977—

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Trish Godman): Mr Park, we are debating the abolition of bridge tolls. Perhaps you could try to stick to that a wee bit more.

John Park: I was trying to talk about the issue that we have around—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I know what you were trying to do, but that is not what you should be doing.

John Park: There is a connection between the safe operation of the bridge and the roads around the area. As members know, FETA was set up to put funding into—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You have only a minute anyway, so you had better do something.

John Park: Can I finish?

Thank you for indulging me there for a minute, Presiding Officer.

There is clearly support for the bill on this side of the chamber, particularly from me, and I look forward to an exciting and important time for the Forth. The removal of the tolls as well as the building of a new crossing will lead to some major decisions for the Government. We are pleased to support the passage of the bill today.

15:46

Jim Tolson (Dunfermline West) (LD): There are a number of issues about the Forth road bridge and, for many years in my constituency and beyond, the major one has been tolls.

I am glad to seek the chamber's indulgence to thank the cabinet secretary for his announcement yesterday. Many of us want a new bridge across the Forth rather than a tunnel, and the Government made the right decision, for the sake of not just my constituents, but people throughout east central Scotland.

The Tay Road Bridge Joint Board has done a good job of managing the Tay road bridge for several years. I want to be sure that the debt on that bridge will be well covered—there is more than £15 million of debt with the councils and the Scottish Government. Will the economic benefits of removing the tolls cover those debts? I ask the minister to comment on that during his winding-up speech.

Like the Tay Bridge Joint Board, the Forth Estuary Transport Authority has done a pretty good job of managing the bridge, which has only ever been closed for essential maintenance and emergencies. I am, however, glad to see that the tolling gantry will go, because that has been another contentious issue.

The timing of the removal of the tolls is crucial. Removal will increase traffic levels and, whether it is by 6 per cent or 20 per cent, it is a big issue and I share some of Patrick Harvie's concerns about the increased traffic, the delays that it might cause, and the impact on the environment. I ask the minister to assure us that better public transport options will be put in place before the tolls are removed. Alison McInnes rightly mentioned bus infrastructure. As a constituency MSP, I get plenty of complaints about the lack of proper links to the Ferrytoll park and ride from within Fife, which discourages people from using the Ferrytoll bus service. We need to ensure that those links are improved to allow as many people as possible to use the bus systems to cross the bridge rather than incrementally increasing the traffic flow.

In the previous Administration, my colleague Tavish Scott helped to address some of those issues by increasing the length of platforms and the amount of rolling stock. That allowed more

people to use the trains, but the population has increased, particularly in Dunfermline in my constituency, and those trains have filled up. More work needs to be done there. An integrated transport system is what we are looking for and I ask the minister to mention that in his closing remarks.

The real issue about the bridge tolls has been one of fairness. Once the Skye and Erskine bridges had lost their tolls, it was essential that Fife did not continue as a prisoner to tolling. Bridge tolls have had and continue to have a significantly detrimental impact on the economy of Fife. Many business people have said to me and other elected members in the area that they are considering moving out of Fife and taking jobs away. I want to ensure not only that we retain the jobs that we have in Fife, but that we have the chance to create inward investment. When the tolls eventually go, we will be on a fair and level playing field with all other areas in Scotland.

It was good of Alex Johnstone to mention staff issues. He is right that some of the treatment of staff by members of the public has been absolutely deplorable. I echo his excellent comments on that. Parts of the debate have been good. Tricia Marwick was right to mention the campaign by *The Courier* and Steve Bargeton, which has had a tremendous impact on the public's views in Fife. John Park made some good points, despite his wee detour round the roads of Rosyth. We will return to that issue, but I think that we have similar views on it.

I ask the minister to take on board the key points that have been made about some of the serious impacts of removing the tolls. However, at the end of the day, the bill is about fairness and giving people in Fife a chance. Inward investment will not be deterred and our constituents will be able to travel for leisure or work in any way they see as reasonable.

15:51

Ted Brocklebank (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): As one who has long campaigned for the removal of the tolls on the Fife bridges, and after listening to the well-aired arguments in this historic stage 3 debate, I am tempted simply to say, "Game, set and match", and then sit down. However, as I know that nobody is in any hurry to get home on this last day of term, I might be allowed one or two reflections of a not-too-serious nature on where we are at and how we got here.

It was James Ogilvy, Earl of Seafield, who said:

"Now there's ane end of ane auld sang",

as he listened to the final debate on the treaty of union in 1707. The tolls campaign has been an

auld sang and a lang ane. I am genuinely sorry that, as far as I can see, Iain Smith is not in the chamber and that he stayed long enough only to abstain in the vote on amendment 1, because the campaign has been a particularly lang sang for Mr Smith. In the debate on the issue on 15 November, he told us that he began campaigning to have the Tay road bridge tolls removed when he was a mere lad of 17. That came as something of a surprise to most, given that, in debate after debate, he had consistently argued and voted with his party to retain the tolls. However, it turns out that that was really a cunning strategy. From the days when he went out waving his "Ban the Tolls" placard, right through until 8 February this year—the first time that he actually voted to abolish the tolls—Iain, like ABBA, had a dream. Okay, it took 30 long years for it to be fulfilled, during eight of which he was part of a Lib-Lab Executive that constantly knocked back any thought of abolishing the tolls but, ultimately, thanks to the coalition being turfed out, Iain's cunning campaign finally paid off. The Tories, backed by the SNP, caved in and, in eight months flat, all Iain's dreams have come true. Now we will have a toll-free Tay bridge and a free Forth crossing as a bonus.

Iain Smith was not alone in having a dream to get rid of the tolls. I pay serious tribute to Helen Eadie, Marilyn Livingstone and departed colleagues Christine May and Scott Barrie, all of whom recognised the absurdity of scrapping tolls on the Skye and Erskine bridges and keeping them on the Tay and Forth bridges. As other members have done, I pay tribute to the tenacious campaign run by Steve Bargeton of the *Dundee Courier*. Their campaign was not quite as long as Iain Smith's was but, dare I say it, it was perhaps a bit more transparent. As others have done, I pay tribute to the bridge staff and management and offer sympathies to them. I hope that their present difficulties can be resolved.

By accepting David McLetchie's amendments, the SNP concedes that tolls cannot be reintroduced by FETA as road user charging or in some other guise on the Forth bridge. We in Fife really do have much to celebrate this Christmas. A new Forth crossing has finally been agreed—not a minute too soon—and we have an end to the punitive road tax on all visitors to the kingdom who cross the two bridges. Of course, we remain concerned that part 3 of the Transport (Scotland) Act 2001 remains on the statute book, as David McLetchie pointed out, and that road user charging schemes could therefore be allowed to appear elsewhere. We expect and hope that the Government, once the passage of the bill is complete, will follow through with legislation to abolish part 3 of the 2001 act altogether.

But hey! Today is a day for magnanimity in victory. It marks the end of ane auld sang indeed.

Game, set and match to the Tories, the SNP and, of course, Iain Smith, and tidings of comfort and joy to the rest of you.

15:55

Des McNulty: I am grateful to Ted Brocklebank for that amusing wee speech because, until he spoke, no one had really mentioned the removal of tolls from the Tay bridge. It is important to flag up the fact that the bill is about the removal of tolls from the Tay bridge as well as from the Forth road bridge. Although the focus has been on the removal of tolls from the Forth road bridge, we should not forget the removal of tolls from the Tay bridge.

Ted Brocklebank paid tribute to Helen Eadie, Marilyn Livingstone, Christine May and Scott Barrie. I add to that list the name of Kate Maclean, who was certainly a vociferous campaigner on the issue.

It is accepted in the Parliament that the bill will go through, but it is important that we should not ignore some of the arguments that Patrick Harvie has made on issues such as congestion management and emissions simply because they were made by Patrick Harvie. One of the burdens of being in government is dealing with such issues. Now that the Government has removed tolls from the Forth and Tay bridges, it would be a betrayal of the people of Fife if the time taken to get from Fife to Edinburgh or back the other way were to grow because appropriate measures had not been taken to manage congestion.

The minister takes the glory for the removal of the tolls from the bridges, but he has the responsibility of ensuring that the people of Fife and Tayside get the full benefit of that measure and the access across the bridges that they need.

15:57

Stewart Stevenson: It is quite clear that a large number of members agree that tolls must go, and that is what the Abolition of Bridge Tolls (Scotland) Bill will deliver.

I was brought up in Fife and spent the first 20-plus years of my life there, so it brings me considerable pleasure to see the abolition of the tolls. I crossed the Forth road bridge on the first day that it was open; perhaps I will have the pleasure of crossing it on the first day on which it is free to do so.

A number of issues have been raised, as many as possible of which I will try to deal with in the time available. As regards the modelling of traffic, I stress that we are talking about a model. Reality might converge with the model and show it to be 100 per cent accurate but, equally, it might diverge

from it. Models are merely estimates; we will of course engage in reality.

Alex Johnstone: I intervene at this point in the minister's speech because those of us who use the Forth bridge regularly are aware that the opening of the A8000 has made a significant contribution to reducing congestion and to improving flow rates on the bridge. Will the minister ensure that any analysis that is done of the removal of tolls from the Forth bridge takes into account the fact that some of the change might be due not to the removal of the tolls, but to the opening of the A8000?

Stewart Stevenson: The member makes a reasonable point. There is certainly no longer the same backing up of traffic, which now goes on to the M9 extension. Nonetheless, we do not anticipate that the volume of traffic using the crossing at the peak hour will be materially different, so we cannot use that as an excuse to fail to engage in dealing with the consequences that may derive from the abolition of the tolls.

Patrick Harvie and Des McNulty quite properly focused on the CO₂ impacts of abolishing the tolls. Des McNulty said that there could be an increase in emissions of 9,000 tonnes of CO₂ per year; other members have used a figure of 8,000 tonnes. It is worth saying that it has been suggested that the climate change conference in Bali cost 47,000 tonnes of CO₂. It is what we do with our expenditure on reducing CO₂ emissions that is important, as well as the mitigation measures that we put in place.

Des McNulty referred to the Erskine bridge. FETA has arrangements for handling separate closure for high-sided vehicles when required, and I am sure that FETA's professionals will continue to manage the bridge as effectively after the abolition of tolls as they have before it. Alex Johnstone referred, quite properly, to what is perhaps an early thought in motorists' minds that the tolls may have been abolished. I can assure him that FETA has a strategy that will go into operation this very night and continue as long as necessary to deal with any misapprehension that the bill having been passed will immediately lead to the lifting of the tolls.

Alison McInnes talked about Ferrytoll. It is absolutely vital and we fully support it. Members will have seen a reference in yesterday's announcement to our continued support for Ferrytoll. Our investment in public transport over the next three years dwarfs the cost of abolishing the tolls. The Tay bridge debt will be repaid at the end of January—I can give an assurance that that is provided for in the current budget. I hope that John Park will forgive me if I do not go on at length about the Rosyth bypass, as that is ultra vires. However, I have had preliminary discussions with

Fife Council on the subject. I say to Jim Tolson that our plans over the piece should deliver an extra 1,000 places on trains from Fife.

The bridge boards have put in place new traffic management arrangements, new signage and temporary works where necessary that will allow the transition to the free crossing. I understand that they are working on the assumption that all the necessary steps will be in place to allow tolls to end around the first weekend in February. That is a reasonable assumption, although it depends on matters such as royal assent, the timetable for which I cannot influence. As I said to Helen Eadie in the stage 1 debate on 15 November, I will sign the commencement order on the first day on which I am able to do so and give the smallest gap to implementation that is consistent with the advice that I get from the boards about what we can do.

There is a clear, if not total, consensus on the bill, both among members and among those outside the Parliament who travel on our roads and bridges. I trust that Parliament will support the motion in favour of the bill at decision time tonight.

Climate Change Bill

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Trish Godman): The next item of business is a debate on motion S3M-1023, in the name of Stewart Stevenson, on the United Kingdom Climate Change Bill.

16:03

The Minister for Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change (Stewart Stevenson): We all understand the need to take action on climate change and to co-operate with other countries to do so. The United Kingdom Climate Change Bill sets a statutory target of at least a 60 per cent reduction in targeted greenhouse gases by 2050. The target relates to carbon dioxide, but the bill provides scope to alter the target level or to include other greenhouse gases in future. It will be the secretary of state's duty to meet that target, but he will look to the other Administrations in these islands to assist.

The bill ensures consultation with the Scottish ministers on setting and amending carbon budgets and on amending targets. The bill will benefit Scotland. It enables us to obtain expert advice from the new committee on climate change on our contribution to the UK target and on our own proposed target of 80 per cent. It provides enabling powers under which all the Administrations may establish trading schemes related to greenhouse gas emissions. That provides a means of establishing joint schemes—but does not require us to have such schemes—and allows us to set up what we decide is suitable for Scotland. We have no immediate plans to use those powers. The bill also provides for a UK-wide assessment of the risks posed by climate change, to which we will need to adapt.

Through the bill, we shall work with our partners at Westminster towards shared objectives and demonstrate international leadership. It is important to note, though, that the bill does not dictate the measures that we should take in Scotland. We can legislate in the Scottish Parliament for our own target and determine Scottish measures to support both targets.

I move,

That the Parliament endorses the principle of introducing for the United Kingdom as a whole statutory targets and a related framework for action to mitigate climate change by reducing carbon dioxide emissions as set out in the Climate Change Bill, introduced in the House of Lords on 14 November 2007, and agrees that the provisions in the Bill which fall within the legislative competence of the Scottish Parliament should be considered by the UK Parliament.

16:05

David Stewart (Highlands and Islands) (Lab):

On the last day before the Christmas recess, there can be few more important subjects for debate than the environment and climate change. Whether one is choking in the smog of Los Angeles or watching acid rain fall in Siberia, climate change is a global issue that requires co-operation, understanding and international action. Al Gore has developed into an evangelist on climate change, and I recommend his film "An Inconvenient Truth" to all members as a Christmas stocking filler.

The Bali summit has made important progress with a development road map to cut greenhouse gas emissions that has been described as a "historic" agreement by the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, Hilary Benn. I recognise that it will not satisfy every non-governmental organisation and every environmental campaigner, but as is often said, a journey of 1,000 miles starts with the first step.

Labour members welcome the legislative consent motion as a positive opportunity to recognise that climate change knows no boundaries. As the minister has, appropriately, laid out, the Westminster bill sets a number of targets: a 60 per cent cut in CO₂ emissions by 2050; intermediate targets by 2020; an independent committee on climate change with, of course, Scottish input; the establishment of trading schemes related to greenhouse gas emissions; and annual reporting. The Climate Change Bill is historic, as it will make the United Kingdom the first country in the world to have a legally binding long-term framework to cut greenhouse gas emissions and adapt to climate change.

The consultation on the bill received more than 17,000 responses. Some called for the bar to be raised, with higher targets; some suggested that other greenhouse gases should be included in the targets; and some suggested the inclusion of international aviation and shipping, which are currently not in the bill. Of course, as the minister pointed out, all those issues can be addressed by the expert committee.

In the spirit of Christmas generosity, I welcome the constructive cross-party engagement that exists on the issue, especially from the SNP. In opposition, the SNP was not keen on legislative consent motions; today, it recognises their usefulness and the benefit that can come to Scotland by allowing Westminster to legislate for the introduction of a shared framework throughout the UK. We all have the common goal of a world with a low-carbon economy, and I always welcome sinners who wish to repent. I also welcome the support of WWF Scotland and RSPB Scotland for the legislative framework, which will ensure that

CO₂ emissions cuts are achieved and be a vital tool in the fight against climate change.

In its election campaign, the SNP made great play of its 3 per cent binding targets year on year. I ask the minister, in winding up the debate, in the spirit of generosity, to confirm today whether those 3 per cent targets will be in the Scottish Government's bill; when the Scottish Government's proposal will be open to consultation; when the draft bill will be published; and whether the Government will consider carbon-neutral budgets whereby carbon-emitting projects such as the Forth road bridge, about which we have just heard, will be mitigated by carbon-reducing projects on the other side of the balance sheet, such as modal shift.

Labour has shown world leadership in taking action on climate change. We made it our top priority for our presidency of the G8 in 2005 and we led the world in setting tough targets for cutting the emissions of greenhouse gases. We also launched the world's first economy-wide greenhouse gas emissions trading scheme and, in April 2001, in a resolution for which I voted, the Labour Government introduced the climate change levy, which is expected to reduce CO₂ emissions by at least 2.5 million tonnes by 2010.

Labour's proposed Scottish climate bill would have delivered a reduction in council tax for householders who recycle more and for those who install energy-efficiency measures and microgeneration. I should at this stage acknowledge Sarah Boyack's work in the area. Will the minister undertake to consider such measures in the Scottish Government's proposed climate change bill?

With ice caps melting in Greenland, wild fires raging in tropical forests and the oceans acidifying, planet earth cannot wait any longer for action on global warming. We strongly support this legislative consent motion and commend it to the chamber.

16:10

Alex Johnstone (North East Scotland) (Con):

This is a unique day: we are all agreeing on things that we have never agreed on before. The irony is, of course, that we are debating a legislative consent motion that is not only supported by the SNP but has been proposed by an SNP minister. In the past, the SNP always opposed legislative consent motions—

Stewart Stevenson: No we did not.

Alex Johnstone: Well, the SNP opposed them in principle because it believed that everything should be done here. On the other hand, the Conservatives always supported legislative

consent motions because, deep down, many of us still think that everything should be legislated for in London. However, as I said, today, we are in the unique position of being in full agreement on the principle.

The legislative consent motion on the UK Climate Change Bill is one of the most complex and important of its kind, and it sets a framework for something that we must and will work towards in years to come. As a Conservative, I might well suggest that there is no need for a Scottish climate change bill because the UK bill can cover everything, but my position has changed almost as much as everyone else's, because I have come to the conclusion that that is not the case. I believe that Scotland needs its own bill because we start from a very different baseline from the rest of the UK and because this country's potential for achieving results in these important areas is very different.

We must also take this opportunity to consider measures such as trading schemes to ensure that Scotland does not suffer from the setting of higher targets. One might, for example, ask why the Government has set an 80 per cent carbon reduction target for Scotland when the UK target is 60 per cent. I am prepared to accept many arguments on the matter, but my worry is that 80 per cent was plucked out of the air because it is more impressive than 60 per cent. If such a target can be justified, I am happy to support it.

I have raised with the minister before—and will raise it again now to ensure that we can have some thinking on the matter—my concern that although the potential for achieving results is different in Scotland, setting even more ambitious voluntary targets might result in the Scottish economy, Scottish businesses and Scottish local authorities suffering financially from trying to find the resources to meet them. As we begin to examine the proposed framework, we must get the minister to think about the additional cost to the Scottish economy of setting more ambitious targets.

When I raised my concern before, the minister said that any effects will be positive rather than negative. I want to ensure that trading schemes or other fiscal arrangements allow for Scotland to be compensated should any negative effects make themselves felt. After all, if Scotland—as it is well able to do—takes on a disproportionate level of responsibility for reducing the UK's output of climate change gases, there must be some mechanism to ensure that it is not financially penalised in that respect. We must all think about ways of ensuring that Scotland's greater effort does not result in its suffering financially.

16:14

Alison McInnes (North East Scotland) (LD): I, too, support the legislative consent motion. The UK Climate Change Bill should be welcomed because it will establish the vital legislative framework for achieving cuts in emissions. Of course, we can and will argue over whether the targets are appropriate. The Liberal Democrats believe that the bill in its present form is too weak and unambitious, so the Liberal Democrats at Westminster will continue to press for a tougher bill that provides a framework for cutting our carbon emissions to a more sustainable level.

The UK bill will not compromise Scotland's climate change legislation. We must work within a national and, indeed, international context on such a crucial issue. The role of the devolved Administrations has now been detailed in the bill. I understand that that was not the case in the draft bill, so I commend the work that has been done by the Scottish Government climate change directorate and the minister on that. The secretary of state will be under an obligation to consult the devolved Administrations on setting carbon budgets, amending carbon budgets and even potentially amending the targets, and he will also have to publish an account of how he has taken account of our ministers' views.

The bill sets UK targets but is silent on the Scottish share of that task, which is why it is so important that the Government move quickly on a Scottish climate change bill. A consultation on the Scottish bill is expected to be launched in January 2008. The Scottish Government has already indicated ambitious targets to legislate for an 80 per cent emissions reduction in all six major greenhouse gases, while the target in the UK Climate Change Bill is to reduce levels of carbon dioxide by 60 per cent by 2050.

Both the UK Climate Change Bill and the forthcoming Scottish bill refer, contrary to the Scottish National Party manifesto commitment, to five-year targets rather than to annual binding targets. The Government's view that annual targets are too difficult is convenient nonsense: five-year targets would be not-in-my-term-of-office targets and not worth the paper they are written on. We want steady progress rather than five-year targets.

The Scottish Government must produce substantive policies to tackle climate change. Ambitious targets are not in themselves enough. The lack of any clear and radical initiatives to achieve them is an important omission from the SNP Government's plans. The budget, with its big investment in motorways and relatively low investment in renewables, offers no clarification.

The SNP's climate change policies are inconsistent. The budget shows a clear discrepancy between the Government's desire for economic growth and its stated intention to reduce emissions, with no explanation of how it will bridge the gap. TRANSform Scotland recently stated:

"while the Government aspires to delivering reductions in emissions, the Budget fails to clearly set out what are the climate change repercussions of the investments it proposes. It is difficult to believe there will be reductions in emissions from transport if we are to see spending on roads go up by a third."

On that point, I welcome the commitment that the First Minister made this morning in response to Sarah Boyack. He said that the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth would return to Parliament before the budget is finalised with detailed information about the carbon impact of his budget decisions. That will be interesting.

The Scottish Liberal Democrats want introduced at the earliest possible opportunity a Scottish climate change bill that contains ambitious and specific mandatory carbon reduction targets. We want policies that will deliver 100 per cent renewable electricity, a carbon balance sheet for all Scottish Government policies, a sustainable transport plan and consideration of a system of personal carbon allowances as part of a domestic carbon-quota trading scheme. We also want annual emissions reduction targets by sector.

The first announcement that the SNP made on the Scottish climate change bill was that it would not contain annual targets, which breaks its manifesto commitment. The SNP has delayed the introduction of the bill for approximately 18 months for a period of "formal and informal consultation", but no details are forthcoming. We are swiftly losing ground.

To return to the UK bill, I reiterate our support for the legislative consent motion.

16:18

Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): Some legislative consent motions have been agreed to without debate. There are good reasons to have even a short debate on this occasion, not the least of which is that it is one of the most extensive legislative consent—or Sewel—motions that we have ever considered, because huge parts of the UK bill cover devolved matters. Perhaps more important than the scope of the LCM is that the legislation is on the most urgent and important issue. More and more, I hear politicians from across the spectrum saying that: I recently heard Gordon Brown say it at the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association in London, although I wonder increasingly how many of them understand the meaning of the words they say.

The Scottish and UK Governments both claim to be world leaders on climate change. Those are reasonable claims, but only because of the crying lack of competition for the title. Very few Governments in developed countries are even saying the right thing, and those that are will still not do the right thing. The Prime Minister's comments came in the same week as the Government gave backing in principle for a new runway at Heathrow airport. They came in the same month as the Bali negotiations, which David Stewart mentioned. He called the agreement an historic treaty, but I prefer to call it an historic irony. We have been in the same place many times with the Americans. We weaken treaties to keep them at the table and we weaken them even more when they threaten to leave again. We weaken them and weaken them, but they do not sign at the end of the day. There is a real danger that we will end up repeating exactly the same process.

Our debate is happening while four political parties continue to strike the balance, as I mentioned in the previous debate. They support road building—including, I remind Alison McInnes, projects that were set in motion by the previous Government and which were supported by all four of those parties—aviation subsidies and fawning over the unsustainable development plans of ill-coiffured billionaires. We are also having the debate in the same month as figures for car journeys and air journeys broke all records—something that happens pretty much annually.

In short, we are failing. We are not doing what we said we would do. If we were ignorant of the consequences—if we did not understand or did not know what was going to happen and is already happening to some countries, particularly small island states—or if we did not understand the threat to our civilisation, our global economy and hundreds of millions of lives, we could almost be forgiven for our inaction. However, we are not ignorant: we understand but we are doing nothing.

I could urge the Scottish Government to press the UK Government to go further in its bill. Certainly, as other members have made clear, it needs to go further. A 60 per cent reduction might have made sense when we were unsure of some of the science but it is now clearly a meaningless and inadequate target. I could urge the Government to go further on which greenhouse gases are covered and whether emissions from aviation and shipping are included, but the Scottish Parliament's job is to urgently demand more from the Scottish bill, which is also clearly falling behind the science—an 80 per cent reduction target is behind the science now.

As we close the year with this short debate on a hugely important motion, let us commit to

spending the next year ensuring that the Scottish bill goes far beyond even the Government's current aspirations and sets the pace for change that could become an example that is genuinely worthy of the title "world leaders on climate change".

16:23

Stewart Stevenson: The legislative consent motion is unusual in its extent. Key elements of the bill are within the legislative competence of this Parliament, but we must work with our UK partners, within the framework of European Union initiatives and with everyone throughout the world on this subject. I will deal with one or two of the points that have been raised and will try to get them all in.

David Stewart correctly said that climate change knows no boundaries. When our CO₂ goes into the atmosphere, it is almost certainly blown across the North Sea to Norway, and what is in our atmosphere comes from other countries. We have a shared responsibility so, in seeking to share responsibility with the Westminster Government, we are taking a pragmatic and proper view of what we should do.

The comment was made that the bill does not cover emissions from aviation. That is true, but we are supporting the UK's attempts to ensure that aviation is included in emissions trading throughout Europe and we will continue to do that. I spoke to Jim Fitzpatrick about that and, in particular, developed with him some of the issues that there would be for smaller propeller-driven aircraft that run a number of our lifeline services. With Westminster, we will continue to track changes to the bill as they are made.

Alex Johnstone—I think, subject to confirmation—said that I was the first SNP member, as an Opposition spokesperson, to propose to our group that we should support a Sewel motion, which we did. I recall that I spoke on that. We are as pragmatic as the Government as we were as the Opposition, and I am sure that we will continue to be so as we go forward.

David Stewart and other members referred to the proposed Scottish climate change bill. I do not recognise some of the things that have been said about the progress that we are making on it. We have been working intensively on the UK bill, and we are working on our own bill. An extensive consultation document will be published next month. I am sure that members will find it interesting. I hope not only that we can all engage in the consultation process as individuals and political parties, but that we can encourage others to do so. We cannot deal with the subject on a partisan basis; we can only—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Excuse me, minister.

There are far too many conversations going on. Take your conversations outside the chamber.

Sarah Boyack (Edinburgh Central) (Lab): I very much agree with Stewart Stevenson that we should not be partisan on the matter. Will he accept that the Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, has already acknowledged that the Climate Change Bill has the scope to increase the UK target from 60 per cent to 80 per cent, and that he is already considering the science on that matter? He understands that the science is pushing us in that direction. Will the minister therefore accept that that is not a matter of partisan dispute?

Stewart Stevenson: Sarah Boyack makes an absolutely proper point. This is not about competing in the UK, with the different targets that the different countries of the UK may have to set. The targets should reflect the different opportunities and challenges of each country. In Scotland, we can be the renewable energy capital of Europe and make a particularly significant contribution through that.

Alison McInnes seemed to suggest that ministers—that would be myself—would not be accountable to Parliament for the progress that is made. Each year, we intend to show what is happening on climate change and we intend that the minister will be accountable to the relevant committee and to Parliament. I suggest gently to Alison McInnes that her talking about our increased roads budget is fair enough, but I ask could she talk to Mike Rumbles about that. Earlier today, he was actively encouraging me to increase expenditure on roads.

Patrick Harvie said that the bill has a huge scope—I agree. He wants the UK Government to go further. We have just heard an indication that it might be prepared to do so, so we will work with the UK Government as it considers its targets. Over the period to 2050, the year at which both the UK and Scotland seek to achieve their targets, we will learn more about the science. We will learn more about what is possible, and we will understand more about the opportunities that exist.

In the context of the LCM, we have to ensure that we determine Scotland's response to the challenge of climate change. The Government, in setting an 80 per cent target, on which we will be consulting next year, is showing the leadership that is expected. We have been congratulated by Al Gore, and we will deliver on what we have to do for the world and for Scotland. I hope that a 104-year-old Stewart Stevenson can be around in 2050 to see us deliver on that.

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson): I will have to let the minister grow a little bit older before we come to the next item of business, which will be decision time. I cannot take it until 5 o'clock, I am afraid.

Members: What?

The Presiding Officer: I mean 4.30—I beg your pardon. I had you worried for a moment there.

16:29

Meeting suspended.

16:30

On resuming—

Decision Time

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson): The next item of business is decision time. There are four questions to be put as a result of today's business. The first question is, that amendment S3M-964.1, in the name of Jeremy Purvis, which seeks to amend motion S3M-964, in the name of Fiona Hyslop, on the Graduate Endowment Abolition (Scotland) Bill, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

FOR

Adam, Brian (Aberdeen North) (SNP)
 Ahmad, Bashir (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Western Isles) (SNP)
 Brown, Keith (Ochil) (SNP)
 Brown, Robert (Glasgow) (LD)
 Campbell, Aileen (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Livingston) (SNP)
 Crawford, Bruce (Stirling) (SNP)
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perth) (SNP)
 Don, Nigel (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP)
 Fabiani, Linda (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Finnie, Ross (West of Scotland) (LD)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee West) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gibson, Rob (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Harper, Robin (Lothians) (Green)
 Harvie, Christopher (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Hume, Jim (South of Scotland) (LD)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Lothians) (SNP)
 Ingram, Adam (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacAskill, Kenny (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Marwick, Tricia (Central Fife) (SNP)
 Mather, Jim (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 Maxwell, Stewart (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney) (LD)
 McInnes, Alison (North East Scotland) (LD)
 McKee, Ian (Lothians) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Morgan, Alasdair (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Munro, John Farquhar (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD)
 Neil, Alex (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 O'Donnell, Hugh (Central Scotland) (LD)
 Paterson, Gil (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Pringle, Mike (Edinburgh South) (LD)
 Purvis, Jeremy (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee East) (SNP)
 Rumbles, Mike (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD)
 Russell, Michael (South of Scotland) (SNP)

Salmond, Alex (Gordon) (SNP)
 Scott, Tavish (Shetland) (LD)
 Smith, Iain (North East Fife) (LD)
 Smith, Margaret (Edinburgh West) (LD)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Lothians) (SNP)
 Stephen, Nicol (Aberdeen South) (LD)
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banff and Buchan) (SNP)
 Stone, Jamie (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Govan) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (North Tayside) (SNP)
 Thompson, Dave (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Tolson, Jim (Dunfermline West) (LD)
 Watt, Maureen (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 Welsh, Andrew (Angus) (SNP)
 White, Sandra (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Wilson, Bill (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Wilson, John (Central Scotland) (SNP)

AGAINST

Aitken, Bill (Glasgow) (Con)
 Brocklebank, Ted (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Brown, Gavin (Lothians) (Con)
 Brownlee, Derek (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Goldie, Annabel (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Johnstone, Alex (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Lamont, John (Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 McGrigor, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 McLetchie, David (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Con)
 Milne, Nanette (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Scanlon, Mary (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)
 Smith, Elizabeth (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)

ABSTENTIONS

Alexander, Ms Wendy (Paisley North) (Lab)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Baker, Richard (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Edinburgh Central) (Lab)
 Brankin, Rhona (Midlothian) (Lab)
 Butler, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab)
 Chisholm, Malcolm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab)
 Craigie, Cathie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab)
 Curran, Margaret (Glasgow Baillieston) (Lab)
 Eadie, Helen (Dunfermline East) (Lab)
 Ferguson, Patricia (Glasgow Maryhill) (Lab)
 Foulkes, George (Lothians) (Lab)
 Gillon, Karen (Clydesdale) (Lab)
 Glen, Marlyn (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Godman, Trish (West Renfrewshire) (Lab)
 Gordon, Charlie (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Gray, Iain (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Henry, Hugh (Paisley South) (Lab)
 Jamieson, Cathy (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (Lab)
 Kelly, James (Glasgow Rutherglen) (Lab)
 Kerr, Andy (East Kilbride) (Lab)
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab)
 Livingstone, Marilyn (Kirkcaldy) (Lab)
 Macdonald, Lewis (Aberdeen Central) (Lab)
 MacDonald, Margo (Lothians) (Ind)
 Macintosh, Ken (Eastwood) (Lab)
 Martin, Paul (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab)
 McAveety, Mr Frank (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab)
 McCabe, Tom (Hamilton South) (Lab)
 McConnell, Jack (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)
 McMahan, Michael (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab)

McNeil, Duncan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab)
 McNulty, Des (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab)
 Mulligan, Mary (Linlithgow) (Lab)
 Murray, Elaine (Dumfries) (Lab)
 Oldfather, Irene (Cunninghame South) (Lab)
 Park, John (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Peacock, Peter (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Simpson, Dr Richard (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Stewart, David (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Whitefield, Karen (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab)
 Whitton, David (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Lab)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 65, Against 16, Abstentions 45.

Amendment agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The second question is, that motion S3M-964, as amended, in the name of Fiona Hyslop, on the Graduate Endowment Abolition (Scotland) Bill, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

FOR

Adam, Brian (Aberdeen North) (SNP)
 Ahmad, Bashir (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Western Isles) (SNP)
 Brown, Keith (Ochil) (SNP)
 Brown, Robert (Glasgow) (LD)
 Campbell, Aileen (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Livingston) (SNP)
 Crawford, Bruce (Stirling) (SNP)
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perth) (SNP)
 Don, Nigel (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP)
 Finnie, Ross (West of Scotland) (LD)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee West) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gibson, Rob (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Harper, Robin (Lothians) (Green)
 Harvie, Christopher (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Hume, Jim (South of Scotland) (LD)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Lothians) (SNP)
 Ingram, Adam (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacAskill, Kenny (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Margo (Lothians) (Ind)
 Marwick, Tricia (Central Fife) (SNP)
 Mather, Jim (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 Maxwell, Stewart (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney) (LD)
 McInnes, Alison (North East Scotland) (LD)
 McKee, Ian (Lothians) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Morgan, Alasdair (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Munro, John Farquhar (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD)
 Neil, Alex (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 O'Donnell, Hugh (Central Scotland) (LD)

Paterson, Gil (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Pringle, Mike (Edinburgh South) (LD)
 Purvis, Jeremy (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee East) (SNP)
 Rumbles, Mike (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD)
 Russell, Michael (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Salmond, Alex (Gordon) (SNP)
 Scott, Tavish (Shetland) (LD)
 Smith, Iain (North East Fife) (LD)
 Smith, Margaret (Edinburgh West) (LD)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Lothians) (SNP)
 Stephen, Nicol (Aberdeen South) (LD)
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banff and Buchan) (SNP)
 Stone, Jamie (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Govan) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (North Tayside) (SNP)
 Thompson, Dave (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Tolson, Jim (Dunfermline West) (LD)
 Watt, Maureen (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 Welsh, Andrew (Angus) (SNP)
 White, Sandra (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Wilson, Bill (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Wilson, John (Central Scotland) (SNP)

AGAINST

Aitken, Bill (Glasgow) (Con)
 Alexander, Ms Wendy (Paisley North) (Lab)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Baker, Richard (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Edinburgh Central) (Lab)
 Brankin, Rhona (Midlothian) (Lab)
 Brocklebank, Ted (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Brown, Gavin (Lothians) (Con)
 Brownlee, Derek (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Butler, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab)
 Carlaw, Jackson (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Chisholm, Malcolm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab)
 Craigie, Cathie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab)
 Curran, Margaret (Glasgow Baillieston) (Lab)
 Eadie, Helen (Dunfermline East) (Lab)
 Ferguson, Patricia (Glasgow Maryhill) (Lab)
 Foulkes, George (Lothians) (Lab)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gillon, Karen (Clydesdale) (Lab)
 Glen, Marlyn (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Godman, Trish (West Renfrewshire) (Lab)
 Goldie, Annabel (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Gordon, Charlie (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Gray, Iain (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Henry, Hugh (Paisley South) (Lab)
 Jamieson, Cathy (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (Lab)
 Johnstone, Alex (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kelly, James (Glasgow Rutherglen) (Lab)
 Kerr, Andy (East Kilbride) (Lab)
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab)
 Lamont, John (Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Livingstone, Marilyn (Kirkcaldy) (Lab)
 Macdonald, Lewis (Aberdeen Central) (Lab)
 Macintosh, Ken (Eastwood) (Lab)
 Martin, Paul (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab)
 McAveety, Mr Frank (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab)
 McCabe, Tom (Hamilton South) (Lab)
 McConnell, Jack (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)
 McGrigor, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 McLetchie, David (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Con)
 McMahan, Michael (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab)
 McNeil, Duncan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab)

McNulty, Des (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab)
 Milne, Nanette (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Mulligan, Mary (Linlithgow) (Lab)
 Murray, Elaine (Dumfries) (Lab)
 Oldfather, Irene (Cunninghame South) (Lab)
 Park, John (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Peacock, Peter (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Scanlon, Mary (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)
 Simpson, Dr Richard (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Smith, Elizabeth (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Stewart, David (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Whitefield, Karen (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab)
 Whitton, David (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Lab)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 65, Against 60, Abstentions 0.

Motion, as amended, agreed to.

Resolved,

That the Parliament agrees to the general principles of the Graduate Endowment Abolition (Scotland) Bill and, in so doing, calls for a statutory duty on Scottish Ministers to provide student support and provision made thereunder to be improved for existing and future students and further calls for more research into the barriers to accessing further and higher education to be undertaken.

The Presiding Officer: The third question is, that motion S3M-992, in the name of Stewart Stevenson, on the Abolition of Bridge Tolls (Scotland) Bill, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

FOR

Adam, Brian (Aberdeen North) (SNP)
 Ahmad, Bashir (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Aitken, Bill (Glasgow) (Con)
 Alexander, Ms Wendy (Paisley North) (Lab)
 Allan, Alasdair (Western Isles) (SNP)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Baker, Richard (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Edinburgh Central) (Lab)
 Brankin, Rhona (Midlothian) (Lab)
 Brocklebank, Ted (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Brown, Gavin (Lothians) (Con)
 Brown, Keith (Ochil) (SNP)
 Brown, Robert (Glasgow) (LD)
 Brownlee, Derek (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Butler, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab)
 Campbell, Aileen (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Carlaw, Jackson (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Chisholm, Malcolm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Livingston) (SNP)
 Craigie, Cathie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab)
 Crawford, Bruce (Stirling) (SNP)
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perth) (SNP)
 Curran, Margaret (Glasgow Baillieston) (Lab)
 Don, Nigel (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Eadie, Helen (Dunfermline East) (Lab)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP)
 Fabiani, Linda (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Ferguson, Patricia (Glasgow Maryhill) (Lab)
 Finnie, Ross (West of Scotland) (LD)

FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee West) (SNP)
 Foulkes, George (Lothians) (Lab)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gibson, Rob (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Gillon, Karen (Clydesdale) (Lab)
 Glen, Marlyn (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Godman, Trish (West Renfrewshire) (Lab)
 Goldie, Annabel (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Gordon, Charlie (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab)
 Grahame, Christine (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Gray, Iain (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Harvie, Christopher (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Henry, Hugh (Paisley South) (Lab)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Hume, Jim (South of Scotland) (LD)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Lothians) (SNP)
 Ingram, Adam (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Jamieson, Cathy (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (Lab)
 Johnstone, Alex (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kelly, James (Glasgow Rutherglen) (Lab)
 Kerr, Andy (East Kilbride) (Lab)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab)
 Lamont, John (Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Livingstone, Marilyn (Kirkcaldy) (Lab)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacAskill, Kenny (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Macdonald, Lewis (Aberdeen Central) (Lab)
 Macintosh, Ken (Eastwood) (Lab)
 Martin, Paul (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab)
 Marwick, Tricia (Central Fife) (SNP)
 Mather, Jim (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 Maxwell, Stewart (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney) (LD)
 McAveety, Mr Frank (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab)
 McCabe, Tom (Hamilton South) (Lab)
 McConnell, Jack (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)
 McGrigor, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 McInnes, Alison (North East Scotland) (LD)
 McKee, Ian (Lothians) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 McLetchie, David (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Con)
 McMahan, Michael (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab)
 McMillan, Stuart (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 McNeil, Duncan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab)
 McNulty, Des (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab)
 Milne, Nanette (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Morgan, Alasdair (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Mulligan, Mary (Linlithgow) (Lab)
 Munro, John Farquhar (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD)
 Murray, Elaine (Dumfries) (Lab)
 Neil, Alex (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 O'Donnell, Hugh (Central Scotland) (LD)
 Oldfather, Irene (Cunninghame South) (Lab)
 Park, John (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Paterson, Gil (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Peacock, Peter (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Pringle, Mike (Edinburgh South) (LD)
 Purvis, Jeremy (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee East) (SNP)
 Rumbles, Mike (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD)
 Russell, Michael (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Salmond, Alex (Gordon) (SNP)
 Scanlon, Mary (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)

Scott, Tavish (Shetland) (LD)
 Simpson, Dr Richard (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Smith, Elizabeth (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Smith, Iain (North East Fife) (LD)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Lothians) (SNP)
 Stephen, Nicol (Aberdeen South) (LD)
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banff and Buchan) (SNP)
 Stewart, David (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Stone, Jamie (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Govan) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (North Tayside) (SNP)
 Thompson, Dave (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Tolson, Jim (Dunfermline West) (LD)
 Watt, Maureen (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 Welsh, Andrew (Angus) (SNP)
 White, Sandra (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Whitefield, Karen (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab)
 Whitton, David (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Lab)
 Wilson, Bill (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Wilson, John (Central Scotland) (SNP)

AGAINST

Harper, Robin (Lothians) (Green)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 MacDonald, Margo (Lothians) (Ind)

ABSTENTIONS

Smith, Margaret (Edinburgh West) (LD)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 122, Against 3, Abstentions 1.

Motion agreed to.

That the Parliament agrees that the Abolition of Bridge Tolls (Scotland) Bill be passed.

The Presiding Officer: The final question is, that motion S3M-1023, in the name of Stewart Stevenson, on the Climate Change Bill, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to.

That the Parliament endorses the principle of introducing for the United Kingdom as a whole statutory targets and a related framework for action to mitigate climate change by reducing carbon dioxide emissions as set out in the Climate Change Bill, introduced in the House of Lords on 14 November 2007, and agrees that the provisions in the Bill which fall within the legislative competence of the Scottish Parliament should be considered by the UK Parliament.

The Presiding Officer: That ends decision time. I wish all members a very happy Christmas and a peaceful new year. I close this meeting of Parliament. We will reconvene next year.

Meeting closed at 16:34.

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