



The Scottish Parliament  
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

# **GENERAL QUESTION TIME FIRST MINISTER'S QUESTION TIME**

Thursday 6 March 2014

The full *Official Report* of today's Meeting of the Parliament will be published online this evening.



[The Presiding Officer *opened the meeting at 11:40*]

## General Question Time

### Aberdeen Western Peripheral Route

#### 1. Richard Baker (North East Scotland)

**(Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on progress with the procurement process and construction of the Aberdeen western peripheral route. (S4O-02977)

**The Minister for Transport and Veterans (Keith Brown):** Procurement for the main works contract is progressing well. Overall the programme remains as set out by the First Minister in October 2012, with the award of the contract expected later this year and construction completed by spring 2018.

**Richard Baker:** Over the Christmas recess, the minister said that sections of the AWPR could be open early and before spring 2018. Can he tell us whether ministers have specific plans to open sections of the road early and which sections they would be? Will they be in the north or the south of the route? Is the pursuit of such plans forming any part of the procurement of the contract?

**Keith Brown:** What we said previously was that the idea of bringing forward certain sections—the two sections that have been mentioned are the Balmedie to Tipperty section and the road around the airport—could not be considered until we had received the bids, because it would have to be done in conjunction with the bidding process and the successful contractor. That remains the case. We will look at not only whether we can advance certain parts of the contract, but at what the implications of that would be for other parts of the road. We will take a balanced view on whether to open certain sections early, but that cannot be done until the process of bids coming forward is complete. We will look at the issue in detail at that stage.

### Campaign for a Leith Museum (Support)

**2. Malcolm Chisholm (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government what support it can give to the campaign for a Leith museum. (S4O-02978)

**The Minister for External Affairs and International Development (Humza Yousaf):** The Scottish Government provides support for non-national museums through Museums Galleries Scotland, the national development agency for museums and galleries in Scotland. However, in this instance I understand that the Cabinet Secretary for Culture and External Affairs has agreed to meet Malcolm Chisholm and his colleagues to discuss the campaign for a Leith museum.

**Malcolm Chisholm:** I thank the minister and I thank the cabinet secretary for agreeing to the meeting. However, does the minister know of the great and growing support in Leith for the creation of a Leith museum and of the unanimous view that the A-listed custom house would be the ideal location? Given that National Museums Scotland will vacate the building quite soon, will the minister and the cabinet secretary ensure that the building is designated in the first instance for acquisition by the community, rather than for sale to a developer?

**Humza Yousaf:** I thank the member for the supplementary question. Of course we acknowledge the important role that the community is playing in relation to a Leith museum and the local interest in it, and the potential for bringing a building such as the Leith custom house back into public use. I am sure that the member will appreciate that the Scottish Government and its public bodies are obliged by the Scottish public finance manual rules to seek best value for the disposal of property. However, options for disposal other than on the open market are available, although they are limited. It would be helpful to discuss that when the member meets the cabinet secretary in the near future.

### Independence (Civil Servants' Impartiality)

**3. Sandra White (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what its position is on the inquiry by the United Kingdom Parliament's Public Administration Select Committee on the impartiality of civil servants in relation to the independence referendum. (S4O-02979)

**The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Infrastructure, Investment and Cities (Nicola Sturgeon):** We welcome the inquiry. It provides the opportunity to affirm both the commitment of the Scottish Government to the principles that underpin the operation of the civil service—impartiality, integrity, objectivity and honesty—and the record of the civil service in Scotland in upholding those values.

I am pleased also that the committee is to examine the role of the civil service in support of the UK Government's position on constitutional reform in Scotland. It will be important for the committee to ensure that consistent standards are applied across both Administrations.

**Sandra White:** I agree with the Deputy First Minister that any review should not single out one part of the civil service. Does the Deputy First Minister agree that it is the proper role of the Scottish Government civil service to support the Scottish ministers' policies for constitutional reform?

**Nicola Sturgeon:** Yes, I agree with that, and I imagine that all democrats would agree with that

position. This Administration stood for election on a platform of supporting a referendum and independence. It is absolutely appropriate for the civil service to support the Scottish ministers in delivering those policies, just as the civil service would support any other Government in developing and implementing its policies.

It is worth pointing out that any complaint that has been made about the Scottish civil service has been found to be unsubstantiated. Indeed, successive heads of the UK civil service have publicly acknowledged that it is the duty of the Scottish Government civil service to support this Government's policies for the constitution.

**Malcolm Chisholm (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (Lab):** I have always supported Scottish civil servants, even when they have been under attack by certain people. Equally, will the cabinet secretary make sure that none of her colleagues criticises the UK civil service, and particularly in this connection the Permanent Secretary to the Treasury?

**Nicola Sturgeon:** As I said in my original answer, I think that it is good and I support the fact that the UK Parliament Public Administration Select Committee will examine the role of the civil service in supporting not just the Scottish Government but the UK Government's position on constitutional reform. It is important that the committee looks at both and that consistent standards are applied to both Governments in terms of the pursuit of their policies in the referendum. My comments about the civil service in Scotland apply generally, and I hope that the committee helps to get us to a position in advance of the referendum where the impartiality of the civil service is absolutely beyond doubt.

#### **Elected Representatives from France (Meetings)**

**4. Christian Allard (North East Scotland) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it plans to meet elected representatives from France and, if so, when. (S4O-02980)

**The Minister for External Affairs and International Development (Humza Yousaf):** The Cabinet Secretary for Culture and External Affairs will meet the French member of Parliament Axelle Lemaire and member of the French elected second chamber Senator Claudine Lepage on Tuesday 11 March.

**Christian Allard:** The eyes of the world are upon us. Does the minister agree with the French Senatrice Mrs Garriaud-Maylam, who made it clear last week in a debate on Scotland's future that the threats formulated by Mr Barroso are inappropriate and are the result of pressure from London? Mrs Garriaud-Maylam added that those threats are not credible and that a yes vote will ensure that Scotland stays in the European Union.

**Humza Yousaf:** The Scottish Government has always been clear that an independent Scotland would negotiate its continued membership from within the EU. Mrs Garriaud-Maylam's comments were a welcome recognition of that point, as were the comments of former Czech president Vaclav Klaus that were reported in *The Herald* on 1 March and those of Professor Charlie Jeffery, professor of politics at the University of Edinburgh, who stated this month in his submission to the Economy, Energy and Tourism Committee:

"Barroso's was a personal, not a Commission statement, made by an outgoing Commission President with no influence on what might happen in the event of a Yes vote, on a matter where there is neither treaty provision nor precedent."

We hope that, by the time the rest of the UK has its in/out referendum on the EU, it too will choose to continue its membership of the European Union.

#### **A83 (Landslip Closures)**

**5. Jamie McGrigor (Highlands and Islands) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government what steps it is taking to prevent further closures of the A83 because of landslips. (S4O-02981)

**The Minister for Transport and Veterans (Keith Brown):** The fact that the Scottish Government, working closely with our stakeholder partners, has already invested nearly £7.5 million on the A83 around the Rest and be Thankful is a clear sign of our intent to find solutions to keep the A83 open and operational. The old military road diversion is in use as we speak, which is a clear example of this Government's efforts.

The A83 route study recommended actions to address landslide hazards at other locations, particularly Glen Kinglas, Cairndow and Loch Shira, to give a level of landslide protection comparable to that which is proposed at the Rest and be Thankful. We have progressed investigations at all three sites and the output of that will be a report that recommends areas at each site that are considered high risk, together with potential mitigation options.

Following this morning's closure and representations that I received from the constituency member, Mike Russell, I have asked for members of the A83 task force to come together in the next fortnight to take forward some of the plans that we have in that area.

**Jamie McGrigor:** I thank the minister for that and I welcome the fact that the old military road is being used as a diversion around today's landslide. However, does he understand the frustration of local businesses and residents that, more than two years on, we are still at the stage of having only draft options for the other locations? What can be done to get practical solutions? Lastly, will he consider his position on

conducting a study of the economic impact of the closures? Every business in Argyll and Bute, from Cairndow to Campbeltown and Dunoon in Cowal, suffers each time the road is closed.

**Keith Brown:** I am well aware of the frustration that is caused and, unlike the member, I have attended all the meetings of the task force group at which the issues have been discussed in some depth.

**Members:** Oh!

**The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick):** Order.

**Keith Brown:** The members of the task force, which includes many of the businesses to which Jamie McGrigor refers, have made those points. They are keen to ensure that the media reports are accurate because they do not want the impression to be given that Argyll is closed for business, which is not the case.

With regard to today's landslip, the resilience programme that we put in place by investing in the old military road has allowed the closure to be brief and traffic to move quickly. That is the type of action that we have been asked to take by stakeholders.

I am aware of the frustration. We are doing as much as we can to mitigate the problem, and will continue to do so in future in the other areas that I mentioned.

#### **NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde (Meetings)**

**6. Duncan McNeil (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government when the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing last met the chief executive of NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde and what was discussed. (S4O-02982)

**The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing (Alex Neil):** Ministers and officials regularly meet representatives of NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde, including the chief executive, to discuss matters of importance to local people.

**Duncan McNeil:** I hope that the cabinet secretary will think that the issue that I am about to mention is a matter of importance.

In response to my freedom of information request, NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde confirmed that it has no systems in place to monitor the number of times that patients with dementia are boarded when they are in hospital. The board's response reflects the situation that exists in a number of other health boards in Scotland.

The cabinet secretary will be aware that boarding can increase dementia patients' confusion, make them more ill and lead to longer stays in hospital. Does he agree that keeping track of dementia patients' bed moves is vital for

their wellbeing? Will he act, along with the health boards, to ensure that monitoring systems are put in place as soon as possible?

**Alex Neil:** As Duncan McNeil will be aware, we, along with the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh and a number of other key stakeholders, published a report on boarding last year in which we agreed a strategy for dealing with boarding in future. A key part of that strategy is to reduce the need for boarding for any patient, including dementia patients.

I appreciate that any change of circumstance is particularly difficult for a dementia patient, and the health service's policy is to minimise any disruption for those patients in particular. We are looking at the situation to see how further improvements can be made with regard to the wider issue of boarding as well as the specific issue of treating dementia patients.

**The Presiding Officer:** Question 7, from Jackie Baillie, has not been lodged. She has provided a full explanation and I am satisfied.

#### **Marine and Islands Renewable Energy (Transmission Charges)**

**8. Rob Gibson (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what progress it is making on reducing the transmission and access charges to the grid for marine and islands renewable energy. (S4O-02984)

**The Minister for Energy, Enterprise and Tourism (Fergus Ewing):** Last week I chaired an island electricity grid summit in Stornoway alongside council leaders from Orkney, Shetland and the Western Isles. It was evident from the discussion that progress has been made towards establishing market and regulatory frameworks that can support island renewables development.

**Rob Gibson:** What chance does the minister consider there to be that Westminster will cede powers to Holyrood to regulate energy production from our substantial marine and island renewables prospects—for example, in my constituency in the Pentland Firth, and in the northern and Western Isles—to give us a greater means of tackling the increasingly urgent issues that are raised by the evidence on climate change and to give certainty to the supply chain?

**Fergus Ewing:** I am not aware of any proposals from the UK Government or from any Opposition party to devolve plans for regulatory powers to this Parliament. Only independence can do that.

It is important to recognise that the islands—Orkney, Shetland and the Western Isles—are the best place in the world to produce renewable energy. According to an expert, they can deliver up to five per cent of the electricity needs of the whole of Great Britain by 2030. However, there

are difficulties, which I can best highlight by quoting Martin McAdam, the chief executive officer of Aquamarine Power. He says:

"There are worrying parallels ... with the UK's early history in wind technology, where the UK had an early ... lead ... but a succession of poor policy measures handed the lead to Denmark ... I would encourage the UK Government to be more bold, to recognise the economic opportunity which ... exists, and to work alongside the Scottish Government to implement island-specific solutions which can work for tidal and wave as well as wind."

I very much endorse those sentiments and look forward to continuing to work with Ed Davey to deliver improved connections for our islands.

**John Scott (Ayr) (Con):** Can the minister update us on interconnection capability in the Firth of Clyde, where, as he knows, there are great opportunities in renewable energy harvesting?

**Fergus Ewing:** I will be able to give John Scott a detailed answer to that question in due course, but we very much welcome the increased connection from Hunterston to the south, which is, I think, the issue to which he is alluding.

Of course, that example simply illustrates the truth of the matter. Contrary to what we sometimes hear from Mr Davey and others, Scotland's electricity, which is massively in greater supply, will be required to be exported to maintain security of supply and keep the lights on in England. Although we might sometimes feel that, metaphorically at least, the English Government is in the dark, we do not actually want the English people to be literally in the dark.

**Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab):** Were Scotland to become interdependent, how would the minister fund the interconnectors to the northern and Western Isles?

**Fergus Ewing:** We will fund them from the very substantial resources that will be available to the people of Scotland. The number of renewable schemes in Scotland is more than those south of the border by about a third, but I point out that no nuclear power stations are proposed, such as that at Hinkley Point, for which the UK Government is proposing a taxpayer subsidy of £35,000 million over 35 years, and that there is no nuclear decommissioning bill of around £70,000 million. We need to look at all parts of the equation, not just at those parts that suit certain political parties.

#### Education Maintenance Allowance

**9. Linda Fabiani (East Kilbride) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government when it will publish the findings of its review of the guidance on the administration of the education maintenance allowance. (S40-02985)

**The Minister for Youth Employment (Angela Constance):** The education maintenance

allowance guidance documents are revised annually to give local authorities and colleges the necessary guidelines to help them administer the EMA programme effectively and fairly. The guidance documents will be issued in April 2014 and will allow local authorities and colleges to deliver the programme using their own discretion and in line with both local and national policies.

**Linda Fabiani:** Is the minister aware of the Scottish Youth Parliament's current care.fair.share campaign for young carers, a component of which is the education maintenance allowance? Does she agree that it would be useful if she could sit down with the members of the Scottish Youth Parliament who are directly affected by this issue and discuss the way forward?

**Angela Constance:** I am more than happy to meet Ms Fabiani, young carers and their representative organisations. I point out that the current guidance makes it clear that discretion can be exercised at a local level in respect of vulnerable young people and that the new guidance, which will be issued next month, will make it crystal clear to our partners in colleges and local authorities that there needs to be flexibility for vulnerable young people and young carers in particular.

I pay tribute to the campaign that the Scottish Youth Parliament is leading. We have had the opportunity to work very effectively on this matter and to ensure that any issues that have arisen have indeed been resolved. This Government, unlike that south of the border, has retained the education maintenance allowance, which benefits nearly 35,000 young Scots, and we will do our utmost to ensure that any young Scot who is entitled to the allowance receives it.

#### Independence (Defence)

**10. Graeme Dey (Angus South) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what engagement it has had with the United Kingdom Government on defence in an independent Scotland. (S40-02986)

**The Minister for Transport and Veterans (Keith Brown):** The Scottish Government has contacted the Ministry of Defence, requesting factual information to support our consideration of the defence options that would be open to an independent Scotland. The Ministry of Defence has been unable to provide the full level of detail requested.

**The Presiding Officer:** Briefly, please, Mr Dey.

**Graeme Dey:** During a recent flying visit to RM Condor in Arbroath, the UK Secretary of Defence Philip Hammond sniped at the Scottish Government's detailed and costed plans for defence in an independent Scotland. Would the minister welcome an opportunity to have a face-

to-face debate with Mr Hammond about the benefits that independence would bring to this country's defence versus the UK Government's track record of slashing Scotland's service footprint?

**The Presiding Officer:** Briefly, minister.

**Keith Brown:** Of course, I have made a public request of Philip Hammond that, rather than jetting into Scotland and then scurrying away immediately afterwards without answering questions, he stays and debates some of those important issues with me. It seems to me that he has no awareness of any contingency plans being laid by the Ministry of Defence; that he is unaware of the fact that Scottish taxpayers pay around £3.3 billion towards defence and that only about £2 billion is spent in Scotland in return; and that he is completely unaware of the defence asset register that is published by his own department.

It is important, especially as we see, even today, complaints about cuts in the armed forces—with people having P45s delivered to them on the front lines—that we debate these issues in a proper and sensible way. I challenge him to do that in future. [*Interruption.*]

**The Presiding Officer:** Thank you, minister. The sound of a phone going off was a cue that your time was up, but I ask members to ensure that all their phones are off when they are in the chamber.

Before we move to the next item of business, members will wish to join me in welcoming to the gallery His Excellency Konstantinos Bikas, the ambassador of the Hellenic Republic to the United Kingdom. [*Applause.*]

## First Minister's Question Time

12:00

### Engagements

**1. Johann Lamont (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab):** To ask the First Minister what engagements he has planned for the rest of the day. (S4F-01927)

**The First Minister (Alex Salmond):** Engagements to take forward the Government's programme for Scotland.

**Johann Lamont:** Will the First Minister join me in condemning the Tories' top-rate tax cut for millionaires, or does he agree with George Osborne?

**The First Minister:** I join Johann Lamont in condemning that. Not only do I do so; I point out that the Scottish National Party led the Opposition in the House of Commons in voting against the measure.

I tend to agree with the points that are now made by the shadow chancellor that, when the deficit is high, it is unfair to place a burden on the ordinary people of this country, and that that burden ought to be shared by those who are better off. Hence we followed that logic in our votes in the House of Commons.

**Johann Lamont:** So will the First Minister back Labour's policy of reintroducing the 50p tax rate now or after a yes vote?

**The First Minister:** I look forward to a vote in the House of Commons, which I am confident will come later this month in the budget, and I am also confident about how the SNP will vote on that.

Perhaps Johann Lamont will give us some assurance that the Labour Party will also vote against the cut. As she will remember, on 27 March 2012, when the SNP moved against the measure in the House of Commons, only two Labour MPs—Dennis Skinner and Paul Flynn—voted against the reduction in the top-rate tax.

There were a number of explanations for why that happened. Willie Bain tweeted that Labour did not support the vote on partisan grounds, as there

“is a ... convention that we do not support SNP motions”.

Luckily for Johann Lamont, if it is the Labour Party that moves against the measure later this month, the SNP has no such bar—we will judge the issue based on what is right and proper.

We think that it is wrong, at this time, when the deficit is high, to ask ordinary people to bear burdens and for those burdens not to be shared by those who are better off. I am sure that, with her influence over her Westminster colleagues,

Johann Lamont will manage to bring them into line on tax matters.

**Johann Lamont:** Of course, we have developed an interesting convention in here that we do not answer the question that we were asked.

In all of that, I do not think that we got an affirmation that the First Minister will back Labour's policy of reintroducing the 50p tax rate after a yes vote. Indeed, on Monday, he said:

"we certainly are not going to put ourselves at a tax disadvantage with the rest of the UK."

He says one thing in one place and says absolutely nothing in here. We look forward to hearing the answer to the question that I asked him, which, as the Deputy First Minister is keen to say, is a quite simple yes or no.

There is something curious here. The First Minister says that we should vote for independence to get away from the Tories' destructive policies, and yet he is committing an independent Scotland to the same tax rates that the Tories set—[*Interruption.*]

**The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Infrastructure, Investment and Cities (Nicola Sturgeon):** No, he is not.

**Johann Lamont:** Well, he was doing that on Monday—unless he is now recanting that position. The exception, of course, are taxes such as corporation tax, which he wants to cut even further than anything George Osborne sets.

Is it not the case that the First Minister's vision of an independent Scotland will not get rid of the Tories but will enshrine a tougher tax-cutting agenda than even the Tories have come up with?

**The First Minister:** In my first answer, I pointed out that I agree with Ed Balls, the shadow chancellor, who changed Labour's policy on 25 January and said:

"When the deficit is still high ... it cannot be right ... to give the richest people in the country a huge tax cut."

That is the right policy. Not only do I think that now; we thought it in 2012 when we led the opposition to the tax cut in the House of Commons.

I was not going to pursue the matter but, since Johann Lamont has offered me the opportunity, I will do so. I said that there were a number of explanations why Labour did not support the SNP motion. Ed Balls's political adviser, Alex Belardinelli, admitted that

"there was a"—

something that is unmentionable in Parliament—

"up somewhere along the way last night and it wasn't clear what SNP had called a vote on or how, so we abstained on their vote."

Alan Gillam, Margaret Curran's political adviser, then emailed Labour's Holyrood media team on 27 March 2012:

"I am trying to find out where we went wrong."

In an earlier email, he hoped that the Scottish media would just ignore the matter, saying:

"We should probably hold off releasing line in Scotland just yet, in the hope that it is ignored".

I thank Johann Lamont for giving me the opportunity to draw the matter to people's attention.

In 2012, we fought the tax cut for the richest people in the country. In the circumstances the cut was wrong, so we voted against it; we think that it is wrong now, so we are voting against it; and, in a vote that I expect to take place in the House of Commons later this month, we will vote against it yet again.

I agree with Ed Balls that in the current circumstances, when the deficit is still high, it is wrong to reduce the top-rate tax on those who are better off in this country. That is unfair. I suggest to Johann Lamont that we seem to have followed that policy rather more consistently than she and her colleagues have managed to do over the past two years.

**Johann Lamont:** We know what the First Minister will do now, but we do not know what he would do in an independent Scotland—no surprise there.

The First Minister appears to be saying that the tax policies of the Tories restrict growth—I agree with that—but that, somehow, the same policies in an independent Scotland would create growth. That is simply not credible. He owes it to the people to whom he is offering an alternative to the Tories to follow through and answer the simple question that I asked him: does he support Labour's policy of reintroducing the 50p tax rate after a yes vote? We have heard no answer from the First Minister—nothing new there.

The truth is that, in seven years, we have not seen a single policy from Alex Salmond that has redistributed wealth from the rich to the poor. He talks of Scotland being a progressive beacon, but it turns out to be a beacon that he has never lit. Now the First Minister has committed himself to tax levels that will be set by a Tory Government in what he will have made a foreign country.

In the 1970s, we called the SNP the tartan Tories. Is it not the case that a First Minister who cannot answer a simple question on taxation might still be tartan but is committing himself to out-Torying the Tories on tax in an independent Scotland?

**The First Minister:** The answer to Johann Lamont's question is "No" on all counts.



Can I just point out the history of this? [Interruption.] Oh, yes—members are going to hear the history. [Interruption.]

**The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick):** Order.

**The First Minister:** Labour was in power at Westminster for 13 years but had the 50p top-rate tax for just 36 days of those 13 years in power. Ed Balls has adopted the entirely sensible position that, while the deficit is still high, it is unfair to ask the lower paid and people on average earnings to accept the burden. Under these circumstances, we should not have the cut in the top-rate tax.

Last month, John Swinney set out very clearly and in detail the SNP's position—what we have done, what we would do and the circumstances of an independent Scotland. He also pointed out that, under the current position of this Parliament, we do not have the power to set taxation. Under the proposals that are coming, we will still not have the powers to vary top-rate taxation.

In an independent Scotland, we will have the ability to vary not just top-rate taxation but all taxation. We will do that to benefit the people of Scotland and the Scottish economy. Under independence, we will also introduce policies such as the transformation of childcare and free schools meals across the country. No doubt we will do that against Labour Party opposition, but we will do so because we are committed to a fairer and better society in Scotland.

### **Secretary of State for Scotland (Meetings)**

**2. Ruth Davidson (Glasgow) (Con):** To ask the First Minister when he will next meet the Secretary of State for Scotland. (S4F-01924)

**The First Minister (Alex Salmond):** No plans in the near future.

**Ruth Davidson:** In 2007, when the First Minister came into office, there were 386 operational police stations in Scotland. How many of those stations have closed to the public under his watch?

**The First Minister:** I will certainly write to Ruth Davidson with the figure. However, I can tell her absolutely that there are now 1,000 more police officers on the streets and in communities around Scotland. That is a substantial achievement and a fact and a figure that the people in Scotland rally around.

**Ruth Davidson:** It was a perfectly simple question, and I do not need to wait for a letter. The answer is 233, as of Monday, when a whole raft of front desks were shut. That is 233 out of 386 police stations, so 60 per cent of Scotland's police stations have been closed to the public or closed altogether under this Scottish National Party Government. That is a disgrace.

On top of that, a fifth of Scotland's sheriff courts have been shut, half of the police control rooms are for the axe, with Dumfries first next month, and a shambolic approach has been taken to corroboration and the law of evidence. The justice secretary has claimed that any opposition to change is a unionist conspiracy. However, the voice of reason, Joan McAlpine—sadly, she is absent from the chamber—said in an SNP press release that I have in front of me:

“The move to a single force, reductions in public access counters and now the proposed removal of the police control room create a risk .... that a service that was once very close to the community is becoming distant from them.”

There we have the First Minister's own adviser warning that the SNP's policies are taking justice further from the people of Scotland. Even Joan McAlpine recognises that there is a problem. When will the Justice Secretary and the First Minister do so?

**The First Minister:** I do not share Ruth Davidson's analysis for a range of reasons. As she well knows, under current circumstances our budget for justice, the police and virtually every other spending department is controlled by what is spent at Westminster. As she also knows, over the past few years, there have been dramatic declines in the justice budget and police numbers in England and Wales of 10 per cent. Despite that situation, we have managed in Scotland not just to maintain but to increase police numbers. Those increases are not being centralised; they are happening across the country.

In comparison with the figures for the first quarter in 2007, the figures for the first quarter in 2013 show that police numbers were up 8 per cent in Strathclyde, 6 per cent in Dumfries and Galloway, 10 per cent in Grampian, 8 per cent in Tayside, 12 per cent in the Northern Constabulary area, 6 per cent in the Central Scotland area, 5 per cent in Fife and 7 per cent in the Lothian and Borders area. That shows that the increase in police numbers has not been concentrated in a few areas, but has taken place around the country.

That brings me to the second difference. The figures on recorded crime demonstrate the extraordinary success—over more than a generation—of the decrease in recorded crime figures. What matters with regard to police effectiveness in communities is not where the back-up office is, but where the front-line officers are. It is not the number of chief constables or deputy chief constables that matters but where the front-line officers are. No reasonable person looking at the situation in Scotland compared with that in England and Wales would come to any other conclusion than that the decrease in recorded crime figures in Scotland totally vindicates our increase of 1,000 police officers in

communities the length and breadth of the country.

### Cabinet (Meetings)

#### 3. Willie Rennie (Mid Scotland and Fife)

**(LD):** To ask the First Minister what issues will be discussed at the next meeting of the Cabinet. (S4F-01925)

**The First Minister (Alex Salmond):** Issues of importance to the people of Scotland.

**Willie Rennie:** Last week, the Cabinet Secretary for Justice let the Parliament down: he dismissed critics of his plan to abolish the requirement for corroboration as a unionist cabal that did not care about victims. Let us look at who he picked on: John Finnie is no unionist; Rhoda Grant stands up for victims every day of the week; and Christine Grahame is a proud member of the Scottish National Party.

I know that, deep down, the First Minister was not proud of his justice secretary, so will he take the opportunity now to put things right by taking the measures on corroboration out of the Criminal Justice (Scotland) Bill?

**The First Minister:** No, that would not be the right way forward. I quote Sandy Brindley, the national co-ordinator of Rape Crisis Scotland, on the reason why it would not be the right way forward:

“We are delighted that the vote went in favour of the removal for the requirement for corroboration in this landmark debate. This is a step forward in ensuring our justice system is able to deliver effective justice for all. All too often victims of sexual violence and domestic abuse see their cases fail at the first hurdle given the burden of proof required by corroboration. Removing this barrier and looking instead at the quality of the evidence in the case is common sense and why every other justice system in the world has abandoned this rule.”

I think that Willie Rennie would agree that, among organisations that represent the victims of crime, there is substantial support for the moves that the justice secretary is making so that justice can be seen to be done for the victims of crime. If, as the justice secretary has proposed with the review group under Lord Bonomy, we can ensure that there are safeguards to prevent miscarriages of justice, that is surely the right conclusion to get to—it safeguards against miscarriages of justice and represents the victims of crime.

I know that Willie Rennie does not feel that people should be denied justice, but does he not at least accept that, for many cases—they were listed before the Justice Committee—a general rule of corroboration results in the denial of justice to some victims of some of the worst crimes that we can have in our society? That tends to indicate that the direction of travel that the Government is taking is the right one.

**Willie Rennie:** There are many others who disagree with the First Minister. He once said in the Parliament that he had a majority but did not have a “monopoly on wisdom”. There is little wisdom in the justice department just now. There is chaos on police centralisation, with a Strathclyde takeover, police stations shutting and control rooms closing; there was a misjudged bill on sectarianism; there have been court closures; there are levels of stop and search that the Metropolitan Police in London would reject as extreme; and now there is corroboration. The justice secretary has had to hire 17 experts to fix the damage that he is about to cause on corroboration and, in today’s papers, there is more news about people being angry at the divisive and tarnished behaviour.

Is the First Minister really proud of the work of the Cabinet Secretary for Justice on the Criminal Justice (Scotland) Bill?

**The First Minister:** Willie Rennie rather ruined his case. I tried to answer his first question by looking at the substance of the argument. Now, after denouncing party politics in his first question, he has asked a second question that seems to me entirely party political and partisan in the points that he has made. [*Interruption.*] People can judge the record. It did not seem to me to represent the pinnacle of consensus towards which Willie Rennie has been working in previous questions.

I will try and answer again on the substance of the issue. The substance of the issue is that there is injustice, which can be perpetuated in a system in two ways. The first is through miscarriages of justice, which nobody wants. Everybody wants safeguards in a system to ensure that those do not happen and are limited. The second is through people being denied justice. We have had case after case that cannot be brought to court because of the general rule of corroboration—that is, cases are judged cases on the quantity of evidence as opposed to the quality of evidence. Therefore, with the safeguards that the justice secretary has proposed and the safeguards review under Lord Bonomy, abolition seems a reasonable way to proceed.

As Willie Rennie offered me the opportunity to comment on this, I think that I will allow myself to do so. Let us say that we were contrasting two justice systems. Let us say that we were contrasting a justice system in which there was a fundamental fissure and division between the police service and the Government and a lack of confidence on both sides with a justice system in which the police, the Government and the justice system were working effectively to reduce levels of recorded crime. The first description is a description of what is happening in England at the moment, where Willie Rennie’s party is in power jointly with the Conservatives. The second description involves more police and less crime,

which is what is happening in Scotland. So, yes, I have every confidence in the pursuit of justice in Scotland.

### Women in Business

**4. Linda Fabiani (East Kilbride) (SNP):** To ask the First Minister what the Scottish Government is doing to encourage more women to start their own businesses. (S4F-01940)

**The First Minister (Alex Salmond):** With the Presiding Officer's permission, I will begin by reflecting on this morning's news—which I am sure will have brought sadness to the whole Parliament—that Ailsa McKay, the professor of economics at Glasgow Caledonian University, has passed away.

As we all know, Ailsa was a leading voice in the campaign for gender equality, not simply through her work, but as a founding member of the Scottish women's budget group. In this week, as we go forward to international women's day, it is important that we note her astonishing contribution as a feminist economist, in arguing the case for getting women into work and in being the principal author of and arguer for, over many years, the transformation of childcare that would make that possible. I know that Ailsa's contribution will be recognised by every member. [*Applause.*]

**Linda Fabiani:** We know that Ailsa will be sorely missed.

I ask the First Minister to set out the opportunities that independence will offer to increase the number of business start-ups by women and to improve childcare for households in Scotland to encourage that.

**The First Minister:** I ask Linda Fabiani to forgive me—I should specifically have mentioned the number of women who run their own business, which grew from 81,900 in 2009 to 93,700 in 2013. That is an increase of 14 per cent. It is also the case that the number of women in employment in Scotland has increased by 70,000 over the past year, which is a substantial success. In fact, the number of women in employment in Scotland is now at a record high.

It is important that everyone understands that policies that we pursue for Scotland should pass what I describe as the childcare test. That is to say, they must be sustainable in the way that the transformation in childcare that we propose will be. That policy needs to be sustained by the Government bearing what is an important cost, but one that must be met because of the crucial nature of the policy and the benefits that it will give rise to, such as the increase in taxation that will come from having more women move into the workforce. The childcare policy is justified not just by the benefits to children, which are substantial, and the emancipation of women into the

workforce, but because it can lead to more sustainable economic growth and fundamental equality in Scotland.

### Accident and Emergency Waiting Time Standard

**5. Neil Findlay (Lothian) (Lab):** To ask the First Minister when the waiting time standard of 98 per cent of patients being seen and admitted, transferred or discharged from accident and emergency departments within four hours was last met across the whole country. (S4F-01938)

**The First Minister (Alex Salmond):** The 98 per cent four-hour accident and emergency performance level, which relates to patients being treated, admitted, transferred or discharged, was set by the previous Administration in 2004 and was never met by that Administration. An Information Services Division sample survey for April 2006 showed performance at 87.6 per cent. ISD statistics show that the standard of 98 per cent was first exceeded in May 2008 and last exceeded in September 2009.

I am pleased to say that, through the £50 million three-year unscheduled care action plan, the national health service will be reshaping and enhancing services to make sure that those standards can be met sustainably in the future.

**Neil Findlay:** I think that what the First Minister meant to say—I am sure that it just slipped his mind—is that the A and E waiting time figures are worse than they were in 2007, and that the last time the standard was met across Scotland was almost four and a half years ago.

People are waiting longer and staff are struggling to cope because of the intense and growing pressures on A and E. I ask the First Minister—just for once—to give us a clear answer. Does he think that that is acceptable? When will he finally keep his promise to staff and patients on A and E waiting times?

**The First Minister:** I will repeat what I initially said to Neil Findlay, since he obviously wanted to get on to his supplementary question. The ISD sample survey for 2006 showed performance at 87.6 per cent and ISD statistics show that the standard of 98 per cent was first exceeded in May 2008 and last exceeded in September 2009. What on earth was his second question about? Everything that he asked about was covered by my first answer.

**Members:** No.

**The First Minister:** We can do a bit of pantomime here—yes, it most certainly was.

The pertinent statistic, which Neil Findlay tried to slide over, is that we had a test in the previous Administration. Not only was the figure 87.6 per cent, but Andy Kerr hailed the performance. He said:

“This is the first time we have had comprehensive data ... The data shows that the vast majority of A & E departments are meeting the four hour target ... Investment and reform in the NHS is paying off”.

That was the then Minister for Health and Community Care hailing a performance of 87.6 per cent.

I agree that the investment that is going into the unscheduled care campaign is enabling us to resist winter pressures far better than last year, for example. How on earth can the Labour Party come along here and complain about statistics that are infinitely better than the statistics that it hailed when it was in office?

### **Rail Network (Upgrading)**

#### **6. Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con):**

To ask the First Minister what the Scottish Government's position is on the calls from Transform Scotland to upgrade the rail network. (S4F-01928)

**The First Minister (Alex Salmond):** The £5 billion package of funding and investment for our railways in 2019, which represents a figure per head of population that is twice the United Kingdom Government's figure, will support improvements to infrastructure and services across the network. That will benefit freight and passengers alike. The investment will enable substantial improvements to the Highland main line and the Aberdeen to Inverness line, for example, including improvements on the route between Aberdeen and Inverness that aim to deliver an hourly service, a two-hour journey time and enhanced commuter services to both cities and which will enable the opening of new stations at Kintore in Aberdeenshire and Dalcross, which is near Inverness airport.

**Liz Smith:** Everybody welcomes the changes to the infrastructure, but I will ask the First Minister about the pledge that he made in August 2008, when he said that the Scottish Government would reduce the journey time on the Edinburgh to Inverness rail route by 35 minutes by 2012. Two years on, when will that pledge be met?

**The First Minister:** I just read out to Liz Smith the investment profile for Inverness and Aberdeen. I am glad that she welcomes what is being done, because there are substantial improvements. For example, there is a 33 per cent rise in passenger numbers, 26.5 miles of new railway line and an investment programme that is twice that of the UK Government.

I know that, in her normal cheery way, Liz Smith will see that as progress. I undertake to see that progress continue in the rail network in Scotland.

**Roderick Campbell (North East Fife) (SNP):** Part of Transform Scotland's proposals is the implementation of a direct link between Perth and Edinburgh at a cost of approximately

£500 million. That might well have a knock-on effect on existing rail services in central and eastern Fife. Does the First Minister share my concern that any proposals should consider fully the impact on existing services?

**The First Minister:** We all welcome Transform Scotland's ambition and many of the proposals that it makes, but it is important to highlight the need for promoters of change to approach the relevant regional transport partnerships to discuss the potential impact of proposals on areas and the requirement to develop an up-to-date feasibility study that examines all transport modes. The member is right to point out that the impact on communities on the Edinburgh to Perth corridor should be assessed as improvements are proposed.

The statistics show that these are exciting times for the railways in Scotland. There are laudable ambitions to make even greater progress. We should recognise the progress that has been made, but we should also consider carefully the implications of any proposals, to ensure that they do not result in a deterioration of the service elsewhere.

#### **Alison McInnes (North East Scotland) (LD):**

On top of the £650 million that is being spent on the Edinburgh to Glasgow rail improvement programme, the First Minister's Government now proposes to build a high-speed rail line between Edinburgh and Glasgow by 2024. In contrast, the scale of his ambition for his constituents is to offer them a meagre 20-minute reduction in train journey times between Edinburgh and Aberdeen by 2030. When will he stop short-changing the north-east?

**The First Minister:** Unfortunately for Alison McInnes, she should have changed her question after she heard my answer to Liz Smith's first question, which was all about the enhanced improvements to the Aberdeen to Inverness line. I can assure Alison McInnes that they are of great concern to my constituents and that they are indeed looking forward to the new stations at Kintore and, I am sure, further north at Dalcross.

The concentration of the transport budgets—rightly so, in my view—over the next planning period is on the peripheral route round Aberdeen and the dualling of the A9, which was, incidentally, not promised by any previous Administration, including the ones that the Liberals were involved in. Does Alison McInnes not recognise that one of the great things that is happening is seeing those transport improvements across Scotland? I am sure that she did not want in any way to attack and criticise—or maybe the Liberals have not got much to lose in the Edinburgh to Glasgow corridor—the important developments in electrification that are taking place from Edinburgh to Glasgow.

I seem to remember that when the Liberals, through the arithmetic of the chamber, had a decisive role in deciding where the transport budget should be allocated, they played an absolutely decisive role in deciding that the trams project in Edinburgh should be put above other things. Thanks to the intervention of Transport Scotland and the good work of the new administration in the City of Edinburgh Council, the trams are back on track, of course, but I think that most people in Scotland might judge that, back in 2007-08, Alison McInnes should have listened to wiser counsel and perhaps given more of what is now being invested in the A9 and the peripheral route round Aberdeen.

**Lewis Macdonald (North East Scotland)**

**(Lab):** Does the First Minister agree with Transform Scotland that the journey times between Aberdeen and the central belt would be greatly improved by double tracking the one short stretch of single track on the east coast main line at Montrose? If he does, is that something that the Scottish Government is prepared to consider?

**The First Minister:** That is most certainly something that the Scottish Government is prepared to consider. The dual tracking of the Aberdeen line and the Inverness line offers substantial improvements to journey times. Keith Brown will actively take forward that issue, and if the member would like to arrange a meeting, he can hear our thinking on that in person.

I know that Lewis Macdonald would want to welcome the improvements on the Aberdeen to Inverness line that I spelled out in my first answer, because his and my constituents are very pleased to hear about them.