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AITHISG OIFIGEIL

DRAFT

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Scottish Parliament

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[The Presiding Officer opened the meeting at 14:01]

Motion of Condolence

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

This afternoon, it is my sad duty to introduce a motion of condolence in the name of the First Minister. The flags at Holyrood fly at half mast today in honour of our dear parliamentary colleague Christina McKelvie MSP. We stand with our friend and colleague Keith Brown MSP.

On behalf of all members and on behalf of all who work in the Scottish Parliament, I give my warmest welcome to Christina and Keith's family, who join us today. Christina spoke of Lewis and Jack with such love and pride, and she adored her grandchildren. Please accept our deepest condolences and our most sincere sympathies. There has been an outpouring of respect and affection for Christina from across the chamber, across the Parliament and from far and wide in these difficult days, and I hope that you will take comfort and solace from the great number of messages that you have received.

Only a few short weeks ago, Christina announced that she would not seek re-election in May next year. She wrote:

"It has been the honour of my life to have had the opportunity to represent the people of Central Scotland and the communities of Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse over the past 18 years."

She wrote, too, of her pride in all that she had achieved as an MSP, as a convener and as a minister—rightly and deservedly so. Christina's desire to make things better for people defined her approach to public service. Her own illness made her doubly determined to use her position to raise awareness and to advocate for others.

The Parliament community is sad and subdued. We feel Christina's loss sorely. She was a passionate debater in the chamber, but she had such great chat in the garden lobby, too. When it came to wearing it pink, no one wore it like Christina. We will miss her.

14:03

The First Minister (John Swinney): It is with great sadness that I rise to move the motion in my name to honour my colleague and friend Christina McKelvie MSP and to express our thanks for the profound effect that she had on all our lives. I thank the other parties in the chamber for offering

their debating time today to allow more of my party colleagues to make their tributes. It is an act of generosity that is deeply valued by us all.

Last week, I used the term "force of nature" to describe Christina's life. Although it is a frequently used term, in Christina's case, it was entirely justified. She was born in Glasgow in the late 1960s, and was very proud of her Easterhouse roots. Growing up, she saw at first hand her fair share of injustice affecting her family and her community. She also saw the very best in people; in particular, she drew enormous inspiration from her mum, her dad and her grandparents. Over the years, Christina spoke a lot about how those experiences had shaped her beliefs and her values, and made her determined to address the injustice that she had witnessed as a child.

Christina's dad was diagnosed with motor neurone disease when she was just nine years old. She saw not only how her mum cared for her dad with such love as his illness progressed, but how she worked nights to support her four children at a time when there was scandalously little support available from the state.

Christina associated a yellow rose with her late mother. You, Presiding Officer, my colleagues and many others are, as I am, wearing the yellow rose in their honour today. For the last week of Christina's life, her family placed a yellow rose by her side.

I have been rereading an interview that Christina gave a few years ago, in which she recounted the day that her dad learned of his MND diagnosis. He came to her school, rounded up Christina and her siblings and told the protesting headteacher that, although his kids could come to school any day, they could not always spend a day with their dad. He then took them to the cinema to see "Star Wars".

On what was a devastating day, I think that I understand the lesson that Christina's dad wanted to impart to his young children. Judging by the way that Christina recounted that story all those years later, it is clear that she did, too. Every day counts, and we should make every day count. That was certainly how Christina went on to live her life.

Christina began her career in social work services and entered the trade union movement as a member of Unison. Elected politics beckoned. Entering this Parliament in 2007, Christina quickly made her mark as one of its most energetic and engaging members. She was a tireless champion and campaigner for the Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse constituency that she loved. Her efforts for her constituents who were struggling, particularly with energy bills, stand out for me as something that she did on behalf of some of the most vulnerable in her community.

In 2018, alongside her council colleague Julia Marrs, Christina worked with Scottish Power to establish a quick credit voucher scheme to support those in fuel poverty. The scheme allowed constituents attending food banks to access vital heating or power to cook their food, and having successfully trialled it in Hamilton, Scottish Power rolled it out in other areas. To date, the plan has helped around 20,000 families or individuals. Christina did not seek personal credit for that wonderful initiative, but it is clear that she was absolutely crucial to its creation.

Christina's achievements in Parliament and in ministerial office are no less impressive. She was rightly proud of her work as convener of two committees: the European and External Relations Committee and the Equalities and Human Rights Committee.

As you mentioned, Presiding Officer, she sponsored the very first wear it pink day in the Scottish Parliament in support of Breast Cancer Now, long before her own diagnosis. Many an image-conscious parliamentary colleague—there are some—will recall that feeling of absolute trepidation as Christina, armed with all sorts of pink paraphernalia, would hunt down members to ensure that they all played their part in the campaign to raise awareness of breast cancer. I can confidently say that the only person on the planet who could persuade me to wear endless pink paraphernalia would be Christina McKelvie.

Christina campaigned for better support for people living with MND in honour of her late father. She was a key parliamentary supporter of the Time for Inclusive Education campaign, which led to inclusive education being embedded in every school in Scotland. The diligent persuasion that Christina undertook—quietly—was crucial in my decision to make it happen.

Christina fought to support those at risk of domestic abuse by championing Clare's law, which allows the disclosure of previous violent and abusive behaviour. She worked to tackle the stigma surrounding menopause. She launched the world's first strategy to tackle loneliness and social isolation. She campaigned to improve the lives of Gypsy Travellers in Scotland. She fought to protect girls by introducing legislation banning female genital mutilation.

Every cause to which Christina devoted herself was underpinned by the core values that she held throughout her life: equalities, fairness and social justice. She was a lifelong campaigner on nuclear disarmament, a proud feminist, a staunch socialist, a committed trade unionist, a nationalist and an internationalist, deeply devoted to Scotland realising her potential as an independent nation at the heart of Europe. In all, Christina did make every day count.

Even in recent years, when facing her cancer diagnosis, Christina was still thinking of others. She publicly encouraged women to check themselves and to attend their screening appointments. She was so passionate about trying to improve the lives of others through her work as Minister for Drugs and Alcohol Policy that she was determined not to step back from her duties until she absolutely had to last summer.

Christina was a much-loved member of the SNP family, but it was of course her own family that brought her the greatest happiness in her life. Everyone who knew Christina and her partner—our parliamentary colleague and my party's deputy leader, Keith Brown—could see how much happiness they brought each other. She spoke always of her pride in her sons, Jack and Lewis, as they grew up, and, more recently, Christina had the unbridled joy of becoming a granny. I express my deepest sympathy and that of the Government to all of Christina's family and friends at their very personal loss.

In Christina's heart, there was room for all of us. She was one of the kindest and most generous people I have ever met in my life. My Government has lost an outstanding minister, my party has lost one of its finest parliamentarians, and many people—of all parties and of none—have lost a true friend. However, I know that we will all feel the glow of Christina's warmth for years to come.

There are tough days in political leadership. If you were ever having one, Christina McKelvie would make you feel better, with warmth, hope, encouragement and always with laughter. I am so profoundly grateful that my life has been blessed by the friendship and the love of one of Parliament's finest: Christina McKelvie.

I move,

That the Parliament expresses its deep sadness at the death of Christina McKelvie MSP; offers its profound sympathy and condolences to her family and friends, and recognises her significant and widely appreciated contribution to Scottish politics and public life through years of dedicated service to her constituents in Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse, as a champion for social justice, as a convener of two Scottish Parliament committees, and as a Scottish Government minister since 2018.

[Applause.]

14:12

Russell Findlay (West Scotland) (Con): On behalf of my colleagues and my party, I commend the First Minister for his warm, heartfelt and personal tribute to our late parliamentary colleague Christina McKelvie. In previous remarks, Mr Swinney said that Christina's

"political allies and opponents would agree—she truly was a force of nature",

a point that he repeated today. Well, we do agree, and we are grateful for the chance to pay our respects to the force of nature that was Christina McKelvie.

On Christina's website is the following quote:

"My aim is to be an accessible MSP, available to respond to my constituents' needs whenever and wherever possible",

and that is exactly what she did. She will be missed by her constituents in Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse, and she will be missed by those who worked with her as she performed her duties as an MSP and as a minister. She will be missed by politicians from all parties, including my own.

In his tribute to his partner, Keith Brown said that she was

"proud of her working class roots in Easterhouse and often said she could not have dreamt of becoming a government minister".

Her success is a fitting legacy and is confirmation that, no matter where you come from, you can aim high and you can succeed.

As a member of this Parliament, Christina made great use of her opportunity. As the First Minister said, she hosted Parliament's first wear it pink event in support of Breast Cancer Now, long before she was diagnosed with the disease that took her life. One of her greatest achievements was promoting Clare's law, which allows the police to disclose whether someone's current or ex-partner has a history of violence or abuse. That has made a huge difference to so many lives.

I conclude by telling Christina's partner, Keith Brown, her beloved family, who have joined us today, and her colleagues that they are in our thoughts. We cannot ease their pain, but we hope that the esteem in which Christina was held brings them some small comfort at this difficult time. *[Applause.]*

14:15

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): On behalf of the entire Scottish Labour Party, I put on record our deepest condolences on the passing of Christina McKelvie. Christina's death will be keenly felt by her family, particularly her sons, Lewis and Jack, and, of course, her partner of many years, Keith Brown. For her friends and SNP colleagues, the hurt will be all too present.

Christina's passing has been a cause of grief and sorrow for many people: those across the chamber; those in her community of Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse; and all who had the pleasure of working with her, including, of course, her constituency and parliamentary staff. She was a woman who dedicated her life to public service

and worked to improve the lives of her fellow Scots.

I first met Christina many years ago, long before she entered front-line politics here at Holyrood, and she was fierce then, believe me. She was already dedicating her time to causes that she believed in. She worked in supported employment in the east end of Glasgow and was an active trade unionist in Unison, which is when I first met her. Standing up for working people and demanding fairness and justice for her colleagues, she was an absolute force of nature.

It was no surprise that, when Christina was elected to the Parliament in 2007, she championed progressive causes. As convener of the Equal Opportunities Committee, many of her early interventions in the chamber reflected her passion for equalities, and she often reflected on her earlier career and real-life experiences of supporting vulnerable young people into adulthood. As Christina's skills became apparent to the Government, she rightly was rewarded with ministerial roles that reflected her commitment to social justice—first, as Minister for Equalities and Older People and, latterly, as Minister for Drugs and Alcohol Policy.

Despite our very occasional differences of opinion, Christina was always open for debate and discussion, and she put outcomes for the people of Scotland before narrow party considerations. I respected her enormously for that.

Back in 2020, when Christina was sadly diagnosed with breast cancer, she responded in characteristic fashion by continuing to raise awareness, having always supported, as we have heard, Breast Cancer Now's wear it pink campaign, and encouraging women to regularly check their breasts and attend screening appointments. As ever, she did all that with her characteristic good humour—she was always smiling, always warm and, I found, always up for mischief.

The passing of Christina McKelvie leaves a void in our Parliament, a void in our public life and a void in the hearts of many who knew her. As we reflect on Christina's life, it is impossible to conclude that it was anything but a life well lived. It was a life that was dedicated to the service of others, a life full of love for her friends and family, and a life that has touched so many others and enriched our days. *[Applause.]*

14:18

Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): I am grateful not only for having known Christina McKelvie but for the opportunity to offer the Scottish Greens' deep condolences to Christina's family and friends for their very personal loss. It is

a loss that will also be felt very deeply by everyone who worked with Christina—most acutely by SNP colleagues.

As we have already heard, Christina was held in great affection right across the political spectrum. I hope that the whole family and, of course, our colleague Keith Brown, know that they have been in our thoughts and will remain so.

Over the past week, there have been some common themes in the conversations that I have had with colleagues from different political parties about Christina. I have heard people reflecting on her friendship, her warmth and the way in which her passionate belief in her values and, at times, her very real anger at injustice never took away from her sense of fun and her positivity.

I have heard from so many members who recall Christina's kind words when they were first elected. That is something that means a lot to new members. Coming here for the first time can be a daunting experience, and I know that many in the chamber today who arrived here in recent elections will value those memories of Christina's friendship and warmth. In offering our condolences to those who knew and loved Christina, I hope that all of us in the Parliament can return some of that friendship and warmth.

As has been said, Christina's work in the Parliament and her first ministerial role covered equalities, and there could hardly have been a better fit. I express my gratitude particularly for her strong track record on LGBT+ rights, equality and human rights, as she often faced down some of the divisive and nasty forms of prejudice—both old and new. I lost count of the number of times that I heard her speak with passion about the need to treat asylum seekers in our society as human beings and about the pride that Scotland should take in offering safety and a welcome to those who need it.

I will mention a final theme that has come up in the conversations that I have had over the past week. It is something that has been on my mind, but I have heard many others make the same observation. We all know that politics is not always a nice business. It does not always bring out the best in us. People sometimes worry that the job will change us for the worse, and sometimes that happens. In my experience, Christina McKelvie defied that fear. She never gave in to cynicism, entitlement or cruelty. She remained a person who instinctively expressed compassion and kindness, so I hope that her life will be celebrated, of course, just as a lovely human being, but also as an example that politics and politicians can stay human and humane. [Applause.]

14:22

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): Members of Christina's family and Keith, there are days when this place sits in shadow—in times of national crisis or of political rancour and on days of grief such as today—but there are times when it absolutely shines. More often than not, the spoken contributions of Christina McKelvie lent themselves to the latter occasions.

We came from different political traditions, but I recognised the defiant brightness with which she carried herself from our first meeting, long before I entered politics, in my days as a youth worker. I will never forget the giddy joy that she brought to Aberlour's "Strictly Come Dancing" fundraiser, when, after a chance meeting with Keith Brown on a train, I persuaded them both to enter months of training ahead of that event.

Christina was well regarded at home and overseas. I was so impressed at the warmth with which she was greeted on a committee trip to Strasbourg by parliamentarians, diplomats and human rights defenders alike. Indeed, the defence of human rights was absolutely central to who Christina was. Presiding Officer, you might recall that she came perilously close to being ejected from the chamber when she wore a Pussy Riot cap in solidarity with the Russian rock band that had been incarcerated for standing up to Putin.

I was Christina's deputy convener on the Equalities and Human Rights Committee for much of the previous parliamentary session, so I got to know her pretty well, and I was always very fond of her. If you were to ask me to summarise Christina's personality in three words, I would use these: love, light and laughter. That is so uncommon in the world of politics but, in the final analysis, what else really matters?

On behalf of the Scottish Liberal Democrats, I express our sincere condolences to all those who loved Christina and who grieve her loss today. [Applause.]

14:25

Nicola Sturgeon (Glasgow Southside) (SNP): This chamber feels far too quiet without Christina's infectious laugh. It is impossible, in three minutes, to encapsulate the remarkable human being that she was, but let me share these fundamental truths about a woman I was privileged to call my friend.

First, she was a truly exceptional politician, with abilities that are all too rare in places like this. The connection that she made with people came from her heart—a heart that she always wore proudly on her sleeve, and which burned with a passion for social justice and equality.

When I made Christina a minister, I knew that she would do a good job, but I did not anticipate the strength of the impact that she made. As First Minister, whenever I encountered someone who worked in her policy field, they would invariably tell me that they loved her. No disrespect to my other ministers, but that was not normal.

Secondly, she was the beating heart of her family. Forgive me, Presiding Officer, if I address them directly.

Keith, you were her soul mate. I do not think you will ever know how much happiness you brought her. I know that she made you deeply happy, too.

Lewis and Jack, she was so very, very proud of you. Rare was the conversation with your mum that did not involve accounts of what one or both of you were up to. A little-known fact is that Jack and I share a birthday, which meant that Christina was always one of the first people I would hear from on my birthday every year. I will so miss those texts. However, from now on, Jack, whether you like it or not, in my little mark of remembrance, I am going to be the first person you hear from on your birthday every single year.

Finally, Christina McKelvie was an absolutely incredible friend. Over the past couple of years, in particular, when she must so often have had the weight of the world on her own shoulders, she was always concerned to know how I was. On St Andrew's day last year, we were both at Janey Godley's funeral. I could tell that day that Christina was not feeling well, so I forced her to let me drive her home. I will gloss over her assessment of my driving, but I am deeply grateful to have had that time with Christina. It was probably the most profound conversation that we ever had. She opened up about her fears of what lay ahead and for the loved ones she knew she would leave behind far too soon. We reflected together on how short life is and how important it is to live every single day of it to the full and, even in the darkest of times, to find reasons to laugh. It is that, ultimately—her laugh and her unfailing ability, no matter what, to lift my spirits—that I will remember most about the beautiful, funny, wise woman that was Christina McKelvie.

Christina, I loved you. We all loved you. And I am going to miss you so very much. *[Applause.]*

14:28

The Cabinet Secretary for Transport (Fiona Hyslop): Bright, breezy, with a brilliant smile bursting into a room—that was the Christina McKelvie I first met more than 20 years ago and how I remember her to this day. I was leading a training day for SNP women, and that bright spark of a woman—an active trade unionist, a feminist and a gallus, articulate woman—related how she

was an organiser and an engine room election agent, but never candidate material. However, I saw that potential, and she credited—or blamed—me, along with Nicola Sturgeon, for getting her to stand in the subsequent election.

I got to know her fierce passion for tackling inequalities when she was my parliamentary liaison officer for the education portfolio, shortly after she was elected. Following that, she was a fine committee convener, navigating the European and External Relations Committee, and then the Equalities and Human Rights Committee, where she thrived and excelled.

All the kind comments that were made by MSPs across the political divide last week demonstrated that, with her sheer force of personality and kindness, she must be the MSP who has impacted the most on so many in this Parliament.

She used her time as a back bencher to reach out and connect with others. Her warm personality, empathy and compassion made an impact on her constituents, and she clearly relished serving her constituency. During the pandemic, I automatically thought of her and her trade union background and asked her to work with Jamie Hepburn to co-ordinate the recovery plans in preparation for reopening workplaces, working with unions and employers. I was so pleased to see the Scottish Trades Union Congress pay tribute to her this week.

Of course, she wore her brightest, beaming smile when she talked with pride of her sons—her boys who have grown up to be such fine young men—and of her pride in becoming a granny recently. Anyone in the company of Keith and Christina as a couple saw the love, affection and joy that they found in each other, although I am never sure how she really felt about affectionately being called “doll” and “hen” by our dear friend Keith.

Christina McKelvie had a curious mind. She loved to learn about and explore new things, and she had an encyclopaedic knowledge of astronomy. For her, the world and space were big and needed to be explored. That big world is smaller with her passing, but she made it brighter by being part of it. It has been a privilege to know Christina McKelvie, and it is now a responsibility to learn from her. My thoughts are with all who loved her. *[Applause.]*

14:31

Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con): I have a memory, as many of us do, of being cajoled into a committee room during our lunch break to don a bright pink feather boa. In my case, I am pretty sure that there were some pink pearls, too. There is much photographic evidence of that. It was all

for a good cause and in support of the wear it pink campaign. I say to the First Minister that some of us needed less persuading than others to do that. Why is that? Because you cannot take yourself too seriously for a good cause.

It was a fun way to highlight a very serious issue. Does that not sum up Christina McKelvie perfectly? She was a fun person who took her passions incredibly seriously, like when she and I marched arm in arm at the 2018 Edinburgh pride event, or when she reached out to me immediately after First Minister's questions to arrange a meeting after I had raised the issue of drug deaths in my own region.

Christina was always proud to work across the chamber on issues where there was a shared passion. It was her fearless support and campaigning for the TIE campaign back in 2016 that I remember. Her lobbying efforts helped that campaign gain cross-party support, including from many Conservatives. Her endless passion for equality was, and still is, something that I hold dear. She once said to me in the Parliament bar after a mutually difficult day, "You're no bad for a Tory." *[Laughter.]* I think that, in our mind's eye, we can all hear her voice in that phrase. It was perhaps because of the similarity of our roots in life that I took that as a massive compliment.

After another mutually difficult day, Christina also said to me, "Jamie, you can only do your best and be proud of your achievements." Colleagues, what more can you ask for in life? Do your best and be proud of your achievements. I hope that Christina's family are proud of her today. If I had to sum her up in a single word, that word would be "fun". Is that not a lesson in life for all of us? Be passionate, be decent, but enjoy your life. I make a promise to those who are grieving her loss today that there are plenty of us left here in the Parliament who will try to keep the flames of her many passions alight. *[Applause.]*

14:33

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care (Neil Gray): Christina is the best of us. She was a force of nature, a warrior for those she served and a rock for those she loved.

Christina gave a great hug. They were indeed powerful, and I will cherish the memory of our last hug. Christina gave more than just physical hugs, though. The way that she built relationships with her staff, her friends, and those she met as an MSP and a minister was by metaphorically putting her arms around you and pulling you in.

Rachael Patterson, Christina's most recent private secretary, shared the following with me:

"from the moment I met Christina, I felt a warmth and noticed she was like this with everyone she came across—

it didn't matter who you were. She taught me so much in the time we spent together.

I will visit the bench in St Andrew's Harbour that you told me your Mum loved and I hope you will be sitting right beside me."

Rachael is right: Christina was always there. I have heard so many stories of people Christina quietly supported through their cancer journey while she was going through her own. Christina lifted those around her—friend or stranger—with her love, her kindness and her generosity. She drove those of us around her with her wit, her fire and her principled determination.

I will very much treasure Christina's messages of encouragement and pride when I joined her in government. She put her arms around me and built me up. Her long-time office manager, Martha McAllister, told me that that was the way she was with her staff, too. She made sure to surround herself, as Martha put it, with similarly bolshie, trade union-trained staff. Christina was clear in the way that people should be treated.

I am so sorry to all those across Government, her constituency and civic Scotland, who will miss her dearly. Most of all, my heart truly breaks for Keith, Jack and Lewis and Christina's family: while we have lost one in a million, you have lost your world. I hope that they can take comfort in the wave of messages and tributes that have been paid to Christina—all testament to her ability to build and forge relationships.

A perfect example of that is from a member of the Gypsy Traveller community, who wrote the most beautiful poem about Christina. This paragraph encapsulates what I mean:

"A Gypsy man once lost, unheard,
Found strength in her promise, her every word.
She showed me I mattered. She taught me to stand
With wisdom, with laughter, with a gentle hand."

That came to Christina instinctively through who she was—her generosity, her gallusness and her graft for people.

Christina is the best of us. While we will not see her again or get that hug, Christina's legacy lives on in all those she sought to serve. She gave them hope and she left the world better than she found it. Thank you, Christina. We will miss you desperately. *[Applause.]*

14:37

Paul O'Kane (West Scotland) (Lab): The book of Wisdom in the Old Testament says:

"Length of days is not what makes age honourable, nor number of years the true measure of life; understanding, this is grey hairs, untarnished life, this is ripe old age."

Even if you are not a person of faith, I think that that poetry speaks to all of us.

Our colleague has gone too soon but, today and in the days to come, we have an opportunity to measure her life, her love, her contribution in this place and the contributions that she made to so many people. That includes her constituents, and many of the stories of how she helped them we will never know, but we do know of the countless people she would have helped with her kindness, compassion and dedication.

We can measure her life and love for Keith, for Lewis, for Jack and for all her family and friends. The book of Wisdom would say of those bonds:

"Coming to perfection in so short a while, she achieved long life".

I did not know Christina for as long as so many others in the Parliament, but I found a photograph last week of the Edinburgh pride march in 2022, which was led by Alex Cole-Hamilton, Maggie Chapman, me and Christina. She brought her two nieces that day, and she was so proud to be showing them the importance of allyship, standing with others and standing up for equality in Scotland, so much of which she helped to build.

We had a great chat that day on what was a long march around Edinburgh. We spoke about everything from our shared admiration for James Connolly to who could whistle the loudest when passing people who were objecting to the pride march. Of course, as colleagues opposite would expect, she tried very hard to convince me of the merits of Scottish independence. We agreed to disagree on that one.

However, that is how I will remember Christina McKelvie: on that sunny day in Edinburgh, full of joy, love and energy, on a march for the equalities and human rights of people she stood with for so long. That was the measure of her life. *[Applause.]*

14:40

Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): There were a lot of hats in Christina's life, from the iconic pink berets, bowlers and cowboy hats to the pussy hat that she wore in this chamber. What we forget about that day is how she so powerfully decried Trump and what he was doing in America. Thank you, Martha, for the crafting.

My heart goes out to Dionne, Alex, Neil, Marianne and Lindsey; to our shared staff, David and Claire; and to all those who worked with Christina over the years. My heart also goes out to the wider Parliament community and to our staff here, including Kirsty, the barista; Audrey in security; and our mace-bearer, Robert, all of whom were favourites. Christina also had many

friends in the consular corps of Edinburgh, and I know that they are hurting today.

Christina was the first SNP group trade union liaison in this Parliament. She was the first person to champion the cause of MND and MND nurses. She was the first committee convener to champion eradicating the scourge of human trafficking. Her outstanding work with the Gypsy Traveller community has also been mentioned, as evidenced by Tommy's lovely poem that was shared by Jack on his Facebook. She was the first to raise the issues of revenge porn and menopause stigma, and to fight for Clare's law. She was the first in line at any pride march. She was the first with a boot on the ground as we walked up the hill to protest at Dungavel with the other Lanarkshire lassies.

Christina was the first on the dance floor, the tables and, occasionally, the bar at the legendary Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse Burns suppers, with her great friend Councillor Lynn Adams. I hope that they are dancing together today.

Christina was the first to offer a hand of friendship to support those in need and to give a voice to those who had none. She was the last person who would ever have let anyone down. She had yet more hats: she was an amazing mum, granny, sister, partner, aunt, daughter and friend. All in her and Keith's lovely blended family adored her.

I will always remember a magical summer evening in Dubrovnik in 2019. An orchestra played beside us while we ate dinner. As the "Ode to Joy" finale was echoing round the square, we all stood alongside the many Europeans who were there that night, hands on hearts, tears in our eyes, mourning what we were about to lose. But, of course, it only fired her spirit to fight all the more for our independence, and to have Scotland rightfully back in the family of European nations. So, you have been telt, folks.

Christina lit up all our lives, and our world will forever be duller without her. *[Applause.]*

14:43

Monica Lennon (Central Scotland) (Lab): Christina McKelvie was passionate, principled and patriotic. We had our political differences but, over many years, I experienced her warmth, which so many others have mentioned, and her wisdom.

As a quarter of Christina's team, "the Holyboobs", with Gillian Mackay and Christine Jardine, I will cherish our unforgettable moonwalk around Edinburgh. She united us to raise funds and awareness of breast cancer—an illness that does not care about party politics.

Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse Labour Party paid tribute to Christina on Friday night, and I extend our sincere condolences and love to Keith, Lewis and Jack; to her grandchildren; to all her family and friends, especially her SNP family; and to everyone who loved Christina.

Larkhall and District Volunteer Group will remember her as compassionate. Friends of Stonehouse Park have honoured a “positive personality”. Hamilton District Foodbank said:

“It has been a privilege to have had Christina in our lives.”

I will remember the woman who believed in human rights, fought for equality and championed social justice.

Christina loved a good quote, so I will conclude with words that she spoke in the Scottish Parliament that she loved. She said:

“Be bold, be courageous and be brave, because the people of this land—our Scotland—demand and deserve nothing less.”—[*Official Report*, 25 May 2016; c 61.]

[*Applause.*]

14:46

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government (Shona Robison): It is an honour to be able to say a few words about our friend and colleague Christina.

I first met Christina when we both worked in social work in the north of Glasgow. Even then, Christina was a force to be reckoned with and was heavily involved and active in her trade union. She was always campaigning for better, always on the side of those who were less fortunate and always campaigning for fairness. On meeting Christina, I immediately had no doubt that there was a place for her in front-line politics. I also felt that I had met a kindred spirit, which turned out to be true when we met again in this Parliament.

As others have said, there is no doubt that Christina made her mark in this place by campaigning on issues that were close to her heart. I have some cracking and quite ridiculous photos of us as part of the wear it pink campaign. Once Christina set her mind to supporting a cause, that was it—she would give total energy and commitment to that cause. That is why so many people from all walks of life have paid tribute to Christina’s amazing contribution to public life.

My last call with Christina was about a month ago, and I can tell colleagues that she was on great form. As well as talking about time with family and life as a granny, she gave me some very strong views and opinions on the issues of the day. She also spoke about how difficult she had found it to come to the decision not to stand

as an MSP again. It was a good call, and I am really thankful for it.

Christina, thank you for being you and for giving everything that you gave to those of us who were lucky enough to know you and regard you as a friend. I offer my deepest condolences to Keith, Jack, Lewis and the whole family. Our thoughts are with you all at this most difficult of times. Rest in peace, Christina, my dear friend. [*Applause.*]

The Presiding Officer: I call Keith Brown.

14:48

Keith Brown (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP): Thank you, Presiding Officer. Thank you, too, for the personal support that you have given to me and the family, not just in the past couple of weeks but in inquiring after Christina’s health for so many months. I also thank the First Minister, not only for doing the same thing—constantly expressing concern for Christina’s health—but for the way that he was able to manage her absence from Government and, crucially, for his two visits to the hospital, the first of which had a huge impact on Christina’s family, who were there at the time.

I also thank the members of the SNP group for their support over many months. I know that you are all hurting, as we are. I thank the party leaders and all those who have spoken. There is not a great deal left for me to say. You have hit all the right notes with regard to who Christina was and what she was about.

It might be invidious to do so, but I would like to quickly mention three people. Kirsty in the coffee bar, who has already been mentioned, was always keen to hear about how Christina was doing. Similarly, Edward Mountain always inquired after Christina, notwithstanding his own issues with cancer. I also thank Jamie Greene, not just for what he said today but for the fantastic card that he sent to Christina. He and I know what was in that card, and that will stay between us.

I also thank our constituents and all the groups that have been in touch. It was an absolutely incredible response.

Christina was everything that people have said of her today. She genuinely was—I know that, sometimes, after somebody passes away, lots of things are said, but she was all those things. She was a feminist, a staunch supporter of the LGBTQ community, and a staunch supporter of Travellers when many people were not. I know that this is contentious, but it would not be true not to say it: Christina was a trans ally. Christina supported trans people.

She was also, of course—it is no surprise to anybody to hear me say this—a very staunch

supporter of independence. Christina loved Scotland, its people, its culture and its history, but she also knew that many other people who did not believe in independence felt similarly strongly about their country. That is why we saw such an absence of malice and vindictiveness on the part of Christina.

It has been mentioned that Christina came from Easterhouse. She was extremely proud of the fact that she came from Easterhouse. She received some really snide comments when she was first elected—misogynistic and classist comments—but those people did not know the real Christina. I think that that is where she imbibed her values of social justice. Many of us learn those things, quite legitimately, when we read or learn about politics, but social justice was instinctive to Christina. It is who she was.

She was also an artist—a very gifted artist. She was a poet: she wrote a fantastic poem for our granddaughter, Maeve, when she was born. She loved to travel. She loved to swim in a warm ocean. She was not for sitting by the pool—she wanted to be in the ocean. She loved science. A tribute was paid to her by David Blanchflower, the astrophysicist, on Twitter, who said that he felt that he had lost somebody who was extremely intelligent and fearless. She was also a very gifted photographer.

I always thought Christina to be a stunningly attractive woman, but the real measure of Christina was not how she looked; it was in her mind and in her heart. She never walked by on the other side. I think of the number of times when we were out that she would stop by somebody in the street, to give them money, food or her time. One time in Campbeltown, a drunken man had fallen down and she would not leave his side until the ambulance came. Another time, a mother who had just given birth to a child had no money for a pram. Christina bought one, and also the bedclothes to go with it.

Christina loved a cup of tea: black, two sweeteners. This will underline the point that I just made: once, in the hospital, I asked Christina whether she wanted a cup of tea. It was not a great time for Christina. Unusually, I was the only person with her in the hospital at the time. She said, “Yes, please, but make sure everyone else has got one.” There was nobody else in the room, but it was her instinct to say that.

I want to reassure people—those who loved her the most—that during the last week or so, Christina was never on her own. At every point, 24 hours a day, members of her family sat with her, held her hand and told her that she was loved. She was surrounded by love in that last week.

When she was first elected, Christina went to an event in central Scotland. She met an MP from a different party—or, rather than met him, she saw him, a large man, haranguing a young woman who was a Scottish Government communications officer and shouting at her. She stormed over and stood between them. She said, “Your size, your shouting and your toxic masculinity don’t intimidate me, so you can back off.” I think it was “back off” that she said—it was something like that. *[Laughter.]* If you were going to intimidate a woman, you did not do it around Christina McKelvie.

She was, as we have heard, very proud to be an MSP and a Government minister. When she became a minister, I wrote on Twitter a line from Simon and Garfunkel:

“Sail on, silver girl ... Your time has come to shine.”

Christina sparkled and she shone.

In the chamber, she never hated anybody. I remember that the worst thing I heard her say was to a Tory MSP. She asked why, if he had come to engage her in a battle of wits, he had come unarmed. It was meant in good humour and it was taken in good humour.

Liz Smith will remember the endless Thursday morning education debates in that session. In one of her contributions, Christina managed to get virtually every ABBA title into her contribution. She was great fun.

Christina and I apparently first spoke in 2001. I do not remember it, but, of course, Christina, who had a mind like a steel trap, remembered it. I was the leader of Clackmannanshire Council. Two of her members, who she was representing, had been arrested at Faslane, and she wanted to make sure that their employer, Clackmannanshire Council, did not further penalise them. She made sure that that did not happen. She recollects saying that she found me to be opinionated and cocky, which just goes to show that, sometimes, Christina could be wrong as well. *[Laughter.]*

In 2007, at a pre-election rally for SNP candidates in Napier University, I just thought that she was a stunningly attractive woman and way, way out of my league. Then I became a committee convener and Christina was on the committee. I found a way to try to get on her good side, because she hated being called Christine—apologies to Christine Grahame, if she is here. I was the person who jumped down the throat of anybody who had the audacity to call her Christine, in a bid to impress her, as her defender. I am not sure whether it worked, but it was 18 months before we got together. Christina’s phrase for that is, “We found love in a hopeless place.” *[Laughter.]*

I have often thought of Christina as a star. People have talked about how much fun she was. To me, she was glamorous, she was sparkly and she was fun. Of course, planets revolve around stars. I just do not know what a planet does when its star has been extinguished.

She was a credit to her two sons, Lewis and Jack, and she took such pride in her grandchildren, Leo and Maeve. They will never be allowed to forget Christina. She was a credit to her community, to Easterhouse, to the Scottish Government, to this Parliament and to Scotland. She was more beautiful inside than outside, and, apart from my children, Christina McKelvie was the best thing that ever happened to me.

Thank you. *[Applause.]*

The Presiding Officer: Thank you.

The question is, that motion S6M-17000, in the name of John Swinney, on a motion of condolence, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament expresses its deep sadness at the death of Christina McKelvie MSP; offers its profound sympathy and condolences to her family and friends, and recognises her significant and widely appreciated contribution to Scottish politics and public life through years of dedicated service to her constituents in Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse, as a champion for social justice, as a convener of two Scottish Parliament committees, and as a Scottish Government minister since 2018.

The Presiding Officer: The motion is agreed to. I suspend the meeting until 3.15.

14:57

Meeting suspended.

15:15

On resuming—

Portfolio Question Time

Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): Good afternoon. The next item of business is portfolio questions, and the first portfolio is rural affairs, land reform and islands.

Scotch Whisky

1. Roz McCall (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what recent engagement it has had with the United Kingdom Government regarding how to ensure the protection of Scotch whisky. (S6O-04512)

The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands (Mairi Gougeon): The Scottish Government takes the protection of Scotch whisky—and all of our iconic food and drink products—seriously. I had hoped to raise the issue at the interministerial group, but the meeting was cancelled at short notice, which is disappointing. I will be taking up this important issue with the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs at the earliest opportunity, to share our concerns and those of the industry at the proposals to redefine what is considered single malt.

The whisky sector is a vital employer, particularly in our rural and island communities, and it is a significant part of our economy, contributing £5.4 billion-worth of exports last year. We will continue to work shoulder to shoulder with the sector to address any attempts to undermine confidence in our iconic single malt whisky.

Roz McCall: That is exactly what I want to ask about. The success and growth of Scotch whisky is a story that we are all familiar with. In 2023, Scotch whisky exports, which accounted for 74 per cent of Scottish food and drink exports and 22 per cent of all United Kingdom food and drink exports, were estimated to be worth £5.4 billion.

In my Mid Scotland and Fife region, there are many successful distilleries, including Deanston, Glengoyne, Glenturret, Tullibardine, Lindores Abbey and Kingsbarns, to name but a few. Therefore, it was extremely concerning to hear that, as the cabinet secretary has alluded to, the UK Government's Minister for Food Security and Rural Affairs is still open to the possibility of giving the green light to an application for English single malt to have protected status.

Single malt is seen as a premium product for a reason. It is handcrafted using traditional methods, utilising local raw material—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I need a question, Ms McCall.

Roz McCall: Will the cabinet secretary commit today to pressurising the UK Government more extensively on this point to ensure the protection of Scotland's iconic brand?

Mairi Gougeon: I am in full agreement with everything that Roz McCall has set out. The member mentioned a number of distilleries in her region. The economic impact and importance of our Scotch whisky industry more broadly across Scotland is clear for everyone to see, and we will continue to do everything in our power to pressure the UK Government to ensure that our iconic product is well recognised. It is unfortunate that the opportunity that we had to do that earlier this week was cancelled at short notice, but we will continue to make that point to ministers at DEFRA.

Gordon MacDonald (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP): Before the Tories forced Brexit on Scotland, whisky had the protection of a European Union geographical indication. Does the cabinet secretary agree that Scotland's produce, such as whisky, will never be amply protected as long as Westminster Governments—whether Labour or Tory—have the power to legislate on and undermine the interests of Scottish business?

Mairi Gougeon: I recognise the member's point. Following Brexit, geographical indication holders were transitioned over and then offered protection through the UK scheme, although that is less well known than the previous scheme that we were part of as members of the EU.

I agree with Gordon MacDonald on the wider point. Our whisky, salmon, beef, lamb and cheese are some of the finest products in the world, and anyone undermining the protection afforded to them by including lesser products is playing with fire. We will continue to do all that we can to ensure that those iconic products are protected.

Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con): Last August, Brazil gave Scotch whisky GI status. That took 10 years to negotiate. Does the cabinet secretary agree that it is deeply troubling for the United Kingdom to potentially have more than one definition of single malt, and that it would be damaging to the industry's negotiations to secure GI status of that iconic Scottish product in other countries around the world?

Mairi Gougeon: I agree with the member on that. I will continue to do all that I can in my role in liaising with UK Government ministers to ensure that any definition of single malt is not watered down. Fortunately, the process is still on-going; DEFRA's consultation is open until 20 May, and we will certainly be making representations to the UK Government.

Land Reform (Engagement with Highlands and Islands Communities)

2. Emma Roddick (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government how it is engaging with Highlands and Islands communities on the future of land reform policy. (S6O-04513)

The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands (Mairi Gougeon): I fully understand the cultural, economic and social importance of land reform and community ownership to people across the Highlands and Islands, and I will always ensure that their views are heard in the development of policy. In the development of the current Land Reform (Scotland) Bill, we consulted with rural communities across Scotland, including at public meetings in Helmsdale, Glenmoriston and Stornoway. Our proposals will bring real improvements to the way in which land is owned and managed across Scotland, and we will soon consult on the community right to buy review, in which the views of Highlands and Islands communities will again be crucial.

Emma Roddick: Like many people, I was deeply concerned to see the sale of Sleat peninsula, given the response of community members, who are surprised and worried that they will not get a say in what happens to the land next. I have written to the cabinet secretary seeking her support and asking her to convene a meeting of relevant stakeholders. It should be a given that communities get the chance to purchase land when it enters the market and that they get any available support to do so. How will the Land Reform (Scotland) Bill support communities such as that on Sleat? Can she offer them any support in the meantime?

Mairi Gougeon: I thank Emma Roddick for raising that important issue, which we covered in the debate on land reform that took place last week. This is an example of a local community not being consulted on or made aware of the landowner's intention to sell, which is exactly the type of issue that we will try to address, should the Land Reform (Scotland) Bill be passed by the Parliament. Had the transparency proposals in that bill been enforced, the local community would have received prior notification of the landowner's intention to sell. I have not yet seen the letter that Emma Roddick has sent to me, but I will consider it and see what more we can do to help the communities.

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): Will the cabinet secretary consider intervening and asking the Clan Donald Lands Trust to pause the sale to enable the community to look at what is happening and perhaps come up with a bid or, in some way, influence the sale of the land?

Mairi Gougeon: I thank Rhoda Grant for raising that question and for highlighting the issue in the chamber last week. I would have to go and see what powers there are in that respect. However, that is why we need the bill to be passed—it is so that we have the opportunity to prevent situations such as the one on Sleat from happening again. I am more than happy to follow up with Rhoda Grant on that.

Wild Wrasse (Management)

3. Elena Whitham (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on its consideration of a fisheries management plan for the future management of wild wrasse. (S6O-04514)

The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands (Mairi Gougeon): The Scottish Government has commissioned Seafish to undertake initial scoping work to help inform our approach to fisheries management plans for non-quota species, including wrasse. The Scottish Government has been clear that our resources are currently focused on delivering the statutory commitment in the United Kingdom Fisheries Act 2020 and the UK joint fisheries statement on the production of 43 fisheries management plans, 21 of which the Scottish Government is the lead co-ordinating authority on.

Elena Whitham: I understand that the cabinet secretary has recently agreed that appropriate assessments will be done on taking wrasse from special areas of conservation and marine protected areas. Can she confirm that the closure of the wrasse fishery between 1 December and 30 April is intended to protect wrasse species during the spawning season and that those protections are a standard part of fisheries management plans?

Mairi Gougeon: I would want to offer that clarity—yes, the closure is to protect wrasse. However, as I outlined when I gave evidence to the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee on fisheries management plans, not having a plan in place does not mean that we will not take any action to look at what more we can do for this important species. Indeed, we have taken a number of measures over the past few years. We continue to keep the matter under review to see what more we can do when it comes to wrasse.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We have a supplementary from Ariane Burgess, who joins us remotely.

Ariane Burgess (Highlands and Islands) (Green): Dr David Bailey, who was commissioned by NatureScot in 2019 to examine whether wrasse fishing could affect protected features, has said

that as a “first measure”, closing protected reefs to wrasse fishing would reduce the risk to protected features,

“ensure that at least some wrasse populations survive, and allow the ecological effects of wrasse fishing to be assessed”.

Does the cabinet secretary agree that it is important for the sake of our aquaculture industry, our marine environment and the commercial species that depend on them that at least some wrasse populations survive?

Mairi Gougeon: Wrasse is of course a very important species, as I hope that I outlined in my previous response. In response to the inquiry that the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee undertook on aquaculture, we set out a number of measures that we are looking to take. Moreover, we set out in that response that we received a report on the issue that the University of Glasgow produced just last year. On the back of that report and in light of that evidence, we are undertaking an appropriate assessment ahead of the wrasse fishery opening in May this year.

I assure Ariane Burgess and other members that we are taking the matter seriously. We must do what we can to ensure that we are protecting this species.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Question 4 has been withdrawn.

Agricultural Land (Development)

5. Tess White (North East Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government whether it has made an assessment of the potential loss of agricultural land in the North East Scotland region as the result of development. (S6O-04516)

The Minister for Agriculture and Connectivity (Jim Fairlie): The Scottish Government has not made such an assessment at a national or regional level. The Scottish Government holds multiple data sets that relate to land use, but they alone could not support an assessment of the potential loss of agricultural land. Scotland's fourth land use strategy is due to be published by March 2026 and, throughout its development, we will work with stakeholders regarding the multiple demands that are placed on our land and the fine balances that must be found as we move forward.

The national planning framework 4 soils policy supports new development proposals on prime agricultural land or locally important agricultural land of lesser quality in limited circumstances only.

Tess White: The industrialisation of the north-east, which Scottish and Southern Electricity Networks is pursuing through its monster pylon plans, is causing alarm and trauma. I recently met Angus farmers, who, along with other

stakeholders, raised serious concerns with me about the overhead lines' impact on prime agricultural land.

The use of farming machinery, such as autonomous tractors, also has worrying implications. Has the Scottish Government considered the loss of agricultural productivity that will result from SSEN's plans, and will it commit to protecting our food security and farmers in the north-east?

Jim Fairlie: The Scottish Government's commitment to protecting not only the farmers of the north-east but farmers across the country is absolute. We have been crystal clear about that from day 1. The specific issue that Tess White is talking about is a local planning issue, and it should be for the local planning authority to decide what happens in that area.

Disease-resistant Ash Trees

6. Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government how it is supporting the breeding of disease-resistant ash trees. (S6O-04517)

The Minister for Agriculture and Connectivity (Jim Fairlie): The Scottish Government invests in forest research and science, and it jointly funds research with the United Kingdom Government and other UK devolved Administrations to further our knowledge and understanding of areas such as tree pests and diseases, tree breeding and forest resilience.

We are supporting plans for a clonal archive of resistant ash trees, which will be located in Scotland's public forest estate. That is part of ongoing work to support the breeding of disease-resistant ash trees.

Graham Simpson: The minister knows that breeding resistant ash is crucial to combating ash dieback disease. The Future Trees Trust has been leading the way on the issue in Scotland, and it has worked with the Woodland Trust to increase the volume of Scottish provenance ash in its breeding programme. However, the funding programme has been suddenly cut, which puts planting targets in jeopardy. Will the minister agree to reconsider the cut so that the programme gets back on track?

Jim Fairlie: I am more than happy to follow up with Graham Simpson in writing about the specific programme that he is talking about.

Sustainable and Regenerative Agriculture

7. Monica Lennon (Central Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to progress its ambition for Scotland to be a

world leader in sustainable and regenerative agriculture practice. (S6O-04518)

The Minister for Agriculture and Connectivity (Jim Fairlie): We are progressing the priorities that are set out in our vision for Scottish agriculture, which are high-quality food production, thriving businesses, climate action, nature restoration and a just transition.

We have maintained direct payments and launched the whole farm plan, and we introduced the Agriculture and Rural Communities (Scotland) Act 2024. Through the agricultural reform programme, we are working collaboratively to deliver a sustainable future for Scottish agriculture. We continue to prioritise the agri-environment climate scheme, with the 2024 round of awards increasing funding on the previous year by £3.9 million. The recently announced £14 million future farming investment scheme will encourage climate-friendly farming and support efficiency and environmental sustainability.

Monica Lennon: I welcome the minister's update. The issue of clarifying the definition of "sustainable and regenerative agriculture" has come up during scrutiny of the Land Reform (Scotland) Bill. What is the Government doing to ensure that there is a clear and consistent definition and that the aims that underpin the Government's vision, strategy and legislation are clearly understood?

Jim Fairlie: I understand Monica Lennon's point about the definition. The Scottish Government is working on a code of practice, which is being co-developed with the industry to give us a better understanding of what it should look like. We will bring forward those measures in due course.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Three members have requested to ask a supplementary question, and I intend to take them all.

Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): Genetically modified crops play a critical role in sustainable and regenerative agriculture by enhancing crop resilience to pests, diseases and environmental stresses. That reduces the need for chemical inputs such as pesticides and herbicides, thereby minimising the environmental impact. In addition, GM crops can improve yields and nutritional quality, thereby contributing to food security and sustainable farming practices. Will the minister update the Parliament on discussions with stakeholders on introducing legislation regarding GM crops? Will he give an indication of timelines setting out the way forward?

Jim Fairlie: I am surprised that Finlay Carson is talking about GM crops, because that is an entirely different conversation from the one that we have been having about gene-edited crops. The cabinet secretary and I recently attended a round-table

meeting to start conversations about what the system should look like and whether there is a place for such crops in Scotland.

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): Given the agricultural property relief proposals and the national insurance budget decisions, I am not sure that Labour cares much about Scottish agriculture. Will the minister highlight the challenges that are posed to Scotland's ambitions to be a world leader by Labour's decision to end ring-fenced funding?

Jim Fairlie: The United Kingdom Government's budget decisions have not delivered the support that Scottish agriculture requires, have failed to reverse the real-terms cuts of previous years and have not provided the multiyear certainty that the sector needs. The changes to agricultural property relief and business property relief will reduce confidence and investment in the sector even further.

Despite the UK Government's removal of ring-fenced funding, our 2025-26 budget continues to ring fence funding for agriculture. We continue to press the UK Government to commit to meaningful engagement across the four nations on the future funding settlement for agriculture and to provide certainty and assurances on the delivery of agriculture policies following our exit from the European Union.

Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): Last night, many members attended the Food and Drink Federation Scotland reception in the Parliament. The agriculture sector is calling for certainty. The enactment of section 29 of the Agriculture and Rural Communities (Scotland) Act 2024 to introduce a code of practice on sustainable and regenerative agriculture is solely in the gift of Scottish ministers. To enable investment, innovation and confidence in the sector, will the minister confirm when section 29 will come into force and when the code will be published?

Jim Fairlie: I think that Rachael Hamilton recognises the importance of proper engagement and consultation with the sector so that, when we deliver the code of practice, it has the full backing of the industry. As I have said, we are investing another £14 million in an innovation fund and, as has been demonstrated year after year, the Scottish Government is absolutely committed to being right beside the Scottish agriculture industry.

Common Fisheries Policy

8. Ash Regan (Edinburgh Eastern) (Alba): To ask the Scottish Government whether its policy position in relation to an independent Scotland seeking to rejoin the European Union includes rejoining the common fisheries policy. (S6O-04519)

The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands (Mairi Gougeon): As set out in "Building a new Scotland: Our marine sector in an independent Scotland", the common fisheries policy is an integral part of EU law. It is well established that membership of the CFP is a fundamental requirement of EU membership.

The Scottish Government supports the overarching principles and strategic outcomes of the CFP and their role in supporting long-term sustainable fishing. An independent Scotland in the EU, as an influential maritime nation, would have a significant opportunity to shape the future of the policy and relevant legislative and regulatory developments.

Ash Regan: Norway, which is a country that is similar in size to Scotland, is a member of the European Free Trade Association, which gives it access to the European Economic Area. Norway thrives outside of the EU but inside the single market through controlling its own waters, managing its own resources and delivering prosperity for its people. Does the Scottish Government accept that Norway offers a viable model of European trade for an independent Scotland? What concrete steps is the Government taking to ensure that Scotland regains access to the single market?

Mairi Gougeon: Ash Regan is right to say that Norway offers an alternative model. However, again, it is the position of the Scottish Government that we would seek to rejoin the EU as an independent nation.

Although Norway is outside the CFP, European Economic Area members such as Norway are required to implement the vast majority of EU law, but they have little or no involvement in how those laws are made. We want to be an independent member state of the EU because we would then have the power and the ability to shape EU law and to work for the benefit of Scotland.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes portfolio questions on rural affairs, land reform and islands. Before we move on to the next portfolio, there will be a brief pause to allow the front-bench teams to change.

Health and Social Care

National Health Service (Single-sex Spaces)

1. Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government how many NHS boards have designated single-sex spaces for women. (S6O-04520)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care (Neil Gray): That is a matter for individual boards, which must ensure that all their facilities

comply with relevant legislation, including the Equality Act 2010. Responsibility for complying with the requirements of the 2010 act rests with individual organisations. The act is enforced by the Equality and Human Rights Commission, which has produced guidance to support separate and single-sex service providers.

Meghan Gallacher: I asked a basic question, and I find it difficult to believe that the cabinet secretary cannot tell me today in the chamber how many NHS boards have single-sex spaces for women. Worse still, ministers have told parliamentary committees that they have no clue whether hospitals and health boards are following the law. The issue is about dignity and women's safety, so will the cabinet secretary urgently write to all health boards to find out what their policies on single-sex spaces for women are? Once the responses are received, will he share those responses with MSPs?

Neil Gray: As I said at the outset, it is a matter for individual boards, as it is for all employing organisations, to ensure that they comply with the law. We will continue to interact with boards to ensure that the guidance that the Equality and Human Rights Commission produced is being maintained. We will keep Parliament updated on that progress.

Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): The Government has repeatedly failed to say how it is ensuring that all health and safety workplace regulations are being complied with in relation to single-sex toilets. I have asked this question before, but can the Government provide any assurance that it will take some responsibility and look to assess the current situation in our NHS and other organisations—particularly those to which the Government provides public funds—and gather the necessary data? It should not be difficult, and I think that it is essential.

Neil Gray: The Scottish Government expects all relevant organisations, in their role as employers, to comply with the requirements of the 2010 act and other legislation that Carol Mochan references, such as the requirements of the law on health and safety in workplaces, as outlined in the Workplace (Health, Safety and Welfare) Regulations 1992. The expectation to follow the rule of law is clear, and we would expect boards and other public organisations to adhere to it.

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): Is the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care really telling us that he does not know how many of Scotland's health boards are complying with the law? Has he not taken the time to ask that question? If he has not, what on earth is he doing?

Neil Gray: I am not the employer of staff in the health service. The staff are employed by

individual health boards, and it is their responsibility to ensure that they adhere to the law. I have made very clear to Meghan Gallacher and Carol Mochan my expectation that health boards should comply with the law—not just the 2010 act but all elements of legislation and regulation. That expectation is clear.

Cancer Waiting Times (Clinically Led Review)

2. Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on the progress of action 42 in the cancer action plan 2023 to 2026 to carry out a clinically led review on cancer waiting times. (S6O-04521)

The Minister for Public Health and Women's Health (Jenni Minto): Action 42 of the three-year cancer action plan is a commitment to

“Carry out a clinically led review of latest data and evidence and determine whether there is merit in specific additional or alternative cancer waiting times standards for different types of cancer and cancer treatment.”

The Government has been putting in place arrangements for that review, which will be under way shortly. The review will require significant clinical leadership, with appropriate engagement across a range of stakeholders. A project steering group is being established. It will support the review and determine whether any amendments to the standards would enhance patient experience and meet the national health service's needs for the future.

Neil Bibby: I lodged the question on behalf of Breast Cancer Now, before the sad passing of our colleague Christina McKelvie. I pay tribute to Christina McKelvie, who was a strong advocate for breast cancer awareness. My thoughts are with her friends and family at this difficult time.

The 62-day target for starting treatment following urgent referral has, sadly, not been met for breast cancer for four years. Breast Cancer Now estimates that, had the target been met during that time, over 1,000 more people would have had a timely diagnosis and access to potentially life-saving treatments. The 62-day standard states that 95 per cent of eligible patients should wait no longer than 62 days from urgent suspicion of cancer referral to first cancer treatment. However, the 62-day standard is currently being met by only one of the 14 NHS boards. Does the Scottish Government agree that waiting time targets for cancer need to be reviewed so that health boards and the Scottish Government can first identify and then address the causes of the delay?

Jenni Minto: I recognise the sentiments that Neil Bibby expressed in his supplementary question, and my heart goes out to Christina McKelvie's family, friends and loved ones.

This morning, I met Make 2nds Count, another breast cancer charity, and we had long discussions about research and the options for getting on clinical trials. The subject is very close to my heart.

I recognise Mr Bibby's question about waiting times and the need to improve the service. That is what the Scottish Government is investing in.

Heart Disease Action Plan

3. Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will commit to renewing the heart disease action plan. (S6O-04522)

The Minister for Public Health and Women's Health (Jenni Minto): We are exploring a new long-term conditions strategy to better recognise the fact that many people who are living with long-term conditions, including heart disease, need the same types of support and care, regardless of their condition. We will shortly launch a full public consultation on that strategy, and we plan to publish a long-term conditions framework before the end of 2025, with action plans following thereafter.

Colin Smyth: In June, the cross-party group on heart and circulatory diseases, which I co-convene, published its inquiry report on the implementation of the current plan. We heard strong support for a specific heart disease plan, but there were concerns that a lack of focus and investment was impacting on implementation. For example, figures from British Heart Foundation Scotland showed that waiting times for cardiology and key diagnostic tests are the longest on record.

How will the minister ensure that the Scottish Government and NHS Scotland provide sufficient resource and focus to address what remains one of the leading causes of death and ill health in Scotland? Will she commit to specific actions in any long-term conditions strategy that address the unique needs of people who are affected by heart disease?

Jenni Minto: I thank Colin Smyth for his supplementary question and recognise the huge amount of work that he has done as a member of the heart and circulatory diseases CPG. Last week, I had a meeting with the British Heart Foundation, in which we discussed exactly what was behind Colin Smyth's question. I recognise that heart conditions need to be treated with importance but that a number of areas of care for heart conditions could be replicated across other long-term conditions.

To that end, I met cardiologists and other heart clinicians just last week, and I visited the Royal infirmary of Edinburgh to see more of what it is doing in diagnostics. I absolutely understand

where Mr Smyth's question is coming from, and I commit to continuing to work closely with those who are living with heart conditions.

Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): The issue that the minister just talked about is not being covered by many health boards, as we have seen at the cross-party group. There still seems to be a postcode lottery when it comes to individuals receiving the care and attention that they require. Having a disease action plan for the heart is vitally important. Clinicians and practitioners have come to the cross-party group to express their concerns. I have heard what the minister has said so far, but I am still not convinced that that action plan and the way forward are going to be addressed in the short term.

Jenni Minto: I recognise the work that Alexander Stewart does on the CPG. Last week, I met members of our cardiac clinical advisory team to discuss exactly those differences of service across the country. I am working with other members of the Scottish Government to look at a task and finish group so as to move forward and ensure that we have the best heart disease support and care in Scotland.

Vaccination Services (NHS Highland)

4. Fergus Ewing (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government whether it was aware that, prior to NHS Highland taking over responsibility for vaccination services from general practitioners, there were reported concerns that the national health service board's system did not allow GPs to know their patients' vaccination status and that this could lead to a heightened patient risk. (S6O-04523)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care (Neil Gray): Since April 2022, health boards have been responsible for delivering vaccines. The vast majority of adult vaccinations, including the flu, Covid, respiratory syncytial virus, shingles and pneumococcal vaccines, are visible to GPs via their general practice information technology system. Currently, childhood and non-routine vaccinations do not automatically flow into GP IT from the separate systems that record them, but that predates the move from GP to health board delivery, as Fergus Ewing outlined.

Some health boards may have data-sharing arrangements in place with general practices that allow health board vaccination teams direct access to patient records to add vaccination history without GPs being required to do that manually. That should be explored locally wherever possible. Any associated patient risk is mitigated by health boards providing GPs with a list of childhood and non-routine vaccines that they have administered. The Scottish Government

funds GPs to manually input those into their GP systems.

Fergus Ewing: The health board system has already failed. One infant lost her life because her mother did not get the vaccination offer letter until it was too late. The cabinet secretary knows that that was the case. His officials knew that, when they brought in the system, the information about who had been vaccinated could not be shared with GPs at that time. The paper chase of doing that through thousands of inputs just does not work.

Surely the service must be returned to local GPs. That is necessary to prevent the risk of further loss of life in the Highlands, which I know that we all wish to avoid. The advice that I have had from GPs is that that risk is heightened, because they do not know who has been vaccinated and who has not, because the civil servants advising the cabinet secretary allowed the system to be brought in when, in fact, it is a reckless risk to public health.

Neil Gray: I thank Fergus Ewing for his question and his engagement—and that of the GPs he represents—over a number of meetings with me. It is not true to say that GPs do not know who has been vaccinated. As I just outlined, boards provide GPs with a list of vaccinations that they have administered across the vaccination programmes for practices to manually enter into GP systems. I recognise the point that he made about the cumbersome nature of that task, but funding is in place to allow that to happen, and it is not a novel situation.

The Scottish Government has not obstructed any changes in the vaccination model used in NHS Highland; indeed, the board has followed the required process, which is set out in legislation, to change its model. It is for NHS Highland to examine the evidence in its area and determine the model that is appropriate to those circumstances.

We have facilitated that move to the new proposed model for exactly the reasons that Fergus Ewing set out, in order to make sure that we protect public health and continue to save lives.

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): The issue that Fergus Ewing raised in NHS Highland highlights the need to start to adopt a basic national collaboration and communication platform. That would allow all healthcare professionals, with the permission of patients, to access basic health data that is important to the delivery of safe patient care, and would bring the Scottish national healthcare service into the modern world. Does the cabinet secretary agree?

Neil Gray: I believe that the new NHS app and the digital front door will allow a greater expansion

of that. I am pleased that NHS Lanarkshire will start the roll-out of that later this year.

The system is very much based on the Covid-19 pandemic new vaccine recording system that was built and the vaccine management tool, as well as the national clinical data store, which stores the information that is collected via the vaccine management tool. That gives us a good platform on which to build the very system that Brian Whittle is asking for.

Social Care Package Assessments (North Ayrshire Health and Social Care Partnership)

5. Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government how many patients in hospital are waiting for a social care package assessment from North Ayrshire health and social care partnership. (S6O-04524)

The Minister for Social Care, Mental Wellbeing and Sport (Maree Todd): The latest published statistics from Public Health Scotland show that, as of 3 March 2025, six people were waiting in hospital for a social care assessment in North Ayrshire. Over the past 12 months, on average, three people were recorded as waiting for a social care assessment in hospital in North Ayrshire, and no more than 12 people at any one point.

The same publication also shows that, on 3 March 2025, 44 people were waiting in hospital for a care-at-home package in North Ayrshire, which is 30 more than was the case in the same week in 2024, when, on 4 March 2024, 14 people were waiting.

The latest published statistics on delayed discharge also show that, as of 30 January, 15 people were delayed in North Ayrshire as they were awaiting a social care assessment. A further 46 people were delayed in hospital as they were awaiting completion of care arrangements, primarily for care-at-home services.

The statistics may well include patients who are delayed in a hospital that is outwith their health board area of residence. It is important that I point that out.

Katy Clark: A constituent of mine has been in touch. She has been in hospital but ready for discharge since 17 November, as North Ayrshire health and social care partnership has been unable to provide a care package.

I am making representations, but what advice does the cabinet secretary have? Does she think that that is the longest that a current patient has been in hospital? What is being done to ensure that we stop such waits happening, given the waste of resource?

Maree Todd: The member will be aware that we are investing in social care in order to provide support for people who need to access it. Although we have overall responsibility for health and social care support policy in Scotland, it is for local authorities and health and social care partnerships to ensure that social care support services are in place to provide people with the appropriate support in the right place and at the right time.

Our budget for 2025-26 sets out almost £2.2 billion of investment in social care and integration, exceeding our commitment to increase investment during this session of Parliament.

The Scottish Government has regular meetings with all our local systems. I would be comfortable if the member were to furnish me with more details of the individual so that I can consider raising the individual's case with the local system, which has responsibility both statutorily and operationally for the delivery of a care package to her.

Turnpenny-Fry Syndrome

6. Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what support is in place for people with the condition, Turnpenny-Fry syndrome. (S6O-04525)

The Minister for Public Health and Women's Health (Jenni Minto): The Scottish Government remains committed to improving the lives of people with conditions such as Turnpenny-Fry syndrome.

Genetic testing for TFS is accessed through one of Scotland's four regional clinical genetics services, which provide essential support to families after diagnosis, including genetic counselling and guidance on any further testing that may be necessary.

Fulton MacGregor: Just last week, my constituent Paul Kelly contacted me about support for his seven-year-old daughter, Harper, who I believe is the only individual in Scotland who has been diagnosed with Turnpenny-Fry syndrome. I am told that she is one of only five people to have been diagnosed with the condition in the United Kingdom. Mr Kelly advised me that, due to the rareness of the condition, the family are struggling to get any support for Harper and feel that they are being passed between different health agencies. As a result of that lack of support, including for very practical things, the family have not been able to get incontinence products from the health board.

Since being contacted by Mr Kelly and my office, NHS Lanarkshire has reached out to the family, and I hope that that contact will lead to appropriate support being put in place. However, I think that there is a bigger issue. Given that my

raising of this very rare condition for my constituent is quite possibly the first time that the condition has been raised in the chamber, what steps can the Scottish Government take to ensure that more research is carried out on Turnpenny-Fry syndrome, so that people who are diagnosed with it now and in the future can get the help that they need and are entitled to expect?

Jenni Minto: I am very sorry to hear about the difficulties that Harper's family have experienced. I assure members that the Scottish Government expects national health service boards to provide safe, effective and person-centred care, and I hope that the Kelly family are now getting appropriate support.

We know how important research is to people who are affected by ultra-rare conditions, but the fact that very small numbers of people are diagnosed with such conditions presents unique challenges in supporting clinical trials. I was pleased to attend the rare conditions disease day in March in the Parliament, when people with rare conditions made moving and powerful speeches.

We know how important research is. Scottish researchers can apply to the chief scientist office and the UK National Institute for Health and Care Research for specific projects. However, for ultra-rare conditions, collaboration across the UK and internationally is essential to enable expertise to be shared, for example with the horizon Europe partnership on rare diseases.

General Practitioner Retention

7. Colin Beattie (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on what steps it is taking to improve GP retention. (S6O-04526)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care (Neil Gray): GPs are essential to the delivery of high-quality, sustainable general practice. In November 2024, I published a plan with a suite of 20 actions to improve GP recruitment and retention. Those actions include reshaping the GP retainer scheme to provide GPs with flexible support when it is needed, expanding the Royal College of General Practitioners leadership scheme to support mid-career retention, and establishing early career fellowships to help newly qualified GPs to develop the skills for a career in general practice. In the current financial year, we have invested an additional £13.6 million to support the retention of key general practice staff.

Colin Beattie: The Royal College of General Practitioners and the British Medical Association say that some practices are freezing recruitment due to financial pressures. What steps is the

Scottish Government taking to reduce costs for GP practices to enable them to hire more GPs?

Neil Gray: I recognise the challenges that general practice faces at this time. I regularly engage with the Royal College of General Practitioners and the British Medical Association. Indeed, I met the chair of the GP committee of the BMA, Iain Morrison, last week and I met the entirety of the BMA committee this morning in order to understand its concerns.

We have invested an additional £73 million in general practice this financial year. That includes the investment of £13.6 million to support GPs to retain and recruit key staff. The increases in national insurance contributions that the United Kingdom Government introduced in its autumn statement have created additional costs for practices that impact on their ability to recruit. In November last year, I published our plan to improve GP recruitment and retention, including by retaining our newly qualified GPs in Scotland. I will continue to engage with the RCGP, the BMA and the local medical committees to ensure that we have a thriving GP community.

Tess White (North East Scotland) (Con): Udney Station GP surgery in my region is the latest casualty of the Scottish National Party's chronic mismanagement of primary care. A lack of clinical workforce, rising operational costs and population growth mean that the surgery is set to close its doors, which will leave rural communities in the lurch. This is not the first time that I have mentioned the issue. Why is the SNP Government still failing to resource GP surgeries, such as the one in Udney Station, to meet the needs of rural populations? What action will it take to address this unacceptable situation?

Neil Gray: I must challenge Tess White's characterisation. We have invested an additional £73 million in general practice. The 2025-26 budget includes more than £2.2 billion of investment in primary care, which will take our spending on wider primary care to more than 11 per cent of the total 2025-26 health and social care resource budget. There has been an increase of more than 300 in the head count of general practitioners and we have expanded the wider multidisciplinary team to approaching 5,000 staff. The characterisation that Tess White gives is just not true.

However, I recognise that challenges remain and I recognise the particular challenges in rural and island communities—I understand that especially given my background. As I said in response to Colin Beattie, I will continue to engage with the BMA and the Royal College of General Practitioners to ensure that we can support general practice in all parts of the country.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): The cabinet secretary knows that the health system is not working just now. The demand is going up and GPs' responsibilities are going up, but the funding—the share of the national health service spend—has almost halved since 2004. What is the cabinet secretary doing to make sure that GPs can be recruited to local practices because they can afford it, by reversing that trend of decline in NHS funding?

Neil Gray: I pointed Tess White to the picture of the funding that we have put forward in the budget in relation to the share of funding that goes to primary care, but I recognise Willie Rennie's concern about the demands on general practice. My vision for what general practice can do for us, which is shared by the Royal College of General Practitioners and the BMA, is to have a sustainable, preventative health service. I will continue to work with them and I will commit the resource that I am able to commit in order to see continued stabilisation, sustainability and onward growth.

Foyso Choudhury (Lothian) (Lab): The medical director of Lothian Local Medical Committee recently stated that many practices can no longer afford to take on additional GPs and that some are at risk of going bust. Given that, in November, the cabinet secretary announced an additional £13.6 million for general practice staffing, can he advise me what impact that will have on GPs' retention and, specifically, how many new GPs the Scottish Government expects that it will hire?

Neil Gray: I recognise the concerns that were expressed by the Lothian Local Medical Committee, which I met, alongside Paul McLennan in his constituency capacity, last week. We had a very good conversation about how we can sustain and improve the position for general practice.

I recognise the financial challenges, which have been exacerbated by the increased employer national insurance contributions that have been meted out by the United Kingdom Government. In spite of that, we will do all that we can to make sure that the resource is allocated to increase the number of GPs and wider practice staff and to support their role in the primary care system to deliver for the people of Scotland.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I will squeeze in question 8, but I ask for succinct questions and answers to match.

Community Health Workers (Impact on Social Determinants of Health)

8. Marie McNair (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what

assessment has been made regarding the potential impact that community link workers have on the social determinants of health. (S6O-04527)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care (Neil Gray): General practice community link workers play a critical role in addressing the social determinants of health. Social determinants such as debt, social isolation and housing can have a negative impact on people's health. In such cases, link workers provide crucial support by linking people with community resources. There is good evidence from local data and evaluations from wider research of the positive impact of community link working.

Our national review of community link workers will look to expand the existing evidence base, including by improving the consistency of the data that health and social care partnerships and link worker services collect.

Marie McNair: Community link workers in my constituency provide a vital service to the most deprived communities. However, the Labour-led West Dunbartonshire Council has cut that service despite the council receiving the highest per-head-of-population settlement of any mainland local authority. The decision has, rightly, been criticised by many, including the GMB trade union. Will the cabinet secretary join me in condemning these Labour cuts and call for them to be reversed?

Neil Gray: I, too, have concerns about the planned cuts to link workers in West Dunbartonshire and the impact that they might have on patients, particularly those on low incomes. We know that there are clear and inextricable links between poverty and ill health and between poverty and barriers to accessing healthcare.

I understand that the integration joint board met last week to confirm its 2025-26 budget and that it agreed to reduce the number of link worker posts from nine to five whole-time equivalents. I stress the principle that link worker capacity should be targeted towards the greatest patient need, and my officials will continue to work with local partners to be clear about that principle.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes portfolio questions on health and social care. Before we move to the next item of business, there will be a brief pause to allow the front-bench teams to change positions.

Points of Order

16:05

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): On a point of order, Deputy Presiding Officer. On the programming of business for the remainder of the afternoon, I note that we are about to hear a statement from the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government, which is scheduled to last for 20 minutes. I have seen the content of the statement and it amounts to little more than a party-political broadcast for the Scottish National Party. As is the case with all statements in the chamber, it requires to be heard without any interruptions or interventions. In this case, there is no capacity for questions to be put to the cabinet secretary on the content of her statement.

The statement will be followed by a debate in which Opposition members will be able to speak, but they will not be given the amount of time that would otherwise be available. Opposition members may also be intervened on in a fashion that the cabinet secretary will not face when giving her statement. That is clearly a departure from normal practice, and it puts the Opposition in this Parliament at an unfair disadvantage. I know that the arrangement has been agreed by the Parliamentary Bureau in this particular case. However, I would welcome an assurance from you, Deputy Presiding Officer—or, in due course, an assurance from bureau members—that it will not set a precedent for future business, given that it unfairly advantages members of the Government.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The matter has been agreed by the bureau, and it has also been approved by the Parliament. The other point that is worth making is that there will be no opening speaker—

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care (Neil Gray): Keep up.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Excuse me, cabinet secretary. I am answering a point of order. Thank you for respecting the chair doing that.

As I was saying, there will be no opening speaker from the Scottish Government in the debate, which I am sure that the member has also noted. I hope that that addresses the issue that has been raised and that we can move on.

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): On a point of order, Deputy Presiding Officer. For clarity, can you confirm that this is a rare, if not unprecedented, situation in that we will have a lengthy, 20-minute statement but no ability for any member of the Parliament to question the cabinet secretary on it? Even in the case of budget and

programme for government statements, there is an opportunity for members to question the person who delivers the statement. Can you confirm that this is without precedent?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I am aware that, in fact, in relation to other matters, this approach has been followed previously, but I reiterate that the matter has been approved by the Parliamentary Bureau and subsequently ratified, if you like, by the Parliament. On that basis, I am obviously required to follow what the Parliament has agreed that it wishes to see happen. I hope that we can now move to the next item of business.

Spring Statement 2025

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The next item of business is a statement by Shona Robison on the impact on Scotland of the United Kingdom Government's spring statement. The statement will then be debated, so there should be no interventions or interruptions.

I call the cabinet secretary. You have up to 20 minutes.

16:08

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government (Shona Robison): The Chancellor of the Exchequer's spring statement, which she delivered last week, seeks to balance the nation's books on the backs of disabled people. Across the UK, more than 3 million families will be left worse off by the changes to the main health element of universal credit. That is a Labour UK Government seeing existing claimants £500 worse off and new claimants £3,000 worse off. Some 150,000 carers will lose carers allowance or the universal credit care element. By its own assessment, Labour's welfare cuts will push 250,000 more people, 50,000 of whom are children, into relative poverty. That is nothing short of shameful.

During the UK general election, Anas Sarwar took to the television studios to promise that there would be no austerity under Labour, and he said that we were to read his lips. The people of Scotland will not quickly forget that this promise has been shattered, just like Labour's promises to Grangemouth, to the women against state pension inequality and to pensioners.

The cuts set out in the spring statement will also have a direct impact on Scotland's planned budget in the coming years. Initial indications are that the block grant adjustment funding that we can expect to receive for social security benefits in 2029-30 will fall by £408 million as a result of the UK Government's changes. The Fraser of Allander Institute has estimated further cuts in planned funding for the Scottish budget of £200 million in 2028-29 and £435 million in 2029-30. That is money that will not now be available to spend on public services, and it comes on top of the shortfall of more than £400 million in the public services cost of increased employer national insurance contributions.

Let me be clear: in the Scottish Government, we will strain every sinew to protect disabled people from this deplorable action from the Labour UK Government. However, let me also be clear about how difficult that will be, given the scale of it. Equally, we will continue to tackle child poverty—a job that is made ever harder by the UK Government's decisions. We will do that in the

face of Labour's austerity on welfare. We as a Parliament must start to plan for and reckon with the impact that those cuts from Labour will have on the sustainability of public finances. As such, I will update Parliament on how we are engaging with the UK Government on its spending review, which will report on 11 June.

In her statement last week, the chancellor confirmed that £4.8 billion would be cut from welfare benefits by 2029-30. Those cuts have been roundly condemned, and the UK Government's own impact assessments show that they could push a quarter of a million people, including 50,000 children, into relative poverty.

The line that is being pushed by Labour following the publication of the UK Government's own assessment is that it did not account for other actions that it is taking, including on free school meals. I will be generous of spirit and take Labour at its word, so perhaps Labour members who contribute to today's debate can outline when the Labour Government will publish a full impact assessment that does account for the actions that it says are not currently factored in. Given that that is the Labour Government's main excuse, I am sure that it will be keen to publish the evidence as soon as possible.

In her statement, the chancellor further announced that the rate of day-to-day public spending growth would reduce from 2026-27. Economic growth projections have been downgraded from 2 per cent to 1 per cent this year by the Office for Budget Responsibility, and it has further sounded warnings about the high levels of uncertainty that the domestic and global economies still face.

The full details of the chancellor's spending plans will be revealed in the UK spending review, which will report in June. We know that UK departments have been asked to plan for either a flat cash or 2 per cent reduction in budget. Either way, it will be a real-terms cut.

One area of the chancellor's statement that I do welcome is plans to increase defence spending. Since the fall of the Berlin wall more than 30 years ago, we have seen what can be described as a peace dividend. Following Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine and the shift from the United States, it is clear that this period is over.

That will necessitate, as it will across Europe, sustained investment in building defence infrastructure and in supporting defence personnel. I believe that, to sustain that and other vital public investment, the UK Government should seriously examine the role of wealth taxation to support such endeavours. Without exploring wealth taxation, there remains a danger that funding for necessary defence capabilities will

come from yet further cuts to social security, public services or investment in other vital infrastructure. It could not be clearer that the UK Government should ditch Trident and instead invest in deepening conventional defence capabilities.

The chancellor's decisions in the spring statement will impact on the Scottish economy. Current Scottish indicators are positive: our economy grew by 0.5 per cent in the three months to January, and since 2007, gross domestic product per person in Scotland has grown by 10.3 per cent, in comparison with 6 per cent in the UK. Productivity has also grown, at an average rate of 1.1 per cent per year in Scotland in comparison with the UK average of 0.4 per cent. We also have lower unemployment than in the UK, with a rate of 3.8 per cent in February in comparison with 4.7 per cent for the UK.

We are using this year's Scottish budget to invest in the foundations of our economy, such as housing, transport and digital connectivity, and in delivering critical infrastructure for a fair, green and growing economy. We are already ahead of England and Wales in building affordable housing. On average, between 2007-08 and 2023-24, affordable housing supply in Scotland has been 73 per cent higher per 10,000 population than in Wales, and 47 per cent higher per 10,000 population than in England.

However, our economy will be affected by the decisions of the UK Government, including the rise in employer national insurance contributions, which is already affecting business confidence and jobs. We also recognise the global pressures that the chancellor has spoken about, with President Trump further increasing tariffs today and the risk to our world-class exports from further trade barriers. The US is Scotland's second-largest export market for goods and services after the European Union, and it is a key market for important sectors such as food and drink, engineering and advanced manufacturing. All are potentially at risk from an increase in tariffs on the UK. The Scottish Government will analyse the potential impacts on the Scottish economy of any tariff measures that are imposed.

However, what the chancellor does not address is the damage that is caused by Brexit, which has reduced the UK's GDP by 2.5 per cent. In Scotland, that equates to a cut in public revenues of approximately £2.3 billion in 2023. That is more than £2 billion in annual public revenues lost as a result of a Brexit that the people of Scotland did not vote for. That is funding that could be making our NHS stronger, enhancing our schools, and supporting Scottish businesses to find their next markets and secure high-quality jobs.

Brexit red tape has hit Scotland's trade with our largest international export market, the EU. It is

estimated that in 2023, UK goods exports to the EU were 17 per cent lower, and goods imports from the EU were 23 per cent lower, as a result of Brexit. With a period of uncertainty in trade expected as a result of President Trump's tariff regime, it could not be clearer that—for the sake of public finances, if nothing else—we should rejoin the EU. Being a member of the European single market would boost trade and give young people more opportunities, and it would improve the public finances dramatically.

The chancellor staked her plans for investment on boosting growth, but if she fails to deliver, we will inevitably see less money for investment in public services and infrastructure. I am particularly concerned about the impacts on rural communities and businesses. I called on the chancellor to pause her widely criticised changes to inheritance tax for farmers, including tenant farmers, and undertake full impact assessments in order to understand what those changes will mean for family farming businesses and the communities that they serve. However, she has failed to do that.

We called on the chancellor to use the spring statement to prioritise investment in public services and infrastructure. I wrote to her, making it clear that the additional funding in last year's budget, welcome as it was, did not make up for 14 years of underinvestment, and that investment needed to be sustained.

Unlike the UK Government, the Scottish Government must balance our budget every year. That is what we will do, as we have done for every one of the past 17 years, but it will be tough. Members are well aware of the impacts of the UK Government's increase in employer national insurance contributions. We have estimated that that will add more than £700 million to the cost of delivering public services—for the national health service, schools, local government, universities, social care providers and a wide range of third sector organisations.

I called on the chancellor to use her statement to announce that she will fully fund additional costs arising from the change to national insurance contributions. The chancellor has failed to do that, and—incredibly—she has still not confirmed the funding that we can expect. As members will recall, the current indication is that we will have more than £400 million short of what is needed, and we will need to wait until May—when we will be already two months into the financial year—to see the final numbers. Frankly, that is not good enough, and it puts devolved Governments at the back of the queue.

I stand by the commitment that I made earlier this year to funding 60 per cent of the direct employer costs for Government portfolios and to

provide an additional £144 million for local government. However, I cannot go any further than that without additional funding from the Treasury.

I am also concerned about the impact on commissioned services, third sector organisations and charities. We have consistently called on the UK Government to protect them from the impact of the increase, but it has completely ignored the needs of social care providers, general practitioners, dentists, childcare providers and universities—to name but a few—which will bear the full brunt of the UK tax increase.

The constraints that our budget will face in future years mean that it is essential that we continue our work to reform public services, improve productivity and ensure that every pound is spent in line with our priorities. The work that the Minister for Public Finance is taking forward will reduce the costs of service delivery and reduce long-term demand through investment in prevention.

Through programmes on the public sector estate, collaborative procurement and the use of digital, we are making significant savings for the public purse. We have secured cost-avoiding and cash-releasing savings that are expected to have reached up to £280 million over the past two years. To accelerate reform, this year's budget has up to £30 million for invest-to-save measures. The savings that we will make from these programmes will help us have choices in future years to deal with the cuts to our funding that we know are coming down the track.

I am committed to ensuring that our public finances are on a sustainable footing. I will set out our medium-term financial strategy and the fiscal sustainability delivery plan before the summer recess, which will set out the measures that we are taking to secure fiscal sustainability. Those will be accompanied by updated economic and fiscal forecasts from the Scottish Fiscal Commission, which will take into account the latest economic and fiscal outlook from the OBR.

The Labour UK Government's planned welfare reforms have caused a great deal of alarm, particularly as sick and disabled people will bear the brunt of the cost savings. For our Government, with its driving ambition to eradicate child poverty, that is absolutely unacceptable. The cuts that were announced last week appear to be driven by a desire to save money and to seek to balance the books on the backs of disabled people.

It is concerning that the Resolution Foundation warned that the full scale of welfare cuts is far greater than the net £4.8 billion in savings. It stated that

“cuts to ill-health, disability and carer's benefits”

will

“rise to £8.1 billion in 2029-30, and will continue to grow over time.”

Those changes were announced without any consultation with this Government—nor, for that matter, the public at the general election—despite the fact that they will impact on our devolved benefits and our budget. The planned changes to the eligibility criteria for the personal independence payment in England and Wales will impact on the funding that we receive from the Treasury for the adult disability payment in Scotland.

This year, we are already spending £1.3 billion more on social security benefits and payments than we receive in funding from the UK Treasury, and we are also already spending £210 million on measures to mitigate UK Government welfare policies, which now include the cut to the winter fuel payment. I again called on the chancellor to abolish the two-child limit for universal credit, but she again failed to do so. Instead, she has taken action that will put more children into poverty, not lift them out of it. Let me be clear: the Scottish Government will effectively scrap the two-child cap in 2026. That work is under way.

The priority that we have given to social security in Scotland reflects the priority that we have placed on ending child poverty. Figures that were published last week showed that the proportion of children living in relative poverty has reduced in Scotland and that the 2023-24 rate is now the lowest that it has been since 2014-15. The proportion of children living in absolute poverty has also fallen, with the annual figure at its lowest in 30 years. It is a shame that the Labour UK Government does not share that priority.

I am proud of the social security system that we have created and of the difference that it has made by providing money directly to people who need it most. However, I am aware that we face an increasingly challenging situation as we take stock of the impact of the UK Government's benefit cuts. It is important that we work together as a Parliament to eliminate the scourge of child poverty but ensure that we have a sustainable social security system.

Last Friday, Professor Ruth Patrick of the University of York and the London School of Economics published a report entitled “Cuts can't fix child poverty: it's time for a new approach”. The report recognises that the key factor in the reduction in child poverty in Scotland has been the Scottish child payment, and it also highlights feedback from families in receipt of the payment. For example, Lisa said:

“The Scottish child payment ... alleviates some of the financial pressure and gives me and my son more

breathing space to enjoy life. The Scottish child payment has been a ‘game changer’ for me.”

The expert report concludes:

“Our new analysis shows that were the UK Government to follow the Scottish Government's example and make an equivalent per-child investment in social security, the rate of child poverty could drop by 700,000 overnight. Talk of tough choices and fiscal responsibility puts balancing the books ahead of supporting children, who are this nation's future.”

I agree.

The funding that we have to take forward our work on child poverty, as well as our other priorities, will be determined by the UK spending review, which reports in June and will set out funding from 2026 onwards. We know from last week's spring statement that the public spending outlook for the period of that spending review, in which resource funding will run up to 2028-29, has been cut from what was previously planned. For capital spending, it will set out budgets to 2029-30, and although the chancellor said last week that she intends to protect capital investment, we still need to see what that will mean for the funding that we have for our infrastructure priorities.

The Scottish Government has been clear that, to support our efforts to deliver economic growth, we need the UK Government to recognise and respect devolved competencies. After all, where we can support growth here in Scotland will contribute to the chancellor's growth ambitions.

Frankly, we need the investment from the UK Government to match the rhetoric. For example, the UK Government must make a positive decision on awarding the Acorn project and the Scottish cluster as a priority. It is estimated that the Scottish cluster could contribute £17 billion to UK gross value added to 2050, and it is a clear opportunity for the UK Government to work with us to stimulate that investment.

I have been frank with Parliament about the impacts of the chancellor's spring statement on our economy and on public finances. I will be meeting the Chief Secretary to the Treasury and the Secretary of State for Scotland later this month to set out this Government's position and the importance of ensuring that the UK spending review delivers for the priorities and needs of Scotland.

We do not yet have full clarity ourselves on all the detail, and much of the detail for future planning will be contingent on the UK Government's spending review in June. It is now vital that the UK Government engages with us fully as it looks to conclude the spending review. We want to seize the opportunities that it presents for Scotland and support the delivery of economic growth, which is crucial to the chancellor's plans.

It is clear from the spring statement that the outcome will be very challenging for our public services. This Government will always focus on doing what is best for the people of Scotland, and, as we get to the end of May, we will set out the detail of that in the medium-term financial strategy and the fiscal sustainability delivery plan.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes the statement.

Spring Statement 2025 (Impact on Scotland)

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The next item of business is a debate on the impact of the United Kingdom Government's spring statement on Scotland.

16:29

Craig Hoy (South Scotland) (Con): Yesterday was April fools' day, but it was no joke for ordinary hard-working Scottish families and businesses. In fact, it laid bare the impact of decisions taken by the Scottish National Party and Labour Governments—two left-wing Governments that are committed to unsustainable tax, spending and borrowing. Labour and the SNP now have serious questions to answer about their fiscal plans.

In delivering the 20-minute statement, the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government was, rightly, able to criticise the Labour Government. However, by using that mechanism, rather than by opening this debate, she has dodged such scrutiny herself. That is more evidence that the Scottish Government is unwilling to answer serious questions about the public finances on its watch and is incapable of doing so.

The Minister for Public Finance (Ivan McKee): Will the member take an intervention?

Craig Hoy: It is a bit of a cheek to ask for an intervention 20 seconds into my speech when the cabinet secretary would not take an intervention for 20 minutes. I will take an intervention when I am further into my speech.

Before I turn to the SNP Government's choices and the choice that it faces, I need to start with the spring statement, which was another broken promise, because it was the second major fiscal event in a matter of months. I will start with the positives, for there were some, if not many. We welcome the increase in defence spending. To those who question its necessity, I say that global security underpins economic security, as it prevents the sort of economic shocks that we saw when Russian boots landed on the soil in Ukraine, which here at home meant a £1,000 increase in energy costs for every British adult.

We also welcome and recognise the need for reform of the planning laws in England, which could drive much-needed growth, as the Office for Budget Responsibility says. However, how quickly will that happen? Will the same approach follow in Scotland, where, for example, recent data has shown that the number of new-build starts is now running at its lowest for a decade?

Ivan McKee: Does the member recognise that, over the past five years, the number of housing units being given planning permission has been 30 per cent higher than the number of housing starts? Stuff is coming through the system.

Craig Hoy: It is coming through the system very slowly, and there are supply and labour issues that the SNP has not addressed through its skills agenda to make sure that we can get houses built.

I give a cautious welcome to public sector reforms but, to deliver those reforms, UK ministers must develop a backbone in the face of their union paymasters, and SNP ministers must be bolder in their approach. I listened to the cabinet secretary say that she welcomes the cost savings that the Scottish Government is going to make. I noticed that it is a 0.2 per cent saving over this year. A fifth of 1 per cent is hardly something to boast about.

Beyond the two or three items that we can welcome, the Chancellor of the Exchequer's emergency budget was a grim moment for the country, because it is now clear that Labour's political choices are making Britain worse off. Projected growth for 2025 halved from 2 per cent to 1 per cent. Inflation and unemployment are both set to increase. The tax burden is set to hit a historic post-war high of 37.7 per cent of gross domestic product. Just yesterday, businesses, charities and local government bodies, including the Scottish Government, were hit by Labour's cynical jobs tax, as well as the change in thresholds, which is impacting many small businesses.

Although Rachel Reeves will blame anyone and everyone, the fact is that that economic misery is a direct result of her political choices—her choice to roll over to the unions on public sector pay, her choice to change the rules on borrowing and her choice to undermine growth and investment by breaking Labour's pledge not to increase national insurance. I agree with Labour that the benefits bill in the UK is too high, and that applies even more so in Scotland. Any Government that prioritises benefits over growth is living in a parallel universe if it believes that that is anything other than unsustainable.

We need to question why Labour is doing this now. The action is not being taken because the Labour Government has had some Damascene conversion to small-state conservatism. It does so out of desperation and because Rachel Reeves has run out of the fiscal headroom that she thought she had only six months ago. I warn the UK Government that the Office for Budget Responsibility still notes that the spring statement has only a 50 per cent chance of restoring that headroom, because borrowing is soaring, debt is becoming more expensive to service and the

revenues and savings that Labour expects are proving stubbornly difficult to achieve.

Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): Will the member give way on that point?

Craig Hoy: Unless I can get the time back, I do not have time. I apologise.

High tax is now the biggest concern for businesses in Scotland. Analysis of the latest business insights and conditions survey found that 18 per cent of firms identified taxation as their main concern for April, followed by concerns about falling demand. As the cabinet secretary alluded to, tariffs will no doubt be weighing heavily on people's minds.

In discussions with the Scottish Government, we in the Scottish Conservatives advocated for lower taxes to stimulate growth. The Confederation of British Industry's Rain Newton-Smith agrees—she has warned that uncompetitive tax policies, including Scotland's income tax gap with the rest of the UK, are a “handbrake on growth”.

From April, anyone who earns more than £30,318 will pay more income tax in Scotland than they would in the rest of the UK, which equates to £1,527 more in tax for someone on a £50,000 salary and £3,331 more for someone on a £100,000 salary. If the UK's financial outlook is bleak as a result of the spring statement, Scotland's outlook under the SNP is grounds for despair.

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Economy and Gaelic (Kate Forbes): Oh, come on.

Craig Hoy: The Deputy First Minister is shaking her head. She is, in part, an architect of the £800 million black hole in the Scottish budget, which is a result of the Scottish economy not growing in line with the UK economy.

The cabinet secretary's statement proves that the SNP Government is simply not serious about growing the economy and is certainly not committed to cutting the soaring benefits bill. Getting people off benefits and back into work is good for growth, society, individuals and their families. Fixing Scotland's broken benefits system is not just desirable but essential, which the Scottish Government does not seem to recognise.

Michael Marra: Will the member give way?

Craig Hoy: I do not have time.

The Institute for Fiscal Studies has warned that the Scottish Government will find it “almost impossible” to avoid cuts to other services if it chooses not to follow UK welfare reforms. In four years' time, the Scottish Government will be spending £2 billion more on benefits than it receives through the block grant. The choice that

ministers face is crystal clear—unless they reform benefits, they will be forced to cut front-line services and increase taxes. They will not be able to do everything.

Last week, the Scottish Government, despite all its extra spending, missed its own legally binding child poverty reduction targets. Ultimately, the best solutions to eradicating child poverty and the wider problem of poverty are: getting the sick well and giving them a roof over their head; giving everyone, regardless of their background, the education and skills that they need; and generating the all-important economic growth that creates jobs and allows the Government to give a fair deal to all.

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government (Shona Robison): Why are you saying that when child poverty has gone down?

Craig Hoy: The cabinet secretary can chunter as much as she likes, but that is the ultimate long-term sustainable solution—the only solution—to resolving child poverty in Scotland today.

I close on a couple of very relevant issues that emerged from the spring statement. OBR data has revealed that tax receipts from North Sea oil and gas will slump from £5.4 billion to just £2.3 billion within five years. I echo the cabinet secretary's call for progress on the Acorn project, but the sudden drop that is forecast in oil and gas receipts—do not forget that such receipts pay for public services—is a result of the political mood music that the SNP and Labour Governments have set.

I welcome the focus and commentary of the Scottish Government and the UK Government on public sector reform and efficiency, but do they really have the appetite for the dramatic and disruptive reforms that are required to drive the real savings that we need?

To close on the cost pressures that people in the real world, beyond the Holyrood bubble, are facing, the SNP Government's chronic underfunding of local authorities means that Scots now face eye-watering, inflation-busting council tax and water bill rises. Households face an energy price cap rise, despite Labour's promise—which has been broken—to cut fuel bills by £300.

Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP): Will the member take an intervention?

Craig Hoy: I will not, because I am almost over time.

Keir Starmer's national insurance hike, which commenced yesterday, will mean higher prices for customers and job cuts or pay freezes for employees.

Scots are now at a breaking point. They simply cannot absorb the quadruple whammy of extra

costs that were brought forward yesterday. In the 1970s, Labour squeezed the rich until the pips squeaked; 50 years on, Labour and the SNP are doing the same thing to lower and middle-income Scots.

16:39

Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): I greatly welcome the opportunity to discuss the UK Government's spring statement and the broad economic and political context, which is the subject of considerable public debate across the country today.

The country faces the real threat of a tariff war, the potential consequences of which can scarcely be overstated for Scotland and the rest of the UK. As the *New York Times* said yesterday,

"President Trump is trying to rewire the global economic order".

Michelle Thomson (Falkirk East) (SNP): [Made a request to intervene.]

Michael Marra: No, thank you, madam. I will make some progress, because I am a matter of seconds into my speech.

No economy, regardless of its size—major, medium or small—is immune to the challenges that are presented by this convulsion. Investor confidence in the debt markets is greatly impacted by this exogenous volatility.

Almost all of us in the Parliament—with some minor exceptions—want much stronger economic growth. The SNP Government has recognised in broad terms that our ability to extract further revenue from our existing tax base is limited. The real question is: what is our strategy in Scotland to grow our median wage and our economic productivity?

Last month, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development warned that tariffs will take a significant toll on the global economy, as it cut its growth forecasts for a dozen G20 countries. At the same time, the OBR has upgraded its medium-term growth forecasts for the UK, as the UK Government seeks to drive the economy and make strategic investments to modernise our infrastructure and increase productivity.

Michelle Thomson: I accept and concur with the warnings about tariffs, but, given how frequently tariffs have been talked about over recent weeks, was the member as surprised as I was that there was no strategic consideration or thinking in the spring statement about their potential impact?

Michael Marra: I fundamentally reject that conjecture that there is no strategic position. The Prime Minister is involved, day and night, in trying

to deliver the best possible deal for the whole of the UK, and he is putting the interests of the country first in that regard. We must ensure that our economy can deliver the kind of public services that we need, and the UK Government is fully involved in conversations to ensure that we can get the best deal.

The Chancellor of the Exchequer's long-term decisions have led to the UK's growth forecasts being revised up for next year, for the year after that and for the remainder of the forecast period. The chancellor's decision to invest for the long term is designed to secure not only our economy but our public services for the long term. To put it bluntly, she is engaged in a rescue mission for UK public services, given the inheritance that she received just nine months ago.

Craig Hoy: Will the member take an intervention on that point?

Michael Marra: No, thank you, sir.

Rachel Reeves inherited an economy in which there had been no growth for 14 years and in which there was an in-year fiscal black hole, with the national reserve having been spent three times over in the first quarter. Public services were in a state of collapse and in need of immediate investment. That was the context in which difficult decisions were made.

We cannot return to soaring interest rates, which the Tories inflicted on us. Instead, under the Labour Government, there have been three interest rate cuts, providing vital help to people with mortgages. Any return to the chaos of vast unfunded and unfundable spending commitments—whether on services or on tax cuts; I am talking about both sides of the aisle—would lead to rapidly spiralling borrowing costs. As a highly indebted country as a result of 14 years of Tory Government, with national debt running at 100 per cent of gross domestic product, we do not have the fiscal space to contemplate that. The room for fiscal manoeuvre is extremely constrained, so the UK Government is facing up to the fiscal realities in front of it.

The cabinet secretary's statement was replete with spending demands and rejections of revenue-raising measures. Her statement has to be considered in that context. Ever more borrowing is not available, and nor is it affordable.

In an increasingly volatile world, it is absolutely right that the chancellor has increased defence spending by £2.2 billion this year. That will result in more jobs, more investment and more security for Scotland if a genuine partnership can be built between the Scottish and UK Governments to deliver that. The SNP claims to welcome the increase in defence spending, but it cannot do so with any credibility when it has opposed every one

of the chancellor's revenue-raising measures. National security requires economic security. We cannot have one without the other. Countries that cannot afford to fight wars do not win wars, and they might struggle to avoid them. Labour will always put our national security first. Our economic security underpins our national security.

In the spring statement, there was a significant amount of focus on the changes to social security, and rightly so. The changes are significant and challenging for everyone across the country, particularly for those who rely on the support of the state. We have to be absolutely clear that a situation in which one in eight young people across the UK do not go into work or training when they leave school but, instead, rely on out-of-work benefits results in a huge loss to their personal potential, as well as a loss to our communities and our economy. The difficult fact for those of us in this Parliament is that that figure is even higher in Scotland.

The Scottish Fiscal Commission highlighted in its December 2024 forecasts the fiscal challenges and choices that are presented by Scotland's growing social security bill. Every pound that is spent on social security over and above the block grant is a pound that is not spent on schools, hospitals and roads. Many people require vital support. We in the Labour Party are proud supporters of the Scottish child payment, which has been a great success. The state must be there for those who require it. However, we have to ensure that as few people as possible require that support, and our public services must be shaped in the direction of achieving that aim.

The UK has committed £1 billion up front to support people into work. Of course, today—this goes to the heart of the question about poverty—is day 2 of a new national living wage, which sees 200,000 Scots get a much-needed pay rise and an additional £1,400 in people's pockets, with the lowest-paid getting an annual pay boost of up to £2,500. The UK Labour Government is also already getting on with fixing the national health service in England, and it will get more people into work via that route. It is already delivering on the promise of 2 million more appointments and is introducing structural reforms to make the system work better.

Meanwhile, in Scotland, we have a mental health crisis among young people and a child and adolescent mental health service that exists in name only. NHS Tayside reports that come directly from the management speak of waits of 13 to 14 years for young people to be seen by CAMHS. There is a direct relationship between that kind of performance on the part of our public services and the number of young people who cannot access work. They require public services

that work in order to help them. The SNP might boast about meeting 18-week treatment time targets, but that is not the reality for young people in my region, with a service that is not serving them all.

I look forward to hearing the various contributions in the debate.

16:46

Lorna Slater (Lothian) (Green): The world has changed. There is no question but that the re-election of wannabe dictator Donald Trump has broken the backbone of the world order that, rightly or wrongly, we have taken as read for three generations. There is no question but that Europe, and therefore the UK, faces increased risks.

Craig Hoy: Does the member think that this inflammatory language will help or hinder the UK and Scottish Governments' attempts to reach a deal on tariffs with the United States of America?

Lorna Slater: Anyone who thinks that Donald Trump is their friend or adheres to trade deals has not been paying attention to the news. Donald Trump is bad news for Scotland and for every country he deals with.

As I was saying, there is no question but that Europe, and therefore the UK, faces increased risks now that America has reneged on its security commitments and appears to prefer to appease authoritarian Russia than defend democratic Ukraine. Unlike my colleague across the chamber, I will call an authoritarian regime an authoritarian regime, and—make no mistake—that is the direction in which Donald Trump is taking America.

There is no question but that the UK needs to re-evaluate its relationship with Europe and with America and no doubt about what commitment to the security of Europe the UK should be making. I can only hope that a security rapprochement with Europe will be the first step in the UK coming to its senses and rejoining the European Union.

Having recognised the need to adapt to this new world, the UK Labour Government has options and choices. The UK is a wealthy country. The UK spends a lot of money on defence and security, including the abomination of the so-called nuclear deterrent, which soaks up money towards a hypothetical scenario in which, somehow, we are okay with threatening civilians with extermination while depriving ourselves of funds that are needed to address urgent issues such as protection from cybercrime and real support for Ukraine.

The Labour Government could have chosen to reallocate or reprioritise defence spending. It could have chosen to stop the massive subsidies for fossil fuel companies and high-polluting industries such as aviation. It could have chosen to consider

raising new revenue from the very wealthiest through land value taxes, carbon taxes, taxes on private jets and other wealth taxes. However, the Labour Government did none of those things. It was founded on the need to tackle gross inequality through the redistribution of wealth, but it has betrayed its roots and has come after the sick and the disabled.

Statutory sick pay in the UK remains among the lowest in Europe, at just £116.75 a week. That is inadequate and leads to employees being forced to choose between working while unwell or suffering financial hardship. Neither scenario supports people to get well. The Labour Government should absolutely reform support for people who are ill and disabled, but it should do so in such a way that they can get well, so that they are not forced out of work by an inflexible and punitive system in which their confidence and skills decline nor forced to continue to work without support while ill such that their condition continues to decline.

Callously cutting money for the sick and disabled without compassionate reform is horrifying. Changes to the assessment for personal independence payments mean that people will qualify for the daily living payment only if they face major barriers to performing everyday tasks, meaning that people who require assistance to wash, or supervision, or prompting to go to the toilet will no longer be eligible. The Resolution Foundation has said that the current Parliament will be among the worst on record for living standards, and all members will know from their constituents that the cost of living is at the top of their concerns. Yet, we have a Labour Government that is choosing to turn the screws on the sick and disabled instead of the super-wealthy.

When the UK decides to cut spending, Scotland's budget gets cut. Every member of the chamber should be angry about that—not just the fact that Scotland cannot fully control its budget, but the fact that we cannot plan ahead and the fact that Scottish budgets that we vote into law can be blown away like dust in the wind by a change of UK Government policy. Day after day in the chamber we hear about the challenges of tight budgets, and the spring statement turns the screws on Scotland as well.

Michael Marra: Will the member take an intervention?

Lorna Slater: Very briefly.

Michael Marra: Does the member recognise that the budget for this financial year will go up as a result of the spring statement?

Lorna Slater: I would like to see the numbers on that, because we have heard of real-terms cuts from the minister today.

The UK Government has made choices. It could invest in the green economy, tax great wealth and remove subsidies for polluters. Instead of doing those things, Rachel Reeves has chosen to make life harder for those who are already struggling. Next year, Scotland's electorate will have its chance to decide whether it approves of that choice. I hope that, someday soon, it will have its chance to decide whether it wants those decisions to be made by Westminster at all.

16:52

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): I echo the remarks of the Conservative members at the start of the debate. Leading with a Government statement without intervention or questions and then going straight into a debate is a very odd way of going about the business of the Parliament. I hope that ministers, as well as business managers, will reflect on that.

The spring statement was a missed opportunity to deliver the change that communities across Scotland are crying out for. At last year's general election, the people made their wishes very clear. Their overwhelming rejection of both the Conservative Party and the Scottish National Party was a demand for something better. The chancellor claims to be focused on economic growth. In that case, she should have supported businesses by scrapping the planned hike on employer national insurance contributions, which is, in effect, a tax on jobs and employment.

Instead, the Government is inflicting yet more pain on small businesses just when they need help the most: rising costs, business closures and economic stagnation—Labour's choices will only make things worse. That means more boarded-up shops on our high streets, fewer jobs and struggling local economies. The spring statement was also a hammer blow to our general practitioner surgeries, pharmacies and care homes, all of which will see their tax burdens rise.

Michael Marra: Does the member recognise that the UK Labour Government put in place a series of reliefs for small businesses on high streets across the UK as a quid pro quo for the national insurance increases? It just was not replicated by the SNP Government.

Alex Cole-Hamilton: I recognise that certain efforts were made to mitigate the impact, but they are not universal. There will be businesses that go to the wall and GP surgeries that have to shed staff or close their lists as a result. The Liberal Democrats have repeatedly warned of the damage that will be caused by the rise in employer national insurance contributions. We have fought to exempt health and care providers, which are exactly the kind of businesses that I am talking

about, from that unfair tax, but the Labour Government is just not listening.

It did not have to be that way. The Government could have raised the money by listening to the Liberal Democrats and asking the big banks to pay their fair share, reversing the tax cuts that were handed down by the Tories, and asking social media giants to pay more. I am concerned that, in the face of the expected announcement on tariffs, we might see a decreasing amount of digital service tax being retrieved from those big social media giants. Online gambling companies should also be asked to pay their fair share.

Instead, ordinary people and small businesses are being squeezed still further. By refusing to scrap the cruel family farm tax, the Government has also made it clear that it does not understand rural communities.

I do welcome the Government's announcement on defence spending, however. The Liberal Democrats have consistently urged the Government to commit to spending 2.5 per cent of GDP on defence, with a clear plan to reach 3 per cent as soon as possible. We are optimistic that that investment will support jobs in Scotland, and it is imperative to our national security and the security of Ukraine.

There is still much more to do to rebuild our economic and defence ties with our European allies. We need a new security alliance with Europe. That becomes even more urgent in the light of the unpredictability of the Trump Administration, which we are seeing again today, as the world awaits news of his tariffs—an event in the White House rose garden at 9 pm tonight that businesses are dreading.

A straightforward way to strengthen our economy is to repair ties with Europe through a youth mobility scheme that allows Scots to live, work and study across Europe, while welcoming young people here in return. That is a win-win, and I am frustrated that the Labour Government has so far refused to properly act on that. Strengthening our security and economic ties with Europe is more important than ever.

The SNP Government has always been very shaky about acknowledging Scotland's important role in defence, but Liberal Democrats are clear that Scotland makes a vital contribution to the security of the UK and Europe. We should be proud of that contribution, whether it is in our dockyards or in our personnel.

The Scottish Government also has a major role to play in growing Scotland's economy, but it is failing to grasp the opportunities that lie before us. That includes unlocking the full potential of our renewables sector and ensuring that people get the healthcare that they need to return to work. I

remind members of the tens of thousands of Scots who are desperate to go back to work but cannot do so because they do not have a care pathway for the long Covid that they still endure. Right now, people are trapped on waiting lists and are unable to get on with their lives and contribute to the economy. That is why my party fought so hard to secure more funding for key skills programmes in this year's budget.

We know that fixing the broken care system, freeing up hospital capacity and getting people seen faster are essential to Scotland's economic recovery. That is why we have secured millions of pounds more to tackle long Covid and to get care pathways in place for the tens of thousands of Scots who are suffering from an illness that has limited their ability to work.

Liberal Democrats believe in building the foundations of an economy that can thrive for generations to come. That means supporting businesses, investing in people and ensuring that no community is left behind.

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

16:57

Kevin Stewart (Aberdeen Central) (SNP): Spring is supposed to be the time when we see the first green shoots of hope after a long winter of despair, but there were no green shoots in the UK Government's spring statement this year. Instead, the Labour chancellor announced a new round of broken promises—austerity mark 2—and a budget that is balanced on the backs of the most vulnerable for the benefit of the richest.

We were promised change, but the only change that there has been is change for the worse. The spring statement was a reverse Robin Hood budget: taking from the poor to give to the rich. The Resolution Foundation reports that, by 2030, the poorest 10 per cent in society will be worse off under this Labour Government than they were under the Tories, while the richest 10 per cent will do even better under Labour than they ever did under the Tories. Thatcher famously said that her greatest achievement was the new Labour Party, and perhaps Liz Truss is grinning to see this Labour Government outdoing the previous Tory regime in trampling poor, ill and disabled people underfoot.

Let us face facts. The impact of Labour's cuts will be devastating. The UK Government's own analysis shows that 3.2 million families will be financially worse off, with an average loss of £1,720 per year. The same analysis from the Labour Government reveals that its welfare cuts will push 250,000 people, including 50,000

children, into poverty, with the poorest households £500 a year worse off.

Although the poor will be worse off due to the spring statement, it is disabled people that Labour has singled out for special punishment. With the stroke of a pen, the Labour UK Government has subjected disabled folk to the most despicable of cuts. The UK Government justifies those brutal cuts because, in its view, too many young people are faking poor mental health. That view flies in the face of independent mental health research.

This year, the UK ranks bottom in the world for mental health, below war-torn Afghanistan. Although the UK is very much the worst, it is not unique, with a decline in mental health seen in all countries. The average mental health score in English-speaking countries has declined from 90 in 2019 to only 60 today, with young people suffering most.

Globally, in 2019, 19 per cent of young people struggled with poor mental health. Today, the figure is 46 per cent, and 55 per cent in the UK. Poor mental health among our young people therefore is a problem.

Maybe benefits need to be reformed. However, rather than reforming PIP for the better, Liz Kendall chose simply to restrict PIP to people who score at least four points in a single category—a move that will consign thousands of disabled people to economic destitution.

Across the PIP scale, to get four points, someone must require physical assistance to do a task. However, needing supervision with a task gives only two points. As Lorna Slater said, it will be those who require supervision with a day-to-day task who will bear the brunt of the changes. As it stands, a disabled person who needs supervision to wash, dress, eat, toilet and understand complex decisions would be entitled to the highest level of PIP. Soon, they will receive nothing—not a single penny piece. The UK Government says that they will be fine, if they get a job—but we are yet to hear where all those jobs for people who cannot wash, dress and toilet themselves are.

The UK Government is also, of course, doing its level best to destroy the economy and ensure that there are fewer jobs by imposing a brutal national insurance jobs tax.

For those who are caught between the UK Government's brutal cuts and economic mismanagement, we in Scotland must strive to remain a beacon of hope in the sea of British despair. However, the impact of Labour's spring statement will also hit home in the Scottish budget, with the OBR predicting a cumulative reduction in Barnett consequential of £1 billion over the next five years. Likewise, although a decade ago we

were promised that we would be £1,400 better off together, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation concludes that the average family will be £1,400 worse off by 2030.

Although we will always strive to be that beacon of progress and hope, as the waves of despair from this Labour UK Government's actions crash against us—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You need to conclude.

Kevin Stewart: —it is more clear than ever that Scotland must unshackle herself from the UK's sinking ship and chart her own course as an independent nation.

17:04

Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Last summer, many of us warned about the economic damage that would ensue if Labour was to form the next United Kingdom Government. Since Labour came into power in July, we have seen many of those fears become reality. Inflation is increasing once again, and UK growth stalled in the second part of 2024. The latest forecasts predict that, in 2025, growth will be half of what was previously predicted.

Although that is bad news for the British economy, none of it is too surprising. The UK Labour Government is a high-tax, high-regulation Government that is undermining the confidence of business across the whole of the UK, but businesses here in Scotland also have to deal with a second high-tax agenda—that of the SNP Government.

Labour's spring statement was, in effect, an emergency budget that needed to signal a change of direction to get the economy back on track, but that did not happen. With the prospect of tariffs coming, which we have known about for some time, we would have hoped that there would have been improvements to provide certainty. Once again, however, such certainty is lacking.

In the light of the continued uncertainty in Europe, Labour's decision to increase defence spending can be welcomed, but from the point of view of growth and long-term investment in our economy, the spring statement failed to deliver the clarity and certainty that are needed for taxpayers and businesses across Scotland.

Although the Labour Government says that growth is its number 1 priority, that was not reflected at all in the spring statement. The increase in national insurance contributions alone will have a significant impact on staffing decisions for businesses across the country. Even though that increase will not come into effect until later this week, many companies have already frozen

recruitment and increased their prices, and we know that that tax increase will cost jobs and slow economic growth. The only question is by how much it will do so.

However, it is not just the jobs tax that is creating uncertainty in the labour market. The Government is also pressing ahead with its workers' rights reforms, which are opposed by employers of every shape and size the length and breadth of the country. Not content with charging companies more for the privilege of employing people, the Labour Government also wants to tie up employers with red tape. The Federation of Small Businesses has said that the reforms are

"rushed ... clumsy, chaotic and poorly planned."

They are not what business needs to hear from the new Government by way of support.

Paul O'Kane: Is Alexander Stewart seriously suggesting that giving a pay rise to 300,000 Scots—the lowest-paid Scots—is simply a matter of red tape? Is he suggesting that giving people day 1 rights on sick pay or ensuring that they are not subject to fire and rehire or zero-hours contracts is bad?

Alexander Stewart: Labour cannot achieve those things in the absence of the growth in the economy that is required to make them happen. Labour knows that, and it is not achieving it.

The FSB has also said that the Government's proposals will

"deter small employers from taking on new staff".

That is the case. Small businesses are being deterred from taking on staff, which is a disaster for economic growth.

The Office for Budget Responsibility has made it clear that the full impact of the reforms is hard to predict because "insufficient detail" has been provided. That means that the growth that is forecast for the coming year could be even lower than has been predicted. The OBR has also highlighted that North Sea oil and gas revenues could fall by more than half by the end of the decade, from £5.4 billion to £2.3 billion. That is partly a result of the anti-investment policies of the UK and Scottish Governments, which are slowly turning their backs on an industry that supports 100,000 jobs.

We cannot go down that road. We must not put such strain on our economy. We must ensure that everything that we do supports the environment for businesses in our community.

The SNP should not forget that its legacy on success in respect of the economy is not good, either. The actions and deeds of the SNP Government are still causing difficulties for the economy. As has been discussed, the Scottish

budget is missing out on £800 million as a result of the SNP's failure to grow the economy.

Conservative members have long called for the SNP Government to use its powers over tax and spending to cut taxes for hard-working Scots, to pass on business rates relief in full and to create a pro-business and pro-innovation environment across Scotland. That is what we want, but we are seeing the opposite. Labour policies have already damaged the UK's economy, but because of the SNP, the damage in Scotland continues.

We will continue to champion policies to ensure that we can provide well-paid jobs and have a growing economy and effective and efficient public services. That is exactly what the Scottish public expects from both Governments. However, the spring statement is bad for the economy, bad for business and bad for consumers.

17:10

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): In March 2015, Rachel Reeves MP, who is now Chancellor of the Exchequer, said:

"We are not the party of people on benefits. We don't want to be seen, and we're not, the party to represent those who are out of work."

She added that she had "robust" policies to ensure that spending would reduce. A decade later, she has been true to her word—not that Labour said so in last year's election campaign.

Anas Sarwar's once defiant, now hollow, proclamation

"Read my lips: no austerity under Labour",

casts a long shadow over the chamber today. Last year, he vowed to stand up to Keir Starmer and to be Scotland's voice at Westminster yet, following the UK spring statement—which was aptly dubbed "austerity 2.0" by Labour MP Zarah Sultana—with modest exceptions, the branch office here in the Scottish Parliament has been conspicuously silent. *[Interruption.]*

Only three of you even bothered to turn up for this debate, Mr Marra. That is how important you regard your own spring statement as being.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Please speak through the chair, Mr Gibson.

Michael Marra: I know how much regard the member has for Paul Johnson at the Institute for Fiscal Studies. Does he agree with Paul Johnson that the spring statement does not represent austerity in any way?

Kenneth Gibson: No. I am sorry, but I actually agree with Labour MPs such as Debbie Abrahams, who said,

"there are alternative, more compassionate ways to balance the books rather than on the back of sick and disabled people",

and Richard Burgon, who said:

"This Statement contains cruel attacks on disabled people. The Government is taking the easy option of cutting support for millions of vulnerable people".

One wonders whether the latest in the succession of regressive fiscal measures that Labour in Scotland has been compelled to passively accept is beginning to take its toll. Those measures go from the removal of winter fuel payments from 85 per cent of pensioners to the dismissal of the women against state pension inequality—the WASPI women—and the backtracking on the promise to reduce household fuel bills by £300 a year.

Labour in Government has depressed business confidence and raised employer national insurance contributions, which impact three times more on lower paid workers than on the highest paid. In North Ayrshire, more than half of this year's council tax increase is a direct result of the increase in employer national insurance contributions. Now the most vulnerable people—thousands of disabled individuals—face brutal cuts while Labour in Scotland takes the fifth.

Under Labour, individuals who are unable to wash half their body, cook a meal, use the toilet unaided or dress themselves independently will be denied PIP unless they suffer from an additional limiting condition. We are talking about 800,000 people. A further 370,000 who receive PIP will have it removed, and 3.2 million disabled people will lose an average of £1,720 a year.

The core justification for those measures lies in the claims that they will generate £8.1 billion in annual savings by 2029-30 and will incentivise workforce participation. Scotland will see year-on-year welfare cuts increase, reaching £455 million, and £430 million in resource cuts by 2029-30.

UK ministers claim that people who are affected will be supported through a £1 billion disability employment package, yet Britain's economic watchdog will not release its employment forecasts until late October. MPs are being asked to endorse disability benefit cuts without any substantive analysis of how many of those who are affected can realistically secure employment.

The Office for Budget Responsibility was completely unsighted on those developments and it has highlighted the absence of detailed policy frameworks or impact assessments. Prior to the announcement, the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, Liz Kendall, was apparently unaware of the impact that the spring statement would have on her department and on the millions of people who rely on it. A transition fund is to be

established and consulted on, but there is no budget for it and the UK Government has no idea of the level at which it will be set. What a mess.

Further uncertainty emerged on Monday when the BBC revealed that the Department for Work and Pensions faces a shortfall of 2,100 work coaches, leaving 400,000 individuals without the employment support to which they are entitled now. How will folk whose benefits are being cut be supported into work?

The only certainty is that the cuts will drive at least 300,000 people—including 50,000 children—into poverty. The spring budget has drawn widespread condemnation from charities and organisations that champion the most disadvantaged in our society. I am well aware that Labour has body swerved those comments so far this afternoon.

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation says that 7.2 million UK households already struggle to afford basic necessities, and that figure will rise. The Resolution Foundation estimates that the UK's poorest 10 per cent will be £500 worse off annually by the time the Labour Government's term ends. The director of the Child Poverty Action Group, John Dickie, says:

"Stealth cuts to UK social security bring neither stability nor security to struggling families. They will push children into poverty across the UK, undermining the progress on child poverty being made in Scotland".

That brings me to the question on everybody's lips. Is austerity truly necessary? Other nations will grow their defence budgets without imposing callous measures on their citizens. Germany amended its constitutionally enshrined rules to increase defence spending while simultaneously establishing a €500 billion infrastructure fund and the European Union has relaxed its fiscal regulations to enable member states to strengthen defence capabilities without resorting to cuts but, no, Rachel Reeves sticks to her fiscal rules as if they are tablets of stone.

Sadly, Labour in Scotland remains subservient to Mr Starmer even as internal dissent grows. Brian Leishman, MP for Alloa and Grangemouth, denounced the UK Government's welfare cuts as an act of inhumanity that will "impoverish" disabled people. Former Labour MSP Neil Findlay accused the Prime Minister of

"Betraying Labour's proud history"

and laying

"waste to any claim of moral principle."

That is, no doubt, why 19 of Labour's group of 22 MSPs weren't here for the start of this debate.

I note that Carol Mochan is now here—she has turned up recently. She said:

"We cannot balance the books on the backs of people who require benefits just to have a passable standard of living."

Still the condemnation goes on and, meanwhile, GDP per capita continues to fall.

Labour is undermining Scotland's economy and public services with cuts that are aimed at impacting the most vulnerable. If—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You need to conclude.

Kenneth Gibson: If Labour wants to be the party of social justice rather than an instrument of calculated indifference, it must abandon its punitive cuts. It is clearer than ever that Scotland must become an independent nation or we will pay the price.

17:16

Paul O'Kane (West Scotland) (Lab): These are deeply serious global times. Already, some contributions this afternoon have acknowledged the changing nature of the western alliance and the global economic and political consensus on which so much has rested for so long. That has been fundamentally shaken. Even today, as we await the imposition of universal tariffs by the world's largest economy on friends and foe alike, the world continues to move at pace in ways that nobody wanted to see and which often do not make rational sense.

Such factors have been referenced increasingly by parliamentarians of all parties in debates and statements over the past few weeks. That degree of seriousness, which is required in debates such as these, is welcome. I do not believe that there is anyone on the Government benches who does not recognise how much those events will impact on our national finances, regardless of whether carve-outs are secured or what the scale of the tariffs might be.

All of that is coupled with an urgent need to spend significantly more on defence in the UK and right across Europe so that we can undertake a programme of rapid rearmament. Those are decisions that have to be made and realities that we must face up to. I welcome the Prime Minister's comments at lunchtime that the UK will take a "calm, pragmatic approach", whereby we will engage in "constructive talks" with partners and be "prepared for all eventualities". Therefore, it is not fair to say that no cognisance has been taken of the situation. Actually, there has been a deliberate attempt to take a very pragmatic approach.

Here in Scotland, we need to be equally calm, pragmatic and realistic about all the factors and what they will mean for our finances and to

consider the impact on the wider UK finances. That is the context in which the Chancellor of the Exchequer's spring statement took place last week, and it would serve us all well in this debate to remember that.

I am pleased that, despite those factors and the significant challenges, which are a worry to many, the chancellor has protected last autumn's transformational budget. In the past few days, we have seen policies come into place that will make a genuine difference to the lives of many people in Scotland. The uplift in the national minimum wage yesterday—the highest uplift in the minimum wage since it was created by the last Labour Government—delivered a pay rise to 200,000 of the lowest-paid Scots. That sits alongside a generational change to the rights of workers to ensure that work is secure and that it supports people who are undertaking it; to end the use of fire and rehire practices and exploitative zero-hours contracts; and to secure rights from day 1.

I do not think that that is something to be ashamed of, as the Conservatives seem to think. The UK Government has prioritised that, because it is the right thing to do to ensure that people in work have the right support.

Stuart McMillan: I do not disagree that putting money into people's pockets is the right thing to do—I welcome that, and I am sure that many constituents in Paul O'Kane's West Scotland region and in my constituency will welcome it, too—but does Mr O'Kane acknowledge that taking money out of the pockets of people who are disabled is not the right thing to do?

Paul O'Kane: Mr McMillan makes a good point about the importance of work. I have said in the chamber a number of times that there are too many barriers to people wanting to secure work so that they can continue to progress. We must ensure that we break those barriers down; indeed, I will come on to talk about that more widely later in my speech.

That budget also confirmed no cut to the Scottish budget, and affirmed a game-changing rise of £5.2 billion to be spent here in Scotland through the largest block grant in the history of devolution. There was also a large-scale package of capital investment in infrastructure across the UK, including here in Scotland, through a renewable future as a result of mechanisms such as Great British Energy. The confirmation in last week's spring statement that Labour will invest in the Scottish shipbuilding industry through a boost in defence spending was vital, at a time when the SNP is sending Scottish shipbuilding jobs abroad.

I note that, in the cabinet secretary's statement, she welcomed an increase in defence spending, although, as usual, it is clear that there has been a

complete rejection of all the ways to pay for that. I do not think that we have heard anything serious from members on the Government benches about how that should be paid for.

I gently suggest to the Government—*[Interruption.]* If it cares to listen, I gently suggest to the Government that, at such a dangerous time, a policy of unilateral nuclear disarmament is deeply unserious. It does not recognise the real challenge in Ukraine and the issues therein. That is before we mention the impact that it would have on jobs and the economy in my West Scotland region and in my colleague Jackie Baillie's constituency.

I acknowledge that concern has been raised about some elements of the spring statement relating to social security reforms. It is important that people have the chance to engage in full with the green paper that has been published by the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions. There is a consensus on the importance of reform generally in the social security system to get more people into work. That is where proposals in the green paper that have been long called for, including £1 billion of employment support and giving people the right to attempt work without risking losing their benefits, are right. That is important, and it is also important that anyone who needs support gets it and that we ensure that we protect those people who do need support.

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice (Shirley-Anne Somerville): Will the member take an intervention?

Paul O'Kane: I am about to conclude, so I will begin to draw my remarks to a close.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You will conclude, Mr O'Kane.

Paul O'Kane: It is important that we base ourselves in the reality of the situation that we face. There is a grave global context to the spring statement, which we must have at the forefront of our minds if we are to have a serious and genuine debate in this place about our public finances.

17:23

Emma Roddick (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): As a disabled person, I find it devastating to witness the Labour Government's recent actions, which ruthlessly and unforgivably punish disabled people and pensioners for the Government's own failures to balance the books and deliver on its manifesto promises. Not only is that economically futile—after all, we will never get more disabled people into work by taking away the money that buys their care and their mobility aids and gets them anywhere close to being on a level

footing with their able-bodied, neurotypical peers—it is brutally unethical.

During the previous Conservative Government, people using disabled spaces online discussed papers that had been made public and which considered extensive options to reduce the money being spent on benefits. Suggestions such as narrowing eligibility for PIP and discriminating against certain groups of people were highlighted as surely going too far for the Tories, including by many in the Labour Party, who frequently made comments that were extremely similar to those that I am making this afternoon.

That it is a Labour Government taking forward these reforms is devastating to everybody who voted for Labour last year, thinking that they were voting for positive change. The SNP has been working hard for years with targeted benefits and programmes to lift children out of poverty, but UK Labour is dragging them into it.

The proposal to remove incapacity benefits from anyone under 22 is not only ignorant and ageist, but cruel. It ensures that people who have their whole life ahead of them, a life that could be productive and happy if they had the right support, are instead going to live in poverty and misery, if they manage to live at all.

I again remind people that the adult disability payment, the personal independence payment and universal credit are not necessarily out-of-work benefits. Disability benefits are a recognition of the extra cost that is faced by successful claimants, who often cannot function without the things that they use the money to purchase. Universal credit is often needed by people who are not making enough money despite being in work, even if they are taking on multiple roles. Many who claim those benefits are out of work, but, knowing a lot of those people myself, I am aware that that is more a reflection of employment practices and societal norms than it is of those people and their own attitudes towards work.

Whether or not people can do full-time hours; whether they experience brain fog, chronic pain or fatigue; or whether they are unable—or struggle—to do things that others find easy, such as reading, sitting, standing, writing or speaking, they generally want to feel fulfilled in their lives. Even the most well-off pensioners I know usually volunteer or take on part-time work, and find things that they can do to be productive.

Looking at how many disabled people are unemployed and concluding that you must take away the little money that they have in order to force them into a workplace that is not set up for them, and which likely will not hire them anyway, is ridiculous, and it demonstrates either extreme ignorance or terrifying cruelty and a lack of

consideration of the risk at which those lives are put.

Brutal changes to the personal independent payment are blatant attempts to remove money from people with mental health issues, whom Labour seems to think are unworthy of support, but they will also affect people who have a wide range of conditions. As Kevin Stewart and others have outlined, people who cannot dress themselves or wash without help will see their payments disappear. How will they pay somebody who will help with those intimate tasks and enable them to show up to any job? Of the 800,000 people who will, thanks to Labour's cuts, lose out on the money that they rely on to manage their conditions, how many will be unable to keep their jobs as a result?

Labour's broken promises are piling up at a truly remarkable speed. I can only assume that Keir Starmer and his team believe that these punitive cuts to the most vulnerable will be forgotten by the next election, but they will not. When it comes to heating payments for pensioners, WASPI women, Grangemouth workers, GB Energy and the promise of no austerity, people are going to remember the harm that is being caused now.

Instead of standing with us against the surge of the far right by protecting human rights in the face of growing risk around the world, Labour is all but handing it the next election. I said that Labour's decisions devastate me as a disabled person, but they also dismay me as a nationalist. All of this reminds me—and I hope that this is not lost on my constituents in the Highlands and Islands—that it does not matter who is in power in Whitehall, whether it be the Tories or the so-called party of devolution. It does not matter how lacking in conscience we—by which I mean the Scottish Parliament, not just my own party—believe Westminster's decisions to be, or how vast the gap is between the approaches up here and down there. All our spending, our plans and our powers can be badly impacted with no notice or consultation, and funding for which we had great plans can disappear at the whim of a UK minister.

We have had some incredible successes in Scotland through devolution, and I am proud of the progress that has been made in this place, but it does not work. We can do better, and we need independence.

17:28

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): The debate so far has shown that it is important to put the spring statement into some context, particularly with regard to the considerable challenges that the chancellor faces—those that are external rather than self-imposed. They

include the considerable uncertainty in the international markets as a result of the very belligerent, protectionist policies that the cabinet secretary spoke about in her statement, which are very much across our newspapers this morning. They make for very grim reading—we should be in no doubt about that. Likewise, there is the considerable uncertainty about US defence policies, which means that we have to prioritise increases in the defence budget, and there are the further increases in world energy prices.

The chancellor is right to say that “the world has changed”, but that is only half the story. The OBR reports that the internal growth problem is one third down to structural weaknesses in the economy and two thirds down to a fall in business confidence, the problem with higher interest rates—which Craig Hoy spoke about—and the expectations factor. As we heard at yesterday’s meeting of the Finance and Public Administration Committee, the OBR has also been critical of the late delivery of some aspects of Reeves’s plans, which has made economic forecasting even more challenging. We have heard that before in another context.

As the Fraser of Allander Institute said, it really is not “credible” that the chancellor and her Treasury ministers were unaware of the OBR’s concerns about the underlying troubles in Britain’s finances. That is why it had to halve its economic growth forecast for the next year. It is also why, given the UK Government’s self-imposed fiscal rules, there is now virtually no room at all for manoeuvre should the economy be exposed to any further exogenous shocks or substantial market changes, which, as my party knows only too well, can come about if the fiscal headwinds are ignored.

There are some encouraging signs regarding new jobs in the construction and defence sectors, which I hope will also be beneficial to Scotland, and the OBR’s determination that reforms to planning legislation could add 0.4 per cent to GDP—it matters that that is the single biggest boost that it has determined for one specific policy. However, that does not detract from the serious problems in the supply side of the economy.

Michael Marra: Will the member take an intervention?

Liz Smith: Perhaps Mr Marra can deal with the supply side of the economy for me.

Michael Marra: Liz Smith talks about the challenge caused by exogenous shocks to the fiscal rules. Is she suggesting that we should create more headroom in the fiscal rules? If so, how would she achieve that?

Liz Smith: The fiscal rules are a self-imposed discipline that the chancellor set. With hindsight,

when we measure the six-month period between October and now, they have proved to be extremely tight. That is a significant problem if there are exogenous shocks—which we sadly have to face up to quite regularly—because the wriggle room no longer exists. There are issues in that regard. Mr Gibson talked about some European countries where there has been a different approach to fiscal rules. There is a lot to be learned about the world economy and how the UK Government can interpret it.

On top of all of that, there is the imposition of the highest-ever tax burden, the serious issues that have resulted from Labour’s national insurance tax on jobs—that is what it is—which is having particularly detrimental effects on retail and hospitality, and the tax increases on Britain’s farmers. The Reeves economy is not in a good place, and some of that is not down to external reasons.

I do not blame the chancellor for addressing the welfare problems. She is right when she says that the size of that budget is unsustainable and that the current structure is not doing nearly enough to attract people back into the jobs market. However, she has allowed so much unhelpful speculation to take place in the past few months, which has scared many people who are genuinely on benefits—many SNP members have reflected on that point—without spelling out the available evidence of what the impacts and the side effects will be. I will come back to the issue of welfare in a minute, but, given the expectations factor, there is confusion and it is grim reading for many people who are living with genuine disability—I have great sympathy with that view.

What about the impacts of the spring statement on Scotland, aside from the relatively small Barnett consequential of £28 million as a result of that change? There will be a £200 million cut in 2028-29 and a £435 million cut in 2029-30 plus the PIP reforms that will reduce the block grant adjustments for devolved social security. The cabinet secretary is correct in saying that the Scottish system of welfare benefits will cost more following Labour’s proposed cuts to benefits, which will mean reductions in the block grant.

However, let us be very clear that Scotland’s welfare system was costing billions of pounds long before Labour’s announcement. To take up the challenge that Paul O’Kane set us of considering the overall economy and fiscal sustainability, we need to have a serious debate in this Parliament about what we will do to reform the welfare system, to encourage more people into work and ensure that we are genuinely helping those who are most in need, not providing so much money to those who can easily get back into the workforce.

17:34

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): It is a pleasure, as always, to follow Liz Smith and to respond to the challenge that she has put to members today. Perhaps a debate in a more traditional format might assist us in understanding that better.

The UK chancellor is absolutely right to point to the global challenges that all the major economies are facing. The world has changed. To dismiss that is to deny the reality that we are seeing with the conflict in the middle east, the war in Ukraine, volatile energy prices and despots and dictators seeking to disrupt and divide. Just today, we see markets and economies the world over holding their breath as they wait for President Trump's announcement at 9 o'clock—our time—this evening.

Kevin Stewart: Will Mr Whitfield give way?

Martin Whitfield: If Kevin Stewart does not mind, I would like to get started first.

The UK Government is working hard to secure a deal with the US, but, in the meantime, there is no doubt that the volatility in the global markets will impact our economy. The chancellor is grappling with these changed and uncertain circumstances, and, in this increasingly unstable and unpredictable world, increasing defence spending was the right choice for our national security. Anyone who argues against that fails to understand the genuine severity of the global moment.

Kevin Stewart: Will the member give way?

Martin Whitfield: If it is short, Mr Stewart.

Kevin Stewart: I agree with Mr Whitfield. Nobody can argue that the world has not changed, but why can the Chancellor of the Exchequer not change her fiscal rules in the light of the changes that have been taking place across the globe? Why not change those rules instead of punishing disabled people?

Martin Whitfield: I point to what happened less than 24 months ago, when we saw a Prime Minister suddenly decide to change their fiscal rules and throw them out of the window. We saw a sudden drop in confidence in the United Kingdom among markets around the world and investors in this country. To risk such economic instability at this time is an utterly reckless proposition.

While we are in the midst of these global challenges, the UK Government is taking long-term decisions to grow our economy. As we have heard, the OBR recognised that last week, and it is upgrading its growth forecast for next year and, indeed, for every year thereafter, with a cumulative

growth forecast that is now higher than was expected at the time of the budget.

The OBR can see that the decisions that this UK Government is taking will lead to economic growth. The increase of £2.2 billion on defence spending in 2025-26 will mean more jobs and more investment right here, in Scotland. In 2023-24, the Ministry of Defence spent more than £2 billion in Scotland, supporting 25,600 jobs. Current UK defence investment represents a huge boost for Scottish shipbuilding, with the £4.2 billion contract to build five type 26 frigates on the Clyde supporting 1,700 jobs directly and 2,300 jobs in the supply chain. While the SNP sends shipbuilding jobs abroad, the UK Labour Government is investing in people and industry here, in the UK and in Scotland. That is the difference that a UK Labour Government can make for our economy and for our national security.

I want to touch on house building. The UK Labour Government is taking bold steps to grow the economy, not least by introducing the most ambitious set of planning reforms in decades to get Britain building, with a target of 1.5 million new homes in England over the next five years. What is the conclusion of the OBR? It says that there will be a real GDP increase of 0.2 per cent by 2029-2030 and 0.4 per cent within the next 10 years. That will add £15.1 billion to our economy and is the biggest positive growth impact that the OBR has ever reflected in its forecasts. That significant action by the UK Labour Government to build more homes, to tackle homelessness and to grow our economy is endorsed by the independent OBR. That is the difference that a UK Labour Government can make.

What about house building in Scotland? Completions are down 7 per cent, new starts are down 9 per cent and the approval of affordable homes is down a staggering 48 per cent from its peak in 2018. I raise that issue because, in the East Lothian constituency, which is part of the South Scotland region, 80 out of every 100,000 people are still living in temporary accommodation, while the Scottish average is 59. There is a housing emergency in Scotland, and the Scottish Government has admitted that. However, the SNP is doing nothing; in fact, last year, it cut the affordable housing budget by 22 per cent.

The "Truth About Youth" survey for 2025, which was published today, reached out to young Scottish people and asked them what their number 1 issue was. Their number 1 issue is affordable housing, with 51 per cent bothered by the issue.

Shona Robison: Will the member give way?

Martin Whitfield: I do not have time.

In the survey, 48 per cent said that affordable housing is the most important issue for their future.

To close, I will pick up one other element from the “Truth About Youth” survey. In that survey, 40 per cent of the young people who responded said that they thought that their childhood was worse than it would have been when their parents were growing up. Only 24 per cent said that they felt that it was better. That is a damning indictment of a Government that has been in power for all or most of the lives of the young people who responded. It is this Scottish Government that is responsible for that, not another Government.

Therefore, while we discuss the impact of the UK Government’s spring statement and the money and investment that it represents, the challenge for the Government here is to consider its impact and what it chooses to do with its resources.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The final speaker in the open debate will be Michelle Thomson.

17:41

Michelle Thomson (Falkirk East) (SNP): I will restrict my remarks to the spring statement. It was sold as a little bit of tinkering to help people, which perhaps sounds kinder than what it really was: a full-on attack on the most vulnerable in our society—and on the most vulnerable of those, in the form of disabled people. A week before the spring statement, cuts to PIP were announced. A week later, the overall cost of PIP was further cut by the announcement of a freeze for existing recipients. That change had nothing to do with rational policy reform and certainly nothing to do with helping people into work; rather, it had everything to do with reaching the chancellor’s headroom target.

The most revealing aspect of the spring statement is that it has resulted in restoring the anticipated headroom to exactly £9.9 billion. As Paul Johnson of the IFS said,

“The Treasury has clearly worked overtime to ensure ... precisely the same fiscal headroom”.

He went on to comment that that is not a terribly sensible way of either using the IFS’s time or making policy. That understatement gently points out that it is the chancellor’s restrictive fiscal rules that are driving policy, rather than the aim of doing the right things for people and the economy.

It is increasingly likely that the headroom will vanish well before the next fiscal event and might be wiped out entirely by the coming of tariffs. On tariffs, Sir Keir Starmer claimed today:

“we have prepared for all eventualities”.

If that were so, an indication of strategy or scenario plans would have been set out in the fiscal event of last week, but there was none. The cost of borrowing has seen a rise in interest on 20-year gilts to around 5.5 per cent, and debt interest in the UK is now approaching £111 billion each year. That is not the result of emerging world uncertainty; it is a result of structural issues in the UK economy, compounded by Brexit. Those payments for debt dwarf the entire Scottish Government budget. The spring statement could ultimately lead to a further cut of around £900 million for the Scottish Government.

Michael Marra: Will the member give way?

Michelle Thomson: I will carry on, if the member does not mind.

It is claimed that cuts to overseas aid are to fund a rise in defence spending. Yet, by comparing the composition of cuts and increases, we see that overseas aid is being cut by £3.2 billion in day-to-day spending, which counts against the main fiscal rule, whereas the rise in defence spending is very different, with only £0.6 billion in day-to-day spending. The planned increase in defence spending is over 90 per cent capital, which is completely different from current patterns of defence spending, in which only 35 per cent is capital. In other words, the net effect of the changes to overseas aid and defence is to contribute £2.6 billion towards restoring the headroom target.

Even after all that effort, the OBR gave the current plans only a 54 per cent chance of achieving a budget balance by 2029-30. Even that 54 per cent is predicated on an end to fuel duty freezes, which we all know will not happen.

The spring statement also shaved more off the earlier announced plans for departmental budgets. It is assumed that the UK Government administration budget will be cut by 15 per cent, but details on that are scarce. Previous Labour Governments made regular efforts to achieve governmental savings, but none ever materialised. Indeed, in almost all cases, expenditure on administration rose. As the Fraser of Allander put it, the spring statement is riddled with “optimism bias”.

There is a very large elephant in the room: how could we address the need to generate economic growth as a means to improve our economic health and tackle the international uncertainty that has been born of wars and Donald Trump’s tariffs? Perhaps a pre-spring statement survey from YouGov can help. Closer trade links with the EU were seen as the best option even by Labour voters, 65 per cent of whom thought it would pay greater economic dividends compared with a mere 15 per cent who favoured benefit cuts. The

electorate seem to have a better grasp of economics than the chancellor.

Presiding Officer, you know that I favour using quotes to illustrate my points in a speech. To draw this time from the musical “Wicked”, Scotland is

“through with playing by the rules of someone else’s game.”

To quote the show again, I go as far as to say the fiscal event is a load of “old shiz”.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I will take advice on that one, Ms Thomson. We move to closing speeches.

17:46

Lorna Slater: This afternoon, I find myself in the unusual situation of agreeing with Liz Smith on the UK Government’s self-imposed difficulty over its fiscal rules. An article in this weekend’s *Financial Times* raised concerns about the OBR’s role in UK democracy and the absurdity of sticking to such rules when the game has changed, especially given the absence of good data for the OBR to use and its history of very poor predictions.

I will go through and comment on members’ contributions. Craig Hoy showed his sympathy for people who are on salaries of £100,000. He was clearly setting out his stall when we were mostly talking about the worries of the most vulnerable, who need benefits just to be able to wash and look after themselves. He challenged Labour to take a bold approach, but he does not think that taxing rich people is a bold approach, perhaps because it makes things awkward at Conservative dinner parties. Accusing Labour of implementing economic misery, given the economic misery that was imposed by Brexit and Liz Truss, was really something to hear from across the chamber.

I challenge whether a benefit system—a compassionate social safety net that looks after everybody and gives everybody a fair chance—can ever be described as unsustainable. What is unsustainable are tax breaks for fossil fuel extraction and use, while, at the same time, we have to spend more money to sequester the carbon away. We are paying twice: once for subsidising it, digging it up and burning it, and then to put it away safely so that it does not harm our environment too badly. That is an insane use of resources and priorities.

There is recognition across the chamber that North Sea oil and gas extraction is now in decline, and I hope that accepting the rate of decline will allow us all to focus on transition and building a green economy. If one thing is missing from the spring statement, it is the chancellor taking opportunities to grow and invest in the green economy.

Preventing climate catastrophe is not optional. Members might recall me sharing information a few weeks ago from the CBI, which reported double-digit growth in the green economy, and I will repeat the figures.

CBI Economics calculated that every pound that is spent on the green economy creates an additional £1.89 in gross value added across the wider economy. In other words, the economic benefits, including the ripple effect into the green economy, exceeded £157 billion. The future is green. If the chancellor is looking for growth, she will find it in the green economy.

The CBI report makes it clear that green industries are primed for rapid growth if policy makers create the right regulatory environment for them. It warns that, should policy makers fail to capitalise on the opportunities, the UK risks losing out to international competition. The CBI’s chief economist, Louise Hellem, said:

“It is clear, you can’t have growth without green ... 2025 is the year when the rubber really hits the road—where inaction is indisputably costlier than action. We are approaching critical points of no return for achieving essential outcomes in energy security and emissions reduction.”

In her spring statement, the chancellor could have made a feature of measures to bring about green growth, which would support the desperately needed transition away from the declining oil and gas industry to industries that have a long-term future.

I challenge some of the points that Michael Marra made. First, on the tax base, not thinking beyond income tax represents a lack of imagination. There could be pollution taxes, carbon taxes, wealth taxes and land value taxes. The growth that the economy has experienced for the past 200 years has created wealth, but most of it is being hoarded by very few individuals. When wealth is hoarded—whether it is invested in depreciating assets such as luxury cars, held in static assets such as mansions or hidden offshore in tax havens—it is not contributing to the economy. In order for money to contribute to the economy and for that wealth to do us good, the money needs to circulate. Cracking down on tax avoidance and winking out that money through wealth taxation are the ways to get money back in circulation and ensure that the system works for everybody.

Secondly, Michael Marra mentioned the increase to the national living wage, but that is still not a real living wage. It traps all workers who receive it in poverty. That is nothing to brag about.

The chancellor missed opportunities in her spring statement to make the UK economy fairer and to support people in need while, at the same

time, recognising that a new world requires new fiscal rules and new priorities. I am very disappointed by the impact that her decisions will have on the UK as a whole, but especially on Scotland.

17:52

Michael Marra: I welcome all the contributions to the debate. I will begin where Lorna Slater finished, because the topic of the fiscal rules has underpinned much of the discussion this afternoon. A very significant change in the fiscal rules was made following the UK Government's autumn budget. There was a change in the amount of money that could be used for long-term capital investment and in how it was counted against debt. That radically changed the prospects for capital investment in this country over the years to come.

I disagree with many members in that, at a time when we are seeking economic stability and leadership, I do not think that it would be credible to radically change the economic rules again within a matter of weeks. That would not send the right signals to people who deal with the markets, given our highly indebted economy.

Liz Smith: The member is absolutely right about the markets. Liz Truss had an absolutely unmitigated disaster because she did not listen to what the financial institutions were telling her. However, there is a danger that Rachel Reeves will repeat that when it comes to listening to advice and responding to the changing world. Does the member agree that that could become a problem?

Michael Marra: I certainly agree that we have to listen to expert learned advice on the structure and direction of our economy when we make decisions. That is absolutely clear. Liz Smith advocated a shift in the fiscal rules, but she did not answer the question about what policy approach should be taken. The challenge is how we achieve the higher amount of fiscal headroom that Liz Smith, Michelle Thomson and other members appear to be advocating. If that is not to be provided through cuts to public spending and higher taxes—finding a match between the two—where will it come from?

I thought that Michelle Thomson seemed to be simultaneously advocating higher debt in the UK economy and bemoaning the high indebtedness of the UK economy. I say to her that she will find that that is, to quote "Wicked", indeed "Defying Gravity".

Kenneth Gibson made similar points in bemoaning the situation regarding the fiscal rules. Again, no answer was given as to what the fiscal rules should be.

Some front-bench members asked, "What about Germany?" Of course, the situation in Germany is that it has indebtedness of 62 per cent of its GDP in comparison with indebtedness of 100 per cent of GDP in the UK economy. The change to Germany's fiscal position has resulted in the largest increase in interest rates in 30 years. If that had happened in this country, that would have led to a £4 billion comparative increase in our debt. How would the Scottish Government deal with that?

Shona Robison: What the member chooses to ignore is that other EU countries have similarly set aside defence spending outside their debt rules and have managed to do that successfully. Rachel Reeves had choices, and Michael Marra seems to be defending the fact that she has made the choice to fund her programme on the backs of disabled people. Is he comfortable with that?

Michael Marra: That is certainly not what I am saying. What I am setting out is that the choice that is in front of the chancellor is between investing in fiscal competence and stability or moving away from those rules. The case that I am making, which I have set out quite clearly already, is that I do not think that this is the time to move away from those rules. We had a significant change to the fiscal rules only a matter of weeks ago, and to do that again at this point would cause chaos. We do not have to look too far for the example of that chaos: Liz Smith pointed out what happens when somebody like Liz Truss takes such an approach.

Craig Hoy was dismissive of the three interest rate cuts that have taken place under the Labour Government since it came to power.

Craig Hoy: Will the member take a brief intervention?

Michael Marra: I am afraid that I do not have the time.

I gently remind Mr Hoy that rates were at 0.1 per cent in 2020 and that they peaked at 5.25 per cent in August 2023. I wonder what happened in that intervening period. I will tell members what happened: Liz Truss happened, and there was an absolute surge in interest rates. They are now down to 4.5 per cent, which is not as low as we would like them to go—we would like them to go further—but that decrease is the result of having a stable fiscal and economic policy that can deliver for the long term.

The challenge that we faced as a Government when we arrived last year was the trilemma of no growth in the economy for 14 years due to the horrific Tory Government; a massive in-year black hole in which the national reserve had been spent three times in the space of the first quarter; and public services that were in crisis. That is the

context that Martin Whitfield was talking about, and it was a result of an utterly reckless approach that is similar to that which is being advocated by people in relation to the abandonment of the fiscal rules at this point.

In a fine speech, Martin Whitfield also pointed out the positive impact that using the capital headroom that we have created to invest in housing for the long term can have, and said that the budget has resulted in the biggest positive growth impact that the OBR has ever reflected in its forecasts. Overall, the budget in the autumn has resulted in £5.2 billion of additional spending for the Scottish Government to invest in public services in this country.

I have to say again to the SNP that being responsible with the public's money does not mean demanding £70 billion of additional spending and then opposing every revenue-raising measure to enable that. Its latest idea is to change the fiscal rules to try to find a means to obtain more debt without ever recognising the impact that that would have on our interest rates. The suggestion is not serious, it is not credible and, frankly, it is impossible.

17:58

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I start by reiterating a point that I made earlier this afternoon and which Alex Cole-Hamilton echoed in his speech. I hope that we will not see a trend whereby Government front benchers present statements to Parliament for 20 minutes, do not take any interventions, do not allow any interruptions, do not allow any questions and then steal Opposition time when it comes to the debate. That would be a very unhelpful development.

In her lengthy statement, the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government made some points that I agree with. She was quite right to make some of the criticisms that she made of Rachel Reeves and the Labour Government. Craig Hoy reminded us of some of the fiscal backdrop. Labour inherited a growing economy, with inflation down and unemployment low. Of course, there was a budget deficit that was inflated by all the payment support for the Covid pandemic, the furlough scheme and the cost of living payments that were made to individuals but, nevertheless, the budget deficit was half what the Conservatives inherited from the previous Labour Government in 2010.

What do we have now? In the UK, economic growth is barely above recession levels, inflation is up, growth forecasts have been halved and business confidence is in the doldrums. The fiscal headroom that Rachel Reeves thought she had has now gone.

All that is even before the national insurance increases kick in on Sunday—a veritable tax on jobs, as Liz Smith reminded us. That tax on jobs will deliver job losses; that is what the Federation of Small Businesses tells us when it surveys its members. The Office for Budget Responsibility estimates that the national insurance increase will lead to lower wages—76 per cent is expected to be delivered through lower wages for staff from 2026-27.

Against all that, we have the threat of tariffs. In a few hours, we will learn more about the impact that they will have. I say gently to Lorna Slater that it is really important that we do not inflame the situation in this chamber or elsewhere by making comments that might be unhelpful. We do not have to love or like Donald Trump or his regime, but it is very important that those in positions of leadership in the United Kingdom do not overreact to the action that he might take.

Alex Cole-Hamilton: Murdo Fraser is right to say that it is important not to overreact in these days of turmoil, but does he also recognise that it is important that the Government does not overly kowtow to Donald Trump through decreasing the digital services tax or removing other payments that American companies pay in order to try to avoid the tariffs that are coming?

Murdo Fraser: I know that Mr Cole-Hamilton bought and drove a Tesla and that he then sold it. I know that he then went over to campaign for Kamala Harris. Maybe he is a little bit embarrassed about his actions. I think that it is very important that we act in the interests of Scottish businesses that are looking to export to America and that we tread very carefully in that respect.

I turn to some of the comments that the cabinet secretary and SNP members made about rejoining the EU. At this particular point, when we are potentially facing the prospect of Donald Trump imposing tariffs on the EU but maybe not on the United Kingdom, nothing could be more misguided than looking at rejoining the EU, until we see where that develops. That would be a staggering proposal in terms of the interests of the UK economy.

Michelle Thomson: I would just like to note that it is extremely unlikely that the UK would be able to rejoin the EU by 9 pm this evening, when the announcement about tariffs will be made. On a serious note, does he recognise that the UK has left itself between a rock and a hard place—aligned to the US, with Trump at its helm, and outwith the EU? That must surely be a concern for Murdo Fraser.

Murdo Fraser: Surely the opportunity to strike a bespoke trade deal with the US that avoids the

possibility of tariffs on Scottish and British exports is something that we should all welcome and not try to denigrate.

We have heard about Labour's economic legacy: the broken promises that we have heard about from others; the winter fuel allowance that has been withdrawn; the farm tax that has been introduced, hitting farmers; the national insurance increases that I have referred to; the benefit cuts; and the promised £300 cut in fuel costs that has not been delivered. My good friend and our former colleague as an MSP Neil Findlay is, sadly, no longer with us in Parliament. He is abandoning the Labour Party because of its "vindictive and brutal policies"—at least he has some guts.

That is enough about Labour. Let us look at the SNP record. We now see a record tax gap between Scotland and the rest of the UK. At a time when people are struggling with the cost of living, we are seeing water charges going up and eye-watering council tax increases of 10 per cent or more, at the same time as people are seeing services being reduced.

Our universities are under threat. The University of Dundee faces 700 jobs being cut due to the funding settlement that it is getting from the Scottish Government. Still, the cost of Government goes up and up, with more civil servants—there have been 500 extra senior civil servants in the past two and a half years. If Mr McKee is looking for where to swing his axe, I suggest that he starts with the Scottish Government and makes progress from there.

The cabinet secretary dangled the carrot of a wealth tax, which is an interesting proposal. I wonder whether anybody on the SNP front bench can tell me how it would be implemented, who it would have an impact on and how much money it would raise. In fact, is there any country in the world that has successfully implemented a wealth tax? If anybody on the SNP front bench can tell me where a wealth tax has been introduced, I will give way to them now.

No, of course not, because that has not been the case—there is no country in the world that has successfully introduced a wealth tax. It is a chimera, which has been introduced just to give the SNP something to say. In fact, its record is one of tax, tax, tax. In the United Kingdom, we have the highest tax burden that we have ever had in our history. In Scotland, it is higher still.

There is a new policy from the SNP that did not get mentioned today—a new policy, or rather a reheat of an old policy: full fiscal autonomy. The cabinet secretary wrote to the Scottish Affairs Committee at Westminster on 16 January to say that the SNP wants full fiscal autonomy, with all revenues raised in Scotland to be retained in

Scotland and all expenditure paid for by the Government here.

What does that mean in practical terms? According to the Scottish Government's own figures, the gap between revenue and expenditure in Scotland is £22.7 billion. That is a deficit of 10.4 per cent, which is twice that of the United Kingdom. In relation to the United Kingdom, that gives us a fiscal gap of £8 billion, or 12.5 per cent of the Scottish Government's annual budget, and the Scottish Government has no idea how that gap would be filled—by cuts or by tax rises. Let us remember that these are the people, in the SNP, who were challenging us all the way through the budget process by asking us where we would find £1 billion; they are proposing to cut the budget by £8 billion—by eight times more.

We have two left-wing Governments letting our country down, with more tax and lower growth. Whether it is under Labour or the SNP, we are paying more for less. You are better off with the Conservatives.

18:06

The Minister for Public Finance (Ivan McKee): I welcome this afternoon's debate and thank members for their contributions. I will cover some of them briefly later.

As my colleague the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government said in her own statement, the UK spring statement has caused widespread concern, as has been evident from listening to members this afternoon. We all have constituents who are very worried about the impact of the chancellor's cuts to benefits for sick and disabled people, and we all have seen the alarming impact assessment that the UK Government has published on its own policies, which clearly shows the number of people who will lose out as a result of the changes.

The finance secretary also described how the UK Government's cuts will impact on our budget for future years. That will mean less money to support our priorities and the investment that we are making to strengthen public services and tackle poverty.

It is yet another example of the UK Government taking bad decisions that impact on the funding that we have for our priorities in Scotland. The Scottish Government is already spending £210 million this year to mitigate damaging UK Government welfare policies, and we have committed to effectively scrapping the two-child limit from next year, but we are at the limit of what we can do with our current powers. The UK benefit cuts will reduce the funding that we receive for our devolved benefits; indeed, funding from the UK

Government for social security is forecast to reduce by more than £400 million in 2029-30.

The funding challenges that we face are made worse by the fact that the UK Government is short-changing us on funding for the rise in employer national insurance contributions, to the tune of around £400 million. We have called on the chancellor to commit to fully funding the additional costs, but she has failed to do so, meaning that the Scottish Government faces having to take funding from front-line services to fill the gap.

Craig Hoy: As we are talking about taking money from front-line services and putting it elsewhere, if the Government sticks to its guns on welfare expenditure and continues to spend £2 billion more on welfare expenditure than it receives in Barnett consequentials, where is that money going to come from: front-line services or tax rises?

Ivan McKee: The Scottish Government will very shortly publish our medium-term financial strategy, our fiscal delivery sustainability plan and our public service reform strategy, which will clearly outline how we will continue to balance the budget—something that we have done every year for the past 17 years and something that we will continue to do into the future.

The finance secretary outlined earlier how we can expect our funding to be reduced in the years ahead, and that makes it essential that we focus on our priorities and ensure that our budget is spent effectively. All of us in this Parliament need to understand that we have to not call for additional spending—as we heard from Craig Hoy himself, who called for tax cuts in one breath and more funding for public spending in the next. Members need to understand the reality of the situation. Indeed, we face the prospect of further cuts and tax rises in the chancellor's autumn statement, as she struggles to maintain her fiscal rules.

I want to talk briefly about our public service reform programmes, which have secured significant cost-avoidance and cash-releasing savings of more than £200 million over the two years up to the end of 2024-25. That is only the beginning; more work is being undertaken on a weekly basis to identify more opportunities to redirect resources to the front line.

Our £30 million invest-to-save fund will catalyse efficiency, effectiveness and productivity projects. We are also proactively addressing the need to control workforce size in order to remain fiscally sustainable. Since 2022, recruitment controls in the Scottish Government have reduced the size of the workforce by almost half a per cent in 2022-23; by 3 per cent last year; and by a similar number this year. That trend will continue in future years.

Liz Smith: Is the Scottish Government in a position to produce some statistics about the savings that have already been made, and which the minister keeps referring to, so that we have a guide to what progress is being made? I am sure that the finance committee would welcome that, too.

Ivan McKee: Yes—absolutely. There is a full breakdown of that £280 million. I will send it to Liz Smith after this debate, and I will happily share it with the finance committee, too.

The Government is committed to working right across the economy to maximise the opportunities that lie ahead and to deliver economic growth, despite the constraints and policies of the UK Government. We remain laser focused on the vision set out in our economic strategy, which is to deliver fair, green growth for all of Scotland, and we are making good progress. Since 2007, GDP per person in Scotland has grown by 10 per cent, compared with just 6 per cent in the UK, and productivity in Scotland has grown by an average rate of 1.1 per cent, compared with a UK average of 0.4 per cent.

Our economy remains resilient, with low unemployment and strong earnings growth. Our unemployment rate of 3.8 per cent remains lower than the UK rate of 4.7 per cent, and proportionally more workers in Scotland are earning the real living wage compared with the rest of the UK.

As for inward investment, Scotland has been the most attractive destination in the UK outside of London for such investment for nine years running. Inward investment projects in Scotland grew by 12.7 per cent in 2023, which is more than double the rate across the rest of the UK. Even now, the latest three-month data in Scotland shows 0.5 per cent growth, compared with 0.2 per cent for the UK. The Tories have been talking about how great things were back in the day when they were in office, compared with where Labour has taken the economy since it has been in power. However, the data from July last year, when the Tories left office, shows that growth in the UK was at 0.2 per cent, and higher than that in Scotland.

In this year's Scottish budget, we are laying the foundations for the long-term success of our people, places and businesses, including by investing in offshore wind to the tune of £150 million and providing a further £200 million to the Scottish National Investment Bank. However, we need the UK Government to use its reserved powers to support the Scottish economy by supporting tailored migration routes, such as the proposed Scottish graduate visa; accelerating the delivery of offshore wind and hydrogen projects; and giving the go-ahead for Acorn and the Scottish cluster's carbon storage and utilisation project.

I also want to talk about Brexit, which is a hugely important issue. We might not be back in at 9 o'clock this evening, but Brexit—a misguided policy supported by both Labour and the Tories—has resulted in a £2 billion hit to the funds available for public spending in Scotland. Just think what we could do with that money.

With regard to members' contributions, Kenny Gibson highlighted very clearly the discontent within Labour ranks; a number of Labour members highlighted the misguided nature of the welfare policies that are being taken forward by the UK Government; and Michelle Thomson expertly unpicked the optimism bias underpinning the UK Government's spring statement. Liz Smith made, as always, an intelligent contribution, focused on the UK Government's fiscal rules—it is true to say that we will miss her contributions in the chamber when she retires.

However, I think that, as is often the case, the prize goes to Kevin Stewart, for working his nautical theme to death. He told us that, as well as being in a sea of British despair and needing to chart a new course and escape from the UK sinking ship, we will be hit by even more waves of despair as we proceed to take that path.

It is deeply disappointing that we face the prospect of welfare cuts and reduced budgets as a result of the chancellor's statement. The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government will set out our medium-term financial strategy at the end of May, and it is up to all of us in this Parliament to face up to those challenges.

As we move forward, the Scottish Government will remain focused on its priorities of eradicating child poverty, growing the economy, tackling the climate emergency and ensuring that we have high-quality and sustainable public services. Those are our priorities and the priorities of the people of Scotland, but if we are to deliver the full potential of Scotland, we need to have the full powers of independence.

Business Motion

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item of business is consideration of business motion S6M-17059, in the name of Jamie Hepburn, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, setting out a business programme. I invite Jamie Hepburn to move the motion.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees—

(a) the following programme of business—

Tuesday 22 April 2025

2.00 pm	Time for Reflection
<i>followed by</i>	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
<i>followed by</i>	Topical Questions (if selected)
<i>followed by</i>	Scottish Government Debate: The International Situation
<i>followed by</i>	Committee Announcements
<i>followed by</i>	Business Motions
<i>followed by</i>	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
5.00 pm	Decision Time
<i>followed by</i>	Members' Business

Wednesday 23 April 2025

2.00 pm	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
2.00 pm	Portfolio Questions: Constitution, External Affairs and Culture, and Parliamentary Business; Justice and Home Affairs
<i>followed by</i>	Scottish Government Debate: UK Government Welfare Reforms
<i>followed by</i>	Business Motions
<i>followed by</i>	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
<i>followed by</i>	Approval of SSIs (if required)
5.00 pm	Decision Time
<i>followed by</i>	Members' Business

Thursday 24 April 2025

11.40 am	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
11.40 am	General Questions
12.00 pm	First Minister's Questions
<i>followed by</i>	Members' Business
2.30 pm	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
2.30 pm	Portfolio Questions: Education and Skills
<i>followed by</i>	Delegated Powers and Law Reform Committee Debate: Inquiry into Framework Legislation and Henry VIII Powers
<i>followed by</i>	Business Motions
<i>followed by</i>	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
5.00 pm	Decision Time

Tuesday 29 April 2025

2.00 pm Time for Reflection
followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions
followed by Topical Questions (if selected)
followed by Scottish Government Business
followed by Committee Announcements
followed by Business Motions
followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions
 5.00 pm Decision Time
followed by Members' Business

Wednesday 30 April 2025

2.00 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions
 2.00 pm Portfolio Questions:
 Deputy First Minister Responsibilities,
 Economy and Gaelic;
 Finance and Local Government
followed by Scottish Conservative and Unionist
 Party Business
followed by Business Motions
followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions
followed by Approval of SSIs (if required)
 5.10 pm Decision Time
followed by Members' Business

Thursday 1 May 2025

11.40 am Parliamentary Bureau Motions
 11.40 am General Questions
 12.00 pm First Minister's Questions
followed by Members' Business
 2.30 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions
 2.30 pm Portfolio Questions:
 Net Zero and Energy, and Transport
followed by Scottish Government Business
followed by Business Motions
followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions
 5.00 pm Decision Time

(b) that, for the purposes of Portfolio Questions in the week beginning 21 April 2025, in rule 13.7.3, after the word "except" the words "to the extent to which the Presiding Officer considers that the questions are on the same or similar subject matter or" are inserted.—[*Jamie Hepburn*]

The Presiding Officer: I call Miles Briggs to speak to and move amendment S6M-17059.1.

18:16

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): I speak in support of my amendment, which seeks to change the business programme motion by replacing the debate on the first Tuesday back on the international situation with a debate on addressing violence in schools.

I make no apology for again highlighting my concerns about the breakdown in discipline in our classrooms and the need for leadership from ministers to turn the situation around. Survey after survey by unions has revealed that teachers are being punched, kicked and spat at by pupils, being set upon by yobs wielding hockey sticks and broken glass, and having their cars vandalised.

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): Miles Briggs will have heard me asking the First Minister about the issue at First Minister's question time the week before last, when I mentioned that Scottish Liberal Democrats had revealed research that showed that, incident for incident, we are matching the trajectory of last year's terrible record-breaking figures on reports of violence in our schools.

Liberal Democrats will support Miles Briggs's amendment. Does he recognise that the situation is not getting any better?

Miles Briggs: I absolutely agree with Alex Cole-Hamilton on that. The recent NASUWT survey points to the evidence that he has put on record. The levels of violence in our classrooms and schools are totally unacceptable. There has been a surge in the number of assaults involving dangerous weapons on school campuses. We need to see action from ministers. The cabinet secretary acknowledged that only yesterday. Many incidents are also going unreported—

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): Miles Briggs is referring to the fact that, yesterday, in responding to a topical question on the subject, the cabinet secretary went to great lengths to say that she acknowledged that we need to have a full parliamentary debate on the matter in Government time. That is in the *Official Report*. What we are asking for is not simply a Conservative request; our request—that we should spend time in the chamber discussing violence in our schools rather than having a debate on reserved matters—has been made with the cabinet secretary's point of view in mind.

Miles Briggs: I absolutely agree. This is an area in which the Government needs to lead. The Government is not aware of the fact that many teachers and schools are not even aware of its national action plan. There are still no standards in place for the reporting and recording of incidents. That must be addressed with urgency.

The First Minister has said that gender-based violence in our society must be addressed. I agree. That is why we are calling on ministers and the Government to lead from the front and to make the issue a priority. Ministers must acknowledge that, in schools across our country, the Government's policies are failing and have led to

the concerning situation that we see in schools today.

Ministers must act urgently. That should start with ministers holding a debate on the subject in Parliament, which will enable us to look at the policies that are failing to address the situation. The Scottish Conservatives requested a ministerial statement on violence in schools over the weekend, ahead of the Parliamentary Bureau meeting, but the minister has committed only to providing one further down the line. That is not acceptable. Teachers cannot wait for ministers to do something further down the line. They need action now. Pupils, teachers, parents and unions are calling for visible and strong leadership from ministers on the issue, and I agree with them. We have not seen that to date.

The Scottish Parliament is here to debate the most pressing issues facing the people of Scotland. I do not think that anything is more pressing than violence in our schools—that is an issue that this Parliament has responsibility over and it is something that we must address. That is why it is of critical importance that we debate the issue of school violence and that ministers are held to account.

I move amendment S6M-17059.1, to leave out “The International Situation” and insert:

“Addressing Violence in Schools”.

18:20

The Minister for Parliamentary Business (Jamie Hepburn): The business motion proposes that, on 22 April, we hold a debate on the international situation, without a motion, to enable us to collectively consider the impact of geopolitical events as they affect Scotland.

We all recognise—and Mr Fraser mentioned several times—the potential for tariffs to have an impact on businesses in Scotland. We recognise that such matters will impact us in Scotland and it is right that the Parliament should have the ability to consider them. Only yesterday, the Parliamentary Bureau agreed to schedule such a debate.

Incidentally, I brought the proposal forward on the basis of a suggestion from another colleague at the time of the First Minister’s statement on Ukraine that a debate on that matter might have been appropriate at that stage. Having engaged with other colleagues, I am seeking to schedule that now. I hope that—

Stephen Kerr: Will the minister give way?

Jamie Hepburn: Of course I will.

Stephen Kerr: Does the Minister for Parliamentary Business at least acknowledge that

the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills was the one who said that there ought to be a full debate in Government time on the subject of violence in schools? All that we are asking for, on behalf of Scotland’s teachers, pupils and parents, is the opportunity to have that debate as soon as possible.

Jamie Hepburn: Mr Kerr is such an impatient fellow. Of course I was going to come to that matter, but he has asked me to come to it now.

Let us also reflect on the fact that it is very good of Mr Kerr to speak on behalf of the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills, because, of course, she cannot speak on her own behalf. We all rely on Mr Kerr to speak on everyone’s behalf.

Yes, the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills recognised that there should be a debate on the issue. We will schedule a debate on it. I have no problem with the Government bringing forward a debate on that issue.

Stephen Kerr: When?

Jamie Hepburn: I hear the question, “When?” That brings me on to process. The way in which we schedule business in this place is that business managers from each party come together at the Parliamentary Bureau to discuss what we should debate. We agree it there, and we put forward a business motion on behalf of the bureau to schedule the business. I will go to the bureau first to discuss the scheduling of that debate with business managers through our agreed normal processes.

I recognise the importance of the matter, but I say to all members that I am more than amenable to being approached by any member about such matters at any stage. I am more than willing to have a discussion about what we should schedule.

Mr Kerr has written to me on these matters—I will reply to him. At least he had the good grace to correspond with me. Mr Briggs, whose amendment we are debating, has not had the courtesy even to speak to me about the matter before he brought an amendment to the Parliament. That is not a serious way to schedule business.

Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con):
[*Made a request to intervene.*]

Jamie Hepburn: We have a process for scheduling business—we go through the bureau to schedule business, and then we agree it.

I will give way to Mr Ross.

Douglas Ross: Does the minister accept that there should be a principle in the Parliament that issues to be debated that are on devolved issues should take precedence over issues on reserved matters?

Jamie Hepburn: International matters will inevitably have an impact on devolved matters. The impact on energy prices will have an impact on devolved services in Mr Ross's area. Maybe he does not care about that—I care about it and I think that we should be debating it.

Let me make another point: we all have the opportunity to bring forward subjects for debate. The business motion before us also indicates that, on 30 April, the Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party will have the chance to bring forward a subject for debate. It can bring forward—*[Interruption.]* It can bring forward the issue for debate then, but I tell members—*[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Members!

Jamie Hepburn: I have accepted a request for, and I am committed to bringing forward, a debate in Government time. I will take the request to the bureau. We can agree it then, we will schedule it then and we will bring it back to the chamber and agree it at that point. However, lodging an amendment at this stage is, frankly, no more than performative nonsense.

The Presiding Officer: The question is, that amendment S6M-17059.1, in the name of Miles Briggs, which seeks to amend motion S6M-17059, in the name of Jamie Hepburn, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, setting out a business programme, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division. There will be a short suspension to allow members to access the digital voting system.

18:25

Meeting suspended.

18:28

On resuming—

The Presiding Officer: We come to the vote on amendment S6M-17059.1, in the name of Miles Briggs, which seeks to amend motion S6M-17059, in the name of Jamie Hepburn, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, setting out a business programme. Members should cast their votes now.

The vote is closed.

Tess White (North East Scotland) (Con): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. My app would not work. I would have voted yes.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, Ms White. We will ensure that that is recorded.

For

Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Eagle, Tim (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)

Against

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don-Innes, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)

Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP) [Proxy vote cast by Rona Mackay]
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP) [Proxy vote cast by Jamie Hepburn]
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

Abstentions

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Choudhury, Foyso (Lothian) (Lab)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green)
 Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on amendment S6M-17059.1, in the name of Miles Briggs, is: For 31, Against 60, Abstentions 26.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S6M-17059, in the name of Jamie Hepburn, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, setting out a business motion, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

The vote is closed.

Ben Macpherson (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I was not able to connect. I would have voted yes.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, Mr Macpherson. We will ensure that that is recorded.

Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I was not able to connect. I would have voted yes.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, Mr Marra. We will ensure that that is recorded.

Tess White: On a point of order, Presiding Officer. My app would not work. I would have voted no.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, Ms White. We will ensure that that is recorded.

For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Choudhury, Foyso (Lothian) (Lab)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don-Innes, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)

Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP) [Proxy vote cast by Rona Mackay]
 Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP) [Proxy vote cast by Jamie Hepburn]
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

Against

Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Eagle, Tim (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
 McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)

Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on motion S6M-17059, in the name of Jamie Hepburn, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, setting out a business motion, is: For 88, Against 28, Abstentions 0.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees—

(a) the following programme of business—

Tuesday 22 April 2025

2.00 pm	Time for Reflection
<i>followed by</i>	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
<i>followed by</i>	Topical Questions (if selected)
<i>followed by</i>	Scottish Government Debate: The International Situation
<i>followed by</i>	Committee Announcements
<i>followed by</i>	Business Motions
<i>followed by</i>	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
5.00 pm	Decision Time
<i>followed by</i>	Members' Business

Wednesday 23 April 2025

2.00 pm	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
2.00 pm	Portfolio Questions: Constitution, External Affairs and Culture, and Parliamentary Business; Justice and Home Affairs
<i>followed by</i>	Scottish Government Debate: UK Government Welfare Reforms
<i>followed by</i>	Business Motions
<i>followed by</i>	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
<i>followed by</i>	Approval of SSIs (if required)
5.00 pm	Decision Time
<i>followed by</i>	Members' Business

Thursday 24 April 2025

11.40 am	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
11.40 am	General Questions
12.00 pm	First Minister's Questions
<i>followed by</i>	Members' Business
2.30 pm	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
2.30 pm	Portfolio Questions: Education and Skills
<i>followed by</i>	Delegated Powers and Law Reform Committee Debate: Inquiry into Framework Legislation and Henry VIII Powers

<i>followed by</i>	Business Motions
<i>followed by</i>	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
5.00 pm	Decision Time
Tuesday 29 April 2025	
2.00 pm	Time for Reflection
<i>followed by</i>	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
<i>followed by</i>	Topical Questions (if selected)
<i>followed by</i>	Scottish Government Business
<i>followed by</i>	Committee Announcements
<i>followed by</i>	Business Motions
<i>followed by</i>	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
5.00 pm	Decision Time
<i>followed by</i>	Members' Business
Wednesday 30 April 2025	
2.00 pm	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
2.00 pm	Portfolio Questions: Deputy First Minister Responsibilities, Economy and Gaelic; Finance and Local Government
<i>followed by</i>	Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party Business
<i>followed by</i>	Business Motions
<i>followed by</i>	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
<i>followed by</i>	Approval of SSIs (if required)
5.10 pm	Decision Time
<i>followed by</i>	Members' Business
Thursday 1 May 2025	
11.40 am	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
11.40 am	General Questions
12.00 pm	First Minister's Questions
<i>followed by</i>	Members' Business
2.30 pm	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
2.30 pm	Portfolio Questions: Net Zero and Energy, and Transport
<i>followed by</i>	Scottish Government Business
<i>followed by</i>	Business Motions
<i>followed by</i>	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
5.00 pm	Decision Time

(b) that, for the purposes of Portfolio Questions in the week beginning 21 April 2025, in rule 13.7.3, after the word "except" the words "to the extent to which the Presiding Officer considers that the questions are on the same or similar subject matter or" are inserted.

Parliamentary Bureau Motions

18:32

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item of business is consideration of two Parliamentary Bureau motions. I ask Jamie Hepburn, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, to move motion S6M-17060, on approval of a Scottish statutory instrument, and motion S6M-17061, on designation of a lead committee.

Motions moved,

That the Parliament agrees that the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman Act 2002 Amendment Order 2025 [draft] be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that the Economy and Fair Work Committee be designated as the lead committee in consideration of the Community Wealth Building (Scotland) Bill at stage 1.—[*Jamie Hepburn*]

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

Decision Time

18:32

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): There is one question to be put as a result of today's business. Unless any member objects, I propose to ask a single question on two Parliamentary Bureau motions.

As no member objects, the question is, that motion S6M-17060, on approval of a Scottish statutory instrument, and motion S6M-17061, on designation of a lead committee, in the name of Jamie Hepburn, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, be agreed to.

Motions agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman Act 2002 Amendment Order 2025 [draft] be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that the Economy and Fair Work Committee be designated as the lead committee in consideration of the Community Wealth Building (Scotland) Bill at stage 1.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes decision time.

Scotland's Islands

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The final item of business is a members' business debate on motion S6M-16901, in the name of Jamie Halcro Johnston, on Scotland's islands. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament recognises what it sees as the social and economic importance and contribution of Scotland's islands, their residents and their businesses; further recognises what it considers are the challenges of living on and running a business on islands and delivering public services to island communities, but believes that islanders, including many from across the Highlands and Islands region, have remarkable entrepreneurship that has fostered advancements in a varied portfolio of sectors, including distilling, manufacturing, space exploration and a growing number of micro and social enterprises; values the distinctive and often unique cultural contribution of the islands to Scotland, the rest of the UK and the world; believes that island communities provide many opportunities, but notes concerns that they can face many unique challenges, including the threat of depopulation, without the provision of adequate housing, healthcare, transport links and connectivity.

17:34

Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I draw members' attention to my entry in the register of members' interests, which shows that I am a partner in a farming business in Orkney. I thank everybody who signed my motion, and I welcome all those in the public gallery—many of whom live and work in Scotland's islands—who represent island businesses across a variety of sectors, both in traditional areas and in newer technologies.

When I was young and at university in England, my friends used to ask me what living on a Scottish island was like. "Do you have roads?", they asked. Well, yes. "Do you have supermarkets?" Yes, of course we do. "Do you have electricity?" Well, most of the time. Without social media, misconceptions about our islands were perhaps more understandable then, but some remain today among the wider public and those in public life. That includes some politicians, who do not always fully comprehend some of the challenges of island life.

Today, I will take members on a journey to Scotland's island communities, which are scattered across the North Sea, the Atlantic and other areas. From Orkney and Shetland in the north to the Hebrides and Arran further south, and many more, these islands are more than just postcard scenery. They represent vibrant communities with unique economies and stubborn challenges, and some truly inspiring things are happening in those communities right now.

Scotland's inhabited islands, which are home to just over 100,000 people, rely on a mix of traditional and emerging industries. Fishing and farming have long been the backbone of many islands. In Shetland, where I was last week, the fishing fleet hauls in millions of pounds-worth of catch every year, while in Orkney, where I will be next week, our beef and lamb are prized across the United Kingdom. I say "our" because I am proud to be part of Orkney's farming community, which puts such brilliant produce on tables across the country.

The food and drink sector and the tourism sector are still big players. Distilleries on Islay, Jura and Raasay, to name but a few, produce whisky that is exported around the world and draws visitors globally. There are the wonders of Skara Brae in Orkney; the Callanish stones on Lewis and the Jarlshof in Shetland, which are world-renowned sites. Those traditional industries do not just keep the lights on; they are the lifeblood of island identity and a vital part of our island economies.

However—if members will excuse the pun—it is not all plain sailing. The challenges are real and they hit hard. Lack of connectivity is a perennial headache. Ferries are lifelines for our island communities, but ageing fleets, with many vessels in urgent need of replacement, have led to increased unreliability and amended schedules. That is most devastating on the Caledonian MacBrayne network, which serves the west coast. It is sometimes hard to really bring home to people who do not live on the islands the fact that delays and cancellations are not just inconvenient; they disrupt supply chains, healthcare access and local businesses.

Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD): I thank Jamie Halcro Johnston not just for taking my intervention but for securing the debate and for the work that he has been doing in the cross-party group on islands. He made the point about the importance of Orkney, Shetland and islands on the west coast to our food and drink, energy and tourism sectors. That suggests that any investments that are made, including those in transport and digital infrastructure, are about allowing not only our islands to fulfil their potential but Scotland to fulfil its potential. It is not about subsidising islands; it is about releasing their potential so that the country as a whole can fulfil its potential.

Jamie Halcro Johnston: I could not agree more with Liam McArthur. That point came up in the round-table sessions that we held in the Parliament today. Islands do not need handouts. They want to be supported in being given the opportunities to find a lot of the solutions and in making a massive contribution, as they already do,

to Scotland's wider economy. That is a really important point.

To return to the challenges, I note that there is also the threat of depopulation. Young people often leave for education or jobs on the mainland and do not come back, or they cannot come back because there are no homes available for them to move into. That can leave behind ageing communities, without the people who are needed to provide care for the ageing population. In Barra, for example, the population has shrunk by a third since the 1980s. If we add to that the high cost of living, fuel and food, as well as house prices, which are higher than they are in urban Scotland, we have a recipe for resilience being tested daily. Climate change looms large, too. Rising sea levels threaten low-lying areas such as parts of the Outer Hebrides, where storms batter infrastructure.

However, those challenges are not the whole story, because Scotland's islands are fighting back, and they are doing so with an ingenuity that is—to be frank—astonishing.

Let us talk about the amazing things that are happening. Renewable energy is a game changer. Orkney has become a global pioneer in green tech. Its tidal and wind projects generate more electricity than the islands can use, so surplus is exported to the mainland. The European Marine Energy Centre in Orkney is testing various wave and tidal devices that could power the world some day. The ReFLEX project has looked at how to better use renewable energy to link what is produced with demand, working to ensure more efficient use of energy and less waste.

However, Shetland is even more remarkable than that, because—again, I hope that members will excuse the pun—it is boldly going where no Scottish island has gone before. When I visited the proposed site of the SaxaVord spaceport, a year or so after I became an MSP, it was hard to picture it as anything more than a good place to keep sheep. However, the site on Unst now hosts the first fully licensed vertical launch spaceport in Europe, which is designed for small rockets to deliver payloads into low earth orbit. I did not want to overuse "Star Trek" references, but I am going to: Scotland's islands are pioneers in conquering space—the final frontier.

The islands also produce innovations in our food and drink sector. Arran's craft gin and Harris's tweed and gin combo are turning heritage into profit. As far as culture is concerned, the islands punch well above their weight. Shetland's Up Helly Aa fire festival draws thousands of people each year, while Gaelic music from the Hebrides will echo worldwide when the Western Isles hosts the Mòd in 2027. Skye is home to Sabhal Mòr Ostaig, Scotland's Gaelic college. The island is also where Ciorstaidh Beaton, who was judged musician of

the year at the 2024 Trad music awards, hails from. Members who come to this evening's islands showcase event after the debate will be able to hear Ciorstaidh play her harp.

Our islands produce amazing sportspeople, too. For modesty reasons, I will not highlight my own sporting successes—*[Interruption.]*—nor those of my fellow Orcadians Liam McArthur and Neil Gray, both of whom are laughing. However, my ancestor played for Scotland in one of the first rugby internationals, while Shetland hosted the island games in 2005. Orkney will host the same games in July, in only 100 days' time, when it will welcome athletes from island communities across the world.

More generally, Scotland's islanders have left these shores to explore the world. They include John Rae—a notable explorer, but one who has been much overshadowed, unfortunately. Many others have left Scotland—not always through choice, of course. Some of their descendants have reached remarkable heights. I understand that one such descendant has quite a big job in American politics at the moment, although today is perhaps not the best day to be hailing those connections.

However, that highlights that what ties all that together is the people. Island communities are tight knit and fiercely proud. They are not waiting for handouts; they are building solutions. Scotland's islands have an entrepreneurial spirit, with a can-do attitude that is often breathtaking.

Scotland's islands are a paradox: they are small in size, but their achievements and their potential for future success are massive. Their economies blend old and new, their challenges demand action, and their innovations light the way forward. They remind us that, even on the edges of a nation, big things can happen. Let us celebrate them, support them and learn from them.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We move to the open debate. I advise members that, given the late start to the debate, I expect everyone to stick to their agreed speaking time of up to four minutes.

18:42

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): I congratulate Jamie Halcro Johnston on securing the debate and sponsoring this evening's islands showcase event.

I am privileged to represent three inhabited islands. Arran's stunning scenery, with its mountains, forests, waterfalls and beaches, and its unique geology have led to its being dubbed "Scotland in miniature". Across Lamlash Bay, Holy Isle has a spiritual heritage dating from the 6th century and is now owned by a Tibetan Buddhist community. Last but not least is Cumbrae, on

which lies Millport, which has consistently been named one of Scotland's most charming towns. Arran's and Cumbrae's natural beauty, abundant outdoor activities and rich cultural heritage draw in many thousands of visitors each year. However, our islands are far more than picturesque landscapes and visit destinations. They host unique and vibrant communities that embody a strong sense of togetherness, where people grow up, grow old and build their lives.

That is not without its challenges, though. We need real improvements in lifeline ferry services. Arran and Cumbrae are more integrated with the mainland than many other islands are, but that is rarely recognised as it should be. For example, free interisland ferry travel was introduced for young people in Orkney, Shetland and the Outer Hebrides, but not in North Ayrshire, Argyll and Bute or the Highlands. For young islanders travelling from Brodick to Ardrossan, Millport to Largs and Iona to Mull, ferry routes are more akin to mainland bus ones, and such travel takes place wholly within their respective council areas. There is no fairness in only partially rolling out that policy.

On vessel deployment, there have been instances this year of the MV Glen Sannox being the sole vessel serving Arran from Ayrshire. As the ship cannot yet sail from Ardrossan, it sails from Troon, turning what should be a 55-minute journey into one lasting 80 minutes and reducing the number of possible return trips per day from five to three. Troon harbour's facilities are as poor as its accessibility. It is difficult for islanders and day trippers to travel to that part of the mainland and back in one day for appointments or a meaningful visit. The people of Arran look forward to the return of the MV Caledonian Isles and the restoration of services from Ardrossan, which it is hoped will happen later this month. Ardrossan's harbour is far superior to Troon's, not least for its public transport links, and local communities need certainty over Ardrossan harbour's long-term future.

Although I very much welcomed the cabinet secretary's announcement, made 43 days ago, that the Scottish Government will work to bring the port into public ownership, we need to see results sooner rather than later. So far, we have no indication of when the seemingly open-ended discussions with Peel Ports will conclude or who is negotiating on behalf of the Government. I trust that the minister will advise members of that in his summing-up speech.

Although the journey time from Cumbrae to Largs is only 10 minutes, the island is only one engine fault away from hours-long queues. The delivery of seven new small vessels through phase 1 of the small vessel replacement programme will benefit the island through the

cascading of existing ferries, with a new vessel for Cumbrae expected thereafter. An update on that would be appreciated.

Despite the challenges, our islands are home to remarkable innovation and ambition, with businesses, social enterprises and volunteers leading the way. Distilleries in Lochranza and Lagg produce whiskies that are celebrated internationally. Arran Dairies ice cream and Taste of Arran are high-quality produce brands that are recognised from Brodick to Houston, Texas. Auchrannie is a testament to the success of community-focused business models. As Scotland's first employee-owned resort, it provides an exceptional service while ensuring that its success is shared with the local community.

Arran Development Trust is building—and has almost completed—18 affordable homes, with a £1,512,000 grant from the Scottish Government. As part of the carbon-neutral islands project, Cumbrae has already delivered substantial results, including a 330 per cent increase in rooftop solar energy generating capacity and £600,000 in energy efficiencies. Cumbrae Community Development Company continues to enhance the island's appeal through community-driven projects such as the regeneration of Millport town hall. Its efforts are focused on improving local amenities and creating vibrant spaces that benefit both residents and visitors.

Scotland's islands have an incredible amount to offer. It is no surprise that they are consistently identified as being among our happiest communities and the best places in which to grow old or raise children. Their strong community bonds and stunning natural environments create an unparalleled quality of life. By supporting such communities, we can ensure that future generations of islanders can continue to thrive, thereby preserving the unique heritage and spirit of our islands for years and years to come.

18:46

Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con):

It is a pleasure to speak in the debate. I congratulate Jamie Halcro Johnston on securing it and the way in which he has opened it, the work that he has done in the lead-up to today and the round-table meetings that were held this afternoon. I expect that the reception that the Parliament will host later this evening will be very successful. I welcome to the gallery members of the public who have come from Scotland's various islands to hear their Parliament discuss issues that are important to them.

It is my privilege, as a member for the Highlands and Islands, to represent so many island communities. Ahead of the debate, I was reflecting

on some of the highlights that I have experienced as I have gone around the islands that I represent. Up in Lerwick, in Shetland, I met skippers from our pelagic fleet and heard about the challenges that they face, but also about their opportunities. I have seen the amazing, world-leading marine energy technologies that are being developed in Orkney. Although a taxi driver in the Western Isles abused me about a decision that I had given in an old firm match, I was pleased that my notoriety as a referee had reached the islands from the pitches in Glasgow. Everywhere you go in the Highlands and Islands, even when you are being criticised for something, you will always get a friendly and welcome reception.

However, it is important that we consider the challenges that islands face. Kenny Gibson was right to mention the problems with ferry services in his constituency, which are often raised with those of us who represent the Highlands and Islands. Jamie Halcro Johnston touched on depopulation, which I am sure the minister will mention, too. I was looking at National Records for Scotland data that shows that more than one in 10 residents of the Orkney islands of North Ronaldsay, Sanday and Stronsay, which together make up one data zone, left there between 2010 and 2015. Meanwhile, the proportion of residents in the islands who were aged 65 or older grew at twice the rate of those aged 16 and under. Not only are people leaving the islands; those who remain tend to be older. We are not getting enough younger people to come to the islands, but they are vital to ensuring that we can keep those places vibrant and, in turn, encourage more young people and families to come to them.

My family is a big fan of the television programme "This Farming Life". We are watching the current series, which features a family from up in Papa Westray, who have their own challenges. The mother had to leave the island, with her family, to give birth to her fourth child. That programme is helpful in that it shows the amazing benefits of living in our more remote and rural island communities. We should be very proud of them, and we should promote them more.

Jamie Halcro Johnston mentioned the spaceport. To anyone else, it would be almost incredible to suggest that a spaceport is being built in the most northerly part of the most northerly isles in Scotland, but that area has really taken on board the benefits of the spaceport. It could be leading not only for Scotland and the rest of the UK but for that type of satellite across Europe and around the world.

There is so much that we could say about our island communities and what they offer to Scotland. This debate is a great opportunity and, along with the round-table meetings that Jamie

Halcro Johnston and other MSPs have been hosting, it should feed into what the Government will, I hope, continue to do to promote island communities.

However, Scotland is about not only what happens here in the capital or in our major cities; Scotland is the sum of all its parts, and our islands play a crucial part in what we are famous for, what we are regarded for and what we benefit from in relation to how we can draw people in from across the world. Our islands punch well above their weight. We should celebrate them, as we are doing in the chamber now and as we will do at tonight's reception in the Parliament, but we should not do so only on occasions like this. We should celebrate them all year round and give them our support to ensure that they can continue to thrive well into the future.

18:51

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab):

I, too, thank Jamie Halcro Johnston for securing the debate. I also thank him and the islands cross-party group for organising the islands showcase event in Parliament today. I pay tribute to all those who attended that, many of whom are in the gallery. It was a pleasure to meet them and to be part of the day.

Our islands are special places and island living is unique. People have to be resilient to be able to live their lives buffeted by weather and transport restrictions. They need to take those inconveniences in their stride—which I had to learn when I was first elected to represent most of Scotland's populated islands. I remember that I spent more time flying over Shetland before I ever landed there. Thereafter, I experienced countless flight and ferry cancellations, which are a common occurrence for our islanders.

In the early days, that was stressful. I had arranged meetings, and the people who I was due to meet were being inconvenienced, because I had not shown up. However, I soon realised that I did not need to worry, as islanders are used to that. They are flexible and resilient, and they live in strong interdependent communities. Every day involves collaborating and co-operating with others to get things done.

In recent years, the ageing Clyde and Hebrides ferry fleet has left communities abandoned. I had a case recently of a mother who was unable to get her children on a ferry when the youngest needed to attend a hospital appointment. CalMac's response was that there was no question of mother and child missing the appointment, as they were both booked on the ferry. However, that begged the question of what was going to happen to the other three children, in their mother's

absence for a number of days. That is simply not good enough. The community in Barra is now looking for legal advice on lifeline services and whether the inability to travel is, indeed, illegal.

Many of our islands suffer depopulation, which is little wonder, if the Government does not provide lifeline services that are fit for purpose. Connectivity, in every sense, is essential. Although the roll-out of broadband continues, smaller communities—many on islands—are being left behind. I previously asked the Scottish Government to allow such communities to use the voucher scheme collectively, along with support from local authorities, but that was rejected. We simply cannot leave people to depend on satellite broadband because, although quality and speed are improving, it is much more expensive, and there is no choice in providers.

In addition to those issues, islands suffer the highest rates of fuel poverty because they are off the gas grid. Draughty old croft houses are hard to heat and need to be upgraded. That would cut fuel bills, as well as making them compatible with more renewable heating alternatives. Sadly, however, approved contractors are few and far between locally, as accreditation takes place in urban areas. The cost of sending staff on courses for that purpose is prohibitive, and hence small local companies cannot carry out the work even if it is grant aided. That cuts out local companies, but it also substantially increases the cost of insulation, as people have to use a travelling workforce to the islands.

Those issues are not difficult to address, but it will take a shift in mindset, from that of a simple tick-box exercise and thinking that the market will provide, to one that understands island communities and works with them to find solutions. I hope that those who represented island communities here today found the event helpful, and that it opens up channels of communication that allow policy makers to have a greater understanding of island life, and islanders to have more influence on policy.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Ariane Burgess joins us remotely.

18:55

Ariane Burgess (Highlands and Islands) (Green): I thank Jamie Halcro Johnston for securing this debate. I am sorry that I could not be in Parliament today for the round-table event and tonight's wonderful celebrations.

It is often said that Scotland is an island nation, but it is not. It is a nation of islands—790 to be exact, some supporting populations of 21,000 and others with as few as seven people. Then there is, of course, the uninhabited majority, which are

home to vital ecosystems made up of Scotland's flora and fauna. Not only do the islands offer invaluable glimpses into our past, with sites such as Skara Brae in Orkney showing that the history of people in Scotland stretches back at least 5,000 years, but they show us what our future can be, for both our islands and those living on the mainland.

The islands show us that we can all live in ways that work with, rather than against, nature, and in ways that offer a constructive community and cultural identity and a true sense of place and belonging, which can sometimes be lacking in other parts of Scotland. I have been lucky enough to see that for myself, be that at Aird Fada seaweed farm on Mull, which is a community-owned project that produces foodstuffs as well as non-plastic packaging, and offers career opportunities to young people; or Hope Cohousing in Orkney, which is a community-led initiative that has shown a great deal of heart in its bid to build a supportive community for island elders.

All of that brings me to the motion that we are discussing today. I share both the pride and the concern contained within it, but I must say that there are two common threads that it does not mention, both of which underpin the unique challenges facing islanders. Those are the climate crisis—which I was glad to hear Jamie Halcro Johnston mention in his contribution—and the human rights crisis.

Our rapidly changing climate is a major barrier for island economies. To take just one example, more frequent bad weather is one of the biggest reasons why the ferries do not run on time. When they are not running as they should be, islanders are stuck away from home and left out of pocket; fresh food and other vital goods do not arrive; and business supply chains are thrown into disarray. Although we cannot solve the climate crisis overnight, we can end the near daily human rights injustices that islanders have to put up with—whether that is lack of affordable housing or having to live in damp and mouldy homes, poor access to the internet, or overtourism hoovering up vital resources such as food and accommodation.

To solve those issues, I would like the Scottish Government to properly invest in our island communities; to pursue net zero through continuing to support the carbon neutral islands initiative and rolling out its findings to other islands; to design services for islands and communities first; and to put human rights front and centre in its island-related policies.

Islanders must be able to feel that their communities and culturally valuable identities are secure, that they can afford the cost of living, access decent jobs that support people to work with, rather than against, nature, and get good

education for their kids. They must also know that the Scottish Government is doing everything that it can to tackle the climate emergency. As I have said in the chamber before, if we can get it right for islanders, we can get it right for everyone in Scotland.

18:59

Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD): I thank the convener of the CPG on islands, Jamie Halcro Johnston, for bringing this important debate to the chamber this evening.

Those of us who live in the islands know of the exciting and challenging activities that happen around us. In the CPG on islands, we are able to learn more about life across all of Scotland's islands. Today, those islands are being showcased at a round-table event and reception, and in this debate, which is an excellent opportunity to highlight their successes to a wider audience. As deputy convener of the islands CPG, I know that today's events would not have been possible without the hard work of the secretariat, the exhibitors and those sponsoring travel, and without lots of work behind the scenes. I thank all those involved for making today's events happen.

There is a resilience and community spirit among those who live in Scotland's islands. As today's events highlight, the islands are home to local businesses, innovation and entrepreneurship of all kinds and sizes, forged with passion and island tenaciousness and, in some cases, developed from necessity—the can-do attitude that Jamie Halcro Johnston spoke of.

Space is Shetland's new frontier. Unst, the UK's most northerly inhabited island, is host to the SaxaVord spaceport and satellite launch facilities—a vision born of an entrepreneur with steely determination who could see the enormous potential for Unst, for Shetland, for the country and, indeed, for the world. Today's modern life is impossible without satellites. Think of all that we access on our mobile phones through maps and apps. With growing global interest in the satellite launch market, the spaceport development is in the right place at the right time.

Shetland is also represented at the island showcase by the Community Development Company of Nesting, which supports local communities with a food bank, a gym and a business studio. Shetland Jewellery is a 70-year-old firm that designs and manufactures jewellery locally that is inspired by Shetland's scenery and heritage. Shetland Aerogenerators is a family-run company that is at the forefront of developing wind farms and energy sites. Its Burradale wind farm is considered to be the most productive wind farm in the world per unit of installed capacity.

Lerwick Port Authority operates Shetland's principal commercial port, which is built around a natural harbour that has offered shelter to many seafarers over the centuries. It is vital for fish landings, as a hub for North Sea oil activities and, with a deepwater quay, for decommissioning. It can accommodate any size of vessel, from small yachts to cruise ships, bringing in thousands of visitors. What happens in Lerwick harbour is like a barometer of the Shetland economy.

Other MSPs have tonight highlighted exhibitors from their local areas across the island groups. I often come to the chamber and highlight the islands' economic contribution and how we punch well above our weight. There could be an even greater contribution, with more investment in the islands to support businesses and local communities.

It would be disingenuous not to allude to the challenges that the motion touches on. Island living can be hard and is threatened by depopulation. That is an interconnected and complex issue but one that could be addressed with greater investment in the islands' infrastructure. Digital connectivity lags behind that in urban areas, and it stifles economic growth and education. Lack of housing, along with unreliable and expensive transport connectivity, deters people from living and working in the islands. In the Faroe Islands, the development of a tunnel network connecting the islands has reversed depopulation. It is no secret that I have been advocating for tunnels for some time, because I see their enormous potential for Shetland.

Scotland's islands might be off the coast, offshore or even out of sight, but they are a huge part of Scottish life and, like sparkling gems, we must protect and cherish them.

19:03

Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP): I congratulate Jamie Halcro Johnston on securing the debate, and I note his comments regarding the islands. As a Highlands and Islands MSP, I would not have expected anything less from him. We all know that our islands are vital for the country. As all speakers so far have highlighted, our islands contribute a great deal to the country and are not short of ambition.

Kenneth Gibson touched on the challenges. I recognise the challenges, particularly with regard to the delay in the delivery of the Glen Sannox, and I whole-heartedly support Kenneth Gibson's consistent calls, and those of local campaigners and other MSPs, to get the deal with Peel Ports over the line to ensure that the port at Ardrossan gets the investment that it sorely needs. In the debate that I led two weeks ago in the chamber on

the Peel Ports conservancy fee proposals for the River Clyde, there was a unified voice throughout the chamber. We all recognise the damage that the proposals would do to the Clyde and that the Harbours Act 1964 should be updated to ensure that the stewardship of our ports and harbours is removed from the private sector.

The updating of the harbours legislation will provide a more joined-up approach, certainly with regard to islands in the west. I do not know about other areas, but colleagues from elsewhere might be able to indicate whether that might improve issues in other parts of the country, including the islands.

At the end, the motion notes concerns that the islands

"can face many unique challenges, including the threat of depopulation, without the provision of adequate housing, healthcare, transport links and connectivity."

I do not at all disagree with those comments, but I gently remind members that depopulation is not solely an islands issue. The Scottish Government action plan to address depopulation, which was published in February 2024, highlighted that Inverclyde faces the most acute depopulation challenge between 2018 and 2028, at minus 5.1 per cent.

The issue is not new—it has been going on since the early 1980s. In the past, Jamie Halcro Johnston and I have debated what happened to industry in my community. We have rehearsed that before, so I do not need to go into it any further today. However, I genuinely recognise the challenges that islanders, businesses and communities face, and I support the calls to assist the islands as much as possible. I genuinely do not want the same mistakes to be made in relation to island communities as have happened in other parts of Scotland.

Kenneth Gibson touched on the part of the motion that deals with transport links, which I highlighted a moment ago. I will address that head on. The delay in the delivery of vessels has not been positive for our islands—nor, certainly, for the shipyard in my constituency. The workforce of Ferguson Marine has apologised on many occasions. Those workers are also visitors to the islands, so they know how challenging the delays have become. That is not the record that they want to have. Before liquidation in 2014, the record was excellent. The current board and management need to turn the yard back to being efficient. Strong leadership is needed so that the yard—whether in public or private ownership—can build vessels for the future for many years to come.

Jamie Halcro Johnston touched on some of the challenges, but he also touched on the

opportunities that our islands now have. He touched on EMEC, which I went to see a number of years ago as part of a parliamentary inquiry and which was a fascinating experience. As members can imagine, EMEC can only grow the economy in Orkney, and I whole-heartedly support it.

I am conscious of time. I again thank Jamie Halcro Johnston for securing the debate, which is important and has certainly been interesting, given in particular some of the contributions from across the parties.

19:07

The Minister for Agriculture and Connectivity (Jim Fairlie): I genuinely congratulate Jamie Halcro Johnston on enabling the debate, as well as the other members who have taken the time to participate. Scotland's islands contribute enormously to our society, economy and global reputation.

I have made several visits to island communities since my appointment—most recently, to Lewis, Harris and Skye to talk to crofters and, over the summer of last year, to Islay, Mull and Arran. As a result, I have found an even greater fondness for the band Skipinnish, whose lyrics and musical prowess capture the spirit of the islands, which I had not previously appreciated. That band and others, such as the raucous and hugely entertaining Peat and Diesel, as well as the haunting voice of Julie Fowles absolutely capture that real sense of belonging—of being at one with the land or the sea, and a sense of community and family. Those things have been apparent and tangible in all my engagements with islanders over the years, whether they were involved in tourism, hospitality, crofting, farming, fishing or the arts and culture. The island sense of community is enviable.

However, there is also an entrepreneurialism that sits comfortably with that island community spirit. Indeed, island economies are built on the mix of innovation and tradition that spawns from all those things—from fishing and crofting to distilling and the arts and, now, opportunities for renewables and space technologies, as has been mentioned by a number of contributors, including Jamie Halcro Johnston at the start of the debate. Many of our island entrepreneurs will attend the showcase event this evening, including those who deal with food and drink, which is a particular passion of mine.

As members have underlined, there is much to celebrate about the economic strengths of our island communities. Still, as members have also heard, it is critical that we continue to address the challenges that they face. The Scottish Government is committed to doing all that we can

to ensure that island enterprises can continue to grow and flourish.

The Government is immensely proud of its islands legislation, which was an unprecedented step forward in acknowledging that our islands merit a bespoke legislative framework. Through the introduction of island communities impact assessments, the Islands (Scotland) Act 2018 requires public authorities to consider the specific circumstances of island communities while carrying out their functions.

In 2019, we published Scotland's first-ever national islands plan. Many of the commitments included in the plan concern island economic development. In our 2023 islands survey, I was particularly heartened to see a sharp increase in the number of respondents who stated that their business is expanding, which is very encouraging.

I also acknowledge the results of the public consultation that we carried out to review the plan. Respondents told us that it is time for a new and strengthened plan to be put in place—one that places even greater emphasis on delivery and that focuses on measures to accelerate positive change, not least in relation to economic growth. That is what we are working on now, in close partnership with communities and local authorities.

The new plan will reflect the incredibly important role that islands play in Scotland's transition to a green economy. During his visit to Orkney last February, the First Minister announced a £5 million grant for new harbour facilities at Scapa Flow. We have also invested £33.7 million in the Stornoway deepwater terminal project, which can unlock a substantial pipeline of green energy investments. Those developments must produce tangible benefits to the communities that are hosting them.

Our carbon neutral islands project gives communities a leading role in reducing emissions in a way that is suitable for their circumstances and that creates economic opportunities. We have already invested £5.2 million in the project, and I am pleased that the 2025-26 budget allocates another £2.5 million to its continuation.

Tourism is a critical sector for our island communities, but it remains vulnerable to seasonal variations, travel disruption and unpredictable weather. That is why the non-domestic rates relief of up to 100 per cent for hospitality businesses on islands will continue in 2025, which will result in roughly 100,000 properties being taken out of rates altogether.

Through the rural tourism infrastructure fund, we have invested more than £4 million in island projects since 2018. The 2025-26 budget maintains £4 million of extra funding for island local authorities in lieu of the review of the special

islands needs allowance. It also includes £20 million to support Orkney and Shetland interisland connectivity. Another £5.3 million of capital has been allocated to the islands programme, helping the development of critical island infrastructure. We will continue to work with local government partners to deliver the cost crisis emergency fund in support of the most vulnerable island households.

We are investing £50 million in the islands growth deal and £25 million in the recently signed Argyll and Bute rural growth deal. Alongside the UK Government and regional partners, we are supporting economic growth among island communities.

In celebrating the successes of our islands economy, we recognise the enduring importance of our land-based and marine industries. Agriculture accounts for a higher share of businesses, turnover and employment on islands than it does in Scotland as a whole. We are committed to supporting the island crofters and farmers through a range of schemes, including the crofting agricultural grant scheme and croft house grant.

Running an island business, regardless of size and sector, is not without its challenges. Kenneth Gibson and Stuart McMillan both talked about the issues around Ardrrossan. I absolutely accept that there are on-going issues, and the cabinet secretary is dealing with them. I also agree with Kenneth Gibson about Auchrannie—my visit there during the summer was absolutely fantastic.

I hope that the decision that Douglas Ross got pulled up for in the Western Isles was the right decision. He also talked about folk leaving the islands, which has been happening for generations. I go back to Skipinnish, who talk about people having left the islands and then being called back home again. I would very much aspire to that as well.

Rhoda Grant talked about fuel poverty, and I agree that it is not acceptable that island communities will host the infrastructure that will create the energy but will then pay some of the highest energy prices in the country.

I apologise for not mentioning other members' contributions, but I am rapidly running out of time.

Yesterday saw the introduction of free ferry travel for under-22s in Orkney, Shetland and the Western Isles. We also continue to invest in housing. Over the past three years, we have invested £15 million in housing in the Western Isles, delivering more than 180 affordable homes, and £10 million in Orkney, delivering more than 130 homes. In Argyll and Bute, the rural and islands housing fund has invested just under £5 million to deliver 31 affordable homes on Mull,

Colonsay, Ulva and Gigha, in addition to projects delivered through the affordable housing supply programme.

It is vital that we continue to act across Government and work across the chamber to ensure that our islands remain economically vibrant. We need to apply an islands lens to our work and be guided by islanders in understanding how best we can support their ambitions.

I conclude by reiterating the Scottish Government's absolute commitment to support, champion and invest in our islands, and a commitment to the folk who live there.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes the debate.

Meeting closed at 19:15.

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