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Thursday 9 February 2023

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Scottish Parliament

Thursday 9 February 2023

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

General Question Time

Women Murdered by Partner or Ex-partner

1. Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government, of the recorded homicide figures in 2021-22, what percentage of women murdered were killed by a partner or ex-partner. (S6O-01892)

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Veterans (Keith Brown): The number of homicide victims in 2021-22 reduced from 59 to 53, the lowest recorded number since comparable records began. Despite that overall reduction, the number of female victims increased from 10 to 16, meaning that 30 per cent of victims in 2021-22 were female. Over half—56 per cent—of female victims were killed by a partner or ex-partner.

We are working on developing a multi-agency domestic homicide review model for Scotland through the recently established domestic homicide review task force. The model will aim to learn lessons to help prevent and reduce the number of homicides related to domestic abuse and to give a voice to those who have been killed.

Ruth Maguire: I welcome the Scottish Government's commitment to domestic homicide reviews. Can the cabinet secretary give a bit more of an update on progress on that model? Is there scope for widening it or looking at a similar type of process where a victim of domestic abuse who is known to services loses her life prematurely but no charges are brought?

Keith Brown: As I outlined in my initial reply, we have established a task force that will meet for the second time in March. We will also hold a workshop with key multi-agency partners later this month as part of a deep dive into what a domestic homicide review model for Scotland might look like. That will inevitably include a discussion around scope, as the member has raised, and I am sure that the issues that she has raised will be part of that discussion. I will certainly ensure that the member's comments are taken into consideration as that work progresses. I am also happy to keep the member informed of the group's progress.

Pam Gosal (West Scotland) (Con): The crime of men murdering women is one of the worst crimes that can possibly be committed. My

thoughts are with all the loved ones who lost a woman who was close to their heart last year. The perpetrators of these crimes deserve the harshest possible punishment. Therefore, does the cabinet secretary agree that we should have whole-life sentences so that judges have the power to order men who murder women to spend the rest of their lives behind bars?

Keith Brown: No, I believe that the sentences that the courts currently have the powers to hand down are sufficient for the purposes that have been described. I do, however, associate myself with the comments made by the member in relation to the horrendous nature of the crime that is being perpetrated, especially by partners of female victims.

It might be the case that 70 per cent of the victims of homicide are men, but it is men who are committing those crimes, as well as the crimes against women. It is really important to tackle this in a preventative manner, as well as making sure that people are properly sentenced; prevention is about thinking about things such as education, including our equally safe strategy.

All members of the Scottish Parliament go into schools regularly. When I do, I reinforce the message that when stereotypes and entitlement start in schools, that is when misogyny starts, and that is what can end up in these terrible figures. I hope that all members take the opportunity to do that because we all have a part to play in relation to this issue.

Local Governance Review

2. Paul McLennan (East Lothian) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government when it will publish the findings of the local governance review. (S6O-01893)

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice, Housing and Local Government (Shona Robison): The Scottish Government remains committed to concluding the local governance review within this session of Parliament, and will continue to work on it in close partnership with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities.

Paul McLennan: The local governance review is one stream of many feeding into Scotland's programme to empower communities and deepen local democracy. I welcome the shared approach of the Scottish Government and COSLA to the improved delivery of sustainable public services. Can the cabinet secretary indicate what progress has been made in that regard?

Shona Robison: We are keen to work with local government on key shared mutual priorities: tackling child poverty and transforming the economy to deliver net zero, as well as sustaining our collective focus in the Covid recovery strategy

on addressing the systemic inequalities made worse through Covid and the cost of living crisis.

A new deal for local government is at the heart of the approach, which comprises a fiscal framework and an outcomes-focused partnership agreement. Those will ensure that there is a clear link between fiscal empowerment for local government and achieving the outcomes that we jointly want for our communities, and that we work with communities to ensure that we deliver their priorities.

Education Maintenance Allowance

3. Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what action it has taken to promote uptake of the education maintenance allowance programme. (S6O-01894)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Shirley-Anne Somerville): We remain committed to providing EMA financial support to eligible young people from lower-income households in order to help them to overcome financial barriers to accessing and staying in learning. Our delivery partners are responsible for raising awareness of the programme at a local level and we work closely with them to ensure that the EMA is promoted effectively.

Clare Adamson: I have been contacted by numerous constituents who have yet to receive feedback on applications that they submitted to North Lanarkshire Council in August. I believe that some applicants have left school as a result of not being able to maintain their education due to financial concerns. It concerns me that any young person is left without the vital support of the EMA. Is the cabinet secretary aware of those problems with the administration of the EMA in North Lanarkshire? If so, what action can be taken to address those issues, as we must get it right for every child and young person?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Clare Adamson has raised a concerning issue. Officials are engaging with colleagues in North Lanarkshire Council in order to resolve any issues. I have asked that they report back to me so that I can be reassured that every young person who is eligible for and has applied for the EMA is receiving that key support. I am happy to report back to the member with further details as that engagement continues.

Benefits Devolution and Development

4. Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government when it will update the Parliament on the future of benefits devolution and development, including any proposals for industrial injuries benefits. (S6O-01895)

The Minister for Social Security and Local Government (Ben Macpherson): On Tuesday, I was pleased to set out to the Parliament the timeline for the delivery of the next phase of the Scottish Government's benefits. As I informed the Parliament, in the next few months I intend to consult on employment injuries assistance and matters regarding the replacement of the current United Kingdom Government's industrial injuries disablement benefit.

Michael Marra: I am concerned that the Government seems to be focusing a little too much on what it cannot do on industrial injuries benefits, rather than on what it can do right now. The easiest way is for it to be decided in Scotland who qualifies for the benefit. Does the minister agree that those decisions should be made in Scotland? To that end, will he commit to supporting my colleague Mark Griffin's proposed Scottish employment injuries advisory council bill and will he work to ensure that the council has the ability to designate new industrial injuries, including brain injuries sustained by footballers who I have been working with?

Ben Macpherson: As I set out to the Parliament on Tuesday, employment injuries assistance is a complex area. It is important that we work with stakeholders and members to decide the right approach, recognising the limits on our devolved powers in relation to issues such as health and safety and employment law. We also need to recognise the substantial costs and operational requirements of a new benefit, as well as the challenges of moving from an antiquated and entirely paper-based UK benefit. For context, the UK's scheme was established in 1948 and has undergone only limited reform since its introduction. I am pleased to say that the Department for Work and Pensions remains committed to working with us to agree an approach that is practical, affordable and in the interests of people, including the current recipients of the benefit.

It is right that we take the appropriate time to consider those issues thoroughly. I have engaged with the proposals that Mark Griffin has put forward and I have met with him and look forward to doing so again, but we also need to be mindful that it is important to consider the establishment of a Scottish advisory council in the round of the consultation activity that I referred to in my first answer, rather than in isolation. With regard to Mr Marra's point about footballers, I would be happy to receive any correspondence from him on that matter.

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): Question 5 has not been lodged.

Scottish Fire and Rescue Service (Discussions)

6. Annabelle Ewing (Cowdenbeath) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government when it last met representatives of the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service, and what was discussed. (S6O-01897)

The Minister for Community Safety (Elena Whitham): I met the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service board chair and acting chief officer on 1 February. A range of matters was discussed, including the tragic loss of firefighter Barry Martin; firefighter pay and industrial action; the Fire Brigades Union's decontamination campaign; finance and SFRS budgets; and fire safety and enforcement.

Annabelle Ewing: I associate myself with the minister's remarks about Barry Martin, who was from Rosyth, and express my sincere condolences to his family and to the fire service.

Will the minister take the opportunity to welcome the FBU's constructive approach to the collective bargaining process, which has resulted in potential strikes being called off while members are balloted on a new pay offer? What lessons can be learned for the future to ensure fair pay for our heroic firefighters and for control room staff?

Elena Whitham: Like Annabelle Ewing, I very much welcome the fact that progress has been made through established collective bargaining arrangements and that strike action has been averted. I emphasise that the Scottish Government is not part of any negotiations on firefighter pay, which is rightly a matter for the SFRS, as the employer, but I am sure that the SFRS, along with the other fire and rescue employers and the FBU, will look carefully at the process to ensure that lessons are learned for the future.

Russell Findlay (West Scotland) (Con): The loss of Barry Martin reminds us of the dangers that our firefighters face. I support all efforts to establish the facts of the tragedy so that others can be prevented.

Scotland's most senior fire officer, Martin Blunden, quit his job five months after being suspended from duty, but the public and firefighters have been kept in the dark about what happened. A whistleblower has now contacted me with allegations regarding a culture of cronyism and bullying in the fire service. I wrote to the minister today to set out in detail what is alleged.

Was the minister aware of those claims? Will she give a commitment to provide a full and transparent response?

Elena Whitham: I thank Russell Findlay for bringing that matter to the chamber and will look at the letter that he has sent me. Staff conduct is a

matter for the SFRS board, but I am happy to discuss the issue with Mr Findlay.

Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): I also associate myself with Annabelle Ewing's comments about the death of Barry Martin, and I place on the record my thanks to the SFRS for its contribution to rescue and relief efforts in Turkey.

Following her meeting last week, will the minister give an update on what steps are under way to address aspects of the FBU's DECON campaign, particularly the call for health screenings, so that all current and former firefighters can keep themselves safe from the health risks that they face on the job?

Elena Whitham: Like Maggie Chapman, I place on the record my thanks to the firefighters who are in Turkey and Syria at the moment on behalf of the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service.

On 2 February, I met Scottish Fire Brigades Union officials and Professor Anna Stec of the University of Central Lancashire to hear directly about their important campaign and the emerging evidence. I have also arranged a dedicated meeting with the SFRS later this month so that I can be briefed on the steps that it is taking to minimise firefighters' exposure to harmful contaminants and can more clearly understand the proposals for enhanced health screening. I will carefully consider those proposals when I receive them to ensure that the Scottish Government is playing its part in keeping our firefighters safe.

Outdoor Education (Children and Young People)

7. Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what recent assessment it has made of the value of outdoor education to children and young people. (S6O-01898)

The Minister for Children and Young People (Clare Haughey): Outdoor education has a range of benefits, such as connecting young people with the natural world, supporting their wellbeing and developing their skills for life, learning and work. Regarding recent assessments, His Majesty's Inspectorate of Education's thematic inspection of outdoor learning, which was published in February 2022, reiterated those benefits and concluded that "increasingly, outdoor environments are being used to deliver the curriculum".

Jamie Greene: I could not agree more with those comments, but those benefits cannot be reaped if outdoor education centres close. Arran Outdoor Education Centre is a wonderful facility that has been offering services to young people in North Ayrshire for a considerable time but, like

many outdoor education centres, it is staring down the barrel of closure due to funding cuts by local councils.

Will the minister give serious consideration to the proposal by my colleague Liz Smith to enshrine in law much-needed access to outdoor education? Is there anything that the Government can do to intervene directly to ensure that the facility on Arran remains open and free to access for young people from across my region?

Clare Haughey: I thank Mr Greene for those follow-up questions. In relation to Liz Smith's proposed private member's bill on residential outdoor education, the Government is currently reviewing the final bill proposal. As with any new legislative proposal, stakeholders' views must be taken into account, and the full range of consequences, costs and options must be explored. We are reviewing those perspectives, the various costs and the potential impacts before deciding on our position on the bill.

I am aware of the potential closure of Arran Outdoor Education Centre, which is one of a range of options that North Ayrshire Council has consulted on. My understanding is that the council is still in the process of finalising its budget proposals and will not make final decisions until 1 March. As Mr Greene is aware, local authorities are accountable to the public that elects them, and they have the financial freedom to operate independently, taking into account local need. However, I reiterate that the Scottish Government values the many forms of outdoor learning, including the specific role of residential centres.

2032 Affordable Housing Target

8. Stephanie Callaghan (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on progress towards its 2032 affordable housing target. (S6O-01899)

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice, Housing and Local Government (Shona Robison): Scotland has led the way in the delivery of affordable housing across the United Kingdom, and I am proud of our record of delivering, since 2007, 115,558 affordable homes, more than 81,000 of which were for social rent. We remain committed to delivering, by 2032, 110,000 affordable homes, of which at least 70 per cent will be available for social rent and 10 per cent will be in our remote, rural and island communities. To the end of September 2022, a total of 4,927 homes, of which 85 per cent are for social rent, have now been delivered.

Stephanie Callaghan: What evidence does the Scottish Government have that increased provision of affordable housing is having a positive

impact on the wellbeing of Scotland's citizens? How does that compare with other UK nations?

Shona Robison: It is well recognised that warm affordable homes can have a positive impact on people's wellbeing. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation report, "Poverty in Scotland 2021", notes that

"Comparatively lower housing costs continue to be the principal reason for lower poverty rates in Scotland compared with England".

Keeping social rents lower than market rents benefits approximately 110,000 children in poverty each year. Across the four years to 2022, we have delivered 59 per cent more affordable homes per head of population and nine times as many social rented homes per head of population as have been delivered in England. We remain committed to providing affordable housing, with £3.5 billion being made available in this parliamentary session.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes general question time. There will be a brief suspension before we move on to the next item of business.

11:57

Meeting suspended.

12:00

On resuming—

First Minister's Question Time

Gender Self-Identification (Rapists)

Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con):

The Scottish National Party Government ordered an urgent review of how double rapist Isla Bryson, formerly Adam Graham, was allowed into a women's prison. The review was due to be delivered to prison chiefs on Friday, but we have had heard nothing further about it. The case of this double rapist has been a huge scandal, but the public are in the dark about exactly what happened and who was involved. Will the First Minister publish the urgent review, in full, today?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): Before I turn to answering Douglas Ross's question, I take this opportunity to express my sympathy with the people of Turkey and Syria following the devastating earthquake earlier this week. The suffering and loss of life will be felt for generations. We are committed to doing all that we can to help. Members of our emergency services have already been deployed to help with the search and rescue operation on the ground. Yesterday, we confirmed a £500,000 contribution to the Disasters Emergency Committee's appeal. I know that all parties will help to promote that appeal following First Minister's question time. Anybody who wishes to donate, and who is able to, can do so at www.dec.org.uk.

I turn to the question. On the review that Douglas Ross referred to, the Scottish Prison Service provided a final report to the Cabinet Secretary for Justice on 8 February. Its chief executive met the justice secretary yesterday, in the course of a regular meeting schedule, to discuss it. The cabinet secretary has already confirmed that he will update the Criminal Justice Committee this week. Both the cabinet secretary and the chief executive of the SPS are due to attend a meeting of that committee later in February, at which, of course, members of the Parliament will be able to ask questions, so there will be full transparency about the findings of the review, as is right and proper.

Douglas Ross: I associate myself with the First Minister's preliminary remarks. She is correct to say that, after this question time, all party leaders and members of the Parliament will join in solidarity to support the DEC Scotland appeal. I welcome the provision of funding by the Scottish Government, and I believe that the United Kingdom Government is providing significant matched funding on all donations received to

support the people in Turkey and Syria who have been affected so terribly.

We are again in the situation where I asked the First Minister a very direct question but I did not get an answer. The Cabinet Secretary for Justice had the report yesterday. The First Minister spoke about there being further discussions with the Criminal Justice Committee, but she failed to commit to publishing the report in full. Will she now do so? Will she confirm that her Government will publish the report in full? It is on the justice secretary's desk, and I assume that the First Minister will have seen it. The public deserve to see it, because there are still so many unanswered questions.

At the last count, the First Minister had refused 12 times to say whether Isla Bryson is a man or a woman. That is important, because it affects how public bodies treat such criminals when they are released from jail. The First Minister says that she does not have enough information to decide whether this double rapist is a man. He is a rapist. He has a penis. What further information can the First Minister possibly need? When this monster comes out of jail, will the First Minister—*[Interruption.]* I am sorry; if SNP members are grumbling about my calling a double rapist a monster, they should look at themselves. When he comes out of jail, will the First Minister and her Government consider him a man or a woman?

The First Minister: First, I really think that Douglas Ross is clutching at straws in his follow-up question. I made it very clear that the findings of the report will be published. The cabinet secretary confirmed—I believe that he did so in the chamber—that he will update the Criminal Justice Committee this week.

Today, Parliament rises for a week. Both the cabinet secretary and the chief executive of the Scottish Prison Service, Teresa Medhurst, will attend a meeting of the Criminal Justice Committee on 22 February, following the Parliament's recess week. Members of that committee will be able to ask questions about the review then. I am therefore not sure how anybody can suggest that there will not be full transparency around the review, but I am grateful for the opportunity to set that out again for Mr Ross.

On the subsequent parts of his question, the individual whom we are talking about identifies as a woman. However, it is really important, I think, to very calmly set out that any rights that are associated with that are not a result of any legislation that has been passed by this Parliament; indeed, they would not be a result of that legislation even if it were in force. They are a result of the Equality Act that was passed by the United Kingdom Parliament in 2004, which is, and has always been, effectively based on self-

identification. However, that act does not give any individual an automatic right to be treated in a certain way in the prison estate. This case actually demonstrates that, because the individual is in a male prison.

What is relevant here, and is the reason why I have focused on it, is the crime and the nature of the risk that is posed. In this case, the individual is a double rapist. In terms of decisions about how they are dealt with in the prison estate, that is the relevant factor.

Finally, in any group, a small minority of individuals will commit crimes. In no other circumstances do we accept the stigmatisation and denial of rights to the whole group, and we should not do that here.

Douglas Ross: To go back to the first point about the report, the First Minister claims that I am clutching at straws. It seems that she is clutching on to the report, because she is not willing to issue it in full today. The report findings, we are told, will be published at some point, but why not today? Why not publish the findings and the full report that her Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Veterans has had for over 24 hours?

For the 13th time, Nicola Sturgeon has been unable to say whether Isla Bryson is a man or a woman. She says that it does not matter, because what matters is how they are dealt with in the prison estate. My question was very specifically about how they are dealt with when they leave prison. The First Minister has tied herself up in knots over this issue, unable to answer that basic question because she cannot admit the truth: her Government is going to consider this double rapist a woman. Nicola Sturgeon has brought in a policy that states that everybody who claims to be a woman must be considered a woman, even if they are a dishonest sex offender with a history of violence. Therefore, Isla Bryson will be considered a woman by this Government. That is why the First Minister is refusing to answer questions about this double rapist.

Let me ask her about another offender who is serving time now—not a rapist, but a dangerous criminal with a history of brutal violence. Tiffany Scott, who was formerly known as Andrew Burns, claims to be a woman. Does the First Minister believe that that criminal is a woman?

The First Minister: I think that Douglas Ross is demonstrating a lack of understanding of the law. *[Interruption.]* Any rights that any individual who identifies as a woman have do not flow from any decisions of this Government or this Parliament. They flow from the protected characteristics provisions in the Equality Act 2004, which is UK-wide legislation and which is and has always been based on self-identification. Of course, the law that

was passed by this Parliament is not yet in force. A gender recognition certificate simply enables somebody to change their birth certificate; it does not give trans people any additional rights. That is important.

How individuals are treated within the Prison Service, as I have said, is based on the nature of the crime and the nature of the risk posed. Both of the cases that Douglas Ross has cited today demonstrate that point in terms of the prisons that those individuals are in.

In terms of how prisoners are treated when they leave prison, there are well-established procedures for sex offenders, including those under the multi-agency public protection arrangements—MAPPA. Again, they are based on an assessment of the nature of risk.

These are important issues; they are sensitive issues, not least for the trans community. As I said last week and have said before, the overwhelming majority of them only want to get on with living their lives and never commit any offences of any nature.

I do not think that Douglas Ross does any service to anybody in the way that he approaches the matter. I am struck by something that his predecessor as Scottish Conservative leader, Ruth Davidson, has said:

“Trying to do gotcha questions about who is a woman, who is a man, I’m not sure that helps, particularly for people in the trans community who are looking at the way this is reported”.

Perhaps Douglas Ross could take some guidance from his predecessor on the matter. That might serve the whole debate better than he is doing right now.

Douglas Ross: This is not a “gotcha” question; it is a very basic—*[Interruption.]* I am sorry that there is dissent from the Scottish National Party. It is a very basic question. It is not just me. Journalists are asking it repeatedly of the First Minister, and I would not stand here asking the questions if, at any point in the 13 previous attempts, I had ever got a straight answer from Nicola Sturgeon. Maybe we should focus not on the question but on the deficiency of the answer. She said that I have raised two different cases, and they are very different cases; the similarity is the First Minister’s point-blank refusal to give an answer. I think that she has to look at that.

The First Minister accused me of a basic misunderstanding of legislation. I would have to say that she is guilty of either a basic or a deliberate misunderstanding of her own policy, because it is quite clear that Tiffany Scott—that dangerous criminal—is treated as a woman in a man’s jail.

We have spoken to a former prison officer, who told us this:

“All officers dealing with this individual were ordered to refer to Tiffany Scott as ‘she’ and threatened with disciplinary measures if we didn’t.”

They said that Scott

“has used gender recognition as a tool to create as much chaos as possible within the prison system.”

They continued:

“This is a classic example of devious, dangerous individuals who are exploiting this ridiculous situation.”

Those are the words of a retired prison officer who has dealt with that person.

We also know that female prison officers have been ordered to carry out intimate strip searches of Tiffany Scott. Reports quote officers who say that

“nothing else about Scott has changed physically”,

and the officers say that their rights have gone “out the window”. Does the First Minister agree that that is completely unacceptable, and will she intervene today to stop women prison officers being forced to strip search the likes of Tiffany Scott?

The First Minister: Let me take those issues in turn. First, let me reiterate that the law that this Parliament passed before Christmas, backed by two thirds of MSPs across the chamber, including members of Douglas Ross’s party, is not yet in force. It would not have the impact that Douglas Ross says it would, even if it was in force, but it is not in force, so, by definition, it cannot have that impact.

The policies of this Government on the issues are guided by the Equality Act—I think I said the Equality Act 2004 earlier, but of course it is the Equality Act 2010—and governed by that act, which is a United Kingdom-wide piece of legislation. The rights and protections that trans people have flow from that legislation, and it is important to set that out.

Those in the prison estate are dealt with depending on the nature of the crime and the nature of the risk posed. Again, it is important, for reasons of public assurance, to underline that as well. That is demonstrated by the two cases that have been cited in the media in recent days and here, again, today.

When it comes to searches in the prison estate, the Scottish Prison Service has been dealing with transgender prisoners—although they are very small in number—for many years now. It has been doing that safely and effectively and it is experienced in managing those situations. However, it is also the case that the SPS has the ability to use technology to search individuals

without the need for officers to conduct any physical search.

The SPS has a trauma-informed approach to the management of those in custody, and an approach that supports staff as well as the inmates who are in their care.

The SPS is experienced in these matters and I trust its handling of them. It is important that we continue to ensure that they are handled appropriately, which is what the Government, in association with the Scottish Prison Service, will continue to do.

Local Government (Budgets)

2. Anas Sarwar (Glasgow) (Lab): We are all devastated by the scenes of the horrific earthquake in Turkey and Syria, with a death toll that now sits at—[Interruption.]

12:15

Meeting suspended.

12:17

On resuming—

Anas Sarwar: I question disruption at any time, but to disrupt when we are talking about the lives that were lost in Turkey and Syria is frankly disgusting. [*Applause.*]

The death toll has now reached more than 16,000 people and, as Douglas Ross and Nicola Sturgeon have done, I send my condolences to all those who have lost a loved one in Turkey and Syria. I think of all those families who live in Scotland and have a connection with Turkey and Syria. I welcome the announcements that the Scottish Government and the United Kingdom Government have made with regard to money and resources to support the relief effort.

I appeal to people across the country. I know that times are really difficult with family budgets, but anything that you can give to support the Disasters Emergency Committee appeal will make a huge difference to families who are suffering in Turkey and Syria. [*Applause.*]

The Scottish National Party Government is leaving councils the length and breadth of Scotland in a dire position. Despite what Nicola Sturgeon claims, independent analysis shows that the budgets over which councils have control have been cut by £304 million in real terms, which has devastating consequences for vital services. Will the First Minister finally admit that she is cutting local government budgets?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): The Government is increasing local government

budgets. The resources that are available to local government—if Parliament passes next year's budget—will increase by £570 million.

Of course, inflation is sky high right now—that is not a result of this Government's policies—and that is affecting the Government's budget. It is absolutely the case that local government is struggling with those financial constraints, as are all parts of the public sector and, as Anas Sarwar has just said, households. That is why it is important that we continue to support local government as much as we can.

Obviously, the budgetary process is still under way and will conclude following the February recess of Parliament. We will continue to discuss with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities ways in which we can help local authorities mitigate the difficult situation in which they find themselves.

Of course, last week, I invited Anas Sarwar to point to other parts of the draft budget from which he thought we could take resources if he wants us to give more money to local government. He might have sent those to my office—I do not know—in which case I will look at them, but I suspect that he has not come up with any reasonable, realistic or credible proposals in order for us to do that.

Anas Sarwar: The First Minister knows that we published a document showing £3 billion of waste under this Scottish National Party Government—that would be a good place to start.

The First Minister wants to deny reality. The Fraser of Allander Institute, the Institute for Fiscal Studies, the Scottish Parliament information centre and Scotland's councils, including SNP-led councils, are all saying that there is a real-terms cut to local government budgets. That is a truth that the First Minister is not willing to accept.

There is no way for councils to balance their books without further destroying local services. All of Scotland's 32 councils are united in opposition to the Government's cuts. A presentation to council leaders last week said that cuts have

“already fallen disproportionately on other council services—libraries, culture and leisure, sports facilities, youth work, waste, roads, parks.”

Those are cuts that have already happened in previous years.

The presentation concludes by saying that the Government's plans are

“increasingly unrealistic, not sustainable, risk non-delivery of other statutory duties”

and that they put

“the financial viability of local government at risk.”

Councillors of every political party, including the First Minister's, are angry and warning her of the dire consequences, but Nicola Sturgeon is not listening. As usual, she is right and everyone else is wrong. Why can the First Minister not see the damage that her decisions are doing to our communities?

The First Minister: I think that Anas Sarwar demonstrated the lack of any credible proposals from Labour in the first part of that question.

Anas Sarwar mentioned the IFS, and it is important to underline that IFS analysis confirms that council funding has increased since 2013-14. It has gone up by £2.2 billion, which is 22.9 per cent higher in cash terms. However, it is the case that inflation is high. Anas Sarwar is shouting at me from a sedentary position, “What about real terms?”—yes, inflation is high right now, which is affecting all parts of the public sector, and that is down to the decisions and economic mismanagement of the Conservatives in Westminster.

We come back to the central point. All of us can accept that these are really difficult times for local councils. We will continue to work with and support them as much as we can. However, the draft budget that is before the Parliament right now has allocated all the resources that are at our disposal, including revenue from asking people who earn the most to pay a bit more in tax.

I understand why members make the argument that we should give more money to local government, but any who do so have the duty and responsibility to point to the lines in the draft budget where they think that that money should come from. Should it be from the national health service, the police budget or social security? These are legitimate debates. However, if members want to be credible in such debates, they cannot argue only one side; they have to do both bits. That is what governing is all about.

Anas Sarwar: We can have an honest debate only if we get an honest answer from the First Minister. This is a real-terms cut to local government budgets, and the First Minister is out of touch with reality.

Let us look at what is on the table and the options that councils are being forced to consider. Aberdeen is considering outsourcing all social work and children's services. Falkirk is considering selling off more than 100 council buildings, including swimming pools and theatres. Glasgow is considering slashing care placements for children, which officials warn will compromise children's safety and increase the risk of abuse and neglect.

Enough is enough. Members need to get off their backs and speak out against this First

Minister, because, across the country, we are facing a future in which children's music lessons are cut, libraries are closed and bins are collected only once a month. The blame for all that lies with Nicola Sturgeon and her Government. Wherever we look, we see that the Government is losing its grip.

People used to say that the First Minister was competent; now, they are saying that she is out of control—and that is just people in her own political party. After 15 years of SNP Government, local government is in crisis, teachers are on strike and the NHS is on its knees. Will she finally admit that this is an SNP budget for cuts, closures and strikes?

The First Minister: No matter how much Anas Sarwar raises his voice and shouts, it does not cover up the fact that he has not brought forward a single proposal, in relation to a budget that is fully allocated, for putting a single extra penny into local government budgets. He shouts because there is absolutely zero substance in anything that he says. "All sound and fury and no substance" is a good summary of Anas Sarwar.

Let me address some of Anas Sarwar's points. He has asked about the real-terms position. The £570 million increase that I have spoken about is a real-terms increase of £160.6 million or 1.3 per cent.

Secondly, Anas Sarwar raised the issue of the proposals that councils are looking at. At this time every year, councils look at a range of proposals. This morning, I have seen proposals from Glasgow City Council. The point is made that those are options and that no decisions have been taken. I remember claims being made at this time of year a few years ago that 15,000 jobs would be cut across local government. Since then, the number of jobs in local government has increased by 19,000.

Yes, these are difficult times for local government, but if you want to propose that more money be allocated to local government within a draft budget that is fully allocated, to have any credibility, you also have to say where that resource should come from. In the absence of Anas Sarwar being clear about that, I can only assume that he wants us to take money from national health service or police budgets and give it to local government—or perhaps he wants us to take it from social security, such as from the Scottish child payment.

If Anas Sarwar wants to be taken seriously, he must bring some substance to what is a very difficult debate and a very difficult situation for local councils across the country.

Alcohol Advertising (Hospitality and Tourism)

3. Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): To ask the First Minister what assessment the Scottish Government has made of the potential impact on the hospitality and tourism sectors of a ban on advertising alcohol products. (S6F-01795)

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): First, the consultation on alcohol advertising and promotion is on-going—it is open until 9 March—so I make it clear that no decisions have been taken on scope or on the type of restrictions that might be taken forward in future. The point of the consultation is to get a range of views on the most appropriate next steps in reducing alcohol-related harm, which I hope we can all recognise is one of the most pressing public health challenges that we face.

Considering restriction on the promotion of alcohol is not unique to Scotland. For example, five years ago, Ireland passed legislation to bring in a number of restrictions, which were focused on reducing the exposure of children to alcohol promotion. I think that reducing the exposure of children to that is key.

Ministers have met a range of stakeholders, including representatives of the alcohol and advertising industries, during the consultation period to hear directly from them. Of course, we will take seriously and consider properly all representations that are made.

Murdo Fraser: The First Minister will know that the whisky tourism sector is worth some £84 million annually to the Scottish economy and that it supports jobs in rural and remote communities where there are few other opportunities. As the sector's leaders have made clear, the sector is concerned about the threat of a ban on all alcohol advertising.

I agree with the First Minister that we need to look at sensible measures to tackle alcohol abuse, but does she agree that it would be absurd if whisky distilleries, which are so important to our economy, had to cover up all their signage, close their shops and stop promoting tours, and the likes of the Johnnie Walker experience in Edinburgh, which is a tremendous tourism draw, had to rebrand itself and board up its windows? That is what people are concerned about.

The First Minister: Yes—to be clear, I do agree with Murdo Fraser on that. I will perhaps come back to that in a moment.

The whisky tourism sector is extremely important to Scotland's reputation, as well as to its economy. The Johnnie Walker experience centre here in Edinburgh is a prime example of that. In relation to the suggestion that we have heard in recent weeks that painted signs on distilleries or

visitor centres would be the target, I make it very clear that those are not in our current thinking. In my initial answer, I mentioned the exposure of children to alcohol advertising. There is a world of difference between a billboard outside or in the vicinity of a school and, for example, a Johnnie Walker baseball cap.

We must look at the issue pragmatically and seriously. I am glad that Murdo Fraser recognised that we have a public health issue—a problem—with alcohol misuse. As countries such as Ireland have done, we need to look at how we sensibly restrict promotion and advertising to try to deal with the problem. We need to do that properly and pragmatically. I hope that my answer reassures those who are in the whisky tourism sector about some of the supposed things that we have heard about in recent days and weeks.

Natalie Don (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP): As the consultation on restricting alcohol advertising is still live and no final proposals have been lodged, does the First Minister agree that any potential harm is still hypothetical at this stage, whereas the real harms that the hospitality and tourism sectors are experiencing because of Brexit are being felt right now? The Tories should be pressing their Westminster leaders to address that.

The First Minister: Natalie Don is so right to talk—[*Interruption.*] The Conservatives do not like it, but there is a difference between hypothetical harm—I understand the concerns that the whisky tourism sector, for example, has expressed and I hope that what I have said today will allay those concerns—and the very real harm that is being done today, right now, by Brexit. The loss of free movement is harming our hospitality and tourism sectors, for example, as well as the wider economy.

In relation to the issue, we will continue to listen to the hospitality sector, the tourism sector and the whisky tourism sector in particular. We will take on board the reasonable points that they make—if only the United Kingdom Government would adopt a similar posture on the concern that those industries have expressed about the real impact of Brexit and the real harm that it is doing to them right now.

Craig Hoy (South Scotland) (Con): Will the First Minister join me in congratulating East Lothian publican Patrick Cairney, who has recently stepped in to prevent two local pubs—the Prestoungrange Gothenburg in Prestonpans and the Tower Inn in Tranent—from closing permanently? Does she recognise that hundreds of pubs around Scotland are likely to close their doors for good this winter?

To prevent last orders from being called across Scotland's hospitality sector, will the First Minister remove pubs, restaurants and cafes from the chaotic deposit return scheme, replicate the UK Government's 75 per cent rates relief for hospitality businesses and halt the alcohol advertising and sponsorship review, which will inevitably put further pressure on Scotland's hard-pressed publicans?

The First Minister: I echo the congratulations that Craig Hoy extended. Like many businesses, pubs are struggling right now with high inflation and high energy costs. We will come shortly to a question about DRS, so I will save my substantive comments on it for that question.

Such businesses benefit from the Scottish Government's approach to business rates. We have the most competitive business rates regime, including reliefs for businesses from business rates, of any country in the UK. We will continue to do everything that we can to support businesses in these very difficult times. Much of that is down to economic mismanagement by the Conservative Government at Westminster.

Deposit Return Scheme (Impact on Drinks Producers)

4. Fergus Ewing (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP): To ask the First Minister what the Scottish Government's response is to reports that 600 drinks producers are concerned about the impact on their businesses, and the survival of them, in relation to the deposit return scheme. (S6F-01796)

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): We will continue to listen to and, where possible, address concerns that have been raised. In direct response to industry feedback, the Scottish Government has worked with Circularity Scotland—the scheme administrator—to reduce costs to producers, including a reduction in producer fees of up to 40 per cent and a two-thirds reduction in day 1 payments for producers that use United Kingdom-wide barcodes. We continue to work with industry to ensure pragmatic approaches to implementation and we will do so right up to the point of implementation.

Fergus Ewing: Many of the 600 businesses that I referred to are in a state of fear and even despair. Some will close, some will fail and others will no longer sell their produce in their own country of Scotland. Unless it is halted now, the scheme—most businesses believe it to be fatally flawed—will damage Scotland's reputation as a place to do business. Will the First Minister therefore instruct a pause of this disaster of a scheme before it becomes a catastrophe, and will she order a thorough and independent review of how better to achieve its aims and exclude glass

from the scope, as the top six nations in the world on glass recycling have done?

The First Minister: We will continue to listen to and engage with businesses. It is important to say that the steps that we have already taken, which I have set out, demonstrate that. In fact, Scotland Food & Drink recognised that approach when it said in recent weeks:

“These changes mean that some of our key requests have been accommodated, which is positive and means our collective effort has materially improved the implications ... for many businesses.”

Forty-four countries and territories operate deposit return schemes, and only four of them do not include glass. It is, of course, the case that there are strong environmental reasons for including glass. However, on all these issues, we will continue to listen. One of the issues that I am particularly concerned to consider further is whether there is yet more that we can do to reduce any impact on small producers, because some of the concerns that have been raised there are not unreasonable.

We will continue to take a responsible approach, listen to the concerns of business, and respond responsibly in the face of those.

Maurice Golden (North East Scotland) (Con): Drinks producers have until the end of this month to sign up for the deposit return scheme. Those who do so will be financially liable for any delays and will have to fork out up to £1.5 million per month. To make matters worse, they are being asked to sign up with key information still missing. If they do not sign up, they cannot sell their products. One leading Scottish brewer described that as “extortion tactics”. Does the First Minister agree that the deadline for such registration should be extended until the full operational, commercial and financial implications of the scheme are provided?

The First Minister: I am struck by the fact that, when we announced an extension to the go-live date for the scheme back in December 2021, I think, to give industry additional time to prepare, that was criticised at the time by the Conservatives among others in the chamber.

The regulations require producers to register ahead of the launch. Registration is now open. However, we continue to work—this is important—with Circularity Scotland and businesses as they finalise their operational delivery plans. The scheme is industry led, and the industry needs to work with the scheme administrator on a joined-up approach to delivering it.

We have already made changes, which I have set out. We will continue to engage with businesses on any further changes that can

sensibly be made to take account of some of the issues that they raise.

Energy Costs (Prepayment Meters)

5. Mercedes Villalba (North East Scotland) (Lab): To ask the First Minister, in light of reports of people being forced on to prepayment meters, what steps the Scottish Government is taking to support vulnerable people in Scotland with rising energy costs. (S6F-01802)

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): First of all, the Scottish Government opposes the forced installation of prepayment meters, because that is only more likely to increase debt or leave people unable to heat their homes.

We continue to call on the United Kingdom Government to provide the necessary additional support for those who are struggling with energy bills, and we are doing everything that we can with the powers that are available to us. That includes doubling the fuel insecurity fund to £20 million and providing an additional £1.2 million to help advice services to meet the increasing demand that they are dealing with.

I chaired two energy summits last year. As a result of those, we continue to work with partners to see what more we can do by working together to support and protect Scottish consumers in these times.

Mercedes Villalba: The oil and gas giants BP and Shell are reporting record profits on the sale of energy while millions of people are struggling to heat their homes. However, the extortion does not stop there. I have received reports from the Dundee Pensioners Forum that its elderly members are receiving alarming letters demanding payment from their energy suppliers. Those are payments to accounts that are not only not in arrears but in significant credit. When those vulnerable people are unable to pay what they do not even owe, they are threatened with forced installation of prepayment meters.

Although I appreciate that much of energy policy is reserved, the First Minister meets energy providers regularly and has their ear, so will she condemn any use of such bullying and strong-arm tactics, and will she commit to ending the granting of warrants by courts in Scotland for the forced installation of prepayment meters?

The First Minister: I have not seen the letters that Mercedes Villalba referred to, but I, of course, condemn any behaviour that seeks to bully consumers or individuals in any way.

Two issues, both of which are important, were raised in the course of that question: first, the taxation of oil and gas companies and, secondly, regulation. Both are reserved to the UK

Government. I wish that that was not the case and that we had those powers here in the Scottish Parliament. Perhaps the member will, in the future, support our calls for such powers.

As First Minister, I cannot instruct the courts; every member understands that. However, within the powers that are available to us—on energy, as the member recognises, those powers are very limited—the Parliament and the Government will and should look at what more we can do to help.

However, on this as on so many other issues, if we did not always have to look to the UK Government—if we held those powers here in the Scottish Parliament—we would be able to do much more than we can do right now.

Fiona Hyslop (Linlithgow) (SNP): In addition, we know, from the Parliament's Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee's report on energy price rises, that customers who move into properties that have expensive prepayment meters have to pay for the privilege of having them removed. Will the First Minister confirm whether, as was recommended in last summer's committee report, her Government has raised with the UK Government the issue of a legal right, in appropriate circumstances, to have a prepayment meter removed free of charge?

The First Minister: Fiona Hyslop has raised another important issue, and I absolutely agree that consumers should be entitled to have a prepayment meter removed from their home at no cost to them. Last autumn, the Cabinet Secretary for Net Zero, Energy and Transport wrote to the UK Government on a number of issues, including protections and flexibility for consumers on prepayment meters. Given the recent developments surrounding such meters, I confirm that that is one of a number of issues that we will be raising urgently with both the UK Government and the regulator.

Just Transition

6. Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): To ask the First Minister what the Scottish Government's position is on whether oil and gas companies are investing enough of their profits to support a just transition in Scotland. (S6F-01815)

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): I certainly think that more could be done. The energy profit levy investment allowance does not do enough to future proof energy supplies and promote green energy. Energy companies should reinvest their profits—which, right now, are very significant—in industries of the future.

The "Draft Energy Strategy and Just Transition Plan", which was published last month, sets out a clear vision to capitalise on the enormous

opportunities that a net zero energy system offers the industry, our economy and our climate. It highlights the importance of accelerating the transition to renewable energy sources. We have clearly and repeatedly set out the actions that the United Kingdom Government should and must now take to ensure a fair and just transition for our energy sector in what will be a decisive decade for action.

Mark Ruskell: Despite the utterly obscene profits of oil and gas companies, investment in transition is not being made at anything like the pace that is needed to keep 1.5°C alive. Over the past week, I have met Shell and ExxonMobil, which operate the Mossmorran complex in Fife—the third-largest climate polluter in Scotland. Does the First Minister agree that we cannot meet Scotland's climate targets without slashing Mossmorran's emissions, and will she call on the operators and the UK Government to commit to investment in a just transition plan for the Mossmorran complex?

The First Minister: First, I reiterate the Scottish Government's commitment to a just transition that meets our climate targets, supports good green jobs for our highly skilled workforce and allows industry to retain international competitiveness. Mark Ruskell is right to say that the decarbonisation of industry plays a vital role in achieving all of that.

Operators, including those at Mossmorran, have much to gain from being at the forefront of a just transition, and I urge them to make sure that that is exactly where they are. Currently, we are developing a just transition plan for Scotland's largest industrial site, Grangemouth. On completion of that, we will evaluate and consider what learnings can be replicated across other sites, such as Mossmorran.

The "Draft Energy Strategy and Just Transition Plan" makes it clear that the UK Government, too, must take action across a number of areas, and we continue to urge it to commit to a concrete timeline and processes to ensure that that is the case.

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): We move to general and constituency supplementary questions.

National Care Service (Scotland) Bill

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): The First Minister has been sent a letter by the Scottish Trades Union Congress and Common Weal, setting out their serious concerns about the National Care Service (Scotland) Bill and asking for the bill to be paused. They are joined by GMB Scotland, Unison Scotland, Unite the union, the Scottish Pensioners Forum, Who Cares?

Scotland, Parkinson's UK, respected professor of public policy James Mitchell, the Scottish National Party Trade Union Group and more besides.

That follows significant criticism of the bill by no less than four committees of this Parliament, the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, a host of care providers and those receiving care. There is nothing to prevent the SNP from delivering improvements to social care now, such as fair pay and ending non-residential care charges, but the sector is concerned that it is not listening to their concerns and is intent on bulldozing the bill through.

Will the First Minister pause the bill and take the time required to get it right?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): We will, of course, take the time required to get it right. There was, in the letter that Jackie Baillie referred to, a line that she did not read out, so I will. It states:

"We want to emphasise that we share the Scottish Government's desire to create a National Care Service."

Several committees of this Parliament are scrutinising the bill at stage 1. When we have all the reports and feedback, we will take time to consider all the issues that have been raised. At that stage, we will set out the timescale for the rest of the legislative process.

In the interim, we are taking steps to improve social care. Let us remember what a national care service is about. It is about ending the postcode lottery in care provision and better rewarding those who work in the sector. In the year ahead, we are taking action to boost social care workers' pay and getting the initial organisational arrangements in place. We will continue to proceed in that responsible way and, as we do so, we will listen to the views of all the organisations that are signatories to the letter and, I am sure, many others besides.

Abortion Services

Gillian Mackay (Central Scotland) (Green): The First Minister, along with the Minister for Public Health, Women's Health and Sport, convened a further summit on abortion services earlier this week, which was hugely useful in exploring further themes for my member's bill. I am very grateful for the Scottish Government's support.

Will the First Minister update the chamber on next steps and what she sees as the most important steps that we can take to protect and further abortion rights in Scotland?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): I was very pleased to convene, with Maree Todd, the

second abortion summit on Tuesday. I thank members from across the parties who attended it.

We had a very constructive discussion on the outcomes of the recent United Kingdom Supreme Court judgment on Northern Ireland's Abortion Services (Safe Access Zones) Bill and on the further issues that we must consider for Scottish legislation. The discussion underlined the continuing need for national legislation on that matter—I reiterate the Government's commitment to that—and provided useful insights. The Government continues to work with Gillian Mackay to develop a bill that is robust and effective. I know that we want to see that bill introduced to the Scottish Parliament as soon as possible.

In addition, we were all clear that the commitments to progressing abortion care and ensuring that women have access to high-quality abortion care in Scotland, which are outlined in the women's health plan, are a priority and will be taken forward.

Scottish Child Abuse Inquiry

Russell Findlay (West Scotland) (Con): The BBC documentary "Beneath the Magic Circle Affair" cast light on a very dark and distressing subject. Senior members of Scotland's legal establishment sexually abused children for decades. Susie Henderson's childhood was destroyed at the hands of her untouchable QC father and his vile associates, and yet the Government's child abuse inquiry will not hear evidence about that. Other survivors, including young footballers, have called for the inquiry to broaden its scope. I ask Nicola Sturgeon whether that will happen.

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): First, I say that the content of the BBC documentary was extremely distressing and disturbing. I think that all of us want to ensure that those matters are properly investigated in the appropriate way. Obviously, any criminal investigations are for the Crown, and it would be deeply inappropriate for me or anybody else to comment on that.

On the Scottish child abuse inquiry, I absolutely hear the points that the member is making, but as he is aware, under the Inquiries Act 2005, the remit and conduct of a public inquiry is entirely for the inquiry, and the chair of the inquiry, and ministers cannot intervene in that. However, it is really important that all of the matters raised are properly scrutinised, probed and investigated in whatever way is necessary. I think that that is something that all of us want to ensure is the case.

Energy Prices

Paul McLennan (East Lothian) (SNP): A new report from the National Institute of Economic and

Social Research warns that households in my constituency and across the United Kingdom could face a £4,000 financial hit from the cost of living crisis this year. What can the Scottish Government do to urge the United Kingdom Government to reverse its plans to allow energy bills to rise again this spring, which will only heap more misery on those who are already suffering?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): Paul McLennan is right to raise the impact on households in his constituency and across Scotland. We have consistently called on the UK Government to provide additional support for vulnerable households with their energy costs. Prior to the introduction of the energy price guarantee last October, we called for the energy price cap to be frozen, and now we need the UK Government to urgently consider cancelling its proposed rise along with the reduction in support for domestic consumers.

We continue to take the action that we can to support households, including, as I said earlier, the doubling of the fuel insecurity fund. However, the key levers lie with the UK Government, and we must press it to use those levers in the interests of households and businesses across the country.

A9 Dualling

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): The First Minister has betrayed communities in the north of Scotland with her broken promise to dual the A9. It is clear that the work required to fulfil that promise has never been done, and her Government seeks to blame events that should never have impacted the timetable.

Will she now give us a date for completion of the dualling of the A9, or is she really telling us that the Greens are running her Government?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): Let me be very clear: the Scottish Government is firmly committed to completing the dualling of the A9 between Perth and Inverness. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Thank you.

The First Minister: That is a £3 billion investment. Already, more than £430 million has been invested in it, and road users are benefiting from some stretches that are already dualled.

On the issue that was covered in Parliament yesterday, we have carefully reviewed the submitted tender for that stretch and concluded, after a very difficult and complex procurement procedure, that the award of that contract at this time would not represent best value for the taxpayer. The price of that tender was significantly higher than expected, even allowing for the impacts of inflation and a volatile economy. If we had gone ahead with that, I am sure that, down

the line, Opposition members would have criticised us for doing so because it was not best value for the taxpayer.

As the transport secretary set out yesterday, steps will now be taken by Transport Scotland on the necessary preparatory steps for the urgent retendering, with the aim of achieving a contract award before the end of this year, and a new timetable will be set out as quickly as possible.

It is also important to point out that the design work is progressing on the rest of the programme, with ministerial decisions to complete the statutory process confirmed for seven of the remaining eight schemes.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes First Minister's question time. The next item of business is a members' business debate in the name of Emma Roddick. There will be a short suspension to allow those leaving the chamber and the public gallery to do so.

12:53

Meeting suspended.

12:54

On resuming—

United Kingdom Income Inequality

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): I ask those leaving the gallery and, indeed, those members leaving the chamber, to do so as quickly and as quietly as possible.

The next item of business is a members' business debate on motion S6M-07249, in the name of Emma Roddick, on United Kingdom income inequality. The debate will be concluded without any question being put, and I invite those members who wish to participate in the debate to press their request-to-speak buttons.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament notes with alarm a recent *Financial Times* analysis, which shows the scale of income inequality in the UK relative to other countries in Europe; records its concern over the implications for people across Scotland, including rural and island constituents in the Highlands and Islands, amid what it considers an unprecedented cost of living crisis; recognises that, according to the analysis, the average Slovenian household is set to be better off than its British counterpart by 2024, and that the richest will get richer; believes that this analysis has reinforced the findings of the Scottish Government's *Building a New Scotland* papers, which, it considers, demonstrate how independent European countries comparable to Scotland are wealthier and fairer than the UK, and considers that it is important to learn from comparator countries and create a fairer Scotland, combining economic dynamism with social solidarity.

Emma Roddick (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): I am grateful to those who supported my motion so that it could be debated, giving us the opportunity to discuss the *Financial Times* analysis, which covers such an important issue that is not given enough attention.

In the hustle and bustle of everyday politics and the headlines, we often forget to step back and look at the big picture. I hope that folk will do that—putting aside Covid, Brexit and strikes just for a moment—to look at the UK as a whole and how it is functioning. We are living in a country whose Governments have long made public policy designed to help the rich get richer and to promote endless private economic growth at the expense of looking after its citizens.

We are living in an extremely unequal society, where the richest can enjoy a good life and the worst-off are in dire poverty, more likely to experience serious health issues and have significant support needs. It is perhaps harder to see because those in the public eye—celebrities, high earners and members of Parliament with fortunate backgrounds—can seem to represent

the UK in more than just television interviews, but they do not.

The *Financial Times* analysis last year described the UK more accurately as a poor society

“with some very rich people”

in it.

Another accurate description can be found in Dick Gaughan's lyrics:

“They make the laws
To serve them well”

and to

“feed the rich
While poor men starve”.

That is the hard truth: half of the people in this country account for 9 per cent of the wealth, and Conservative Governments do their best to ensure that that gap keeps getting bigger. That is normal to us, but it is not normal. The same *Financial Times* analysis found that the poorest Irish household has a standard of living that is almost 63 per cent higher than the poorest in the UK. Other younger nations such as Slovenia are also likely to have a higher average standard of living than us from next year.

The message that I want to get out there is that there are better ways forward than the way that we are used to, that there are alternative economic ideologies to Conservatism and that we can redistribute wealth so that nobody has to experience extreme poverty. There are examples of alternatives across Europe, and a clear alternative is presented in the Scottish Government's “Building a New Scotland” papers. We could be more like European neighbours such as Sweden, Ireland, Finland and Denmark, which use their full powers to achieve a fairer society as well as economic success.

Being taken out of the European Union against the wishes of the Scottish electorate has led my Highlands and Islands region to lose out on funding that we previously relied on for projects that improved the economy of rural and island communities as well as the lives of the people living in them. The replacement funding that we have seen so far has fallen far short of what we used to get and far short of what Whitehall promised.

We are taught a big lie—that the huge gap between the richest and the poorest in our society is a necessary side effect of having a healthy economy. First, I would argue that that is not a worthwhile sacrifice in the first place, but, secondly, it is not even true. Conservative, capitalist policies have resulted in an unequal society and in the UK being the only country in the

G7 forecast to have negative growth—and worse than that of Russia, which has been facing international sanctions for almost a year.

I have always found that people will try to put off those of us who did not grow up learning about stocks and shares and did not study philosophy, politics and economics at Oxbridge from debating financial policy, using buzzwords and talking about the businesses that they have run and their investment funds—using frames of reference that are so far removed from what most of us will ever experience that it seems as though there is no room in the debate for those on the left, but there is.

Even if someone believes that a more socialist approach to public spending would crash the economy, I have to ask at this point: what have they got to lose? Conservative and neo-liberal capitalist economics have just crashed the economy, so let us give something else a try.

Successive Tory UK Governments have historically fixed—or more accurately, covered up—cash-flow issues, which they like to pretend do not exist under Conservatism, by selling off public services. The problem with that is that, once Royal Mail has been sold off, it cannot be sold off again. All that that has done is gift future Governments the issue of having to deal with private interests running roughshod over workers' rights, with ministers no longer able to force changes to pay and conditions and having nobody but their own institution to blame. People deserve a Government that will do better than that, which will acknowledge issues and tackle them, rather than pretend that they are not happening.

Most people, whether they are personally managing or not, do not want to live in a country where kids grow up hungry and in poverty when there is no need for it. Most people want public services to be run in the interests of the public, not private shareholders. Most are happy to pay their share to make sure that they do not live in that kind of country, which is what we have to remember when we make decisions on taxes, just as the Scottish Government has done this year by asking people who are on the highest income to pay 1p more on their top rate of tax.

Taxes are not like giving to charity. Living in a civilised society where opportunity is available to everyone is not—or certainly should not be—a charity case. I do not want to go out and ask rich folk to consider giving money to the cause of people not being left destitute because they need to access what should be a public service that is free at the point of need. That is why taxes are not optional; they are the price of living in a country that provides people with security and public services. Personally, I am happy to pay a lot more in tax than someone who is earning what I used to

earn three years ago for the sake of the Scottish Government being able to pay money to kids who are growing up in poverty.

The Scottish Government is doing more than any other Administration in the UK to help the people who need it most and to reduce inequality by introducing measures such as the Scottish child payment, which is unique in the four nations, and working on proposals for a minimum income guarantee.

Imagine what more we could do with the powers of independence. We have everything that it takes to become a successful, fair, internationalist nation—apart from not being tied to a Westminster that has brought us Brexit, cost of living crises and austerity. The UK's economy is not strong and stable; it does not have broad shoulders—it is failing the people of Scotland. The Opposition will continue to criticise us for highlighting those facts, but people need to know—they deserve to know—why the promises of prosperity and opportunity never appear, and they need to know how much fairer other countries that are doing what the Scottish National Party wants to do are. If other countries in Europe can tackle inequality through independence in Europe, why not Scotland?

13:01

Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I thank Emma Roddick for securing the debate. I found a lot of what she said to be quite interesting. The cost of living crisis that she has referred to is something that we all have to live with, and no one should be under any illusions that the crisis has been driven mainly by Russia's illegal invasion into Ukraine. It has driven up the prices of electricity; it has driven up the cost of power; and it has driven up the costs of fertiliser and the production costs of all the basic foods that we require.

Emma Roddick rose—

Edward Mountain: I will give way to the member when I am a little further on.

I accept that there is more to do, which is why I believe that we need to drive down inflation to half of its current rate, grow the economy, reduce national debt and build our public services, which is something that we should all be concentrating on.

Emma Roddick: I appreciate the member's point about electricity costing more. However, should it not be the case that, if people are having to pay so much for electricity that they have no money left or that they are pushed into debt, it is the job of the UK Government to step in and use its powers to regulate the market?

Edward Mountain: The problem is that the UK Government regulating the UK market does not resolve the energy problems or the cost of energy, as energy is driven by a world market. We can help, and I will tell you some of the ways that the UK Government is doing that.

I was interested in the article that Emma Roddick quoted from. I underlined the final paragraph, which says:

“Our leaders are, of course, right to target economic growth”.

That is what we should be doing: growing the economy. We know that doing that will help everyone to have a better standard of living.

Jim Fairlie (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP) rose—

Edward Mountain: I will take the member's intervention in a moment.

To my mind, that would not come about with independence, where we would be building walls that would cut off 60 per cent of our market.

The member has suggested that we need to build a new Scotland. In the papers that made the case for independence, if they were going to be anything other than fantasy economics, I wanted to see a discussion about who would pay for pensions, what the currency would be and what the border barriers would be. We did not have that. Indeed, we know that we are not even doing some of the things that we said that we would do in those papers, such as handling benefits payments. We have asked the UK Government to continue to manage that, because the Scottish Government could not.

One of the things that we are not clear about is the cost of independence. In 2014, it was put down as £200 million, yet we are probably talking about billions and billions of pounds, because we know that £200 million does not go far—it does not even build two ferries.

Jim Fairlie: You mention all the things that you think are causing problems for the UK economy. Tory Prime Minister John Major told the Westminster Parliament that the UK's exit from the European Union was a colossal mistake”, yet your party never—

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

Jim Fairlie: Sorry; okay. Your party never accepts that, so what would you say about the damage that Brexit has caused?

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

Edward Mountain: Presiding Officer, I say, through the chair, that the decision about Brexit

was taken in a referendum. That decision was made by a majority vote and we should therefore respect the result. It is not something that I campaigned for, but it is not something that the Scottish Government really campaigned against: it actually spent more money campaigning in Orkney than it did on campaigning against Brexit. That is a fact.

Let us look at some of the things that we could do better. I think that I am running out of time, Presiding Officer, as I have taken some interventions.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I can give you a bit of time to compensate you for that.

Edward Mountain: Thank you very much, Presiding Officer.

What concentrates the minds of people in the Highlands, as far as I can see, is an issue that we discussed this morning: when the A9 will be dualled. At the rate that the Government is going, Calum's Road on Raasay will turn out to be a better investment than the A9 and it will have been built quicker—just one man built one and a half miles of road in 10 years.

The A96 still has not been built. We are all desperate for the national treatment centre, because 3,200 people in the Highlands alone are waiting for treatment and they have been told that they might have a seven-year wait. We are waiting for ferries, which are six years late. We are waiting for HMP Highland, which is six years late, and we are waiting for broadband that we were promised in 2021.

Those are the issues that concentrate the minds of people in the Highlands. Those are the issues that we should be talking about, not the points that Emma Roddick makes, which are all based on her belief that independence is the only solution. It is not. There are problems that we must deal with. Let us get on with dealing with them.

13:06

Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): I thank Emma Roddick for bringing the debate to the chamber, and I welcome her contribution. The idea that stood out in it and that has motivated me for my entire life is that we live in a poor society with some very rich people in it.

The wealth divide across the UK, including in Scotland, is absolutely shocking.

Emma Roddick is right to highlight the scale of income inequality in the UK relative to that in other countries in Europe. That has undoubtedly been exacerbated by the Tory-made cost of living crisis, which has made the poor poorer while multimillionaires record eye-watering profits. We

cannot get away from that. There are eye-watering profits to be made and there is money in the system. We hear about that every day, and it is something that we must challenge. Wealth can and should be redistributed, and there are acknowledged fair, just and green ways to do that.

Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): I agree with the member's comments. Earlier today, I attended an event with the Wellbeing Economy Alliance, at which there was some discussion of the gap between the richest and poorest in Scotland and of the opportunity for Scotland to nurture purposeful businesses that make a positive difference to our wellbeing, among other things, rather than putting profits in the pockets of shareholders. Does the member agree that that is a good thing for Scotland and that we should embrace it?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I can give you the time back, Ms Mochan.

Carol Mochan: The member may know that I attended the same event, which gave us some excellent food for thought about how we might move the economy forward and how we might encourage people and communities to be part of what we might describe as business, but which, through community wealth building, lets them be in charge of their own areas. Members will know that I am extremely positive about those ideas. The example was given of North Ayrshire Council leader Joe Cullinane. He has taken steps that I view as bold, but, in his view, he is just being fair about how we should run the economy for communities.

Where Emma Roddick and I disagree is that, in my view, leaving the UK is not the way to reduce income inequality. I suggest that delivering a Labour Government at Westminster—which would repeal anti-trade-union legislation, invest in services and communities and offer fairer jobs to people—would be a better way to achieve solidarity in how we run communities in the UK. Those jobs would be well-paid jobs in which workers, unlike under the current Scottish and UK Governments, would be treated with the respect that they deserve.

Indeed, before the cost of living crisis, the cost of living in more rural communities was already substantially higher than it was in their urban counterparts, yet the Scottish Government has continued to do little for those communities. Yesterday, Emma Roddick and Fergus Ewing highlighted that the Highlands have been deprived of transport links that they were promised in relation to connectivity around the A9.

Edward Mountain: Will the member give way on that point?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The member is just about to conclude.

Carol Mochan: In my view, the Scottish Government has not shown the necessary determination. We have had delays in land reform, poor industrial relations with teachers and a lack of movement on regressive forms of taxation such as the council tax. We know that 20 families in Scotland own as much wealth as 30 per cent of the rest of the population, and that is unacceptable.

I do not believe that the Scottish Government has shown enough will. It has done things around the edges, and that is what we talk about in this Parliament. However, I hope that I can get some solidarity around the work that we need to do, to make sure that the Scottish Parliament does everything that it can. Emma Roddick and other members know that my point is that, if we believe that that gap is unjust, the Scottish Parliament must do everything that it can to fight for a better economic structure out there in the wider UK and world.

13:12

Paul McLennan (East Lothian) (SNP): I thank Emma Roddick for bringing forward this important debate this afternoon.

“Where would you rather live? A society where the rich are extraordinarily rich and the poor are very poor, or one where the rich are merely very well off but even those on the lowest incomes also enjoy a decent standard of living?”

That is the opening line from a *Financial Times* report, entitled “Britain and the US are poor societies with some very rich people”. Research has consistently shown that, although most people express a desire for some distance between top and bottom, they would rather live in a considerably more equal society than they do at present.

Edward Mountain talked about issues in the here and now. He made some valid points and talked about the invasion of Ukraine, but the debate is about the structural long-term decline of the UK financial model.

Let us look at the position in which the UK finds itself. As Emma Roddick mentioned, on present trends, the average Slovenian household will be better off than its British counterpart by 2024 and the average Polish family will move ahead before the end of the decade. The analysis also found the standard of living of the poorest Irish households was almost 63 per cent higher than that of the poorest in the UK.

In most developed countries, such as neighbouring north-western European states, the distribution of income is relatively equal, with the

top 10 per cent earning about three times as much as the bottom 10 per cent. However, as in the US, income distribution in the UK is much less equal, with the top 10 per cent earning almost five times as much as the people at the bottom. That is about long-term structural design, which does not happen overnight and is caused by UK Government policy choices. That is the cost of the union, which fails Scotland.

On Wednesday, we heard Scottish Tories criticise the Scottish Government on social security. While the Scottish Government was introducing the groundbreaking Scottish child payment, the Tories were cutting universal credit. Not one Tory MSP spoke against that—they all sat in silence.

Carol Mochan: I hope that Paul McLennan understands that we agree on a lot of points. I wonder whether he would accept that, sometimes, some of the back benchers in this Parliament have to stand up to the Government if we really want to get the full benefit of the things that we can do in the Scottish Parliament.

Paul McLennan: That is a valid point. Some of the most important work that we do in this Parliament is in committees. We all raise important issues at that point, and SNP members will continue to do so.

Let us look at the position of our European neighbours. For Norway, the picture is consistently rosy. The top 10 per cent rank second for living standards among the top deciles in all countries. The median Norwegian household ranks second among all national averages. All the way down at the other end, people in Norway's poorest 5 per cent are the most prosperous bottom 5 per cent in the world. Norway is a good place for someone to live regardless of whether they are rich or poor.

Relative to those of its European peers, the UK's economic model is increasingly outmoded. Despite our wealth, too many households continue to live in poverty because of UK structural inequalities. Healthy life expectancy is too low in the most deprived areas of our country. Tackling the underlying causes of inequality in our society and providing economic opportunity will be vital if we are to improve people's life chances.

The clear fact is that Scotland's policy options remain constrained by the current devolution settlement and the embedded features of the prevailing UK market model. That is where Carol Mochan's views and mine diverge. To a significant extent, the policy decisions of successive UK Governments have determined where we can take our own economic development. Brexit has exacerbated the UK's long-standing structural problems. Jim Fairlie spoke about that in the context of Mr Major's thoughts on the situation.

Countries of Scotland's size have consistently outperformed the UK across a range of economic measures. They have the ability to thrive in our globalised economy because they are agile and can move towards and direct policy choices that are better suited to their own circumstances. Scotland is well positioned to learn from the experience of other nations and use the powers that would accrue through independence to improve economic, social and environmental outcomes significantly. We have strong business sectors in food and drink, financial services, energy and low carbon.

We also have world-class universities. Scotland has more universities per million people in the top 200 when compared with the figures for the rest of the UK, and it ranks third globally, behind Switzerland and the Netherlands.

Having full control over our tax and benefits would help to accelerate progress towards the ambitious targets that have been set by the Scottish Government for reducing child poverty.

The inequality gap across the UK will grow; it is structurally built into its financial model. However, there is another way. We do not have to accept the UK Government's mediocrity.

13:16

Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): I am grateful to Emma Roddick for securing the debate. At a time when we see global energy corporations recording obscene profits, we must discuss the inequalities that are ravaging our communities.

The picture of income distribution in Scotland is shaped like an hourglass. Most people earn the minimum wage, or thereabouts, but a small number of people earn fabulously high incomes. Most income is at the bottom and the top of the distribution, with a middle that is narrow—or narrower than it should be. The motion points to the reality that the average British household will soon be caught by Slovenian households when comparing how well off they are. However, the situation is actually worse than that: in 2021, the lowest earning bracket of British households was 20 per cent weaker than that of the equivalent household in Slovenia.

Let us think about where wealth comes from. It has two main sources: natural resources that we should all share, and the labour of workers who add value to such resources. Natural resources such as oil and gas should have benefited us all while we exploited them, so now we must share the fruits of the renewable revolution. It must make us all richer—not just those who are rich enough to own energy companies. Wealth, including income from labour, must be shared as equally as

possible so that we can share the endowments that we received from nature with everyone.

As has already been mentioned, John Burn-Murdoch, writing in the *Financial Times*, has called the UK a poor country

“with some very rich people”.

The insight of Kate Pickett and Richard Wilkinson has made it clear that having unequal societies makes things worse for everyone. Over the past 10 years, we have seen how the interests of the super-rich have warped our politics. We had austerity, which cut vital spending on services. The bond purchases that were associated with quantitative easing increased the wealth of asset holders who, of course, were already in the wealthiest decile. We are now seeing the disastrous impact of 12 years of austerity and underinvestment in public services. However, the UK Government is okay with that, because its wealthy backers have got richer.

Not only did we have austerity; we had a Brexit that owed much to the desire of the wealthy to prevent the UK from being part of Europe-wide measures to reclaim wealth stemming from the labour of workers and the extraction of resources for the common good. Such tax avoidance costs us all dear. Brexit has compounded all the failings of the British economy from the past 15 years. We still have low productivity, skewed wealth distribution and labour shortages.

All that is set against vast evidence from Pickett and Wilkinson that the simplest way to improve the lives of everyone in our country would be to equalise the distribution of wealth and income. Societies that prioritise more equal distribution perform better on all indicators from health and crime to education. We all want to improve the national health service and schools and to make our society safer, but inequality means that we are pushing that stone up an ever-steeper hill.

We know that wealth in the UK is undertaxed. By taxing wealth less, we end up taxing work more, and that is bad for everyone. It is a disincentive to work, and a key driver of inequality. The United Kingdom Government, which controls most of the powers to tax wealth, must act. We need to make the case that equality will be at the heart of an independent Scotland.

We have to find a way to introduce a pay ratio. In 2022, FTSE 100 executive pay increased by 23 per cent, at a time when we were told that most ordinary workers would need to take a real-terms pay cut. We need to taper pay increases so that those on lower incomes catch up with the high earners. We also need genuine action on income in kind.

We need to tax wealth effectively by tackling asset bubbles, radically reforming our local tax system and so much more. Some things should be done now, by the UK Government, to help us deal with the cost of living crisis that we face today. However, most of all, we need to recognise that inequality is not necessary, it is not healthy and it is at the root of many of our society’s problems. Every step that we take to reduce inequality makes our job in creating a better society much easier.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The final speaker in the open debate is Christine Grahame.

13:21

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): I am a spontaneous speaker in the debate—I did not intend to speak, but Edward Mountain really got to me. I accept that Putin’s war and Covid have contributed to the cost of living crisis, but why did Edward Mountain sidestep Liz Truss’s disastrous economic policies? What about Brexit, which 62 per cent of Scotland sensibly voted against? There is no doubt that that percentage would be higher now. Practically every economist tells us that Brexit has exacerbated the current situation, including Mark Carney, the former governor of the Bank of England and hardly a Scottish nationalist.

I say to Carol Mochan that I am a socialist, too, but I have lived through too many Labour Governments, starting with Harold Wilson’s—that is how far I go back. Then there was James Callaghan and the winter of discontent, Tony Blair and an illegal war that cost lives and millions of pounds, and then Gordon Brown and the banks’ collapse. With each of those Governments, I could see no distinction between them and the Conservatives, because the rich got richer and the poor got poorer. Then I saw the light, and I decided that Scotland could make a better fist of it itself.

Carol Mochan: I wonder whether Christine Grahame might mention some of the other things that Labour Governments have done. It is only fair to acknowledge that, in terms of the way in which we treat workers, the fact that we have good terms and conditions is because of what Labour Governments have done. It would only be fair for her to acknowledge that the SNP does not do everything that it commits to.

Christine Grahame: The big difference is that we do not have macroeconomic powers. We have a handout in the form of Barnett consequential from the United Kingdom Government, and that limits us. However, we mitigate, and we should be mitigating, policies that we do not agree with. While we bring in the Scottish child payment—

[*Interruption.*] Does Mr Mountain want to make an intervention?

Edward Mountain: If the member will take an intervention—

Christine Grahame: I am delighted to.

Edward Mountain: It is always nice to acknowledge that you have made mistakes. Do you want to address the ferries and the costs of that? Do you want to address the A9—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Speak through the chair.

Edward Mountain: Sorry.

Would the member like to address the issue with the ferries? Would she like to address the issues with the A9 and the A96? I would love to hear about her Government's failures.

Christine Grahame: Some of that did not relate to what I was saying about not having macroeconomic powers, but I will let Mr Mountain bleat on about those issues again.

I say to Carol Mochan that there was more mobility for my generation, after the war, than there is now. On that I agree with her. I started out in a prefab, and then we moved on to a council house. I was the oldest of five children; we were very working class. I became the first girl to stay at my school beyond the age of 15—we were supposed to leave school at 15 and get married early. After that, I was the first to go to university, and so on.

I do not see that mobility in those areas any more. We now have silos where people are trapped by the economic system and warped taxation system that we have. The people who are suffering now from inflation are ordinary people, whether we call them the middle or working class. They are bearing the burden, not the millionaires who can put their money offshore and keep it safe somewhere and who can afford to heat their houses and still eat in posh places.

The only growth industry that I see just now as a result of UK Government policy is food banks. Even some Tory politicians have the temerity to attend and celebrate the opening of a food bank. It is disgraceful. We should not have food banks in Scotland.

13:25

The Minister for Public Finance, Planning and Community Wealth (Tom Arthur): I thank Emma Roddick for bringing this important debate to the chamber, and I thank members for their contributions.

As Emma Roddick eloquently highlighted, although we all recognise that we have immediate

and pressing priorities—particularly as we face the cost crisis—it is important to lift our heads up and consider the larger picture. I believe that sincerely for a number of reasons, not just because it is a responsibility but because, ultimately, many of the social ills that we must confront are driven by, and reflections of, our underlying economic system.

That point was highlighted eloquently by Paul McLennan in his speech. He was absolutely correct to focus on structure because, when I consider the economic model that we have, I am struck—I had this reflection while listening to members' contributions—that there is almost an analogy between it and the nature of devolution. We have an economic model that leads to significant negative externalities, to use the jargon, and social and environmental consequences, and those issues must then be addressed through redistribution and mitigation. However, we want an economic system that pre-distributes and brings parity between economic, social and environmental factors—a genuine wellbeing economy—just as we want a constitutional arrangement in which the Scottish Parliament does not have to take the role of mitigating and addressing to the best of its ability the consequences of actions and policy decisions that are taken at Westminster.

It is important to reflect on that point. I am conscious that, sometimes, opponents of independence or constitutional change characterise debates and arguments about the constitution as arcane, recondite, esoteric and not grounded in reality or practical relevance to the people of Scotland. People with longer memories—those who have read their history and people who were there, such as Christine Grahame—will remember a time when that was the charge and criticism levelled at proponents of establishing the Parliament. They said that it was not relevant to the priorities of the people of Scotland and that to debate it was not to focus on the day-to-day, bread and butter issues.

Let us consider the reality. Compared to 2017, the poorest 10 per cent of households in Scotland will see their incomes increase by £580—4.6 per cent—per year compared to the rest of the UK, while the richest 10 per cent will see their incomes fall by just over £2,500. Among the poorest 30 per cent, reforms in Scotland to the income tax and benefit systems are set to raise the incomes of households with children by about £2,000 per year on average. That is the reality of what devolution has been able to do. It has brought about material improvement to the economic circumstances of the individuals whom we are charged with serving and honoured to serve.

My view is that we can go beyond that. Emma Roddick highlighted that point, and we have

sought to articulate it through the “Building a New Scotland” series of papers. It is not that independence in and of itself offers a panacea, magic bullet or overnight fix, but it equips us with the tools to fundamentally change how our economy operates in a way that is pragmatic, focused, realistic and done in partnership with public, private and third sector interests and communities.

We are taking action on that where we can. Last week, I launched the Government’s consultation on community wealth building. I welcome members’ references to that, because that is a means to rewire how our local and regional economies operate. I commend the work on that that has taken place under multiple administrations in North Ayrshire and the way in which the community wealth building model has been incorporated within the wider Ayrshire region. I also recognise the excellent work that is going on across the five pilot areas, which the Scottish Government has been supporting. I encourage all members to engage with the community wealth building consultation process.

The reality is that, in this Parliament, we do not currently have the powers to do everything that I would like to do to advance community wealth building, but that should not be a barrier or an impediment to our ambition. We should be bold, and I encourage members to engage—if they have ideas about how we can take community wealth building forward, they can get in touch with me. A community wealth building approach has the means to effect real, lasting reform at the local level, which can aggregate and accumulate to change things at the national level, and it is a practical means of delivering on our aspirations for a wellbeing economy.

We need a situation in which we can make that change permanent and lasting, as long as there is consent for it in Scotland. One of the enduring frustrations that I have experienced as a citizen, an MSP and a minister concerns the reality that political positions on which there is consensus in Scotland cannot be achieved and effected because of the current constitutional arrangements.

Carol Mochan is correct to highlight that Labour Governments—from Attlee to Wilson, and, indeed, from 1997 onwards—have delivered progressive policies that have been of benefit to people at UK level. However, we can look at the legacy that Labour would seek to adduce in favour of the argument for a future Labour Government, in relation to investment in the NHS and tackling child poverty, and we can think of what has taken place in the past 13 years since the coming to power of, first, a Conservative and Liberal Government and, then, a majority Conservative

Government—a Government for which there has been no democratic consent in Scotland.

I recognise that Scotland is part of the United Kingdom, but it is also an ancient nation and a recognised polity. The reality is that, in Scotland, there has not been majority support for the Conservatives in my lifetime. The last time that the Conservatives won a majority of seats in Scotland at a UK general election was in 1955. The last time that they came close to that was in 1959, and that was with a Prime Minister, Harold Macmillan, who at one point considered joining the Labour Party—a man who was a one-nation Conservative of a very different variety.

That raises an interesting point about the word “Conservative”. There is much within the Conservative tradition about a pragmatic and considered process of reform, and seeking to preserve the best of what has come before us and bequeath it to the next generation, with which many would agree. However, since 1979, we have had not a Conservative party in the tradition of Macmillan or even Churchill—who was also a Liberal, of course—but a party of the radical right, engrossed by transatlantic neoliberal politics that focus solely on the maximisation of profit and to hell with the consequences, be they social or environmental.

There might not be a consensus in the UK Parliament or in UK politics to address these issues. We might find ourselves in a situation in which the Labour Party, in seeking office in the United Kingdom, constantly finds itself having to triangulate in the hope of attracting Tory voters. We do not have that problem in Scotland. We have majority support for progressive, social democratic politics—we have that broad consensus. With independence, we can move on from having to mitigate to delivering the better future and the wellbeing economy that we all want to see.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes the debate. I encourage some members to spend their lunchtime refreshing their understanding of speaking through the chair, but, for now, I suspend the meeting.

13:33

Meeting suspended.

14:30

On resuming—

Point of Order

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): On a point of order, Deputy Presiding Officer. I seek your guidance and help on an important matter, which I believe lies at the heart of the business of Parliament. It cannot be said too often that it is fundamental that members of Parliament have opportunities to ask questions and to receive appropriate and timely answers from ministers. I know how keenly you, as Deputy Presiding Officer, and the Presiding Officer guard the public reputation of Parliament and the rights of its members, including the right to carry out the business of the people of Scotland who seek support and help from them.

I wrote to the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills, Shirley-Anne Somerville, on 1 December to seek her advice and help in respect of a burning concern that is shared by several of my constituents, all of whom contacted me separately to intercede on their behalf. The concern that they have relates to the level of support for children with autism or additional support needs in Falkirk schools.

I will limit my description of those cases in order to preserve the anonymity of those who are involved. Put simply, and to stress the urgency of the need for help from the cabinet secretary, those children are getting little to no support in their schooling. Their parents are doing the very best they can to help. Each case is, of course, unique, and there is complexity, but there is a problem with the provision of an appropriate level of support from Falkirk Council, which is causing immeasurable stress and upset. On top of that, the children and adolescent mental health services—CAMHS—waiting times in Forth Valley make getting a formal diagnosis of autism very difficult.

That those children have identified and diagnosed support needs highlights how clear cut their cases are and the extent to which that support is needed. There are clearly insufficient resources in place to meet those needs in the education system in Falkirk, so the children who are going into that system are being failed—badly so—which will have painful and long-lasting impacts on the children and their families.

I wrote to the cabinet secretary to request that an urgent investigation be undertaken to understand the reasons for that resource deficiency and to ensure that commensurate steps be taken with equal immediacy to rectify the situation. I have not had an answer. I was given a reference number—202200333763. There is a

problem in Falkirk for pupils with severe needs, which needs sorted out quickly.

I wrote again over two weeks ago to the cabinet secretary and still have had no answer. Can you please help me with the concerns of my constituents? What more can or should I do to receive an answer to my inquiries from the cabinet secretary?

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): Thank you, Mr Kerr, for your contribution—[*Interruption.*] Can I be the one who decides things? I am in the chair; I am the referee. Thank you.

I thank you for your contribution, Mr Kerr. I hear what you are saying. Obviously, what you have said is now on the record. You will know from your reading of the standing orders of Parliament that the time within which the Government responds or otherwise to correspondence from members does not engage those standing orders, and hence does not engage me as chair. However, the member will, I am sure, be aware of other potential ways in which to pursue those important matters—for example, through written questions, with respect to which timed deadlines are set forth in the standing orders of Parliament.

I hope that that is helpful.

Portfolio Question Time

Net Zero, Energy and Transport

14:33

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The next item of business is portfolio questions on net zero, energy and transport. Question 1 was not lodged.

Recycling Facilities (Glasgow)

2. James Dornan (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to help modernise recycling facilities in Glasgow. (S6O-01885)

The Minister for Green Skills, Circular Economy and Biodiversity (Lorna Slater): I recently awarded Glasgow City Council more than £21 million from the recycling improvement fund to improve recycling in the city. The investment will support the introduction of a new twin-stream kerbside service for the separate collection of recyclable materials, making it easier for households to recycle and improving the quality and quantity of recycling. The council's investment in a new material recovery facility will also mean that more materials will be reprocessed rather than thrown away.

James Dornan: I thank the minister for her response and welcome it. It would also be helpful if the minister would outline what other steps the Scottish Government is taking to improve recycling across the country, as it will be an essential tool in the fight against the climate crisis.

Lorna Slater: The recycling improvement fund is one important part of our overall efforts to improve recycling. It is already making a big impact across Scotland, with 17 councils benefiting from an award. We will soon publish a circular economy bill for the Parliament to scrutinise, as well as the final version of our waste route map. Together, those will support and empower local authorities to drive forward the modernisation and improvement of recycling facilities across Scotland and to cut the overall amount of waste that is produced through, for example, incentivising reuse over disposal products. That will help to cut emissions, tackling the climate emergency, and it will mean that everyone benefits from less litter and better public services.

Mercedes Villalba (North East Scotland) (Lab): Although efforts to modernise recycling facilities across Scotland are welcome, there are some items, such as disposable vapes, that simply should not be clogging up our waste management systems in the first place. The Scottish

Government has announced a review into those items, which is welcome, but we cannot afford to wait for action. Does the minister support the proposal in Dundee for a pilot ban of disposable vapes to help to inform national policy?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That is a bit wide of the question, which concerns modernising recycling facilities in Glasgow.

West Coast Main Line (Network Rail Discussions)

3. Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what discussions it has held with Network Rail regarding passenger services on the west coast main line, including services calling at Lockerbie. (S6O-01886)

The Minister for Transport (Jenny Gilruth): Transport Scotland has regular meetings with Network Rail and train operating companies regarding passenger services at railway stations on the west coast main line in Scotland.

Lockerbie services are provided by TransPennine Express and Avanti West Coast, which are train operating companies that are specified and funded by the United Kingdom Government. I discussed TransPennine services when I met the UK Government rail minister recently. TransPennine services at Lockerbie have been affected by an unacceptable level of cancellation and delay, which has been compounded by industrial action.

Emma Harper: The TransPennine service at Lockerbie is in a complete fankle. Trains are consistently cancelled or delayed with no notice, no replacement bus and no alternative options. That has a major impact on my constituents who rely on the service to travel to the central belt and south of the border. Currently, only 43 per cent of TransPennine services run on time, with CrossCountry, Avanti and LNER occasionally picking up the slack by making unplanned stops at Lockerbie. Will the minister agree to make representations to TransPennine regarding how unacceptable the situation is, and will she commit to facilitating a meeting with me and Network Rail regarding the contract for the service?

Jenny Gilruth: As I have previously outlined, TransPennine is a cross-border rail operator, so the contract is run and managed by the UK Government Department for Transport. It is, ultimately, a matter for the UK Government to resolve and, as I alluded to in my response to Emma Harper's initial question, I have very recently raised her concerns with the UK Government rail minister directly. Huw Merriman acknowledged the poor performance of TransPennine, and I am advised that the DFT is

working closely with it to improve performance levels.

Separately, I have written to the previous minister for rail, Kevin Foster, on the matter of cross-border performance in relation to the Avanti contract, which is managed by the DFT, too. The member may recall that Mr Foster provided Avanti with a contract extension last year, despite Avanti's poor performance. I am happy to make the direct representation that Emma Harper has asked me for, and I will ask my officials to facilitate the meeting with Network Rail that she has requested.

Oliver Mundell (Dumfriesshire) (Con): The situation is worse than “a fankle”—there is nothing to get tied up or tangled. Will the minister consider a solution that is closer to home? Given that ScotRail is now in public ownership, will she take forward discussions about running a passenger service that actually calls at Lockerbie?

Jenny Gilruth: I recognise Mr Mundell's frustration. We have heard similar frustration from Emma Harper about the service. However, ultimately, the service is a contract that is managed by the DFT, so I urge the UK Government to help TransPennine to resolve the issues. I raised the matter with the rail minister only a few weeks ago, but I am more than happy to make further representations. If Mr Mundell is able to persuade his colleagues down south—because, as I said, the contract is managed by the DFT—to give the necessary focus to resolving the situation, I am sure that his constituents would welcome that.

Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab): I hope that, in her representations, the minister will back my calls for TransPennine Express and Avanti West Coast to lose that franchise, which, frankly, is a failed one.

Last month, I asked the minister whether the plans to remove peak fares would cover all routes in Scotland. She said yes. Lockerbie might be a ScotRail station but, as we know, the services are provided by TransPennine and Avanti. Is the minister raising that issue in the discussions that she is having with those companies to ensure that passengers who go from one Scottish station to another, irrespective of who delivers those services, also benefit from the removal of peak fares? Passengers from Lockerbie should not be treated as second class just because, at the moment, ScotRail chooses not to run services from there.

Jenny Gilruth: I recognise Colin Smyth's observations. The peak fares promotion that will be forthcoming in the coming months will apply to ScotRail services. I do not have responsibility for the services in question, which sit outwith the

Scottish Government's control. I am more than happy to raise such matters directly with the train operating companies, as I mentioned in my response to Ms Harper, and directly with the UK Government.

Railway Industry in Scotland (Transport Scotland Discussions)

4. Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what discussions it has had with Transport Scotland about the future of the railway industry, including its supply chain in Scotland. (S6O-01887)

The Minister for Transport (Jenny Gilruth): I have regular discussions with my officials in Transport Scotland about a wide range of rail matters affecting the Scottish railway industry.

At the end of last year, I spoke at the Railway Industry Association conference, which considered the supply chain in the rail industry in Scotland. Last month, I met the railway unions to discuss the issue, particularly in the context of public ownership of ScotRail.

Paul Sweeney: The minister and the Cabinet Secretary for Net Zero, Energy and Transport will be aware of the Caley railway works in Springburn, which was forced to close in 2019, despite being profitable, having a highly skilled workforce and being of strategic importance to Scotland's railway infrastructure. Since that closure, ScotRail trains are routinely sent to England and Wales for maintenance, repair and overhaul, due to a lack of capacity to do that work in Scotland.

There is interest in returning the Caley works to use as a railway engineering and maintenance site, but it is likely that intervention from the Government and its agencies will be required to make that happen. Will the minister agree to meet me and representatives of the trade unions, alongside Scottish Government agencies such as Scottish Enterprise, to find a workable and viable solution that will bring long-term benefits to Scotland's economy through the reopening of the Caley railway works?

Jenny Gilruth: I suspect that Paul Sweeney's question probably cuts across the responsibilities of different ministerial portfolios and, as he will appreciate, I was not in post at the time of the closure of the Springburn works.

However, I recognise the need to encourage our having Scottish jobs in Scotland to support the rail industry, particularly as we move forward with our decarbonisation agenda. I have discussed that at length with the railway unions in recent times, and I would be more than happy to meet the member and, more broadly, other ministers who might also have responsibilities in this space to look at what

more we might be able to do to sustain jobs in Scotland, as the member has asked us to do.

Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): The Railway Industry Association, which represents the supply chain in the sector, has welcomed the publication of the high-level output specification and statement of funds available for Scotland's railway infrastructure for control period 7.

The Scottish Government's vision for our railway is one of an attractive, environmentally friendly mode of transport, and a wholly publicly owned, fully integrated rail network. Does the minister agree that, if Labour shares those aspirations, it is time that it backed the calls for the full devolution of rail powers, to bring track and train together and ensure that Scotland has the levers that it needs to create a sustainable rail service in the future?

Jenny Gilruth: Yes, I do. Earlier this week, the third UK Secretary of State for Transport in my time as Minister for Transport presented a vision for the railways of Britain that sits fundamentally at odds with the approach that we have taken in Scotland. Mark Harper wants to use more private sector investment in our railways, whereas we want there to be less private sector investment in our railways. That is why, last April, we took ScotRail into public ownership.

It is worth saying that the Scottish Government has consistently presented a clear case for the full devolution of rail powers. The Conservative UK Government's plans for rail will not deliver that. Public ownership of ScotRail means that our railway should work for the people who own it, not for shareholders, and that is exactly why powers over train and track must be fully devolved to Scotland.

Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con): The minister mentioned the UK transport secretary's vision. We have yet to hear her vision for ScotRail. Perhaps it could include lower fares and a simpler ticketing system. Would she agree?

Jenny Gilruth: I did not quite catch the end of Mr Simpson's question but, of course, Scotland has lower rail fares than other parts of the UK do. I think that, on average, rail tickets in Scotland are about 15 per cent cheaper than they are in other parts of the UK.

It is worth pointing out that we have an offer coming forward in relation to the removal of peak fares, which another member asked about. I absolutely want to drive the provision of a more accessible and affordable railway for the people of Scotland, which is what public ownership should be about. That is the vision for Scotland's railways.

Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): We have long been promised investment

at Longannet by the rail industry. We have the right infrastructure sitting there to provide thousands of green jobs and reopen an important freight and passenger route on the back of any potential investment. Does the minister agree that regeneration at Longannet remains key to the future of Scotland's railways and the supply chain that is based in Scotland?

Jenny Gilruth: Yes, I agree with the sentiment of the member's question, and I strongly support attracting railway industry suppliers to the strategic Longannet site. At the time, I thought that it was deeply disappointing that Talgo was unsuccessful in securing the rolling stock order for high speed 2 from the UK Government. That would have allowed Talgo to quickly confirm its plans for a manufacturing facility on the site, so it was a real missed opportunity.

More broadly, my officials, working alongside Scottish Enterprise, remain available to discuss relocation opportunities with rail industry suppliers that are looking for a strategic development site, particularly in relation to Longannet.

Coastal Erosion (North East Scotland)

5. Tess White (North East Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on what steps it is taking to address coastal erosion in the North East Scotland region. (S6O-01888)

The Minister for Environment and Land Reform (Màiri McAllan): Through our dynamic coast project, we have worked closely with local authorities to help them plan for coastal adaptation, and in our programme for government 2020 we announced a new £11.7 million capital budget over four years for coastal change adaptation, which starts in 2022-23.

In the north-east, in 2023-24, Aberdeen and Angus will each receive £150,000 and Aberdeenshire will receive £206,000 for coastal change adaptation, making a total commitment of more than £500,000. In addition, the Montrose dune and beach replenishment project has also received £350,000 from our nature restoration fund.

Tess White: Thank you, minister. It is really good to hear that some money is on its way. It would be good to see that actually delivered. The reality is that councils have never had the money to make multimillion-pound investments to turn the tide. Now that the revenue position has worsened, the people of Montrose are telling us that there are scant years left in the dune system and the historic golf course. A few fairways have already been lost to the sea, and there are huge implications with regard to flooding. When will the Scottish

Government grasp the nettle and decide whether it will support a sand motor at Montrose?

Màiri McAllan: I am absolutely aware of the serious erosion issues with the sand dunes in Montrose and the impact that that can have on residents in terms of flooding. I completely understand their concern about flooding. Equally, I understand how important the golf course itself is to the people of Montrose. I have narrated exactly how the Scottish Government is responding to that, not least through a research programme, dynamic coast, which maps risk. Working with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, we have agreed to assign money directly to those risks as they are identified.

Officials in Marine Scotland's licensing team are working with the port authority to investigate whether it could be beneficial to use dredged material to shore up the situation there. Angus Council has also worked on a flood risk management plan that seeks to address erosion and flooding in a co-ordinated way. In all those ways, we are seeking to rise to the undoubted challenge of movement in our coastlines.

Clean Air and Net Zero (UK100 Report)

6. Michelle Thomson (Falkirk East) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what its response is, regarding any impact in Scotland, to the new report by UK100, which highlights the benefits of clean air and net zero approaches. (S6O-01889)

The Minister for Environment and Land Reform (Màiri McAllan): Our cleaner air for Scotland 2 strategy recognises the significant benefits of aligning approaches to address climate change and improve air quality, particularly in areas such as transport, agriculture and industrial emissions. Our strategy sets out an explicit commitment to ensure that the policies that we pursue to reduce climate change also deliver co-benefits for air quality. We have done much work in that regard, not least on our low-emission zones, and a lot of work to decarbonise public transport. It is paying off because, for the first time outside recent lockdown periods, no monitoring sites are exceeding air quality objectives.

Michelle Thomson: I thank the minister for that response. In respect of CANZ, the environmental organisation UK100 has said that

"wider progress is being hampered by the government's lack of a coherent national strategy, disjointed short-term funding and a refusal to recognise the importance of CANZ."

It is my view that the CANZ approach aligns with much of what we are seeking to do in Scotland, but recent exchanges with Westminster demonstrate that that is not a view that the Tories share. Does the minister therefore share my

concern that that is, regrettably, another example of where the UK Government's obstinacy regarding net zero might hold Scotland back?

Màiri McAllan: I absolutely agree with the sentiment of Michelle Thomson's question. We need faster action and higher ambition from the UK Government on delivering net zero and doing so justly.

The Scottish Government has repeatedly called on the UK Government to act, and we will continue to do so. It must take the necessary actions.

Better still, we want Scotland to be an independent country with powers over our own resources so that we can tackle climate change and, at the same time, build the clean, green and prosperous economy of the future that we know that Scotland can have.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Liam Kerr, who is joining us remotely, has a supplementary question.

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): Strangely, Michelle Thomson failed to mention the report's second recommendation, which mentions local authorities getting to net zero needing longer-term dedicated funding commitments to allow proper planning and implementation. A report in *The Press and Journal* last week showed that, as Transport Scotland no longer subsidises the repair and maintenance of the public electric vehicle charge point network in the Highland Council area, it will be cheaper to run a petrol car than it will be to run an electric car. Does the minister think that Transport Scotland is demonstrating exactly the sort of short-termist and short-sighted thinking that the report counsels against? Have similar cuts been made in any other Scottish local authorities?

Màiri McAllan: I do not agree with that whatsoever. In fact, I know that our EV infrastructure coverage is among the best in the UK. I think that we have among the most coverage per head of population outside London.

The 2023-24 draft budget prioritises the Government's commitment to a just transition to net zero, climate-resilient and biodiverse Scotland. It does that backed by, I think, some £2.2 billion of funding.

Deposit Return Scheme

7. Craig Hoy (South Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on progress towards the launch of the deposit return scheme. (S6O-01890)

The Minister for Green Skills, Circular Economy and Biodiversity (Lorna Slater): Scotland's deposit return scheme will be a major part of our efforts to reduce littering, cut emissions and build a more circular economy. It is a bold,

complex and transformational scheme that is in line with the scale of the climate emergency that we face, and it will mean a significant change for everyone in Scotland.

I am pleased that industry has made significant progress towards implementation. That finding is echoed in our recent independent review.

This week, I am writing to all MSPs to provide a detailed update on progress and to highlight the additional actions taken by the Scottish Government and the scheme administrator, Circularity Scotland, to provide support for businesses to get ready for the DRS. The momentum that is under way is a testament to the efforts that are being made by businesses, Circularity Scotland and the Scottish Government to ensure that there are pragmatic approaches to launch. I will continue to engage closely with industry to ensure that the transformational scheme is a success.

Craig Hoy: I sense that, with less than six months to go, the minister is still woefully complacent about the impact of the deposit return scheme. The owner of Broughton brewery in the Scottish Borders has said that it will pose real challenges to the business. They said that the brewery competes

“with other small brewers based across the UK and the different system will leave small Scottish brewers at an economic disadvantage.”

They added:

“We will have to invest in producer fees, revised packaging and an increase in our stockholding, which impacts on our cash flow and our ability to innovate and protect jobs.”

Will the minister now act in light of the voice of small brewers by postponing the introduction of the DRS for small producers and putting in place a permanent low-volume exemption scheme, or will she push small producers to the brink and wilfully carry on regardless?

Lorna Slater: I am very aware of the concerns of small producers. We have worked closely with Circularity Scotland, and we have already published new producer fees that are lower than originally planned for the scheme and that reduce the overall cost. Day 1 payments for producers using United Kingdom-wide barcodes will be reduced by two thirds, from 2.4 months of fees to three weeks of fees. There will be no registration fee for producers with an annual turnover of less than £85,000 and for producers that only fill and sell single-use drink containers at the point of sale. For all other producers, the registration fee will be £365.

I am keen for the scheme to work properly for small producers, and I will meet small producers

tomorrow morning to find out what more we can do to support them to fully participate in it.

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): I share Craig Hoy’s concerns about Broughton brewery, which is in my constituency.

Dryden Aqua, which is a very profitable company and is also in my constituency, recycles glass for innovative water filtration systems. The proposed DRS, as it stands, puts that business at risk. Will the minister meet that company to discuss its concerns?

Lorna Slater: Including glass in our scheme will save more than 1.2 megatonnes of CO₂ over 25 years and will significantly increase the quantity and quality of glass recycle. Like similar schemes around the world, our scheme in Scotland is being delivered and funded by industry, so the materials that are generated by the scheme, and their disposition, are matters for industry—that is, for Circularity Scotland—not the Scottish Government.

However—*[Interruption.]*

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Excuse me, could we have less sedentary chat?

Lorna Slater: I am always happy and interested to meet companies that work in my portfolio area, and I will contact Christine Grahame to make arrangements.

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): I feel a real need to stand up and plead with the minister to listen not only to members of her own party who are making the case for businesses but to businesses themselves.

As, I am sure, many other members are, I am deluged with correspondence from producers, retailers and the hospitality sector saying that they fear the scheme. They want the details, but they fear the calamitous impact that the scheme will have on their businesses. They fear going out of business. Will the minister therefore, please, listen to her colleagues and to people in the industry, who know what they are talking about, and will she assure us that she is open to change, so that the calamity that they fear can be averted?

Lorna Slater: I am very aware of the concerns of industry, and I regularly meet large retailers, small retailers, large producers and small producers. I am particularly aware of the concerns of small producers. As I have said, I plan to meet them again tomorrow to find out what else we can do.

Through listening to the concerns of industry, we have adapted and are adapting the scheme. The extension to the go-live date to this year, which was announced last December, gave

industry additional time to prepare. On 27 January, Circularity Scotland announced an increase in the return handling fees for retailers in order to support them to collect the materials. I have already listed the reduced fees for producers to help them to participate in the scheme. I have also set out that I am meeting producers to find out what else we can do to help them to participate fully in the scheme. I am keen for all Scottish businesses that are affected to be able to participate successfully in the scheme.

Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD): At First Minister's question time, we heard about the 600 producers who have raised concerns. Some of them are from my Orkney Islands constituency, where the logistical challenges of the DRS are even greater. Over the past year, I have worked with many local stakeholders to try to get answers to their questions about how the scheme will work in practice. Now that it is clear that those questions cannot be answered in the timeframe that has been set, I urge the minister to think about pausing the scheme in order to avoid damaging businesses, public confidence and even the case for the DRS itself.

Lorna Slater: The scheme in Scotland will go live on 16 August this year. The extension to the go-live date, which was put back to this year, was announced in December 2021 in order to give industry more time to prepare.

As with similar successful schemes around the world, our scheme is being delivered and funded by industry. Those organisational matters are for industry to resolve. I am working very hard to facilitate the ability of industry to have the answers to that organisational blueprint, so that we can move forward with a successful scheme. Much progress has been made to deliver the scheme, and we are building momentum towards the go-live date of 16 August.

Energy Affordability (Support)

8. Gordon MacDonald (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government, in relation to support that it can provide for households in Scotland, what recent discussions it has had with the United Kingdom Government regarding energy affordability. (S6O-01891)

The Cabinet Secretary for Net Zero, Energy and Transport (Michael Matheson): We have urged the UK Government to ensure that the interests of Scottish consumers are represented in the decision making around future support with energy costs, and we have called repeatedly for support to be targeted towards those who need it most.

Last year, the First Minister chaired two energy summits, which were attended by energy

suppliers, advice agencies and third sector representatives. We continue to build on those and subsequent discussions with stakeholders and to identify further actions that we can take, within our devolved powers, to mitigate the impacts of high energy costs on Scottish consumers.

Gordon MacDonald: It has been reported in the past week that, while most people are struggling to heat their homes, big energy companies are making record profits. Given that energy pricing is reserved, will the cabinet secretary urge the Chancellor of the Exchequer to tax share buy-backs, expand the windfall tax and scrap plans to raise the energy bill cap by a further £500 in April?

Michael Matheson: In relation to the member's final point, yes, I would ask the chancellor to revisit the price cap, which is due to be increased in the next couple of months.

Given that consumers face hikes in their energy costs, it is galling to households right across the country to see major energy providers making record profits. I cannot think of a better example of the sheer failure of the UK Government to regulate and manage our energy sector than the example that we have seen in the past week. It is a clear example of systemic failure by successive UK Governments to manage the energy markets in a way that reflects the needs of consumers.

The situation is made all the worse for consumers here in Scotland given that our energy costs are greater than those in any other part of the UK. As a result of that systemic failure by the present UK Government on the issue, even more households in Scotland find themselves in fuel poverty or extreme fuel poverty. That is why the UK Government should take urgent action to extend the windfall tax on companies that are making record profits off the back of households throughout the country that face extensive price increases as a result of Westminster Government failure over many years.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes portfolio question time.

International Day of Women and Girls in Science

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-07852, in the name of Jamie Hepburn, on international day of women and girls in science.

I invite members who wish to participate in the debate to press their request-to-speak buttons now or as soon as possible.

15:02

The Minister for Higher Education and Further Education, Youth Employment and Training (Jamie Hepburn): In 2015, the United Nations adopted a resolution to designate 11 February as the international day of women and girls in science. Since then, that day has become an annual celebration of their achievements in science.

However, the day also serves as a reminder that women and girls remain underrepresented in many areas of science. We should commend the many organisations across Scotland that are playing a part in seeking to address that issue. Science, technology, engineering and mathematics—STEM—has traditionally been a male-dominated sector. Although women have made tremendous progress in that area, sadly, a significant gender gap still exists. For that reason, the drive by the United Nations to establish an annual day dedicated to recognising the incredible contributions that women make in the STEM sector was, in itself, an important milestone.

Since then, on 11 February every year, countries around the world, including Scotland, mark this important day. That is the reason for the debate, and I look forward to hearing members' insights during the afternoon.

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): The minister is making a very valid point about the disproportionate underrepresentation of women in certain career and sector areas. Has any analysis been done on the representation of women in apprenticeships in the sectors that the minister has in mind?

Jamie Hepburn: Yes, there has been analysis of that. I do not have the figures to hand right now, but I would be happy to write to the member to provide those details. Sadly, we see the gender segregation in colleges, universities and the wider labour market replicated in the apprenticeship frameworks. There has been progress, and I am sure that Stephen Kerr, like other members, would welcome that. Activity is under way. An equalities action plan is in place through Skills Development

Scotland and the Scottish apprenticeship advisory board has made a series of recommendations specifically on gender. Those recommendations were provided at the end of last year and we are currently considering how to respond. As I said, I would be happy to write to Stephen Kerr with more information.

I will reflect on some of Scotland's pioneers in the STEM sector. For more than a century, Scottish women have not only played influential roles in the industry itself but helped to provide the funding and infrastructure that is necessary to allow other women to progress.

On her death in 1872, the mathematician, astronomer and scientist Mary Somerville was dubbed

"The Queen of 19th Century Science".

Her books were bestsellers, and such was her standing that hers was the first signature on John Stuart Mill's petition to Parliament calling for votes for women. Mary Somerville holds the distinction of being the first female scientist featured on a British bank note, following a public vote.

In the field of medicine, the Edinburgh seven were trailblazers, as the first group of matriculated undergraduate female students not only at any Scottish university but at any British university. They began studying medicine at the University of Edinburgh in 1869, and although, scandalously, they were ultimately prevented from graduating and qualifying as doctors, the campaign that they fought gained national attention and won them many supporters. That campaign led to a change in legislation in 1876 that ensured that women could be licensed to practise medicine and to legislation that would ensure that women could study at university. From 1894, women were allowed to graduate from the University of Edinburgh, with the first female doctors graduating in 1896.

Victoria Drummond of Perthshire was the first woman marine engineer in the United Kingdom and the first woman member of the Institute of Marine Engineers. In the second world war, she served at sea as an engineering officer in the Merchant Navy and was recognised for bravery at sea under enemy fire. She was inducted into the Scottish Engineering Hall of Fame in 2018.

It is important that we recognise, mark and celebrate that lineage, but just as important—perhaps more important, lest we fall foul of thinking of Scotland's scientific achievements and endeavours only in the past tense—we must recognise and celebrate what is happening today. Scotland has some incredible women who are making groundbreaking discoveries here and now. There are many examples that I could give—I

hope to hear many today—but I will highlight just a few.

Professor Elham Kashefi was appointed as National Quantum Computing Centre chief scientist in November 2022, and leads the University of Edinburgh's quantum software lab.

In May 2021, Professor Catherine Heymans of the University of Edinburgh became the first woman to be appointed as Scotland's astronomer royal. She is best known for her work on using the technique of cosmic weak gravitational lensing to learn more about the universe.

Professor Sheila Rowan of the University of Glasgow became the president of the UK Institute of Physics in October 2021. She is part of the international research collaboration that first detected the existence of gravitational waves, opening up new ways to understand our universe. She was also chief scientific adviser for Scotland from 2016 to 2021.

Professor Rebecca Goss at the University of St Andrews is making great strides in the field of chemical synthesis using biotechnology. In 2022, she spun out X-Genix, a biotech start-up with the goal of enabling discovery of better drugs for better health globally. It received £2 million of investment to translate the technology and was recognised through winning first place in Converge 2022, which is Scotland's top spin-out competition, with a prize of £69,000.

In the Scottish Government, Professor Julie Fitzpatrick is Scotland's chief scientific adviser. A veterinary surgeon by training, Julie champions putting science and evidence at the heart of Government policy making and she is spearheading a range of activities in support of that. As the minister for science, she is an invaluable source of support to me.

Pam Gosal (West Scotland) (Con): Does the minister agree that women and girls from the black, Asian and minority ethnic community are underrepresented among the names that he has listed? Is there any data around that?

Jamie Hepburn: Yes, we will have that information. In the same vein as my response to Stephen Kerr, if we look at apprenticeships specifically, gender is only one of the characteristics on which we know that we need to make progress through the equalities action plan that Skills Development Scotland is working to.

We will have that information, and I am happy to provide the detail to the member.

For all the outstanding achievements that we will—rightly—recognise today, as has been alluded to, we know there is much more to be done. Many of our learned institutions are carrying out important work to understand the issues,

including the Institute of Physics and the Royal Society of Chemistry. I take the opportunity to recognise the role of the RSC's first female president, Professor Lesley Yellowlees of the University of Edinburgh, who was appointed in 2012, in championing that. They have produced a number of reports over the past few years to highlight the issues involved, including recruitment, retention and promotion, research culture, and pay and reward. Crucially, they also suggest ways to address the underrepresentation of women in science, some of which involve tackling deep-seated problems around inequalities.

For many years now, Scotland has championed the importance of women in the STEM sector as part of our wider efforts to address the issue of gender inequality, which sits at the heart of our vision for an equal Scotland. Tackling gender inequality across different areas of the education and learning landscape is fundamental to changing perceptions about STEM and challenging assumptions about who does what in relation to gender and wider inequalities. At the same time, STEM is integral to Scotland's future economic and social development, and the Scottish Government wants everyone in Scotland to build a strong foundation of STEM skills and knowledge.

Bringing that together, the developing the young workforce strategy includes specific actions around promoting career options to different protected groups, designing senior phase vocational pathways to improve gender balance, reducing occupational segregation in modern apprenticeships and embedding equality across the curriculum for excellence, recognising that assumptions about which gender undertakes which subject matter or pursues which career starts early.

I was delighted to be at Dundee Science Centre as part of the Dundee science festival, where I met a group of enthusiastic young people from Rosebank primary school; the girls in attendance were engaged in the activities that were under way.

Michelle Thomson (Falkirk East) (SNP): I hear what the minister is saying about the encouragement of girls, even in primary school. However, to my mind, that could start earlier, by creating specialist teaching materials for nurseries, geared specifically towards girls' engagement in science. Is that something that he might agree with?

Jamie Hepburn: We are always keen to do what we can to ensure that we engage as early as possible with young people, particularly young girls, to make sure that we are tackling these challenges. I know that activity is under way in the

early years and learning sector. That is something that I would commend and be keen to see more of.

Other areas of activity that we are supporting include funding for Equate Scotland to support the recruitment, retention, return and success of women in jobs where they are significantly underrepresented. Funding is also provided to Careerwise, which offers female undergraduates paid work placements with STEM employers.

Each college has measures in place to help to reduce gender disparities within STEM subject areas. The ambition is that, by 2030, no college or university subject will have a gender imbalance greater than 75 per cent of one gender.

As the international day of women and girls in science demonstrates, collective action is needed, and I have highlighted some of the activity that is under way. I have framed the motion in terms that I think that we can all unite around, as I note that it is not just Government that has to make this effort; all of us collectively as publicly elected representatives must do that.

I hope that members will support the Government's motion. We will be supporting both amendments. I look forward to hearing what members have to say.

I move,

That the Parliament commends the International Day of Women and Girls in Science as a celebration of the achievements of generations of female scientists; recognises that female scientists and innovators are integral to Scotland's world-leading science and research excellence, and addressing the global challenges faced; affirms its commitment to tackle gender inequality across different areas of the education and learning landscape, and commends the support given by a range of organisations in helping to drive forward the Scottish Government's commitment to gender equality in science.

15:13

Pam Gosal (West Scotland) (Con): I am delighted to be opening today's debate for the Scottish Conservatives. The debate marks the international day of women and girls in science. As shadow minister for higher and further education, youth employment and training, and an advocate for women reaching their full potential, I have proposed an amendment to the motion.

Marie Curie said:

"Be less curious about people and more curious about ideas".

For a long time, women's contribution in science was hidden or discredited. That point is well articulated in the University of Glasgow women in STEM blog. Challenges for women in science in the past and present have built a sense of

camaraderie among female scientists to ensure that that does not determine the future.

I am extremely impressed by the efforts of many institutions and grass-roots groups across Scotland and around the world to tackle the gender gap and make science an accessible, attractive career for young women. I will name a few that are close to home. I admire the work that is being done by FemEng at the University of Glasgow to encourage girls at school to seriously get involved and consider a future in science. FemEng has collaborated with the University of Rwanda and the University of Malawi to inspire young budding female scientists in schools.

In my region, the University of the West of Scotland has also made tremendous steps in increasing female participation in science. It has had more than 2,000 new female science undergraduates in each of the past three years. Nearly 30 percent of women in science subjects at the university have come from the 20 percent most deprived areas in Scotland and it has supported more than four fifths of women science graduates into employment or further education within the first 18 months of their graduation.

The University of the West of Scotland also boasts some tremendous scientific contributions by female scientists, such as that of Professor Fiona Henriquez, the woman behind the team who developed the world's first treatment for a devastating eye condition that affects millions of people every year; and Marija Nekrasova, a chemistry student who was enabled by UWS to go to the Kennedy Space Center in Florida to watch her experiment launch into orbit on SpaceX CRS-26.

Recently, I visited the British Heart Foundation's research excellence centre at the University of Glasgow and was overcome by the work that is being done there. I was introduced to six students, four of whom were young women. It is difficult to put into words the immense impact that their research will have. One excellent example is that of Caitlin Cosgrove, who is trying to identify micro-ribonucleic acid molecules that may be beneficial in strokes, and could in the future be inserted in the brain to target bad cells.

I thank the Royal Society of Chemistry for its briefing, which sets out how addressing the gaps in data, funding and flexibility will help to enable the equal participation of those from underrepresented groups. In addition, increasing accountability and eliminating bias will go a long way to build cultures of belonging.

I am happy to support the Government's motion, which speaks about the importance of women to Scotland's world-leading science and research sector. Likewise, the Labour amendment makes

some important points about how gender inequality in STEM begins from a young age. However, there are areas where the Government's motion could have gone further. My amendment sets out the importance of inclusion, and of ensuring that no woman feels unable to enter the STEM sector because of her gender, ethnicity or disability. As we recognise the international day of women and girls in science, it is important that we celebrate the contributions of women in all their diversity. Therefore, I hope that members from across the chamber will support my amendment.

It is clear that there is more to be done to ensure that STEM is accessible to all. That means addressing the root causes of the inequalities that exist at all levels, ensuring that schools are able to tackle inequality from a young age and recognising that unlocking the talents of women in all their diversity is the key to empowering our science sector. Although great work by universities, colleges and grass-roots groups is under way, they cannot do it alone. It is therefore the duty of all members in the chamber to work together, find solutions and work towards eliminating any remaining barriers for good.

I move amendment S6M-07852.2, to insert at end:

“; notes that the Parliament must build on the work being done by a range of organisations to inspire young women and girls to engage in science and STEM subjects from early years education and throughout their education journey; recognises the need to improve diversity and inclusion for women; commits to exploring further pathways to ensure that no woman is denied the ability to enter the science and STEM sector as a result of their gender, ethnicity or disability, and further commits to removing the barriers that are hindering diversity and inclusion in science.”

15:18

Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab):

Across the long stretch of our written history, the achievements of women in science have been neglected or, worse still, subsumed into the achievements of their male counterparts. Professor Dame Jocelyn Bell Burnell is an astrophysicist who is best known for her discovery of radio pulsars in 1967, which was one of the great astronomical discoveries of the 20th century. However, when the Nobel prize in physics was awarded in 1974 for her discovery, Bell Burnell was not one of the recipients: two men were honoured instead.

Even so, the light of Dame Jocelyn's brilliance could not be dimmed or kept hidden by cumulative millennia of patriarchy and misogyny. She has since become the first female president of the Royal Society of Edinburgh and is now chancellor of the University of Dundee. Progress, wherever that is found, should always be welcomed.

I have been privileged to work under outstanding female academic leaders: Professor Georgina Follett, Professor Dame Sue Black and Professor Niamh Nic Daéid are extraordinary leaders in this country in their fields of design, forensic anthropology and forensic science. There is also a whole new generation of inspiring female academic leaders in Scotland who are transforming our great universities, including Professor Clare Bond in earth science and net zero at the University of Aberdeen, Professor Natalie Coull in cybersecurity at Abertay and many, many more.

However, those examples are of women who have successfully navigated what is termed the “leaky pipeline” of talent. Many women and girls do not continue STEM subjects at university or carry on into STEM careers. Data published by the RSE shows that more than 70 per cent of female STEM graduates leave STEM-related careers. Athena scientific women's academic network programmes—where they have been adopted and invested in—are helping, but the pandemic has been a further setback to the careers of women who carry the burden of care.

Unfortunately, the loss of girls from STEM begins far earlier. That is reflected in the statistics for subject uptake, which remain woefully unequal. In 2021, only 20 per cent of candidates taking national 5 chemistry were female. Whatever the Scottish Government may tell us, interventions in that area have had no discernible impact. The percentage of female candidates for national 5 chemistry has not changed for years and the figure for those taking national 5 physics has only inched up from 28 per cent to 29 per cent in the past three years. Those statistics are hardly cause for celebration or self-congratulation.

We also know that we have a dire lack of STEM teachers in schools and that the number of those taking STEM subjects to senior level is plummeting.

Stephen Kerr: I am grateful to Michael Marra for giving way during such an excellent speech.

Part of the problem is the recruitment of STEM teachers. Would Mr Marra be open to considering ways of broadening the routes into STEM teaching in order to encourage a greater uptake in interest, particularly from people who may be further on in their careers and may have much to give back, particularly to young women?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I can give you the time back, Mr Marra.

Michael Marra: Such ideas are certainly worthy of consideration. It is imperative that we look for new and innovative ways of getting people into our STEM classrooms so that we can make good on that shortfall.

Computing science, in particular, is an unfolding disaster, with a curriculum in dire need of revision and schools being priced out of the market for those who might teach it, all at a time when the economy desperately needs more of that knowledge, rather than less of it.

Our job here, as Mr Kerr points out, is not to be commentators but to make change. One important area of STEM that desperately needs more women is our tech industry. The Office for National Statistics has shown that only 23.4 per cent of the tech industry workforce in Scotland is female. Last night, Pauline McNeill and I hosted a round-table meeting in Parliament on violence against women and girls. The proliferation of misogynistic content online, the impact that that is having on our culture and the consequential rising tide of violence against women and girls is abundantly clear.

A better gender balance in the technology workforce, where products are conceived and designed, must be part of that solution. Risks are better understood where gender design can prevent harm and a better culture can be created. Professor Lesley Yellowlees's advice paper on diversity in STEM for the Royal Society of Edinburgh calls on the Scottish Government to lead the way by using the powers and influence that it has now to shape societal attitudes to gender inequality and parental roles and, crucially, to target key influencers of children and young people to challenge gender stereotypes. That would show leadership, which would be demonstrated by having women in key positions.

Professor Yellowlees's report also calls for greater investment in STEM-specific data collection, in order to better understand intersectionality and the variations between sectors and regions. I ask the minister to consider those calls in his closing remarks.

Rather than resigning ourselves to being the narrators of events, I urge the Scottish Government to take on all the RSE's recommendations and to do all that is in its power to implement them.

I move amendment S6M-07852.1, to insert at end:

“; recognises that gender inequality in participation in science and other STEM subjects starts at a young age, and considers that Scotland's schools have a vital role to play in ensuring that STEM subjects are available to young women and encouraging young women to consider careers in science.”

15:24

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): When I was making my choices for fourth year at school, my mother accompanied me to meet Mr Hayward. At that time, I was keen to abandon maths—I was

bored with maths and had had enough of it. That probably tells now, because I was in charge of the finances of my party. Nevertheless, I was determined to abandon maths. However, Mr Hayward repeatedly said that maths was a must for boys, and my mother's face went brighter red the more he said it. Even at that time, she was incandescent about the discrimination that was built into the careers advice at our school. It is very clear that we saw it before then, and it has been evident ever since.

Today, we are told by the Institute of Physics that physics is the fourth most popular subject for boys, but that, for girls, it comes 16th. Therefore, something is still wrong at the heart of our society and, perhaps, within our careers advice.

It is no wonder that sometimes women do not want to choose those subjects. If they are going to be the only girl or woman in the class, why would they choose them? We know that in politics: if you think that you are going to be the only person in the room like you, why would you go in?

If we are going to get change, we need to start that change. Thankfully, the situation is a little better now. According to the RSC, half of the people who sit higher chemistry are female; at advanced higher, the number goes up a little bit, which is good; and at university, when people are studying for a degree in chemistry, the level goes up to 60 per cent. However, then it absolutely plummets—at professor level, the number goes down to 9 per cent. That is a clear indication that there is something wrong with the career path in science. The higher up we go, the less likely it is that there will be women.

Pam Gosal: Does Willie Rennie believe that parents also have an important role to play in the change that we need to happen? You talked about your mother going red. Do you think that the Government needs to include parents in the programmes that it is working on?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Please ask questions through the chair, Ms Gosal.

Mr Rennie, I can give you that time back.

Willie Rennie: Yes, of course, parents are an important factor. We have had recent discussions about apprenticeships, and this is where Stephen Kerr's point comes in. Trying to get more people to do apprenticeships rather than go through the university route is a real challenge, and a lot of it is down to the influence of parents and society, and peer pressure.

The same applies to this area. Stephen Kerr asked the minister for some figures. Of those people who take modern apprenticeships, 38 per cent are female, but the level goes down to 8 per cent for engineering and energy apprenticeships.

That is a dramatic difference and, again, shows in-built discrimination in the system. We need to change that, and part of the issue is pressure from society, parents and schools.

What do we do? What steps do we take? The Scottish schools education research centre runs good projects with the STEM ambassadors, allowing people such as my wife, who is a scientist, to go into schools and encourage young women and men to take up science. Those projects are important—they are trying to get a million interactions with young people.

However, there is also something that we can do in policy terms. It is of great credit to the Government that the last few chief scientific advisers have been female. Anne Glover was fantastic and a great advocate; she went off to Europe to do the same role there. Julie Fitzpatrick is doing a great job now, too.

We need to call out the discrimination, as Michael Marra did earlier. However, we could use funding to incentivise organisations to have plans in place and take steps to encourage more women into all these subjects. We could have some requirements, just as we do for the likes of Amazon, with regard to apprenticeships, paying tax and paying the living wage. Perhaps we should use funding to incentivise organisations to make that change.

Education Scotland's improving gender balance and equalities programme, which the minister referred to, is great. Education Scotland is changing, but I hope that the programme will continue, because it is important that, if something is working, it is allowed to continue to do that good work.

15:29

Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): Today we celebrate the international day of women and girls in science. Women are a pioneering and unique body within the sciences, yet they remain underrepresented.

Earlier this week, I met Professor Linda Lawton of Robert Gordon University to discuss women and girls in STEM, as part of my preparation for a members' debate. An internationally renowned researcher in the field of toxic cyanobacteria, Professor Lawton perhaps summed up the current position when she said:

"Well it doesn't help that if you google the word 'professor' you get a picture of a man with white hair, wearing glasses."

She was wrong: I got a complete screen full of men—and only men.

There has been progress in the past decade or so for girls and women in STEM education, but

also for women entering the STEM workforce. It is a slow burn, but such progress will be absolutely essential if we are to tackle our climate emergency.

I will highlight two examples of work in the north-east that underpins that trend: one in education and the other led by industry. The Aberdeen computing collaborative is a collaboration between Aberdeen City Council, North East Scotland College, Robert Gordon University and the University of Aberdeen that seeks to improve alignment between the school curriculum and the associated demand for skills created by the next phase in our energy production sector and other growth sectors. I note the reference in Michael Marra's amendment in that regard.

The collaboration also aims to increase the profile of computing science learning and to attract graduates into computer science, including teaching. That fantastic initiative aligns with the Scottish Government's STEM education and training strategy, which outlines our ambition to encourage girls and young women to engage with computing science with a view to strengthening Scotland's future tech sector. It was therefore bitterly disappointing that a recent just transition funding bid to support the collaborative was unsuccessful. I ask the minister to give an assurance that comprehensive feedback and advice will be provided to the collaborative to inform and support its future applications, which I hope will succeed.

Turning to industry, girls in energy is a one-year course delivered by Shell, in partnership with North East Scotland College and Fife College, to senior-phase girls that helps them to rethink preconceptions about the energy sector and hear about the range of careers available in it. Recently, I joined this year's cohort of around 100 girls in Aberdeen. I was blown away by the way in which they worked together to find innovative solutions to food production, heating and energy-related challenges.

Michelle Thomson: I have a question relating to an earlier point. Does the member agree that if we are to facilitate the engagement of more science, maths and technology specialists as speakers in schools, one possible initiative would be to support the creation of national or regional lists of speakers on the subject of women in STEM from among those who are willing to evangelise and to help to bring other girls and women into their professions?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I can give you the time back, Ms Nicoll.

Audrey Nicoll: Perhaps Michelle Thomson, who is sitting behind me, has been reading my notes over my shoulder. I completely agree with

her suggestion and am about to come on to a point that might be relevant to it.

The judging panel for girls in energy comprised strong local female role models who were already in senior positions in the north-east tech and energy sectors. From my conversations with many of them, I know how committed they are to that vital work. I suspect that many of them would be interested in Ms Thomson's proposal.

There are, of course, many challenges in this area: the gendered world that we live in; our culture; the availability of mentoring opportunities; and the lack of funding. However, today is about celebration. I hope that, on this international day of women and girls in science, my short contribution has showcased a snippet of what is happening on the ground in that exciting sphere.

15:34

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): In his opening remarks, the minister referred to the Edinburgh seven. Had we been having this debate 150 years ago, we would have been discussing the story on the front page of *The Scotsman* newspaper. It referred to the riot at Surgeons' hall, which is just a mile away from the Parliament, when those female undergraduates were prevented from getting into their examination hall. The crowds that had turned up were pelting them with all kinds of rubbish, screaming abuse at them and doing all sorts to ensure that they could not sit the exam.

Some of their male compatriots came to their rescue and ensured that they could get into the examination hall, but, inside the hall, other males prevented them from sitting at the desks. Rumour has it that a live sheep was set loose in the hall—goodness knows how it was got in, but it was—and there was absolute chaos, to the extent that it made the front pages of international news. The Edinburgh seven, who became pioneers in their field, ended up being put in touch with Charles Darwin. That just shows what can happen.

Some really interesting things have been said in the debate. Willie Rennie referred to the advice that he was given at school. I was told at school that I should be doing science and that economics was not for girls. That did not work out very well, because obviously I became an economist. I did not do science, but one of the things that I have come to understand as a teacher and a parliamentarian is that science is absolutely critical to the understanding of our knowledge.

What the curriculum for excellence ought to be able to do—because it is built on the principles of expanding that knowledge—is ensure that all youngsters have the ability to study in the arts, the sciences and the social sciences. Personally, I

think that that is absolutely the right way to approach the school curriculum. Sadly, because of some of the problems that we have in the education system now, it is not the case that they have that ability. One of the huge difficulties that we have, which Mr Kerr and Mr Marra referred to, is significant problems with teacher numbers in the sciences and STEM subjects.

However, that is not the only issue. There is also the fact that many young people are not getting the opportunity to study science because of the squeeze on subject choice. That is a major issue. People cannot be expected to take up a subject if they are not getting the right exposure to it in their young years. The point that Michelle Thomson—who has disappeared somewhere—made about nursery education was also a very strong one, because the existence of the stereotypes that Audrey Nicoll referred to is absolutely clear. Those stereotypes continue, and we cannot allow that to happen.

If we want to make sure that Scotland remains open for business in this respect, there is an awful lot that we need to do in terms of education. I also think that there is awful lot that we can do—and I would lay this challenge before the Westminster Government—to ensure that the visa system is much more open than the one that has been put in place post Brexit. In my view, there are too many circumstances in which young people, who are the meat and drink of our future, are being prevented from taking up opportunities in this country because of too tight a visa system. I would like to see something—

Stephen Kerr: Will the member give way?

Liz Smith: Yes, of course, if I have the time.

Stephen Kerr: Would the member also agree that there is a very strong case for expanding the postgraduate work visa programme, because we want some of those people to stay here and make their futures in our country?

Liz Smith: Stephen Kerr is absolutely right. I would like to see us go back to the post-study work visa system, in which we encourage people to stay in this country and take opportunities to expand their expertise, as they are part of this system. I do not think that we are doing enough on that.

I will finish on a crucially important point. Scotland has always led the world when it comes to women in science. Sadly, it is only very recently that that has been recognised and honoured in some cases. We need to do an awful lot more to treasure what women in science can give to our society. As parliamentarians, we all have a role in ensuring that that happens.

15:38

Kaukab Stewart (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP): In 2018, during a workshop on gender equality at the European Organization for Nuclear Research—known as the CERN research institute—in Geneva, Switzerland, theoretical physicist Alessandro Strumia began his presentation. On one of his slides was a very short, but very powerful, quote, which read:

“physics was invented and built by men, it’s not by invitation”.

According to reports, Professor Strumia went on to present evidence in the form of graphs and tables, and he concluded that, as the most-cited academic papers were disproportionately written by men, men were simply better at physics. I imagine that, for a predominantly female audience that was full of young prospective scientists, it was not quite the motivational speech that they were anticipating, and, for women already working in the field, it would likely have felt sadly familiar.

The professor’s claims were quickly dismantled and denounced as “unacceptable”, and he was suspended by CERN. The following day, Donna Strickland was awarded the Nobel prize for physics for her pioneering work with high-intensity lasers. Astrophysicist Andrea Ghez would receive the same honour just two years later for providing the first conclusive experimental evidence that a supermassive black hole with the mass of 4 million suns sits at the centre of our galaxy.

Incredibly, those are two of only four women who have ever won that prize in its 121-year history, so, clearly, the question is not one of ability. Rather, that statistic is emblematic of a centuries-long struggle for recognition and the obstacles that women and girls face at every point in their careers, which contribute to their underrepresentation across the scientific disciplines.

In acknowledgment of that uneven landscape, the United Nations international day of women and girls in science, on 11 February, provides a welcome opportunity to celebrate the essential contributions that they have made and will continue to make, enabling us to better understand the world we live in.

I am incredibly fortunate to have internationally renowned higher and further education institutions in my constituency, and I am grateful to colleagues across the chamber who have mentioned the University of Glasgow, for instance. I recognise the commitment that those institutions have demonstrated to promoting gender equality in science, as supported by the Scottish Funding Council, and the development of tailored gender action plans.

Stephen Kerr: I invite Kaukab Stewart to comment on what we saw in Buchanan high school on Monday. Kaukab Stewart, Stephanie Callaghan and I went to the school with the Education, Children and Young People Committee, and they had a huge display about women in science. It is that kind of emphasis and that kind of promotion of women in science that will lead to the places that Kaukab Stewart is describing in those higher educational institutions being filled by women.

Kaukab Stewart: I absolutely accept that from Stephen Kerr. To have that very powerful visual image in our schools up and down the country reminds our children of what they are aiming for and of the fact that we need them. I thank Stephen Kerr for highlighting that.

City of Glasgow College’s pioneering “Women into Engineering” courses have resulted in an almost 100 per cent increase in female participation in engineering programmes, and the college’s STEM girls society creates an encouraging space for female students to meet in and share ideas.

At the University of Glasgow, Dr Sofiat Olaosebikan, a former student turned lecturer in computing science, was selected as one of the university’s future world changers for founding the Computer Science Academy Africa. That initiative delivered successful computer programming workshops in Nigeria and Rwanda, providing young Africans in STEM with access to quality computer science education. Women are strongly encouraged to apply and they are offered the possibility of childcare support. As a result, in 2022, 45 per cent of CSA Africa participants were women.

Perhaps what is most challenging for us all is that we must work to recognise our own unconscious biases and create an inclusive environment for the next generation of female scientists.

15:44

Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): Ahead of international day of women and girls in science, we celebrate the achievements of generations of female scientists in Scotland, including the notable contribution of Burntisland’s Mary Somerville. The term “scientist” was coined to describe her many achievements in chemistry, astronomy, magnetism and mathematics, and her remarkable and inspiring work is rightly celebrated.

Although we recognise the huge contribution of women to scientific discovery and research, we know that we are still not doing enough to ensure that women and girls are able to pursue careers in

scientific fields. We need to do more to encourage and support their doing so, but we also need to address the existing structures that deter them from those careers.

We need to see changes at every level, from schools to further and higher education and workplaces. Boys and girls start with equal interest and ability in STEM areas, but women make up only 25 per cent of the Scottish STEM sector. At every stage of the pathway from school to work, there is an attrition of females. Women are being prevented from achieving their full potential, and we fall short of the economic potential that only a diverse STEM sector can bring.

We need to ensure that more girls are choosing STEM subjects and that we have enough teachers to deliver courses so that pupils do not end up having their choices taken away from them. Issues with teacher recruitment are not unique to STEM subjects, although the uptake of those subjects is at a five-year low. Across the curriculum, there are examples of subjects that are struggling to recruit. That situation directly impacts on pupils, who are left either unable to pursue subjects or in classes without specific subject teachers, which in turn increases absenteeism and impacts on attainment.

We cannot have girls being steered away from science and technology subjects because they are “male subjects”. It is unfortunate that there are still reports of that happening. We need to address that matter both in the way in which departments run themselves and in the discussions that take place with career advisers and others. Although there are noted issues with uptake, some schools buck those trends, with a high number of girls choosing technology subjects and departments that encourage them and cultivate an environment into which they are welcomed, which other schools should learn from.

While we continue to encourage girls into STEM subjects at school and beyond, a cultural challenge exists for all STEM departments in that they are male-dominated and can be a challenging environment for girls and women. The minister highlighted successful women in science; however, girls and women should not be achieving in STEM subjects despite the barriers—instead, the barriers should be removed.

The debate briefing from the Royal Society of Chemistry talks of a “leaky pipeline” through the education pathway. When it is compared to other STEM subjects, chemistry has a higher number of females studying the subject at school, but there is a steady decline in the proportion of women in chemistry departments as they move from undergraduate to postgraduate positions, and then on to staff and professor positions.

The RSC has identified some of the issues that need to be addressed to remedy that situation—many will be common across the STEM subjects—which point to themes such as the rigidity of academic funding structures and working options, exclusionary behaviour, bullying and harassment. The gender pay gap is clearly still in place and emerges as early as the first year after graduation, despite figures showing that women are more likely to be retained in employment at that point. That retention falls away over time, and those women who do remain are much less likely to hold a permanent contract.

The 2019 survey by Equate Scotland found that 64 per cent of women who work or had worked in STEM did not feel that enough was being done to create inclusive workplaces or education institutions.

Over Christmas, I read the book “Lessons in Chemistry” by Bonnie Garmus, who is a science, technology, engineering, arts and maths graduate—a STEAM rather than a STEM graduate. The novel is set in the 1950s, and it is disappointing to see that the issues that are explored in it of sexism, harassment, exploitation and underemployment for women working in science are still relevant today.

Across the STEM subjects, we need to see action on the areas that the RSC and Equate Scotland highlight. We need continued work to eliminate bias and to increase accountability. We need to ensure that STEM courses and workplaces are inclusive and welcoming, and to do so we need intervention and support at all levels.

15:48

Willie Coffey (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP): I, too, start by celebrating the achievements and successes of women in science, some of whom were pioneers in the field of computer science—my area of interest, which still sees far too few women studying it and going on to carve out a career in it.

The first of those pioneers was perhaps Ada Lovelace, who was born in 1815 and is regarded as the world’s first computer programmer. She worked on Charles Babbage’s analytical engine and devised what we think is the world’s first algorithm, or set of rules, now known as a computer programme. The programming language Ada was named after her.

I would also like to mention Margaret Hamilton, who has possibly never been mentioned in the Scottish Parliament before.

Margaret was one of NASA’s chief programmers for the Apollo programme in the 1960s. There is a

famous picture of her as a young woman, standing beside a huge printout of her computer programmes—it was taller than her. She coined the term “software engineer”, and she is still working today.

A local Kilmarnock success story is Professor Victoria Martin, who has done some incredible work on the Higgs boson particle, which, as members will remember, is the so-called God or creation particle that lends other particles their mass.

What do those women have in common? I am prepared to stick my neck out and say that none of them—certainly not the first two—had any exposure to the types of initiative that we deploy today to bring more young women into science. I am prepared to bet that they have something else in common: curiosity mixed with ability and the opportunity that kept them on the pathway to their glittering careers.

There is no doubt that there are a number of ongoing initiatives to attract more young women into science and retain them. Those initiatives will make a difference, to a degree. However, we can see the stats for ourselves, and they have not changed too much over the years. For example, only 20 per cent—or 23 per cent, as Michael Marra reported—of the tech workforce in Scotland are women. That is 3 per cent higher than in England, but it is still miles too low. Only 21 per cent of the graduate apprentices who are studying a STEM-related framework are women, and female college enrolments in STEM in Scotland have barely exceeded 30 per cent since 2016. We have to keep working on this.

Is there another solution? Is it more money, new initiatives, more equality and gender work, more apprenticeships, equal pay, career progression issues, more science or computer science in schools or more teachers? Is it a need for all those things? Perhaps it is, but I am not sure that that explains why young women, in particular, walk away from science. I am prepared to again stick my neck out and say that, when youngsters are still at primary school, boys and girls are equally interested in science—Claire Baker mentioned that, too. However, when the transition to secondary school gets under way, the fall off begins when it comes to young women sticking to science, and the numbers tend not to recover.

Why do we not think of some other initiatives alongside what we have, and see whether they work? What about female-only science classes at school, perhaps with female-only science teachers—would that work? That need only be for those vital couple of years to try to keep young girls inside the science bubble. I am sure, as Michelle Thomson said, that we can find female role models who are in science today to go into

schools to enthuse young women about the wonderful careers that could be ahead of them.

Can we do further things to incentivise employers to build up their intake of female scientists? The minister mentioned that in his opening speech. Importantly, can we ensure that a career in science does not mean young women sacrificing lifestyle and other choices that are important to them?

When we look around Europe, we see that participation rates of women in information technology are all on the low side—the rates in Ireland and Lithuania are the highest at 32 per cent and the rate in France is the lowest at 24 per cent—but all are ahead of the 20 per cent rate of Scotland. We still have 24,000 IT vacancies in Scotland.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You need to conclude, Mr Coffey.

Willie Coffey: I sincerely hope that we can make big changes, so that we might, one day, celebrate 50:50 representation of women and girls in branches of science. After all, that is long overdue.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I advise members that we have now exhausted all the time that we had in hand, so I invite members to stick to their speaking allocation time, even if they take interventions.

15:53

Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): I wish to express my solidarity from the chamber with the women and girls throughout the world who are denied education—particularly the women in Iran at the moment. [*Applause.*]

We have been reflecting on anecdotes from when we were younger. I was not going to put this in my speech, but I will say it now. When I went into my first O grade physics class as the only girl in the class, the teacher said to me, “What are you doing here? Girls don’t belong here”. In response to Willie Rennie’s earlier question about why someone would stay in such an environment, I can only answer for myself: it was because I am thrawn—he probably knows that by now. However, it was quite challenging.

When I chose to study computing science at university, I had three options. I could have gone to the University of Glasgow, where there would have been three women in my year, or I could have gone to the University of Strathclyde—where, again, the class was less than 10 per cent women. I chose to do one of the first degrees at what was then Glasgow College, which has now become Glasgow Caledonian University.

It was a four-year degree. It was not an honours degree, but it involved a year in industry. When it came to the intake of women and girls, there was a 50:50 split. To me, it felt much more comfortable. I have never regretted that decision, because it taught me a lot about pathways into careers and how apprenticeships, work experience and a different approach can make all the difference. I studied economics for two years as part of that degree, so it involved quite a different approach. The point that has been made about the use of unique and different approaches to encourage women is really important.

I am a member of the British Computer Society, and I draw members' attention to my entry in the register of members' interests, which states that I am the vice-chair of the Scottish Schools Education Research Centre—SSERC. That means that I am one of those women who are part of the "leaky pipe", which the Royal Society of Edinburgh talked about in its "Tapping all our Talents" report, which other members have spoken about in detail. That report, which covers some of the challenges that women face in maintaining a career in science, says that only 27 per cent of women who graduated to degree level in STEM subjects still remain in those disciplines.

Yesterday evening, I hosted the RSE and the Physiological Society in the garden lobby, and was delighted to find out about the science travels project, which is an outreach programme that reaches out to hard-to-reach groups from the Traveller, showman and boater communities. That project is important in highlighting that, as well as being necessary, diversity improves our collaboration, our thinking and our scientific investigations. If we are to address the big challenges that society faces, such as those of climate, migration, changing demographics and older populations, and to do that well, we must have groups and minds that represent all of us and all of our communities involved in that work. I was glad to hear people talk about the importance of teaching in that regard. SSERC runs the STEM Ambassadors in Scotland and Young STEM Leader programmes, which are incredibly important in giving women the confidence to lead in their areas.

I am quickly running out of time, but I want to highlight the work of the inspiring teacher Toni Scullion, who started the social enterprise dressCode. She runs coding classes for young women throughout Scotland and is award winning in her endeavours. That highlights how important the role of inspiring teachers is if we are to inspire future generations of women and girls in science.

15:57

Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): I thank all the organisations that provided briefings and information for today's debate, because it is so important that we recognise the international day of women and girls in science, which takes place on Saturday.

I want to recognise that day by talking about three women in science. They all have some things in common. They are all from the global north, they are all white and they all recognised the realities of climate change. Members will know the name and career of one of them very well, but that is perhaps not the case with the other two.

Eunice Newton Foote was born in the United States in 1819 and studied at the Troy Female Seminary. In 1856, she wrote a groundbreaking paper on the absorption of heat by carbon dioxide, in which she suggested that changes in its atmospheric concentration might change the climate of the earth.

Three years later, John Tyndall, the so-called father of climate science, published similar observations. Did he know of Foote's work? We cannot tell. If he did, he did not credit it, but it would not be the first, or the last, time that a man took credit for work that was built on that which a woman had done.

In 1947, a young chemistry graduate, Margaret Roberts, began her first job at British Xylonite Plastics. Like many sensible workers, she joined a union. As Secretary of State for Education and Science and Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher oversaw the reshaping of university research by market forces. In our universities, we now see an obsession with ratings, exploitative publishing and exploited staff, obscene wage inequalities and the wasting of time, money, energy, good will and hope.

However, we also see dedicated scientists doing vital and inspiring work. That is a tribute to the researchers themselves, but also to all the staff and students who make up a university community. We stand in solidarity with them; with—perhaps particularly today—the University and College Union and its campaign to close the gender, ethnicity and disability pay gaps; and especially with the Unite and Unison workers at the University of Dundee, many of them women, who refuse to be browbeaten into giving up their hard-won, long-promised, well-deserved and extremely modest pensions.

For the women on those picket lines, many of them scientists who are working on some of the most crucial environmental and health crises, Margaret Thatcher is no role model, but Eunice Foote, who campaigned for the abolition of slavery

and for women's rights, is a role model, and there are others.

Professor Julia Steinburger was a lead author of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's sixth assessment report and has painstakingly communicated the realities of climate science to those who would much rather not hear about them. However, that is not enough. Last year, she took part in a campaigning road blockage in Bern, gluing her hand to the pavement. In 2021, she co-wrote an academic article challenging universities to open up their ivory towers to allow and to encourage advocacy and activism in relation to the climate and ecological emergencies. That is science, it is academic excellence and responsibility, and it is feminism, too.

It matters that girls learn STEM subjects, that young women study science and that graduate women take their places in academia and industry. It matters that men get used to having women working alongside them, and even leading them, in STEM. It matters what women do when they get into academia and industry. Margaret Roberts made a wise decision when she joined a union. Margaret Thatcher made another when she acknowledged the scientific reality of climate change.

However, Eunice Foote, Julia Steinburger and generations of scientists after them, including those who have given their time to speak at the on-going Extinction Rebellion Dundee science talks, have done better. They have maintained solidarity, retained compassion, shown courage and told the truth. That is why we need women and girls in science.

16:02

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): We do need women and girls in science. I could not quite work out whether Maggie Chapman was paying an uncharacteristic tribute to Margaret Thatcher, but let me be clear: I do, in the context of the subject of this debate, because she was not only the first woman Prime Minister but the first scientist to become Prime Minister. The fact that she was the first woman scientist to become Prime Minister is, in itself, astonishing, and it is quite right to say, as Maggie Chapman did, that she was a very early warning voice on the dangers of climate change. Therefore, there is much to be said in praise of Margaret Thatcher in the context of the subject of this debate.

I hope that we all felt the kick in the stomach that Willie Rennie inadvertently gave us when he revealed the statistics that I was inquiring of the minister: of those doing engineering apprenticeships, 8 per cent are women. That is shameful, and it shows how much more we have

to do. There is a huge public policy interest in this area. We have had public policy interests in relation to equality and equal pay. We have a public policy interest in relation to the gender pay gap. We should absolutely and unreservedly have a public policy interest in equal representation of women in vital fields such as those represented by the subjects that make up STEM.

Part of my political ethos is that education is key. It is the golden ticket; it is about maximising potential. We need to provide equality of opportunity for every young person—male and female—in our nation. Regardless of where they live and what their background or sex is, they must be able to feel empowered. We want them to feel empowered to pursue their personal destiny and to meet the needs of a vibrant and rapidly changing economic environment—the one that we live in now. We must develop breadth and depth of knowledge and skills in our workforce, and that absolutely must include the talent, the drive, the creativity and the toughness of women to get these things properly done.

We must tackle the underrepresentation of women in these critical sectors of our economy, because, as I say, we are missing out massively. This is not a particularly Scottish problem, so we can all work together across boundaries and across parties, as I think is evidenced by the tone of the debate.

Let me say something about other things that colleagues have said. Yes, we can talk about the past. We have heard some wonderful examples from the past—I have one in my speech notes, which I will not use. The reality is that, when Scots are asked to identify famous inventors, scientists and engineers, the answers tend to be all men. That has to be addressed. That is why I have brought up the example of Buchanan high school. We need to teach our young people from the earliest possible age about the fact that great advances and achievements in science and engineering are, in equal part, the fields of women and men.

I want to comment on something that Liz Smith said about broad general education. The reality is that we are not bad at giving young people opportunities to be in touch with different arts subjects, but we are less good at that when it comes to STEM subjects. We have already rehearsed the issues surrounding STEM. Those have to be addressed if Scotland's economy is to be competitive and we are to achieve the transformation in the Scottish economy that all of us in the chamber want to see. We absolutely must, as a public policy objective, deliberately change the scene when it comes to the availability of STEM teachers and subjects for our young people through broad general education and for

those who present at the higher and advanced higher levels.

I will conclude by simply saying that I have one ask to make of the minister. Later this year, there will be a historic event in Shetland: there will be a vertical launch of a rocket that will go into space. I remember, as a boy, being assembled in our primary school to watch the launch of the QE2 from Clydebank. There was a lot of excitement about that. Would it be possible for every Scottish schoolchild—

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): Thank you, Mr Kerr.

Stephen Kerr: —to be able to see a live broadcast of that rocket launch to excite them about what can be achieved in the name of science and progress?

16:06

Fiona Hyslop (Linlithgow) (SNP): The education activist Malala Yousafzai said:

“If people were silent, nothing would change.”

That statement rings true when we consider access to education for girls. Marking international day of women and girls in science gives us the opportunity to highlight women and the work that they do, as well as areas in which more needs to be done.

This year’s theme is “Innovate. Demonstrate. Elevate. Advance.”—or I.D.E.A. In my area, West Lothian College runs a successful women in STEM course that encourages and enables more women to enter that field. Last weekend, the Enigmas, which is a group from Linlithgow academy, took part in the CyberFirst girls competition.

Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states:

“Everyone has the right to education.”

However, that right is not guaranteed for all girls. In Afghanistan, Taliban rulers ordered an indefinite ban on university access for women in December. That is an outrage, and members must stand in solidarity in expressing our condemnation of that outrage. In Burkina Faso, only 1 per cent of girls complete their secondary education. According to UNICEF figures, 129 million girls across the globe are not in school. In Iran, the “women, life, freedom” protests are focused on women’s rights. They began in September 2022 following the death of Mahsa Amini, who died in police custody. I pay tribute to all those who have been injured or killed in those protests.

Women in Iran can and do study STEM subjects at school and university levels. In fact, in 2014, the late Iranian mathematician Maryam Mirzakhani

became the first female to win the prestigious Fields medal. In 2020, while celebrating international day of women and girls in science, UN Women named Mirzakhani as one of seven women scientists who have changed the world.

However, women and girls in Iran face inequalities that are a barrier to their education. A 2022 report from the United Nations special rapporteur on human rights in Iran stated the need to repeal laws that violate the rights of women and girls, to take measures to advance women’s equal participation in public life and to ratify the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women.

Women in Iran face several barriers to receiving an education, including strict dress code rules that impact on all aspects of their public lives, including study, work and leaving their home. Iran’s laws restrict the careers that women can enter and deny equal benefits to women in the workplace. Women are not permitted to travel abroad, for work or study, without the permission of their male guardian. Internet access is intermittent, which restricts online study and work for women and girls across the country. According to World Bank statistics, women account for only 15 per cent of the labour force in Iran.

In a letter that was signed by 104 Iranian chemists from across the globe and published in *Chemical & Engineering News* in October 2022, a call for solidarity with the women’s movement in Iran was unmistakable. The letter also highlighted the lack of access to STEM subjects for women and girls in Iran, and the departure from the country of highly educated Iranians over the years, including the late Maryam Mirzakhani, whom I mentioned earlier.

To advance international progress in relation to women and girls in STEM, we must not only support those who enter that field but call out the human rights violations that prevent women and girls from entering that area of study. Women in Iran and Afghanistan need all of us to stand in solidarity with them and to condemn the abuse of their rights, so let us not be silent. Let us all be inspired by the words of Malala and use our voices to fight for the right to education for women and girls across the globe as we mark the international day of women and girls in science.

The Presiding Officer: We move to winding-up speeches.

16:11

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): Frequently, on standing to speak in a debate, I thank the previous speaker because it is courteous to do so. However, in this debate, I thank Fiona Hyslop for an incredibly powerful

speech, which went to the heart of what Saturday's international day is about: standing up for the human rights of women and girls so that, we hope, they can develop into powerful scientists and human beings, as many already are. That was a powerful speech, and I thank Fiona Hyslop for it.

The debate has been good, has involved much consensus and reflects the views of Scotland. Of course, those views are one of the reasons for the institution in which we stand today.

Audrey Nicoll referred to Shell's girls in energy programme, which involves 100 girls and is fighting views about the industry. They have perhaps grown up with a view of that industry as male dominated when, actually, the reality is very different. It is a true testament to Shell and to the accompanying college that they are able to do that.

That allows me also to refer to Michelle Thomson's intervention on the importance of role models at nursery level. From experience, I can say that I see all children performing great science at that level, be that in the mud kitchen, outside or with Lego. Those powerful examples of their working together to solve problems lie at the heart of what STEM is about: approaching something in a different way to other people in order to solve it.

That different approach is just as relevant for women and girls as it is for men and boys. We simply remove 50 per cent of the people who could solve problems by ignoring that, when we crowd them out, push them out, persuade them away and gently condone—with ideas such as “Maths is not for women”—their moving away from a very important problem-solving area. Frankly, across the whole world, we lack that scientific thinking in so many places.

I mention Liz Smith's speech, because of her powerful points. We heard from a number of people about the difficulty with teacher numbers, which, I think, we have to accept, here in Scotland and particularly in STEM. There were interesting contributions on whether we can change that. However, this country and human beings need a balanced curriculum so that, as people go through their childhood, they experience a vast and wide variety of influences and ideas, and learn new facts and approaches. Only in that way can an individual celebrate their thinking patterns and be able to contribute fully later in life. Indeed, having been a teacher, I know that young people contribute strongly to adults' learning and understanding of a situation.

It is worth mentioning Claire Baker's speech, because she talked about that “leaky pipeline”. Frankly, we have aware of that for decades, but are we any better at plugging those leaks? I suggest that we are not. One of the challenges is

that perhaps we are looking at the issue in the wrong way.

We have heard many examples today of individual women who have strived and achieved so much. Some members have asked why those women were able to do it. We do not know the answer. However, as we have heard today, we have great examples of schools that have a larger number of girls taking science subjects than other schools. We should look to the success out there and try to replicate it. We should expose our teachers and policy makers to the very best.

For example, Stephen Kerr mentioned visiting a school and seeing a display about female scientists. We need to treasure what works well and allow others to see and replicate it. Mr Kerr said that if we ask a Scot to identify a scientist, it tends to be a man. I would suggest that that probably depends on the age of the person who is asked.

I quickly mention Clare Adamson and her choice to go to an institution with a 50:50 balance. That speaks powerfully to the desire that individuals have, and to the responsibility of this place, and indeed the Scottish Government and other Governments, to support that.

I have a quick question for the minister about the STEM education and training strategy. I am disappointed that there is only one reference to a girl in it, and only five references to women. We talk about changing the fundamentals, and we should think about that in everything that we do. I would like to ask about the STEM strategy implementation group minutes for the group's meeting in September 2019, which were published in March 2020. I would be grateful for an update on when the group last met, and indeed whether it will continue to meet.

Jamie Hepburn *rose*—

The Presiding Officer: The member must conclude, so I ask the minister to respond when he sums up.

Martin Whitfield: I will conclude, to allow for an answer from the minister in due course.

16:16

Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con): I am delighted to close on behalf of the Scottish Conservatives in this debate marking the international day of women and girls in science. There are a number of reasons for that. First, I was fortunate enough to have two female science teachers at school. I dedicate this to Mrs Moug, who taught chemistry and is sadly no longer here, and Mrs Roley Walton, who may just be watching—who knows?

Another reason is that I am a life sciences graduate—in biochemistry—from the University of Edinburgh. Fortunately, to refer back to Jamie Hepburn's comments, it is no longer 1896, and I was able to graduate quite successfully. What I learned then is now most likely taught at school, however, because understanding of the workings of the cell has progressed rapidly since then.

Imagine a time when every lab did not have a PCR—polymerase chain reaction—machine and genome-editing tools such as CRISPR-Cas9 did not exist. Whole-genome sequencing took years and fluorescent microscopy was only just becoming commercialised. Doing quality science under those conditions seems archaic, but that is what we were doing back then. The adaptation of new tools for simple and affordable use has increased the speed of research. If we look back 20 years, it reveals just how far we have come in terms of technology, but sadly not in terms of gender equality in the science world.

Although improvement has been made in increasing the number of women in STEM subjects, we have all agreed that more progress must be made, because the STEM sector is still dominated by men. As my colleague Pam Gosal mentioned, there is a big gender gap in science, with women making up just 7 per cent of STEM apprentices in training and only a quarter of the STEM sector. Entries in science subjects by women are also at their lowest level in five years at both national 5 and higher level.

Michael Marra—and, to be fair, many other members—spoke about the leaky talent pipeline that occurs throughout our careers, from as early as school all the way through to advanced science careers. I am a scientist, and I am probably part of that leaky pipeline now, because I am a politician. It could be much the same for Clare Adamson. It is clear that there is an on-going struggle to attract young women and girls to study STEM subjects and pursue STEM careers.

However, even when there is success in attracting women to the sector, there are, as has been said, issues in retaining female talent. Royal Society of Chemistry statistics show that, in 2021, more than 60 per cent of applicants accepted to university chemistry courses in Scotland were female—the highest figure of all the UK nations. That is laudable, but it is not good enough. At the same time, though, only 9 per cent of professors of chemistry are female. We heard from Audrey Nicoll about the page of grey-haired men that appears on our screens when we google professors, which is not quite what we like to imagine.

Scotland's schools play a vital role in ensuring that STEM subjects are available to young women and encouraging young women to consider

careers in science. I was not able to do all three sciences at the same time, so I did all three by staggering them. I recently helped a constituent to study all three sciences at the same time, but she had to move schools to do so. We need to get better at that. There were fewer science, maths, physics and computer science teachers in 2021 than there were in 2008. Computer science is the future, but we do not know what careers young people will be taking up. However, understanding programming and computers is the way forward, so we have to have more of those teachers.

My colleague Liz Smith made quite a contribution regarding the seven ladies of the University of Edinburgh's medical school. It was a spine-tingling speech—the way that she animated the story was great. Liz Smith also mentioned that, in 2015, the Royal Society of Chemistry called for dedicated science teachers in each primary school. I support that, considering that gender inequality in participation in science and other STEM subjects starts at a very young age.

Although we commend the improvements in getting women into STEM, there are still massive improvements to be made, and not much progress is being made under the Scottish National Party Government. Martin Whitfield mentioned that there are very few references to women in the STEM education and training strategy. We have to set the example; we are the leaders in this, and it is up to us to ensure that, in our strategies and policies, we present a world that young women can aspire to be part of.

Scotland is home to world-leading organisations in science, and we have heard many examples today. Last year, I visited Q2 Solutions, which is a leading clinical laboratory services organisation in West Lothian. A senior female there, who is a friend of mine, was my link into that organisation. I give a shout out to Maggie Conacher.

Later this month, I will be visiting the National Robotarium, which has unrivalled facilities and world-leading expertise in robotics and artificial intelligence. That is out at Heriot-Watt University. I recently took part in a round-table event entitled "Innovating Healthcare Scotland" alongside remarkable women, including Dame Anna Dominiczak, a Polish-born medical researcher who is now our chief scientist.

Every single day, we should be actively encouraging young women to study STEM subjects and to pursue those careers. The Scottish Conservatives would fully fund the placement of dedicated STEM teachers in every primary school. We want to restore excellence in Scottish schools so that every child has the chance to succeed, no matter their background.

We will support the motion and both amendments today.

16:22

Jamie Hepburn: I thank all members who have contributed. Over the course of the afternoon, we have heard a range of speeches that have enabled us to reflect on the many achievements of women in science across Scotland.

I am really pleased that colleagues have been able to highlight so many examples of the various female science pioneers in Scotland. I have felt some degree of inadequacy when compared with some of our colleagues—a number of them have qualified into and formally practised in the STEM professions. To those members, I say that it is great that they have contributed, because they can be pointed to as role models for the professions that they have been involved in.

Stephen Kerr made a request of me regarding the rocket launch from Shetland, although I was a bit concerned about where he was going with that. I thought that he might have been suggesting that I should be tied to the rocket, but he did not go there. I would certainly commend to our schools that they give their young people the chance to watch that event.

There will be activity under way in the coming period. Education Scotland will be engaging with local authorities, schools and other partners to consider what activities can be undertaken around that launch to inspire young people. I hope that that reassures Mr Kerr in that regard.

As much as we have, rightly, spoken about the many successes, much of the debate has focused on some of the challenges that we face—I do not shy away from that. Stephen Kerr was right to say that it is not a uniquely Scottish problem, but we do have to tackle it head on.

If ever there was a reminder, though, about the international context in which we operate, it was Fiona Hyslop's contribution. She spoke about some of the deep-seated outright discrimination that exists for women and young girls in other parts of the world, furth of Scotland—not as historical examples, as both I and Liz Smith were able to reflect on in relation to the Edinburgh seven, but in the here and now.

It is important that we say with one voice, loudly and clearly, that here, in Scotland, we fundamentally believe in the right to an education, including in the STEM subjects, for every young girl and woman in the world. That is something that we absolutely believe in.

The issue of STEM teachers was mentioned, and I recognise that we have a challenge in that area. Frankly, I think that it is symptomatic of the

wider labour market challenge that we face right now. Those who are qualified in STEM are in great demand—including, it appears, to work in the political profession, but more widely as well.

It is a challenge, but we have the STEM bursaries in place to encourage people who have a background of working in the STEM sector to switch careers and professions and to become STEM teachers. They would be fantastic role models for the young people they would end up teaching.

On Martin Whitfield's point on the STEM strategy implementation group and the STEM strategy more widely, there was, of course, some disruption over the course of the Covid-19 period in relation to that group meeting up. However, the group has continued to act as a source of invaluable advice and assistance to the Government as we take forward the strategy. That strategy is coming to an end and we are considering the next steps, but we rely on exactly that type of personnel to continue to inform our work. I will also certainly reflect on the point that both Martin Whitfield and Sue Webber made about the number of times that women feature in the STEM strategy that we have been operating to.

Martin Whitfield: Perhaps, with the redevelopment of the implementation group, having more of a gender balance on that group would be of assistance to the Government.

Jamie Hepburn: Just as I will reflect on the wider point, I will reflect on that, too. It is an eminently reasonable point to make.

Apprenticeships were mentioned—by Stephen Kerr and Willie Rennie, in particular, but by others as well. Having had the chance to look out some of the figures, I can say that we have a significant challenge in terms of female participation in the relevant frameworks. The figures that I have seen suggest that around 11 per cent of those taking part in the STEM modern apprenticeship frameworks that are in operation are women. That goes wider than the engineering framework that Willie Rennie mentioned, which is why it is a slightly different figure, but the figure is still far too low.

I can say—and Willie Coffey mentioned this—that if, for comparison, we look at graduate apprenticeships, we see that the figure is in excess of that, at 21.2 per cent. That is an increase from when those apprenticeships were first created. In the case of the foundation apprenticeship frameworks, nearly a quarter of the participants are young girls in the secondary school environment. That is still not good enough, but it gives us some optimism for the future that the numbers are higher at that young age. However, we need more progress in this area.

That is why the SDS equalities action plan and the Scottish apprenticeship advisory board recommendations are important and we will consider them.

Employers also have a huge role to play in this. Apprenticeships are an employment opportunity and it is up to employers to make sure that they are thinking through their recruitment practice when they take on apprentices. I am pleased to say that many employers are actively engaged in thinking about how to do better in that regard. Role models were also the subject of some discussion—I will come back to the issue of role models in a minute.

Willie Rennie rightly identified the importance of the activity that Education Scotland is undertaking to improve the gender balance. I can assure him that I do not want to see that being lost through the process of reform.

Role models are fundamentally important to any activity that we undertake. The Scottish Schools Education Research Centre is undertaking activity in that regard, and Clare Adamson mentioned the ambassadors programme that it runs.

I would be very interested in following up on Michelle Thomson's innovative suggestion—made when she intervened on Audrey Nicoll—about how we might do more to utilise female ambassadors as part of that and our developing the young workforce activity, which can also play a role.

We provide £220,000 to support our science festivals, which is an important part of our work. As I have mentioned, I was in Dundee during a science festival and I was pleased that young girls were engaged with that activity.

Clare Adamson mentioned Toni Scullion, who is part of Scottish Teachers Advancing Computing Science, which is funded by the Scottish Government and recently ran a teacher upskilling programme.

That is some of the activity that is under way.

This debate has been a useful opportunity for us not only to reflect on the many outstanding achievements of women scientists in Scotland, as we should rightly do, but to recognise the challenges that still exist and that, collectively, we are determined to rise to.

Point of Order

16:31

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. You will be aware that I made a point of order at the beginning of this afternoon's business in relation to correspondence from the office of the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills. In the spirit of fairness, I point out that I am grateful for the direct and immediate intervention of the office of the Minister for Parliamentary Business.

I have now received a reply to the correspondence that I referenced, which was sent, although not received, on 25 January. I thank the office of the Minister for Parliamentary Business as well as the office of the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills for handling my query in a timely way, even though there was a technical problem with receiving it. I have removed any reference to my point of order from my social media accounts.

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): Thank you, Mr Kerr.

Scottish Income Tax Rate Resolution 2023-24

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-07853, in the name of Tom Arthur, on the Scottish rate resolution. Members should note that I will put the question on the motion immediately following the conclusion of the debate. I invite members who wish to speak in the debate to press their request-to-speak button.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees that, for the purposes of section 11A of the Income Tax Act 2007 (which provides for Income Tax to be charged at Scottish rates on certain non-savings and non-dividend income of a Scottish taxpayer), the Scottish rates and limits for the tax year 2023-24 are as follows—

- (a) a starter rate of 19%, charged on income up to a limit of £2,162,
- (b) the Scottish basic rate is 20%, charged on income above £2,162 and up to a limit of £13,118,
- (c) an intermediate rate of 21%, charged on income above £13,118 and up to a limit of £31,092,
- (d) a higher rate of 42%, charged on income above £31,092 and up to a limit of £125,140, and
- (e) a top rate of 47%, charged on income above £125,140.—[*John Swinney*]

16:32

The Minister for Public Finance, Planning and Community Wealth (Tom Arthur): I will draw the Parliament's attention to the procedural connection between this debate and rule 9.16.7 of the standing orders, which states that a Scottish rate resolution must be agreed before stage 3 of the budget bill is able to proceed.

The debate is set against a backdrop of one of the most challenging periods for the economy and public finances that we have seen since devolution, almost a quarter of a century ago. Over the course of the past year, we have seen Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine, a cost of living crisis, spiralling inflation and the continuing economic impact of Brexit, all while recovering from a global pandemic. We have been forced to navigate all that with our hands tied, given the limited fiscal powers that are at our disposal. Not only are we unable to borrow to support businesses and households in these challenging times, we have no legislative powers over key policy areas that would support the wider economy, such as the energy market and immigration. Therefore, in the 2023-24 budget, we have taken the difficult but necessary decisions to allow us to protect our vital public services on which so many households, communities and, indeed, the Scottish economy rely on.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): We will cautiously support the resolution. As it is an emergency, we understand the need to protect public finances. However, if public finances improve, the economy will improve. Does the Government intend to then restore tax rates to the lower levels that they were at before this resolution?

Tom Arthur: I thank Mr Rennie for his support for the resolution, for his instructive engagement and for his enthusiasm, because he wants to start talking now about the 2024-25 budget. As I am sure he appreciates, we will use each budget in turn to set out our decisions on tax policy and will take into account a number of factors, including the prevailing economic conditions.

Now more than ever, it is vital that we are guided by the principles that are set out in our framework for tax, which we published in December 2021. One of those principles is engagement. That is why, ahead of the Scottish budget, the Deputy First Minister and I listened to a range of stakeholders. We thank all those who were involved for their input. We heard a consistent message from that engagement, which is that we need to use our tax powers to support and invest in our public services, reaffirm our commitment to reaching net zero emissions, tackle child poverty and support the economy.

Our income tax policy for 2023-24 responds to that. It seeks to strike a balance between ensuring that there is enough money for public spending and acknowledging the challenging economic conditions facing households and businesses and it supports Scotland being a great place to live, work, study and do business.

Our proposed income tax policy for 2023-24 is for there to be no changes to the starter, basic or intermediate rates and bands, protecting those on lower incomes. We also propose making no change to the current higher-rate threshold of £43,662 and lowering the top-rate threshold from £150,000 to £125,140. Finally, we propose raising the higher and top rates of tax by 1p, bringing them to 42p and 47p respectively.

We have estimated that the income tax policies that I am asking members to vote for today will raise an additional £519 million for the Scottish budget in 2023-24. Those policy changes, which are grounded in our principles for taxation, will enhance the progressive approach to tax that we have taken to date. The majority of the additional revenue that is raised by those changes will come from those individuals and households in the top two income deciles.

Our approach will mean that we can continue supporting our leading social contract with the people of Scotland, while also ensuring that the

majority of taxpayers still pay less income tax than they would if they lived elsewhere in the United Kingdom. Crucially, as set out by the Deputy First Minister in his budget statement in December, the changes that have been announced for 2023-24 mean that we will be in a position to exceed the health resource Barnett consequentials received from the UK Government and to make a substantial additional investment in our national health service. Our NHS is a precious public asset; by choosing to raise more revenue from tax to invest in vital front-line services we are making an investment that will benefit us all.

I close by reminding members that we have had to make these income tax policy choices not only in a difficult economic climate but within the political chaos that has been caused by the UK Government in the past year. In 2022, there were four UK chancellors in the space of four months. We saw constant U-turns on tax policy from UK Government ministers and should not forget the ill-judged tax cuts in its short-lived mini-budget in September and the impact on financial markets that many in Scotland are still facing as a consequence.

That chaos presented significant challenges as we developed our transparent income tax policy in Scotland. The UK Government's financial plans look increasingly bleak and there is no doubt that they will cause significant fiscal challenges for us here in Scotland. The Office for Budget Responsibility estimates that the UK has entered a recession that will last for more than a year and the International Monetary Fund suggested last week that Britain will be the only G7 country whose economy is forecast to shrink in 2023.

This Government is clear what its priorities are. We are choosing to invest in the economy, in our leading social contract and in the people of Scotland. That is why I ask members to vote today to ratify the proposed changes to Scottish income tax that are set out in the budget for 2023-24.

16:39

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): The minister is quite correct that there is a convention in this Parliament—rule 9.16.7 of standing orders says that a rates resolution must be passed before stage 3 of a budget process can happen.

It is clear there are strongly different views about tax policy and, in fact, I think that Mr Rennie has opened up another area of difference of opinion about tax. I will be interested to hear what he is saying this time next year about Liberal Democrat party policy. We have that difference of opinion, but there is the restraining order on us that, if we were to vote against a resolution, the

Scottish Government would be prevented from collecting any tax whatsoever. From that angle, particularly just now, that would send out an irresponsible message, because it is a time of great economic difficulty, and people are under the cosh when it comes to raising sufficient revenue. That is difficult, and it would be irresponsible to vote against the resolution, so I put on record that we will not oppose the rates resolution, but we have considerable differences of opinion with the Scottish Government about tax.

In recent weeks, this Parliament has witnessed several debates—in the chamber or in committees—about the economic priorities that will be required as we continue our efforts to tackle the very difficult economic circumstances that the minister has referred to, including the fallout from the war in Ukraine, the many problems of supply chains, energy costs and labour markets, adapting to a post-Covid and post-Brexit landscape, as well as the significant changes that happened as a result of UK Government fiscal policy.

Despite our differences and the committee's report, we have agreed on some main objectives, especially in relation to addressing the skills gap and retraining, encouraging different policies that will promote economic growth and ensuring that we do something about the labour market inflexibilities. I am grateful to the cabinet secretary and the minister for their engagement on that basis, because there is a huge issue with people leaving the labour market post-Covid, either because of long Covid or because they have decided, for one reason or another, that they wish to come out of the labour market. At stage 2, we had an exchange about that issue, and I share the cabinet secretary's concern.

Of course, we are especially keen to ensure that Scotland remains a very attractive place in which to work, live and invest, and it is important that that is right at the centre of our deliberations.

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Covid Recovery (John Swinney):

I am interested in the line of argument that Liz Smith is developing because, essentially, she goes into territory where the tax system can be utilised to create incentives but, as she will appreciate, that is not within our range of responsibilities. Without me making a big constitutional song and dance about it, does she accept that those are legitimate areas where additional flexibility might be of use to us in trying to address the specific and real issue that she raised in relation to participation in the labour market?

Liz Smith: Yes, I accept that and I think that tax incentives are critical. We have had considerable differences of opinion about the behavioural aspects of different tax policies, and we will

rehearse those again as time goes on. However, Mr Swinney is quite right that it is important that incentives are very much part of the tax decisions. The decisions that the Government makes about taxes are very much about its choices, and the decisions that the Government has taken on tax policy are different from the ones that we would like to see. When we look at the Scottish Fiscal Commission's recommendations on where we have to focus and at the statistics that it has produced for the next few years, we are particularly concerned, because some worrying trends are coming down the track.

We have to think about a lot of issues and we also have to think about the fiscal framework, which the cabinet secretary signed in 2016 and which is due to be renegotiated. There is a lot of interesting debate to be had about that and, although we have different constitutional perspectives, we must ensure that the fiscal situation for this Parliament is as effective as—and in line with—what is happening at the UK level.

There is general agreement that there are issues with quite a lot of aspects of what we need to focus on. Obviously, the political debate about how we address those things will continue but, again, I put on record that we will not oppose the rates resolution when it comes to decision time.

16:44

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab): I think that it was deeply unfair of the cabinet secretary to make the Minister for Public Finance chuckle as he got to his feet. Tax is a very serious business, and I thought that the cabinet secretary was a serious man. I just want to put that on the record.

John Swinney: I am happy to confirm that I was not in any way deliberately trying to make the minister chuckle. I was simply somewhat discomfited by the fact that I was having to move the motion on the resolution; I thought that a speech from me was to follow. [*Laughter.*] Thankfully, the minister came to my rescue on that.

Daniel Johnson: In fairness, that is a matter for the Minister for Public Finance, from whom we will hear later.

I am pleased to see the proposals being made. We are now seeing the powers that were granted by the Scotland Act 2016 being used. We have some £19 billion being raised directly by the powers that the Scottish Government exercises, which represents some 35 per cent of all available revenues and 44 per cent of revenue funding. It is important that we see that bit of the budget—the part that is within the Scottish Government's control—being used and exercised. The other day,

the cabinet secretary described that as being in the foothills of variation of tax policy. I am pleased to see that; it is what devolution is about.

I also note that the measures are progressive. Tax is a part of the social compact whereby those who benefit from public services are asked to contribute, and those who have the ability to pay more do so.

Scottish Labour will support the rate resolution this evening. I note the proposal on the top rate of tax, which we called for back in 2019. In reflecting—but not necessarily completely mirroring—the comments of Willie Rennie and Liz Smith, I say that we need to consider the effectiveness of such powers. The relevant behavioural impacts need to be studied. I suspect that they might be overstated, but we need to examine in detail whether such impacts detract from the mechanical increases that would have been predicted.

Likewise, we need to consider the effects of fiscal drag, which are of concern to the Finance and Public Administration Committee. Those include the interactions between the Scottish bands and rates and other aspects of taxation—in particular, national insurance.

We now have anomalies in our tax regime, which we must examine. We need to consider the fact that the inflection point—the point at which a person in Scotland starts to pay more tax than someone who lives elsewhere in the UK would—is some £28,000. That will take in people who are in promoted posts in the teaching profession and nurses. We need to examine all those issues in the round and be led by the evidence to ensure that we have a progressive taxation system that is also effective. It is important that we assess that.

I believe that although our system should be progressive, raising taxes is not a benefit in and of itself. Although I absolutely support the right of the Scottish Government to have a taxation policy that is different from that of the UK Government—that is important—if we are to have a sustained higher level of taxation we must continue to test and challenge in order to ensure that we get commensurate benefit.

Finally, the clear point of fact with the fiscal framework is that it operates on the basis of average tax receipts per person in Scotland, their growth being higher than those in the rest of the UK. If that approach is to be sustained, we will have greater tax receipts and more money to spend in Scotland. Therefore I say to the Scottish Government that we need increased focus on growing jobs and wages, because ultimately that will be good not only for the exchequer in Scotland, but for Scottish people.

Scottish Labour will support the rate resolution. I seek to debate such topics further in the months and years to come as we explore tax devolution and variation in Scotland.

16:48

Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): I will briefly pick up on an issue that has dogged our debates on taxation in recent years. It has not come up this afternoon, but it did during last week's debate on the budget when I did not have time to pick up on it. It is about whether Scotland is better off as a result of income tax devolution. We are all now at the stage where we recognise that, as a result of the specific arrangements in the fiscal framework, it is true to say that, in recent years, Scotland has ended up with less revenue to spend on public services than if income tax had not been devolved.

That is completely separate from the question whether our public services have benefited from the changes that we have made to income tax as a result of such devolution. I will come on to this point later, but for now it is absolutely true to say that our public services have benefited substantially from the progressive changes that we have made. It would benefit the Parliament's debates on taxation to recognise the significant difference between those two points—in particular, because there is, I believe, cross-party consensus on the need to reform the fiscal framework.

As I said last week, despite the immense challenges, this is the greenest budget in the history of the Scottish Parliament. It is funded in part by the most progressive tax system in the UK—a point that was confirmed earlier today by the Institute for Fiscal Studies. By raising the higher rate of income tax and the additional dwelling supplement, the highest earners and people who buy holiday homes and extra properties will pay a bit more to fund the public services that are so desperately needed during the cost of living crisis.

Scotland has extremely limited devolved taxation and revenue-raising powers. We certainly need more powers over tax and borrowing and we need a more functional reserve, but we also have an obligation to make best use of the powers that we have.

In 2018, the Scottish Greens worked with the Government to deliver progressive changes to income tax. We lowered the tax that is paid by the lowest-paid workers and increased tax for those on higher incomes. Our public services are better off to the tune of £1 billion as a result of the progressive changes that we have made in the past couple of years.

However, given the monumental pressure that the budget is now under, and the need for high-quality public services during the economic crisis, we need to go further. I am proud of the agreement that we have reached on those further changes, which will raise over half a billion pounds more for our public services.

We might be in a cost of living crisis—one that is pushing many households to crisis point—but there are plenty of high-income and wealthy people in this country who can afford to pay a bit more. Those on the highest incomes can afford an extra penny on the tax rate that is paid on the top slice of their salary. People who are in a position to buy a second home or holiday home can absolutely afford to pay a bit more tax on that purchase.

It is incumbent on those who are opposed to the progressive changes to explain why they think that the most privileged people in our society should not be paying a bit more right now, and to explain what they would cut from the budget if they were to prevent those changes.

I welcome in particular the contribution that Liz Smith made to the debate in recognising the challenges that would be posed by voting down the rates resolution and in explaining the position that the Conservatives have come to. I absolutely agree with the points that she made about labour market participation. I commend to Parliament the study by Sheffield Hallam University on that subject, which found that a substantial number of people in Scotland—perhaps in the tens of thousands—would like to work but are on incapacity benefit because they are unable to find the kind of employment that meets their needs as disabled persons. Those people are not trying to avoid being in work; rather, they are people for whom we have not put the right employment support in place to enable them to join the labour market and to contribute to our public finances via tax revenue.

In the period leading up to publication of the budget, both the Scottish Trades Union Congress and Unison produced papers on tax reform. Both papers advance the principle that those who have the most should contribute the most. Although most of their specific proposals were for long-term legislative change rather than for this budget, I believe that they deserve a large share of the credit for the immediate-term progressive changes to income tax and additional dwelling supplement that we will vote on today. The long-term changes that they propose, however, cannot be lost as we move rapidly from one annual budget cycle to the next.

Despite the challenges, this budget delivers for people and planet. It includes a record £2.2 billion to tackle the climate emergency, it delivers more

affordable public transport and it provides essential support to children and families—and does so by having the wealthiest people in our society pay a bit more. That is something that is worth voting for.

16:52

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): Scottish Liberal Democrats have considered the vote on the rate resolution separately to the vote that will come on the budget after recess. In the debate that we had on this a year ago, few would have predicted double-figure inflation or that Vladimir Putin would invade the sovereign territory of Ukraine. Nobody could have foreseen the extent to which the incompetence of the Conservatives would trash the economy and the public finances.

Public services have had to brace themselves against these winds. It has been a “protection operation”, as Sir Anton Muscatelli told the Scottish Parliament’s Finance and Public Administration Committee. However, it is essential to grow the economy, because Scotland has underperformed relative to the UK since powers were first devolved to it. The Scottish Fiscal Commission believes that ministers might already be losing out on almost £700 million in income tax revenue. Worse still, it is expecting Scotland’s economy to grow more slowly over the next 50 years.

An IFS analysis published today showed that average net household income will be reduced by £110 next year by the tax and benefit changes. The bottom third of households with children will gain, on average, around £1,200 a year, due to the Scottish child payment, but poorer households without children will, in the words of the IFS,

“see virtually no change in their incomes”.

Those households have rent to pay and rising food and energy bills, which is why we need to see progressive changes to the budget, such as a new, national emergency insulation programme.

We have previously supported modest tax rises to deliver essential investment. We will do so today, as we are in an emergency.

However, for those at the higher end, the cumulative effect of tax changes matters. Next year, someone earning £50,000 will pay over £1,500 more in Scotland than if they lived elsewhere in the UK, and someone earning £150,000 will pay almost £4,000 more. Those are talented people whom we are already short of—the consultants that we desperately need in our NHS, cyberanalysts, tech innovators and the best engineers.

I do not believe that one-off, defined and limited tax rises have a significant impact on behaviour, but people need to be confident about the future intentions of Governments, which is where I think the intervention from my friend and colleague Willie Rennie came from. If people think that the Government has lost control of tax rises, their confidence drops and that affects their behaviour. When those individuals come to weigh up where they want to live and work, it could cost us dearly if the Scottish Government has lost their confidence. Those people are mobile and there are opportunities elsewhere in the United Kingdom.

It is an imperfect science, but I am not convinced that the Government understands what those people are thinking, and their behaviour really matters to the tax take. Where is that evidence? I think that higher-rate taxpayers are worried about the long-term intentions of the Scottish National Party Government. The presence of the Greens does not reassure them; it adds to the uncertainty about the direction of taxation and the perception that the Government may go much further and take tax to extraordinary levels. Those taxpayers do not know what is going to happen next.

The social contract is also being stretched by Government incompetence. The ferries have become a symbol of that. Then there is ScotWind—the best chance for generations to bring serious money into the public purse, but Scotland’s prized seabed was sold on the cheap. I fear that the national care service will be the next shambles.

I worry that we are coming to a tipping point and that some people will say, “Enough is enough”, so I am telling the Scottish Government today that it cannot guarantee to have our support if it brings forward further tax increases.

The Scottish Liberal Democrats fought for tax powers for this Parliament, and when we proposed a moderate penny for education in 2016, it was for a defined purpose and period. It was designed to make education the best again, driving the economy and growth.

Now there is a crisis in every corner of our NHS and social care. It is unprecedented, so we can see the logic in a penny—a further penny—for health at this time. Putting aside the refusal of the SNP Government to acknowledge its role in this—

The Presiding Officer: Could you please conclude, Mr Cole-Hamilton?

Alex Cole-Hamilton: —we can see the necessity of fixing it. I would like an answer from the cabinet secretary, in his closing remarks, to the question: will those tax increases remain if that health crisis abates? I do not think that the answer was given to Willie Rennie, so if the cabinet

secretary can find it in himself to give it in his closing remarks, I would be very grateful.

The Presiding Officer: I call Tom Arthur to wind up. You have up to four minutes, minister.

16:57

Tom Arthur: Thank you, Presiding Officer. I am conscious that I stand between members and recess, so I will keep my remarks as brief as possible.

I begin by thanking folk from across the chamber for their contributions. I welcome the fact that no member is intending to vote against the SRR, and I welcome that pragmatic approach.

The Presiding Officer: Minister, if you could just give me one moment. I would be grateful if members who are just coming into the chamber could do so quietly and if conversations could cease.

Tom Arthur: I will build on the response that I gave to Willie Rennie's intervention, in direct response to Alex Cole-Hamilton's question. He asks what our future policy will be on tax at different budgets. I think that the member will acknowledge, as other members have eloquently summarised, the very changed landscape that we have found ourselves in over the past year. I am conscious that it was only three years ago that we became familiar with the term "Covid", and that we still have three years to run until the next election. Therefore, I think that members would agree that it is a sensible, prudent and practical approach to recognise that decisions around taxation are best taken at the budget, in line with a range of circumstances.

I will give way to Mr Rennie.

Willie Rennie: I completely understand that point—the world is unpredictable. However, I hope that the minister understands our point about the balance. We need to have proper evidence to make sure that, in future years, we do not create behavioural change that has a cumulative effect on tax, and that we consider the possibility of reversing tax changes that we have brought in in an emergency. I hope that he understands that.

Tom Arthur: I do, entirely, and that speaks to the importance of the independent and robust assessment and forecast provided by the Scottish Fiscal Commission, of the Government's process of engagement and, indeed, of adhering to the principles and objectives that are set out in our "Framework for Tax".

I recognise that the devolution of income tax affords us the opportunity to take a different approach and, indeed, a range of different approaches across a range of areas in Scotland.

Our powers over income tax and over taxation more widely are essential to enabling us to do so, to fulfil the commitment to delivering the best social contract that we possibly can.

I note the recent findings from the IFS report, which recognise that the Scottish Government's changes to the income tax and benefits system over the past six years will make the Scottish system considerably more progressive than that of the rest of Great Britain. The same report finds that, since 2017, the poorest 10 per cent of households will see their incomes increase by £580—4.6 per cent per year—compared to the rest of the UK, England and Wales, while the richest 10 per cent will see their incomes fall. Among the poorest 30 per cent, Scottish reforms to the income tax and benefits system are set to raise the income of households with children by around £2,000 per year on average.

That is made possible because we have those powers over income tax. It speaks to the point that powers are for a purpose and can effect real change—here, the material change in the circumstances in which individuals on low incomes find themselves.

I am conscious that we are out of time. I again thank members from across the chamber for their constructive input and support—or, at least, lack of opposition—to the Scottish rate resolution.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes the debate on the Scottish rate resolution.

Rule 11.3.1 requires the question on the Scottish rate resolution to be put immediately after the debate.

The question, therefore, is that motion S6M-07853, in the name of Tom Arthur, on the Scottish rate resolution, 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.

17:02

Meeting suspended.

17:04

On resuming—

The Presiding Officer: The question is, that motion S6M-07853, in the name of Tom Arthur, on the Scottish rate resolution, be agreed to. Members should cast their votes now.

The vote is now closed.

Gillian Martin (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP):

On a point of order, Presiding Officer. My app did not connect. I would have voted yes.

The Presiding Officer: We will ensure that that is recorded.

Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP):

On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I have a slow connection, and I am not sure whether my vote has been recorded.

The Presiding Officer: I confirm that it has been 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, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Choudhury, Foysol (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, 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)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 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)
 Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)

Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 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)
 Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (SNP)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 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)

Against

Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)

Abstentions

Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Cameron, Donald (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (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)
 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)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 90, Against 2, Abstentions 28.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that, for the purposes of section 11A of the Income Tax Act 2007 (which provides for Income Tax to be charged at Scottish rates on certain non-savings and non-dividend income of a Scottish taxpayer), the Scottish rates and limits for the tax year 2023-24 are as follows—

- (a) a starter rate of 19%, charged on income up to a limit of £2,162,
- (b) the Scottish basic rate is 20%, charged on income above £2,162 and up to a limit of £13,118,
- (c) an intermediate rate of 21%, charged on income above £13,118 and up to a limit of £31,092,
- (d) a higher rate of 42%, charged on income above £31,092 and up to a limit of £125,140, and
- (e) a top rate of 47%, charged on income above £125,140.

Decision Time

17:06

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): There are three questions to be put as a result of today's business.

The first question is, that amendment S6M-07852.2, in the name of Pam Gosal, which seeks to amend motion S6M-07852, in the name of Jamie Hepburn, on international day of women and girls in science, be agreed to.

Amendment agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S6M-07852.1, in the name of Michael Marra, which seeks to amend motion S6M-07852, in the name of Jamie Hepburn, on international day of women and girls in science, be agreed to.

Amendment agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S6M-07852, in the name of Jamie Hepburn, on international day of women and girls in science, as amended, be agreed to.

Motion, as amended, agreed to,

That the Parliament commends the International Day of Women and Girls in Science as a celebration of the achievements of generations of female scientists; recognises that female scientists and innovators are integral to Scotland's world-leading science and research excellence, and addressing the global challenges faced; affirms its commitment to tackle gender inequality across different areas of the education and learning landscape; commends the support given by a range of organisations in helping to drive forward the Scottish Government's commitment to gender equality in science; notes that the Parliament must build on the work being done by a range of organisations to inspire young women and girls to engage in science and STEM subjects from early years education and throughout their education journey; recognises the need to improve diversity and inclusion for women; commits to exploring further pathways to ensure that no woman is denied the ability to enter the science and STEM sector as a result of their gender, ethnicity or disability; further commits to removing the barriers that are hindering diversity and inclusion in science; recognises that gender inequality in participation in science and other STEM subjects starts at a young age, and considers that Scotland's schools have a vital role to play in ensuring that STEM subjects are available to young women and encouraging young women to consider careers in science.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes decision time.

Meeting closed at 17:07.

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