

MEETING OF THE PARLIAMENT

Wednesday 9 January 2002
(*Afternoon*)

Session 1

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CONTENTS

Wednesday 9 January 2002

SCOTTISH MINISTERS AND DEPUTY MINISTERS
PRESIDING OFFICERS
SCOTTISH PARLIAMENTARY CORPORATE BODY
PARLIAMENTARY BUREAU
COMMITTEE CONVENERS AND DEPUTY CONVENERS

Debates

	Col.
TIME FOR REFLECTION	5127
SCOTTISH EXECUTIVE'S PRIORITIES	5129
<i>Motion moved—[First Minister].</i>	
<i>Amendment moved—[Mr John Swinney].</i>	
<i>Amendment moved—[David McLetchie].</i>	
The First Minister (Mr Jack McConnell).....	5129
Mr John Swinney (North Tayside) (SNP)	5137
David McLetchie (Lothians) (Con).....	5142
George Lyon (Argyll and Bute) (LD).....	5147
Sarah Boyack (Edinburgh Central) (Lab)	5151
Nicola Sturgeon (Glasgow) (SNP).....	5153
Mr Frank McAveety (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab)	5155
Mr Kenny MacAskill (Lothians) (SNP)	5157
Mr Brian Monteith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con).....	5159
Mr Mike Rumbles (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD)	5161
Scott Barrie (Dunfermline West) (Lab)	5163
Andrew Wilson (Central Scotland) (SNP).....	5165
Alex Fergusson (South of Scotland) (Con).....	5166
Robin Harper (Lothians) (Green).....	5169
Mr Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD).....	5170
Irene McGugan (North-East Scotland) (SNP)	5171
Tommy Sheridan (Glasgow) (SSP)	5173
Des McNulty (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab).....	5175
Miss Annabel Goldie (West of Scotland) (Con).....	5176
Roseanna Cunningham (Perth) (SNP).....	5178
The Deputy First Minister and Minister for Justice (Mr Jim Wallace)	5181
PARLIAMENTARY BUREAU MOTION	5186
<i>Motion moved—[Euan Robson].</i>	
DECISION TIME	5187
BUS WARS (EDINBURGH)	5194
<i>Motion debated—[Mr Kenny MacAskill].</i>	
Mr Kenny MacAskill (Lothians) (SNP)	5194
Mr John Home Robertson (East Lothian) (Lab)	5197
David McLetchie (Lothians) (Con).....	5198
Fiona Hyslop (Lothians) (SNP).....	5201
Sarah Boyack (Edinburgh Central) (Lab)	5202
Mrs Margaret Smith (Edinburgh West) (LD).....	5205
Robin Harper (Lothians) (Green).....	5207
Lord James Douglas-Hamilton (Lothians) (Con)	5208
Susan Deacon (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (Lab).....	5209
Ms Margo MacDonald (Lothians) (SNP)	5211
The Deputy Minister for Enterprise, Transport and Lifelong Learning (Lewis Macdonald)	5212

SCOTTISH MINISTERS AND DEPUTY MINISTERS

FIRST MINISTER—Mr Jack McConnell MSP
DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER—Right hon Jim Wallace MSP

Justice

MINISTER FOR JUSTICE—Right hon Jim Wallace MSP
DEPUTY MINISTER FOR JUSTICE—Dr Richard Simpson MSP

Education and Young People

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DEPUTY MINISTER FOR EDUCATION AND YOUNG PEOPLE—Nicol Stephen MSP

Enterprise, Transport and Lifelong Learning

MINISTER FOR ENTERPRISE, TRANSPORT AND LIFELONG LEARNING—Ms Wendy Alexander MSP
DEPUTY MINISTER FOR ENTERPRISE, TRANSPORT AND LIFELONG LEARNING—Lewis Macdonald MSP

Environment and Rural Development

MINISTER FOR ENVIRONMENT AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT—Ross Finnie MSP
DEPUTY MINISTER FOR ENVIRONMENT AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT—Allan Wilson MSP

Finance and Public Services

MINISTER FOR FINANCE AND PUBLIC SERVICES—Mr Andy Kerr MSP
DEPUTY MINISTER FOR FINANCE AND PUBLIC SERVICES—Peter Peacock MSP

Health and Community Care

MINISTER FOR HEALTH AND COMMUNITY CARE—Malcolm Chisholm MSP
DEPUTY MINISTERS FOR HEALTH AND COMMUNITY CARE—Hugh Henry MSP and Mrs Mary Mulligan MSP

Parliamentary Business

MINISTER FOR PARLIAMENTARY BUSINESS—Patricia Ferguson MSP
DEPUTY MINISTER FOR PARLIAMENTARY BUSINESS—Euan Robson MSP

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MINISTER FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE—Iain Gray MSP
DEPUTY MINISTER FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE—Ms Margaret Curran MSP

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9 January 2002

Scottish Parliament

Wednesday 9 January 2002

(Afternoon)

[THE DEPUTY PRESIDING OFFICER *opened the meeting at 14:30*]

Time for Reflection

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Mr Murray Tosh): The first item this afternoon is time for reflection, led today by Rev Ian Scott, the Church of Scotland minister of Greenbank parish church in Edinburgh.

Rev Ian Scott (Church of Scotland Minister of Greenbank Parish Church, Edinburgh): I thank you for the privilege of leading this time for reflection, particularly at this, the first meeting of the Parliament in 2002.

It seems appropriate for me to begin by wishing you all a happy new year. Yet that traditional greeting, however sincerely meant, may often seem to be little more than a ritual expression. The words tend to be tinged with a certain caution, and punctuated, perhaps, with a question mark. Such a greeting has been described as an expression of hope in spite of experience. We all know that, in personal terms, the past bears ample witness to the fact that life can sometimes be very hard indeed. Very recent events confirm that truth.

National and international affairs seem to give even less cause for optimism. Perhaps, beneath the buoyancy of festive cheer, we turn to the future with more foreboding than optimism. Yet I am optimistic—confident is perhaps a better word. For me, the Christian gospel proclaims not just a belief in God, but a belief in a loving God who is also a God of justice.

That does not remove all of life's difficulties, but the Christmas message that we carry into the new year and into every day of life is that God in Jesus entered into real life and experienced all its turmoil and trauma. Yet, by sacrifice and love, he conquered evil. We have a hope that is not just wishful thinking, but a promise that, ultimately, life will be fulfilled and will be fulfilling. But that is not magic: we cannot just sit back and wait for it all to happen, nor should we suffer in silence until it does, for the God revealed in Jesus invites us—even challenges us—to use our lives to make a difference, to tackle the ills that afflict humanity, to develop the full potential of every individual and to create a caring society.

On Sunday past, my eye fell on these words

from one of our hymn books. They seem relevant to this occasion, for a Parliament and for us all:

“Till all the jails are empty
And all the bellies filled;
Till no-one hurts or steals or lies,
And no more blood is spilled;
Till age and race and gender
No longer separate;
Till pulpit, press and politics
Are free of greed and hate:
God has work for us to do.”

I wish you a good new year. May God bless all your endeavours.

Scottish Executive's Priorities

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Mr Murray Tosh): There are no Parliamentary Bureau motions to be taken now, so the next item of business is a debate on motion S1M-2578, in the name of Mr Jack McConnell, on the Scottish Executive's priorities, and two amendments to that motion.

14:34

The First Minister (Mr Jack McConnell): I, too, wish everyone in the chamber and everyone watching us today a very happy new year. In this very sad week, I also wish to extend my sympathy and sorrow to Sarah and Gordon Brown on their recent family tragedy. I am sure that everyone in the chamber will want to join me in sending our condolences.

Today I want to set out the kind of Scotland that we want to help create, our priorities for public services and the way in which we will govern: by listening and acting in partnership to build a better Scotland.

There is little doubt that recent months have been tough for devolution in Scotland. We have gone through testing times and there will be testing times to come. However, as each session passes and the years go by, devolved government in Scotland will mature. Increasingly, it will touch the lives of ordinary Scots.

Our law-making powers have already delivered major changes that will have a lasting impact on the lives of those who live in Scotland and will have a positive impact in the critical areas of education, housing and transport. In the Parliament, the work of the committees shows us devolution in action. The people of Scotland are being listened to—people with real concerns and experts with much to offer. Ideas are being discussed and acted on. In the committees, ministers are—quite rightly—held to account.

Yesterday, the leader of the Scottish National Party said:

"We don't need another debate—we need action."

However, we do need a debate, because we do not agree on the action. We need a debate because this Parliament has the right and the responsibility to consider and then affirm the action that will be taken.

Of course we need action, and there has been action. In health, we now have more doctors and nurses than there have been for years. More operations are taking place than ever before. New hospitals and modern equipment are being provided to ensure that Scots get the health care

that they deserve. However, that is not enough. We need to drive down waiting times for patients. We need to modernise and upgrade our cancer services. We need to raise morale among health service staff. For the long term, we must build a healthier Scotland in which the next generation of people worry more about what they eat and how much exercise they take to prevent illness and disease.

In education, every three-year-old in Scotland now has a nursery place. More young Scots of all ages are attending further or higher education than ever before in our country's history. Our teachers are rebuilding their professionalism for the 21st century. However, there is much more for us to do. Levels of literacy and numeracy are still too low. Too often, children in care leave school without qualifications. Our school buildings need continued investment and planning to create and sustain the modern learning environment that our children deserve.

On transport, we have begun the reinvestment that everyone knows is required in roads, railways, air and ferry services. Bus use has increased in urban areas and more than 400 rural transport projects are helping people to get around and to get to work. From October this year, all of our pensioners will have free off-peak bus travel. However, as every member of this Parliament knows, we have more to do. Scotland's transport systems still let too many people down. For our economy and our urban and rural communities, we need transport that gets people to where they want to be, when they want to be there. We must push ahead with investment in our transport systems and deliver on time the road improvements and other projects that will make a real difference to Scotland's travelling public.

Fergus Ewing (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP): Will the First Minister give way?

The First Minister: Mr Ewing may not like this, but it will be good for him to hear it.

We have record numbers of police officers. The number of crimes has been going down. More of those crimes are being solved. Most important of all, perhaps, Scotland's police forces are attacking the drug dealers where it hurts, locking them up and going after their assets. However, I want Scots to live without the fear of crime: criminals must be prosecuted and convicted quickly and effectively. We need more police officers out in the community, rather than having to shuffle paper. We must redouble our efforts to get young people away from using drugs and to get them to believe in a positive future for themselves and their communities.

On jobs, more Scots are in work. Modern apprenticeships and the new deal are providing

new hope for young people who would otherwise have faced a life on the dole. Last year employment and enterprise services matched the majority of redundant workers to new jobs. However, in 2002 our economy will face its biggest challenges for some time. In electronics, tourism and other areas, changes at home and abroad threaten job security and economic growth in Scotland. Too many adults still find themselves without the skills that they need to cope in the modern workplace or in the modern world. We need to promote our country and our exports, supporting the ideas and skills that are needed to build and sustain the dynamic modern economy that Scotland needs to compete in the global marketplace. That is what I mean by action.

I will also say why I think that we need a debate. *[Interruption.]* SNP members may not want a debate, but we will have one. We need a debate because there are those in the chamber who would prefer to spend the next 12 months stopping new hospital-building projects, school refurbishments and road improvements, rather than delivering better education, health and transport services. They would have us spend the next 12 months in constitutional arguments with London, rather than tackling crime and creating jobs in Scotland. We need a debate because if we are serious about building confidence in the Parliament, we must focus our responsibilities, not waste time blethering about what others are or are not doing. Frankly, it is not good enough—

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

The First Minister: I say to Mr Swinney that it is not good enough for the Opposition continually to tell us what cannot be done. It is time for us to focus on what must be done for Scotland.

Mr Swinney: The First Minister mentioned the private finance initiative, of which he is so incredibly proud. Does he believe that it provides value for money for the taxpayer to spend £12.3 billion on contracts for the public-private partnerships when the assets would cost the public purse £2.7 billion? Is not that simply putting money into private pockets rather than into our public services?

The First Minister: Those figures are a complete and total distortion. Everyone in Scotland knows that the new hospitals, the refurbished schools and the new roads that are being built under public-private partnerships would not exist if the SNP had its way in Scotland today. We believe in the Parliament and we will use the powers that it already has to make improvements in the lives of all those who live in Scotland.

When I was elected by the Parliament to be First Minister on 22 November, it was perfectly clear to

me that the record levels of resources in the health service were not yet delivering enough improvements in patient care. It is always possible to spend more money, but the system needs to work, too. I have spent the weeks since then talking to doctors, nurses, patients and professional staff at all levels of government and it is clear that delayed discharge—or bedblocking, as we all know it—leaves elderly people in hospital when they should be back in the community and that it increases waiting times for everyone else. That concern has been raised in the Parliament and the Minister for Health and Community Care has paid attention to it. We have talked to those affected, we have listened and now we will act. Malcolm Chisholm will announce an action plan to tackle that serious problem early next month. I can announce that this morning the Cabinet agreed to back that action plan with £20 million of new money to ensure that our hospital beds are used for patients and that our older people get the care that they deserve.

Nicola Sturgeon (Glasgow) (SNP): I always welcome extra money for delayed discharge, but would the First Minister confirm what the Minister for Health and Community Care confirmed at a recent meeting of the Health and Community Care Committee when he said that £10 million of last year's underspend was money that was supposed to be spent on tackling delayed discharge? If the Government was not competent to spend all the money that it had, how can we be confident that it will manage to spend new money more competently?

The First Minister: That is a complete and total distortion, both of what happened and of what Malcolm Chisholm said. The money was allocated, but there is still a problem. If we, as a Parliament, do not act on that problem, we are not facing up to our responsibilities. If more money is needed, it should be made available. However, this is not about money alone—there must be reform and change to ensure that the money enables the delivery of solutions.

That is just one example of how this ministerial team will listen, learn and then act on the solutions that are required. Every minister will spend time talking and listening to front-line staff and those who use our public services. They will listen and pay attention to people across Scotland, in our towns, cities and rural communities. They will hear first-hand of the problems and the blockages in the system that need to be tackled. Then they will act to ensure that the highest ever public expenditure in Scotland's history delivers the best ever public services for Scotland's future.

Fergus Ewing: Will the First Minister give way?

The First Minister: I will give way with pleasure.

Fergus Ewing: Does the First Minister understand the huge concern in the north of Scotland that BEAR Scotland Ltd is not able to perform its job of keeping the trunk roads clear and safe and that, as a result, some lives may well be at risk? Will he direct BEAR Scotland to ensure that there are sufficient resources, including vehicles and a labour force, to keep the roads safe for the road users of the north of Scotland?

The First Minister: Safety on Scotland's roads is a desperately serious issue. I am sure that each winter all members are concerned about that, not just because of who might or might not hold the contract to maintain those roads, but because year after year in Scotland we face difficulties on our roads, despite the fact that we know that the bad weather will come at some stage.

There are two issues: one is to prepare better in every winter for the longer term; the other is to monitor today, tomorrow, the next day, last week and the week before that the current contracts. That is what we were doing. As I promised before Christmas, we will report to Parliament on our monitoring of that performance.

Listening, reflecting and acting makes for mature government to take the decisions and make the improvements that our people deserve. We do not deliver this alone: we work in partnership. To strengthen our economy and secure Scottish jobs, we will work in partnership with businesses, trade unions and the United Kingdom Government.

Dennis Canavan (Falkirk West): On co-operation with the UK Government, I read in the paper the other day that the Scottish Executive is thinking about setting up a base in London, possibly by renting part of Helen Liddell's office at Dover House. Is it wise for the First Minister to get involved in the subletting of offices?

The First Minister: The comment may be witty, but it is unfortunate that Mr Canavan is so flippant when we are talking about jobs in a year that will be challenging for the Scottish economy. I believe that, where we share transport responsibilities with the UK Government, where we are both involved in economic responsibilities, where we share and have an impact on environmental responsibilities, it is important that the Scottish Executive maintains top-class relations with the UK Government. I intend to ensure that that is the case for Scotland.

To improve the education that our children receive and the transport service that our people use, we will work in partnership with councils and with those who work in our education and transport services. To tackle crime and improve our health service, we will work in partnership with the doctors, nurses, police officers and community leaders who want to build a better Scotland.

Sitting in Edinburgh, we should not have the arrogance to think that we know everything or can fix everything alone. I know that, to make a lasting difference to people across Scotland, we will have to inspire and empower local leaders to address the issues that their communities face continually.

Rhona Brankin (Midlothian) (Lab): The First Minister talked about the Executive's priorities being important for people throughout Scotland. Does the First Minister agree that the priorities that he is identifying will be vital for people whether they live in Shetland or Dumfries, rural Scotland or urban Scotland?

The First Minister: I was absolutely stunned to see Mr McLetchie on the television at lunch time—he has woken up; that is good—saying that jobs, crime, transport, education and health were not priorities for rural Scotland. I find that an astonishing conclusion to reach. They are as important in rural Scotland as they are in urban Scotland—I intend to ensure that we deliver in both.

We will have to show by our actions that we are truly committed to helping local leaders to do their jobs as best they can. I firmly believe that managers and leaders throughout the public and voluntary sectors want to do the right things and to do things right. It is our job to help them to do that, not to get in the way. If there is action we can take to reduce the red tape and to streamline the bureaucracy, we will listen and act to strengthen the capacity of local leaders to get the job done.

When we set priorities, we will stick to them. By summer 2002, we will be preparing our spending plans for the next three years. In the decisions that we make, we will ensure that this Government's resources and any new money that might be available are used directly to target improvements in health and education, to reduce crime and to strengthen our transport systems and the Scottish economy.

Mrs Margaret Ewing (Moray) (SNP) rose—

The First Minister: I have given way to a number of nationalist members already.

Those are our key priorities. I want existing resources to make a difference to those who need it most and who have the least opportunity in today's Scotland. Using resources and making improvements—all our action must close the opportunity gap, increase the possibilities and improve the future of all our children and young people.

Just as every decision and action is targeted at closing the opportunity gap, so too will all our work be judged against how well we conserve and sustain the environment that our children will inherit from us. Scotland is a land of many riches:

our natural resources and the talents of our people. Our responsibility to future generations is to conserve, protect and harness all those resources.

The governance of Scotland is not just about the efficient management and delivery of services for their own sake. Everything that we do must have a greater purpose, and that sense of purpose should be about the kind of Scotland in which we want to live. I want to live in a Scotland that is bursting at the seams with opportunity—where a child's potential and not their background is the greatest determinant of their future; where older people are rewarded for their years with care and respect from younger generations; where intolerance and prejudice are universally condemned; and where violence and abuse become unimaginable.

A strong economy married with excellent public services can make such a Scotland real. A growing, knowledge-based, wealth-creating economy means that more can share in our nation's prosperity. The boom-and-bust economics of the Tories, which so devastated Scotland's industrial base, are a thing of the past. We now have a strong and stable economy that is better placed to weather the global economic storms than that of many of our competitors. The Scottish economy is stronger because of our place in the union—not in spite of it.

Our duty, in this devolved Parliament, is to provide first-class public services. The quality and breadth of our public services are what mark our nation as a decent and civilised society. To create a Scotland that is full of opportunity we must have public services that are excellent, improving or both. Public services at their best provide a springboard for citizens to lead fulfilled and happy lives. They help the strong to look after the weak and they add strength to local communities. But public services at their worst can exaggerate inequality and devastate families by failing those who need us the most.

When I say that it is time for us to do less, better, it does not mean that we will stop setting targets: it means deliberately focusing our efforts on the five priority areas—health, education, transport, crime and jobs. They are our priorities because they are the things that matter to the people of Scotland. That is why they wanted the Parliament in the first place. Let there be no mistake about our determination. We can, and must, do better, because Scotland can, and must, be better.

While there remains a single child in poverty, there is more to do. While there are women living in fear of violence, there is more to do.

Tommy Sheridan (Glasgow) (SSP): Will the First Minister take the opportunity to congratulate

Glasgow City Council on its visionary policy of introducing free breakfast for every primary school child in Glasgow? Does the First Minister think that that is a useful use of resources? Would he care to repeat it across Scotland?

The First Minister: The recent initiatives by Glasgow City Council—the Labour Glasgow City Council—have been absolutely first class, not just in providing breakfast services for children across the city but in providing free fruit in schools and free exercise in the city's swimming pools. The council is to be congratulated on those efforts, which have been made locally by an elected council that takes its responsibilities very seriously.

Sometimes we have to make local authorities and other agencies work closely together; while there is an elderly person in hospital because there is no place for them in the community, again, there is more for us to do.

Cynics say that politicians cannot change things. That is not true. I do not accept that our children's education cannot be improved; I do not accept that our transport system cannot be better; I do not accept that it is beyond our collective ability to drive down hospital waiting times; I do not accept that Scotland cannot compete in the world economy; I do not accept that the resources of this country—the talent and the energy—cannot be used to improve the quality of life and opportunity available to those among us who need it most; and I certainly do not accept that the emerging democratic institutions of Scotland—dormant for too many years—cannot listen to the people of Scotland and then act maturely and confidently to make the difference that they seek.

In two short years, we have built a platform of achievement that we can be proud of—record police numbers and record clear-up rates for crime; a national drug enforcement agency to tackle directly those who peddle misery and despair for profit; the biggest hospital building programme this country has ever seen; our first national cancer plan; and record levels of investment directed at improving the health of our people. For the first time in our history, every child in Scotland has been given the right to an education that develops their talents and abilities—regardless of background.

I could go on and on and on listing the achievements of this Executive and this Parliament in the past two years. Although the SNP does not want to hear about it, that is just the platform on which we build. That is the record of achievement that we are committed to continuing, in partnership with Westminster to deliver a strong economy and in partnership with all those working in our public services to deliver continuous improvement. That is partnership with a purpose:

to create a better Scotland tomorrow and a Scotland that is bursting with opportunities for all of its people.

I move,

That the Parliament agrees that the Executive's priorities across Scotland must be to deliver first class public services that help create a Scotland full of opportunity, where children can reach their full potential, and that in 2002 this will mean working in partnership to improve the health service and the health of all, to achieve high employment and promote educational opportunities, to reduce crime and the fear of crime, to build an integrated transport system which meets the needs of all users and to promote sustainable development across Scotland.

14:55

Mr John Swinney (North Tayside) (SNP): I associate the Scottish National Party with the remarks that the First Minister made at the outset in relation to the sad events in Gordon and Sarah Brown's family. We share those sentiments without reservation.

I wish the First Minister and his colleagues a happy new year. However, it has not been a great start, because the First Minister is unable to get his soundbites out correctly when speaking to Parliament. His soundbite should have been—I know because he has been going on about it for days—"Do less, but do it better," but he made a slip and accidentally gave us the truth by saying that we should do less better. That sums it up. The Executive is certainly doing less better in everything that it gets up to.

The First Minister attacked the statement that I made about the private finance initiative and its cost to the public purse. The information that I gave him—that the public purse would pay back £12.3 billion for assets costing £2.7 billion—came from a written parliamentary answer from the former Minister for Finance and Local Government, Angus MacKay. I know that the Executive has a lot of trouble with written parliamentary questions these days. Half the time ministers do not answer them and the rest of the time the Minister for Enterprise, Transport and Lifelong Learning answers them, telling us that she sources her information from newspapers. The Government is in great trouble on written parliamentary questions.

Angus MacKay (Edinburgh South) (Lab): I hope that Mr Swinney will accept, as almost every member and most commentators do, that any PFI or PPP project that goes ahead under the auspices of the Scottish Parliament can do so only if it can be proven that the whole life costs of the project will be cheaper than the traditional public sector alternative. In that respect, the First Minister was absolutely right when he described Mr Swinney's comments as absolute nonsense. The

SNP is not comparing like with like.

Mr Swinney: Clearly, with such terribly helpful interventions, Mr MacKay has decided to pursue a certain career path and get himself back on the front bench. He is masking the fact that the private finance initiative is taking money from our hospital wards and schools and putting it into the pockets of private providers and financiers.

This is an interesting debate. I am all for debates in Parliament in which we can hold the Government to account. We started off the Parliament after 1999 with a superb programme for government and came back with another programme for government in 2001. It is interesting to look at the second programme for government, particularly the page that has a photograph of all the ministers on it. Out of the 11 people in the picture, all we have left is one Labour minister and two Liberal Democrat ministers. It is a bad day when one finds out that the Liberal Democrats have survived. It shows how desperately awful the Labour ministers must have been if they were even worse in office than the Liberal Democrat ministers.

What we have not had in this debate, which we did have a year ago, is a report card on the Government's performance. I am not arguing for the Government to publish another glossy document—we get enough such documents. I am arguing for a report card on how the Government has performed in the delivery of public services. The Government would have to divulge to Parliament a record of failure.

Today's debate is an exercise in spin—another relaunch for the Scottish Executive. There were two lines of spin about the debate before it took place. On Sunday, according to one of the newspapers, a source in the Executive said that it was to be a "bonfire of bureaucracy". Everyone wants a bonfire of bureaucracy, but that is a bit rich coming from a Government that, since 1999, has had 18 different consultations or reviews on health, 16 on children's issues, 17 on transport issues and 25 on justice issues. Perhaps the Government should get down to less talking and more action in the delivery of public services.

If we go back to the first programme for government, the First Minister, who was then the Minister for Finance, had responsibility for modernising government and attacking bureaucracy. If we are to have a bonfire of bureaucracy, the First Minister cannot have been very good when he was Minister for Finance at tackling the bureaucracy that the Scottish Executive spews out year after year.

The second spin that we had this morning was the five tests. Apparently, to get new money, every initiative must have something to do with health,

education, jobs, crime or transport. We have been racking our brains to think of something that might slip through the net—something that would not have a reference to health, education, jobs, crime or transport. One of the suggestions was that Scottish Opera is perhaps about to fall through the net, because it does not have an effect on any of those five areas, but there was a drugs bust at Scottish Opera yesterday, so that probably puts it in the frame for new money because it is now involved in crime.

The spin also said that the Minister for Finance and Public Services would have a veto on projects that come forward for new money. I can only assume that that is because all the guys who have been finance minister until now have not done their job properly and so the new Minister for Finance and Public Services has to apply better financial control. Perhaps that is why Angus MacKay got the sack. It does not say much for the First Minister when he was Minister for Finance.

Before we get on to the Executive's future priorities, let us examine what it has delivered on its existing priorities in health, education, jobs, transport and crime. Here is the report card. Waiting lists have risen under Labour from 75,000 in 1999 to 81,000 in September 2001, which is a rise of 7.8 per cent. Median out-patient wait has risen steadily and is now 57 days, which is a 14 per cent rise since September 2000 and a 29 per cent rise since December 1997. Delayed discharge figures—and I welcome what the First Minister said about more money for delayed discharges—have risen by 2.4 per cent in the past year. In total, 2,954 patients are ready for discharge compared with 2,885 at the previous census. The number of acute beds in Scotland has fallen by 510 since Labour came to power. How can we reduce waiting lists and waiting times if we reduce the capacity within the health service to deliver? The health report card for the Executive reads "Failed."

An early pledge by Jack McConnell, which he has made for a number of years, was that education is a right and not a privilege to be paid for. He made that pledge in 1980 as president of Stirling University Students Association. He is now in charge of a Government that presides over a higher education system that has seen student debt rise to £534 million. When he was a student, education was a right and not a privilege to be paid for. Now he is no longer a student, it is no longer a right. It is no longer "Jack the lad"; nowadays it is, "I'm all right, Jack."

To come more up to date, a pledge in the programme for government reads:

"We will reduce class sizes in P1, P2 and P3 to 30 or less by August 2001."

The latest figures show that 2.5 per cent of primary 1 pupils, 4.4 per cent of primary 2 pupils and 16 per cent of primary 3 pupils are in classes of more than 30.

Another pledge was to halve

"the proportion of 16-19 year olds who are not in education, training or employment."

In 1999, 13 per cent of young people were not in education, training or employment. That figure has risen to 14 per cent. There is total failure on that issue. The education report card—failed.

Mr Duncan McNeil (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab): It has been very interesting up until now, but will John Swinney tell us when we will come to the bit about the SNP's priorities and how he will deliver them?

Mr Swinney: It may have escaped Mr McNeil's notice that he is on the Executive benches and this is a debate about the Executive's priorities. Mr McNeil knows that I never let him down with my speeches. I will come to the SNP's priorities, but it is quite interesting how Executive party members fall silent when the reality of their record is put to them. They do not like to hear it.

Rhona Brankin: Mr Swinney has said that he has not had an opportunity to come to the part of his speech that he wants to come to. Will he get on to the bit of his amendment that states:

"only by equipping this Parliament with the powers of a normal independent Parliament?"

When will he talk to us about independence, or has he dropped the commitment to independence?

Mr Swinney: I will certainly not disappoint Rhona Brankin in my speech, just as I will not disappoint Mr McNeil.

Let us consider jobs. One of the pre-election documents that Labour put out stated:

"government has responsibility for growth and high levels of employment."

Scottish economic growth has trailed United Kingdom economic growth, which has trailed European economic growth. In the year to June 2001, UK economic growth was 2.5 per cent. What was Scottish economic growth? It was 0.3 per cent. That is the legacy of this Government. At 6.7 per cent, the unemployment rate is up and, at 73 per cent, the employment rate is down. Last year, nearly 27,000 jobs were lost in Scotland. The jobs report card is a failure as well.

The Government says that it wants an integrated transport system, which is a laudable objective. We have total chaos on our railways and the minister with responsibility for transport tells us that he has nothing to do with it. How on earth can

we have an integrated transport policy if the minister has absolutely nothing to do with delivering the transport system? The Parliament has powers over roads and ferries, but it does not have the power over railways that is necessary to ensure that we deliver an integrated transport policy. The transport record is a failure as well.

According to the Scottish crime survey, violent crime is up by 9 per cent. Strathclyde police figures show that, from November 2000 to November 2001, murders in Strathclyde were up by 11 per cent, serious assaults by 13 per cent, robberies by 7 per cent and abductions by 23 per cent. Those are the realities of the crime statistics in Scotland. The crime report card is a failure.

With that appalling record, is it any wonder that the First Minister tried to shift the burden of responsibility from his Executive to the Parliament in an interview at the weekend? Mr McConnell said:

"There's a wee question mark hanging in the air which says our hopes and dreams for this parliament are not being realised. I think we're now at the stage where we have about 15 months to prove ourselves effectively."

The Parliament has proved itself: it dragged the Executive kicking and screaming into a commitment to deliver free personal care for the elderly; it voted democratically for a tie-up scheme for Scotland's fishing industry; it shone a light on the cronyism of the Labour party that has corroded Scottish politics; and, with the SNP in the lead, it exposed the scandal of closed waiting lists. The Scottish Parliament has proved itself; the problem is that the Executive has failed to deliver on any of its policy commitments to the people of Scotland.

Mr John Home Robertson (East Lothian) (Lab): Will the member give way?

Mr Swinney: I would love to give way, but I have a limited amount of time to deal with the two key issues that Mr McNeil and Miss Brankin want to hear about. I am sure that the Presiding Officer will give me the requisite time to discuss those issues.

Scotland needs political change and an Administration that will rise to the challenge of making this country the best that it can possibly be. The SNP will use the powers of the Parliament to the maximum in a smarter and more effective way than the Liberal and Labour coalition. To make the country the best that it can be, we demand that the Parliament should have the normal powers of a normal independent country.

What would we do? We would scrap the private finance initiative and replace it with a Scottish trust for public investment, which would ensure that there were more schools and hospitals and more investment in the provisions that are required for our society. We would recruit more nurses for our

hospitals, to ensure that we increase nurse numbers rather than preside over the fall over which the Executive has presided. We would reintroduce free dental check-ups for everyone in Scotland. We would aim to reduce class sizes to 18 for Scotland's youngest children in the areas of highest deprivation—we must give our children the best possible start in life. We would introduce compensation orders to ensure that parents of young thugs pay for the cost of damage that is caused by their children. We would introduce unit fines to stop dealing out extra punishment to people just because they are poor. We would ensure that Scotland's fishermen and farmers had a direct voice in Europe through the voice of an independent country that can deliver on their behalf. To protect our environment, we would ensure that no new nuclear power stations were built on Scottish soil.

We are a party that has the highest ambitions for Scotland, to ensure that we use Scotland's resources to the best advantage of everyone who lives here. It is amazing how the Executive does not like to hear about its record. It does not like to hear about our imaginative policy ideas for taking Scotland forward and it does not want to hear about how we can ensure that Scotland uses the resources that are at its disposal to make the country the best that it can be.

The Executive is starved of ambition. The SNP is ready to deliver the leadership that will transform Scotland, with the normal powers of a normal, independent Parliament.

I move amendment S1M-2578.2, to leave out from "and that" to end and insert:

"notes the failure of the Executive since its inception to deliver both those first class public services and to create a country in which all children can reach their full potential; recognises that the Parliament has undertaken impressive work but regrets the loss of trust in government caused by the actions of the Executive; calls on the Executive to dramatically improve its performance in delivering public services on health, education, transport and jobs, crime and on the environment, and agrees that only by equipping this Parliament with the powers of a normal independent Parliament will Scotland be able to reach its full potential."

15:10

David McLetchie (Lothians) (Con): I associate the Conservatives with the First Minister's expression of condolences to Mr and Mrs Brown.

Today's debate and the motion amount to an admission of guilt—recognition that the Labour and Liberal Democrat Executive has failed to deliver the better public services that the Scottish public were told would flow from devolution. To cover up that collective failure, Mr McConnell adopts the usual Labour Pol Pot year zero approach, but the one thing that has become

abundantly clear in the past few weeks is that year zero no longer starts in 1997, or even in 1999, but starts on 22 November 2001, when Mr McConnell became the First Minister of Scotland.

We never doubted that what went before was total failure, but now it seems that the First Minister agrees with us, and thinks so little of his predecessors' efforts that he wishes to dissociate himself from Administrations of which he was a member. That is not the end of the First Minister's sleight of hand. As well as air-brushing his predecessors from the historical record and performing a late-night purge of the comrades, Mr McConnell has tried that other Labour trick of blurring the lines between the Scottish Executive and the Scottish Parliament.

Mr Swinney referred to the interview at the weekend in which Mr McConnell was reported as saying that only a limited period was left in which to restore public confidence in the Parliament's work. I tell the First Minister to stop trying to tar us with his brush. The people of Scotland have lost confidence in devolution because of the Scottish Executive's policies. By blurring the distinction, it is Mr McConnell who undermines the Parliament as an institution.

The First Minister, the Labour party and their Lib Dem lackeys all refuse to recognise that public disillusionment with the fruits of devolution stems from the Executive's failure to address the problems that people in Scotland experience as part of their everyday lives.

Mr Mike Rumbles (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD): Mr McLetchie talks about the Executive's and the Parliament's failure. Does he think that the abolition of tuition fees, the restoration of grants, the introduction of free personal care for the elderly, the Land Reform (Scotland) Bill and the Freedom of Information (Scotland) Bill are successes or failures? I would like to hear from him.

David McLetchie: The Land Reform (Scotland) Bill is a dismal failure and an appalling example of the irrelevance of the Scottish Executive's programme, which should be devoted to the crisis in rural Scotland and the damage that has been done to Scotland's rural economy. As for that old saw about tuition fees, I say for the umpteenth time that the Liberal Democrats betrayed the young people of Scotland. Although they may no longer be required to pay up front, from next summer, every graduate in Scotland—irrespective of their background or income—will have to pay a Liberal Democrat graduate tax of £2,000. That is the reality to which the Liberal Democrats should own up.

We are witnessing the third relaunch of the Scottish Executive. Mr McConnell has started by

talking the language of priorities, which, as Aneurin Bevan told us, is the religion of socialism. However, in the Executive, pretty much everything seems to be a priority. The First Minister's list grows day by day. His motion mentions children, health, employment, education, crime, transport and sustainable development. By my reckoning, that covers pretty well all the devolved areas, except of course farming and fishing—an omission that will be no surprise to people who live and work in rural Scotland.

Rhona Brankin: Will the member take an intervention?

David McLetchie: No, thank you. I must make progress.

That certainly seems an odd way of doing less, better, but then again, the phrase is just another Labour soundbite. I would hazard a guess that it will not be too long before we see other issues joining the list of priorities. That is because, with an election on the horizon, Mr McConnell is as terrified as were his predecessors of upsetting one or another interest group. When is a priority not a priority? The answer is when it is the priority of a Scottish Executive minister who is trying to appease the most recent interest group to which he has spoken.

The result of that combination of political self-interest and political cowardice is a completely incoherent approach, in which everything is a priority and, as a result, nothing is a priority. Moreover, we have an ever-changing set of priorities. On 25 January last year, Malcolm Chisholm told the chamber that free personal care was a "priority". By 1 March, the priority at the heart of the health agenda was better access. By April, delayed discharge and mental health had joined the list of priorities, but by September, modernisation of the national health service had become the "key priority". In December, on taking over as health minister, Mr Chisholm told us that cancer services were now his "top priority". With such a bewildering array of priorities, is it any wonder that our health service is in such a mess?

Other members of the Cabinet have their own set of priorities. Cathy Jamieson told the chamber last February that social justice was the "No 1 priority". In February, Ross Finnie told wool growers that the sheep sector was a "high priority" for the Executive, but one month later, delivering a sustainable Scotland had suddenly become the "top priority".

There are other ways to express the wide range of priorities. Amazingly, hearts figure prominently. According to Jackie Baillie, homelessness was at the "heart of policy". A week later, she told members that voluntary issues were at the "heart of policy". A month after that, equality of

opportunity was at the “heart of policy”, but two months and one transplant later women’s issues were at the “heart of policy”. Three months later equality of opportunity was back at the heart of Executive policies, but later that year Jackie decided to cover all the bases and put people at the “heart” of policy making. What was the one thing that all those issues had in common? They are all areas for which the big-hearted Jackie Baillie was formerly responsible.

Another soundbite is “centre stage” and that is where Henry McLeish put adult basic education. However, the stage was crowded, as Susan Deacon had already claimed it for public health. Both adult basic education and public health had to share the limelight on the same centre stage with Ross Finnie’s rural agenda. That is the same Ross Finnie who, at the weekend, was portrayed as the unlikely saviour of Scotland’s farmers by the master of sycophancy George Lyon—I think not.

Far from being a fresh start, Mr McConnell’s motion represents a continuation of the confusion and lack of direction that has characterised the Executive from day one. The all-things-to-all-men approach continues—the only difference is one of presentation. Indeed, Mr McConnell has shown already that his real priority is to promote his friends and settle old scores with his enemies. I would be happy to take an intervention from any of them.

Rhona Brankin *rose*—

Andrew Wilson (Central Scotland) (SNP): Will the member take an intervention?

David McLetchie: No, thank you, but I will come to Rhona Brankin.

The Scottish people have had enough political posturing. They want action on the priorities that matter to them. Sadly they will get no such action from the Executive, as it is long on rhetoric but short on results.

Rhona Brankin is one of the disappeared. She is most welcome to intervene.

Rhona Brankin: I am grateful to the member for taking an intervention. Does he accept that the Scottish Executive has a great deal of heart and is a caring Government? Does he also accept that the priorities set out by the First Minister are important for people whether they live in Shetland or Dumfries? The only two interest groups that Mr McLetchie has mentioned so far are farmers and fishermen.

David McLetchie: The problem is one of the distortion and misrepresentation of language. The point of having priorities is that they should be listed in order. We cannot have priorities if everything is made the same. That is my point.

If we examine the failures, the most glaring relates to the health service, where waiting lists have lengthened since the coalition came to power and the people on them now number more than 11,000. We were promised higher standards in schools, but growing indiscipline plagues many schools. Comparisons with other countries demonstrate that we are losing ground academically. As Mr Swinney rightly commented, Scotland’s economic performance, when compared with that of the rest of the United Kingdom, has been appalling. The number of job losses in manufacturing is growing, as witnessed by the unfortunate announcement at Motorola only yesterday.

Instead of concentrating on sorting out those issues, which are the concerns and priorities of the public, far too much time in the Parliament continues to be wasted on irrelevancies such as fox hunting and land reform. The truth is that Labour has no answers to the problems. It talks a great deal about a pragmatic, modernising agenda as a way of raising standards in our public services, but it cannot deliver because, although it may have been forced to accept that some of its former ideological obsessions about the economy were wrong, at heart it is still a party that believes in top-down solutions to problems. That can be seen in its desire to centralise control over our public services. Indeed, poor performance in our health and education systems has generally resulted in even more state direction as a remedy for the Executive’s faults. Witness Mr Chisholm’s so-called hit squads to tackle waiting times.

Andrew Wilson: Does Mr McLetchie agree that, whether they live in Shetland or the Borders, the people of Scotland tend not to support the Conservatives? Would they be helped in their decision making in future if Mr McLetchie made clear his party’s position on the top-down approach? If there were a referendum on the Scottish Parliament this week, would the Conservatives vote “Yes” or, once again, “No, no”? Is not it better that Labour is accountable to the people of Scotland through the Parliament than its being remote in London and accountable to no one?

David McLetchie: I believe that my party is growing in strength in Scotland. That will be amply demonstrated by the votes that are cast for us in 16 months’ time. I will give the member a fuller answer to his other questions when I have more than one and a half minutes in which to do so and fewer than four pages to complete.

Angus MacKay: Will the member take an intervention?

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

Improving our health and education systems and strengthening our economy are of paramount importance. That means putting trust in people. All other parties in Scotland want to use political power to impose solutions on people, whereas we trust people to make the right decisions. We want to devolve power and responsibility down to individuals, families and communities.

The first thing that the Executive has to do to win the trust of people in Scotland is to put the interests of the people before its own. That means cutting the Government down to size by cutting the number of ministers, scrapping much of the legislative programme—which is meaningless and irrelevant to most Scots—and finally getting a financial grip on the Holyrood building project instead of continuing to write one blank cheque after another. Those steps would be a practical demonstration of doing less, better. I recommend them to the First Minister.

I move amendment S1M-2578.1, to insert at end:

“but, whilst accepting that these are worthy objectives, does not believe that the approach adopted by the Executive will fulfil them.”

15:23

George Lyon (Argyll and Bute) (LD): I associate the Liberal Democrats with the remarks that were made by Jack McConnell and the other party leaders in expressing their sympathy with and condolences to Gordon Brown and his family.

I welcome the First Minister's robust speech and his emphasis on health, education, crime, transport and jobs, and the need to deliver for rural and urban Scotland. Those are the key priorities of the people of Scotland on how their taxes should be spent. I am pleased to note that those priorities build on those that were expressed in the partnership agreement that was signed immediately after the elections in 1999. That agreement, put into practice through the programme for government, has provided stability to the Executive through three First Ministers. During the difficult times when Donald Dewar was ill, followed by his sad death and again when Henry McLeish resigned, Jim Wallace, the Deputy First Minister, stepped into the breach and guided the coalition through some difficult waters. He deserves praise for that.

The Liberal Democrats have brought stability, continuity and competence to the coalition. I am proud of the role that we have played in delivering stable government in Scotland. We will continue to play our part. Within the coalition, our ministers have pushed a Liberal agenda on freedom of information, human rights and solutions to the drugs problems that we face. The Liberal

Democrats, in partnership with our Labour colleagues, are delivering in Scotland for the people of Scotland.

Bruce Crawford (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP): George Lyon will no doubt be aware that, in September this year, the world climate summit will take place in Johannesburg and that climate change will be at the top of the agenda. The Scottish climate change consultation document that was published by the Executive in March 2000 states that the Executive intends to produce an annual Scottish inventory of greenhouse gas figures.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: This sounds more like a speech than a question, Mr Crawford.

Bruce Crawford: My point is that a Liberal minister is responsible for that. Does George Lyon accept that the latest figures that are available relate only to 1998 and that, since the publication of that document, no inventory has been published by the Liberal minister?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Crawford, this is a very long intervention.

Bruce Crawford: Indeed it is. The Executive has the figures for 1999, but it has not yet released them.

George Lyon: I shall come to those points later in my speech. I shall return to where I was.

The Liberal Democrats, in partnership with Labour, are delivering in government in Scotland. We are delivering free personal care; we are delivering on tuition fees and on student grants; we are delivering with a record teacher's pay settlement, with free central heating for our pensioners and with more money for the voluntary sector and for farming and fishing. In anyone's book, that is a record of which the Executive should be proud.

Fiona Hyslop (Lothians) (SNP): George Lyon mentioned the central heating scheme. Can he tell us how many houses have had a central heating system installed under that scheme since it was announced last September? How many houses and pensioners are benefiting from the central heating scheme now?

George Lyon: As Fiona Hyslop well knows, the central heating scheme is well under way. By the end of the programme, central heating will have been delivered for all pensioners who qualify under the scheme.

I welcome the future opportunity that the Liberal Democrats will have—as part of the coalition—to do even more in delivering for the people of Scotland.

The rural agenda is also important, as is environmental work. The work that Ross Finnie is

doing is winning, piece by piece, the respect of the people involved. When he came back from the fisheries council in December with substantial improvements in the total allowable catches for the Scottish fleet, the SNP was reduced to calling for an EU official—rather than the minister—to be sacked. There is slow and grudging recognition from the SNP that we are delivering on rural issues.

Richard Lochhead (North-East Scotland) (SNP): Will George Lyon give way?

George Lyon: I have taken enough interventions.

Ross Finnie is making good progress on less favoured areas and is shaping a scheme that will suit the needs of Scotland's fragile rural communities. It is important to get that right for the future sustainability of rural Scotland. I hope that, in his closing speech, the Deputy First Minister will reinforce the importance that the Executive places on improving the environment for both rural and urban Scotland. Improved public transport will help, but I hope that the Executive will go further and will explain the other aspects that it will address, particularly on accepting the need for environmental assessment in everything that it does.

Richard Lochhead: Will George Lyon give way?

George Lyon: I agree with the First Minister that the challenge for the final period of the Parliament up to 2003 is delivery. Members should make no mistake about that—it is what we will be judged on. Money has been allocated to priority areas in record amounts. We need to see that money being used effectively. We have seen that the Executive has provided the cash to get record numbers of police in post, and every community in Scotland should see the benefit of that. We know that the McCrone settlement will give Scottish schools the opportunity to retain and recruit high-quality staff. Tuition fees have gone and grants are once again being paid to students in Scotland. I tell Mr McLetchie that the record number of students who are voting for the tuition fees deal are voting with their feet, and there is a 10 per cent increase on last year's figures. That is the true test of the tuition fees deal.

The Liberal Democrats recognise that the extra resources that have gone into health need to be used for maximum benefit. Delivery in the health service is one area that causes me concern and I am pleased to hear that the First Minister is agreeing to tackle problems in that area. We want to see the cash that is being given to recruit extra nurses being used to recruit extra nurses. We want the money for cancer care to be used to replace equipment that is now outdated, and we

want the money that has been allocated to the reduction of bedblocking to have an impact on patients who are trying to get a discharge from hospital. On behalf of the Liberal Democrats, I welcome the extra £20 million that the Executive has made available today to tackle bedblocking, which is a serious and important issue. Those are the challenges that the First Minister has set himself, and the Liberal Democrats will continue to back him.

I turn to the Opposition. The SNP set off at the start of this Parliament like kids on a school trip—the ones who drink their Coke and eat their Mars bars in the first five minutes of the journey and look a bit sick from then on in.

Richard Lochhead: Will the member take an intervention?

George Lyon: The SNP's head boy is over there on their benches. The former head boy has left for another place.

The SNP racked up £3 billion of extra spending promises in the first six months of the Parliament. It was caught out and ensured that it ditched them all for the general election. It promised to budget the same as the Executive for this year and next year. However, it has set the spending bandwagon rolling again. Extra cash for water and tourism was promised within a week, but there is no doubt that it will ditch those promises before it must put a price on them in its manifesto.

Will the SNP ever have the integrity to follow through on its spending press releases? How on earth can the people of Scotland take the SNP seriously as an Opposition when week after week, SNP members come to the chamber to gurn and complain about the Executive's performance, but can never tell us what they would do that is different? Every week, they promise more money, yet they cannot tell us where the money will come from and what budgets will have to be cut.

SNP members call for more powers for the Parliament, but they are unable to tell us how they would use the powers that Parliament has. The Executive has produced three budgets to support our priorities. The SNP has not once offered an alternative budget with its priorities laid out for the people of Scotland to judge. A serious Opposition, even in a council, would produce an alternative budget that included priorities. The SNP cannot do that. If the SNP wants to be taken seriously, it must demonstrate how it would use the powers that are currently available before it calls for more.

Richard Lochhead: Will the member give way?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: It is clear that the member will not give way.

George Lyon: Richard Lochhead should sit down.

I turn to the Tories. David McLetchie gave the game away on BBC Scotland when he told Ruth Wishart that, given the chance again, he would still vote no in a referendum on the creation of the Scottish Parliament. The Tories have only one objective—to discredit and wreck the Parliament. That is why the people of Scotland will continue to reject them. That objective should be contrasted with Liberal Democrat priorities. We will work in partnership with Labour—we will continue to deliver stable government and make certain that people throughout Scotland share in the benefits of our new Parliament.

I support the motion.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I thank members for their adherence to time limits.

Fergus Ewing: On a point of order, Presiding Officer. Richard Lochhead repeatedly asked George Lyon to take an intervention, but George Lyon consistently refused to give any response. Would not it have been courteous for him to say that he would not take an intervention? Will you reflect on that matter for the future? George Lyon showed great discourtesy to the Parliament.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That is not a point of order, Mr Ewing. Members know that it is a matter for the member who is holding the floor to decide whether to give way. The member gave way to other members, so there is nothing to reflect upon.

15:33

Sarah Boyack (Edinburgh Central) (Lab): It is clear to everybody that members on the Government parties' benches recognise the need to set priorities. The Opposition has the luxury of sitting on the sidelines and being constantly critical while promising the world. John Swinney's speech was a classic example of that, although it was more negative than is usual for the nationalists. Only two sentences were given to their core priority of establishing independence for Scotland.

Members on the Government parties' benches are striving for first-class services that are delivered through working in partnership with our colleagues in Westminster, local government and Europe. The 2000 spending review set in train the biggest-ever investment in services that Scotland has seen. In my constituency, the new St Thomas of Aquin's RC High School will open in the autumn. That school will have been built under Labour through partnership between central and local government. In the coming years, more schools will be built. I am looking forward to the new facilities at Tynecastle and Boroughmuir high schools. There will be new schools that are fit for the 21st century.

We must get real benefits for people from services throughout Scotland. That means that, to dismantle and replace the free-market inheritance that the Tories left to us, we must reform the delivery of services. That means that we must change the management culture in every organisation to put people first. That is why I welcome Malcolm Chisholm's announcement of a task force on waiting times.

Andrew Wilson: Will the member give way?

Sarah Boyack: Not just now.

I also welcome the First Minister's commitment of new money for health.

I suspect that every constituency MSP in the chamber will have examples from their mailbag of unacceptable waiting times. I, too, have heard from many angry and frustrated patients and families who do not understand why they must wait so long for treatment. We cannot allow that situation to continue. Over the Christmas break, the SNP's dismissal as bureaucracy of Malcolm Chisholm's actions shows how little it understands the challenge of delivering radical change in practice.

Shona Robison (North-East Scotland) (SNP):

I wonder whether—when Sarah Boyack gets her large mailbag with the large number of complaints about the health service—in explaining why people must wait so long for operations, she points her finger where the blame lies, which is with her party's Government. I hope that she will be honest about that with her constituents.

Sarah Boyack: The point that I make to my constituents is that we are ploughing massive resources into the NHS. We need to ensure that those resources are delivered to every hospital in Scotland so that people see the benefits of that change in every kind of service. That process takes time.

I am proud of the decisions that we have made in the Parliament over the past two and a half years, particularly in transport. We have transformed a transport budget that was dominated almost exclusively by roads expenditure.

Tommy Sheridan: Will the member take an intervention?

Sarah Boyack: No, thank you.

In 1996-97, only 12.5 per cent of the transport budget was spent on public transport. By 2003-04, we will have shifted our transport spending priorities to deliver a massive boost to public transport—53 per cent will go on initiatives such as safer routes to school, on buses and on trains. At the same time, we will maintain investment on our roads.

The coalition is based in the real world. We are committed to building for the long term, which is why I welcome the recognition of sustainable development in the Executive's motion. We are already making massive progress on promoting renewable energy, on resource management—through tackling our waste mountains—and on sustained investment in our new transport choices. Over the long term, that will help us to tackle our global emissions targets.

The challenge of using our resources wisely must be one of the fundamental challenges of the 21st century around the globe, not just in Scotland. Our decisions and resources need to fit in with our social justice priorities and we must make the most of the economic opportunities that will come from wise use of resources. That is why it is absolutely right that in motion S1M-2578 the Executive identifies young people as being at the heart of our ambitions. I notice that Mr McLetchie has missed another reference to the heart of our priorities.

The First Minister said that he will lead the Executive's work on sustainable development. That commitment should be welcomed by us all, because it shows the political priority that sustainable development is being given from the top. We are in the business of bringing about long-term change, which means difficult choices—not the quick fix or the glib soundbite. It means making decisions that give us the maximum return on every pound that we, as a Government, spend. That is why the Executive's priorities are right for Scotland.

Mr McNeil: On a point of order, Presiding Officer. Will you give us an assurance that you will mention the absence of the Conservative front-bench members, who have left the debate? The Presiding Officer has made public his concern about members who take part in a debate and then leave. It is a disgraceful discourtesy to the Parliament and to participants in the debate that those members have left.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That is a fair debating point, but I honestly do not think that it is a point of order. Members will no doubt reflect on what they read in the *Official Report*.

I neglected to give a time target. If members stick to speeches of about four minutes, I am confident that everyone who is on my screen will be called.

15:39

Nicola Sturgeon (Glasgow) (SNP): The Government relaunch has become a regular feature of the parliamentary calendar. It is a sobering thought that a patient who was on a waiting list for a hip replacement operation at the

time of last year's Government relaunch is likely still to be on that list. That is in spite of all the extra money that the Government says it is investing in the NHS, and in spite of the repeated promises—made in 1999, 2000 and 2001—that getting waiting lists and waiting times down was the Government's priority.

For the thousands of such patients all over Scotland, the First Minister's words are merely words—the words of a man who, as everyone knows, has been at the heart of the failing Administration from its inception. Why would anybody—in the chamber or anywhere else in Scotland—trust him now?

In the past two years, the only thing that has been reliable about the Government has been its failure to deliver. Promises have been made, broken and remade with monotonous and, for thousands of patients, painful regularity. The Government promised to cut waiting lists; it broke that promise. Nearly 6,000 more people are on waiting lists now than when Labour took office in 1999. The Government also promised to reduce waiting times and it broke that promise—waiting times have risen by an average of two weeks since Labour took office. Today, we are expected to forget all that, to wipe the slate clean again and to take it on trust that—this time—the Government really means it and will do something to sort those things out.

How will the Government do that? It will spend £20 million to tackle bedblocking, although last year it failed to spend £10 million that was already available to tackle bedblocking. It will also cut bureaucracy and to prove how serious the Government is about cutting bureaucracy, yesterday a new unit to tackle waiting times was set up in the Scottish Executive. Still the Government misses the central point.

There is no mystery about why more people are waiting for longer for treatment in the national health service. It is quite simple; more people are waiting for longer because, under Labour, hospitals are doing less. More than 100,000 fewer patients have been treated in Scotland's hospitals since 1999. Why is that? Again, there is no mystery.

Mr McNeil: Will Nicola Sturgeon explain how the SNP's priority of holding a referendum on independence would solve the problem of bedblocking?

Nicola Sturgeon: We are talking about matters that affect thousands of patients throughout Scotland. The member would be well advised to show them some courtesy and sympathy for their plight.

Our hospitals are doing less because they have less capacity. There are not more nurses, as the

First Minister suggested, but 1,000 fewer nurses and a record number of nursing vacancies. There are also dozens of consultant vacancies and 500 fewer acute beds, and the numbers are falling with every PFI contract that the Government signs up to in the interests of lining private pockets at taxpayers' expense.

Let us have no more empty pledges from the Government. Let us have a First Minister who is prepared to face up to the fact that no hit squad will enable a shrinking national health service to treat more patients more quickly. We need to hear from the First Minister a guarantee that he will not allow any more cuts in the number of acute beds and that he will instead devote the rest of his term in office to rebuilding NHS capacity, increasing bed numbers, attracting nurses back into the health service and making Scotland competitive in the worldwide market for consultants. If the First Minister can do that, perhaps he will begin to make a difference. If not, he will continue to fail, patients will continue to suffer and we can all put next year's Government relaunch into our diaries now.

15:43

Mr Frank McAveety (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab): The central thrust of Nicola Sturgeon's speech was broken promises. I want her to reflect on earlier promises that were made by the SNP, in her younger days, such as its promise that Scotland would be independent by 1993. That promise was broken. The SNP promised that independence would be delivered in 1997, but it failed to deliver that. It is therefore with interest that I read in John Swinney's new year message—the longest new year message from a leader of a political party in Scotland—that the SNP will

“establish the foundations of victory at the 2003 Scottish Parliament elections.”

I am going to the bookie's to put a bet on that to guarantee a return on my investment.

The contribution of Opposition members to the debate has, unfortunately, never risen above the mediocre. The Executive's record since 1999 shows that there have been record levels of investment in public services. It is interesting that Nicola Sturgeon did not address that. She tried to address aspects of the way in which that investment is being used, but she did not challenge that central fact. Our broad economic strategy has created a much more stable economic structure to deliver many of the changes that are required for Scotland's future, which would be jeopardised primarily by the Tories.

Andrew Wilson: Will Mr McAveety give way?

Mr McAveety: I shall give way in a moment. I want members to understand my central point.

In today's debate, the Executive has made it clear that we should make connections across social policy areas rather than—as the SNP suggested this afternoon—pick a particular area and flog it to death. Unless connections are made across all the social policy areas, the transformation that the First Minister argued for will not be achieved.

It is unfortunate that the Tories left the chamber after contributing to the opening of the debate. The scale of the situation that was left by the Conservatives was larger than anyone expected it to be and the rebuilding process is taking much longer than any of us would have wanted it to.

Alex Johnstone (North-East Scotland) (Con) rose—

Mr McAveety: I knew that that would strike a chord with Mr Johnstone and raise him from his rather ample backside, but I will not give way.

The consequences of the comprehensive spending review that was announced recently by the Chancellor of the Exchequer will deliver many of the changes that most members would want.

Tommy Sheridan: Will the member give way?

Mr McAveety: Given the concern that Mr Sheridan shares with me about the city of Glasgow, I am sure that he will allow me to make this point. The nationalist position, as articulated in the SNP's new year message, would mean that we could not address housing debt in Glasgow because the necessary changes could not be made unless we had outright independence on an unspecified date. We would have been unable to deliver the necessary level of secondary school investment, even under the SNP's allegedly noble programme of public service trusts, because the necessary level of investment could not be reached in the short period of time. That would have let people down. The SNP's economic strategy would jeopardise employment and economic opportunities for many of our young people.

Andrew Wilson: Will the member give way?

Mr McAveety: I wish to be enlightened, so I will do so.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: As Mr McAveety is in his last minute, I ask you to be brief, Mr Wilson.

Andrew Wilson: I will be as brief as I can. Will Mr McAveety extend the logic of joined-up thinking to matters that are currently reserved to Westminster? Does he agree—if he wants to reform social policy in Scotland—that we should not have to wait for a chancellor in London to make a random decision, but that we should make choices for ourselves? If that is his opinion, does

he agree that the way in which we can guarantee that our priorities are dealt with as priorities is to make decisions for ourselves? That is the priority of devolution and—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You have made the point, Mr Wilson.

Mr McAveety: Mr Wilson's comment ties into the statement that he and his leader repeat and which annoys me as a Scot, that we should have the normal powers of a normal Parliament. I do not know what they mean by "abnormal powers" or "abnormal Parliament". Perhaps they can educate me on that.

The Executive is delivering in many areas of social policy that most members think are important. Unfortunately, the SNP's side of the debate is dominated by the view that was articulated by John Swinney; that only if we have independence can those social policy issues be addressed. That contradicts directly many of the regional and national autonomy movements throughout Europe and many of the points that the SNP makes in other debates.

Mr Swinney might be able to learn from the words of Diogenes, who said that we are born with two ears and one tongue so that we may listen more and speak less.

15:48

Mr Kenny MacAskill (Lothians) (SNP): The Executive says that it had high hopes, but so did we and so did the public. However, the Executive's claim was a lie. The Executive has talked big and delivered little.

What is the genesis of the situation in which we find ourselves? This is the third First Minister's vision that we have heard in the Scottish Parliament. The Executive will say that it is third time lucky, but we say that bad luck comes in threes. Today we have the McConnell menu, before that we had the McLeish muddle and before that we had the Donald Dewar "Partnership for Scotland" that was mentioned by George Lyon. That is the genesis of the situation that we are in. That document was a sell-out of Liberal Democrat principles that has been surpassed only by the selling-out of the pledges that it contains.

Let us consider some of the document's pledges, particularly those relating to transport. On page 18, we read that the Executive will

"promote rail transport and encourage an improvement in journey times"

and that it will

"continue to encourage freight off the roads and onto trains and ships".

It is rather bizarre to go about achieving that aim

by ensuring that the loss of a manhole cover on the M8 would bring gridlock not only to road freight but to all road transport in the west of Scotland. That situation cannot be considered to be an incentive to put road freight on to rail because, at Christmas, we discovered that English Welsh and Scottish Railway had suspended movement by train of Scottish exports to the continent because its trains could not get through the channel tunnel. Far from promoting a switch from road to rail, the Executive has managed to ensure that we cannot even deliver our goods to the continent.

As my colleague, Fergus Ewing, mentioned, there is also a question over BEAR Scotland. Let us be frank; the matter concerned not only BEAR, but Amey Highways. Mr John Home Robertson was quoted in the *Edinburgh Evening News* at Christmas time complaining about Amey's lack of attention to the A1. What was the situation there?

The current Minister for Finance and Public Services—who is not in the chamber—was, in his alter ego, vehemently opposed to privatisation of road maintenance contracts. Everything that he said would happen when he was, as a back bencher, opposed to privatisation has come true. There was recently a disaster because of a manhole cover, which caused gridlock in the west of Scotland like that in a third-world nation. The Executive also failed to address the problem of winter snows, whether in East Lothian—Mr Home Robertson's constituency—or in Inverness-shire, in Mr Ewing's constituency. The Executive has failed.

What else does the Executive say? That same partnership document stated:

"We will set up regional transport partnerships to develop transport strategies throughout Scotland."

What Ms Boyack failed to mention, however, was that outside the chamber in the city of Edinburgh there is a shambles because of the bus wars, which are causing congestion and pollution and are costing routes and services. Far from promoting a transport strategy, the Executive is following a free market free-for-all, which was brought in by the Tories in the 1980s and which is now, in the 21st century, supported by the Liberal Democrats and Labour. It is costing a public service in Edinburgh and it is jeopardising an institution in the form of Lothian Buses, which has served the city well for more than 100 years. The Executive has failed to deliver in that regard.

That brings us to the best:

"We will promote rail transport and encourage an improvement in journey times."

In a week when 25 per cent of rail services in Scotland have been cancelled without consultation, the Executive has done nothing. Its Minister for Enterprise, Transport and Lifelong

Learning is not even in the chamber to comment and, more important, has not even sought to bring together the rail unions and the management. The Executive is allowing the Scottish economy and the Scottish commuter to pay the price for its inadequacy and its inefficiencies. ScotRail has been given by the Executive a private monopoly, which is provided by public money—our money; taxpayers' money—and the Executive has washed its hands of it. It has failed to address the problem.

Today, we have not been shown a vision, but a vacuum, which will be filled only following the removal from office of the Liberal Democrats and Labour in 2003.

15:52

Mr Brian Monteith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Unlike SNP members, I welcome the opportunity to debate the Executive's priorities. It is important that we have the opportunity to review those priorities and to put before the public an examination of them.

The Minister for Education and Young People has defined the Executive's first priority for children and young people as being to raise the attainment of the lowest 20 per cent in our schools

"to close the gap and to give every child the same opportunities to realise their full potential."

That approach, although worthy at first sight, risks neglecting the need to improve standards in education overall and to serve all of Scotland's children well. It is exactly the politically correct approach that has exacerbated discipline problems in Scottish schools. It has artificially slanted inclusion policies to keep those children who misbehave in mainstream classes to the detriment of the education of the well-behaved majority. It is not just me, as a Conservative, saying that. I meet many teachers, and indeed trade union leaders representing teachers, who feel the same way about the Executive's distorted priorities.

The lack of priority given to the education of the vast majority of Scotland's children is also evident in the minister's decision to concentrate on children's issues. She says that she will leave the day-to-day running of education matters in the hands of her deputy.

The Minister for Education and Young People (Cathy Jamieson): I have already covered and clarified this point in earlier debates, but, for the record, I will state once again that my responsibilities include education and children's and young people's issues and that I take full responsibility and accountability for both. The Deputy Minister for Education and Young People is working hard and coherently to support me in that role, and he will continue to do so.

Mr Monteith: I thank the minister for that clarification. However, it serves only to underline the fact that people in Scotland understand that the minister lacks the self-confidence to deal with day-to-day educational matters. She says that she can represent education in the Cabinet, but believes that the deputy minister should do the work.

Cathy Jamieson: Clearly, Mr Monteith's change of image for the new year has not improved his hearing skills. I have made it abundantly clear that my priorities relate to all the children of Scotland. I have no difficulty in dealing with both educational and children's and young people's matters. I do not feel that I need to repeat that. I hope that, having heard me make this point for about the fifth time, Mr Monteith will take it on board and give us some indication of what he sees as the priorities for children and young people. We are trying to deliver.

Mr Monteith: I thank the minister again. She will notice that my beard has not yet covered my ears. Any change in image has not deprived me of the ability to touch a raw nerve with the Minister for Education and Young People.

The minister's only major education announcement so far is that she plans to hold a national debate on the future of school education. I welcome that initiative, because it is likely to highlight the flaws in the Executive's policies. I look forward with relish to the forthcoming debate, which will require more time than today's debate affords.

The Scottish Executive's education policies are an incoherent mess. One day a minister will advocate greater devolution, the next day the same minister—or another minister deputising for them—can be hearing advocating policies that entail greater centralisation, stifling innovation and imposing the Executive's one-size-fits-all approach on Scotland's schools. Central control is exemplified in the ring fencing of funds, through the excellence fund, at the expense of devolved school management, and in the dogmatic decision to force the high-achieving St Mary's Episcopal Primary School in Dunblane to come under council rather than parental control.

According to reports in *The Scotsman*, the minister seems to think that devolution can take place only from one set of politicians to another. *The Scotsman* appears to have information suggesting that—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You are over time, Mr Monteith.

Mr Monteith: I took a number of interventions from the minister. However, I am coming to the end of my speech.

The Scotsman has reported that the Executive has plans to deprive Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education of the ability to carry out inspections of schools. I would be delighted if at some point in this debate the minister could say whether that report—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You must conclude, Mr Monteith.

Mr Monteith: I understand, Presiding Officer. I hope that at some point the minister will deal with the issue that I have raised.

The message is quite simple: the Executive has failed to reach its targets for education. I am confident that, when we have a real debate in 2003, the Scottish public will measure the achievements of this coalition Executive and vote against it.

15:58

Mr Mike Rumbles (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD): This debate is a welcome opportunity at the start of the new year to emphasise the priorities of the Executive for the good governance of Scotland. Quite rightly, Jack McConnell has highlighted the fact that, to be successful, the Scottish Executive must deliver first-class public services across all parts of the nation. He focused particularly on working in partnership to improve the health service and the health of all. He also identified the need to build an integrated transport system that meets the needs of all users. I am glad that the First Minister decided to highlight those issues, because in the north-east of Scotland we are concerned that we are missing out on the allocation of resources by the Executive in both the areas that I have mentioned, as well as in local government and police finance.

I will deal first with the issue of the health service. Although I would be the first to recognise that more money than ever before is being channelled into health, those resources are not being allocated on a fair basis. I refer, of course, to the Arbutnott formula, which ensures that although Grampian has 10 per cent of Scotland's population and 10 per cent of health service activity in Scotland, it receives only 9 per cent of available funding. Grampian Health Board should receive more than £50 million more every year than it is receiving at the moment. That is the main reason why many services such as digital hearing aids are not yet available to patients in the north-east.

Alasdair Morgan (Galloway and Upper Nithsdale) (SNP): If Mr Rumbles's argument about the allocation to Grampian Health Board is correct, would he care to say which health boards should receive less?

Mr Rumbles: Yes—practically all the other health boards should receive less, thank you very much. I am arguing for a fair basis for resource allocation. I am convinced that we must put resources into socially deprived areas, but we have a social security budget for that. The health budget should not be subverted in that way.

As far as local government is concerned, Aberdeenshire Council receives only 88 per cent of the grant to which it would be entitled if funding was allocated according to a fair formula.

Tommy Sheridan: Will the member take an intervention?

Mr Rumbles: I will give way in a moment.

That issue should be addressed according to the needs of the population in each authority. There should be recognition of the fact that council services in rural Scotland are more expensive to deliver, and funding allocations should reflect that fact. While the increase in the funding of our local authorities by the Executive is extremely welcome, the bias against rural authorities, such as Aberdeenshire Council, remains unaddressed.

I would like the Executive to reform much of local government, including the funding formula, which remains one of the most arcane and secret formulas known to man. The formula is open to abuse and is certainly not transparent. Action must be taken to reform many aspects of local government, including the way in which resources are allocated.

Tommy Sheridan *rose*—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: No. The member is in his last—

Tommy Sheridan: I will be brief. I am tempted to say that the funding formula is almost as arcane and secretive as the Liberals' plans for proportional representation. However, on reform of local government finance, does the Liberal party support the right of local authorities to retain the business rates that they collect?

Mr Rumbles: I am not going to pursue that issue, because I have only one blasted minute left to get through my speech.

On police funding, although a higher number of police officers now serve in Grampian than ever before—that is an important point—those figures have been achieved by the chief constable on only 85 per cent of the budget to which he should be entitled, if funding were allocated fairly and proportionately.

Finally, I turn to the First Minister's comments on developing integrated transport systems that should meet the needs of all users. The Deputy Minister for Enterprise, Transport and Lifelong Learning, Lewis Macdonald, represents part of the

city of Aberdeen and is well aware of the lack of an effective integrated transport system for the city and its environs. Aberdeen City Council and Aberdeenshire Council have a well-formulated plan for an integrated transport system that could transform the lives of the travelling public in the north-east. We have a plan and the co-operation of all in the north-east to implement it, but we need the Executive's political will to provide the funding.

In the north-east, we have high hopes that the Executive will deliver and transform words into action. I am sure that, given the first-hand knowledge of the issues of ministers such as Lewis Macdonald, we can expect action soon. I am disappointed that he is not in the chamber to hear that point.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Rumbles, you must conclude.

Mr Rumbles: I am convinced that the Executive's priority of delivering first-class public services across the nation is the right one. In the north-east, that is exactly what we are looking for. In particular, we are looking for a fair allocation of resources in our health services, in our local government services, in our police services and in the provision of a truly integrated public transport system for what is the energy capital of Europe in the 21st century.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I ask members to bear in mind the fact that if we do not stick to the time allocations, other members will lose out at the end of the debate. I must ask members not to give way for points of information and interventions in the final minute of their speeches.

16:04

Scott Barrie (Dunfermline West) (Lab): I welcome this debate, which sets out the Executive's priorities clearly. In Glasgow last November, when Scottish Labour elected Jack McConnell as our leader, I was impressed that he singled out children and young people as being at the heart of his priorities.

Tommy Sheridan: Election? Does the member not mean appointment?

Scott Barrie: That is a ridiculous point.

I am sure that the First Minister's previous roles as Minister for Education, Europe and External Affairs and as a teacher played some part when he set that priority. However, services for children are not simply about delivering through the formal education system, as there are many other services that children and young people rely on if, as the First Minister said, they are to reach their full potential, irrespective of background. Today, the First Minister again highlighted the fact that too many looked-after children leave school without

any qualifications, particularly those who are accommodated away from home. That has been a sad fact for decade after decade. If any group in our society deserves a higher priority, it is surely looked-after children. What other group of young people better typifies the First Minister's statement that a child's potential, not their background, should be the greatest determinant of their future?

The Executive has initiated two debates on the subject of looked-after children. That distinguishes us from many other Parliaments, in which that vulnerable group is largely ignored. What better champion could those children have than the new Minister for Education and Young People, Cathy Jamieson, whose substantial experience in that field of work will be invaluable? A group of young people long overlooked has at last the chance of a much brighter future, the chance to end the sad fact that most children in care leave school with no qualification, to end the fact that children in care have far worse physical and mental health than their contemporaries and to end the fact that our prison population contains a substantially higher proportion of those from a care background than those who do not have such a background.

I believe that by signalling that looked-after children are a priority we can improve the outcomes for that group. I can only presume from Mr McLetchie's speech that he disagrees. If we took his advice of doing less, the damning statistics would continue into the next generation just as they came from the previous generation. Presumably, he would be content with that.

David McLetchie stated that, by listing too many priorities, the Executive was somehow prioritising nothing. I would rather have an Executive that has too many priorities than one that has none at all. What were the Tories' priorities for Scotland when they were in power at Westminster? Very little indeed. Labour at the UK level and the Labour-Liberal Democrat partnership at Holyrood are now delivering for Scotland.

In his amendment, David McLetchie accepts that the Executive's priorities are worthy objectives. However, then he says that the approach that the Executive has adopted will not fulfil them. Not only did David McLetchie not say why that is the case, but he did not say what the Tories would do differently. Sarah Boyack was right to say that Opposition parties have the luxury of always criticising, always promising but never having to say where the resources will come from. Today, the Executive has laid out its priorities and said what needs to be done. What distinguishes the Executive from the Opposition is that we can guarantee to deliver.

16:07

Andrew Wilson (Central Scotland) (SNP): I begin by agreeing with something that the Minister for Enterprise, Transport and Lifelong Learning wrote just before the turn of the year in a heart-rending piece of journalism in the *Sunday Herald*. She said:

"if we allow Scotland's post-parliament politics to be reduced to a personality-driven, parochial game, we will all be the losers."

That opening of the minister's heart to the people of Scotland following the ravages of a Cabinet reshuffle should be taken note of.

Quite seriously, given the parlous state of Scotland's economy and our economic prospects at present, the First Minister's decision to play faction politics with a Cabinet reshuffle, overburden the Minister for Enterprise, Transport and Lifelong Learning and leave her in a position of personal despair is to be condemned absolutely. The future of Scotland's jobs and economy is far too important to be left to an internal Labour party faction fight. We need better from our new First Minister than the early experiences of that Cabinet reshuffle.

Let us consider the present performance and prospects of the Scottish economy: the situation could not be graver. As colleagues mentioned earlier, the UK economy is growing eight times as fast as the economy of Scotland. The economy of the Republic of Ireland is growing 18 times as fast as that of Scotland. Over the entire post-war period, our experience has been one of managed relative decline. It is not enough for this Government and successive Governments to be complacent and stick their heads in the sand in the face of such a grave position. If only we could close the gap with the rest of the United Kingdom, we would add significantly to the wealth at the disposal of our economy and therefore of our governing sector. The latest growth rates are parlous. The Executive must act.

We heard Mr McAveety say that he regarded the current context as one of economic stability. Helen Liddell previously said that the economy was doing well. The economy is in dire straits in Scotland and nothing in the Executive's programme, nothing in its visions or targets and nothing in the Cabinet reshuffle suggests that it is willing or able to acknowledge or do anything about the situation. That is mediocre—the issue must be tackled. The Executive's position is unacceptable and must change. Growth must be targeted and not ignored. We must examine the collapse in manufacturing industry and inward investment, examine the other ravages of the Scottish economy and start to deal with them.

In our context of economic stagnation, we have

had to put up with the governor of the Bank of England saying at the turn of the year that he wanted interest rates to be put up. Does the Minister for Enterprise, Transport and Lifelong Learning have a view to express on that matter, which is of such central importance for the future of Scotland? We have heard nothing. Does she, or the Executive, have a view on the five economic tests for entering the euro zone? We have heard nothing from them on the position of the Scottish economy. Instead, we hear the language of Californian new economics being talked while Scotland's economy is driven towards worklessness, joblessness and continued relative decline. We need less self-congratulation and more recognition of the heart of a grave problem.

If we consider unemployment, the claimant count may have fallen since Labour came to power but, in reality, only half of the people who left the dole—half of the people who came off the unemployment register—have a job. If we consider the long-term unemployed, only one third of those who left the unemployment register are in work, while two thirds have gone out of the labour market altogether or on to incapacity benefit. That is appalling. It has to be acknowledged as a serious problem. One in four of the working-age population of Glasgow is not in work. That fact has to be acknowledged and tackled. We cannot follow the Conservative dogma of repeating lines from civil service briefs on unemployment when the situation is utterly grave.

According to all forecasts in Scotland, employment is set to drop, despite the self-congratulation of the First Minister in his opening remarks. In the past few years, full-time students have added about 30,000 to the employment figures in Scotland because they have been forced into the job market to pay for their own welfare. If we take that into account, we see a situation in which the overall level of employment in Scotland is taking a tumble. That has to be dealt with.

These are grave problems in the Scottish economy that must be tackled and dealt with. Many of the powers to do that are reserved to Westminster. Even if the Labour party, with its constitutional obsession against progress, cannot bring itself to argue for greater powers for this Parliament, it should at least have the gumption to express a view on the policy that is being administered by a London-based Labour Government that has absolutely no idea of the real condition of the Scottish economy.

16:12

Alex Fergusson (South of Scotland) (Con): I draw members' attention to my entry in the register of interests because I want to concentrate on the Scottish Executive's priorities from a rural

perspective.

Despite George Lyon's almost unbelievably complacent assertions, rural Scotland is currently in a state almost of shock. Its traditional industries are under enormous simultaneous pressures. The agricultural industry, which for so long has been the mainstay of the rural economy, was already devastated by BSE. It has now been decimated by foot-and-mouth disease. The tourism industry, which was already showing a worrying decline in rural Scotland, has been hammered by that same disease. The forestry industry, which is increasing its output every year as it approaches what will be its peak production in about 15 years' time, is facing its lowest ever returns. And I need remind no one in this chamber that the fishing industry is under immense pressures, with serious consequences for jobs onshore and offshore. In other words, the four traditional pillars of the rural economy—farming, fishing, forestry and tourism—are rapidly crumbling. They will need assistance as they have never done before if they are to continue, as I believe they must, as the bedrock industries of the rural economy.

Over the years, the Executive has produced expansive, expensive and extensive strategy documents for each of those industries. Normally, those documents contain a set of aspirations and objectives with which it is difficult to disagree. I would cite "A Forward Strategy for Scottish Agriculture" as an example. However, I know of no one who is involved in any of those industries who genuinely believes that they feature among the Executive's top priorities. It is not difficult to see why when we study the Executive's record of trying to do something.

Let us consider the recently introduced rural stewardship scheme—

Alasdair Morgan: Will the member give way?

Alex Fergusson: Certainly.

Alasdair Morgan: I wonder whether Mr Fergusson agrees that three of the areas that he singles out—farming, tourism and forestry—would benefit from our entry into the euro at an appropriate rate.

Alex Fergusson: The short answer is no. I do not agree with that. The benefits that have been accrued ever since the Fontainebleau agreement are well known and amount to considerably more than would have been to the benefit to any of those industries in the meantime.

The rural stewardship scheme was introduced with a great flourish on 14 December 2000 but was launched in virtual secrecy, three months after the promised date, on 17 December 2001, in a form that was barely recognisable as the original. Any benefit to the wider rural economy

had been summarily removed from the scheme. That is but one example of the Executive's fine aspirations and promises being backed up by muddle and confusion. The past two and a half years have been littered with similar examples.

Helen Eadie (Dunfermline East) (Lab): If that is Alex Fergusson's view, what does he think of the fact that, for the first time ever, Scotland has a transport strategy? In July 2002 that strategy will deliver free bus passes for pensioners across Scotland, we are taking a record number of lorry freight miles off the road and soon we will have sea transport from Rosyth to Zeebrugge.

Alex Fergusson: I invite Helen Eadie to the part of the world where I live, the south-west of Scotland, or even to the Borders and most other parts of rural Scotland, where she will find that an integrated transport strategy does not exactly excite the locals because it does not exist.

How can rural Scotland feel that its needs are being prioritised by an Executive that refuses to realise that one cannot replace the car as the only practical method of transport in rural areas and that appears unable to accept that it costs more to deliver education in rural villages, thus forcing local authorities to consider closing schools in many such villages? The Executive makes brave noises about the new industries leading the way in rural Scotland, but does virtually nothing to help roll out the information technology infrastructure that would allow rural Scotland to compete for those industries on a level playing field with the central belt.

How can rural Scotland feel that its needs are being prioritised by an Executive that appoints as its Minister for Tourism, Culture and Sport an MSP who is regarded by many as the scourge of rural Scotland and who appears to believe that the answers to the problems of rural Scotland lie in the Land Reform (Scotland) Bill, which has been only half thought through?

Rhona Brankin: Will the member give way?

Alex Fergusson: I am sorry, but I am in the final minute of my speech.

The Land Reform (Scotland) Bill is confrontational in the extreme, although it need not be. In parts it is more akin to social engineering than genuine land reform. It is policy made on the hoof to be delivered on the cheap and worry about the consequences later.

How can rural Scotland feel that its needs are being prioritised when it does not even feature in the Executive motion? It took Rhona Brankin's—rather cheeky, if I may say so—planted intervention to try to put that right.

Rhona Brankin *rose*—

Alex Fergusson: The tragic message that rural Scotland will take from today's debate is that, as far as the Scottish Executive is concerned, despite the First Minister's belated assurances, rural Scotland does not matter.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Robin Harper and remind members to stick closely to the four-minute limit.

16:17

Robin Harper (Lothians) (Green): I, too, would like to preface my speech by associating myself with the opening remarks of the First Minister. My party and I offer our sincere sympathy and condolences to Gordon and Sarah Brown.

The First Minister's motion ends with the phrase:

"and to promote sustainable development across Scotland."

However, when the First Minister put out his press release, he managed to miss out the end of the motion and the reference to sustainable development. I hope that that was not a Freudian slip, but simply a mistake made by the First Minister's press office. It does not fill me with confidence that the Executive is indeed devoted to improving the quality of life for people in Scotland through the protection and enhancement of our environment.

The word "environment" is not specifically mentioned in the Executive's list of priorities. Too often, the phrase "sustainable development" has been used to mean sustained economic development, whereas the original intention of the term was to convey the crucial concept that development can be sustained only if it is based on a stable and healthy environment. Any development that is not based on a healthy and stable environment will inevitably be short-lived. In other words, the greed of the present is likely to ruin the needs of future generations. If by sustainable development the Executive truly means that it will put the pursuit of priorities on jobs, education, health, transport and crime on a platform with the creation of an environmentally sustainable society, all is not lost.

I am also worried by the fact that, last year, the First Minister committed himself to presiding over the ministerial group on sustainability, yet he made no reference whatever to that committee in today's speech—a speech that was supposed to outline the Executive's priorities for the next year.

Over the past couple of years I have mentioned several concerns—in fact, I have mentioned dozens—that have presented themselves to me as things that are missing from the Executive's list of priorities. Will the First Minister confirm today that the protection and enhancement of the

environment will be the basis for the pursuit of the Executive's priorities?

What has happened to representations that the First Minister has received on environmental education? Will he issue a list of proposed actions in response to the inputs from Education 21 on education policy? What has happened to the representations that the Executive has received on outdoor education or on the training of teachers in outdoor education? Following foot-and-mouth disease, BSE, genetically modified organisms and so on—I add my voice to the voices of the Conservatives—why were rural affairs not specifically mentioned?

I would be content if the First Minister committed himself to the enhancement of the environment. That would mean that an awful lot of suggestions that I have made over the past year would automatically be taken on by the environment and rural affairs department. I would like to have seen some mention of building standards, including the provision of home zones, child-friendly environments, insulation and energy recovery. I would like to have seen mention of the huge economic opportunities that are offered by renewables development.

Finally, in relation to aquaculture, I am extremely concerned that today we have learned that the water environment bill may not address the concerns about aquaculture that have been expressed over the past six months.

16:21

Mr Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): In rising to support the motion, I welcome the fact that the First Minister referred to transport in his statement. Alex Fergusson touched earlier on the use of cars. I bring to the attention of members the situation that John Farquhar Munro and I have had to face, as have MSPs of all colours, in the Highlands over the past few days. I am sorry that Fergus Ewing is not with us, because he mentioned the BEAR contract. In fairness to BEAR, it has maintained the trunk roads in the Highlands rather better than some of us had expected.

Mrs Margaret Ewing: Will the member give way?

Mr Stone: I will give way in due course.

The trouble that we have had is that non-trunk roads—the rump that is maintained by Highland Council—have been in a desperately bad condition. Frankly, driving has been dangerous. We all knew that that could happen, because Highland Council downsized as a result of losing the contract to BEAR, and has shed men, equipment and depots. It is not the fault of

Highland Council or its councillors, but it is a critical problem.

This may please members, but I found myself snowed in for quite a few days and, frankly, got pretty fed up digging out. Alex Fergusson's mother came to have an evening meal with us at home, and a very nice lady she was. She almost did not get out of her house.

John Farquhar Munro and I have received an enormous number of complaints about roads; indeed, we all have. I remember Donald Dewar saying that all parts of Scotland mattered and that rural areas were just as important as anywhere else was. The Executive has shown itself to be a listening and flexible Executive. In a calm, considered and reasonable way, we must talk as an Executive to the local authorities that are involved in the problem. I suspect, although I am not sure, that the levels of budgets, equipment and resources are too low to be able to go back up to deliver the level of service that we enjoyed in previous years.

I recognise the needs of rural areas, and I have banged on in this chamber for long enough about the state of the A9 from the county of Sutherland to the county of Caithness. The Deputy First Minister and I are having a meeting shortly with Lewis Macdonald. I make the point to the Executive once again: in advancing all its laudable objectives, please could it remember flexibility? The Executive should remember that what is not a great deal of money in the overall scheme of things can make an enormous difference to a constituency such as mine. Putting right the Ord of Caithness would link in with the Scrabster ferry, which received a big investment from Sarah Boyack, and would link in with all that we are trying to do with tourism. Indeed, it would underpin forestry, agriculture and all the other rural industries.

I am sorry to have made such a partisan speech, but at least it was short. However, I mean what I say. I hope that the Scottish Executive will continue to listen and perhaps even listen a little bit more.

Mrs Margaret Ewing: Will the member give way?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I am afraid that the member has sat down, Mrs Ewing.

Mr Stone: I am sorry about that.

16:25

Irene McGugan (North-East Scotland) (SNP): The fact is that after two and a half years of new Labour and Liberal Government here in Scotland—just as after almost five years of new Labour Government in the UK—very little has

been delivered. The losers are not just the people of this country, whose trust and support has been betrayed, but the children and young people of Scotland, whose futures are being blighted. I will give a few examples of that.

The benefits of smaller classes have been well researched. Educationists have universally supported that policy development. However, the Executive elected to implement mere cosmetic changes and even they have taken far longer to deliver than was promised. In contrast, the SNP offers real progress, achievable within a clear time scale. Classes in primaries 1 to 3 would have no more than 18 pupils, with areas of disadvantage being targeted in the first instance. With the Executive, there is no real difference. With the SNP, there is a difference that gives new opportunities.

The Executive's policies on bullying are another example of failure. There have been many task forces and much rhetoric, but the reality is that families are now queuing up to take local authorities to court because of the failure of the system to protect their children adequately. That did not happen under even the discredited Tories.

What about the recently published draft guidance on home education, which was issued without proper account being taken of the views of the parents and children whom it would affect most? That seriously damaged relationships between families and local authorities. The document seeks to condone unlawful breaches of data protection and human rights legislation and has caused nothing but alarm in the home education community, prompting calls for it to be withdrawn forthwith. The Executive promised those who believe in home education a new future, but what are being delivered are the foundations of a police state.

There is more. We read in the papers yesterday about proposals for what amounts to a do-it-yourself inspection by local authorities of their schools. However, the Executive has paraded constantly a concern to provide so-called independent information for parents, even sticking to the old and failed Tory league tables long after the devolved Administrations in Wales and Northern Ireland abandoned them.

Lack of independent inspection will only diminish parental confidence in education and can only reduce real choice. Instead of cutting back for reasons of finance—that is why that type of inspection is being proposed—the Executive should invest in better information by means of better school handbooks and better and more supportive inspection. There should be better and more rational means of parental involvement through reformed school boards. School boards should be reformed in a way that is more in

keeping with the views of parents and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and less in the half-baked way that the Minister for Education and Young People appeared to suggest in the press last week.

The Minister for Education and Young People's priority is children, so let us consider the issues of children. After 16 different consultations and reviews on children's issues, what progress has been made? Incredibly, with almost 2,000 children placed on the child protection register last year—72 per cent of whom were identified as being at risk of physical injury or neglect—the Executive is presiding over an acute crisis in the recruitment and retention of social workers. There are unprecedented vacancy levels and numbers of unallocated cases. The Executive is taking no real action to ensure that the role of those workers is valued, to review their pay and conditions or to address the negative public image. By failing the people whose job it is to intervene for our most vulnerable children, the Executive is failing those children when they are most in need of our support.

The problem goes wider. In the third year of the Parliament, Scotland still has some of the highest levels of child poverty in the developed world. When the Executive came to power nearly three years ago, one in three children grew up in poverty; today that statistic is the same. The Executive has had no impact and is failing those children.

Despite the rhetoric, children in schools are not being helped; despite the promises, children in need are not being helped; and despite the laws that exist to protect them, children at risk are not being protected. The ability to improve the life chances of children in Scotland will and should be the defining test for those who wish to form a Government in Scotland. The Labour and Liberal members have failed that test, but we will not.

16:29

Tommy Sheridan (Glasgow) (SSP): We are now in the Parliament's third year. The First Minister said today that the Executive's ambition is to do less, but better. That represents the poverty of ambition and vision that haunts the Executive and serves to undermine the Parliament.

We are in the third year of the Parliament. No announcement was made today about airport links for the two major cities in Scotland or about light rail schemes in Scotland's five cities. No announcement was made of the return of universal grants for students or the return of students' right to claim housing benefit, which would tackle student poverty. No announcement was made of the Executive's intention to tackle the

grinding and shameful poverty that, after five years of Labour in Westminster and two and a half years of new Labour and Liberal Government in Scotland, still results in 882,000 Scots trying to survive on an income of less than £10,000 a year—£110 a week.

Mr Rumbles: Tommy Sheridan mentioned student grants. Does he accept that the Executive has made at least a start, as more than 40 per cent of students will benefit from the reintroduction of grants, which can be worth up to £8,000 for a four-year course?

Tommy Sheridan: The Liberals should make more of this issue for the 2003 election, because at least they can be credited with getting Labour to change in Scotland what it is unprepared to change in England and Wales. As most of the students who lobbied the Parliament today had to admit with their hands on their hearts—many of them were sad about it—it is financially harder to be a student under a Labour Government than it was under even a Tory Government. That is the sad reality on which Labour should reflect.

Why has no action been taken or announced today to redistribute Scotland's income by doing away with the unfair council tax system? That would allow the introduction of a system that was based on the personal income of Scottish citizens, which would improve the income of almost 2 million Scots. The disposable income of 1.8 million Scots would increase if, instead of having an unfair regressive council tax, we moved to a fair, progressive income tax throughout the country.

What about water rates? What about a progressive personal income tax instead of an unfair and arbitrary water rate?

What about the fact that the First Minister referred to how well Glasgow has done with its free breakfast proposal for all the children of Glasgow? That provision involves no means testing or targeting—it is for all the children of Glasgow. Would it not have improved the Parliament's reputation if the First Minister had announced that all the children of Scotland would have healthy, nutritious meals? Then we could be proud of an achievement that the Parliament had delivered.

As for the First Minister's allegiance to PFI, we talk about the bed space and staff problems in our health service. Why does the First Minister not realise that it is PFI that results in a reduction in bed space and in staff? We should consider the situation of the new Edinburgh royal infirmary. That PFI deal has delivered a 33 per cent reduction in bed capacity and a 25 per cent reduction in staff capacity. Surely it is time to end PFI and reintroduce proper public financing for public services.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Mr George Reid): We move to winding-up speeches. Again, I will have to enforce times strictly. I call Des McNulty, who has five minutes.

16:33

Des McNulty (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab): I welcome the First Minister's commitment that the Administration that he leads will concentrate on the people's priorities of education, health, transport, crime and jobs. Those are the priorities of the communities that I represent and I am confident that they are the priorities of the people of Scotland.

I remind John Swinney and other Opposition speakers that the reality is that the Scottish budget for the next financial year of 2002-03 represents another increase in Scotland's total budget of about 3.5 per cent in real terms. The Labour-Liberal Democrat Executive is putting more and more resources into our public services and there are year-on-year increases that are larger than those that we have seen for a generation.

Jack McConnell made it clear that alongside putting additional resources into our public services, he will ensure that existing resources are targeted more effectively at delivering the service improvements that people properly demand. I was particularly heartened to hear Jack McConnell link the prioritisation of investment in public services to a clear vision for taking Scotland forward in the 21st century. That is the debate that we should be having in the Scottish Parliament, because that is the debate that will take Scotland forward. It is unfortunate that the debate that we have had today has not focused on that.

Week after week in the chamber, we hear the Opposition parties denigrating the achievements of the Administration. In so doing, they talk down the real progress that has been made in the areas that were identified by Jack McConnell and they disparage the efforts of the hundreds and thousands of public service workers who have worked hard to secure improvements in the key areas of education, health, transport, crime and jobs.

The contrast between the Labour-led Executive and the SNP Opposition could be no starker. On the one hand, we have Jack McConnell identifying partnership as the way forward and, at the same time, identifying the challenges that the Executive and every political party in Scotland face. On the other hand, we have John Swinney denigrating Labour for trying to listen to people. Frank McAveety made the point about Diogenes listening more and talking less; we are trying to listen to what people want and that is a task for every political party.

No political party can be all things to everybody. However, the job of the Opposition is not simply to oppose and to snipe, but to put forward a constructive alternative. The Opposition is failing in that respect.

John Swinney, in his keynote speech on taking up the leadership of his party, said:

"We must never say anything we cannot deliver and we must prove where the money is coming from to pay for each and every one of our policy commitments."

That statement had the effect of reducing the SNP's spending commitments from the £100 million that it appeared to be running up between September 1999 and April 2000. However, it had the adverse effect that the SNP does not define what it is going to do. SNP MSPs up and down the country are saying that they will do things better and that they will improve things. However, the Opposition parties make few specific proposals.

There is a debate to be had about policies and how those policies are to be delivered. Jack McConnell highlighted that. The debate is not one in which the Executive puts forward its proposals for them to be shot at, but one that every party that aspires to govern our country should enter into in a constructive vein. John Swinney said that he wanted to propose imaginative ideas and advocate smarter ways of doing things. We would be delighted to hear from him when he is ready to start talking to us.

The coalition members of the Parliament want to build on the achievements of our first two and a half years in office. We also want to meet the challenges that Jack McConnell set out. We do not want the civil service to drop everything and devote its energies to negotiations on matters of constitutional law. We want to focus on the key priorities of the people of Scotland. Those are the priorities that have been identified. Let us see an end to the politics of division. Let us work with local communities to realise their aspirations. The Government is working to make real achievements in that direction. People in public services are working in that direction.

Scotland expects a drive forward to make Scotland a better place. We need more than voodoo economics to do that. We need real application on how things can be delivered. Following what Jack McConnell said today, and what some of his ministers have said on other occasions, I am optimistic that we are focusing on what needs to be done. The task is to do it.

16:39

Miss Annabel Goldie (West of Scotland) (Con): The First Minister used many words in his speech this afternoon. Indeed, he used some words many times. Two of his phrases were:

“what must be done for Scotland”

and

“Listening, reflecting and acting”.

The difficulty is that, when the First Minister asks of himself and his colleagues what must be done for Scotland and urges himself and them to listen, reflect and act, the outcome seems very different from the expectations of the people of Scotland.

The motion could have been—indeed, for all that I know, it was—in the Labour party’s 1999 manifesto. The surprise is not what it expresses, which frankly seems to be the minimal aspiration of any political party, but that, after two years and seven months of a Labour-Liberal Democrat coalition Executive, it requires to be re-expressed. If we examine that period of two years and seven months, the need for re-expression of those priorities can be explained. The reality, I fear, is somewhat disparate from the aspiration.

Take health, for example. More people are waiting for treatment, people are waiting longer and fewer patients are being seen. Indeed, Mr Rumbles referred to those matters in his speech and constantly reminds the chamber of the paucity of dentists in the north-east.

Take education. The First Minister referred to the problems of literacy and numeracy in our schools. Indeed, many of our higher and further education institutions are devoting precious resources to remedial instruction, which suggests that there is a sad and alarming deficiency in our education system. Many of our businesses find that, in taking on new employees, they have to provide basic education.

Take the economy. In 2001 alone, we lost more than 20,000 jobs in Scotland. Our economic growth is lagging badly behind that in the rest of the UK and Scottish firms are paying 9 per cent more in business rates than their English counterparts.

The motion is not about an innovatory, dynamic new year vision for Scotland. It is reheated Christmas turkey. Quite simply, the motion is an astonishing Executive admission of failure, confusion and complacency: failure to address problems that the Executive has presided over, confusion about what to do about those problems and complacency about the continuing deterioration of our public services. It is a sorry reflection of the Parliament that the Executive has to come before it and, two years and seven months down the line, seek to justify what it has been doing during that period.

The forthcoming parliamentary and legislative schedule for the Executive contains matters such as the land reform proposals, for which I have met little interest or enthusiasm among the people of

Scotland. There may be interest in those matters in selected pockets, but there is a universal concern that that is not what the people of Scotland thought that the Parliament would be worrying itself about. The same sort of cynicism extends to the Protection of Wild Mammals (Scotland) Bill.

What I find disquieting about the motion is not that it lays out a radical vision for the next 18 months and innovatory proposals that could excite the people of Scotland and, we hope, engender a renewed interest in and affection for the Parliament, but that it is a sad reflection of what has failed and has not been done and what has been cobbled together in a desperate attempt to try to put that right.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You have one minute, Miss Goldie.

Miss Goldie: I shall spare you the pain, Presiding Officer.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We are immediately back on schedule in that case.

16:43

Roseanna Cunningham (Perth) (SNP): I am tempted to spend my seven minutes talking about independence, as so many members on the Labour benches apparently want to hear more on the subject. Perhaps a number of them privately agree with the SNP. I say to them: late conversions are always welcome.

However, we are talking about the Executive’s priorities. There should be no disagreement that the Executive’s priorities must be, to quote its motion,

“to deliver first class public services that help create a Scotland full of opportunity, where children can reach their full potential”.

That is where we have to part company, however, because, since day one, the Executive has failed to deliver those first-class services and has signally failed Scotland’s children. It has also failed today to convince anyone of anything other than its failure. What was needed from the Executive was not some trite restatement of its priorities but a recognition of that failure in respect of public services. Its motion should have contained a genuine commitment to change. Instead of the new broom sweeping clean, however, it looks as though it will not sweep at all.

We have today the Executive’s new year’s resolution, which will no doubt go the way of all new year’s resolutions. The Executive might try to hide this from the rest of us and it might even try to convince itself otherwise, but in reality all that it offers is more of the same empty pledges that we have heard throughout the Parliament’s short life.

I would like to quote what the First Minister said in his speech; I apologise if I have to paraphrase slightly. He said that it was not good enough for the Opposition to tell the Executive what cannot be done rather than what can be done. As well as being asked to talk about independence, we keep being asked what we would do. I understand that Labour members are anxious to know the detail of our policies because, to judge by past performance, that is one of the few ways in which they get their own policies.

If the First Minister does not believe me, I shall read a little list of the policies that Labour has stolen already. It includes drugs courts, a minister for external affairs, abolition of air passenger duty, abolition of quangos, changes to judicial appointments, the introduction of a seller's survey, a local government power of general competence, the creation of poverty indicators, the promotion of measures to deal with anti-social behaviour, the introduction of a secure tenancy, the assumption by local authorities of more strategic responsibilities and, as I hear one of my colleagues saying, free personal care—although perhaps we should wait a while to convince ourselves that that is happening.

That is why Labour members want to hear what the SNP's policies are. They need to know because they need those policies for their manifestos. It sometimes feels as though the only things that the Executive has delivered on are the SNP policies that it first derided and has now adopted.

Obviously, I have a particular interest in justice issues. The Executive is promising to reduce crime and the fear of crime. Of course we all want that to happen, but what is the Executive's track record? What has actually been achieved? Has the Executive kept the promises that it has made? Let us look at some of the pledges from the programme for government. It pledged a Scotland "where people are safer and feel safer."

Is Scotland safer? Despite the First Minister's claims, between 1997, when Labour came to power, and 2000, the number of crimes recorded by the police increased by 2,500 according to the Government's official statistics. Non-sexual crimes of violence recorded by the police were up by more than 4,000—an increase of 22 per cent. Homicides in Scotland were up by 18 per cent.

We know that the Procurator Fiscal Service is under strain. We know that the number of cases in which it took no action on reports that it received from the police and other bodies rose by 20 per cent between 1997-98 and 2000-01. We also know that a youth crime strategy was promised by March 2001. I may have missed that, but perhaps we are still waiting for it.

The programme for government pledged to

"develop more effective community penalties for offenders, taking particular account of the needs of women offenders".

The reality is that the prison population in 2001 reached record levels. The numbers in Cornton Vale peaked at 265 on 30 November 2001. That is the highest figure ever. Use of community disposals remains highly variable. Community service orders were used by courts in Dundee twice as often as by courts in Glasgow. There seems to be no progress on that at all.

That is the reality: broken promise upon empty pledge upon hollow words. The Executive's only real success appears to be in the number of consultations or reviews that have been set up or are in progress.

A number of Labour and Liberal Democrat members seem to be rather startled that the job of an Opposition is to oppose. If that is their attitude, it is no wonder that it took the Labour party 18 years to get back into government.

I make no apology for repeating the key failures of the Executive. I quote a few people who are not members of the Parliament. On health, Gavin Tait, consultant orthopaedic surgeon, said:

"Short termism, penny pinching, parochialism and micro-management by government are all preventing rational and rapid development of the service".

On children, Henry Maitles of Strathclyde University said:

"As the Scottish parliament enters its third year, virtually no impact has been made on child poverty".

On transport, David Begg, one of Labour's people, said:

"We had one of the lowest levels of investment (as % of GDP) in transport".

The truth is that nothing that has been said by members on the coalition parties' benches today changes the verdict that the Scottish people have already passed: guilty of failure. If Labour members ask voters about their views of health service delivery, they will hear hollow laughter if they are lucky. There are longer waiting times and longer waiting lists. If they ask university students for their verdict on higher education policy, perhaps when those students are on their way to visit the bank manager, trying to cope with spiralling and crippling debt burdens, the answer will be that it is a failure. Dismal reports on the economy give the lie to any claims of success.

I could go on. We have heard how much money the Government claims to have ploughed into Scotland's public services, but our constituents—the people of Scotland—are not seeing any benefit. Services are getting worse.

Part of the problem is the Executive's

incompetence. Another part of the problem is that the Parliament simply does not have the power that is needed truly to transform Scottish society. We will be able to create a Scotland that is full of opportunity only with independence—that is what SNP members want and strive for.

16:50

The Deputy First Minister and Minister for Justice (Mr Jim Wallace): Deputy First Minister—or rather Deputy Presiding Officer. I am sorry—I had an identity crisis there.

The debate and the contributions from members on the Liberal Democrat and Labour benches in particular have shown the considerable amount that has been achieved by the Parliament in the two and a half years of its existence. We have shown that we are committed to delivering high-quality public services. The priority now, as the First Minister and others on the Executive benches described, is to continue to deliver those services and to make them more accessible to those who use them.

We have shown our commitment to the national health service by investing record sums of money in it. By 2003, we will have built eight new hospitals, which is a record. We have shown our commitment to making a safer Scotland by providing a record number of police officers and by improving crime clear-up rates. In 2000, crime fell 3 per cent from the previous year. In the Scottish crime survey—to which, significantly, Roseanna Cunningham did not refer—members of the public were asked whether they were worried about their safety when they walked home in the dark. In 1996, 35 per cent said that they were worried. In 2000, the figure was down to 28 per cent. When they were asked whether they saw crime as an extremely serious problem, in 1996 under the Tories, 44 per cent said that they did, whereas, in 2000 under this Administration, 28 per cent said that they did. When they were asked whether they were worried about housebreaking, in 1996 under the Tories, 52 per cent said that they were, whereas the figure was down to 45 per cent in 2000. It appears from those figures that considerable steps have been taken to make people feel safer.

We have shown our commitment to teachers, parents and pupils by the most significant pay and conditions agreement in our schools for decades and we have shown our commitment to Scotland's students. We have shown our commitment to Scotland's elderly by agreeing to introduce free personal and nursing care later this year. A member asked about central heating. As Iain Gray has indicated, the Eaga Partnership has installed 208 central heating systems in the private sector and is on target to install 3,550 by 31 March. All

the indications show that local authorities and housing associations are on target to install central heating systems in around 6,800 dwellings by 31 March.

Sarah Boyack mentioned the Executive's commitment to transport under her stewardship. Some £100 million for 55 public transport fund projects and £660 million for improving motorways and trunk roads has been provided. Like Jamie Stone, I look forward to discussing the A9 with the minister later this month.

Tommy Sheridan: Will the minister give way?

Mr Wallace: I first want to deal with a point that Kenny MacAskill made. He queried the switch from road to rail and conveniently ignored £23 million of freight facility grants, which have led to 13 million fewer lorry miles. That is an indication of commitment.

Tommy Sheridan: Will the Deputy First Minister tell us whether there will be airport links to Edinburgh and Glasgow airports before 2003?

Mr Wallace: Anyone who knows the planning system would think that that is highly unlikely. To ask that question betrays a naivety about how the processes of government work.

I want to pick up on a specific point that Brian Monteith made—there was no opportunity to answer it. Irene McGugan also referred to the matter. There was a report in yesterday's *The Scotsman* about Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education. We do not have a clue where that report came from—it is not rooted in anything that the Executive is doing. We have no objection to—and I hope that the chamber would welcome—local authorities wanting to take a keen interest in the performance of their schools. However, there was no substance to the report.

People would have been interested to hear Mr Swinney set out the case for the SNP in his opening remarks, but he did not set out a positive case for the SNP for much time at all. He seemed to suggest that the Administration was at fault for having reviews and consultations. Roseanna Cunningham repeated that suggestion

I sat with Mr Reid, the Deputy Presiding Officer, in the consultative steering group, which was chaired by Henry McLeish. Many of us thought that reviewing with, consulting, taking into our confidence and sharing with the people of Scotland was what the Parliament was meant to do. If Roseanna Cunningham is complaining about the justice department, for example, does she think that we should not be reviewing licensing laws or consulting on police complaints, stalking and harassment and evidence taking in rape trials?

Mr Swinney: As well as consulting on all those

issues, does the Deputy First Minister and Minister for Justice accept that the public are just a little bit interested in the delivery of the promises of shorter waiting lists and waiting times, which the Executive has failed to deliver?

Mr Wallace: I think that it is very much to the point that the SNP objected to consultation. I showed not only that have we consulted, but, in the list that I gave, that we have acted on that consultation. No SNP member has said that they did not want the results of that consultation. For example, we consulted about evidence taking in rape trials; now there is a bill before Parliament about that matter. We consulted on stalking and harassment; the Justice 2 Committee produced a good bill on that and the proposed criminal justice bill will take the issue further. We had 3,580 replies to our consultation on land reform; the Land Reform (Scotland) Bill is much better as a result of that. I do not apologise for consultation.

John Swinney said that the SNP would use the Parliament's powers to their full extent. He listed all the things that the SNP would do—the taxi meter started running again—but he did not say what would be cut to achieve those things. We will watch carefully as the pennies and pounds mount up.

As for David McLetchie, he attacked us for setting priorities. Let me remind him of some of the priorities that the First Minister set. Scott Barrie properly pointed to the priority of improving school leaving qualifications for children in care, which the First Minister also mentioned. Does David McLetchie want us to ditch that priority? Does he want to us to ditch the priorities of improving literacy and numeracy? Does he want us to ditch the commitment that was made today of £20 million of new money to tackle bedblocking? Does he want to ditch the commitments to bring down waiting times, to modernise and upgrade cancer services, to encourage health promotion, to integrate transport systems and to make the prosecution and court system in this country more effective? I could go on. He attacked us, but he is not prepared to say which of our priorities we should not be pursuing.

David McLetchie: In my speech, I gave the answer to some of the coalition parties' back benchers, saying that the Executive should ditch the nonsense of land reform. The Executive should listen to its 3,580 responses and take account of the fact that the Land Reform (Scotland) Bill is a gross irrelevance when rural Scotland and the economy are in crisis. The bill is a good example of what the Executive could ditch, thus doing a lot better by doing a lot less.

Mr Wallace: A substantial number of the responses support our proposals. Because we have listened to those responses, the bill covers a

responsible right of access and represents recreational interests. The farmers have indicated that the bill is a lot better for that.

I was interested in David McLetchie's speech, in which he gave a lot away. He referred to the fact that the First Minister said that health, education, transport, crime and jobs are of considerable importance and are our priorities. However, David McLetchie also said that fishermen and farmers are not included. I have represented a fishing and farming constituency in this Parliament and at Westminster for almost 19 years. Most of my constituents who are fishermen and farmers are interested in the health service, education, transport—particularly—and tackling crime. However, they are perhaps most interested in jobs and employment. The fact that David McLetchie thinks that jobs do not matter in rural areas is perhaps a big giveaway that the people he knows in rural areas probably do not work for a living—they are the kind of absentee landlords who are part of the problem to which we are trying to provide a solution.

Alex Fergusson said that the Executive was ignoring information technology in rural areas. Where has he been over the past year, when we announced that on the broadband strategy the pathfinder project would cover the whole of the south of Scotland, which he is supposed to represent, and the Highlands and Islands? Those areas are pretty rural by my rule of thumb.

The Executive is showing an innovative approach in many areas of its work by looking at policies in a joined-up fashion and by considering issues that affect rural and urban communities and the environment in the round.

When the Executive was established, we made a conscious decision to take a new approach to issues affecting rural communities. Rather than considering separately the primary sectors of fishing, farming and forestry, as previous ministers did, our Minister for Environment and Rural Development is tasked with bringing together ministers with portfolios across a range of services that are delivered in rural areas. That has been a successful innovation. Although we do not underestimate the problems and challenges that face rural Scotland, the Government is better equipped through taking a more all-embracing approach to tackling those than was taken by Administrations in the past.

Alex Fergusson: Will the Deputy First Minister give way?

Mr Wallace: I am approaching the end of my time.

The SNP amendment mentions independence, although SNP members barely spoke to it. For the best part of the 1960s through to 1999, this

country had a debate on the constitution. That debate came to a successful conclusion with the establishment of the Scottish Parliament. What the people of Scotland now want, and what the Executive is delivering, is high-quality public services. We do not want to open up a new constitutional debate. We are proud of what we have done and what we are going to deliver between now and the election in 2003.

Parliamentary Bureau Motion

17:01

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Mr George Reid): The next item of business is consideration of a Parliamentary Bureau motion. I ask Euan Robson to move motion S1M-2583, on the designation of lead committees.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees the following designations of Lead Committee—

the Health and Community Care Committee to consider the National Health Service (Scotland) (Superannuation Scheme and Additional Voluntary Contributions) (Pension Sharing on Divorce) Amendment Regulations 2001 (SSI 2001/465);

the Justice 1 Committee to consider the Legal Aid (Scotland) Act 1986 (Availability of Solicitors) Regulations 2001 (SSI 2001/464);

the Local Government Committee to consider the Police Pensions (Pension Sharing on Divorce) (Scotland) Amendment Regulations 2001 (SSI 2001/459); and

the Local Government Committee to consider the Police Pensions (Additional Voluntary Contributions and Increased Benefits) (Pension Sharing) (Scotland) Amendment Regulations 2001 (SSI 2001/461)—[*Euan Robson.*]

Decision Time

17:02

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Mr George Reid): There are four questions to be put as a result of today's business. The first question is, that amendment S1M-2578.2, in the name of John Swinney, on the Scottish Executive's priorities, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

FOR

Adam, Brian (North-East Scotland) (SNP)
 Campbell, Colin (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Crawford, Bruce (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perth) (SNP)
 Elder, Dorothy-Grace (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Ewing, Dr Winnie (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP)
 Ewing, Mrs Margaret (Moray) (SNP)
 Fabiani, Linda (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Gibson, Mr Kenneth (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Hamilton, Mr Duncan (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Lothians) (SNP)
 Ingram, Mr Adam (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (North-East Scotland) (SNP)
 MacAskill, Mr Kenny (Lothians) (SNP)
 Marwick, Tricia (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 McGugan, Irene (North-East Scotland) (SNP)
 McLeod, Fiona (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Morgan, Alasdair (Galloway and Upper Nithsdale) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (North-East Scotland) (SNP)
 Sheridan, Tommy (Glasgow) (SSP)
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banff and Buchan) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Swinney, Mr John (North Tayside) (SNP)
 Ullrich, Kay (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Welsh, Mr Andrew (Angus) (SNP)
 White, Ms Sandra (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Wilson, Andrew (Central Scotland) (SNP)

AGAINST

Aitken, Bill (Glasgow) (Con)
 Alexander, Ms Wendy (Paisley North) (Lab)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Barrie, Scott (Dunfermline West) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Edinburgh Central) (Lab)
 Brankin, Rhona (Midlothian) (Lab)
 Brown, Robert (Glasgow) (LD)
 Butler, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab)
 Chisholm, Malcolm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab)
 Craigie, Cathie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab)
 Curran, Ms Margaret (Glasgow Baillieston) (Lab)
 Davidson, Mr David (North-East Scotland) (Con)
 Deacon, Susan (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (Lab)
 Douglas-Hamilton, Lord James (Lothians) (Con)
 Eadie, Helen (Dunfermline East) (Lab)
 Ferguson, Patricia (Glasgow Maryhill) (Lab)
 Fergusson, Alex (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Finnie, Ross (West of Scotland) (LD)
 Fitzpatrick, Brian (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Lab)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gillon, Karen (Clydesdale) (Lab)

Godman, Trish (West Renfrewshire) (Lab)
 Goldie, Miss Annabel (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Gray, Iain (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Lab)
 Henry, Hugh (Paisley South) (Lab)
 Home Robertson, Mr John (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Hughes, Janis (Glasgow Rutherglen) (Lab)
 Jackson, Dr Sylvia (Stirling) (Lab)
 Jackson, Gordon (Glasgow Govan) (Lab)
 Jamieson, Cathy (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (Lab)
 Jenkins, Ian (Tweeddale, Etrick and Lauderdale) (LD)
 Johnstone, Alex (North-East Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Mr Andy (East Kilbride) (Lab)
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab)
 Livingstone, Marilyn (Kirkcaldy) (Lab)
 Lyon, George (Argyll and Bute) (LD)
 Macdonald, Lewis (Aberdeen Central) (Lab)
 Macintosh, Mr Kenneth (Eastwood) (Lab)
 MacKay, Angus (Edinburgh South) (Lab)
 MacLean, Kate (Dundee West) (Lab)
 Macmillan, Maureen (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Martin, Paul (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab)
 McAllion, Mr John (Dundee East) (Lab)
 McAveety, Mr Frank (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab)
 McCabe, Mr Tom (Hamilton South) (Lab)
 McConnell, Mr Jack (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)
 McGrigor, Mr Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 McIntosh, Mrs Lyndsay (Central Scotland) (Con)
 McLeish, Henry (Central Fife) (Lab)
 McLetchie, David (Lothians) (Con)
 McMahan, Mr Michael (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab)
 McNeil, Mr Duncan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab)
 McNulty, Des (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab)
 Monteith, Mr Brian (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Morrison, Mr Alasdair (Western Isles) (Lab)
 Muldoon, Bristow (Livingston) (Lab)
 Mulligan, Mrs Mary (Linlithgow) (Lab)
 Mundell, David (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Munro, John Farquhar (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD)
 Murray, Dr Elaine (Dumfries) (Lab)
 Oldfather, Irene (Cunninghame South) (Lab)
 Peacock, Peter (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Peattie, Cathy (Falkirk East) (Lab)
 Radcliffe, Nora (Gordon) (LD)
 Raffan, Mr Keith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD)
 Robson, Euan (Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (LD)
 Rumbles, Mr Mike (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD)
 Scanlon, Mary (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)
 Scott, Tavish (Shetland) (LD)
 Simpson, Dr Richard (Ochil) (Lab)
 Smith, Iain (North-East Fife) (LD)
 Smith, Mrs Margaret (Edinburgh West) (LD)
 Stone, Mr Jamie (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)
 Thomson, Elaine (Aberdeen North) (Lab)
 Tosh, Mr Murray (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Wallace, Mr Jim (Orkney) (LD)
 Watson, Mike (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab)
 Whitefield, Karen (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab)
 Wilson, Allan (Cunninghame North) (Lab)
 Young, John (West of Scotland) (Con)

ABSTENTIONS

Canavan, Dennis (Falkirk West)
 Harper, Robin (Lothians) (Green)

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The result of

the division is: For 30, Against 83, Abstentions 2.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The second question is, that amendment S1M-2578.1, in the name of David McLetchie, on the Scottish Executive's priorities, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

FOR

Aitken, Bill (Glasgow) (Con)
Davidson, Mr David (North-East Scotland) (Con)
Douglas-Hamilton, Lord James (Lothians) (Con)
Fergusson, Alex (South of Scotland) (Con)
Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Goldie, Miss Annabel (West of Scotland) (Con)
Johnstone, Alex (North-East Scotland) (Con)
McGrigor, Mr Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
McIntosh, Mrs Lyndsay (Central Scotland) (Con)
McLetchie, David (Lothians) (Con)
Monteith, Mr Brian (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Mundell, David (South of Scotland) (Con)
Scanlon, Mary (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)
Tosh, Mr Murray (South of Scotland) (Con)
Young, John (West of Scotland) (Con)

AGAINST

Alexander, Ms Wendy (Paisley North) (Lab)
Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
Barrie, Scott (Dunfermline West) (Lab)
Boyack, Sarah (Edinburgh Central) (Lab)
Brankin, Rhona (Midlothian) (Lab)
Brown, Robert (Glasgow) (LD)
Butler, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab)
Chisholm, Malcolm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab)
Craigie, Cathie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab)
Curran, Ms Margaret (Glasgow Baillieston) (Lab)
Deacon, Susan (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (Lab)
Eadie, Helen (Dunfermline East) (Lab)
Ferguson, Patricia (Glasgow Maryhill) (Lab)
Finnie, Ross (West of Scotland) (LD)
Fitzpatrick, Brian (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Lab)
Gillon, Karen (Clydesdale) (Lab)
Godman, Trish (West Renfrewshire) (Lab)
Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
Gray, Iain (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Lab)
Harper, Robin (Lothians) (Green)
Henry, Hugh (Paisley South) (Lab)
Home Robertson, Mr John (East Lothian) (Lab)
Hughes, Janis (Glasgow Rutherglen) (Lab)
Jackson, Dr Sylvia (Stirling) (Lab)
Jackson, Gordon (Glasgow Govan) (Lab)
Jamieson, Cathy (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (Lab)
Jenkins, Ian (Tweeddale, Etrick and Lauderdale) (LD)
Kerr, Mr Andy (East Kilbride) (Lab)
Lamont, Johann (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab)
Livingstone, Marilyn (Kirkcaldy) (Lab)
Lyon, George (Argyll and Bute) (LD)
Macdonald, Lewis (Aberdeen Central) (Lab)
Macintosh, Mr Kenneth (Eastwood) (Lab)
MacKay, Angus (Edinburgh South) (Lab)
MacLean, Kate (Dundee West) (Lab)
Macmillan, Maureen (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
Martin, Paul (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab)

McAllion, Mr John (Dundee East) (Lab)
McAveety, Mr Frank (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab)
McCabe, Mr Tom (Hamilton South) (Lab)
McConnell, Mr Jack (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)
McLeish, Henry (Central Fife) (Lab)
McMahon, Mr Michael (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab)
McNeil, Mr Duncan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab)
McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab)
McNulty, Des (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab)
Morrison, Mr Alasdair (Western Isles) (Lab)
Muldoon, Bristow (Livingston) (Lab)
Mulligan, Mrs Mary (Linlithgow) (Lab)
Munro, John Farquhar (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD)
Murray, Dr Elaine (Dumfries) (Lab)
Oldfather, Irene (Cunninghame South) (Lab)
Peacock, Peter (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
Peattie, Cathy (Falkirk East) (Lab)
Radcliffe, Nora (Gordon) (LD)
Raffan, Mr Keith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD)
Robson, Euan (Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (LD)
Rumbles, Mr Mike (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD)
Scott, Tavish (Shetland) (LD)
Sheridan, Tommy (Glasgow) (SSP)
Simpson, Dr Richard (Ochil) (Lab)
Smith, Iain (North-East Fife) (LD)
Smith, Mrs Margaret (Edinburgh West) (LD)
Stone, Mr Jamie (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)
Thomson, Elaine (Aberdeen North) (Lab)
Wallace, Mr Jim (Orkney) (LD)
Watson, Mike (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab)
Whitefield, Karen (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab)
Wilson, Allan (Cunninghame North) (Lab)

ABSTENTIONS

Adam, Brian (North-East Scotland) (SNP)
Campbell, Colin (West of Scotland) (SNP)
Canavan, Dennis (Falkirk West)
Crawford, Bruce (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
Cunningham, Roseanna (Perth) (SNP)
Elder, Dorothy-Grace (Glasgow) (SNP)
Ewing, Dr Winnie (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
Ewing, Fergus (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP)
Ewing, Mrs Margaret (Moray) (SNP)
Fabiani, Linda (Central Scotland) (SNP)
Gibson, Mr Kenneth (Glasgow) (SNP)
Grahame, Christine (South of Scotland) (SNP)
Hamilton, Mr Duncan (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
Hyslop, Fiona (Lothians) (SNP)
Ingram, Mr Adam (South of Scotland) (SNP)
Lochhead, Richard (North-East Scotland) (SNP)
MacAskill, Mr Kenny (Lothians) (SNP)
MacDonald, Ms Margo (Lothians) (SNP)
Marwick, Tricia (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
Matheson, Michael (Central Scotland) (SNP)
McGugan, Irene (North-East Scotland) (SNP)
McLeod, Fiona (West of Scotland) (SNP)
Morgan, Alasdair (Galloway and Upper Nithsdale) (SNP)
Robison, Shona (North-East Scotland) (SNP)
Stevenson, Stewart (Banff and Buchan) (SNP)
Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow) (SNP)
Swinney, Mr John (North Tayside) (SNP)
Ullrich, Kay (West of Scotland) (SNP)
Welsh, Mr Andrew (Angus) (SNP)
White, Ms Sandra (Glasgow) (SNP)
Wilson, Andrew (Central Scotland) (SNP)

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 16, Against 69, Abstentions 31.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The third question is, that motion S1M-2578, in the name of Jack McConnell, on the Scottish Executive's priorities, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

FOR

Alexander, Ms Wendy (Paisley North) (Lab)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Barrie, Scott (Dunfermline West) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Edinburgh Central) (Lab)
 Brankin, Rhona (Midlothian) (Lab)
 Brown, Robert (Glasgow) (LD)
 Butler, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab)
 Canavan, Dennis (Falkirk West)
 Chisholm, Malcolm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab)
 Craigie, Cathie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab)
 Curran, Ms Margaret (Glasgow Baillieston) (Lab)
 Deacon, Susan (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (Lab)
 Eadie, Helen (Dunfermline East) (Lab)
 Ferguson, Patricia (Glasgow Maryhill) (Lab)
 Finnie, Ross (West of Scotland) (LD)
 Fitzpatrick, Brian (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Lab)
 Gillon, Karen (Clydesdale) (Lab)
 Godman, Trish (West Renfrewshire) (Lab)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Gray, Iain (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Lab)
 Henry, Hugh (Paisley South) (Lab)
 Home Robertson, Mr John (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Hughes, Janis (Glasgow Rutherglen) (Lab)
 Jackson, Dr Sylvia (Stirling) (Lab)
 Jackson, Gordon (Glasgow Govan) (Lab)
 Jamieson, Cathy (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (Lab)
 Jenkins, Ian (Tweeddale, Etrick and Lauderdale) (LD)
 Kerr, Mr Andy (East Kilbride) (Lab)
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab)
 Livingstone, Marilyn (Kirkcaldy) (Lab)
 Lyon, George (Argyll and Bute) (LD)
 Macdonald, Lewis (Aberdeen Central) (Lab)
 Macintosh, Mr Kenneth (Eastwood) (Lab)
 MacKay, Angus (Edinburgh South) (Lab)
 MacLean, Kate (Dundee West) (Lab)
 Macmillan, Maureen (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Martin, Paul (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab)
 McAllion, Mr John (Dundee East) (Lab)
 McAveety, Mr Frank (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab)
 McCabe, Mr Tom (Hamilton South) (Lab)
 McConnell, Mr Jack (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)
 McLeish, Henry (Central Fife) (Lab)
 McMahon, Mr Michael (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab)
 McNeil, Mr Duncan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab)
 McNulty, Des (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab)
 Morrison, Mr Alasdair (Western Isles) (Lab)
 Muldoon, Bristow (Livingston) (Lab)
 Mulligan, Mrs Mary (Linlithgow) (Lab)
 Munro, John Farquhar (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD)
 Murray, Dr Elaine (Dumfries) (Lab)
 Oldfather, Irene (Cunninghame South) (Lab)
 Peacock, Peter (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Peattie, Cathy (Falkirk East) (Lab)
 Radcliffe, Nora (Gordon) (LD)
 Raffan, Mr Keith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD)
 Robson, Euan (Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (LD)

Rumbles, Mr Mike (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD)
 Scott, Tavish (Shetland) (LD)
 Simpson, Dr Richard (Ochil) (Lab)
 Smith, Iain (North-East Fife) (LD)
 Smith, Mrs Margaret (Edinburgh West) (LD)
 Stone, Mr Jamie (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)
 Thomson, Elaine (Aberdeen North) (Lab)
 Wallace, Mr Jim (Orkney) (LD)
 Watson, Mike (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab)
 Whitefield, Karen (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab)
 Wilson, Allan (Cunninghame North) (Lab)

AGAINST

Aitken, Bill (Glasgow) (Con)
 Davidson, Mr David (North-East Scotland) (Con)
 Douglas-Hamilton, Lord James (Lothians) (Con)
 Fergusson, Alex (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Goldie, Miss Annabel (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Johnstone, Alex (North-East Scotland) (Con)
 McGrigor, Mr Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 McIntosh, Mrs Lyndsay (Central Scotland) (Con)
 McLetchie, David (Lothians) (Con)
 Monteith, Mr Brian (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Mundell, David (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Scanlon, Mary (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)
 Young, John (West of Scotland) (Con)

ABSTENTIONS

Adam, Brian (North-East Scotland) (SNP)
 Campbell, Colin (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Crawford, Bruce (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perth) (SNP)
 Elder, Dorothy-Grace (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Ewing, Dr Winnie (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP)
 Ewing, Mrs Margaret (Moray) (SNP)
 Fabiani, Linda (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Gibson, Mr Kenneth (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Hamilton, Mr Duncan (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Harper, Robin (Lothians) (Green)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Lothians) (SNP)
 Ingram, Mr Adam (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (North-East Scotland) (SNP)
 MacAskill, Mr Kenny (Lothians) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Ms Margo (Lothians) (SNP)
 Marwick, Tricia (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 McGugan, Irene (North-East Scotland) (SNP)
 McLeod, Fiona (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Morgan, Alasdair (Galloway and Upper Nithsdale) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (North-East Scotland) (SNP)
 Sheridan, Tommy (Glasgow) (SSP)
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banff and Buchan) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Swinney, Mr John (North Tayside) (SNP)
 Tosh, Mr Murray (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Ullrich, Kay (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Welsh, Mr Andrew (Angus) (SNP)
 White, Ms Sandra (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Wilson, Andrew (Central Scotland) (SNP)

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 68, Against 15, Abstentions 33.

Motion agreed to.

That the Parliament agrees that the Executive's priorities across Scotland must be to deliver first class public

services that help create a Scotland full of opportunity, where children can reach their full potential, and that in 2002 this will mean working in partnership to improve the health service and the health of all, to achieve high employment and promote educational opportunities, to reduce crime and the fear of crime, to build an integrated transport system which meets the needs of all users and to promote sustainable development across Scotland.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The fourth question is, that motion S1M-2583, in the name of Patricia Ferguson, on the designation of lead committees, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to.

That the Parliament agrees the following designations of Lead Committee—

the Health and Community Care Committee to consider the National Health Service (Scotland) (Superannuation Scheme and Additional Voluntary Contributions) (Pension Sharing on Divorce) Amendment Regulations 2001 (SSI 2001/465);

the Justice 1 Committee to consider the Legal Aid (Scotland) Act 1986 (Availability of Solicitors) Regulations 2001 (SSI 2001/464);

the Local Government Committee to consider the Police Pensions (Pension Sharing on Divorce) (Scotland) Amendment Regulations 2001 (SSI 2001/459); and

the Local Government Committee to consider the Police Pensions (Additional Voluntary Contributions and Increased Benefits) (Pension Sharing) (Scotland) Amendment Regulations 2001 (SSI 2001/461).

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes decision time. Before we move on to members' business, I ask members to leave the chamber quietly.

Bus Wars (Edinburgh)

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Mr Murray Tosh): The final item of business is a debate on motion S1M-2247, in the name of Mr Kenny MacAskill, on congestion and pollution caused by Edinburgh bus wars. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

In a few seconds, I will ask Mr MacAskill to open the debate—we seem to be taking a long time to get a clear chamber. I note that none of the members who are leaving the chamber has taken my hint. As long as the last one leaving does not turn the lights off, we can risk Mr MacAskill starting now.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament notes with concern the escalation of the “bus wars” in the city of Edinburgh, a situation which is detrimental to routes, services and passengers and which results in congestion and pollution in some areas, at the same time as routes and services are lost in others, and urges all responsible parties to take appropriate action to address this situation and to allow Scotland's capital city to develop an integrated transport network in the 21st Century.

17:08

Mr Kenny MacAskill (Lothians) (SNP): I am grateful for this opportunity to debate an issue of significant concern to Edinburgh: the on-going and escalating bus wars in the streets of our capital. As the motion says, the situation is

“detrimental to routes, services and passengers and ... results in congestion and pollution in some areas, at the same time as routes and services are lost in others”.

The situation is conducive to neither the health nor the welfare of the capital's citizens.

I should perhaps digress somewhat at this point to provide a history and background to bus services in this city. It might also be appropriate for me formally to declare that I am the holder of a Lothian Buses RidaCard, as are some other members. However, like others in the city, while I am a supporter of our publicly owned bus service, I reserve my right to criticise it and I often do so. Having said that, I think that the city has benefited from having had a publicly owned bus—or, historically, omnibus—service since the late 19th century. Lothian Buses is the line successor to the Edinburgh Corporation Tramways and the Leith Corporation Tramways, which commenced operations in the 1890s. The service became Edinburgh Corporation Transport—I am old enough to still talk about corporation buses—before becoming Lothian Region Transport and, ultimately, Lothian Buses.

Thousands may have criticised the service on occasion, but it is our service and our buses. We

have earned that right.

Bristow Muldoon (Livingston) (Lab): Would Kenny MacAskill welcome, as I would, moves by Lothian Buses to reintroduce the services that were provided in West Lothian until approximately five years ago?

Mr MacAskill: That is a matter for Lothian Buses to discuss with the local authority, but I certainly agree that an improvement in services that ensures the development of the travel-to-work area around the city of Edinburgh should be considered. I am aware of the differences in perspective. Perhaps in West Lothian, and indeed in Midlothian and East Lothian, there are different views of Lothian Buses and the other companies that provide a service. From a city of Edinburgh perspective, which I am addressing today, what we want is an end to the bus wars. From the point of view of the whole of Lothian, we want an improvement in services full stop. I will turn later to how I think that should be achieved.

As I said, we have earned the right to criticise—it is a Scottish characteristic to be harder on one's own than on others. Lothian Buses is still a publicly owned company: 91 per cent of it is owned by the City of Edinburgh Council, and 9 per cent is split between East Lothian Council, West Lothian Council and Midlothian Council. It is the only remaining publicly owned bus company in all Scotland, and is one of the few that is left in the United Kingdom. It resisted privatisation under the Tories and it will, I believe, resist commercial attack under the current Administration.

Lothian Buses may be our service, but it is not a big player in national terms. It is only about 2 per cent of the size of FirstGroup, the other combatant in the current situation. But what is the current situation? For a decade, FirstGroup has eyed Lothian Region Transport, and then Lothian Buses, the jewel in the crown of the city of Edinburgh. Overtures were rebuffed. A back-door attack, through the failed, but not lamented, city of Edinburgh rapid transport—CERT—project, was repelled. FirstGroup is still a huge conglomerate. It is the biggest operator in Scotland, and has not a national, but a multinational, stature.

When that wooing failed, it was time for FirstGroup to adopt bully-boy tactics. Since the summer, FirstGroup has stepped up a commercial attack on the services historically run by the public bus company for the public benefit in our capital city. FirstGroup entered, offering bounties to drivers, cut-price fares to passengers, shiny new buses and an unprecedented service for the city. Across Edinburgh, passengers on key routes were met by a flotilla of buses competing for a limited number of passengers. However, as I pointed out at the time, that was—and still is—unsustainable. Bus wars cost routes and services. The bounties

to drivers were unsustainable and prices have risen. The new buses in the city are there only because old buses are running in the country, particularly in the Borders. Transferable tickets between operators are no longer available.

Most important, although we have more buses than we need at key times on key routes, we are losing essential services at off-peak times on the less profitable or unprofitable routes. Some of the cutbacks have come from Lothian Buses, which has been pilloried by the public. However, we have to remember that Lothian Buses, although it is publicly owned, is not publicly subsidised. It uses the money it makes on profitable routes to support the unprofitable services. There is no such quid pro quo for FirstGroup, which chooses profitable routes to boost shareholders' profits. As a result, services have declined. The new year has brought no respite. As at Monday, further key, profitable routes operated by Lothian Buses have come under commercial attack. It will not be a bounty of buses; it will be the death knell for less profitable routes.

If we have in excess of a bus a minute going up Leith Walk, we have reached an absurd and ridiculous situation. If it continues any further, it will be easier and quicker to walk on the roofs of the buses gridlocked on the Walk than it will to travel inside them. That is not just absurd in transportation terms but unhealthy in environmental terms. Complaints come not just from Leith Walk. Members can go and speak to residents on Torphichen Place, where a public highway has become a public bus park.

What is the solution? Doing nothing has not worked. FirstGroup is in for the kill and condemnation from a united front will not suffice. FirstGroup will not be persuaded; it must be dealt with. Some cling to the hope of the cavalry coming over the hill in the form of the Office of Fair Trading. That organisation's ability to protect Scots was clearly exposed in its failure to protect them from charter flight supplements for flights from Scottish airports. That aside, the situation in Edinburgh would take months to consider. That delay is unacceptable for our citizens, and it will be too late for Lothian Buses. In any event, a fine and a slap on the wrists will not stop a multinational with deep pockets; only regulation will.

I do not wish to pre-empt the minister's response to the debate, but I wish to address the Transport (Scotland) Act 2001 and the quality contracts. They provide no salvation, which is probably why the City of Edinburgh Council has not even bothered to take preparatory steps. If a quality contract were to be invoked, it would be easy to write the script for what would occur. The organisation with the deepest pockets—the multinational—would put in an artificially low

tender and would win, and Lothian Buses would lose. Lothian Buses would pay off its drivers and sell off its buses, as there would be no alternative. When the tender came round again, as we have discovered with cut-price fares during the current price wars, the cost would rise, but there would be no competition, as there would be no Lothian Buses. The same thing happened with privatisation of environmental services in many English local authorities.

The best and only solution is bus regulation, which is supported by Glasgow City Council Labour group. That is what happens in London, England's capital city. The increased passenger numbers there put any pride that we have in our bus service well into perspective. With bus regulation, FirstGroup or any other company would have an opportunity to operate services. However, it would have to provide a package of routes, not cherry-picked routes—a balanced service for all our citizens, rather than just for those travelling on profitable routes at peak times. A bus service is by nature a public service. That must be reflected in the area that it serves and the times at which it operates.

My purpose is to highlight the importance to the city of Edinburgh of our publicly owned bus company, Lothian Buses; the congestion, damage to the environment and loss of routes and services that have been caused by FirstGroup's predatory attack; and the need for action to be taken before prices rise again and routes are lost once more. A capital city deserves a capital bus service. Action must be taken. If the minister cannot offer a solution to the problem, I ask that the Executive support my member's bill to regulate buses in this city. The error of the Tories in the 1980s must not continue under the Lib-Lab Administration a generation later.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Nine members have indicated that they wish to speak. I ask them to keep their speeches to four minutes.

17:16

Mr John Home Robertson (East Lothian) (Lab): I will try to be a bit briefer than that, to give others a little more time.

Like Kenny MacAskill, I must declare an interest. I am very grateful to Lothian Region Transport for providing me with a RidaCard. I would be even more grateful if it could run the 35 service rather more frequently. It is not unheard of for buses to run 40 minutes apart on that route. The bus wars have not benefited the 35 service greatly.

It is important to emphasise that this is not just an Edinburgh bus war, but a Lothian bus war. All our constituents in Lothian are affected. Infantile competition on profitable and congested routes in

and around the city of Edinburgh is having a detrimental effect right across the region—not only in the city, but in East Lothian, Midlothian and West Lothian. Some passengers are getting short-term benefits from competition, in the form of frequent services and low fares. However, that sort of predatory competition is not sustainable. If it continues, there must be very serious concerns for the future.

Routes outside the competition areas—in East Lothian, for example—are getting worse services, as the bus operators switch resources on to busy routes. Passengers on routes to and from North Berwick and Dunbar, and on subsidised services to small villages, are getting worse timetables, high fares and clapped-out buses. Frequent changes to timetables have caused serious problems to people travelling to and from work. We do not even have integrated ticketing. Life is very difficult for passengers from the constituency that I represent.

This sort of free-market competition is idiotic. It is to the credit of the Scottish Executive and the Parliament that we passed the Transport (Scotland) Act 2001, which provides for the establishment of quality partnerships or, where necessary, binding quality contracts. Local authorities can enter into agreements with bus operators to provide services for local passengers. Mutually assured destruction among bus operators cannot make sense for bus services in the Lothian region and the city of Edinburgh. These shenanigans must be stopped. They are causing chaos in the city and great difficulties in areas such as East Lothian.

I hope that local authorities will begin the process of establishing quality partnerships or, if necessary, quality contracts, under the terms of the Transport (Scotland) Act 2001. That cannot come soon enough.

17:19

David McLetchie (Lothians) (Con): Kenny MacAskill is right to be concerned about the congestion impact of the present battle for market share on certain city routes. However, it is important to stress that fair competition and choice are vital to ensure that a good-quality, good-value bus service is available to commuters in Edinburgh and Lothian.

Operators that seek to gain access to the market—whether First Edinburgh in respect of city routes or Lothian Buses in respect of its operations in East Lothian and Midlothian, or wherever companies seek to operate—and want to provide choice to commuters should be allowed to compete fairly with one another. I welcome the fact that the situation is being examined by the

OFT, and I hope that its report will shed some light on the matter and on the welter of claims and counter-claims that have been made by the rival companies that are involved in this debate.

The matter must be resolved. It is essential that the operators and the council, as the transport authority, work in partnership with one another. In defence of FirstGroup, it is fair to say that it already has a good track record in that respect. In Glasgow, FirstGroup has worked with Glasgow City Council and is committed to substantial funding of quality bus corridors as part of the public transport funding project, with infrastructure funding and £10 million allocated to the provision of new vehicles. In Aberdeen, which is the original home of FirstGroup, the company is working fruitfully with the council to deliver a quality service, with large-scale investment in vehicles, integrated ticketing and bus priority measures.

Brian Adam (North-East Scotland) (SNP): Is the member aware that, in Aberdeen, which he rightly identified as the home of FirstGroup, the company was challenged to provide a similar fare structure to that which it offers in Edinburgh? However, it declined to do so, saying that it would not be commercially viable. I would argue that that fare structure is not commercially viable in Edinburgh and that the company is merely adopting the predatory pricing policy that some other multinational bus companies have been found guilty of using in the past. We have lost quite a number of smaller bus companies in Scotland because of such policies. Does the member agree?

David McLetchie: Whether unfair competitive practices and predatory pricing are going on is a matter that will be investigated and adjudicated on by the OFT. For a company to be in breach of the Competition Act 2000, it would have to be demonstrated that the party complained of is abusing a dominant position in the market. The market share in Edinburgh and Lothian of Lothian Buses is some 85 per cent, while that of First Edinburgh is barely 15 per cent. How the company can abuse a dominant position from a market share base of 15 per cent is an interesting question. However, no doubt all that will come out as a result of the OFT report.

In addition to the examples that I mentioned of Glasgow and Aberdeen, it is fair to say that FirstGroup has similar partnership arrangements with cities in England, in Leeds and Bradford. It is more than a little significant that there is no evidence of so-called bus wars going on at present in any other part of the United Kingdom in which the company operates.

I fear that there is little prospect of long-term progress being made to address the present situation as long as the dominant operator within

Edinburgh and Lothian—namely, Lothian Buses—remains in municipal ownership. I was quite interested in Mr MacAskill's comments on the city bus service's origins in the Edinburgh Corporation. As Mr Adam acknowledged, the origins of FirstGroup were in the municipally owned Grampian Transport, which was privatised in 1989 through a management buy-out. At the time of privatisation, the company operated fewer than 300 buses, had an annual turnover of £11 million and employed 650 staff. Today, FirstGroup's turnover exceeds £2 billion. It employs 50,000 people worldwide and carries 2.7 million passengers a day on 10,000 buses operating across 28 UK operations. I say to Mr MacAskill that that is an outstanding success story of privatisation. It is a Scottish success story in which I would have thought that the Scottish National Party would have taken some pride.

By contrast, Lothian Buses was originally a much larger operation than Grampian Transport. In 1989, Lothian Buses was running bus services in Edinburgh and the Lothians and, 13 years later, it is doing exactly the same. Under municipal ownership, the company is standing still. Lothian Buses has missed the bus and relies on political protectionism to sustain its domination of the Edinburgh market.

The City of Edinburgh Council has an ambitious and expensive programme of proposals and plans for improving public transport in the city and Lothian. If those plans are to become reality, funding must be found from other sources, without burdening our motorists with city entry tolls of £3 a day. I believe—and I have said before in the chamber—that Lothian Buses should be sold off.

Mr MacAskill: Will David McLetchie give way?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: No, Mr McLetchie is over time.

David McLetchie: To sell off Lothian Buses would raise some £100 million for a city public transport fund that could turn many of the dreams, plans and visions into practical reality. It would also end the inherent conflict of interest in which the council finds itself as a transport authority on one hand and the major shareholder in Lothian Buses on the other, and would enable the council as transport authority to work in even-handed partnership with all those who wish to provide services to commuters in the city.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr McLetchie, you are well over time.

David McLetchie: Thank you, Presiding Officer.

I seriously commend that proposal to the City of Edinburgh Council. I know that it has examined it in the past and I hope that it will give the proposal serious consideration again.

17:25

Fiona Hyslop (Lothians) (SNP): I congratulate Kenny MacAskill on securing the debate.

Although David McLetchie might want to advocate the needs and interests of multinational companies, our duty and responsibility as members of the Parliament and representatives of the Edinburgh and Lothian areas is to represent the needs of the travelling public. The situation in Edinburgh is causing havoc. If it is doing so now, the prospects for the future, should the Lothian bus war be to the detriment of service from Lothian Buses, could be far worse.

Mr Brian Monteith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Will Fiona Hyslop give way?

Fiona Hyslop: No, let me continue.

I have severe concerns that the Conservatives have a misconception. Lothian Buses operates privately, although the local authority is the majority shareholder. Surely it is a David-and-Goliath bus battle. The situation is one of a multinational against a small company. Interestingly, in Edinburgh, the smaller company has the majority share.

Mr Monteith: Will Fiona Hyslop give way?

Fiona Hyslop: No. I would like to continue, if Brian Monteith does not mind. I am sorry that I did not recognise him in his new attire. Indeed, I am not quite sure whether the minister and Bristow Muldoon are wearing Lothian Buses ties. In fairness, I am sure that they are not. It is probably a Heart of Midlothian uniform.

I will address the serious matter of the reliability of the bus service and provision where and when it is needed. In wars, there are casualties. I will not use that horrible term "collateral damage". There are casualties beyond Edinburgh, as John Home Robertson mentioned, and there are casualties in Edinburgh. Edinburgh Central has one of the lowest car-ownership rates of any constituency in Scotland. There are children who are subject to the pollution that the congestion is causing. There are pensioners in the Grassmarket who cannot get about late in the evening because the 36 service has been cut. Young women who are working late in the city centre face fear because there might not be a bus to get them home as bus services are being cut. The fear that women in the city are facing is serious and we should address it seriously.

Because of what it is doing in Edinburgh, FirstGroup is cutting services in West Lothian. Is it any coincidence that the Linlithgow-Bathgate via Torphichen service was cut in November or that in the south of Livingston the bus services have been cut substantially? Indeed, the EX1 Armadale-Edinburgh service has been rerouted, which has

led to commuters setting up their own service—the AX1—to address the situation.

I will address some of the points that have been made and were touched on by my colleague Brian Adam. If the bus war is not a predatory price war, why is the £1 fare that FirstGroup introduced, which is now £1.50, different in other cities in which it operates? In Sheffield, it is £2.30; in Huddersfield, it is £2.70; in Glasgow, it is £2.10; in York it is £2. The bus war is clearly predatory.

I do not have the confidence that David McLetchie has that the OFT report will offer a solution. It may come too late. Points have also been made about the Transport (Scotland) Act 2001 and quality contracts. Those too might come too late to give any solution in the situation.

We must identify what we can do. The people of Edinburgh will not thank us politicians if we do and say nothing about the situation. We heard the Tory dogma of privatisation. The Tories seem to be pursuing a scorched-earth policy on the matter. Their former leader said, "There is no alternative." There is a practical alternative. It is about regulation and re-regulation. Regulation could allow competition but much fairer competition, as has been seen in other cities.

The Deputy Minister for Enterprise, Transport and Lifelong Learning (Lewis Macdonald): Mr MacAskill did not spell out for us the difference between the re-regulation that Fiona Hyslop described and the quality contracts that have been introduced under the Transport (Scotland) Act 2001. I would be interested to hear whether Fiona Hyslop could spell out the difference.

Fiona Hyslop: My first concern is that the quality contracts would, as I have said, be too late to be effective. In London, there is regulation but also competition and a far more integrated service. At the end of the day, we want a better service. Let us keep our eye on the ball: our duty and our responsibility is to act for the people of Edinburgh to ensure that they have a proper and decent service. The bus wars are not serving the people of Scotland and the politicians are not serving the people of Edinburgh if they sit on their hands and offer either the scorched-earth policy of the Conservatives or the do-nothing policy that has been the Executive's policy so far.

17:30

Sarah Boyack (Edinburgh Central) (Lab): I am grateful to Kenny MacAskill for choosing buses in Edinburgh for the topic of this end-of-day debate. I suppose it is an easy target for him as he hits out at what is happening in Edinburgh with the so-called bus wars, but both he and Fiona Hyslop missed many of the points. It is ludicrous to say that the biggest problems with transport in

Edinburgh are the pollution and congestion caused by buses. Everyone who lives in Edinburgh Central knows that the main problems of congestion and air pollution are caused by cars snarling up our roads because of the difficulty of attracting people on to buses.

I actually think that it is good that we have lots more buses in Edinburgh. Questions about how long the large number of buses on routes will last arise, but that is an issue for the operators to sort out. I will come on to talk about possible solutions.

Kenny MacAskill's speech did not contain a great deal of recognition of the positive changes that have taken place in Edinburgh over the past few years in the quality and range of bus services. Greenways deliver faster bus times and mean that there are more passengers on buses; new routes link people with their work and with where they want to go for leisure opportunities, whether at the Gyle or at Ocean Terminal; and there are newer and more attractive buses across Edinburgh with low floors so that pensioners and people with disabilities can now get wheelchairs on and off. The latest buses that Lothian Buses are introducing are entirely automated so that the drivers do not have to get out of their seats.

Big changes are taking place. Next year there will be free bus travel for pensioners. All the changes are causing more people to use buses—we know that from the year-on-year increases in Edinburgh.

There is a degree of hypocrisy in this debate. I know that we are meant to be touchy-feely at members' business debates, but I remember Kenny MacAskill's comments last year when he criticised the Executive for spending money on new bus routes. He said that the bus was a mode of transport for the last century. I think that buses are a key part of any transport strategy and that there is a lot to be praised in Edinburgh.

Some of Mr MacAskill's speech was intriguing to say the least. Anyone who had to sit through the endless debates in the Transport and the Environment Committee had the opportunity to consider a new regulatory framework for buses. We did that in great depth, but the nationalists did not propose any alternative regulatory framework. We had rigorous debates about the timing of the introduction of contracts. In response to comments from a number of people, including the Association of Transport Co-ordinating Officers in Scotland, we brought forward the time at which contracts could be introduced and we changed the nature of the terms of contract introduction. I still feel that the Transport (Scotland) Act 2001 took a balanced approach, but no alternative was proposed by the nationalists during those extensive debates.

Mr MacAskill: I concede many of Sarah

Boyack's points. If we are now magnanimous enough to say that we perhaps should have proposed an alternative and that we did not recognise that quality contracts were not going to work, will Sarah Boyack now accept that quality contracts are not going to work and will she accept that we should now introduce regulation? Mr Home Robertson has issued a press release indicating that quality contracts do not work and that regulation will have to be considered.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You are drifting into a speech, Mr MacAskill.

Mr MacAskill: Why has the City of Edinburgh Council not gone for quality contracts? Because it knows that they will not work.

Sarah Boyack: Mr MacAskill would have to put that question to the City of Edinburgh Council. The regulations on the buses were published only towards the end of last year. They are lengthy and will require a great deal of thought.

The debate over bus partnerships and bus contracts centres on the fact that they should be used where appropriate and in the public interest. That judgment is one that only the City of Edinburgh Council can make. It will then be able to put its case to the Executive. I think that the framework provided by the Transport (Scotland) Act 2001 is absolutely appropriate.

Part of what I found intriguing about Mr MacAskill's speech was the notion that, having spent two to two and a half years debating transport in this Parliament, we should now totally disregard the new transport act, set up a totally new framework of regulations that ignores the regulations in the act, and pretend to people that a new tender process—or a new regulatory process, as Mr MacAskill described it—can be triggered that would be quicker than setting in place the contracts that we already have and that have the detailed guidance that the Executive has produced. That is a ludicrous position.

The nationalists are trying to con people in Edinburgh and the Lothians into believing that they have a solution for transport in Scotland. The real challenge is to use the grinding process of going through the Transport (Scotland) Act 2001, working out what is best for us. We need more consultation with bus users so that when bus routes are taken away we can campaign on them. The challenge is to put the tougher regulation that is provided for in the Transport (Scotland) Act 2001 into place, creating more bus lanes and ensuring more long-term investment. That is a job for local authorities.

I am glad that we have had tonight's debate, but I note that there has been an awful lot of hypocrisy in the nationalist case.

17:35

Mrs Margaret Smith (Edinburgh West) (LD): I welcome the opportunity to speak in the debate about the so-called Edinburgh bus wars. One thing is certain: as in most wars, the people who are suffering the most are the civilians of the city who find themselves caught in the middle. This is not just about Edinburgh. The battle is being fought on two fronts: in First Edinburgh's traditional network heartland of West Lothian, East Lothian and Midlothian and on the streets of the city. Lothian Buses has moved into routes such as those going from the city to Penicuik and Haddington. Correspondingly, First Edinburgh has begun to compete on city routes that are already well covered.

As has been said, Edinburgh is unusual in having the last remaining publicly owned bus company in Scotland. I would put forward the view that both the company and the City of Edinburgh Council—and its predecessors—are to be congratulated and supported not only for resisting previous attempts to privatise the company but for the civic-minded manner in which the company has continued to operate over the years since the Tories introduced deregulation. I am not opposed to competition. In fact, fair competition would perhaps help to address the unfair fares anomaly in, for example, South Queensferry, which constituents of mine have had to put up with for many years. I am not opposed to cheap and affordable fares, but they must be sustainable in the long term.

As the Liberal Democrat transport spokesperson on the council, I was only too aware of the significant profit—close to £1 million—that Lothian Buses made for the council as its major shareholder and the impact that the dividend had when it was recycled back into subsidised services throughout the city. Without that commitment from Lothian Buses and the council, large areas of west Edinburgh would be without early-morning, evening, weekend and Sunday services. The current bus war on our roads threatens the positive ethos and the level of services in such areas. It benefits no one.

First Edinburgh has lost 25 per cent of its market share over recent years and is currently making losses. Lothian Buses also finds itself under threat. Integrated through ticketing has been a casualty and the council as company shareholder and transport authority finds itself in the middle of a no-win situation. The swamping of certain routes has led not only to pollution and congestion, with an estimated trebling of buses on some routes, but to Lothian Buses having to withdraw services from loss-making routes such as the link between Barnton and East Craigs. In certain parts of the city, such as Leith Walk, there is a glut of buses,

while in other areas already inadequate services have been lost.

Like other members, I welcome the fact that the Office of Fair Trading is investigating this untenable situation. I am pleased that it will undertake an investigation and is due to report in the autumn. That investigation should not focus simply on the activities of any one company; it should consider both. We must ensure that neither company abuses its position—Lothian Buses as market leader or First Edinburgh as part of a large multinational operation. We need an independent view of the situation and a pragmatic and fair way forward to deliver better services and a solution.

What can be done? The council is to be commended for having brokered a ceasefire between the two sides last October, when each company agreed not to move into new routes. Route 87, which was introduced by First Edinburgh this week, was discussed by the companies at those meetings. First Edinburgh was criticised for that, although it had been negotiated with the council and Lothian Buses at the meeting in October.

The general problem between the companies has led to attempts by First Edinburgh and the south-east Scotland transport partnership—SESTRANS—to move forward with a new integrated ticketing system being derailed in the past few weeks. That system would be of great benefit to my constituents in South Queensferry. Those who have been involved in transport issues in Edinburgh know that it is essential that all sides support initiatives on integrated ticketing.

The Transport (Scotland) Act 2001 moved us forward. The problem is that although quality partnerships have a part to play, quality contracts are a step too far. The act gave councils the power to introduce quality partnerships. There are advantages in embarking on targeted formal quality partnerships for certain areas of Edinburgh, but nobody would benefit—certainly both companies have told me that they would not benefit—from a quality contract that would risk the destruction of Lothian Buses, as was outlined by Kenny MacAskill. Neither would anybody benefit from setting in stone for three years a bus monopoly in our city.

While the Executive is to be congratulated on the support it has given Edinburgh recently with crossrail, the west Edinburgh bus system in my constituency and the initial work on the central and north Edinburgh loop, it is clear that for the foreseeable future the city will remain dependent on its bus services. That is why I hope that the Executive will do all that it can to encourage quality partnerships in Edinburgh. The present situation benefits no one. Right now, the people of Edinburgh are suffering from too many buses in

certain areas but too few in others, a hold on progress on through ticketing, the loss of certain routes and the threat to the survival of a much loved local bus company. In terms of social justice, the environment and common sense, the situation is not sustainable.

I hope that the Deputy Minister for Enterprise, Transport and Lifelong Learning will do all that he can to protect long-term fair competition in Edinburgh—competition that enhances the transport choices for the capital's citizens. Those citizens have shown through recent history that they are prepared to make a modal shift to public transport. We want that to continue against a background of fair pricing, fair competition and a balanced network throughout Lothian.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: With the honourable exception of John Home Robertson, members have had a great deal to say in this debate and we will not get everybody in unless someone seeks to move a motion to extend the debate by about 20 minutes. I would be happy to entertain such a motion if someone would be kind enough to move it.

Motion moved,

That the debate be extended by up to 20 minutes.—[Mrs Margaret Smith.]

Motion agreed to.

17:42

Robin Harper (Lothians) (Green): I too am a proud possessor of a Lothian Buses bus pass. I use it regularly on the 23 bus service, which provides me with an almost door-to-door service from my home to the Parliament. Due to the vagaries of traffic flow, the 23 bus occasionally travels in convoys of up to three. Due to the current competition, there are sometimes convoys of five or six 23s because First Edinburgh's method of competition is to try to put one of its 23s between two LRT 23s. The competition is unfair and my observation is that, so far, most of the First Edinburgh 23s seem to be almost empty, with about two or three passengers.

David McLetchie: Can Robin Harper tell me from his observation of the 23 route whose buses are doing the most clogging up? Are the buses mostly LRT buses or are they mostly First Edinburgh buses?

Robin Harper: The clogging up is due to the blocking of buses by cars, not other companies' buses. If there is any such clogging up, it is because of the extra buses that have been put on by First Edinburgh. I will address a point that David McLetchie made earlier. If a company with a £2 billion turnover and 50,000 employees being in competition with a company that has a mere £1

million profit is not unfair competition from a monopoly position, I do not know what unfair competition is.

Like many others, I have written to the OFT asking it to investigate the matter, but it may take another four or five months to provide us with its findings. I find that extraordinary. I do not see why it cannot shift a lot faster than that, but that is beyond our control and my ken. An element of urgency should impress itself upon the Executive.

Perhaps I am complacent, but my interpretation of the Transport (Scotland) Act 2001 was that the Transport and the Environment Committee assisted with the construction of a quality contracts and partnerships system that would provide for a satisfactory element of regulation.

I would like to hear from the Executive an interpretation that can be provided to the council in the present crisis to enable it and First Edinburgh to come to an agreement whereby Lothian Buses will not suffer from unfair competition and will survive to continue to provide the by and large excellent service it currently provides in Edinburgh. I am sure that we will hear about one or two gaps in the services that are provided to Midlothian, East Lothian and West Lothian. I would like the Executive to address the situation as a matter of considerable urgency.

I shall finish before my four minutes are up.

17:45

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton (Lothians) (Con): With regard to provision of the best possible bus services for Scotland's capital, we support fair competition, leading to lower prices and better services.

The City of Edinburgh Council has a conflict of interest, given that Lothian Buses is the only surviving municipally owned bus company in Britain. As David McLetchie said, a dominant bus company owned by the council prevents rivals from entering the market. As well as owning Lothian Buses, the council is the transport authority, which is a barrier to resolving this issue.

The effect of the kind of bus wars that we are seeing locally is increased congestion at various points and higher than necessary levels of pollution in certain areas. We know, for example, that Lothian Buses operates buses at a frequency of about three minutes against First Edinburgh on Leith Walk when such frequency is not necessary. Lothian Buses doubled the frequency of 25s from seven to 14 buses an hour following the introduction of First Edinburgh's six buses an hour. When First Edinburgh had to withdraw, Lothian Buses reduced the service to six buses an hour. In other words, driving a rival out of the marketplace

appeared to be more important than the provision of the best service for the travelling public.

Robin Harper: Will the member give way?

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

Robin Harper: Who is trying to drive whom out of the market?

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton: If the member has followed the debate closely, he will know that there have been many allegations and counter-allegations. It is for the Office of Fair Trading to sort them out. The allegations on predatory pricing are well known. We believe that the introduction of fair competition, which was advocated by David McLetchie, would have a huge impact on the problem of increased congestion and pollution.

Ensuring that operators maintain links between Edinburgh and the Lothians through the introduction of integrated ticketing and innovative ticketing initiatives would also help to tackle the problems of congestion and pollution. The provision of low-cost public transport will focus on converting car users to bus users. John Home Robertson touched on that. It is worth pointing out that a low-fare introductory offer by First Edinburgh resulted in a 35 per cent increase in passengers, many of whom were car users. Low fares continued—peak and off-peak tickets were up to 64 per cent cheaper than those of Lothian Buses.

If Edinburgh is to have the quality bus service it needs—one that does not have an adverse impact on congestion and pollution—the City of Edinburgh Council should seek to develop quality partnerships with the bus operators. It should make use of the existing service tender powers for socially necessary services. I accept what Margaret Smith said about that. Such action would preserve innovation and investment in the private sector and provide the socially necessary services that cannot be sustained commercially.

I recommend that the council tackle bus frequency, the maintenance of links between Edinburgh and the Lothians and integrated ticketing and other innovative ticketing proposals. Our strong conviction, which arises out of experience from elsewhere in Britain, is that free and fair competition, which leads to lower prices and better services, is the best solution.

17:49

Susan Deacon (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (Lab): I, too, am pleased that the debate has been held. As it has shown, members for the Edinburgh area are well aware of the problems. I am pleased that we have an opportunity not only to identify problems, but to

think about solutions.

I reiterate an important point that John Home Robertson made. As the member for Edinburgh East and Musselburgh—with a foot inside and a foot outside the city boundary—I think that it is important that we do not consider the issue as affecting only Edinburgh; it impacts on many parts of Lothian.

Many examples have been given today, but I would like to give a few examples that have arisen in my area in recent weeks and months. In Craigentenny and Lochend, which are in my constituency, the bus service has been depleted in the past year to the extent that there is no longer a direct link to any Edinburgh hospital. In addition, the only bus link for pupils at the local Catholic secondary school was withdrawn and was reinstated at the start and close of the school day only because a local councillor and I intervened. On Sundays, the area has almost no service. Those are just a few examples. The situation is intolerable and we cannot allow it to continue.

The bus wars are a symptom and a cause of many of the existing problems. I was struck by the robust defence of competition by David McLetchie and James Douglas-Hamilton, because the competitive environment that the previous Conservative Administration introduced led to the present situation. As other members said, the key issue is ensuring that the marketplace has the appropriate degree of regulation to give passengers the services that they deserve. If I have a concern about the debate, it is that we may have spent a wee bit too much time talking about bus companies and not enough time talking about bus services. In the weeks and months to come, we must get right the services for people in our local area.

I take issue with those who suggested that no action has been taken. The new Transport (Scotland) Act 2001 has just been put on the statute book. When I listen to SNP members, I sometimes think that they must have gone to Hogwarts school, because they seem to think that a law can come into force overnight by waving a magic wand. The process takes a wee bit longer than that. Now that the legislative provisions exist, it is important that we do everything that we can. For those who are confused, I say that the reference to Hogwarts was for Harry Potter fans. It may have passed by those who are not familiar with such things.

The legislative provisions are coming into force only now and it is vital that full use is made of them. I am struck and encouraged by what I have seen of the City of Edinburgh Council's plans to develop not only the right bus services, but—crucially—the right transportation system for the city. I have also been struck and encouraged by

the work of other local authorities in Lothian. I want them to be given all the support and encouragement possible to ensure that provisions can be put in place to ensure that services and ticketing systems are right, that integration is in place and that information is available for passengers. That is one of the greatest failings—it is frustrating for passengers when they cannot find out which buses are running.

Addressing such matters takes money and time. If I were to make one appeal to City of Edinburgh Council and the Executive, it would be to ensure that everything is done to expedite the necessary decision-making processes. Having had an insight into the Executive's operation in that regard, I am concerned that decisions are sometimes not taken as quickly as they might be.

The situation in Edinburgh is urgent, but much has been achieved, not least through Sarah Boyack's work in putting the Transport (Scotland) Act 2001 on the statute book. I want the statutory provisions to be put to work for the benefit of my constituents and others throughout Edinburgh and the Lothian area.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Finally, we come to Margo MacDonald.

17:54

Ms Margo MacDonald (Lothians) (SNP): I wish the Presiding Officer a happy new year.

I will pick up where Susan Deacon left off. The situation is urgent. The motion refers to the congestion and pollution that have been caused by Edinburgh's bus wars. Sarah Boyack took issue with that and said that buses were not causing the pollution. She is right—the pollution is not caused totally by buses, but it sure ain't helped by the bus wars. That is why we must deal with an urgent problem, which had been building in Edinburgh and of which we were already aware. With all due respect to Sarah Boyack, I think that the motion is in order.

Sarah Boyack: I did not say that the motion was not in order; I said that I disagreed with some of its content. It is a matter of degree. I take Margo MacDonald's point on the matter.

Ms MacDonald: Thank you.

The diminution in the frequency of some of the services in the south side of the city seems to this southsider to be forcing people in an affluent part of the city, where the level of car ownership is high, back into their cars to get into the city to work. That is a personal observation. I have no figures to back it up other than the fact that I am sometimes late for things—as members may have witnessed earlier when I missed the vote. The frequencies of bus services 5, 41 and 42 have been reduced. Anyone who lives on the south side

of the city, and I see Angus MacKay agreeing with me, knows that that is where people who go to work in Sarah Boyack's constituency live.

I am concerned greatly about pollution. I have four grandchildren who live in Edinburgh. From speaking to my daughter and her friends who also have young children, I know that there is genuine concern about the level of pollution that is recorded in Edinburgh. Pollution has to be tackled.

I am the link person in the Lothians for the National Asthma Campaign. A survey undertaken for the campaign showed that 81 per cent of people who suffer from asthma cite pollution generated by traffic as a negative contributory factor in their condition. I am disappointed that no one has referred to pollution, as it is an issue now and needs to be tackled urgently.

Many new houses are being built in the city, which is leading to the arrival of new families. In that respect, the pollution caused by traffic congestion is of great importance and the bus wars are not helping. Research has been produced in the Netherlands that shows a close link between the pollutants in diesel fumes and asthma in young children. That is another argument in favour of sorting out bus transportation in Edinburgh.

I realise that the Office of Fair Trading is examining the issue and that everyone has talked about the commercial aspect of bus transport, but I am interested in the health aspects of the issue. We cannot wait for the Office of Fair Trading. It is also not enough to say that we have quality contracts, as they will not sort out the pollution problem. A narrow degree of regulation will not do that—we need to do more.

I pay tribute to City of Edinburgh Council for what it has tried to do, and to Sarah Boyack for what she tried to do to make sense of traffic in Edinburgh, but we need to do more. Strategic planning is required. I will not widen the debate at this stage, but we need to examine the size of the city, as with more houses come more cars. If we want to reduce the number of cars in the city, and get more people on to buses, we must examine the size of the city and we must also examine city-centre workplace parking. That has not been tackled and it must be done.

I am sorry to have introduced two caveats at the end of the debate, as I welcome it and we have talked about important things. However, the debate is wider than what we have managed to tackle tonight.

17:58

The Deputy Minister for Enterprise, Transport and Lifelong Learning (Lewis Macdonald): I am glad to have the opportunity to address the issues

that Kenny MacAskill raised in his motion. I will start by outlining where responsibilities lie with regard to the current situation in the Edinburgh bus market.

Members will understand that responsibility for competition policy does not lie with the Scottish Parliament or with Scottish ministers but, as has been said, with the Office of Fair Trading. Following a complaint of predatory practice, the OFT launched a formal investigation. That investigation is expected to conclude in the spring of this year. It will be for the OFT to come to informed conclusions on the competition aspects of the situation in Edinburgh.

Mrs Margaret Smith: My discussions with First Edinburgh suggest that it was led to believe that the OFT investigation will not be completed in the spring or the summer of this year. It will be the autumn before that happens. That is because the OFT has widened its investigations to examine other aspects. Will the minister do all he can to pass on to the OFT the sense of urgency that has been expressed in the debate?

Lewis Macdonald: Certainly.

Robin Harper: Does the minister agree that there is a sense in which the OFT's findings will be irrelevant because, whether the competition is fair or unfair, it is causing a great deal of disruption? It is not sensible to allow the present situation to continue.

Lewis Macdonald: It is important to say that the competition aspects are the responsibility of the OFT. It is entirely appropriate that the OFT should investigate the complaints. I hope that it will do so as quickly as it can. I would also expect it do so thoroughly and to take into account the evidence before it. That responsibility lies with the OFT.

Responsibility for the rules and regulations governing the registration of local bus services lies with the traffic commissioner, who works within a legal framework set by Scottish ministers. Under regulations made in July 2001, Scottish ministers require bus operators to notify local councils of changes in services. I can verify that neither the traffic commissioner nor the City of Edinburgh Council has reported any instance where those regulations have been breached. If that should happen, the commissioner has powers to block any proposed changes in service provision. We would expect him to use those powers, were those regulations to be breached.

As has been said, Edinburgh is a jewel in the crown of the Scottish bus industry. The city has a large network of services that are well used and one of the highest per capita levels of bus service use among the towns and cities of the United Kingdom. It continues to be a centre of buoyant economic growth, creating the possibility of further

growth in bus use.

The benefit of improved bus service provision was being demonstrated to great effect in Edinburgh even before the Transport (Scotland) Act 2001 with the completion of many greenways and plans for more. The Executive has made more than £15 million available to the city to pursue bus priority initiatives. The greenways have proved that a combination of high-quality buses and bus priority measures to move buses quickly through traffic congestion will help to get people out of their cars, reducing congestion and improving air quality.

A number of speakers have referred to the need for an integrated transport network for the 21st century. That is a high priority in Edinburgh and throughout Scotland. Margaret Smith mentioned an earlier through-ticketing initiative that did not reach fruition, but it is important that we acknowledge the fact that Lothian Buses and FirstGroup work together on a number of initiatives to promote bus use in the city.

In spite of the competition between them, the two operators are currently discussing a new joint ticketing initiative under the auspices of the regional transport partnership, SESTRANS. If those discussions are successful, they will allow passengers with a ticket for either company to access services provided by the other and bring about a significant step forward in public transport integration in the SESTRANS area. I hope that those discussions are successful and that joint ticketing can be introduced in the near future.

Mrs Smith: My understanding is that those negotiations have broken down in the past few weeks because Lothian Buses has pulled out of them. First Edinburgh, the council and others in SESTRANS are very concerned about that. Those negotiations should not be a casualty of the current situation.

Lewis Macdonald: I noted the member's earlier remarks. The discussions to which she refers and those that have recently got under way are separate, although they are aimed at the same outcome.

The reason for developing joint ticketing initiatives, which are being considered further even as we speak, is to encourage the necessary modal shift from car to public transport. I agree with Sarah Boyack that we need to keep concerns about congestion and the pollution caused by buses in perspective. They have to be put in the context of the car congestion and pollution that can be avoided if more people catch the bus.

Traffic commissioners have long had power to apply traffic regulation conditions to cover the routes of bus services and stopping places on the basis of criteria such as road safety and traffic

congestion. The Transport (Scotland) Act 2001 amended those powers to add a further criterion for making a traffic regulation condition to include the reduction or limitation of noise or air pollution. I hope that that will go some way to address that issue generally. In the Executive's view, adequate powers exist to limit the congestion and pollution effects of increased bus provision.

The areas in which ministers have acted to improve local bus services are far wider than that. I am glad that Susan Deacon and others have paid tribute to the work of Sarah Boyack in introducing those provisions under the Transport (Scotland) Act 2001. The act contains powers on road user charging, which City of Edinburgh Council is pursuing, and a whole raft of new powers in relation to local bus services.

Those powers allow local councils to make quality partnership schemes, ensuring that only high-quality buses are used, and to make quality contract schemes, effectively allowing councils to undertake wholesale contracting of local bus services, subject to ministerial approval. Councils can also decide what information should be made available and can charge bus operators for the cost of doing so if they do not deliver what is required. The act also requires bus operators to establish joint ticketing schemes.

Mr MacAskill: What powers in the Transport (Scotland) Act 2001 would the minister advise City of Edinburgh Council to use to resolve the bus wars, given that the conflagration started in August, one or two months after the act came into force, and to preserve Lothian Buses?

Lewis Macdonald: The objective of the Transport (Scotland) Act 2001 is to preserve and improve services for passengers. Quality contracts are designed to do precisely that and to give local authorities the powers effectively and substantially to re-regulate certain services, if they so wish, to achieve that objective.

In addition, we tightened up the registration requirements that bus operators must observe. As I said, we updated those in July. Operators must now inform local authorities 10 weeks in advance of any proposed service changes, and must also give 21 days' notice to the public of any such changes. In addition, the 2001 act requires new or amended services to operate for a minimum of 90 days from commencement, except in exceptional circumstances. Our bus policy is based on a partnership approach. We want to encourage councils and bus operators to work together to deliver high-quality services to bus users.

Quality partnerships and quality contracts represent a step change in policy in comparison to what went before. It is for local authorities to determine how best to meet their local transport

strategy objectives for buses through use of the new powers. The 2001 act gives City of Edinburgh Council, and every other council in the country, a greater say in how to deliver those services, and it assists in promoting a bus-friendly environment.

However, there are also circumstances where bus operators are not willing or able to deliver a suitable and satisfactory level of service within the framework of the partnership approach. That is where quality contracts come in. We have consistently said that our first preference is for a partnership approach, but we have made it clear that if that approach does not deliver the required improvements, quality contracts are there to be used.

I listened closely to members' speeches to discover what alternative to quality contracts the SNP had in mind. Regulation with competition was what one member suggested. I believe that that is precisely what quality contracts can provide. A quality contract allows a local authority to specify either the whole or part of a bus network in its area, including what local bus services should be provided, what fares should be charged and the standard of buses to be used. That would allow bus operators to bid for exclusive rights to provide those services in that context.

The Transport (Scotland) Act 2001 enables councils to take control of the bus market through the use of quality contracts, providing that approval is sought from and given by Scottish ministers. As Susan Deacon requested, we are on record as having said that we would do that timeously. We do so because we believe that it is an appropriate way to progress.

We believe that we have increased the role of local authorities in the provision of services to facilitate better and more reliable services. We have provided a framework whereby local authorities and bus operators can work to achieve that, either through partnership or through quality contracts.

I look to the City of Edinburgh Council, and to every other council in the country, to make full use of those powers as appropriate to improve bus services for all.

Meeting closed at 18:09.

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