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Meeting of the Parliament

Tuesday 17 September 2024

Session 6



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Scottish Parliament

Tuesday 17 September 2024

[The Presiding Officer opened the meeting at 14:00]

Time for Reflection

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): Good afternoon. The first item of business is time for reflection. Our time for reflection leader today is Professor Rowan Cruft, professor of philosophy at the University of Stirling.

Professor Rowan Cruft (University of Stirling): Thank you for inviting me. I work in philosophy at the University of Stirling. Philosophy can mean slow, careful attention to what we already know. I will attend to an idea that is familiar to politicians, which is rights.

Scotland has notable rights achievements, including the incorporation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child into Scots law. An important question is, what are the practical effects of such measures on children's lives? A philosophical question asks about the effects on our thinking: what difference does it make to our view of children if we think of them as right holders? What is the value of seeing anyone as a right holder? I argue that rights, especially human rights, matter in our thinking because they show that the individual must not be sacrificed for the sake of society.

Many concepts provide guidelines for behaviour, including duties, goals and ideals. The 10 commandments list duties—ways that people should behave—while the sustainable development goals list goals, which are aims that states should pursue. When we use the concept of a right, we add something extra to the idea of a rule, duty or goal: we give special status to an individual person or group as a right holder. They have status as the person who is wronged if the duty is violated, and have standing to demand fulfilment of the duty. Sometimes, we create that status just because it is efficient to do so: think about the rights created by car parking regulations, for example.

Karl Marx worried that rights are dangerously individualistic and that they focus attention on powerful claimants at the expense of duty bearers. He might be correct when it comes to some of the rights that define markets, but human rights are not like that: they are justified independently of efficiency or social usefulness. They mark a mutual recognition of our common humanity and protect individuals against being exploited or abandoned. When we see the duty not to torture

or a duty to provide healthcare as duties that secure human rights, we are recognising that each person matters independently of whether respecting them is good for the wider group or whether that serves other values.

In that way, human rights are anti-fascist: they give a person a special moral and legal status, meaning that they are unsacrificeable for wider society. That is a vital feature, springing from how rights highlight individual claimants, and from how human rights are justified by what they do for the individual right holder. I wanted to remind our elected representatives of the essential value in thinking of people as right holders.

Thank you for listening.

Business Motion

14:03

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item of business is consideration of business motion S6M-14533, in the name of Jamie Hepburn, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, on changes to business.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees to the following revisions to the programme of business for—

(a) Tuesday 17 September 2024—

after

followed by Stage 1 Debate: Scottish Languages Bill

insert

followed by Ministerial Statement: Securing a Sustainable Future for the Grangemouth Industrial Cluster

(b) Thursday 19 September 2024—

delete

2.30 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.30 pm Portfolio Questions:
Education and Skills

and insert

2.00 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.00 pm Portfolio Questions:
Education and Skills

followed by Ministerial Statement: Greenhouse Gas Emissions 2021-2022—[*Jamie Hepburn*].

Motion agreed to.

Topical Question Time

14:04

Harland & Wolff (Methil and Arnish Yards)

1. Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab):

To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on what discussions it has had with Harland & Wolff regarding the future of its construction yards at Methil and Arnish. (S6T-02099)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Economy and Gaelic (Kate Forbes):

On 2 September, I met Russell Downs, the interim executive chairman, alongside the local management of both yards. We discussed the on-going refinancing of the business, the options for a sale and the business's engagement with the workforce. My officials and the enterprise agencies remain in regular contact with the business and with unions. All our collective effort is focused on achieving the best outcome for the business and its workforce. The Scottish sites continue to operate, as was communicated by the business yesterday.

Claire Baker: I thank the cabinet secretary for that update. I urge her to continue the talks, particularly with the trade unions, because this is not the first time that those who are employed at the Methil yard have faced this level of uncertainty. The yards have a skilled and dedicated workforce, including a number of apprentices, and the hope and the aim is that they will continue working under new ownership. What reassurances can the cabinet secretary offer to the workers? What is the Government doing to ensure that such opportunities continue to exist in the longer term?

Kate Forbes: The member is absolutely right to praise the workforce and those workers' skills. I will continue to engage with the trade unions, as she recommends. We are also engaging with the United Kingdom Government—I have had a number of conversations with various secretaries of state about Harland & Wolff—and, as I said, I have also had conversations with the business.

The member will know that, ultimately, it is up to the management team and investors in the business to work through the commercial options in order to provide a sustainable future for the organisation and the workforce. The business is fully aware of the interests and scrutiny of both Governments, and the management team is working closely with us and the UK Government.

Claire Baker: I welcome the cabinet secretary's comments about working with the UK Government. If the yards are to have a future, it is

important that the Governments continue to work together.

The Methil yard has huge potential and is of strategic importance to Scotland delivering on its net zero ambitions, but it faces limitations in relation to infrastructure investment. The yard is owned by Scottish Enterprise. Has the Government carried out an evaluation of the yard and of what could be done to help it to be more viable and compete on an international basis?

Kate Forbes: The member is right that the sites are owned by the enterprise agencies, which have been working closely with the business and with Rothschild & Co, the financial advisers, to analyse the most sustainable opportunities for the business. The enterprise agencies are looking at how they can support the ambition and communicate it effectively to potential new parties.

I reassure the member that we see our industrial assets as creating significant opportunities across Scotland. Some decisions need to be made on a commercial basis first, but there is no lack of engagement, interest and willingness in ensuring that there is a sustainable future for both sites in Scotland.

David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP): I take heed of the cabinet secretary's comments. As has been said, Scottish Enterprise owns the Methil yard and its facilities. In my dealings with the site's management and with the unions, they have emphasised that the yard and its facilities are key to any future investment. What could we do to attract future buyers and investment in the site?

Kate Forbes: David Torrance has set out a number of important issues. The business must take a number of commercial decisions, none of which will be taken lightly. The board has reprioritised activities to protect the business's core operations, which include the Arnish yard and the Methil yard, which is in David Torrance's constituency. As I outlined, we are in regular contact with trade unions on the issues concerning the business, and we are keen to understand where we can add value and how we can support the business.

Tim Eagle (Highlands and Islands) (Con): The Deputy First Minister might be aware that—similar to the situation with Harland & Wolff—Bakkafrost announced last week that it was making 74 staff redundant at its processing facilities in Marybank and Arnish, near Stornoway. What action, if any, is the Scottish Government taking to support affected staff? Has it had any engagement with Bakkafrost on this sad development?

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): I ask the Deputy First Minister to respond to the

points that are relevant to the substantive question.

Kate Forbes: I am not sure that that question is relevant to Harland & Wolff, but we are engaging extensively with the company. In particular, Mairi Gougeon has engaged with it, including in the Faroe Islands. We want to ensure that the facilities have a long-term future.

Where the question does relate to Harland & Wolff is that we all want the depopulation in our islands to be reversed, which will happen through well-paid secure jobs being provided. The member mentioned one such employer, and Harland & Wolff is another.

Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): This is the second time in three years that workers at the Methil yard have faced a very uncertain future. The yard at Methil was previously on a long list for a portion of the £500 million investment in Scotland's offshore wind supply chain. Can the cabinet secretary confirm whether the Government has explored all options to lock Methil yard into that supply chain for the future? Can she also give a commitment that any investments that come through the green freeport will not undermine the case for investment at Methil but will work alongside it to strengthen the supply chain that we need to grow in the east of Scotland?

Kate Forbes: On the site at Methil, the business is continuing to seek commercial options. There have been no specific formal requests from the business to Government at this point, but we will continue that dialogue. There are opportunities for a number of sites in Scotland. The member referenced the strategic investment of up to £500 million to anchor the offshore wind supply chain in Scotland. I certainly see no risk from the green freeport to Methil—I see only that it will increase the commercial opportunities that might be available to support the site.

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab): From Grangemouth to Alexander Dennis to Harland & Wolff, the past week has demonstrated in brutal terms that the energy transition will not necessarily be smooth. In particular, on Harland & Wolff, it seems that the demand that we know will be there is not there yet. What is the Scottish Government considering in terms of smoothing order books so that we can build the capacity that we know that we will need in fabrication and engineering to build the infrastructure that is required for renewable energy sources?

Kate Forbes: That is certainly on-going. The member is right that the whole point of the transition is that things are done sequentially to support the workforce as far as possible and to create new opportunities. That is the approach

that we are taking to all the sites that the member referenced.

On Harland & Wolff, we are conscious that there are economic opportunities out there, and we are keen to support the yard in securing those commercial opportunities. Scottish Government support is available through the enterprise agencies and the £500 million for developing the supply chain. There is also the Scottish offshore wind energy council's strategic investment model. There are schemes out there. The point that the business has made to the UK Government and to us is that the request must come from the business, based on what works for it. We will continue to engage with trade unions to make sure that we are fully sighted on what would support the workforce.

Edinburgh Rape Crisis Centre

2. Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to the recent independent inquiry, carried out by Vicky Ling, into the Edinburgh Rape Crisis Centre and the subsequent resignation of its chief executive, Mridul Wadhwa. (S6T-02095)

The Minister for Equalities (Kaukab Stewart): The needs and safety of survivors of rape and sexual assault must be the utmost priority of support services. As the report makes clear, it is totally unacceptable that survivors were let down by a core failure of Edinburgh Rape Crisis Centre to deliver services to national service standards. The report highlights important areas where action is needed to ensure that survivors can confidently continue to access support from Edinburgh Rape Crisis Centre. I welcome the intention of the centre's board to implement all the recommendations.

The employment decisions of ERCC are a matter for its board, and I cannot comment on individual cases. I hope that the board and the interim chief executive who is now in place can be given the space to continue to rebuild the service and confidence in it.

Sue Webber: I thank the minister for that response, but the truth is that Edinburgh Rape Crisis Centre and Rape Crisis Scotland have been reliant on Scottish Government funding in recent years. The Scottish Government dismissed those with gender critical beliefs, and that attitude has filtered down to organisations that depend on its funding. That has led to the extraordinary situation in which Rape Crisis Scotland and others came out in support of the Scottish National Party's gender self-identification bill and condemned critics for spreading apparent misinformation.

If Edinburgh Rape Crisis Centre and Rape Crisis Scotland are to change their culture, so, too,

must the Scottish Government. Will the minister commit to a complete reset of the Government's priorities, so that women's safety, rather than gender ideology, takes precedence when it comes to tackling violence against women and girls?

Kaukab Stewart: Women's safety is paramount for the Scottish Government, and we continue to fund Edinburgh Rape Crisis Centre to support survivors of rape and sexual assault, as we do rape crisis centres across the country, because such funding is needed for the vital work to support survivors. The Scottish Government can discontinue funding if those funds are not used in line with the conditions of the grant being met.

Vicky Ling's report highlights the positive impact of the services that Edinburgh Rape Crisis Centre provides to a significant number of survivors who have used the services. Our fund manager, Inspiring Scotland, will continue to work with ERCC's board as it implements the necessary changes that are recommended by Vicky Ling's report.

Sue Webber: The independent report was scathing. It stated that ERCC

"did not put survivors first".

That shocking revelation forced the chief executive officer to resign over the weekend, but she had previously said that survivors should be challenged on their prejudices. ERCC's culture of ostracising those with gender critical beliefs was enabled by Nicola Sturgeon, who described concerns about gender self-identification as "not valid". Does the minister agree that it is time for the leadership of ERCC to step down and, indeed, to allow for an entire change of culture, so should the chief executive of Rape Crisis Scotland, who championed the very policies that have been at the centre of this entire caustic situation?

Kaukab Stewart: It is not for us, as the Scottish Government, to comment on individual organisations' employment and retention processes. The board of Rape Crisis Scotland is responsible for decisions about the employment of its staff.

Ash Regan (Edinburgh Eastern) (Alba): The Government cannot continue to distance itself from the fact that it is pushing a certain type of ideology and from the circumstances that have arisen from that. The Government must provide some leadership. I would like to know what action it will take immediately to investigate why oversight by Rape Crisis Scotland did not prevent a male from being employed across various roles that have single-sex exemptions. That led to egregious erosions of safeguarding—it allowed a now-convicted sex offender to self-identify for his access to rape trauma services and led to the service's failure to support vulnerable women. The

Government must show some leadership on the issue.

Kaukab Stewart: The Scottish Government strongly supports the separate and single-sex exemptions in the Equality Act 2010, which allow trans people to be excluded when that is a proportionate means of achieving a legitimate aim. It is service providers' responsibility to interpret and comply with the 2010 act.

We would expect the wishes of survivors about the sex of their support worker to be followed. I am pleased that the Edinburgh Rape Crisis Centre board has publicly stated that single-sex provision has been reintroduced at the centre.

Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): In response to the ERCC report, Rape Crisis Scotland stated that it had been concerned for 16 months that Edinburgh Rape Crisis Centre

"did not provide dedicated women only spaces, as required by the National Service Standards, while declaring to RCS that they were adhering to the standards."

What can the minister do to improve adherence to and enforceability of those standards? Will she confirm that all the other 16 member rape crisis centres are currently providing dedicated women-only spaces?

Kaukab Stewart: The report highlighted the fact that many service users received an excellent service, although some were significantly let down by Edinburgh Rape Crisis Centre.

I have lost track of the question, I am afraid. *[Interruption.]*

As I stated in my previous answers, the Government's role was in funding. Through that legitimate route, we will continue to work with Inspiring Scotland to make sure that all the conditions are met.

Foyso Choudhury (Lothian) (Lab): We recognise that this is a damning report on an organisation that should be providing a vital service to women during an incredibly difficult time. Female survivors should be treated with respect and should be able to choose what is best for them. All referrals to the service have now been stopped, which leaves survivors with no help. Where will those women be directed to now? What action is the Scottish Government taking to ensure that women and girls in Edinburgh and Lothian can access this vital service?

Kaukab Stewart: Rape Crisis Scotland continues to provide a service. Mr Choudhury is correct in saying that no external referrals are being taken, but women can self-refer.

I reiterate that violence against women is a fundamental violation of human rights and is totally

unacceptable. We must root that out and tackle the toxic masculinity and gender inequality that lead to violent harassment, misogyny and abuse against women. We should stand against it and call it out when we see it.

Pam Gosal (West Scotland) (Con): During consideration of the Gender Recognition Reform (Scotland) Bill, I lodged amendments to ensure that those who were seeking healthcare such as cervical smears could request to be treated by biologically female staff. Unfortunately, the Scottish National Party Government rejected the amendments.

I have spoken to many survivors of male violence, many of whom have expressed the importance of there being female counsellors and staff at rape crisis centres. Does the minister not believe that female victims of rape and sexual assault ought to know the biological sex of those who are offering them support?

Kaukab Stewart: I am very sympathetic to the needs of survivors, and I believe that they should have their needs put before anything else. I think that I have stated that quite clearly.

I remind the Parliament that the Gender Recognition Reform (Scotland) Bill was not, in fact, enacted.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes topical question time. I will allow a moment or two for front benchers to organise themselves.

Scottish Languages Bill: Stage 1

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-14484, in the name of Kate Forbes, on the Scottish Languages Bill at stage 1. I invite members who wish to take part in the debate to press their request-to-speak button. Members should ensure that they are on channel 2 to hear the interpretation. Members who are attending remotely will have received an email with instructions.

14:23

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Economy and Gaelic (Kate Forbes): Tha mi a' cur fàilte air a' chothrom gus an deasbad seo fhosgladh a thaobh a' ghluasaid taic a chur ri prionnsapalan farsaing Bile nan Cànan Albannach.

Do mhòran chan e dìreach cùis phoblach a th' ann an cànan ach nì a tha aig cridhe na coimhearsnachd aca—agus tha sin fìor dhomh-sa. Air sgàth sin 's e urram a th' ann dhomh a bhith a' fosgladh an deasbaid seo.

Bu mhath leam taing a thoirt do Chomataidh Foghlam, Clann agus Òigridh airson mar a bheachdaich iad ann an dòigh thuigseach, thaiceil air a' chùis seo. Mo thaing cuideachd do Chomataidh nan Cumhachdan Tiomnaichte agus Ath-leasachadh an Lagha agus Comataidh an Ionmhais agus na Rianachd Poblach airson an cuid eòlais is breithneachadh. Tha mi cuideachd gu mòr an comain nan daoine a chuir seachad ùine gus fianais a thoirt seachad.

Air a' mhìos seo, tha Comunn na Gàidhlig, a' bhuidheann-leasachaidh Ghàidhlig, a' comharrachadh an dà fhicheadamh ceann-bliadhna aca. Nuair a chaidh Comunn na Gàidhlig a stèidheachadh nochd dìcheall am pailteas bho am measg choimhearsnachdan na Gàidhlig.

'S ann mar thoradh air na rinneadh an uair sin a thàinig piseach air na seirbheisean a bha rim faotainn do choimhearsnachdan Gàidhlig. Mar eisimpleir, tha seirbheis craolaidh na Gàidhlig againn, tha foghlam tro mheadhan na Gàidhlig againn, ealain agus foillseachadh na Gàidhlig.

Tha na roinnean sin a' cur ri ar beatha chultarail, agus chithear a' bhuidheann aca gu h-eadar-nàiseanta le iomadh buil is buannachd a' tighinn bho innleachd nan Gàidheal. Feumaidh sinn cuimhneachadh air an fheadhainn a chuir na pròiseactan seo air chois. Gun teagamh, rinn iad diofar, chaidh adhartas a dhèanamh agus thug an Riaghaltas taic seachad. Tha sinn fhathast a' cur ris an dìleib sin.

Às dèidh stèidheachadh Pàrlamaid na h-Alba chunnacas tuilleadh ìmpidh is adhartais. Bha coimhearsnachdan ag iarraidh inbhe thèarainte agus an ceann ùine chuir a' Phàrlamaid seo aonta ri Achd na Gàidhlig (Alba) 2005.

Chaidh Bòrd na Gàidhlig a stèidheachadh, dh'ullaich ùghdarrasan poblach planaichean Gàidhlig, agus thòisich soidhnichean Gàidhlig a' nochdadh air prìomh rathaidean agus toglaichean. Chaidh seanail Gàidhlig a stèidheachadh ann an 2008. Bho 2006 thòisicheadh air sgoiltean Gàidhlig fa leth a stèidheachadh.

Bha na h-iarrtasan a thàinig bho choimhearsnachdan na Gàidhlig cudromach. Cuideachd, bha a' Phàrlamaid fhèin cudromach do thòrr de na leasachaidhean seo agus bha an taic a chuir a h-uile pàrtaidh ris a' chànan na chuideachadh mòr. Rinn na rudan seo uile diofar.

Ged a tha adhartas ann, tha fios gu bheil dùbhlain romhainn fhathast. Tha tuilleadh adhartais a dhith sna sgoiltean, ann an sgìrean le gainnead sluaigh, agus a thaobh nan dùbhlain eaconamach is bun-structair.

'S e an obair a tha romhainn atharraichean susbainteach a chur an sàs às dèidh bhliadhnaichean de mhilleadh agus crìonadh. Chan eil sinn gar mealladh fhèin a thaobh na bhios a dhith. Chan eil sgleò air ar lèirsinn nuair a thig e gu fìrinn an t-suidheachaidh, agus chan eil sinn airson gun lean cùisean dìreach mar a tha iad.

Bu mhath leam facal no dhà a ràdh mu Albais anis. An t-seachdain a chaidh, chaidh duaisean na h-Albais a chumail ann an Cumnag ann an Siorrachd Àir an Ear. Ma bheirear sùil air na seòrsaichean duaise, na daoine a chaidh a mholadh agus an luchd-taice, tha e' toirt misneachd dhuinn. Tha e a' toirt dealbh air roinn na h-Albais a tha làn spionnaidh is gnìomh agus a' soirbheachadh, far a bheil daoine bho raointean leithid foghlam, foillseachadh agus na h-ealain air an riochdachadh.

Tha diofar bhuidhnean a' dèanamh obair ionmholta ann a bhith a' cur taic ri Albais. Thar nam bliadhnaichean mu dheireadh tha Riaghaltas na h-Alba air taic a thoirt do bhuidhnean leithid an Scots Language Centre, Scots Hoose, Dictionaries of the Scots Language, Doric radio agus dhan chùrsa aig an Oilthigh Fhosgailte agus Foghlam Alba a tha a' cuideachadh thidsearan le bhith ag ionnsachadh Albais.

Seo a' chiad turas a tha Albais air a bhith mar phàirt de reachdas sa Phàrlamaid seo. Le sin, tha sinn a' togail air obair nam buidhnean Albais agus air soirbheachas nan sgrìobhadairean, seinneadairean agus tidsearan Albais air a bheil fianais gu leòr aig duaisean na h-Albais.

Tha sinn a' toirt Bile nan Cànan Albannach air adhart gus structairean a stèidheachadh airson barrachd adhartais a dhèanamh. Leis an tuigse nach toir am bile fhèin freagairt dhuinn airson gach ceist. Bidh am bile a' cur taic ri iomairtean a tha gan cur an sàs aig ìre an Riaghaltais, nan ùghdarrasan poblach agus na coimhearsnachd.

Tha feum orra uile agus gu tric thig adhartas mar thoradh air coimhearsnachdan is ùghdarrasan a bhith ag obair còmhla gus structairean cudromach a chur air bhonn a bheir cothrom do dhaoine na h-iomairtean seo a chur an sàs. Tha eisimpleirean gu leòr againn de dh' iomairtean stèidhichte is ùr, leithid Sabhal Mòr Ostaig a chomharraich an leth-cheudamh ceann-bliadhna aige an-uiridh. An uair sin tha sinn a' dèanamh fiughair ri togalach ùr Chnoc Soilleir a bhith deiseil an-ath-bhliadhna ann an Uibhist a Deas.

Bu mhath leam taing a thoirt dhan chomataidh. Thathar a' cur fàilte air grunn phuigean ann an aithisg na comataidh. Mar a tha iad a' bruidhinn air èiginn an t-suidheachaidh agus air mar a dh'fheumar barrachd a dhèanamh. Cuideachd, bha a' chomataidh ceart ann a bhith a' cur cuideam air com-pàirt nan coimhearsnachdan, taic do dh'fhoghlam tro mheadhan na Gàidhlig, ionnsachadh taobh a-muigh na sgoile, foghlam Gàidhlig adhartach agus àrd-ìre, tidsearan Gàidhlig, agus prìomhachasan is foghlam Albais.

Bidh aig ùghdarrasan ionadail aig a bheil foghlam tro mheadhan na Gàidhlig is planaichean Gàidhlig ri planaichean coileanaidh ullachadh airson foghlam Gàidhlig.

Gu cudromach, stèidhichidh am bile frèam gus sgìrean cànan sònraichte a chomharrachadh, agus seo na mheadhan cumhachdach gus dleastanasan ùra a chur air buidhnean poblach airson a bhith a' neartachadh cor a' chànan.

Tha fios agam gu bheil cuid ann a tha ag ràdh nach eil am bile làidir gu leòr. Tha mi air coinneachadh ri buill Pàrlamaid bho na pàrtaidhean eile gus dearbhadh gu bheil mi deònach obrachadh còmhla riutha air atharraichean aig ìre a dhà. Gu dearbh, tha an Riaghaltas an dùil atharraichean a chur air adhart gus leudachadh air na còraichean is cothroman a bhios aig daoine a tha a' fuireach ann an sgìrean cànan sònraichte.

Tha mi gu h-àraidh a' beachdachadh air roghainnean a thaobh mar a dh'fhaodadh barrachd pàirt a bhith aig coimhearsnachdan ann a bhith a' comharrachadh sgìrean cànan sònraichte. Bu mhath leam oifigearan leasachaidh Gàidhlig fhaicinn anns gach sgìre cànan shònraichte, a bhiodh ag obair gus taic a chumail ri coimhearsnachdan ann an iomadh dòigh, gus àrdachadh a thoirt air àireamhan luchd-labhairt na Gàidhlig agus gus seirbheisean ùra a chur air

dòigh dhan a h-uile duine—eadar a' chlann as òige agus na daoine as sine.

Tha mi cuideachd a' beachdachadh air mar a ghabhas còir a stèidheachadh airson sgoiltean Gàidhlig fa leth, agus am bu chòir iomradh a bhith air sin anns a' bhile.

'S e a' chiad chomharra a bhios againn air soirbheachadh, ma bhios cothrom aig cuideigin, a tha fileanta ann an Gàidhlig an-dràsta, a' bheatha air fad aca a chur seachad tro mheadhan na Gàidhlig san sgìre ionadail aca. An dàrna comharra, ma bhios sinn, aig àm an ath chunntais-shluaigh, air stad a chur air a' chrìonadh a tha air tighinn air àireamhan luchd-labhairt na Gàidhlig sna sgìrean traidiseanta—na h-Eileanan an Iar, an t-Eilean Sgitheanach agus coimhearsnachdan eile sna h-eileanan agus air a' chosta.

Cha toir am bile fhèin fuasgladh dhuinn airson a h-uile rud. Ach, bheir e stiùireadh dhan obair a nì buidhnean poblach na h-Alba, do dh'fhoghlam is ionnsachadh na Gàidhlig is na h-Albais agus do dh'obair is iomairtean coimhearsnachd.

Tha mi a' cur fàilte air an taic a fhuair am bile thuige seo. Tha mi a' coimhead air adhart ri bhith a' cluinntinn bheachdan dhaoine agus bu mhath leam moladh do na buill taic a chur ri prionnsapalan farsaing Bile nan Cànan Albannach.

Tha mi a' cur gluasad air adhart,

Gun cuir a' Phàrlamaid aonta ri prionnsapalan farsaing Bile nan Cànan Albannach.

Following is the simultaneous interpretation:

I welcome the opportunity to open the debate in favour of the motion to support the general principles of the Scottish Languages Bill. For many people, language is not just a matter of public business; it is a matter that is at the heart of their community. I count myself among that number and, for that reason, I consider it an honour and a privilege to open the debate.

I thank the Education, Children and Young People Committee for the thoughtful and supportive way in which it has considered the matter in front of it. I also thank the Delegated Powers and Law Reform Committee and the Finance and Public Administration Committee for their interest and expertise. I am grateful, too, to those who took the time to submit evidence.

This month, the Gaelic development body Comunn na Gàidhlig is celebrating its 40th anniversary. When it was established, there was a burst of activity from the Gaelic community. It was as a result of that activity that some improvements were made to the services available to the community. For example, we have a Gaelic broadcasting service, a Gaelic-medium education

sector, and Gaelic arts and publishing. Those sectors enrich our cultural life and have international reach. We could add that they are punching above their weight. We must be mindful of those who set those projects in motion. There is no doubt that they made a difference. Progress was made and the Government provided support. We are still building on that legacy.

When the Scottish Parliament was established, there was evidence of further welcome pressure and progress. There was a demand from the community for secure status. In time, this Parliament passed the Gaelic Language (Scotland) Act 2005, Bòrd na Gàidhlig was established, public authority Gaelic plans were produced and we began seeing Gaelic signage on major roads and buildings. Stand-alone Gaelic schools began to emerge from 2006 and, in 2008, a Gaelic television channel was established. The demand from the speaker community was important. In addition, this Parliament played an important role in many of those developments, with support from all parties a welcome feature of that. All those things made a difference.

Progress must still be made in schools and in areas of low population or with economic and infrastructural challenges. Our task is to effect significant change after a long period of damage, neglect and decline. [*Interpretation should read:* Our task is to effect significant change after a long period of damage and decline.] There is no complacency about that, no rose-tinted specs, no burying heads in the sand and no wish to settle for the status quo.

I turn to the subject of Scots. Last week, the Scots language awards were held at Cumnock in East Ayrshire. The list of the award categories, nominees and sponsors is impressive and provides a picture of a lively, thriving and active Scots sector, where education, publishing and the arts are all represented.

A number of bodies are doing excellent work in supporting the Scots language. In recent years, the Scottish Government has been able to support bodies such as the Scots Language Centre, Scots Hoose, the Dictionaries of the Scots Language, Doric radio and the Open University and Education Scotland course that supports teachers with their Scots learning.

This is the first time that Scots has been included in legislation in this Parliament. In doing that, we are building on the work of Scots bodies and on the example that has been set by Scots writers, singers and teachers at the Scots language awards.

We are taking the bill forward now in order to put in place structures that will bring further progress. We are aware that the bill is not, in itself,

the whole solution. It will sit alongside the growing package of measures and interventions operating at Government, public authority and community level. All those are needed because progress is often a combination of communities acting and authorities putting important structures in place to make things possible.

One example of the old and the new is that Sabhal Mòr Ostaig celebrated its 50th anniversary last year while, at the same time, we look forward to the completion of the Cnoc Soillier building in South Uist next year.

I thank the Education, Children and Young People Committee. There are a number of points in the committee report that are particularly welcome. It has an emphasis on urgency and says that more needs to be done. The committee also—rightly—focuses on community involvement, support for Gaelic-medium education, out-of-school learning, Gaelic further and higher education, Gaelic teachers, and Scots priorities in education.

Local authorities with Gaelic-medium education and Gaelic language plans will be required to prepare Gaelic education delivery plans. Most important, the bill will introduce a framework to designate areas of linguistic significance, which will put new responsibilities on public bodies to strengthen the language.

I am aware that there are those who say that the bill does not go far enough. I have met MSPs from other parties to demonstrate my willingness to work with them on amendments at stage 2. Indeed, the Government also intends to lodge amendments to strengthen the rights and opportunities of people living in areas of linguistic significance. In particular, I am considering options to increase community involvement in the designation process for areas of linguistic significance. I would like to see Gaelic development officers in each area of linguistic significance who are tasked with supporting the community in many ways to increase the number of Gaelic speakers and secure new services for everyone, from infants to the elderly.

I am also considering how to secure a right to stand-alone Gaelic-medium schools and whether that should feature in the bill. The first mark of success will be if somebody who has Gaelic fluency today can live their whole life solely in Gaelic medium in their local area. The second mark of success will be if, at the next census, we have reversed the tide of declining numbers of speakers in the Gaelic heartlands—the Western Isles, Skye and other coastal and island communities.

The bill will not solve everything by itself, but it will shape the work of Scottish public authorities, of Gaelic and Scots education and learning, and of community activity. I welcome the support that the bill has received so far and I look forward to hearing members' contributions to the debate. I commend to members the motion to support the general principles of the Scottish Languages Bill.

I move,

That the Parliament agrees to the general principles of the Scottish Languages Bill.

14:33

Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con): For the avoidance of doubt, I confirm that I will be speaking in English this afternoon, so members will not need their headsets.

I am delighted to be speaking on behalf of the Education, Children and Young People Committee. I thank my colleagues for their diligent work on the bill so far, and I thank all the people and organisations who provided evidence, either in person or by responding to our call for views. We are also grateful to the Delegated Powers and Law Reform Committee and the Finance and Public Administration Committee for their work to scrutinise the bill and for sharing their conclusions and recommendations timeously so that we could reflect on them when considering our report.

As our report makes clear, the committee supports the general principles of the bill, and its aim

“to provide further support for Scotland’s indigenous languages, Gaelic and Scots.”

However, we believe that the bill would have limited effect in its current form. Although stakeholders told us of the symbolic value of declaring those languages to be official, particularly in relation to Scots, witnesses also highlighted the long-standing challenges around funding for Scots and Gaelic. Many cited Bòrd na Gàidhlig’s budget as an example. It has remained largely stable for the past 17 years, rising from £4.4 million in 2006-07 to £5.1 million in 2024-25. Had it kept pace with inflation, the annual budget would now be around £7.5 million. The Bòrd stated that, as a result, it is constrained in the support that it can give to community and other projects. In its most recent funding cycle, for example, it could fund—or part fund—only 39 per cent of the projects that had applied.

Witnesses stated that, without more resources, the aspiration of the bill would be undermined. The limited costings set out in the financial memorandum did nothing to allay those concerns. On its own, symbolism will not be sufficient to address the challenges—particularly for Gaelic,

which is in a perilous position. It requires support to ensure an increase in both the number of speakers and the fluency of their language skills.

On fluency, the committee noted that the evidence highlighted the desire for speakers to have more “functional fluency” in Gaelic as an outcome of Gaelic-medium education—GME, as we will probably hear it referred to throughout the afternoon. That is, that speakers should be able to use the language in everyday situations. The committee therefore recommended

“that the Scottish Government include this as one of the identifiable outcomes within the strategy and to develop a consistent national measure for this.”

The committee was also struck by the repeated requests, from organisations and individuals alike, for much more clarity in the bill, whether in relation to the content of the strategies, standards and guidance that will be pursuant to the bill, its associated costs or indeed what an area of linguistic significance might look like within local authorities in which there are proportionately fewer Gaelic speakers. Many questions are still to be answered.

The committee therefore notes that the response from the Scottish Government included illustrative examples of the kinds of measures that could be included in the standards and guidance. Those were helpful. They encompassed a wide range of areas, including publications, community development, online materials and impact assessments. In relation to education, the areas that were covered include GME access, provision, teacher requirements and catchments. In her opening remarks, the Deputy First Minister made reference to some of the GME provisions.

Many highlighted the potential for the bill to provide more coherent policy in support of both languages and associated dialects, with national strategies being authored by the Scottish Government. Although education is critical, it is hoped that such coherence will ensure that areas such as housing, infrastructure and economic policy are also considered when taking steps to support communities. Such steps could, in turn, support those languages to thrive.

In its response to our stage 1 report, the Scottish Government has said that it is

“keen to explore the extent to which infrastructural issues can be included in standards and strategy”,

and the committee looks forward to hearing more about the potential for those to feature in Gaelic language plans in areas of linguistic significance.

Kate Forbes: The member has put on record her willingness for the committee to engage with me at stage 2 to address some of its criticisms. I am keen to do that.

Sue Webber: I thank the Deputy First Minister for her response. The change that has taken place in the leadership of who is responsible for the bill will help us to work together more closely around stage 2, I hope.

The committee also highlighted concerns from stakeholders that the consultation that will be required on the draft strategy is, potentially, limited, and that the results of that consultation should be published. We have had some clarification from the Scottish Government that it will ensure full public consultation on the strategy. Although we recognise the Scottish Government's assurances that that was always the intention, we welcome the Scottish Government's commitment to considering what further measures can be taken to ensure that that is clearer and is in the bill.

The Scottish Government's response to our report set out that, recently, it has been standard practice for Scottish Government policy documents on Gaelic to be issued for public consultation; for those to be accompanied by public meetings with a range of community and interest groups, as well as ministerial meetings; that, following that process, an independent analysis is prepared for Scottish ministers; and that the results of the consultation, and the analysis, are published. The committee welcomes that reassurance. If that is how consultation on the national strategy will be treated, we welcome that as well.

I turn to Scots. The committee acknowledges that almost half the population of Scotland report having some Scots language skills. However, the formality of the infrastructure for Scots is much less advanced than it is for Gaelic.

The committee heard evidence that declaring official status for Scots was

"a mammoth step forward"—[*Official Report, Education, Children and Young People Committee*, 1 May 2024; c 31.]

and important in and of itself. However, we also heard that more support and resource were required. For instance, in its report, the committee noted that, in the absence of a Scots language board—although we are not saying that there needs to be a Scots language board—the Scottish Government is relying on Scots organisations to engage on the Scots strategy, standards and guidance.

The committee further noted that, given resource constraints, those organisations may not have the capacity to engage in such processes without affecting their day-to-day activities. They are small organisations. We heard that, for example, responding to multiple consultations on standards and guidance is resource heavy and intense. Although the organisations stressed the need for more resource, both Scots and Gaelic

organisations are concerned that, based on the costings in the financial memorandum, any increase in resource for Scots would be at the expense of Gaelic.

The committee welcomes the Scottish Government's commitment, in its response, to reflect on measures that could be considered in relation to that. The committee also welcomes the Scottish Government's commitment to try to reduce the burden on Scots organisations by considering whether it can, where possible, consolidate consultations.

The committee also heard concerns that the current definition of Scots in the bill lacks the nuance that is required to encompass the various regional variations of Scots. The committee believes that, if the purpose of official status is to give recognition to Scots in all its forms, there must be a much more explicit reference to all those forms, and the bill should set that out much more clearly.

The committee notes that the Scottish Government's response says that it took its lead from the speaker community for Scots, that being the overall umbrella term within which all forms and regional varieties are recognised and respected. I stress that many stakeholders who provided evidence to the committee did not consider the bill to be sufficiently clear regarding its intended inclusiveness.

I reiterate that the Education, Children and Young People Committee supports the general principles of the bill. However, much more clarity is required on how the provisions in the bill will be used and how they will be supplemented by other policy and budgetary decisions to achieve the bill's aims.

I am pleased that the Deputy First Minister shared additional information ahead of the debate today. As we made clear in our report, we expect more detail and clarity, as well as further costings prior to stage 2 proceedings.

14:42

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): At stage 1, the Parliament considers a narrow point on whether to vote for or against the principles of a bill. In this case, it does so following consideration by the Education, Children and Young People Committee, which has produced a fair report that rightly flags a number of challenges for which the witnesses who helped us, the clerks to the committee and, indeed, my fellow members deserve great credit.

The Scottish Languages Bill expresses its general principles as being

“to provide further support for Scotland's indigenous languages, Gaelic and Scots.”

On that narrow basis, I confirm that the Scottish Conservatives will vote for the general principles of the bill at decision time tonight, in order that it can move to stage 2—the amending stage—at which radical surgery is required.

Let me explain. Last week, there was a report about the Scottish National Party's repeated failures to deliver the intended outcomes of its stated policies, alongside a failure to evaluate their effectiveness. I fear that the bill may result in more of the same. Witnesses told us as much. Bòrd na Gàidhlig said:

“the legislation will not solve the issues that we face at community development level, which require a new and transparent investment model that can deliver the targets in the new national Gaelic language plan.”—[*Official Report, Education, Children and Young People Committee*, 15 May 2024; c 29]

Further, Professor Conchúr Ó Giollagáin said that the bill would not introduce

“anything new that will help the vernacular community in the islands with the linguistic crisis that they live with.”—[*Official Report, Education, Children and Young People Committee*, 1 May 2024; c 30]

Indeed, we have just heard the bill described as having “symbolic importance only”, which is hardly what the Gaelic community, in particular, would hope for.

Throughout the evidence-taking, there were persuasive and, indeed, pervasive indications that much—if not all—of what is in the bill could perhaps more competently and coherently be achieved through non-legislative means.

The bill suffers by seeking to address two issues that are at different stages and that require different interventions. Gaelic is evidently clearly identifiable and definable as a language, and it seems to me perfectly possible and, indeed, way past time, for the Government to decide what it wants to achieve in relation to Gaelic; where the Gaelic Language (Scotland) Act 2005 has fallen short and why; what the outcomes and measures of success might be; and, therefore, what is required and at what cost to achieve them.

The cabinet secretary aspires to reversing the tide in the declining number of Gaelic speakers, but I do not think that that, in itself, is a measurable outcome. It is regrettable that such outcomes are not currently in the bill, but I hope that the deficiencies that are apparent at stage 1 of the process can be rectified at stage 2.

Part 2 of the bill relates to, as section 26 puts it, the “Scots language”. Following the debate, the Government might feel it prudent to reflect carefully on what it is trying to achieve in that part and, indeed, whether the bill is the best place to

do it. The problems started immediately views were called for, with the Law Society of Scotland's submission recognising, as did the committee, that the bill persists in defining the “Scots language” as “the Scots language as used in Scotland”. Apart from that definition being circular, it is simply a prescription for ambiguity and uncertainty. In recognising Scots without defining what falls within or outwith it, all that will be achieved will be the folding of all of Scotland's dialects under a term that is recognisable by people in parts of the central belt but utterly alien to those who speak Doric, for example.

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind):

Does Liam Kerr accept that the bill is, at least, a step in the right direction? He might want to go further or do things differently, but Scots being given official status in statute makes a pretty big difference.

Liam Kerr: No, I do not accept that. The bill does represent a step in the right direction, but not if we simply homogenise everything under one indivisible term. Both the committee and the witnesses made that point. I say to John Mason that we cannot simply deem everything to be Scots and thereby make dialects such as Doric unrecognisable.

To clarify my point, I highlight that when teachers and authorities are performing their new duties under section 31 of the bill, which are to

“promote, facilitate and support Scots language education”,

they might very well ask which Scots they are to promote. Is it Lallans, Doric or Orcadian? James Wylie of Orkney Islands Council told the committee that Orcadian and Shetlandic are not Scots dialects but separate languages. However, that will not be recognised if they are all to be grouped under the term “Scots”.

Such ambiguity is replicated by the conveying of official status on Gaelic and Scots by sections 1 and 26 respectively. Nowhere is it defined what “official status” actually means. Members might feel that such a lack of clarity is not so important, but the committee found itself very concerned as to what obligations the strategies, standards and guidance that will be developed pursuant to the bill will place on public bodies. That is not clear, and neither are the associated costs.

The financial memorandum sets out additional costs that will arise from the bill—that is, the whole bill, as it applies to both Gaelic and Scots—at £700,000 over five years. It is apparent, though, that that figure represents an estimate of the cost to develop the strategies and the like—in other words, additional costs for existing people. It is not the cost of delivering those strategies or the extra duties that are imposed when an area of linguistic significance is designated.

In Ireland, additional resources are put in place to ensure better support for the use of Irish in Gaeltacht areas. In contrast, the bill does not anticipate any additional spend for designating such an area here, which is bizarre. The committee found that some of the activities that would take place in an ALS are already there; that it is not clear that legislation is required; and that stakeholders are unclear as to what an ALS practically means, what it will look like or the duties that are imposed. Therefore if it is accepted—as I think the cabinet secretary did in her opening remarks—that, once a local authority has designated an ALS, that will create additional duties, then, without commensurate additional funding for tools, mechanisms or employees, our cash-strapped local councils might be reluctant so to designate.

The committee has asked the Scottish Government to revisit the costs set out in the financial memorandum and to provide, prior to stage 2, further detail on the full financial costs associated with the bill's provisions. I find that approach, and the idea that new and significant duties might be brought in at stage 2, a pretty unsatisfactory way of making law, but we are where we are, and it is to be hoped that the Government will comply.

I will conclude where I started. The bill's principles are so general that people really cannot argue with them, but they are arguing that the bill is symbolic and will not ultimately achieve its laudable aims even if it does not do much damage, either.

I believe that it is preferable for the Parliament to legislate for outcomes, rather than optics—and that leads me to my final thought. A significant number of people have asked me whether—given that the attainment gap is widening, free meals for primary school kids have gone the way of laptops and push-bikes, violence is endemic in our schools, teacher numbers are plummeting and child poverty remains where it was in 2007—part 2 of the Scottish Languages Bill, in particular, represents the best use of the limited, perhaps very limited, time left in this session. I wonder if, in closing, the Deputy First Minister might give them an answer.

14:50

Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): Nearly 20 years after the first Gaelic language act, the Gaelic Language (Scotland) Act 2005, the Scottish Languages Bill comes at a critical point for Scotland's ancient language and culture. In the words of the stage 1 report from the Education, Children and Young People Committee, the Gaelic language

“is in a perilous state.”

Other members have covered the Scots language provisions in the bill, and the Deputy First Minister set out well some of the institutional progress in that area. I will concentrate my remarks on Gaelic, as I believe that the very survival of the language is at stake.

Research by academics at the University of the Highlands and Islands that was published in 2020 revealed the depth of the Gaelic crisis in the vernacular community. The decline in Gaelic speakers was steepest among young people, the majority of whom were not using Gaelic socially or in the home. The evidence is clear. Without changes to policy and intervention at community level, the present Gaelic vernacular community will not survive beyond the next decade. The social use of Gaelic within those communities is at the point of collapse.

A plan to revive Gaelic that is rooted in the communities where the language is spoken is required. The experts are clear that

“the education system alone cannot effectively implement revitalisation efforts among the Gaelic vernacular community”,

yet here we are—that is exactly what we have received to date. We have a narrowly drawn, poorly conceived piece of education legislation.

Recent census figures should not be used by the Government to mask the imminent demise of a living language. It is, at best, statistical sophistry to equate Gaelic speakers of limited proficiency in the central belt with a living language in the vernacular community. I know that the Deputy First Minister did not seek to do that in her speech, but that thinking has been used in other circumstances. The young people concerned leave school and never speak Gaelic again. Young people in the islands leave home and never live in a Gaelic community again. So dies this ancient culture, preserved only as an academic curiosity.

The issues that endanger Gaelic are principally economic and social. Last October, Scottish Labour published a policy paper entitled “An Economic Plan for a Living Language”, which argued that economic issues including housing, jobs and other critical infrastructure must be addressed in order to arrest the decline of the Gaelic language. The Deputy First Minister, I suspect, agrees. The report of the short-life working group on economic and social opportunities for Gaelic rightly acknowledged the structural issues that must be addressed. However, more than a year after that report's publication, the Scottish Government has made no formal response. I would urge the Deputy First Minister, who commissioned that report in her

previous role in government, to ensure that the response is published as soon as possible. The bill before us is far too narrow. Alone, it will not meet all our shared objectives.

The Deputy First Minister might also look to the proposed crofting bill, which has been fairly universally slated. It has been described by the Scottish Crofting Federation as “extremely disappointing”. The continued decline of crofting tenure will do more to harm Gaelic than any good that might come from the bill before us.

The Scottish Languages Bill gives responsibility for a national Gaelic strategy to the Scottish Government, replacing the previous responsibility for a national Gaelic language plan, which sat with Bòrd na Gàidhlig. The bòrd has welcomed that clarity and the change that it will bring.

On the subject of areas of linguistic significance, which has already been covered in members’ speeches, a range of stakeholders told the committee that further clarity is needed, and I was glad to hear the Deputy First Minister recognise that significant changes are required in that regard. As the bill stands, it remains unclear how such a designation would work in practice or what further duties would be placed on local authorities. As colleagues have pointed out already, given that there is zero financial resource attached to the bill, local authorities may be reluctant to designate an area of linguistic significance, or the designation may exist in name only. Stakeholders have already suggested that we could end up in the perverse situation where an authority with a clear and compelling case for the designation of an area of linguistic significance chooses not to, simply because it is already vastly overburdened and sees the prospect of extra duties with no additional resource.

The bill inserts a new section 6B into the Education (Scotland) Act 2016, giving the Scottish ministers power to make regulations to prescribe the standards and requirements of an education authority in relation to Gaelic-learner education, Gaelic-medium education and the teaching of Gaelic in further education. However, as the committee heard in evidence, the biggest issues for Gaelic-medium education rest in teacher recruitment and retention. There has been no indication from the Government that it has further interventions planned to address those issues.

I fear that the bill is raising expectations around GME without any of the necessary resource or action to be able to deliver on those expectations. Furthermore, having spoken with leaders in education, I know that there is real scepticism about the extent to which any of this will be achieved without additional resource. They are weary of Government promises in education policy and press releases hailing consultations and

reviews that fail to deliver any of the tangible actions that are needed—the Muir review, the Hayward review, the Withers review, the reform of Education Scotland and the abolition of the Scottish Qualifications Authority. Nothing ever happens—nothing happens at all.

Were there a financial resolution today, given all that I have said so far, citing the zero pounds and zero pence cost of expanding duties, Labour would have rejected it as incompetent. Exactly two weeks ago, we were in the chamber for the finance secretary’s now annual statement of in-year budget crisis cuts. I am acutely aware of the pressures on the budget stemming from an incompetent Scottish National Party Government making promises that it cannot afford to keep. However, it is not credible to keep increasing the duties on public bodies and claim that they cost nothing. The Finance and Public Administration Committee, of which I am a member, was very clear in that regard.

During her time as finance secretary, the Deputy First Minister was keen to align her Government’s promises with fiscal realities. She is, I am sure, painfully aware that the current finance secretary and, indeed, the First Minister have taken a rather different approach. If the Deputy First Minister cannot win the argument for fiscal responsibility around the Cabinet table, she should do so at least in relation to the bills in her control.

Scottish Labour supports the general principles of the bill, but, bluntly, the best that can be said at present is that, if amended, it will do no harm. Scottish Labour wants to make legislation that does some good. We have waited 20 years for legislation on Gaelic, but on the current course, in another 20 years’ time, there will be no language to save.

14:57

Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): I thank the clerks for fixing my pass and apologise to colleagues on the Labour benches who were getting distracted by my doing laps around their desks.

We all agree on the principle of valuing the Gaelic language, but as we have heard from Liam Kerr, there is perhaps a bit more difference when it comes to how we approach Scots in the bill. I will start with Scots before moving on to Gaelic for most of my contribution. Symbolic recognition—in this case, symbolic recognition of a language that has not had that before in law—is important. Scots is a language that has undergone centuries of denigration. It is a living language. As the census showed us, it is thriving in all sorts of ways that Gaelic is not, despite sustained efforts to force it out of public life.

On Gaelic, we have waited 20 years for this bill, but it is fair to say that the response to it has been underwhelming. It will not be transformational when transformation is what is needed. I fear that the bill as currently drafted is a result of that classic political process: we needed to do something, so we have done something.

The census showed two very different stories in relation to Gaelic. As has been indicated, the number of Gaelic learners is growing, but in traditional communities, where it is a living community language, it is in steep decline. We heard the stories of Gaelic-medium education schools in the central belt and of Duolingo learners, which are both very positive developments, but the reality for a young person who goes to a GME school in Glasgow is that they cannot go into a shop on the way home or into a cafe and buy something in Gaelic. It is not a language that they can live their life in. There has been some progress in extracurricular activities, sports clubs and community groups, but it is not a community language, and in the communities where it is, it is under existential threat. We heard in evidence to the committee at stage 1 a good anecdote from one of the witnesses, who said that, in Lewis, she saw a group of teenage boys on the street who were misbehaving in Gaelic. That is an example of what a living community language actually looks like.

Again, I do not want to dismiss the value of symbolism, especially when the legitimacy of Gaelic and Scots has been challenged for centuries—and is, in many ways, still challenged today. Having the Scottish Government and the Scottish Parliament making a clear statement in law has value, but on its own, however, that is not good enough. The bill will pass—there is no reason for it not to do so—but it currently represents a missed opportunity. The question for us this afternoon is whether we can amend the bill at stages 2 and 3 so that it means something much more.

I will run through a couple of the amendments that the Greens are considering lodging at stage 2. The first is about measuring success. It is good that responsibility for the national Gaelic language strategy should sit with Scottish ministers, but there is not much value in strategy that is all motherhood and apple pie. The strategy is that we are going to make things better, but we, or our successors, will all be back here in five or 10 years' time feeling very disappointed at the fact that things did not get better. We need to be much clearer about what we mean and how we measure success. The Greens would like members to consider an amendment that would require ministers to outline how they will measure success and progress towards the goals that are set out in any strategy.

Success will look different in different places. If we want to move beyond Gaelic being a language that is spoken only in GME schools in places such as Glasgow and Edinburgh, we would do that in a very different way from how we would go about protecting it as an existing but declining community language in Lewis.

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): On what the member says about measuring success, there is one thing that I think might be useful. The census used to ask, "Do you speak Scots?", but now it asks people whether they read, write, understand and speak Scots. Could we perhaps use those results as a measurement of success?

Ross Greer: I am grateful to Emma Harper for that intervention, because the value of the census is massive. While the results from the most recent census told a pretty stark story in relation to Gaelic, they told a different, and more nuanced, story in relation to Scots. At this point, we are getting the data from that census month by month, but we should already be looking ahead at what the most useful questions might be in the next census, and thinking about how we tie the strategy in with that and use the census as a way to measure success in that regard.

I highlight the reality that, in many of our communities, there is a hostility towards the public sector's efforts to increase the use of Gaelic. It is worth exploring that, because—certainly in my experience locally—there is not so much an inherent hostility to the language; rather, in a lot of ways, it is about class dynamics in relation to Gaelic-medium education schools. The class make-up of the children who attend those schools can be quite different from that of those who attend other schools nearby, and we therefore need to take a more nuanced approach to the matter in order to build community support.

Nonetheless, I think that ministerial accountability for the national picture and for progress with regard to it is important, so we need to know what we are measuring progress against. To that effect, another amendment that might be useful would be to require that reports on progress are produced annually. There is a reporting requirement in the bill, but it is not clear that the reports would have to be produced annually. I should emphasise that I am talking about annual reports rather than annual targets.

I will go through a number of other potential amendments in my closing speech. Again, however, I emphasise the point that we should not be passing legislation simply because Parliament felt the need for legislation. There is a clear desire for us to do something genuinely transformational—that word was used a lot in evidence at stage 1. The bill that is currently in front of us does not do that, but I think that there is

a clear parliamentary majority in favour of it, and that we are capable of bringing forward amendments to ensure that the bill creates the meaningful, transformational change for which both the Gaelic community and the Scots language community are crying out.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): We move to the open debate.

15:04

George Adam (Paisley) (SNP): It is interesting when you look at the debate. When I came to sit on the Education, Children and Young People Committee, it was nearing the end of its consideration of the bill and the evidence had already been taken. I read some of that evidence and had a read-through—for want of a better word—of the committee’s report on the bill. However—to use some local vernacular—ma heid is absolutely meltin wi the negativity that is comin from Opposition members.

Ross Greer brought up the important point that the bill will give legal status to the Scots language for the first time. I come from a generation in which our parents told us not to speak any form of Scots, and in which our teachers constantly told us not to speak any form of Scots. That was our language.

Scots is also a live language. The English that is spoken in certain parts of England is entirely different from the English that is spoken in the north-east of England. It is the same with any language in general, but there is a basis for the language itself.

I have felt some of the frustrations that my committee members felt with the report. I was looking at some of the legislation in the area. I remember the Education (Scotland) Act 2016. I was a member of the incarnation of the education committee that dealt with that legislation. I am a bit like Al Pacino in “The Godfather Part III”—I keep trying to get out of the education committee and they keep dragging me back in again. However, the Gaelic Language (Scotland) Act 2005 was before my time.

I suppose that the Scottish Languages Bill is more about what is and is not working in relation to those acts—what we got right and, inevitably, what did not work. Steady progress has been made since the legislation was passed, but now is the time to look at both of Scotland’s languages.

Liam Kerr: The member makes a very good point in referring to what aspects of the 2005 act did not work. Can he point me to any report or any evidence that the Government has taken that shows where it has fallen short and what needs to be done to remedy that?

George Adam: I think that the Government has made it pretty obvious what we have to do to move forward with both languages: that is the point of having the bill.

An important element is that some people might question the point of progressing such a bill in these very difficult times that we live in. That is a valid argument. Equally, I would say that our languages and how we communicate are key factors to who we are as Scots. I am always someone who is looking forward in relation to what we can do and what we can become. However, I believe that we need to know who we are in order to move forward, and our languages are an important part of that.

You might ask, “What has Gaelic got to do with a post-industrial town like Paisley?” It has quite a lot to do with it, actually, because, like our Weegie neighbours, our name is taken from the Gaelic form. Being an ancient town means that we have had many Gaelic traditions. Our town has embraced those and has now held the Royal National Mòd on two occasions, embracing our Gaelic heritage to listen to everything that modern Gaeldom—I hope that that is a word—has to offer.

Some 8,410 visitors came to Paisley for the previous Royal National Mòd, which is a 12 per cent increase on the number who attended the previous year in Perth. It brought £1.7 million of revenue to Paisley town centre, generating £390,000 of potential future visitor spend. Perhaps our languages are part of the solution to the many challenges that we face.

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): George Adam is giving a stout account of his constituency’s place in Gaeldom, but what is the one thing in the bill that will move the dial for Gaelic? The member is talking enthusiastically about the bill, but what is it that will move the dial in favour of Gaelic?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: George Adam, I will give you the time back for the two interventions.

George Adam: Thank you, Presiding Officer. The important part is that we are talking about it. Gaeldom is here, in the centre of the Scottish Government and the Parliament. We are also talking about Scots being given legal status as a language. That is an important thing for us all to look at, surely.

I will continue the positivity. I have some frustrations, and some of those frustrations will be in ma ain mither tongue of Scots. Language is fluid; it is alive and continually grows. Liam Kerr referred to defining Scots earlier. That might be how we differ. During the evidence sessions, committee colleagues said that there was a problem with defining what the Scots language is.

Is it the colourful language of the west of Scotland, the Doric of the north-east, or the more academic proper Scots of literature?

As I said, I spent most of my childhood being told not to speak in Scots at any stage. My mother also warned me about the demon drink, and that did not work out well for her, either. This is a very long way of me saying that, in my opinion, it is all Scots. That includes DC Thomson's "The Broons" and "Oor Wullie", because they are an important part of our culture.

I want to hear the voice of my community in art and drama. The Deputy First Minister and I attended a cultural event recently, and she joked about there being even more drama in Paisley. Although there is quite a lot of drama in the great town of Paisley, I would be quite happy to have more drama based there.

All I want is for us to get over ourselves a bit and to embrace the many variations of our vibrant and extremely expressive Scots language. I am pleased that the Scottish Government has a Scots language policy and that Scots features prominently in education, publishing and the arts, but we still need to work to ensure that all our voices are heard. I appreciate that the bill will be the first time that we give Scots legal status, but we need to ensure that our language remains alive and vibrant and an important part of our nation.

I welcome the bill and how it treats Scotland's languages. It is important that we embrace our past, while looking to the future. If we do not do that, what is the point of all of us in the chamber? Who are we as a people? Never again do I want any man, woman or child to feel embarrassed by their use of language, or the language that they use. We are better than that. Who would not want to describe themselves in the colourful language of Scotland?

15:10

Tim Eagle (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I commend the Deputy First Minister for opening the debate in Gaelic. When we speak about languages, it is really important for those who can to speak them in the Parliament. I have also always been an advocate for foreign languages in our schools.

In advance of giving my thoughts, I am keen to reflect on the fact that my predecessor, Donald Cameron, would have loved to have taken part in the debate. He would, no doubt, have responded in Gaelic. He would have loved to have scrutinised the bill and he would have enthusiastically participated in its progress through the Parliament. He would also have relished the opportunity to highlight his personal passion for Gaelic, given that it is the language of his forefathers and that,

to this day, he remains committed to its survival and growth.

Kate Forbes: I will take any excuse to put on record my appreciation for Donald Cameron. We always sought to work together to ensure that Gaelic did not become overly politicised by any party. I hope that he can continue in his mission of championing Gaelic cross-party.

Tim Eagle: I am absolutely sure that he will. I know from my office staff that he felt that the bill was important.

Although I do not have the same history with the Gaelic language as Donald Cameron, I share his belief that it should be preserved and promoted, not just because of its national importance as one of Scotland's indigenous languages, but because of its importance within its vernacular communities—almost all of which I represent.

As my colleague Liam Kerr said in his opening remarks, the Scottish Conservatives cautiously welcome the bill, although we share many of the concerns that were outlined by witnesses during evidence sessions at the Education, Children and Young People Committee earlier in the year. The main consideration with respect to the Gaelic language is the concern that the bill as it stands tinkers around the edges and, therefore, risks failing to address all the issues that prevent Gaelic from thriving.

During a committee evidence session, Professor Ó Giollagáin of the University of the Highlands and Islands stated that the bill

"is a rebureaucratisation of the existing set-up, and, as the crisis emerged under the existing set-up, the only way out of the crisis is radical change, and the bill does not amount to radical change."

He went on to argue that it would be better to

"halt the process as it is and redraft the bill with a view towards addressing the social issues, rather than placing an emphasis on schools and the symbolic value of Gaelic."—[*Official Report, Education, Children and Young People Committee*, 1 May 2024; c 30, 31.]

Although I would never go as far as to advocate starting from scratch, I believe that that position should certainly give members food for thought, as should the fact that substantial amendments would be needed should the Parliament pass the bill at stage 1.

However, it was difficult to disagree with much of the evidence that the professor put forward, especially his view that much more emphasis is needed on addressing the social factors that prevent the growth of the Gaelic language. That was a key recommendation of the report, "The Gaelic Crisis in the Vernacular Community", which was published in 2019 and of which the professor was a lead author.

Others have already touched on the findings of the 2022 census, which showed that there was an increase in the number of people who have some Gaelic skills. However, that is a far cry from what is needed to ensure the language's long-term future. During a committee evidence session, Professor McLeod of the University of Edinburgh urged a note of caution about the census, which others have picked up on, as, prior to the release of its findings on languages, he stated that the census was a crude instrument. While the aforementioned headline figure might show some positive signs, the fact that the number of people who speak, read and write in Gaelic has increased by only just over 11,000 people in a decade—a third of whom live in Glasgow and Edinburgh—shows that the current policy is not delivering the results that are expected or needed, especially in the Gaelic heartlands.

I turn to the role of the Gaelic board, which came under some scrutiny during the evidence sessions. The Scottish Government has proposed that the board will no longer have responsibility for producing the national Gaelic plan or for providing statutory guidance on Gaelic education. That was broadly welcomed by those who gave evidence to the committee, with the general view being that such changes will mean that the national Gaelic strategy will receive more prominence, and that they will ensure that public institutions take their responsibilities for promoting the Gaelic language more seriously. I understand that the changes have also been broadly accepted by the board and that, in return, the board will receive new reporting powers. However, the fact that responsibility for developing the national strategy for the Gaelic language and Gaelic education will be removed from the board begs a question about the board's purpose in the future.

We must ensure that we get the bill right, because it has implications not just for the future of the Gaelic language but, importantly for me, for the communities where Gaelic remains a working language. Tackling rural depopulation is one of my driving missions as an MSP, and ensuring that we have a thriving Gaelic language in the vernacular communities is one of several ways to halt the depopulation trend in those areas. That means that the Government must meet people, where they are, in those communities who have real and practical solutions to offer. At present, they feel that they do not have a voice in such debates.

More work is needed on the bill to ensure not only that it is fit to address the challenges that it seeks to address but that it receives wide support from the communities that it will most impact. On the Gaelic language in particular, the Parliament has talked a lot about strategies and planning, but advocates of the language want meaningful

action. That is what we need to achieve, and I look forward to playing my part in that.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Emma Roddick, who joins us remotely.

15:16

Emma Roddick (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): I start by thanking the Deputy First Minister for meeting me earlier this month to discuss some potential ways to improve the bill.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Ms Roddick, can I halt you there? There is something up with your microphone or with the way that the sound is playing out in the chamber. The sound is coming out through our headphones.

If you resume now, we will see whether that is any better.

Emma Roddick: Okay. Can you hear me now?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The sound is still coming through our headphones rather than through the chamber speakers.

Emma Roddick: I have tried turning off the interpretation, in case that is the problem.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The sound is now coming through both, but better than it just coming through our headphones.

Emma Roddick: Are you happy with it coming through both?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That is much better. If you could start again, Ms Roddick, that would be very helpful.

Emma Roddick: I thank the Deputy First Minister for meeting me earlier this month to discuss some potential ways that the bill could be improved. I realise that I am pushing at a doras fosgailte with her, but I believe that there are opportunities that could be taken to strengthen the bill, particularly in relation to Gaelic.

As we have discussed, there should be an obligation on local authorities to designate areas where there is a high proportion of Gaelic speakers; it should not just be an expectation or an option that is open to them. I am not pointing at any particular local authority when I say this, and I also include the Scottish Government, but we must recognise that those areas have, so far, not had the support that they need. We cannot allow that to continue by making designation optional. The bar of more than 20 per cent of the population speaking Gaelic is high, as it stands, and I cannot imagine a reasonable excuse for not designating an area with so many Gaelic speakers as an area of linguistic significance.

The mandate must also account for smaller areas than local authority areas or even wards, because although not the whole Highland Council area, where I live, is at 20 per cent, there are certainly places within the local authority area that are. I would expect that Skye, or at least part of Skye, would be designated as significant, as well as islands in Argyll and Bute, even if Inverness and Oban are not.

Similarly, I am sure that clarification on, or even an expansion of, the public bodies that are required to produce and implement Gaelic language plans would be welcomed by the community, especially when such bodies operate in areas of linguistic significance. Gaelic should be normal and visible, especially in areas where there is already a significant population of speakers.

It is not unreasonable to expect to be able to access Gaelic services in a Gaelic-speaking area. For that, we require clearer and enforced consequences when public bodies do not fulfil their obligations. I will keep on speaking with the Deputy First Minister about what kinds of enforcement or incentives could be adopted.

Secondly, I want to restate, as I did years back at the launch of the consultation for the bill, the need to continue to recognise British Sign Language as one of Scotland's official languages. I understand the intention of the bill and the reason for focusing on Scots and Gaelic. However, I will continue to engage with the Deputy First Minister on whether the recognition that BSL deserves could be ensured through the next stages.

The resident Gael in my office, Rory Cormack, as well as providing translations for me and for constituents who want to correspond in Gaelic, which I always welcome, provides a really helpful insight as somebody who, unlike me, is a fluent speaker. I was not taught Gaelic growing up, nor was I encouraged to learn it. My mother, although she was not against Gaelic, was keen that I learn French when I was given the option, because she felt that it would open up more opportunities and be more useful to me.

I regret that, but I also know from Rory that a person's having Gaelic when they are growing up does not mean that they keep it. He has reflected that, despite learning Gaelic in secondary school, which he left only four years ago, he does not now have the same opportunities to practise, and feels that his Gaelic skills are declining as a result, even in a role where Gaelic is encouraged by his boss. Although I always encourage any constituents who would prefer to engage with my office in Gaelic to do so, they should also know that, by doing so, they are giving both Rory and me a very welcome opportunity to practise.

It is important to recognise the limits of Gaelic schooling as a solution, but it is also important to support Gaelic schools. I know from speaking with colleagues in the City of Edinburgh Council that waiting lists there are incredible, and the same is true in the Highlands and Islands. Communities should have the right to request a stand-alone Gaelic school where there is sufficient demand: Oban is a good example of that situation, although it is far from the only one.

I was glad to hear the Deputy First Minister speak about Sabhal Mòr Ostaig. I have already spoken with her officials about ensuring support for the school and what it offers, which nowhere else does. It is known as "the national centre for Gaelic language and culture", but it might as well be called "the earth centre for Gaelic language and culture". I look forward to further conversations ahead of stage 2 about what role the bill could play in supporting Sabhal Mòr Ostaig to grow and keep providing what it does to learners, and to recognise the huge role that it plays. Its loss or a limit on its ambition would be a huge blow to the language, so I hope to continue conversations about what support it could receive from the Scottish Government. For example, it could establish itself as a small specialist institute and have its contribution acknowledged in law.

I will finish by saying that I have loved exploring the Gaelic language since taking up my role as a Highlands and Islands MSP. I have been learning new words, opening meetings in Gaelic where I can, and picking up on syntax that I recognise from my Highland words and turns of phrase. However, I am gutted that I did not learn Gaelic in school and that I am not yet fluent, so I want to make sure that other Highlanders are actively encouraged to learn and to find joy in the language as early as possible. It certainly should not be the case that any young person who wishes to learn Gaelic cannot access Gaelic-medium education. If we are falling at that hurdle, we are falling far too early.

Gaelic is a rich language and is part of a rich culture. It is also an indispensable part of Scottish culture, but there is a real threat of losing it, as things stand. I look forward to voting for the bill's general principles and to working with the Deputy First Minister to help the bill to go as far as it can to protect Gaelic.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, Ms Roddick. I apologise again for the audio issues at the start of your contribution.

15:23

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): Language is a means of communication and a vehicle to socialise, work and live, but fewer and

fewer people are using Gaelic to do that, which is a real concern. Until now, try as we might, we have failed to turn that tide; therefore we have to do something different. Sadly, the bill does not deliver any change, and it certainly does not deliver the change that Gaelic communities need.

We need to fight the situation on two fronts. First, we need to protect the Gaelic-speaking communities—communities that use Gaelic daily. Those communities are in perpetual decline and are largely ignored by Government policy. People who speak Gaelic are not Gaelic language activists any more than those of us who speak English are English language activists. They communicate in Gaelic, but that is it. They do not question why. It is simply how they communicate—yet, without them, Gaelic dies.

The census has been hailed as being encouraging and improved numbers of people who have Gaelic skills. I would tick the box as a learner, yet I am not delivering this speech in Gaelic. I could not. We need to measure the number of fluent speakers and to gauge success by increasing that number. If we count having Gaelic skills as a success, we totally miss the point and fool ourselves into believing that past interventions have been successful. They have not: indeed, the increase in people having Gaelic skills could be down to Duolingo alone.

We are losing Gaelic-speaking communities because of the economy, demographics and societal issues. The communities where Gaelic is spoken are under threat. There is a lack of jobs, homes and services—the things that we need to make it possible to live there. We can add to that the ferries that do not run. Such things all impact on Gaelic. People are forced from their communities, and Gaelic-speaking communities become diluted or fail altogether to survive.

People move to communities where Gaelic is no longer used as a means of communication, so their linguistic skills weaken and their language is not passed on to future generations. The issues that cause depopulation are the same issues that undermine Gaelic. Neither can be addressed by bringing in new people; rather we need to tackle the societal problems that force people out. We need opportunities that will allow young people to stay. They need homes, jobs and a future.

The upsurge in the number of second homes and holiday homes also plays its part. It is an act of omission rather than an act of commission.

The research in “The Gaelic Crisis in the Vernacular Community” shows the decline, but it also offers solutions including Gaelic development and sociolinguistic planning—*urras na Gàidhlig*. The Government must first act to create the

conditions that help those communities to survive and act against the threats.

Secondly, we need to provide education, but we have often offered education as the only solution, rather than as part of the solution. At the weekend, I read with interest Rhoda Meek’s piece in *The National*, where she highlights how some of the actions that have been taken to preserve Gaelic have actually had the opposite effect. She says:

“Gaelic speakers should be able to see things in their own language without always allowing for people who are learning or without always seeing the English next to it.”

She explains that all Gaelic TV has subtitles burned into it and there is no ability to switch them on and off. She goes on to make the point that

“the teaching and learning of Gaelic should not always come at the expense of the existing speakers. And too often, it does.”

I agree with her.

John Mason: On the point about seeing Gaelic, does the member think that more could be done with road signs? When I am in Wales, I see many more road signs in Welsh than I see even in the north of Scotland in Gaelic.

Rhoda Grant: Road signs are to be welcomed but are often the only thing that Transport Scotland does for the promotion of Gaelic. Too often, we ask Government bodies to produce Gaelic plans that just gather dust over the years, only for them to be renewed, again. We have to do more. Providing things in Gaelic is fine, but it cannot just stop there. That is tokenistic at best and it does not encourage people to speak, understand and communicate in their language. We need to look at that very carefully to see how we build on the things that are to be welcomed but, in themselves, do not really make the change that we need.

We also need to cater for speakers, and that is missing from the bill. The focus on education is missing the crucial element of Gaelic speakers themselves. On education, the bill does not provide the right to Gaelic education, and that is something that Gaelic activists have asked for.

Kate Forbes: Will Rhoda Grant take an intervention?

Rhoda Grant: Will I get some time back, Deputy Presiding Officer?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You will if the intervention is brief.

Kate Forbes: That is an area that I, too, am very exercised about, and we have been exploring it. One of the things that Rhoda Grant will appreciate is that, for good reason, enshrining certain rights in law often bumps up against equalities legislation. The example that she cited

is one in which we have to be careful and to explore with legal minds how we can give effect to it without creating more problems.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Please begin to conclude, Ms Grant.

Rhoda Grant: We need to give effect to that, because I know of Gaelic communities in which pupils cannot even access a Gaelic language education course, in school, let alone access education in the medium of Gaelic. That is wrong, because the default position for Gaelic-speaking communities should surely be that we provide education through the medium of Gaelic and provide English units for those who want them.

The Scottish Labour Party has published our policy paper on Gaelic, and we are clear that we need to protect and build Gaelic-speaking communities. That takes hard work in delivering services and providing homes and jobs. Arthur Cormack's short-life working group drew many of the same conclusions and, prior to that, the very stark reality was published in "The Gaelic Crisis in the Vernacular Community". Sadly, none of those findings is reflected in the bill, and that needs to change at stage 2.

15:31

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): As co-convenor of the cross-party group on the Scots language, and as a long-standing proponent of the Scots language, I welcome the fact that we have now reached the stage 1 debate on the Scottish Languages Bill.

At the outset, I thank the cabinet secretary for her engagement in meeting me and other members last week, and for her commitment to continuing to work on a cross-party basis to ensure that we get the bill right for all of Scotland's Scots and Gaelic speakers. I also thank the Open University in Scotland and all the members of the Scots language cross-party group for their engagement regarding the bill. I welcome Dr Sylvia Warnecke to the public gallery of the chamber—thank you for being here.

Just on Saturday, I attended the Scots language awards in Cumnock's toon hall. The breadth of talent and the dedication and commitment to preparing, shaping and advancing Scots were absolutely clear. That there is so much love for our Scots language was so evident in the performances and the words of the presenters at the awards on Saturday. Hands Up for Trad and everyone involved deserve huge recognition for that.

Today, I will focus my comments on the areas in which I would like the bill to be strengthened. One of the key policy objectives of the bill is

"to provide further support for the Scots language and improve its status, profile and use ... in public life"

and in our diverse communities, with the many variants of Scots that are spoken in those communities. A lot of work is already being done in the areas of housing and transport, which was mentioned in evidence at the Education, Children and Young People Committee. I think that the Deputy First Minister said earlier that, for example, when we build new housing, the street names could be named using Scots or Gaelic words, so that we can further enhance awareness and put the language out there right in everybody's face when they drive into their new street.

The Scottish Government has consistently recognised that the Scots language is an important part of Scotland's heritage, culture and national identity, but it is fair to say that the recognition could go further. A key discussion point that is consistently brought up at the cross-party group and by those who are involved in the Scots community is the need to tackle the stigma and discrimination that Scots speakers face. I have experienced that myself, and I know that other people have, too. When growing up, like many others, we would often be told to speak English, to speak properly and to stop speaking slang, and we hear that such comments are still prevalent today.

To highlight that stigma and discrimination, I note that, last year, when I invited prominent Scots author and broadcaster Billy Kay to present Parliament's time for reflection in Scots, there was a huge backlash of negativity on social media. I therefore welcome the statement in section 26 of the bill that the Scots language will receive "official status in Scotland." It is the first time that legislation has made a statement about the status of the Scots language.

Liam Kerr: Will Emma Harper take an intervention?

Stephen Kerr *rose*—

Emma Harper: Just in a wee second.

I would welcome further discussion with the cabinet secretary about how we can push that provision further to tackle the discrimination and stigma that those speakin their native Scots tongue face.

Liam Kerr: The bill does not define "official status". How would the member define it?

Emma Harper: I would like to use amendments at stage 2 to explore the issue of defining what the Scots language is. There are umbrella terms. In his evidence to the committee, Bruce Eunson said that the umbrella term "Scots" includes variants from across Scotland that differ depending on whether you are in Stranraer or Stromness. As we

move forward, we could look at how the bill could further define the language. That point was also included in the evidence submitted by Time for Inclusive Education.

Stephen Kerr: Will the member accept an intervention?

Emma Harper: I need to carry on.

Section 27 of the bill requires the Scottish ministers to

“prepare a Scots language strategy”

and sets out the required content of that strategy, along with the consultation and publication requirements and timescales for its preparation, review and revision. The provision in the bill to prepare that strategy will give importance to those priorities and to the work that Scots bodies and other authorities do to make progress on them.

I have a couple more points to make. Section 31 of the bill requires the Scottish ministers to

“promote, facilitate and support Scots language education in schools”,

which means that education authorities must also do that in the schools that they manage. There have already been some fantastic examples of that in Dumfries and Galloway, including at Troqueer primary school in Dumfries.

In preparing that guidance, the Scottish ministers must consult interested persons, who might include, for example, the Scots Language Centre—which has already been mentioned—Scots Hoose or Yaldi Books. That work will ensure that young people are exposed to Scots from an early age, and it should help to tackle some of the stigma surrounding the Scots language.

I have one ask—this issue was raised by the Open University—which is that the bill should place a statutory duty on public bodies in relation to their use of Scots, as is already the case for Gaelic. I would welcome further discussion of that with the cabinet secretary.

It is right that we are now providing greater recognition of the Scots language in education. As I said to the cabinet secretary, the bill is important in recognising how the history, heritage and culture of all our communities relate to Scots. I will support the bill at stage 1, and I look forward to working with the cabinet secretary as we move forward.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I gently remind members who want to make an intervention that it would be helpful if they could press the appropriate button. That will not guarantee that their intervention is taken, but it certainly helps those who are joining us online.

15:37

Foysoil Choudhury (Lothian) (Lab): Gaelic and Scots are part of the historical and cultural fabric of this country. It is estimated that some form of Gaelic has been spoken in Scotland since the fourth century. Gaelic is in our songs and place names and our national bard wrote in Scots, but those languages are not confined to history and culture. They are living and are used daily across Scotland, but they must be supported if they are to thrive.

Gaelic, in particular, is in a worrying state. A study by the University of the Highlands and Islands warned that it could die as a living language within decades. Although the number of people with some understanding of Gaelic has risen, according to the most recent census, the number of people who speak it in the Western Isles, where it is used most, has fallen.

The struggle of the Gaelic language, despite Government initiatives over the years, is linked to many other issues that members have raised today. A lack of job opportunities in Gaelic-speaking areas and of suitable housing in rural and island communities means that people who grow up speaking Gaelic have no choice but to leave. Much of the housing in those areas is older and less energy efficient, which makes living there more expensive. Those issues all tie in with the wider depopulation that is taking place in rural Scotland.

We have to get this right, so the current scope of the bill is disappointing. It focuses largely on education, but the challenges that are faced by Gaelic and Scots are multifaceted. Of course, a bill cannot be everything at once, but we must recognise the issues.

Stakeholders have welcomed the proposed creation of Scots and Gaelic strategies, but we must work to ensure that ministers are able to create strategies that are genuinely consequential. Earlier this year, the First Minister said that the Scottish Government published too many strategies and that it should focus on delivery. Currently, however, Gaelic and Scots strategies will not even be delivered until 2028. We cannot afford to waste time.

Expanding access to education is undoubtedly important. Last week, my colleague Michael Marra and I met Sabhal Mòr Ostaig—a Gaelic college based in Skye. We were told that although many students receive part of their education in Gaelic, they lose out as they move on to other education providers who cannot give lessons in Gaelic. Ensuring the provision of Gaelic education in primary and secondary schools as well as in further education is key to ensuring that the language has a strong future.

However, education will mean little if young people cannot find a home or a job in areas where their language is spoken.

Liam Kerr: I do not necessarily disagree with the member's remarks, but he talks about the need for more teachers in order for Gaelic to be taught. Where is he going to get the teachers from?

Foyso Choudhury: I will leave it for the Scottish Government to tell us where the teachers will come from, because there are shortages of teachers in every sector.

The bill also contains provisions to give local authorities the power to designate areas of linguistic significance. The proposed recognition of areas where Gaelic is spoken is welcome, but the bill is light on details of what that will entail. The financial memorandum states that there will be no costs associated with the bill. The bill proposes that ministers be given powers to create standards and requirements for education authorities in relation to Gaelic, but the responsibilities to be placed on local authorities should be clarified. We must not have another bill that gives more responsibilities to councils that are already struggling, but which does not give them the resources to meet those additional responsibilities.

Gaelic and Scots should not be reserved for train signs and tourists. They are living languages, but they face threats from many different directions. At present, the bill does not account for those threats, but we must not miss this opportunity to safeguard Scottish culture. I hope that Scottish Labour can work with other parties to amend the bill to ensure that it responds to the pressing challenges that Gaelic and Scots face.

15:43

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): I will follow the lead of my colleague Liam Kerr and vote for the bill at stage 1, but Foyso Choudhury hit the nail on the head when he talked about the lack of any consequential strategies coming out of this Government. Therein lies my number 1 concern about the bill. I believe that, despite efforts by SNP members to argue the contrary, much of what we see in the bill is symbolic. George Adam could not name a single thing that pertains to the bill that would make a tangible difference to what actually happens. It is making that difference that really matters.

I am completely up front in saying that I support the foundational principle of the bill, which is about securing the viability of Gaelic. I compliment the Deputy First Minister, because her comments to the committee about the importance of Gaelic continuing to be spoken, which are featured in the report, were eloquently made. I also support the

desire and the right of Gaelic speakers to live their lives entirely using the Gaelic language if they want to do so. However, when the Deputy First Minister says that she hopes that the bill will achieve that, I think that she is being overly optimistic, because I cannot see how.

I therefore thank my colleagues on the Education, Children and Young People Committee for their report on the bill. They get to the nub of many of the issues, and we should all take note of their concerns, not the least of which was the unwillingness of local authorities and public bodies, including the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives and Senior Managers, to come to the committee to give evidence. That concerns me, as it has concerned the members of the committee, because, given the duties that will be placed on those bodies by the bill, it would have been advantageous to all of us, as lawmakers, to have heard evidence from them.

What will change if the bill becomes legislation? I do not doubt the good intentions of the Deputy First Minister—I think that she knows that I respect her enormously—nor, indeed, those of the Scottish Government, in producing the bill. However, frankly, it reads like any other framework bill that has come before the Parliament this session. It will lay obligations on ministers, local authorities and public bodies that will not move the dial one bit.

I am looking for tangible deliverables. I cannot see anything in the bill that comes remotely close to one of those. We are cramming the statute book with ever more framework bills that are nebulous. We need to get much more specific. There is no need for us as a Parliament to go on producing ever more legislation that adds to the statute book but lies unimplemented because it is unimplementable.

The bill places additional responsibilities on local authorities in particular, at a time when there are huge pressures on the public finances. On behalf of the committee, Sue Webber described the limitations of the financial memorandum. If the SNP Government gives local authorities licence to increase council tax in the coming year by double-digit percentages, there will still be a paucity of funding for councils to carry out even the most basic services. I do not think that the Deputy First Minister wants a bill to support the Gaelic language to be yet another of the tick-box exercises for which her SNP Government has become renowned.

Kate Forbes: I agree with Stephen Kerr that I do not want such a thing. The issue weighs heavily on my shoulders and, indeed, on those of everybody in this room. I reference again my open invitation to his colleagues that, in advance of stage 2, there will be an opportunity for

amendment, to ensure that the bill has the confidence of every member.

Stephen Kerr: I appreciate not only what the Deputy First Minister says but where she is coming from, and I think that she will find colleagues across the parties who are willing to work with her on that basis.

I turn to the Scots language. Frankly, I am with Liam Kerr, because I do not believe that there is only one Scots language. The committee report highlights time and again that there are so many variants and dialects of Scots that to talk about a single Scots language does not reflect the real-life experiences of any of us. The Scots language is, fundamentally, an oral tradition, and is highly localised. My wife comes from Ayr and I come from Angus, and we use completely different Scots words and phrases for the same thing. We have always enjoyed that aspect of our language, and we celebrate it.

Emma Harper: My understanding is that the language of the Parliament in Scotland was Scots right up to the 16th century; then it was decided that it should be Latin. It is not an oral tradition. Will Stephen Kerr not consider the history and the heritage of the evolution of the Scots language?

Stephen Kerr: I say to Emma Harper that we are living in not the 16th century but the 21st. I am talking about the experience of the people who live in Scotland today. The Scots language thrives because it is an oral tradition. It is part of the celebration of our Scottishness and, frankly, it is enjoyable because of that. The fact that it is an oral tradition really matters. *[Interruption.]* Emma Harper is shouting at me. She is welcome to interject again if she wishes to.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: No, she is not, because we are running out of time, Mr Kerr.

Stephen Kerr: I had a look at the Scots language version of the committee's report. We do ourselves no favours by spending taxpayers' money in creating such documents, which I do not believe for one minute that people are going to read other than to mock. I do not like that. We can get a pretty clear idea of what someone is speaking about when we listen to them speak in their local variant of Scots, but writing it changes its nature, making it—to my mind—a bit laboured and bogus.

Let us ensure that we are doing the right things to underpin the take-up of Gaelic, and not turn people away from it by imposing it in places where it is not even a tenth language. We should not be plastering public buildings, signs and vehicles with Gaelic in areas where it was never traditionally spoken. That only creates irritation among the public about their taxes being pointlessly spent.

Emma Harper: Will the member take an intervention?

Stephen Kerr: I wish I could, but I cannot. If we are going to take the bill further—and I think that we will—stages 2 and 3 need to properly refine the bill. If we cannot properly define or measure desired outcomes or be realistic about how the bill will be funded, we should go back to the drawing board.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We have no time in hand, so members will have to stick to their speaking allocations from now on.

15:50

Bill Kidd (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP): As the Parliament celebrates its 25th anniversary, we look back to the many achievements during the past quarter of a century. Almost 20 years ago, back in 2005, when I—and many others in here—were but youngsters, the Parliament passed the Gaelic Language (Scotland) Act 2005. Members can have a wee laugh to themselves, at least.

There were many contributions that day, not only in English but in Gaelic, too. However, members will be glad to hear that I will not subject them to any rusty Gaelic today. Back in 2005, our then colleague Alex Neil welcomed the passing of the act, saying that we could be proud that

“the Scottish Parliament has rectified decades, if not centuries, of neglect of a key part of Scotland's past and heritage.”—*[Official Report, 21 April 2005; c 16344.]*

Today, I feel the same. Today, I welcome the introduction of the Scottish Languages Bill, which seeks to emphasise that Gaelic and Scots are a significant part of Scotland's culture and to ensure that they thrive and grow. The bill is more than a legislative step; it is a cultural commitment and a recognition that Scotland's rich linguistic heritage deserves our full attention and support.

Our nation's identity is woven not only through the land and its history but through its words, languages and voices. Today, we take a step towards preserving and celebrating those voices. For centuries, Scotland has been a multilingual country. Gaelic, Scots and English are not only methods of communication but threads that bind us to our past, connect us to one other and give us a sense of belonging. They are the languages of our poetry, our stories, our communities and our traditions.

With this bill, we look to the future. We look to protect and nurture our rich heritage for future generations. The bill, at its heart, seeks to ensure that our Scottish languages are not left to wither away or be relegated to the margins of society.

Liam Kerr: If the bill seeks to achieve that, does the member think that it will?

Bill Kidd: The bill is at stage 1, and it is a start towards advancing our cause to bring Scots and Gaelic back into everyday use. Yes, I think that it will make that difference. It is the beginning, but it is an important beginning.

The bill seeks to make certain that Gaelic and Scots get the recognition, support and promotion that they deserve, not only in our rural areas or specific communities but throughout Scotland. By doing so, we acknowledge that our languages are not historical relics but living and breathing parts of our modern culture. It is often said that to lose a language is to lose a part of ourselves. Each language offers a unique world view and a different way of understanding our relationship to the world and to one another.

However, it is not enough to simply recognise those languages; we must actively promote and support them. The bill outlines key measures as to how we begin to do that through increased funding for language education, greater representation in public life and a commitment to ensuring that services—from healthcare to local government—are accessible in those languages.

We must ensure that the Gaelic language is not only preserved in the classroom but spoken in the community, homes and workplaces and in the media. The establishment of a national Gaelic language plan as part of the bill is a vital step. It will ensure that future generations grow up not only hearing the language but feeling empowered to speak it as part of their everyday lives.

We must continue to give Scots the respect that it deserves as a legitimate language and not a dialect or informal form of English. Scots has been the language of many of our greatest writers and thinkers, and it remains the language of many people in our communities today. The bill will provide support for Scots in education, and so help children to learn and take pride in their native tongue, as well as ensure that the language is represented in literature, media and public life.

As we consider the bill, let us think of it not merely as an administrative step but as a commitment to the future of Scotland—one in which our languages are spoken freely, our communities are connected through shared understanding and our cultural diversity is celebrated rather than diminished. I urge all members to support the bill, to stand for a multilingual Scotland and to protect the voices that have shaped—and will continue to shape—our national identity. Together, we can ensure that Scotland remains a land where all languages are spoken with pride and heard with respect.

15:55

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in the debate. I only joined the Education, Children and Young People Committee in June, so although I contributed to the wording of its final report on the bill, I was not involved in the hearing of evidence prior to that point.

I confess to not having any Gaelic and not being fluent in Scots. In fact, languages are not my strong point at all. I did get somewhere with Nepali during my three years in Nepal, but that was only because so few people there spoke any English. That tends to show that we can all learn other languages if we need to. However, for those of us who speak English, there appears to be very little need to learn them—even ones that are native to this country. I wanted to speak in the debate mainly to declare my support and enthusiasm for Scots and Gaelic, and for any help that we can give them. Whether we speak them or not, those languages are part of our national heritage and the whole country would be poorer without them.

On a positive note, there are some encouraging signs—including in the literal sense—compared with when I was younger. Just seeing more Gaelic around, such as on signs at railway stations, is helpful. For example, seeing “Sràid na Banrighinn” at Glasgow Queen Street station has helped to get those Gaelic words into my mind. The demand for Gaelic-medium education in Glasgow and beyond is also encouraging. I commend Glasgow City Council for responding to parents’ desires on that front, which includes the development of a new GME primary school in Calton in my Glasgow Shettleston constituency. A few months ago, it was encouraging for me to hear Alasdair Allan ask a question in the chamber in Gaelic and Kate Forbes respond in the same language. We want to see more of that happening.

When it comes to Scots, some of us might be comfortable using a few words, even if we could not manage a whole speech. I commend Emma Harper for suggesting words that members might use in the chamber. My father was quite keen on using Scots words. For example, I remember him coming home on a Friday evening and saying that he was “wabbit”. We currently have no local newspaper in the east end of Glasgow, so my surgery notices appear in a magazine called “Hoolit”. I am sure that everyone here knows what that means. Mind you, when it comes to accents, I sometimes struggle to understand Kevin Stewart and Jackie Dunbar when they get going, whatever language they might be using.

Some people would say that Gaelic is a dying language, and that it brings no benefit to Scotland and should be forgotten about. However, let us remember how important our tourism sector is and

the amount of money that it brings into our economy. In the summer, I went to Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. Among other things, I wanted to see which words people used in those countries, how those words differed from each other and which ones were similar across the three languages. If people had all been using the same language—for example, Russian—that experience would not have been nearly so interesting.

Similarly, in Wales and Ireland, it is great to see the local language on display, even if virtually everyone speaks English. One of my few Welsh words is “araſ”, which I know means “slow” because it is painted all over the roads—I do not think that that is just for my benefit. However, I do not even know the Gaelic for “slow”, because I have never seen it on our roads.

Having one or more national languages can be a boost for tourism and encouraging more visitors to Scotland. The committee made a number of clear recommendations in its report, and the Scottish Government has responded to those. Perhaps not surprisingly, I will focus on the financial aspects. For example, paragraph 43 of the committee’s report noted that

“stakeholders are looking for more tangible support”.

I assume that such support would include more money, but the Government’s response does not really address that point.

Similarly, in paragraphs 122 to 125 of its report, the committee notes that the bill does not provide funding for local authorities in relation to designating an area of linguistic significance. The Scottish Government’s response says that several authorities

“are making their own funding decisions”

and that the Government

“will continue to do what it can to support authority initiatives.”

I take the point—I think that the committee does, too—that some current funding can perhaps be redirected. However, there remains a concern that expanded duties are likely to require money from somewhere.

In paragraphs 279 to 283, we ask about the standards, the requirements and the associated costs. The Government’s response contains an annex, with examples of standards for illustrative purposes. Unless I am missing it, there is no mention of the costs, however.

The committee notes that a Scots language board is absent, in contrast to the board that Gaelic has, and that could put extra costs on to the Scots organisations that the Government is potentially relying on. The Government says that it

“will reflect on measures that could be considered”.

I am not entirely sure what that means, but it sounds a bit vague.

Paragraphs 487 to 491 of the committee’s report deal with the financial memorandum. The Government’s position

“that the Financial Memorandum is not a budget”

is technically correct. However, if the FM is meaningful, it is a pretty strong commitment that the budget for the relevant year will be at least what is in the FM.

I am not entirely comfortable with the phrase “wholly new costs”, which appears a number of times. The committee’s concern, and that of external organisations, is that the bill might lead to increased costs, even if they are not “wholly new”. Therefore, if a local authority is currently spending £500 on a particular issue, say, and the cost goes up to £1,000, that £1,000 would not be “wholly new costs”, but the amount would be increased, and it would be partly old and partly new money.

Sue Webber: Just to give some background on the “wholly new costs”, the intention is that, right now, money is being spent on Gaelic provision, and the costs would not be “wholly new”; they would be in addition to the costing. I hope that that helps.

John Mason: I understand that point, but we could perhaps come up with some different wording. Both the Government and the committee were using that phrase. Anyway, I accept that I was new to the discussion, and I did not have all the history.

The committee accepts that finances are very tight at present, but there is a concern that the bill will raise expectations that cannot be delivered on current budgets.

Having said all that, I very much support the principles of the bill, and I hope that it will pass at stage 1. There should be plenty of opportunity for amendments at stage 2.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): We move to closing speeches.

16:02

Ross Greer: I said in my opening speech that I hoped that this afternoon’s debate would bring up some of the questions about the bill that needed resolved, and some of the potential solutions. I think that it has mostly done that, and I have enjoyed the debate—with just one exception. Members made some very positive contributions.

There are a couple of points that I wish to address. I do not agree with Liam Kerr’s position on Scots, but I think that he was right to raise the submission from the Law Society of Scotland on

definitions. I would say, however, that we do not define what English is in law, and the definition of Gaelic in law under the 2005 act is

“the Gaelic language as used in Scotland”,

so I do not see the reason why we would need to hold Scots to a completely different standard from our two other national languages.

It grates a bit for me when some argue that the range of other social ills that we face means that we should not be prioritising the two languages. After centuries of decline, deliberate marginalisation and attempts at annihilation of both languages, when should we start prioritising them? When Gaelic is facing an existential threat, how much longer should we wait before we start prioritising it? This is absolutely the right time. The right time was 20 years ago or 200 years ago, but the second most appropriate time is most certainly now.

I have much more sympathy with Michael Marra's points about the financial memorandum. That connects to some of the evidence that we heard that legislation is not really what is needed, or it is certainly not the major missing piece of the puzzle. We heard that community development and youth work, for example, are absolutely essential, but we cannot ignore the financial picture. We know that significant amounts of additional investment are not going to be forthcoming any time soon, and there are areas of the challenge that we can resolve through legislation.

The cabinet secretary reflected on the progress made over the past 40 years, and she was absolutely right to do so. There has been lots of achievement. Forty years on, however, Gaelic is under existential threat today, so it is hard to say that the past 40 years has been a success overall. It is to the credit of so many people who have worked so hard that the situation is not much worse than it is, but we need to recognise that the language faces an existential crisis.

The community is looking for much more tangible support. I understand that it is not always legally possible to act on some proposals, particularly around education—as the cabinet secretary mentioned in response to Rhoda Grant—but also around areas such as housing. There is a tricky interaction with equality law here.

I would like to detail a couple of further potential amendments to the bill that the Greens are considering lodging. The first concerns section 2(2)(c)—and I quite like what it adds. That paragraph adds new subsections to the 2005 act outlining that, in its functions,

“the Bòrd must ... as is both appropriate in the circumstances and reasonably practicable ... seek to give

effect ... to the principle that the Gaelic and English languages”

should be treated with

“equal respect.”

That is not repeated throughout the rest of the bill. I would like that to be mirrored in other relevant sections, particularly the section on the strategy, because the principle of equal respect is important and that section is particularly well drafted and could be replicated elsewhere.

I also ask the Government to consider strengthening the section on remedies when there is a failure of a public body to implement the duties placed on it. If the Government accepts the Bòrd's conclusions that a public body has failed in those duties, it can direct remedial action or lay a report before Parliament, but surely if the Scottish Government has already agreed that a public body has failed to meet the duties that are set out in law, it must direct that body to act, so I am not sure why that is optional.

I welcome section 13(2), which moves responsibility for provision of Gaelic education guidance from the Bòrd to ministers. I hope that that will raise the status of that guidance, because we are all well aware that there are real challenges with compliance with the guidance that has been produced by the Bòrd. However, again, that section can be stronger. It gives the Scottish Government the option of providing that guidance, which, by my reading, means that it has the option of not providing it, so I would like to replace the word “may” with “shall”. I do not think that that is onerous for the Government. That would safeguard against any future Government losing focus on the matter.

On a similar theme, the Law Society of Scotland points out that the bill includes no sanction for non-compliance or, indeed, provision for appeal for a public body that wants to challenge the Bòrd's conclusions. I think that both those issues need to be addressed, and I agree with Emma Roddick on the need to strengthen and clarify that section. Both carrots and sticks can be used in such situations.

Areas of linguistic significance feel like a good idea, but to what end? The committee has asked for greater clarity on that, and, again, the provision could be strengthened by amendment. There is a danger of it being a tick-box exercise or of it being an imposition rather than a community-led process. Ruth Maguire made that point very effectively on a number of occasions throughout stage 1 evidence gathering.

The education sections of the bill have been pretty broadly welcomed. Emma Harper cited some excellent examples of what is already happening in the area, but further clarity is needed

in the bill. The Bòrd and His Majesty's Inspectorate of Education have asked for clarity on the relationship between this piece of work and the on-going education reform programme, particularly in relation to inspections and the question of enforcement.

The Greens will support the bill, but we are worried that what is in front of us is, as I said earlier, the result of the logic that something must be done, so we have done something. We want to work with the Government to go further, and we welcome the cabinet secretary's outreach on that. The word "transformational" was used a number of times in evidence gathering and was used again this afternoon in the cabinet secretary's opening remarks. No one believes that the bill that is in front of us will result in the kind of transformation that most, if not all, of us want.

The bill alone was never going to do that, but there are areas of this challenge that can be solved only through legislation, and we cannot wait another 20 years for another go. I look forward to working on a cross-party basis to get the bill right.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Pam Duncan-Glancy to close on behalf of Scottish Labour. Ms Duncan-Glancy joins us remotely. You have up to six minutes.

16:08

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab): The needs of the Gaelic language and Gaelic communities have, of course, developed since Scottish Labour's—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Ms Duncan-Glancy, could you please pause for a second? We are having problems with the sound. Thank you.

Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. The sound is coming through members' headphones.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: It seems that the sound is coming through the headphones, so I ask all members—[*Interruption.*]

I am advised that the broadcast unit would rather fix the problem. I am sorry about this, Ms Duncan-Glancy—please be patient with us and we will get there.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: No problem, Presiding Officer.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Ms Duncan-Glancy, could you please give us a test run? If you say a few words, we can see whether the sound is now working.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: I will. Does it work now? Is that better?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Perfect. Thank you. I invite you to start your remarks from the top.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: Thank you, Presiding Officer.

The needs of the Gaelic language and of Gaelic communities have, of course, developed since Scottish Labour's Gaelic Language (Scotland) Act 2005, which we are particularly proud of, was passed, and we need legislation that reflects that change. Therefore, although Scottish Labour members will vote for the bill that is before us today, it is our belief—and many others have agreed—that it does not do enough to protect the future of the Gaelic language or of Gaelic communities. The legislation's focus on education means that it is restricted in scope. Even within that focus, there are—as many members have highlighted—flaws in the bill, not least in the assumption that all of its provisions can be delivered within existing resource. That matter was raised by the committee, and Sue Webber, John Mason and other members highlighted it in their contributions today. Indeed, as my colleague Rhoda Grant set out, the bill somewhat misses the point.

My colleague Michael Marra mentioned the research by academics at the University of the Highlands and Islands that was published in 2020. The authors concluded that, without changes to policy and intervention at community level, Gaelic will not survive beyond the next decade. Yesterday, one of the authors of that research said that

"The draft Bill effectively denies the crisis"

and that it

"fails to acknowledge the evidence base indicating that these communities are at the point of societal collapse."

He went on to say that the bill offers simply

"more of the same' ... rather than the much-needed new departure to help sustain Gaelic as a community language".

While Scottish Labour believes that there is, and must be, a place for Gaelic-medium education and that it must be supported, we also agree with the concerns that have been raised that the survival of Gaelic as a living language cannot be pinned on a narrowly drawn piece of legislation. In being such, the bill offers few, if any, concrete steps to support Gaelic communities, and it is quite vague, including—as witnesses told the committee—in definitions, which lack sufficient clarity, and in the absence of effective community voice within its provisions.

I hope, therefore, that the Government will consider addressing those issues at stage 2, and I note the Deputy First Minister's commitment, given to the committee's convener today, to engage on the bill as it progresses. As I and other members

in the chamber have said, the bill requires surgery to get it to a place where it can be truly effective. I agree with Liam Kerr on that. The bill also lacks sufficient enforcement capacity—as we just heard from Ross Greer—and there is an absence of sanction or appeal provisions. All of that, coupled with the Government's own assertion that the bill does not need more resource, as it is simply “repurposing” activity, gives credence to some of the concerns of those who think that the bill lacks substance.

Although the bill endeavours to deliver change in education, the provisions in that regard need more thought. Gaelic-medium education is already struggling. In Glasgow, the region that I represent, although we are proud to have four primary schools and the only secondary school in the world teaching through the medium of Gaelic, we need a new primary school and there are limited funds to either build one from scratch or refurbish an existing property. There is also no additional resource for the cost of translating or providing learning resources, including those that are required by the SQA, such as textbooks in Gaelic.

The responsibility for that falls on Gaelic-medium schools, which puts additional time and cost demands on already overburdened and overworked teachers. On that point, a member of the parent council in Glasgow contacted me and put the issue perfectly. They said:

“There are particular responsibilities put on leadership teams in Gaelic-medium schools which are necessary to allow our children to fully access the curriculum, for example ensuring a language-rich immersion during the early years, which has to reach far beyond the classroom and the need for staff to create resources from scratch, particularly to meet the needs of all children.”

They go on to say that they have made the case that

“This should be reflected in the staffing formula”,

but they have been advised that

“any changes will need to take place at a Scotland-wide level with that then reflected in the funding allocated locally.”

The Scottish Government's financial memorandum says:

“The main impact of the Bill provisions is a shift in activity”

and

“a repurposing of resources”.

I hope, therefore, that the Government will take seriously the concerns that have been raised by those parents, and I would welcome the Deputy First Minister's response to them, and to these issues, in closing.

On a related point, the Government must also take seriously the committee's recommendation that it undertake

“a workforce planning exercise”

in that respect. I remind the cabinet secretary that this Parliament voted for the Government to publish such a comprehensive workforce plan for education.

Finally, the Scottish Government must also realise that Gaelic-medium education does not exist in isolation, as many members on all sides of the chamber have highlighted today. For Gaelic-medium education to be effective, parents and carers must also be supported to learn and use Gaelic, as Emma Roddick set out. At present, many parents and families lack fluency and are therefore unable to help their children with homework in Gaelic, so—again—it falls to the school to find that additionality.

The reality is that the bill fails to recognise the current reality and the intrinsic connection between Gaelic-medium education and the need to keep the use of the language alive in the wider community, and it fails to take account of the resource that is needed for it to be successful.

Supporting Gaelic communities and saving the Gaelic language, including through Gaelic-medium education, will need broad-ranging change that the bill does not yet deliver. I hope that the Scottish Government takes seriously my concerns—as well as those of colleagues, the committee, the community and experts—and makes the necessary changes to the bill, so that it can make the difference that is needed and retain Parliament's support.

The Gaelic community cannot afford our missing this opportunity. Today, Scottish Labour will support the bill, but much of it will need to be amended if it is truly to deliver change of the scale that is needed to protect our Gaelic communities.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, Ms Duncan-Glancy, and thank you for your patience at the start of your speech.

I call Roz McCall to close on behalf of the Scottish Conservatives. You have up to seven minutes.

16:15

Roz McCall (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I have the privilege of closing this afternoon's stage 1 debate on the Scottish Languages Bill on behalf of the Scottish Conservatives. As ever, we welcome the opportunity to engage in debate about all of Scotland's languages, and I welcome the constructive approach that members from all parties have taken.

I reiterate that we are supportive of the bill at this stage and we agree, in principle, that there should be additional focus on and support for our traditional languages. As I have said previously, my Gaelic and Scots are very limited, as are my Doric, Orcadian and Lallans. Having said that, I am a Conservative, and our whole ethos is based on tradition. Our customs and heritage play an important part in who we are, and our past informs our future. Not all that went before is bad. I believe in conserving things, particularly the culture that we all share.

I will note a couple of the interesting contributions to the debate. First, I thank the interpreter, who helped me massively to follow the opening remarks by the Deputy First Minister. Similar to John Mason, I am particularly linguistically challenged.

The Deputy First Minister talked of reversing the tide when it comes to the uptake and continued use of our Scottish languages, but it is important to recognise that we are pushing against a tsunami of social media that is all in English. I also note the Deputy First Minister's agreement that the bill, in itself, is not a solution and that further work, for which cross-party support will be needed, will come at stage 2. We Conservatives are happy to take up that offer.

My colleague Sue Webber highlighted that, due to current funding restrictions, only 39 per cent of Gaelic projects that have been applied for have received funding. Liam Kerr and Stephen Kerr expressed concerns about the bill's financial memorandum, which is an important point.

Ross Greer mentioned the need for the symbolic recognition of Scots, and I agree with him about that. However, it is important to note that Gaelic and Scots are at different stages in the legislative process, and that must be recognised. Liam Kerr's question about what the Government wants to achieve for both languages is an important one. Perhaps the Deputy First Minister will comment on that in her closing remarks.

As I have mentioned, I support our traditional languages. Scots Gaelic descended from Irish Gaelic in about 500 AD. Scots descended from northern English, with the earliest written records dating back to the 14th century, and we have different dialects within that. Orcadian is a dialect of Scots that is influenced by Old Norse. The term Lallans was traditionally used to refer to Scots as a whole, but, more recently, interpretations suggest that it refers to the dialects of central and south Scotland. Doric is a term that was also once used to refer to the Scots dialect in general, but it is now used only to refer to the mid-northern Scots dialect.

We can certainly see the adaptations and morphings of our language over the centuries, and the challenges that each language has faced, forcing change to the way that we speak and where. It is those changes that, in part, brought the Scottish Government to recognise Scots as an indigenous language of Scotland and led to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization recognising it as a vulnerable language. Gaelic, in particular, faces many challenges, and it was vital to address those threats adequately at the outset of the bill.

A number of members have mentioned those threats today, and they will not be unfamiliar to any who have read the official report on proceedings relating to Gaelic over the past 25 years. The University of the Highlands and Islands published its report "The Gaelic Crisis in the Vernacular Community" six years ago. Its findings were sobering and included that the social use and transmission of Gaelic was at the point of collapse.

According to the researchers, only 11,000 habitual speakers of Gaelic were left. There have been several initiatives to enhance Gaelic across Scotland, which should be applauded, but the truth is that they have failed to cement any sort of basis for Gaelic speaking among young people across the Highlands and Islands and beyond. The bill must not repeat the mistakes of the past—it must not become just another piece of legislation. It must have the required cut-through with both the Gaelic and Scots-speaking communities if it is going to make a difference.

I turn to the committee's stage 1 report, which supported the general principles of the bill, which are

"to provide further support for Scotland's indigenous languages, Gaelic and Scots."

Credit goes to the committee for its work. I will point to a couple of its conclusions. The committee did

"not consider that, on its own, the Bill will create the necessary conditions to address the challenges facing the Gaelic language or provide the necessary support and protection to both Gaelic and the languages and dialects that come under the term Scots."

Emma Harper: You said that Scots comes from northern English. My understanding is that Scots is a west Germanic language, so it comes from the same family as English, Dutch, Flemish, Frisian and German. I just want to make sure that I heard you correctly.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Members should always speak through the chair.

Roz McCall: I researched that. In her intervention, Emma Harper has highlighted very

well the problem with trying to define Scots, which is a very difficult process.

The committee

“believes that more needs to be done by the Scottish Government beyond what is set out in the Bill”.

It was also

“concerned by the lack of clarity within the Bill, particularly in relation to what obligations the strategies, standards and guidance ... will place on public bodies, and the associated costs of meeting such obligations.”

That is not least because the financial memorandum needs to be sufficient to fulfil the objectives, about which there is consensus across the floor.

I also note the Law Society of Scotland’s concerns, which were mentioned by my colleague Liam Kerr. In its briefing for the debate, it queried whether the definition of “the Scots language” as the “the Scots language as used in Scotland” is clear enough to take into account the regional variations within Scotland. There are legal issues involved, so we must look at that.

The committee expected the Scottish Government to come back with some clarity prior to stage 2. We, on the Conservative benches, concur—much has to be done. The bill must be more than a further promise of hope and change. We must look at the investment of further public funds in a quantitative and qualitative way and actively make a change to the use and promotion of our indigenous languages.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call the Deputy First Minister, Kate Forbes, to close on behalf of the Scottish Government.

16:23

Kate Forbes: Cha do thill Gàidhlig riamh gu coimhearsnachd far an deach a call—A’ Chomraich, Srath Narann, àiteachan ann an Loch Abar, Earra-Ghàidheal agus na h-Eileanan. Chan urrainn dhuinn a chòrr choimhearsnachdan a chall. Sin an aon amas a th’ agamsa leis a’ bhile seo agus ma tha sin ag iarraidh adhartas a dhèanamh, feumaidh sinn beachdachadh air grunn cheumannan.

Chan e, agus cha b’ e riamh, dìreach aon cheist no aon fhuasgladh a th’ ann nuair a thig e gu Gàidhlig is Albais. Tha sin soilleir bhon deasbad seo, an fharsaingeachd de dh’fhianais an fhuaras sa cho-chomhairleachadh agus na diofar chùisean air an deach coimhead ann an aithisg ìre 1. Tha iad sin uile cudromach airson an adhartais a dh’fheumas sin a dhèanamh.

Thòisich Sue Webber a’ bruidhinn mu bhuidseat. Chuala mi na thuirt a’ chomataidh agus na daoine a chur seachad ùine gus fianais a thoirt

dhan Riaghaltas. Ged a tha cuideam mòr air a’ bhuidseat againn an-dràsta, tha mi a’ tuigsinn dè cho cudromach ‘s a tha maoineachadh airson Gàidhlig agus Albais.

Ach aig an aon àm nam bheachdsa, tha na prìomhachasan aig luchd-labhairt na Gàidhlig agus na prìomhachasan aig luchd-labhairt na Beurla uaireannan an aon rud: taigheadas, bun-structair agus còmh-dhail. Bu chòir beagan den airgead a tha sinn a’ cosg air bun-structair mar sin an-dràsta a dhol nas fhaide ann an coimhearsnachdan Gàidhlig ma tha sinn airson barrachd oidhirp fhaicinn anns na coimhearsnachdan Gàidhlig traidiseanta.

Chan e dìreach maoineachadh ùr a tha a dhith oirnn—agus chuala sinn sin bho John Mason—ach a bhith a’ dèanamh cinnteach gu bheil maoineachadh a th’ anns a’ bhuidseat an-dràsta a’ dèanamh barrachd gus Gàidhlig a neartachadh anns na coimhearsnachdan traidiseanta.

Bha mi cuideachd ag aontachadh ri Liam Kerr agus daoine eile gu bheil feum againn air beachdachadh air dè cho èifeachdach ‘s a tha na h-ìomairtean, planaichean agus laghan againn—am bile seo. Tha an cunntas-sluaigh a’ toirt freagairtean dhuinn—tha barrachd dhaoine a’ cleachdadh a’ chàin agus tha na h-àireamhan de luchd-labhairt a’ dol suas.

Ach chunnaic sinn cuideachd gu bheil de luchd-labhairt anns na sgìrean traidiseanta a’ dol sìos agus chan eil an cunntas-sluaigh a’ sealltainn dè cho fileanta ‘s a tha luchd-labhairt no cho tric ‘s a tha iad a’ bruidhinn a’ chàin. Tha mi a’ beachdachadh air na trioblaidean agus na dùbhlain a thaobh na ceist mu èifeachdachd.

Tha mi cuideachd taingeil airson na taic a chuala mi bho Mhìcheal Marra is daoine eile. Thuirt esan gun robh an cànan ann an èiginn agus gum feumadh am bile a bhith èifeachdach. Bheachdaich e cuideachd air an aithisg a dh’fhoillsich an Riaghaltas air na cothroman eacanomaigeach is sòisealta airson na Gàidhlig agus sin as adhbhar gu bheil mi uamhasach taiceil ri oifigearan leasachaidh Gàidhlig.

As t-Samhradh, bha mi ann an Cille Mhoire anns an Eilean Sgitheanach far a bheil Eilidh Rankin, aon de na h-oifigearan leasachaidh Gàidhlig an sin. Is nuair a chaidh mi sìos dhan talla anns a’ bhaile, chuala mi tòrr Gàidhlig air a bruidhinn. Bha a’ choimhearsnachd uile a’ suidhe ri chèile le brot is cèic le daoine òg is daoine nas sine is bha Gàidhlig ri cluinntinn. Chuir Eilidh an lunch sin air dòigh gus Gàidhlig a chumail beò – àite far a bheil daoine aig a bheil Gàidhlig a’ tighinn ri chèile agus a’ bruidhinn Gàidhlig.

Gu h-inntinneach, bha sgoilearan bho bhaile Pheairt ann cuideachd agus bha iadsan anns an Eilean Sgitheanach airson seachdain airson a

bhith ag ionnsachadh na Gàidhlig agus a bhith a' dèanamh diofar rudan leis an tidsear Gàidhlig aca. Chan eil mòran sgoilearan Gàidhlig ann an Acadamaidh Pheairt, agus bha iongnadh orra Gàidhlig a chluinntinn anns a' choimhearsnachd san fharsaingeachd. Agus tha sinn a' sealltainn dè cho cudromach 's a tha e gu bheil oifigearan leasachaidh againn agus tha e cuideachd a' sealltainn mura h-eil coimhearsnachdan traidiseanta ann, cha bhi Gàidhlig beò.

Mar a thuirt mi aig an toiseach, cha do thill Gàidhlig riamh gu coimhearsnachd far an deach a call. Ma tha sinn airson Gàidhlig a chumail beò, tha sin a' ciallachadh gu bheil na coimhearsnachdan mar Chille Mhoire feumach air barrachd taic.

Thuirt Ross Greer gun robh inbhe a' chànain cudromach agus tha sin fìor gun teagamh sam bith. 'S urrainn dhuinn obair a dhèanamh air a' bhile mar a tha sinn a' feuchainn ri dhèanamh agus aig an aon àm a bhith ag obair tro iomairtean eile, a' lorg barrachd maoinachaidh ma tha sin a dhith oirnn agus a' stèidheachadh stiùireadh soilleir airson buidhnean poblach. Chan e taghadh a th' ann—tha a h-uile càil cudromach—'s e an aon phrìomhachas againn uile a bhith a' faicinn adhartas air na h-àireamhan, air na coimhearsnachdan agus cuideachd air an ìre de dh'fhileantas.

Le cumhachan a' bhile seo 's urrainnear buannachdan brioghmhor a ghleidheadh airson sgoiltean is ionnsachadh, an eaconamaidh is bun-structair, na meadhanan, iomairtean coimhearsnachd agus ionnsachadh do dh'inbich.

Mus crìochnaich mi, bu mhath leam mo thaing a thoirt dhan chomataidh airson nam beachdan mionaideach is taiceil aca.

Cuideachd, fhuair sinn tòrr taice bho na daoine a ghabh pàirt ann an co-chomhairleachadh Riaghaltas na h-Alba agus a thug fianais seachad dhan chomataidh.

Following is the simultaneous interpretation:

Gaelic has never returned to a community from which it has been lost, such as parts of Argyll, Lochaber and the islands. We cannot lose the language in more communities. That is my aim with the bill. If we want there to be progress, we have to make changes in different places. For Gaelic and Scots, it has never been a case of there being one issue and one solution. That is clear in the debate, and when we consider the broad range of evidence that was submitted to the committee during its consultation, as well as the range of issues that were highlighted in its stage 1 report. All those are important for the progress that we need to make.

Sue Webber spoke about budget. I have heard what the committee said in the evidence that it gave to the Government. Much has been said about funding, because it is important for Scots and Gaelic.

The priorities for Gaelic speakers and Scots speakers are based on similar things, such as housing, infrastructure, energy and transport. *[Interpretation should read:* The priorities for Gaelic speakers and English speakers are based on similar things, such as housing, infrastructure and transport.] If we spent on Gaelic anything similar to what we spend on infrastructure in those communities, we would see more progress.

As we heard from John Mason, we do not just need new funding and investment; we need to spend the money in the budget more effectively to strengthen Gaelic in traditional communities.

I agree with Liam Kerr and others that we need to think about how effective our strategies, plans and laws, including the bill, are. The census gives us an answer. More people are using Gaelic. The number of Gaelic speakers has gone up, but the number of Gaelic speakers in traditional communities has gone down. The census does not show how fluent a Gaelic speaker is or how often they speak the language, so it is important to consider how effective things are.

I am thankful for the support that I got from Michael Marra and others. He said that the language is in a state of emergency and that the bill could be useful, and he discussed the economic opportunities in relation to Gaelic. That is why I am very thankful for Gaelic development officers. This summer, I was in Kilmuir, in the north of Skye, where Eilidh Rankin is one of the Gaelic development officers. When I visited the local hall there, I heard a lot of Gaelic being spoken. Members of the community—young people and older people—were sitting together having soup and eating cake, and Gaelic was to be heard. Eilidh organised that lunch to keep Gaelic alive and give people an opportunity to come together and speak Gaelic.

Interestingly, there were pupils there from Perth. They were visiting Skye for a week, during which they were learning Gaelic and participating in other things with their Gaelic teacher. There are not many Gaelic pupils at Perth academy, and they were surprised to hear Gaelic in a local community. That shows how important it is that we have Gaelic development officers and that, if those traditional communities are not there, Gaelic will not be kept alive. As I said at the beginning, Gaelic has never returned to a community where it has become extinct, so if we want to keep Gaelic alive, we need to give communities such as Kilmuir, on Skye, more support.

Ross Greer said that the status of the language is important. That is, of course, undeniable. There is work that we can do—work that we are trying to do through the bill—and we are looking for other opportunities and for more funding, if that is required. We are also looking to give good strong guidelines to organisations. Everything is important, but one of our priorities is making progress in the number of people in communities speaking Gaelic and in the level of fluency in Gaelic.

The bill's provisions have the potential to offer tangible benefits for school learning, for the economy and infrastructure, for media and community activity and for adult learning.

Before I draw to a close, I thank the committee for its detailed and supportive comments. We have also been well supported by all those who took the time to contribute to the Scottish Government's consultation exercise, and those who submitted evidence to the committee.

Sue Webber: Will the cabinet secretary comment on Foyso Choudhury's comments regarding Gaelic-medium education teachers and how we might address the challenge that we have on that issue?

Kate Forbes: Tha sin uabhasach cudromach. Bha mi a' bruidhinn ri cuideigin an-diugh fhèin agus tha dithis chloinne aige a tha a-nis a' dol tron oilthigh airson a bhith nan tidsearan Gàidhlig. Tha sinn feumach air barrachd thidsearan Gàidhlig. Tha mi a' smaoinichadh gu bheil dòighean ann an-dràsta fhèin airson barrachd thidsearan a lorg agus tha mi a' tuigsinn gu bheil e uabhasach cudromach. Ma tha barrachd phàrantan ag iarraidh foghlam tro mheadhan na Gàidhlig airson na cloinne aca tha sin a' ciallachadh gu bheil sinn feumach air barrachd thidsearan. Tha mi a' tuigsinn sin gun teagamh sam bith.

'S iomadh turas ron seo a chunnacas taic thar-phàrtaidh sa Phàrlamaid seo dhan Ghàidhlig agus Albais. Agus bha dearbhadh againn air an taic sin a-rithist an-diugh agus tha mi cinnteach gu bheil sinn uile airson gun lean an taic sin. Tha mi gu math taingeil airson na taic sin bho na pàrtaidhean air fad.

Tha eachdraidh a' sealltainn dhuinn nach deach spèis a nochdadh dhan Ghàidhlig is Albais san àm a dh'fhalbh mar a bu chòir. Ach, bu chòir àite a bhith ann dhaibh ann an Alba agus anns a' Phàrlamaid seo, agus 's ann an urra rinne a tha e dèanamh cinnteach gun tèid aithne is taic a thoirt dhan dà chànan, agus gun tèid an cur air adhart.

Air an adhbhar sin, bu mhath leam mo thaic a chur, agus moladh do na buill taic a chur, ris a' ghluasad:

Gun cuir a' Phàrlamaid aonta ri prionnsapalan farsaing Bile nan Cànan Albannach.

Following is the simultaneous interpretation:

That is very important. Just today, I spoke to somebody about the issue. He had two children who are now in university and who are trying to become Gaelic teachers. We need more Gaelic teachers. There are currently ways for us to find teachers, but the issue is very important. If more parents want to have Gaelic-medium education for their children, that means that we need to have more teachers—I understand that.

We have seen so much cross-party support on the issue. That has been demonstrated again today, and I am sure that we all want it to continue. I am very thankful for that support from all the parties.

History does not demonstrate a good record of respect for Gaelic and Scots, but they both belong in Scotland and in this Parliament. The responsibility sits with us to ensure that both languages are recognised, promoted and supported. For that reason, I support and commend to members the motion:

That the Parliament agrees to the general principles of the Scottish Languages Bill.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes the debate on the Scottish Languages Bill at stage 1. There will be a short pause before we move on to the next item of business, to allow the front-bench teams to change position.

Grangemouth Industrial Cluster

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The next item of business is a statement by Gillian Martin on securing a sustainable future for the Grangemouth industrial cluster. The cabinet secretary will take questions at the end of her statement, so there should be no interventions or interruptions.

16:32

The Acting Cabinet Secretary for Net Zero and Energy (Gillian Martin): The Parliament will be aware that Petroineos, the owner and operator of the Grangemouth refinery, has confirmed its intention to cease refining in quarter 2 of 2025. It is a matter of deep regret that Petroineos has not opted to continue operations at the site for longer, despite the efforts of the Scottish Government and the United Kingdom Government to urge it to do so. However, we both recognise the commercial nature of the decision.

I met Petroineos chief executive officers on Thursday, shortly after the announcement, and conveyed my deep disappointment about the decision. They informed me that the decision had been taken on the basis of the viability of the refinery, informed mainly by a challenging market outlook that it and other such refineries face.

I pay tribute to the workforce at the refinery. It is a highly skilled workforce and has been intrinsic to Grangemouth's status as Scotland's foremost industrial concentration. I recognise that the announcement means a most concerning time for those workers and their families, and I put on record my gratitude to them for the role that they have played in meeting Scotland's fuel needs over many decades.

I assure members that I have made it clear to the business that, regardless of the status of the refinery in 2025, it has a duty to the workers now. I expect the business to actively explore all options to identify new roles across the Grangemouth cluster for those affected by the asset's closure. I have also asked all partners of the Grangemouth future industry board to do the same.

I give my commitment that the Scottish Government will also do all that it can to support those workers. I can confirm that we have enacted our partnership action for continuing employment initiative and stand ready to offer support.

On Friday, the First Minister met workers, union representatives, Falkirk Council and community representatives to hear at first hand their concerns about Petroineos's decision, and he reaffirmed the Government's commitment to doing all that it can to secure a long-term future for the industrial

cluster. In addition to that, members will note the commitment that the Scottish Government made last week to put in place a targeted skills intervention to support those who are impacted by the asset's closure. That will be supported by up to £500,000 of additional Scottish Government investment. We will work closely with business and trade unions to ensure that that meets the demands of the workforce.

I recognise that vast numbers of people in the wider community rely on the refinery for their employment. We will therefore engage constructively with Falkirk Council, businesses and other stakeholders to consider all possible actions to mitigate any impact of the refinery closure on the economy of the wider Falkirk area.

We have announced significant investment in the Falkirk and Grangemouth growth deal of £100 million across the Scottish and UK Governments. The funding will support economic development in the area that will support securing a long-term future for the Grangemouth refinery. Members will be aware that the Scottish Government has already provided material support for low-carbon projects, and the UK Government has confirmed that it will join us in supporting Petroineos's project willow study. Our joint £1.5 million grant is enabling Petroineos to progress that cross-site study, which will examine the enablers and blockers to transforming Grangemouth into a low-carbon fuels hub. The study will conclude early in the new year, but it has already identified a shortlist of three credible options to begin building a new long-term industry at the site, including low-carbon hydrogen, clean e-fuels and sustainable aviation fuels.

We have also provided £2 million to fund the initial phase of National Gas Transmission's feeder 10 project, which would see an existing gas pipeline between Grangemouth and St Fergus being converted so that it can transport captured carbon dioxide to the Scottish cluster. That demonstrates our commitment to evacuating emissions from the central belt and supporting the development of the Scottish cluster.

I know that many will be concerned about what this means for the future of crude oil that is extracted in the North Sea and transported to Grangemouth, so I want to allay those concerns. As outlined in the Scottish Government's draft energy strategy and just transition plan, oil that is extracted from the North Sea is predominantly exported to international markets. The Scottish Government anticipates that that arrangement will continue and that North Sea oil will continue to be refined in a number of international locations.

There is no doubt that all routes to Scotland reaching net zero rely on decarbonising Grangemouth, as it is responsible for 27 per cent

of Scotland's industrial emissions. The Scottish Government has been and remains committed to securing a long-term and sustainable future for the Grangemouth industrial cluster and our draft Grangemouth just transition plan sets a clear strategic direction for its future. The plan will recognise the significant role that the cluster and its workforce has played to date, as well as the important role that it will play in the future. I know that members will look forward to engaging with the draft plan in due course.

It is my firm belief that there is a future for Grangemouth where the cluster can play a key part in Scotland's energy transition. However, as we have made clear previously, our fiscal and regulatory autonomy in this area is limited and, therefore, the Scottish Government cannot do it alone. The future of the Grangemouth industrial cluster is clearly a shared interest for the Scottish Government and the UK Government. I have to report that I am encouraged by the UK Government's commitment to exploring the possibility of supporting the future stages of low-carbon projects at Grangemouth via the national wealth fund, and I am committed to working with it to play our part.

In the coming weeks and months, it will be critical for all stakeholders to play their part to support the workforce and secure a long-term future for the site. I call on those with a vested interest across the chamber and beyond to work with me to secure a future for the site that aligns with our shared ambitions for the area. I have already initiated a series of engagements with key stakeholders. In the coming weeks, my full attention will be on mitigating as much of the negative impact of the decision as possible.

I conclude by once again placing on the record that my thoughts are with the workforce. I give the assurance that the Government will do all that we can to mitigate the impact of the commercial decision by Petroineos. I call on Petroineos to ensure that it handles the next phase of the process with care and respect for its workforce and the wider economy while being conscious of its responsibilities as an operator.

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): The cabinet secretary will now take questions on the issues that were raised in her statement. I intend to allow around 20 minutes for questions, after which we will move on to the next item of business. I would be grateful if members who wish to put a question were to press their request-to-speak button.

Douglas Lumsden (North East Scotland) (Con): I thank the cabinet secretary for advance sight of her statement.

This is bad news not just for the hundreds of workers—and their families—who are directly employed by Petroineos but for the wider supply chain in the area. However, the news is not unexpected to the devolved Government. Michael Matheson, the former Cabinet Secretary for Net Zero, Energy and Transport, met Petroineos as far back as February 2022 and discussed options for a just transition for Grangemouth workers. In addition, we had a statement in February this year from Màiri McAllan. The Government has known that the situation has been coming for the past 31 months, but it seems that little has been done to prepare for the future, with the acting Cabinet Secretary for Net Zero and Energy admitting last week that project willow was only just starting. Why has the Scottish Government achieved so little in the 31 months that it has known that this was coming? Will the Scottish National Party Government accept responsibility that it is its narrative and its presumption against oil and gas that has got us to where we are now? The SNP is driving away investment and driving away jobs.

Gillian Martin: I do not accept that at all. The Scottish and UK Governments have been part of the Grangemouth future industry board for the past 18 months. In that time, the Scottish Government has made clear its intention to support the Falkirk and Grangemouth growth deal and to put funding on the table for project willow, at the request of Petroineos. Even before project willow, the Scottish Government provided funding to Petroineos to investigate the transition to a biorefinery. That is a study and a piece of work that it was working on well before any of these decisions were made.

I gently say to Douglas Lumsden that there was a bit of a sea change in July when I talked to my counterparts in the new UK Government, who actually stumped up the money to match our commitments. I note that that money was never pledged by Douglas Lumsden's colleagues when they were in power. That is a matter of deep regret for me, because, if project willow had been funded by them, it could potentially have been under way a lot quicker. However, we are where we are.

In July, I got a pledge from Ed Miliband that he would match fund us not just on the project willow study but on the Falkirk and Grangemouth deal, which would add an additional £10 million from both Governments to engage specifically in projects in the Grangemouth community.

Did we know that the refinery was going to close? Yes, because Petroineos told us back in November. It told us of its plans to turn the refinery into an import terminal. Have we been working with it at pace ever since? Yes, we have. However, I have to tell Douglas Lumsden that, in November and beyond, the Scottish Government

representative on that board might as well have been on their own, because there was nothing coming from the Tory UK Government at the time—absolutely nothing.

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab): I thank the cabinet secretary for advance sight of her statement. More importantly, I associate myself with her statement of solidarity with the workers. This is a deeply troubling time. Indeed, trade unions in recent days have expressed frustration with both Governments and, given the statement that we got from Petroineos, we need to be reflective of that frustration.

The cabinet secretary has already answered this in part, but we have heard much about the intensive engagement between the UK and Scottish Governments in recent days and about project willow, so will she outline the volume, focus and frequency of those meetings to enable us to understand that every effort has been made? What prevented the efforts in project willow from being taken forward prior to recent weeks and months?

It has been clear for more than 10 years that something would have to happen at Grangemouth, but the future industry board was convened only at the end of 2020. What efforts did the board make to secure long-term investment and could that initiative have been started earlier?

Gillian Martin: Daniel Johnson asks a number of questions. I will try to remember and to come to all of them. I will work my way backwards from the question about future investors.

The refinery is a joint venture between PetroChina and Ineos, which own and operate the site, so any investment decisions are for them. During our many meetings with Petroineos and the Grangemouth future industry board, we have always been clear that we wanted to see them maintaining the refinery for as long as possible, that we wanted to interrogate their plans for an import terminal and that we wanted to ensure that the refining of natural gas and oil would be extended for as long as possible. They were never really in a position to give us a date for when that would cease, but, after they made the announcement in November, the writing was on the wall, even though we wanted them to extend refining further.

The member asked about the frequency of meetings. The Grangemouth future industry board meets every three months, with both Governments and a lot of stakeholders also involved. There have also been discussions with Petroineos to try to get a flavour of what it would do, whether and when it would make an announcement and what that would involve. We have also had meetings with Petroineos about its proposals for an import

terminal, to ensure that we were content with those.

Since the new UK Government came in, I have had meetings probably once or twice a week. It was at the top of the agenda for discussion when the First Minister met the Prime Minister the day after the general election. We have not been sitting still, but something has troubled us. The member asked whether project willow could have started. That project was in the second tranche of the work by Petroineos. We have part funded the work on what would be needed to convert Grangemouth into being a biorefinery. That work also had to come to fruition. Petroineos has done a great deal of work on the options and has put the results of that study to its joint venture partners, who will have a view on whether that is an investable proposal.

Unfortunately and regrettably, the shareholders have taken the decision to stop refining, but I see a future for Grangemouth as a biorefinery. Believe you me, I am interested in anyone—whether that is Petroineos or anyone else—who comes forward with proposals either to extend the life of the refinery or to turn it into a biorefinery.

Michelle Thomson (Falkirk East) (SNP): I have a short question about what might occur in future. Has the cabinet secretary explored with Petroineos the possibility that the shares held by PetroChina might be sold, thus leaving Ineos with a slightly different proposition to consider? I am not saying that that will be the case but that all those potential business options must be on the table.

Gillian Martin: As Michelle Thomson will understand, when two organisations are part of a joint venture there will be some things that they want to say and there will be commercially sensitive things that they will not want to say. There are some meetings where both members of the joint venture will be there.

Whatever PetroChina decides to do is a matter for that company. Ms Thomson is the constituency member for the area and I know that she has met Petroineos many times, so she should ask that question directly because I cannot answer it. Commercial decisions have been made by both partners in the joint venture. I do not know if they would tell an elected member—or anyone—about the split of shares, but that is up to them. I cannot speculate about that and do not think that I would have any part whatsoever in it.

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): I very much regret the tone of the minister's comments about the previous UK Government, because they directly contradict what the First Minister said at First Minister's question time on Thursday.

Will the minister spell out in specific terms what practical outcomes she expects to come from the deliberations of GFIB? Will she talk about the additional £10 million from the Scottish Government? Will she confirm that it is new money? What will it be spent on? Will she also talk about how that money will be parcelled? Will it come in a one or will it come over the lifetime of the growth deal, which is a decade?

The Presiding Officer: There were several questions there. I still have many members who wish to put a question, so I would be grateful for concise questions and responses.

Gillian Martin: I will go through the questions really quickly. The Grangemouth future industry board has a lot of stakeholders in it. It is not just about the refinery—I have to make that clear. It is looking at the wider Grangemouth area and the cluster as a whole. It includes Forth Valley College, the Federation of Small Businesses and Petroineos but also other companies that are in the cluster. Obviously, the refinery has had an impact on what we talk about in GFIB, and it will very much do so going forward.

On the growth deal, the two Governments will deliver the money—the £100 million—as a whole. What will happen with that money will be decided by Falkirk Council and its partners—they will decide how best to use the money. Obviously, I hope that the work of GFIB and the discussions that we have in that board will inform that. We have a very constructive relationship with Falkirk Council and its leadership, who were one of the first that I phoned on Thursday to talk about the matter.

We have asked that the £10 million—or the £20 million—be kept aside particularly for the Grangemouth community, but the growth deal is for Falkirk and Grangemouth as a whole.

Michael Matheson (Falkirk West) (SNP): I am grateful to the cabinet secretary for her statement. I want to follow up on the growth deal, which I raised at the joint ministerial meeting on Friday last week. The minister will be aware that the funding for the growth deal is now £100 million over a 10-year period and that there are already 11 projects, which come to approximately £80 million, in the Falkirk Council area. Given the impact that the closure of the refinery will have on the wider Falkirk economy, I believe that there is strong merit in looking at bringing some of those projects forward with an earlier timescale than was planned with the original 10-year period.

Will the cabinet secretary, through her offices, engage with the UK Government, given that it is joint funder of the Falkirk growth deal, to see whether it will accelerate the deal to allow projects to be commissioned at an earlier stage in order to

mitigate some of the economic challenges that we will face in the immediate future?

Gillian Martin: In short, yes. The suggestion is an absolutely sensible one. Now that we have got to this point and we know what is happening following the announcement that was made on Thursday, I will be having accelerated and copious meetings with my counterparts in the UK Government. They will be looking at what they can do to support things with the wealth fund, and we have also put in place a skills package. Michael Matheson's idea about bringing projects forward is something that we absolutely need to discuss, and we will be discussing it not just with the UK Government but with Falkirk Council and the members of GFIB.

Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab): What immediate difference will today's statement make, given the need for investment on site from both the public and private investors, so that workers and communities know that there will be jobs this time next year? Will the cabinet secretary clarify how much will be invested in Forth Valley College now to make training and skills available for people who need them now?

Gillian Martin: We have made the skills offer and we are discussing how it is going to be delivered not just with Forth Valley College but with Petroineos. We need to get an assessment from Petroineos of the potential skills gaps. Petroineos has undertaken work to look at a biorefinery and we are accelerating project willow. A lot of that assessment of the workforce and the skills that it has will come out of those pieces of work, but Petroineos has said that it will work with me and GFIB to give an idea of the skills landscape in the current workforce. Whether skills training is done by Petroineos in-house, by Forth Valley College or by the coming together of both entities is for all of us in the GFIB to work out. I will take my lead from Forth Valley College and Petroineos on all those matters.

The member asked what difference my statement makes. My statement is a second opportunity for elected members to ask me about what is going on. I was pleased to spend time with not just MSPs but MPs on Friday afternoon, to work through a lot of their questions. We extended our session to allow more questions to be asked. Members may not have had a look at their email, but we have sent out some of the questions that we could not answer, or did not have time to answer, on that day, so that members will have a better flavour of some of the things that we are doing in that space.

Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): The early authorisation of the Acorn carbon capture project in Aberdeenshire would be a significant boost to efforts to find new

opportunities at the Grangemouth site. Will the cabinet secretary provide an update on the latest engagement with the UK Government with a view to securing the approval that is needed?

Gillian Martin: I agree with Audrey Nicoll that carbon capture, utilisation and storage, and the acceleration into track status for the Acorn project and the wider Scottish cluster is imperative. It was good to hear Michael Shanks on the BBC—I think that he followed me directly on *The Sunday Show*—talking about that as a potential priority for the UK Government.

We have had conversations about that. The UK Government knows how important it is to get track status for the Scottish cluster. It will make a material difference to getting carbon out of the atmosphere and out of our industries in Scotland, but it will also make a material difference in the UK's drive to net zero. I am having a lot more constructive conversations about that. I will keep Audrey Nicoll up to date. I know that she has a particular interest in the issue, as do I. Things in that space are looking a lot better than before.

Gillian Mackay (Central Scotland) (Green): The solidarity of all members should be with the workers at the refinery. I am pleased to hear that work is on-going to support those workers, and we should engage with the unions to ensure that that support has the desired effect.

When the Longannet power station closed, there was a similar strategy of money being invested in industry in the wider area; however, very little made it to small local businesses that relied on the power station. What lessons have been learned from that, to ensure that small businesses receive the support that they need, and what is being done to engage with the community on the changes that it is likely to see?

Gillian Martin: Those are all very valid questions. Gillian Mackay will have heard me say that the Federation of Small Businesses is a core member of the Grangemouth future industry board. I am very alive to the fact that not just the workers in the refinery but people in the supply chain are worried about their future. A lot of them are in small or medium-sized businesses, and they are very much in my mind.

That is why the growth deal is so important; it is not necessarily just a response to the refinery closing. The impact of anything happening in that industrial site will have a much longer reach. I am therefore committed to making sure that we do not concentrate just on what is happening with the refinery, important though that is; that the workers have jobs at the end of the process; that as many of those workers as possible are involved as much as possible in the decommissioning process; and

that their redundancy packages are what they should be.

I am also committed to making sure that people in the wider supply chain have an in to discussions with me and stakeholders—*[Interruption.]*—including the UK Government, the Scottish Government and, crucially, Scottish Enterprise, about what that means for them and how they it can access support if they need it.

Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): I apologise for my alarm having gone off. As someone who represents Motherwell and Wishaw, I know only too well the devastation and the impact of deindustrialisation in my area, with there having been no fair transition at all for the supply chain and the workers. I share the minister's concerns—and others that have been expressed—for the workforce in the area.

In this situation time is of the essence, so securing the future industrial unit, the industrial work at Grangemouth and the highly skilled workforce for that area has to happen as quickly as possible. Can the minister give any indication about when the proposals that are being examined by project willow will be completed and when the information will be forthcoming?

Gillian Martin: I want project willow to report early next year. I do not want it to wait until spring, but want it to be accelerated. I want the report to be thorough and to consider the questions that Clare Adamson asked.

As I said to Sarah Boyack, project willow will look not only at the three front-running strands of potential future work for the site, but at the skills assessment. A great deal of work has already been done on the skills assessment. I was told by Petroineos—it must have been last summer—about the transferability of the skills of its workforce if the site were to become a biorefinery. However, I am concerned that, once we have lighted on the potential, we minimise the gap between the cessation of refining in its current form and attracting inward investment. Regardless of whether that investment comes from Petroineos or somebody else, I want the gap to be as short as possible.

Clare Adamson has my word on my commitment to that. I also originally come from an area that did not have a just transition. We will never do what Margaret Thatcher did, because we know that the consequences last for decades. She has my absolute commitment that I will ensure that Grangemouth has the full effort of the Scottish Government. It will work in partnership with whoever is serious about turning the Grangemouth site into a biorefinery, a sustainable aviation fuel hub or a hydrogen production hub—whatever will get us the maximum economic activity for the

highly skilled workers whom we want to retain in the area for as long as possible.

The Presiding Officer: I am keen to take questions from members who have pressed their request-to-speak buttons, but I will require more concise responses, cabinet secretary.

Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD): Like others, the Scottish Liberal Democrats recognise that it is an extremely worrying time for everyone who is connected with Grangemouth—its workers, the community and businesses up and down the supply chain. It is the single biggest test of the just transition to date, with hundreds of jobs, credible skills and the vibrancy of the community at stake.

The cabinet secretary referred to the credible options in low-carbon hydrogen, e-fuels and sustainable aviation fuels. However, she will recognise that, with the passage of time, retaining those skills and even persuading people to remain in the area will become ever more difficult. Can she give a more precise timeframe for the progress that she expects to be made in those three key areas?

Gillian Martin: I cannot commit to a timetable, because the Government is not the only party involved. However, I can tell Liam McArthur that there are other streams of work. Scottish Enterprise has been involved in attracting inward investment to the wider site, and it is accelerating that and focusing on attracting inward investment and setting out the stall.

Grangemouth is geographically and infrastructurally perfectly placed to be a sustainable aviation fuel hub, a hydrogen production hub and an e-fuels hub. The relevant infrastructure, skills and people are there. Any organisation that is interested in investing in such things should be considering Grangemouth, because it has all the component parts. It is an extremely competitive option.

We all speak to airlines; I am always interested to know what they are doing in relation to sustainable aviation fuel. I was told by a representative from Heathrow that it cannot get enough sustainable aviation fuel to meet its ambitions. That says to me that there is a very viable proposition there for someone who is looking to invest in Grangemouth.

Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con): The problem is that sustainable aviation fuel is not manufactured in Britain. We need to have it manufactured in Britain, and we should have it manufactured in Scotland for strategic reasons. I have been saying that for a long time. The previous UK Government did not do nearly enough on that. What does the Cabinet Secretary think needs to happen to get SAF manufactured in Grangemouth at speed? We do not need a

Government report to know that; we already know that it needs to be done.

Gillian Martin: I agree with Graham Simpson. Regulations in the reserved space could have been modified to release the hydrotreated esters and fatty acids—HEFA—cap, for example.

One interesting conclusion that has come from Petroineos's work on using the site as a biorefinery is that not just feedstock from vegetation could be used for SAF purposes; it has discovered that an awful lot of other materials could be used for that.

If someone wants to create a hub for sustainable aviation fuel in Scotland, they will have our support as far as possible. I believe that they will have the support of the UK Government, too. Our door is open, and Scottish Enterprise will be delighted to speak to anyone who has a proposition.

However, the current owners carried out a feasibility study on refining and still decided to stop doing so, which is regrettable. Could something happen in the intervening period? Could Petroineos decide that it wants to turn the plant into a biorefinery? Those are questions for Petroineos, but they concern a commercial field that will absolutely be supported by the Scottish Government and the enterprise agencies.

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): The cabinet secretary has, rightly, mentioned the fact that the workforce at Grangemouth is highly experienced and has vital transferable skills and expertise that could be used in other parts of the energy sector. Can she provide further detail on how the Government can support the affected workers in finding new employment?

Gillian Martin: I mentioned the skills package that we have put in place. I am hopeful that Petroineos will also put funding into that package so that we can augment the offer.

We have funded a £4 million skills transition centre that will use state-of-the-art equipment to respond to the needs of emerging sectors, such as the ones that we want to encourage into the larger Grangemouth site. However, an awful lot more work is happening in the Grangemouth site than just refining—for example, chemicals production. I am interested to hear from Petroineos how many people it will be able to redeploy to that area of its business.

We want to ensure that we attract inward investment and help to plug any skills gaps that there might be. The fact of the matter is that we are talking about people who are already highly skilled. As other members have highlighted, the biggest danger is that those workers will be snapped up. We want to ensure that we minimise

the gap between activities, so that those workers do not leave the area and we retain the skills base at Grangemouth.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes the ministerial statement on securing a sustainable future for the Grangemouth industrial cluster.

Decision Time

17:07

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): There is one question to be put as a result of today's business. The question is, that motion S6M-14484, in the name of Kate Forbes, on the Scottish Languages Bill at stage 1, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees to the general principles of the Scottish Languages Bill.

Federation of Small Businesses (50th Anniversary)

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): Our final piece of business today is a members' business debate on motion S6M-13753, in the name of Audrey Nicoll, on celebrating the Federation of Small Businesses's 50th anniversary. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament congratulates the Federation of Small Businesses (FSB) on celebrating its 50th anniversary on 15 September 2024; understands that micro and small businesses comprise almost all enterprises in Scotland, at 98% of the total, and employ 900,000 people with a turnover of £82 billion; further understands that, since its formation in 1974 in response to what it sees as unfair increases in national insurance for the self-employed by the UK Government, which was later repealed, the FSB has gone on to become the largest direct business membership organisation in the UK, and recognises what it considers the vital non-profit, non-party-political business services that it offers, including advice, financial expertise, support and a powerful advocating voice to government at all levels, as well as its aim to achieve changes for 5.5 million small businesses and the self-employed.

17:09

Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): I am delighted to bring to the chamber today this debate celebrating the 50th anniversary of the Federation of Small Businesses. I am grateful to colleagues for signing the motion, and to those who will speak today. I look forward to hearing their contributions.

First, I acknowledge that we are having this debate straight after members received an update on the closure of Grangemouth refinery. I was pleased to hear the cabinet secretary acknowledge the impact of that on small businesses, and I know that organisations such as the Federation of Small Businesses stand ready to offer as much support as they can.

Talking of the FSB, I am delighted that we are joined this afternoon by colleagues from the organisation—David Groundwater, Stacey Dingwall, Euan McGrory and, of course, Colin Borland. It is nice to see them in the gallery. I also extend my thanks to Mike Duncan, the north-east Scotland region development manager, for his invaluable support to me, particularly during my recent small business spotlight, about which I will say more shortly.

I shamelessly dedicate today's debate to my dad. He was a greengrocer in Aberdeen who, like many small business owners, worked long hours, supported a local supply chain and, most of all, knew his community like the back of his hand. If

you are listening, dad, I always thought that you massively undercharged for fresh Perthshire strawberries every summer.

Founded in 1974, the Federation of Small Businesses was established in response to an increase in national insurance for self-employed workers by the then United Kingdom Labour Government. That measure has since been repealed, and now, 50 years later, the FSB is the UK's leading business campaigner and has proven to be a powerful voice in Government through its policy work and political engagement. FSB members benefit not only from the organisation's cross-party campaigning but from other services that it provides, including tailored support, research, financial expertise and specialist advice.

Today, in Scotland, small businesses make up almost the entirety of the economy, accounting for 98 per cent of the business population. Those 335,000 businesses employ 900,000 people, with an annual turnover of £82 billion.

Scotland's population of small businesses and self-employed people is resilient, diverse and innovative. From traditional retailers and grocers such as my father, to carbon capture technologists and spaceports, today's small businesses are continuing Scotland's long history of innovation and invention.

Almost half of small businesses now work from home in areas such as professional, technical and scientific activities. Digital nomads are increasing in number, offering business owners the flexibility to travel while being able to work remotely with access to technology and the internet.

My Aberdeen South and North Kincardine constituency has an amazing variety of small businesses and, over recess, my summer business spotlight was the perfect excuse to visit some of them. Those businesses included Farm Stop, which is an expansion of a busy working farm that offers animal interaction or lots of cuddles with piglets and lambs and is the inspiration of Christina and Tom. I also met Megan Falconer, who creates unique silver jewellery at the amazing Deemouth Artist Studios. Another business is the Bread Guy, which sells artisan breads and cakes across the city and was created by local lad Gary McAllister.

I now want to get into the detail of local businesses' plans for growing and diversifying, what is working and what the challenges are. It was apparent that the Scottish Government's small business bonus scheme was—and I quote—"a life saver" for many businesses. Having the confidence and means to diversify also enabled businesses to react to changing consumer

behaviour and to adapt and expand their offering accordingly.

However, a reality for many small businesses is that Brexit has been extremely damaging, restricting export opportunities, increasing costs and forcing businesses to source materials from cheaper overseas markets. For one business, planning was creating a blockage to its expansion plans, while, for another business owner, a lack of access to affordable studio space to expand her Scottish knitwear business might mean her having to leave Scotland.

On a positive note, we cannot talk about support for small businesses without acknowledging their presence in the energy supply chain across Scotland, especially across the north-east. They create vital job opportunities and help grow our economy—and I am talking not only about those working in what I will call the hard-hat space but about events planners, lawyers, architects, programmers, digital content developers and many more.

I am particularly pleased to note that the programme for government outlines a commitment to supporting women starting and scaling businesses, and to supporting our universities in continuing with world-leading research and innovation that will lay the foundations for small business development across Scotland. Under the Scottish Government's Scottish growth scheme, businesses can access financial support through a number of initiatives such as DSL Business Finance, Business Loans Scotland and Techstart Ventures. Initiatives such as those provided by the Scottish Government will help grow micro and small businesses, and will allow for innovation within their respective sectors.

Despite the economic conditions following Brexit and the Covid-19 pandemic, the small business index reports that in the first quarter of 2024, the number of Scottish businesses that expect their performance to improve over the coming quarter is at its highest level since 2022. That certainly shows encouraging signs of recovery, but the Federation of Small Businesses has made it clear that, in order to take full advantage of that, the Scottish Government needs to continue to prioritise measures aimed at economic growth. Even in the current challenging fiscal environment, I am confident that that will happen.

Scotland's small businesses will always remain important to our economy and to local communities. The FSB recognises that, and it has been a great asset to small businesses across Scotland. For half a century now, the FSB has armed its members with necessary knowledge and tools to help them grow and create sustainable businesses. Likewise, the FSB has been a powerful voice in Government, championing

positive change for small businesses. I very much look forward to working alongside it and to ensuring that I play my part in supporting my local small businesses, which I will join next month for a business networking event in my constituency.

In closing, I congratulate the Federation of Small Businesses on its 50th anniversary, and I look forward to its future contributions over the next 50 years.

17:18

Clare Haughey (Rutherglen) (SNP): I thank Audrey Nicoll for bringing this debate to Parliament.

For the past 50 years, the FSB has grown to become the United Kingdom's largest membership organisation for small businesses and the self-employed. It provides its members with vital services, including access to finance, business banking, legal advice and specialist support to help their businesses flourish.

Last year, my Rutherglen constituency was home to around 2,000 registered businesses, the vast majority of which are small businesses of all varieties. Those small businesses are the lifeblood of Scotland's economy and the backbone of our communities across the country. Many are flourishing, because of the uniqueness of what they offer, despite the competition from multinational companies and superstores. Small businesses keep our high streets alive and provide a variety of bespoke and artisan services and personal service that large companies cannot compete with. They are not just sources of employment but places where people can meet, socialise and form deeper connections within their communities.

The Control Panel in Rutherglen, which was established more than 24 years ago as a supplier of computer equipment, repair and upgrading services, provides a much-valued personal service, not only using its expertise to keep customers' information technology equipment running smoothly but offering bespoke custom personal computers built from the case up. There is also Strachan Craft Butchers in Blantyre, which has been operating for seven years now. At the end of last year, it was named training partner of the year at the industry awards, honoured for its commitment to staff progression and supporting apprentices.

Finally, I would highlight the Wee Gurkha Curry House, a Nepalese restaurant that opened earlier this year in Blantyre. This award-winning, family-run business was previously based in East Kilbride but has now moved to new, larger premises, where it has quickly established itself as a much-loved and appreciated local business. Those are

just three examples from my constituency—all at different stages of development—of the kinds of small businesses that make up our communities, and make those communities what they are.

Other small businesses are not only making an impact on the local economy and providing jobs in our communities, but making their mark on the world. Watt Laser, in my constituency, is a small business that is becoming a leader in its field. It exports all around the world, and it is so close to the cutting edge of technology that some of the equipment that it demonstrated when I visited the business recently is one of a kind.

SMEs are often embedded in the communities in which they operate. They range from non-profit-making entities such as credit unions, including 1st Class and Thistle credit unions in my constituency, to businesses such as MDH Recruitment—whose social values see it donate to many local good causes—that are working with local schools and supporting our young people, or are sponsoring local and youth sport.

Resilient, productive businesses are the bedrock of Scotland's economy, which is why I strongly welcome the fact that helping businesses to succeed lies at the heart of this year's programme for government. The programme includes specific actions around increasing the number of women who are creating and scaling businesses, and widening participation in business from other groups that are underrepresented. That is a cause championed by my constituent Bayile Adeoti, herself a successful entrepreneur, and those aims are priorities for the FSB, too, which further underlines the valuable role that the organisation plays in supporting its members.

Small businesses thrive when they are well supported, and our wider communities thrive when those businesses are doing well. I commend the work of the FSB in moving towards that aim, and I wish it well for the future.

17:22

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I congratulate Audrey Nicoll on her motion and on bringing the debate to the chamber. I am sure that we will hear consensus among members on all sides of the chamber on the valuable work that is being done by the Federation of Small Businesses, which is celebrating a remarkable anniversary—50 years in business.

Scotland is well served by a range of business organisations including the Confederation of British Industry in Scotland and Scottish Chambers of Commerce, and a range of sector bodies such as the Scottish Tourism Alliance, the Scottish Licensed Trade Association, the Scottish Retail Consortium, the Scottish Grocers

Federation and many more. We welcome the inputs from all those different trade bodies.

I think that it is fair to say, however, that few of them have achieved the reach, and have given us the policy contribution, that the Federation of Small Businesses has in the many years for which it has been practising. That includes, in particular, its contribution to the work of this Parliament over the past 25 years. It has been my pleasure to work over a number of years with the FSB and its changing members of staff. Like Audrey Nicoll, I welcome representatives of the FSB to the public gallery tonight, and I recognise the valuable work that they have done.

Audrey Nicoll was right to point to the importance of small businesses, which make up 98 per cent of the economy and are vital to our economic future as a nation. Over the years, members have been lobbied by the FSB—indeed, it has lobbied us in the contribution that it has made to this debate—on a range of issues including business rates, taxation, regulation, access to skills and the importance of infrastructure.

I was very interested to read that, as Audrey Nicoll mentioned, the FSB had its origins in lobbying against what it saw as unfair increases in national insurance for the self-employed by the UK Government back in 1974. That campaign was successful, because the provisions in question were later repealed by the Government.

I will just mention two issues that are relevant to the FSB's work. The first is the small business bonus scheme, to which Audrey Nicoll referred. I well remember the genesis of that particular policy, for which the FSB campaigned over a number of years. Back in 2007, it was in the Conservative manifesto, and it was in the Scottish National Party's manifesto, too, so we worked together on it. That does not happen very often these days, but at the time, the Conservatives, in Opposition, worked with the new SNP minority Government to bring in the small business bonus scheme. We were pushing the SNP to go further than it originally intended, but there was a shared ambition by two parties on different sides of the chamber to ensure that the scheme was introduced. It has been successful, and it has continued ever since; indeed, it has been worth thousands of pounds to small businesses across Scotland.

We have had many debates in the chamber on an issue that we will all recognise: the decline of retail and of the traditional high street. The situation would, however, be many times worse, were it not for the small business bonus scheme, which has allowed small businesses to continue to trade from retail premises in our local high streets in our towns and villages.

I know that there is debate about the scheme, and some members in the chamber will argue that it is not good value for money and should be scrapped. My view is that it is vital to small business and the health of our retail centres, and I would be very reluctant to see the end of the scheme, which has been a real success story for the FSB.

I will briefly mention the issue of regulation, because the FSB has been very effective in pushing back against excessive regulation of small business. We have seen new laws brought in to implement the deposit return scheme, the regulation of short-term lets and restrictions on alcohol sales and marketing, but there has been no rigorous assessment of their impact on small businesses. The FSB has quite rightly highlighted its concerns about that, and we—certainly those of us on the Conservative side of the chamber—will continue to articulate the issues and concerns that it has raised.

To conclude, I would say that it has been a very successful first 50 years for the Federation of Small Businesses, and I look forward to working with the organisation over the next half century ahead.

17:27

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab):

I, too, congratulate Audrey Nicoll on bringing the debate to the chamber, and I thank her for doing so, because it gives us a fantastic opportunity not just to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the FSB but to talk about the critical work that it does and, more broadly, the importance of small business to our economy and our communities.

At this point, I declare an interest: I am a one-time small business owner and I am currently a director, as well as a sometime member of the FSB. The debate is therefore important to me in terms of not just policy but personal interest. That is the most important thing that I want to say.

I thank Audrey Nicoll for highlighting her personal connection with a family business, as the daughter of a grocer. There are other daughters of grocers from parties on other sides of the chamber that we might not want to mention, but I share that sense of a personal connection with small business. Being the child of a small business owner often meant occupying myself in the stockroom; I enjoyed playing with price guns as a child.

Audrey Nicoll: I thank the member for his kind comments. I think that we have both made the point that there are people behind these businesses. Many members in the chamber will have friends and family members who work in

small businesses, and it is important to recognise the hard-working people behind such businesses.

Daniel Johnson: I could not have put it better myself. We can often make the mistake of thinking that business is all about big business. Big business has an important role, but small business is about people. Small businesses are often very personal—running them can be frustrating and lonely, and decisions can be difficult because there is only the owner there to make them. However, it can also be exciting and rewarding, because those involved get to work with other people, and critically—as we heard from a number of members, including Clare Haughey—small businesses are often at the heart of communities. If we take small business out of those communities, what is left? Small businesses provide people with what they need day to day; they provide human contact; and they are often a source of local information.

We need to take small business more seriously and look at some aspects again. For example, Scotland's birth rate for businesses is slightly lower than the rate in the rest of the UK, and we should be asking how we can encourage more people to go into business. Likewise—this is an issue across the country—our growth rate for small businesses is slightly lower than that in many similar countries, so we need to ask ourselves why that is and what more we can do.

Murdo Fraser made a good point about regulation. We need to think about whether regulation is helping small business or whether it gets in the way. Critically, we need to think about whether small business has been at the forefront when regulation has been considered. Are our support mechanisms and agencies appropriate for small businesses? We could do much more to help small businesses to adopt technology and access the skills regime. We also need to look at investment.

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): Does Daniel Johnson agree that our Parliament could perhaps spend more time discussing the very questions that he usefully raises in the debate, and less time on some of the other issues that we discuss in this place?

Daniel Johnson: I will give the half-full version in answer to that. We should absolutely be talking more about small business, because small businesses are not just at the heart of communities; they can also be at the heart of growth in the economy.

Investment is undoubtedly difficult for small business, and we need to look at whether we can do more to support businesses through Government-backed investment. In addition, we can consider doing things to help to bring in

private investment and to help businesses to develop skills for self-investment.

Procurement also needs to be addressed. Time and again, we hear from the FSB that the current procurement situation is incompatible with the realities of running a small business. We need to provide access to procurement. Above all else—this is my overarching message—I encourage all members to engage with small businesses in their area and, as we pass laws and engage with policy, let us ensure that there is much greater understanding of small businesses. In that way, we can make sure that we have stronger communities and a stronger economy.

17:32

Pam Gosal (West Scotland) (Con): I take a moment to congratulate the Federation of Small Businesses on its 50th anniversary and welcome its representatives to the public gallery.

I thank all the organisations that have provided briefings for the debate, and I thank Audrey Nicoll for bringing such an important debate to Parliament. As with her family, my late father and mother also started from a small grocery business, in the west end of Glasgow in the 1970s, so I, too, know well the importance of small businesses not just to the economy but to communities.

Since the FSB was established in 1974, it has been the leading voice of 5.5 million small businesses across the United Kingdom. It helps small businesses and the self-employed to succeed by offering them advice, financial products and support. The FSB states that its

“mission is to help smaller businesses survive through these difficult times and ultimately achieve their ambitions.”

The FSB’s principal objectives include being

“fully representative of the whole UK small business community”;

providing

“support, advice and practical solutions to”

small businesses; advocating

“on behalf of small businesses”

by

“providing a powerful voice heard by Governments and key decision makers”;

and managing

“financial resources in a manner that ensures best value for members”.

Currently, almost 335,000 small and medium-sized enterprises are operating in Scotland, and they account for 98 per cent of private businesses. They employ around 900,000 people and account for a turnover of £82 billion annually.

I have been an MSP for more than three years and, throughout that time, I have championed small businesses in my area through making visits, asking questions, giving speeches, lodging motions and highlighting campaigns such as shop local, Scotland Loves Local week and small business Saturday.

Since last year, I have been running my own small business awards to celebrate the best small businesses locally. Last year’s winners included No1 Boutique, which is an owner-led business that sells unique clothing and went online for the first time during Covid to survive; Gavin’s Mill fair trade shop and cafe, which specialises in organic foods and home baking and has many volunteers supporting it; and many more great businesses that, unfortunately, I do not have the time tonight to mention.

The Covid-19 pandemic and the cost of living crisis have presented challenges for Scotland’s SMEs. A lack of access to cash and to financial support has meant that many SMEs have been forced to shut down or have been sold off.

It is disappointing that, instead of mirroring the previous Conservative UK Government’s provision of a 75 per cent business rates relief, SNP ministers in Holyrood have decided to punish businesses. Figures that the Office for National Statistics released show that, between September 2022 and September 2023, there was an 8 per cent fall in the total number of retail jobs in Scotland, which accounted for about 29,000 jobs. Had the Scottish Government passed on the rates relief to Scottish businesses, those losses could have been mitigated.

Some other actions that the SNP Government could undertake to help small businesses include maintaining the small business bonus scheme at its current threshold at least; ensuring that any further regulation does not stifle small businesses’ ability to grow; tackling late payments; and creating opportunities for further growth. I hope that, in his closing speech, the minister will offer much-needed support to small businesses across Scotland.

I again congratulate the FSB on its 50th anniversary and on the excellent work that it does. Here’s to another 50 years.

17:36

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): I, too, congratulate Audrey Nicoll on securing the debate and, most important, I congratulate the FSB on its 50th anniversary. As members can imagine, the vast majority of businesses in my constituency of Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale are small and medium-sized enterprises, which

reflects the situation throughout Scotland. Such businesses are, indeed, the backbone of our economy. They are embedded in the communities and employ people locally, their employees often spend in the local economy, and their commitment is local.

I celebrate small businesses, from the local Galashiels painter and decorator who painted my office and the glazier who installed the windows to the many other businesses and shops in the area. I suppose that I am also a small business in Gala, where I have been since 1999.

Austerity made the situation hard for all those businesses before Covid. Covid was dreadful but, thankfully, with help from the UK and Scottish Governments, many managed to stagger on. The Central Bar in the Northgate in Peebles—a free house—received no support, as the premises are too small to accommodate the hot food provision that was required to qualify for the support scheme. However, Roddy MacKay, the owner of that wee, friendly gem, buckled down, redecorated and smartened up the pub frontage—indeed, he recently won an award for the floral display. That demonstrates the resilience of a small business that is embedded in the community.

However, we still have austerity and the fallout from Covid, and many people's shopping habits have changed. Further, businesses' work patterns have changed—home working was an exception, but now it can be the norm. That impacts on how businesses operate, while they still have the same outlays in rental, heating and so on. Indeed, we know how retail has changed, with shopping online no longer an occasional or marginal activity—Covid changed that for good.

I will raise the impact of the small business bonus scheme, which Murdo Fraser and others referred to. I was here in 2007 when it was brought in, in agreement with the Conservatives, who supported the SNP's budget. It was a good idea at the time, and I support it today. Figures from 2023 show that, in Midlothian, 1,060 businesses benefited from 100 per cent relief—they paid nothing—and another 870 had a measure of relief. In the Borders, 5,170 paid no rates under the scheme in that year, and 5,280 had a measure of relief.

The FSB provides support in the form of financial expertise and by speaking up for small businesses to the Governments here and at UK level. It also speaks up on their behalf to the local MSP, if required—my door is always open.

Local people can also do their bit. I note that Pam Gosal referred to Scotland Loves Local week, which began on 26 August. I shop locally anyway, so that was no challenge for me.

Among the local shops in my constituency, there is AilaBells, in the Penicuik precinct, which has a wonderful array of upmarket Scottish goods. The precinct has footfall, but I laid down the gauntlet to Shelley, the owner, about going online, where I am sure that she could increase sales. I told her that I would be checking on her progress. I also directed her to Business Gateway for assistance in setting up her website. That is the problem for sole owners—they are so busy that they sometimes cannot do the stuff that they need to do to expand. She needs help with that, because it would make a world of difference.

Then there is—wait for this name—Fifi La Bonk! at School Brae in Peebles. What a name, and it is apposite; exotic and idiosyncratic—that is just the owner—are the clothes that she makes and designs individually. Websites help with such esoteric and—if I may say so—even for me, offbeat designs; they are staggeringly interesting.

In both those shops, I made lovely purchases; I might wear them in here at some point. By the way, I pay for the items myself—just to put that on the record. I encourage communities to be mindful, even in these tough times, of supporting local businesses and shops as best they can. As others have said, the serious point is that they are the lifeblood of our communities. They are embedded in and feel indebted and responsible to their communities. We should keep our high streets and town centres, which are under such pressure today, alive and kicking.

Again, I congratulate the FSB on its special anniversary, my colleague on securing the debate and, if I may say so, all the small and medium-sized enterprises in my constituency.

17:41

Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con):

I, too, congratulate Audrey Nicoll on securing this important debate. I was particularly keen to contribute today to thank the FSB for the support that it has given me—and, I know, all politicians—since I entered elected office. It has been a constant both nationally and locally, feeding in ideas for manifestos and making suggestions that we can take forward at a local level.

As a Government minister and as party leader, I would meet the FSB regularly to hear its members' concerns, what its members were looking for and what it felt that parliamentarians across the political spectrum could deliver for it. That is why, over the past 50 years, the FSB has built itself into an organisation that every single political party respects and listens to and whose suggestions they hope to bring on board.

At national level, the FSB has played a crucial role, but I also want to speak about what it has

done with me and others at a local level. I was reminded by Mike Duncan, with whom I spoke earlier today, about some of the FSB's involvement locally in Moray. I know that the minister will touch on that as well. Back in 2010, we had the terrible decision to close RAF Kinloss and there was the potential for RAF Lossiemouth to close, too. When a task force was brought together, with Moray Chamber of Commerce, the council and elected representatives, the FSB was a vital part of that. It spoke for the small businesses, particularly those close to Kinloss, Forres and the surrounding towns, about the impact that the closure would have and the double impact if we were also to lose Lossiemouth. Not only was Lossiemouth retained because of the campaign that the FSB was part of, we also have Kinloss barracks—in fact, Lossiemouth has increased its presence in the local economy. That is thanks to the efforts of everyone on that task force, including the FSB.

The FSB also played an invaluable role during the Covid pandemic. We had weekly meetings online in Moray with various different organisations. I have to say that David Groundwater was an absolute force of nature. He seemed to be on every single call that we were involved in. In particular, he was looking at the impact that we were facing of decisions that were taken at a UK level or Scottish level that might have been slightly different, or even of decisions taken in the north-east, where some councils were doing things one way and others were doing them another way. Not only was the FSB quickly digesting new legislation, rules and enforcement practices and putting them out to its members, it was feeding back to members of Parliament at Westminster and Holyrood on what was going well and what could be improved. That was crucial.

Most recently, Mike Duncan, as our area representative and the development manager for Moray, Tayside and the north-east, has sat on the Elgin town fund, which is a £20 million fund from the UK Government to invest in Elgin. It has not been re-committed to by the current Labour Government, but I hope that it will be, because it is an opportunity to drive forward investment in Elgin, in which the FSB has a crucial role to play.

Finally, I could not speak in a debate about the Federation of Small Businesses here in Parliament without mentioning another person who has long been associated with the FSB in Moray and nationally: Pearl Hamilton. She has worked tirelessly on behalf of FSB members in Moray and across the country on policy development. Earlier this year, she was made a Burgess of Forres. In the citation for her becoming a Burgess of Forres, mention was made not only of the work that she does in her shop, Pearl's Pet Care, and the work that she has done for local charities in helping old-

age pensioners and getting volunteers to help out in the community, but of the fact that she has been and continues to be a major force in the Federation of Small Businesses.

It is right that we celebrate 50 years of the FSB nationally. We celebrate people such as Pearl, who have worked hard as business owners and in contributing to the work of the FSB, and we look forward to the next 50 years. Members will be unanimous in praising the FSB, but perhaps the greater gift that we can give to the federation is to encourage all our constituents to use their small businesses. They are the life-blood of our towns, our villages and our communities. We must encourage people to continue to use our small businesses, because they provide so much for us.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Due to the number of members who have still to speak in the debate, I am minded to accept a motion without notice, under rule 8.14.3, to extend the debate by up to 30 minutes.

Motion moved,

That, under Rule 8.14.3, the debate be extended by up to 30 minutes.—[*Audrey Nicoll*]

Motion agreed to.

17:46

Lorna Slater (Lothian) (Green): I draw members' attention to my entry in the register of interests: at the time of my election, I was working for Orbital Marine Power, which is a small tidal energy company that has about 30 members of staff.

I have a combined degree in electrical and mechanical engineering design, which, these days, would probably be called mechatronics. That was a reasonably new idea 30 years ago, when I started university. I cannot believe that that is how long ago it was. The idea behind it was to create engineers specifically to support smaller technical businesses that could not afford separate mechanical, electrical and software engineering departments.

I am a machine builder. Throughout the 20-plus years of my career, I worked for innovative small tech companies that, in many cases, were doing absolutely cutting-edge stuff, which included work on robotic telescopes, automation for the biomedical industry, the development of microelectronic mechanical systems and, most recently, work on wave and tidal energy. I know first hand how much small businesses contribute, not only to the baseline of our economy, jobs, investment and revenue, but to innovation, design and new technology, and I am delighted to participate in today's debate to celebrate that contribution.

We all want our economy to thrive. A big part of that is finding ways for successful small businesses to scale up. There is significant benefit to the economy from a business of 50 people becoming a business of 150 people. More of our attention should be focused on businesses that are already doing well but need support to take that next step. I would like targeted support to be provided to help such businesses to grow, whether by setting ambitious regulation and legislation for net zero and low-carbon technology, providing financial support for new equipment, machinery and software or by inspiring more young people—especially girls and women—to study science, maths, engineering and technology. We need to encourage more people to learn to weld, to wire things up, to plumb things in and to write software, and we need to have more people who know how to build things, to repair things and to make things last.

Whether in designing, building or repairing, there are creative problems to solve, teams to be part of and change to bring to our country and the world. I want young people to know that that is work that makes a difference. Much of that work will be undertaken and led by small businesses. Small businesses are embedded in their communities. Their revenue is spent locally and on the wages of local people, rather than being squirreled away in tax havens. Small businesses contribute to our public services because they pay the taxes that the mega-corporations and multinationals are experts in dodging.

The Scottish Greens have long believed that one of the best ways to support small businesses is to make sure that big businesses have to play fair. Governments must ensure that big businesses pay fair taxes, pay living wages and clean up after themselves. The Scottish Greens know that small businesses depend on having good internet connections, good public transport links and affordable energy, and we will continue to work for more investment in those areas.

I look forward to meeting the FSB on Friday and congratulating it on its anniversary. The Scottish Greens want our economy to thrive, and we recognise the role of small business in that. We will continue to work towards that end and are grateful to Audrey Nicoll for the debate.

17:50

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): I agree with just about everything that Lorna Slater said. I can hardly believe that I am saying those words, but I absolutely agree with what she said. To the list of things that big businesses should do, I add that they should pay their bills on time, in full, and not make small businesses wait for 60, 90 or 120 days to have their bills paid.

I congratulate Audrey Nicoll on bringing the motion because, as I mentioned to Daniel Johnson, it provides us with an opportunity to talk up the importance of small businesses—and, indeed, medium-sized businesses—to our national economy. I can honestly say that, in my career in business, the greatest accelerated learning that I had was in working for a medium-sized business in central Scotland. There, on the rock face of business, people really learn what it means to be the backbone of an economy.

Small and medium-sized businesses have some strategic advantages, which were listed by Lorna Slater. They have advantages over larger businesses because they have the ability to adapt quickly to changing market conditions and to embrace innovation with a greater degree of agility than a larger business, which might find it more difficult.

Christine Grahame is absolutely right about the deep-rooted resilience that is in many small businesses. However, that is not to say that there are not, as others have suggested, real challenges for small businesses. In that respect, thank goodness for organisations such as the Federation of Small Businesses, because, not least among the challenges is that of running a business while investing time and energy in all the strategic things that go into running and growing a successful business: from recruitment and retention to staff training, managing the cash, managing inventory, and drawing up contracts and tenders. As was mentioned earlier, tenders are a nightmare for small businesses.

Christine Grahame: In the spirit of the debate, I say to Mr Kerr that I am in agreement with almost everything that he says.

Stephen Kerr: Knock me over with a feather, we have unanimity—however, why not? The subject should bring us all together, because it is the meat and drink of how we will grow our country's economy and become a more prosperous Scotland.

The owners, leaders and operators of the businesses that we are describing are both generalists and specialists. I congratulate everyone who is connected to the world of small business in Scotland, because I genuinely believe, from my own experience, that they are the heroes of our economy.

I will say something about the need for us to foster entrepreneurship in our country. So many young people—the current generations—have a flair for spotting opportunities and an almost intuitive grasp of how to make the most of them. They have the gene that is needed to be a successful entrepreneur. As a number of others have said, we need to support their aspirations by

making it as easy as possible for them to set up a microbusiness, at whatever age they first have the idea of doing something. Again, as others have said, we should do everything that we can to encourage young entrepreneurs. They exist all around us, and we need to nurture them.

I have a friend whose son is barely into his teens and is already harnessing the power of social media to monetise some of his hobbies and interests. As a result, he has a growing, self-generated income. Thousands of young people have the capacity and the inclination to do exactly that, because of the nature of the technological environment in which we now live.

We need to encourage the creation of micro and small businesses, and we must make it easier and more possible for those businesses to be scaled up through support. Small businesses need our vocal and practical support as policy makers.

In closing, I praise the work done by many people. The FSB and the chambers of commerce have been mentioned, as has Business Gateway, which also deserves appreciation. There are many other forms of grass-roots support programmes. Let the Parliament resolve to become the greatest champion of Scotland's entrepreneurs. Let us see more positivity on all sides of the chamber, as we have seen in this debate, to champion Scotland's small businesses.

17:55

The Minister for Business (Richard Lochhead): It is not often that we have Christine Grahame agreeing with Stephen Kerr and Stephen Kerr agreeing with Lorna Slater, so, first, I congratulate the FSB on achieving that major milestone. Secondly, and more importantly, I join all members—particularly Audrey Nicoll, who lodged the motion, for which I thank her—in congratulating the FSB on achieving its 50 years of supporting small businesses here, in Scotland, and across these islands.

I welcome the senior representatives of the FSB to the public gallery for this debate. As an MSP and as a minister, I have, like many members, engaged heavily with small businesses and the FSB over the years, which has been of enormous value. Douglas Ross mentioned some of the initiatives in Moray over the years. As the constituency MSP for Moray, I very much associate myself with his comments in tribute to the FSB and its representatives.

Other members have mentioned Mike Duncan, who is the north-east Scotland development manager for the FSB. Last year, he took me on a tour of small businesses in Keith. We visited Square Roots Cafe, J&E Kleaning, the Keith Motorist DIY business and the Ugie House hotel. It

was very valuable to visit those important businesses in my constituency.

Audrey Nicoll and Lorna Slater mentioned small businesses in the energy sector, Clare Haughey mentioned a laser company in her constituency, and Stephen Kerr mentioned social media businesses in his area. That reminds us that, when we talk about small businesses, we are talking about businesses right across the Scottish economy; we are not talking simply about the retail businesses on our high streets that we visit to encourage people to shop locally, although I am sure that we all do so and that those are a valuable part of the debate. Small businesses are represented in all parts of the Scottish economy and are doing incredible things in relation to innovation and other areas.

As Pam Gosal mentioned, small businesses support communities, so they are not just about supporting the economy. Many small businesses are anchors in our local communities.

As Daniel Johnson mentioned, it can, at times, be very tough and lonely running a small business, and it is extremely hard work. People have to be determined and have grit, but it is rewarding, and we have a resilient small business community in Scotland. Those are important points to make.

As other members have mentioned, our small businesses have faced a number of significant challenges. Members mentioned the pandemic, and we know from speaking to local small businesses that rising energy bills have been a big challenge for them. In the past few days, Aston University has published a report on the impact of Brexit on small businesses and the difficulties of exporting and so on. Those are real challenges that the small business community has had to cope with. Inflation and the cost of raw materials and supplies have also increased dramatically.

The Scottish Government is not responsible for all those challenges, but there are some areas for which we are responsible and which can be challenging. A number of members mentioned the regulatory framework and the burden of regulations and how we have to get that right. One challenge was the role of the business and regulatory impact assessments that we carry out in Scotland, which are known as BRIAs. The new deal for business commits us to improving the regulatory landscape, which we recognise can have a real impact on small businesses.

The FSB played a central and constructive role in shaping the Government's understanding of the cumulative regulatory impact, and it has contributed to improving the BRIA process. The FSB's diligence and partnership working with the Scottish Government led to the publication of a revised BRIA—a revised impact assessment. That

includes strengthening guidance for officials to consider impacts on small businesses when developing new policy or regulation. The FSB continues to offer balanced and considered leadership through the sub-group on regulation and business partnership, which is also part of that agenda.

Lorna Slater: Does the minister agree that small businesses can also be supported through regulation and legislation? For example, upcoming legislation on heat in buildings could set a level playing field for businesses in the construction industry, so that all builders of new homes and buildings have to meet the same high environmental standards on insulation and so on.

Richard Lochhead: I agree with the important general principle that Lorna Slater has expressed. Quite often, businesses approach politicians and MSPs to seek policy interventions from Governments to ensure that there is a level playing field in particular areas, so it is good to mention that principle in this debate.

As a Government, we must continue to work with businesses to develop a process for identifying, considering and, if appropriate, removing regulations that are no longer required, and we are looking to identify new regulations that can support businesses in Scotland, especially our small businesses. The FSB is playing a crucial role in all those agendas.

Of Scotland's 340,760 businesses, just over 98 per cent are small businesses, and 95 per cent of those are sole traders or microbusinesses. Vital sectors of the Scottish economy, such as the tourism and hospitality sector, are covered in that 98 per cent figure. In 2023, that sector alone comprised 13,495 registered small businesses, with 117,455 people or more being employed in the small business sector in 2022.

The retail sector is another important part of our economy, and small businesses are represented heavily in that sector. Many members have mentioned the importance of shopping locally and supporting our small businesses in the retail sector. In 2023, that sector alone comprised more than 14,000 registered businesses, which accounted for 8.3 per cent of Scotland's total.

Members have emphasised the important role that shops and retailers play in our local communities and in our towns and cities, and they have mentioned some of the challenges that our high streets have faced, particularly during and following the pandemic. A lot of work, done in partnership with local government and other local and regional economic players, is under way to revitalise our town centres in Scotland for the benefit of our small businesses. Again, the FSB is

playing a very important role in helping us to move that work forward.

I should point out that, when the Government has negotiations and discussions with small businesses and the Federation of Small Businesses, we clearly do not always agree on everything—that will be the case for all Governments—but we try to find solutions to common challenges when we can.

I will make a couple of final points. Murdo Fraser described the small business bonus scheme as a “real success story”, which, of course, it is. The policy has been in place for a number of years, and I have spoken to small businesses—as, I am sure, others have—that have said that they would not exist if it were not for that scheme, which has taken 100,000 businesses out of paying rates altogether. There are also the services that are offered by Business Gateway.

I reiterate all the powerful points that members across the chamber have made about the vital role that the Federation of Small Businesses plays in championing and giving a strong voice to the small business community in Scotland. I congratulate it again on achieving its first 50 years. I have been an MSP for 25 of those years, and I look forward to the next 50 years of the FSB supporting Scotland's small business community.

Meeting closed at 18:04.

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