OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Meeting of the Parliament

Wednesday 5 March 2025

Session 6

The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Wednesday 5 March 2025

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Scottish Parliament

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

Portfolio Question Time

Deputy First Minister Responsibilities, Economy and Gaelic

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): Good afternoon. The first item of business is portfolio question time, and the first portfolio is Deputy First Minister responsibilities, economy and Gaelic. I remind members that, if they wish to ask a supplementary question, they should press their request-to-speak buttons during the relevant question. There is a lot of interest in asking supplementary questions for both this and the next portfolio, so I make the usual appeal for brevity in questions and responses.

Businesses (Opportunities for Scaling Up)

1. **Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government what steps it is taking to incentivise businesses to seek opportunities for scaling up. (S6O-04378)

The Minister for Business (Richard Lochhead): The Scottish Government is incentivising businesses to scale up through targeted support, including our £15 million enterprise package and Scotland's first dedicated series A fund with Par Equity and the Scottish National Investment Bank. Through the Techscaler grant, we have provided over £720,000 for feasibility studies and implementation projects. Beyond funding, our £42 million Techscaler programme offers specialised infrastructure, expert mentoring and international opportunities through initiatives such as our silicon valley and Singapore pop-ups, which connect Scottish founders with global investors and markets to accelerate their growth potential.

Alexander Stewart: Facilitating new business activity is crucial to economic growth, and it is as much about enabling new business as it is about enabling existing businesses to expand and reach wider markets. A great deal of valuable expertise exists in our small and medium-sized enterprises, which we should be harnessing. Will the Government consider making a proper assessment of how it can smooth and ease small businesses' transitions through those thresholds as they seek to grow?

Richard Lochhead: Those are the types of considerations that we always have in mind, because we want to support small businesses in Scotland to expand and grow, and to ensure that venture capital and private equity are there to help them to expand. There has been a long-running debate in Scotland about how to ensure that that gap is closed.

Scottish Enterprise plays a big role. It has invested £921 million over the past 21 years, leveraging £2.45 billion of private sector investment to help companies to scale up. Those figures go up to the 2023-24 financial year. We also have other initiatives including the Scottish National Investment Bank, which helps businesses to scale up when their commercial cases are not attracting investment from elsewhere. The SNIB takes those decisions on an on-going basis.

A number of initiatives are under way, but we are always happy to consider new assessments.

Clare Haughey (Rutherglen) (SNP): Recent reports have indicated that Scotland is leading the United Kingdom in the growth of technology start-ups and that its success runs entirely contrary to the overall decline in the sector in the rest of the UK. Given the Scottish Government's ambition to make Scotland one of the best places in the world to develop, launch and scale up a tech company, what assessment has the minister made of the success of Scotland's leading Techscaler programme?

Richard Lochhead: I thank Clare Haughey for highlighting some positive reports that have been published about Scotland's performance in that area. The "Techscaler Annual Report 2024" shows remarkable progress. Techscaler has more than 1,400 members from nearly 1,000 start-ups, and member businesses have raised £118 million in capital since the programme began. Of their founders, 34.7 per cent identify as female, which is significantly higher than the industry average.

A comprehensive evaluation of the Techscaler programme's delivery to date has been commissioned. It is currently under way and is due to be completed in the summer of this year. That will help us to build on those successes and further strengthen Scotland's position as a leading start-up nation.

Petition PE1979 (National Whistleblowing Officer)

2. **Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to the calls in public petition PE1979 for gaps in the Scottish child abuse inquiry to be addressed and for an independent whistleblowing officer for education and children's services to be established. (S6O-04379)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Economy and Gaelic (Kate Forbes): We are fully committed to ensuring that Scotland's child protection system is as robust as it can be. The Minister for Children, Young People and The Promise has provided several responses to the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee about PE1979, which are available on the Scottish Parliament website, and she has also met the petitioners.

The minister's response to the committee dated 26 February advised that officials are working to understand what improvements can be made. They include reviewing current whistleblowing processes and engaging with on-going reviews, including the Scottish child abuse inquiry and the review of the General Teaching Council for Scotland's fitness to teach procedures.

Colin Smyth: The petitioners have rightly highlighted the huge power imbalance that exists between the lone victim or whistleblower who seeks to highlight serious child safeguarding failures and the public bodies. Those who make complaints often face huge obstacles, not least because of public bodies' lack of openness and transparency and the fact that they often have unlimited legal and financial resources to defend themselves against allegations.

Does the Deputy First Minister not recognise that what the Scottish Government has proposed will not address that huge power imbalance but will simply enable public bodies and institutions to continue to mark their own homework? Does she not accept the argument of the victims who are arguing for an independent whistleblower to be set up to support people who bring forward complaints?

Kate Forbes: I thank the member for that point. I very much recognise that his primary concern is to ensure that child abuse is eradicated and that perpetrators are strongly held to account. I will pass his comments on to the Minister for Children, Young People and The Promise and will make sure that any proposals that we proceed with have the confidence of those who want to have a stronger system in place.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: A number of members want to ask supplementaries. I will try to get them all in, but they will need to be brief, as will the responses.

Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP): Although the inquiry is still under way, work to improve the protection of children in Scotland should remain on-going. Can the cabinet secretary provide an update on the new national child sexual abuse and exploitation strategic group and its work to support survivors and prevent exploitation?

Kate Forbes: We are working closely with partners to deliver a co-ordinated multi-agency response to prevent child sexual abuse and exploitation in all its forms. In recognition of the need to go further, we have established a new strategic group to provide national leadership and further improve the shared response in Scotland to child sexual abuse and exploitation. The group last met in December, and it is due to meet again in the coming weeks. It brings together key stakeholders including representatives of social work, the police, health, education and local authorities, as well as expert practitioners, charities, researchers and academics.

Roz McCall (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I note the Deputy First Minister's response, but the original question related to gaps in the Scottish child abuse inquiry, and her response brings me back to that. Allegations have been made about covering up patterns of behaviour among male teachers that relate to physical and sexual abuse; hiding behind the general data protection regulation; social workers withholding information from records and placing children at significant risk of physical, sexual and emotional abuse; and cover-ups of the mishandling of child protection in schools, to name but a few of the concerns.

What more is the Scottish Government doing to fill those gaps in the inquiry to ensure that our children are safe?

Kate Forbes: I will answer Roz McCall's question in the same spirit in which I answered Colin Smyth's, by recognising members' interest in ensuring that the inquiry is as robust as possible.

It is important that the Scottish child abuse inquiry remains independent and that its chair, Lady Smith, has the ability to decide how the inquiry fulfils its terms of reference, which I believe are broad. We have been clear that we will carefully consider the inquiry's findings and recommendations, and that we will move as speedily as possible to implement those recommendations.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We need to move on to question 3.

Economic Development (Direct Links with Markets)

3. **Annabelle Ewing (Cowdenbeath) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government how it is facilitating direct links with markets to promote economic development. (S6O-04380)

The Minister for Business (Richard Lochhead): Our export strategy, "A Trading Nation—a plan for growing Scotland's exports", guides our efforts to strengthen international links and support our economic ambitions. For example, we have added 15 new trade specialists

in key markets, doubled the GlobalScot network to 1,200 people in 60 markets and grown the trade and investment envoy network. In addition, through Scottish Development International, we provide exporting programmes including trade missions, trade shows, exhibitions and ministerial visits. Through the international trade partnership with Scottish Chambers of Commerce, we also fund trade missions for new exporters.

Direct and resilient transport links are key to effective international connectivity, and we are working continuously with partners to understand how best to service them.

Annabelle Ewing: The minister will be aware of efforts by DFDS to re-establish a direct ferry route for passengers and freight between Rosyth, in my constituency, and Dunkirk—the third-largest port in France, which is 20 minutes from France's most significant fish market. The opportunities for Scotland's exporters and for tourism are significant, but I understand that, to date, DFDS has come up against a bit of a brick wall from Scottish Government officials. Will the minister arrange to meet DFDS to see what, if anything, the Scottish Government can do to unlock the huge potential for Scotland of such a direct link with the key markets of the European continent?

Richard Lochhead: I assure Annabelle Ewing that the Scottish Government has conducted extensive discussions with the promoters of the potential Rosyth-Dunkirk ferry service. The Cabinet Secretary for Transport has met them and has held discussions with United Kingdom Government counterparts, and the Deputy First Minister will be happy to pick up on those discussions with DFDS and Ms Ewing if required.

The Scottish Government would welcome any expansion to current facilities at Rosyth to enable a new service to be introduced, although that would primarily be a financial and commercial decision for Forth Ports and potential operators.

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Air links are very important in promoting economic development. What is the Scottish Government's current policy on the devolution of air passenger duty? Is it still working towards that? If so, and if air passenger duty becomes air departure tax, what is the Government's policy on adjusting the current rates upwards or downwards?

Richard Lochhead: Air links are very important for Scotland's global connections and internally. We continue to have discussions on the issues that Murdo Fraser mentions. Speaking as the minister for tourism, I know that my transport colleagues have assistance available to establish new direct links from Scotland. That is important for business and tourism.

A96 Dualling

4. **Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government what discussions the economy secretary has had with ministerial colleagues regarding any economic impact of delaying the full dualling of the A96, in light of the Moray and Inverness Chambers of Commerce calling for the road to be dualled in full and raising concerns that delays to delivering this are "constraining economic growth" in the area. (S6O-04381)

The Minister for Employment and Investment (Tom Arthur): The Scottish Government fully recognises the crucial role of transport infrastructure in supporting sustainable economic growth and access to essential services. Our position on the A96 has not changed. We remain in favour of full dualling, and we are progressing the dualling process from Inverness to Nairn, including the Nairn bypass. Feedback from the consultation on the draft outcomes of the A96 corridor review—including from Moray and Inverness Chambers of Commerce—will be key in helping to inform our final decision on how best to take forward improvements to the A96.

Douglas Ross: I am sorry that the Deputy First Minister did not answer that question, because it was framed in such a way as to elicit a response from almost the top of Government.

Does the minister agree with the two chambers of commerce, which say in their letter that

"the lack of progress on this vital project is causing increasing frustration and economic constraint"

and

"The lost decade of inactivity has stifled the potential for economic growth"?

Will he tell us how many people have responded to the most recent consultation on the A96 corridor review and when we will hear the Scottish Government's response to that?

Tom Arthur: The total number of responses is just over 1,400. The matter is now under active consideration by Transport Scotland, and the cabinet secretary will update the Parliament at the conclusion of that process.

I reassure Douglas Ross and the Inverness and Moray Chambers of Commerce that I very much recognise the significant and crucial role of transport infrastructure links in ensuring economic development. All members, I think, are united in recognising that, and I am happy to continue to engage constructively with the chambers of commerce on those issues, as I have been engaging on transport infrastructure with chambers of commerce elsewhere in Scotland. I assure Douglas Ross and the chambers of

commerce that the matter has the full attention of the Government.

Fergus Ewing (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP): There have been serial breaches of commitments to dual the A96 by 2030. The A96 connects Aberdeen, which is the European capital of renewable energy, with the Highlands, which is the powerhouse for renewable energy—the number 1 priority for the Government. Why should the Highlands be expected to deliver all of that, given that a goat track connects those two areas? Does the minister agree that it is simply impossible to defend the failure of the Scottish Government to implement policies that have been promised in every election since 2011?

Tom Arthur: I recognise the member's tenacious campaigning on the matter for his constituents and the wider region. As I set out in my original answer to Mr Ross, I very much recognise the significant importance of that arterial route for the economic prosperity of not only the north-east and the Highlands but the whole of Scotland.

As the member will be well aware, we endured 14 years of austerity in an exceptionally turbulent period, which has impacted the delivery of a number of infrastructure projects. As I set out in my original answer, the Government's position has not changed. We remain in favour of the full dualling of the A96, and we are progressing the dualling process from Inverness to Nairn, including the Nairn bypass.

Self-catering Accommodation Businesses

5. **Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government what discussions economy ministers have had with ministerial colleagues regarding what steps it is taking to improve regulatory clarity and reduce compliance costs for self-catering accommodation businesses. (S6O-04382)

The Minister for Employment and Investment (Tom Arthur): Ministers engage across the Government on a range of issues where sectors may be impacted by regulation. In relation to the self-catering accommodation sector, that includes engagement on a range of regulatory issues that relate to the visitor economy to ensure that there is clarity and appropriate guidance on implementation and compliance, including, where necessary, on working in partnership with local authorities and public bodies where they have a role in applications and support for self-catering businesses.

We have also commissioned VisitScotland to chair an expert guidance group, bringing together expertise from across the industry and local authorities to provide recommendations on clarifying the short-term let guidance for operators and licensing authorities. VisitScotland will present its recommendations in March.

Sue Webber: I thank the minister for that response, but we are at risk of losing the valuable and productive economic sector of self-catering accommodation businesses. These small local businesses are under attack, and they are being forced out of the sector by demands for planning applications from local authorities, most notably here, in the city of Edinburgh. Shockingly, that is despite judicial rulings that the permissions are not mandatory for self-catering operators that were in business before September 2022. The practices contradict judicial rulings and appear to be arbitrary, with inconsistency between local authorities. Lord Braid has rightly described them as "oppressive and disproportionate". What immediate steps will the Scottish Government take to ensure that local authorities abide by the law and end the unjust imposition of planning requirements on self-catering operators that the courts have already ruled to be lawful?

Tom Arthur: As the member will appreciate, local authorities are autonomous bodies, and, like any public body, they have to uphold and comply with the law. With regard to the work that the Scottish Government has undertaken, as I said, we have commissioned VisitScotland to chair the expert guidance group, which is bringing together expertise from across the industry. We anticipate that VisitScotland will present its recommendations this month.

Edinburgh's Economy

6. **Ben Macpherson (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government how it is supporting Edinburgh's economy. (S6O-04383)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Economy and Gaelic (Kate Forbes): Growing the economies of our cities and regions is a priority for the Government, and we are investing significant time, effort and funding in the area.

In addition to the £300 million investment in the Edinburgh and south-east Scotland city region deal, which is supporting infrastructure and innovation to drive growth, and the range of benefits that are being delivered through the Forth green freeport, we have invested nearly £70 million in regeneration projects across Edinburgh, all of which are aimed at creating jobs and supporting individuals, businesses and communities.

Ben Macpherson: As the cabinet secretary stated, much is being invested in Edinburgh, and the Edinburgh economy is thriving. That is driving

significant population growth, which creates additional pressures on services and housing demand. The Convention of Scottish Local Authorities' distribution formula determines the allocation that the City of Edinburgh Council gets for its budget, but how is the Scottish Government providing separate funding streams to meet Edinburgh's growing needs? One example is the investment in Granton, in my constituency, which the First Minister announced today. What more can the Scottish Government do to support growth and to deal with the pressures that that puts on our population?

Kate Forbes: Ben Macpherson is absolutely right to draw a distinction between the standard general revenue grant that local authorities receive and the extra and additional funding that is invested in particular areas of Scotland. He mentioned Granton, and I believe that the First Minister visited Granton this very day to hear about the City of Edinburgh Council's ambitious programme of investment for the area.

We have also been boosting the city's budget with a further £16.8 million, which takes support for affordable housing to more than £51 million and a total of £160 million in the past three financial years. We are accepting bids to several funds to support the first phase of the Granton investment programme, including the housing infrastructure fund.

Edinburgh and South-east Scotland City Region Deal

7. **Foysol Choudhury (Lothian) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government what resources it has allocated to projects in the Edinburgh and south-east Scotland city region deal, including transport projects. (S6O-04384)

The Minister for Employment and Investment (Tom Arthur): The Scottish Government has committed £300 million to the Edinburgh and south-east Scotland city region deal. The projects that will be supported were selected by deal partners and include £120 million for improvements at the Sheriffhall roundabout, £20 million for public transport improvements in west Edinburgh, £65 million for housing, £60 million for innovation and infrastructure to drive business growth, £10 million for the Dunard centre—which will create a world-class music venue in the heart of Edinburgh—and £25 million to develop the skills base that is needed by employers.

Foysol Choudhury: One of the key interventions to drive inclusive growth in the city region deal is improving connectivity. A train station at Winchburgh in West Lothian could unlock millions in decongestion benefits and strengthen the millions that have already been invested in the area by developers. Councils planned to apply for funding from the city region deal. Does the minister agree that that is exactly the type of project that should be funded?

Tom Arthur: I appreciate the member's points, but he will appreciate that a proposed Winchburgh railway station is not something that is deal funded. As I set out in my original answer, funding through the deal is now fully committed, but I am happy to have further discussions and engagement with the member.

Colin Beattie (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP): The Edinburgh and south-east Scotland deal includes the highly successful data-driven innovation programme. Edinburgh has long been a leading artificial intelligence and robotics zone in the United Kingdom. It was therefore highly disappointing when the UK Government announced Oxford as the UK's first AI growth zone and reneged on the commitment to Edinburgh as the home of the UK's first and the world's third exascale supercomputer. Does the minister share my concerns that the Labour Government is bypassing long-standing economic investment opportunities in Scotland?

Tom Arthur: As noted by my colleague the Minister for Business, the Scottish Government is deeply concerned to learn that much-needed UK Government investment, which could site the exascale supercomputer at the University of Edinburgh, is now in doubt. I share the member's concerns about that issue, given that the University of Edinburgh plays a central role in the UK's data science and innovation sector.

The Minister for Business and I are collectively and actively engaging on that, and the Deputy First Minister has written to the Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology to make the point that Scotland is well placed to play a leading role in hosting AI growth zones and vital AI infrastructure, and that the exascale should be looked at again as part of the spending review. We are currently awaiting a response.

Gaelic Support (North Lanarkshire Mòd)

8. **Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government how it plans to further support Gaelic at a local level, in light of the announcement of North Lanarkshire's first ever local Mòd, which will take place this September. (S6O-04385)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Economy and Gaelic (Kate Forbes): Let me first offer my congratulations to North Lanarkshire Council and to An Comunn Gàidhealach for working together to establish a local Mòd in North Lanarkshire. It is excellent news, and it builds on and adds to the many Gaelic activities that are already available in that

council area. It also provides opportunities for young people to use the language and strengthen their Gaelic skills, but, perhaps even more than that, it strengthens their musical skills and a range of cultural skills.

A range of measures are in place that support Gaelic at a local level. Local authorities support Gaelic medium education, the work of Gaelic bodies such as Fèisean nan Gàidheal, An Comunn Gàidhealach and Comann Nam Parant, and the work of Gaelic development officers. All that work will be strengthened by the provisions in the Scottish Languages Bill.

Fulton MacGregor: I, too, welcome the announcement of the Mòd, which will help to foster and develop the Gaelic language in my area, which traditionally would not have been considered a Gaelic-speaking heartland—that is, certainly, not in comparison with the cabinet secretary's constituency.

From a strictly social perspective, promoting other languages helps us to preserve our heritage, engage with communities and improve our cultural awareness. How can the Scottish Government work with councils to ensure that Gaelic initiatives receive sustained support at the local level, especially in areas outwith the stronger Gaelic-speaking regions? How does it intend to build on events such as the North Lanarkshire Mòd to create a lasting legacy for Gaelic in the region?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: As briefly as possible, Deputy First Minister.

Kate Forbes: The member is absolutely right to highlight those points. We support and work with councils to ensure that Gaelic initiatives receive sustained support. It is worth making the point that this is not only about Gaelic-speaking families, let us say. The Scottish traditional music scene would be poorer without local Mòds and without Fèisean nan Gàidheal. I commend both organisations and look forward to continued support for the efforts in North Lanarkshire.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes portfolio questions on Deputy First Minister's responsibilities, economy and Gaelic. There will be a brief pause before we move to the next portfolio to allow members on the front benches to change places.

Finance and Local Government

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The next portfolio is finance and local government. I remind members that questions 2 and 4 have been grouped together. I will take any supplementary questions on those after the substantive questions have been answered.

Members who wish to ask a supplementary question should press their request-to-speak button during the relevant question. There is a lot of interest in asking supplementary questions, so brevity will be required in both questions and responses.

Scottish Visitor Levy (Stakeholder Engagement)

1. **Tim Eagle (Highlands and Islands) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government how it monitors the ways in which local authorities engage with stakeholders regarding the implementation of the Visitor Levy (Scotland) Act 2024. (S6O-04386)

The Minister for Public Finance (Ivan McKee): Councils that introduce a visitor levy are required to establish a visitor levy forum. Membership is drawn from local businesses, and it provides views on the scheme. Scottish Government officials continue to liaise with VisitScotland in considering how best to build on the work of the expert working group, and the Scottish Government will conduct a full review of the operation of the 2024 act within three years of the introduction of the first scheme.

Tim Eagle: A month after asking the minister a different question on the issue, my inbox remains full of emails from worried constituents about the disaster that is the visitor levy. As more details have come out, businesses have said to local authorities, and to me, that the proposed spreadsheet to collect data is a massive overreach of power and hugely burdensome to businesses. With the pressures of falling into a VAT trap, businesses having extra costs to administer the scheme and other issues, will the Scottish Government work with authorities to review what data actually needs to be collected or, better, finally pause the roll-out of the scheme?

Ivan McKee: I commit to our continuing to work with local authorities, businesses and business organisations to ensure that we make the process as streamlined as possible and to understand how to make the scheme deliver on its intention while leveraging in as little administrative or other impact as possible on businesses.

Employer National Insurance Contributions (Aberdeen City Council)

2. **Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government how it is supporting Aberdeen City Council to manage the impact of the UK Government's increase to employer national insurance contributions. (S6O-04387)

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government (Shona Robison): We have sought to protect all local authorities from the impact of

the United Kingdom Government's increase to employer national insurance contributions by providing record funding through the local government settlement. In 2025-26, Aberdeen City Council will receive £505.1 million to fund local services, which is an additional 8 per cent compared with the 2024-25 budget. A further £5.4 million will specifically contribute to meeting the increased costs of the UK Government's changes to employer national insurance contributions, as was confirmed at stage 1 of the budget bill.

Jackie Dunbar: Scotland's councils are being left to make difficult decisions about whether to increase council tax bills or cut back on services due to Labour's reckless decision to increase employer national insurance contributions and not to cover the cost. I am aware that Aberdeen City Council is setting its budget today and that most, if not all, of the proposed increase in funding will be used to pay for its increased employer national insurance contributions. Does the cabinet secretary agree that the Labour UK Government must stop twiddling its thumbs and agree to fund that additional public sector cost in full? Will she join me in calling on all Scottish Labour MSPs, along with the Scottish National Party, to put pressure on their Westminster colleagues to reverse that ill-thought-through decision?

Shona Robison: The Scottish Government will absolutely continue to press the UK Government to fully fund the increase in employer national insurance contributions. It is not just Scotland that is affected—all the devolved Administrations have a gap in funding between what is being provided from the Treasury through the Barnett formula and what the actual cost is. I would certainly welcome support from across the Parliament in that respect, as Jackie Dunbar has suggested. I do not believe that Scotland should be penalised for investing in public services, and the UK Government must therefore fully fund the actual cost of the increase for the public sector in Scotland. We will continue to press the Treasury on that issue.

Employer National Insurance Contributions (Local Authority Finances)

4. **Clare Haughey (Rutherglen) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government, in light of the United Kingdom Government increasing employer national insurance contributions, how it is supporting local authority finances. (S6O-04389)

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government (Shona Robison): The Scottish Government will continue to support local authority finances, and we will continue to make the case jointly with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and civic Scotland that His Majesty's Treasury must fully fund the actual cost of the changes to employer national insurance contributions to Scotland's public sector.

In the interim, we have provided more than £15 billion of funding through the local government settlement, as well as committing £144 million to contribute specifically to the increased cost of employer national insurance contributions.

Clare Haughey: South Lanarkshire Council has estimated that the United Kingdom Government's changes to employer national insurance contributions will cost the council around £15 million a year. To close that funding gap, the council's Labour administration unveiled a 6.5 per cent council tax increase, which is set to raise the local authority £9.5 million. Does the cabinet secretary agree that the Scottish Government's record funding for South Lanarkshire Council would have allowed the local authority to properly invest in our communities but that, instead, that has been curtailed as a result of Labour's national insurance tax rise?

Shona Robison: I agree with Clare Haughey that the cost of the UK Government's employer national insurance contributions shortfall in funding is an opportunity gap for Scotland's public services. With our partners in COSLA, we have repeatedly raised concerns with the UK Treasury about the impact on public services if that reserved tax increase is not fully funded.

As I already confirmed to Jackie Dunbar, it is incumbent on all members of the Scottish Parliament to protect public services in Scotland by calling on the Chancellor of the Exchequer to fully fund the impact on public services, not just in Scotland but across the other devolved Administrations.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: There are a couple of brief supplementary questions—they will need to be brief. I call Finlay Carson first.

Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): No.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That is very brief. I call Alexander Stewart.

Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Labour's increase in employer national insurance contributions is not only damaging to the private and public sector, but a shameful and direct violation of an explicit manifesto promise. The Scottish National Party Government has tried to tout its budget this year as some sort of salvation for councils—it is not. The high council tax increases to which councils are having to resort proves that.

Cabinet secretary, are you at least willing to recognise the reality that the financial position that Scotland's councils have been put in for 2025-26 is extremely challenging?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I will not be recognising anything—speak through the chair, Mr Stewart.

Shona Robison: I will say two things to Alexander Stewart. First, we have provided a record level of funding—£15 billion—for local government, as has been recognised by COSLA, which is a cross-party organisation. Secondly, we have given as much funding for employer national insurance contributions as we are able to, given the funding that we are likely to receive from the Treasury.

Finally, I note that, if we had listened to Alexander Stewart, we would have had £1 billion of unfunded tax cuts to the budget, which would have meant less, not more, money for local government. The Tories have no credibility on this issue.

"The IFS Scottish Budget Report—2025-26"

3. **Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to the Institute for Fiscal Studies assessment in "The IFS Scottish Budget Report—2025-26" that "it is particularly important that the front-loaded increases in investment and public service spending planned are undertaken effectively". (S6O-04388)

The Minister for Public Finance (Ivan McKee): Following last week's approval of the Scottish budget for 2025-26, the Government will continue to ensure delivery across our collective priorities, which include tackling child poverty, supporting public services and promoting economic growth.

Michael Marra: Of course, this year, there has been an uplift of £610 million for the capital budget from the United Kingdom Labour Government. We have to ask whether the Government is capable or competent enough to spend it effectively. For starters, it has been hard for it to do any of that when the Government has not published a capital spending plan for nearly two years. That was promised in December 2023, March 2024, May 2024 and December 2024. Now, in March 2025, there is still no sign of it, with the Government seemingly kicking it into the long grass of autumn 2025. Will the minister tell us when and on what date the long-awaited and vital document will be published?

Ivan McKee: As I have indicated, the document will be published later in the autumn. Of course, it is important that we recognise that that will follow the UK Government's spending review, which will be hugely important information.

Michael Marra quotes from the IFS's report. Preceding that quote are the words "in this context". What does the report say about that context? It talks about

"a planned slowdown in increases in UK government funding"

and notes:

"The outlook ... will become much clearer after the UK government's multi-year Spending Review due on 11 June."

It goes on to say:

"it seems highly likely that overall funding increases will be smaller for at least several years from 2026–27 onwards".

We have a Labour MSP asking the Scottish Government how we will manage in an environment in which there is a planned slowdown in funding increases for the Scottish Government from the UK Labour Government. If Michael Marra wants to make a serious impact, he should put pressure on his colleagues at Westminster not to slow down increases in the Scottish Government's funding from 2026-27 onwards.

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): A sudden jump in capital resource without an increase in capacity is likely to feed construction inflation. However, the Scottish Fiscal Commission has made it clear that, in real terms, our capital allocation will flatline and, by 2029-30, will be lower than it was in 2022-23. Does the minister agree that, to deliver long-term investment and sustainable growth in infrastructure and the economy, available capital must grow consistently in real terms each year? Will he continue to make that case to the UK Government?

Ivan McKee: I agree with Kenneth Gibson. That reinforces my earlier point that, after years of underinvestment by the UK Government, our capital funding must grow in real terms to deliver long-term investment and sustainable growth in infrastructure and the economy. My colleague, the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government, has called a number of times on the UK Government to increase investment in infrastructure. She will continue to make that case to ensure that we have the capital budget available to deliver our priorities for the people of Scotland.

Craig Hoy (South Scotland) (Con): The IFS's Scottish budget report states that the Scottish Government should be "more transparent" about what it intends for

"year-on-year changes in spending by consistently comparing plans for the coming year with the latest plans for the current year."

Even now, £350 million has been unallocated for this year, with no clarity about where it will be ultimately spent. I accept that the Government

must keep money back for certain circumstances, but do the smoke and mirrors around the budget and portfolio allocation not raise suspicions that the Scottish National Party is moving money around to give a false and misleading headline-grabbing impression of where resources are going and how much is being spent? As we look forward to the medium-term fiscal strategy, will the Government commit to greater transparency on how it is using what is, after all, taxpayers' money?

Ivan McKee: The transparency of information that we publish and share with the Finance and Public Administration Committee and the public continues to increase. There is no shortage of available information. Craig Hoy makes a point about moving money around. Of course we move money; we do so first to ensure that we balance our budget and, secondly, to ensure that we focus on our priorities as we move towards year end.

Craig Hoy answered the question himself. He recognised that the £350 million is there to address issues that will come up as we move towards year end, including year-end audit adjustments, changes in demand-driven budget lines, uncertainty around the final tax position and other uncertainties relating to the Scottish Government's income. His question recognised that it is important that we have the funds to be able to address issues in a controlled and prudent way and to ensure that the Government continues to balance its budget.

Non-departmental Public Bodies (Cost to Taxpayers)

5. **Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to the reported comment by the Scottish Information Commissioner that Scotland's non-departmental public bodies, also known as quangos, are costing taxpayers £6.6 billion annually. (S6O-04390)

The Minister for Public Finance (Ivan McKee): I do not recognise the £6.6 billion annual cost that Liz Smith has referred to. As the member should know, data that was supplied by public bodies for 2022-23 and was published towards the end of last year indicated that public bodies' total resource expenditure was more than £23 billion, through which they delivered a huge range services, including in health, education justice and elsewhere.

Of that, public bodies spent almost £1.3 billion on running their corporate functions, and another £2.3 billion was spent by those corporate functions. Public bodies passed through funding of more than £7.6 billion to other organisations, including third sector and public sector organisations. An additional £800 million was spent on the Scottish Government's own operating costs.

It is our intention to continue to collect that data on an on-going basis to enable the identification of further opportunities for more cost reductions through the removal of duplication and increased efficiency in service delivery.

Liz Smith: I thank the minister for that answer. Nonetheless, serious concerns have been issued by the Information Commissioner. Whatever the total is—I have to say that it is strange that the Scottish Government is questioning what the Information Commissioner has said—will the minister make an absolute commitment, in the light of the Finance and Public Administration Committee's concerns, to ensure that the number of quangos in Scotland is reduced and that we get greater transparency and scrutiny about how that will happen?

Ivan McKee: First, the number of "quangos", as Liz Smith calls them, has been reduced. We published data that shows that the number has come down from 199 when we took over to 131 at the moment. There has therefore been a significant reduction.

However, the important point is the data. I am, frankly, disappointed that the member has not looked up the extensive quantity of data that we published on precisely the point about expenditure, down to a very high level of granularity, at the end of last year. We are absolutely committed to being transparent about that data and understanding where there are opportunities to drive further cost savings across public bodies' running costs, on top of the £280 million that we have already delivered over this year and last year and the £300 million that we will deliver over the next two years.

Fergus Ewing (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP): Quangos and other public bodies have had access to the £200 million heat in buildings decarbonisation fund. One successful application was by a public body headquartered at 25 Chambers Street in Edinburgh, which was valued before the works at £4.75 million. The works cost £11.3 million and the grant was £9.1 million. That is the headquarters of no less than the Crown Office. Has the Crown Office not committed a major offence against the public purse?

Ivan McKee: As Fergus Ewing knows, we are hugely committed to identifying any use of public funding that is excessive and ensuring that it is addressed. He knows fine well about the example that he cited. Other examples have also been cited.

We are focused on making sure that, where we invest any money of that sort going forward, the value of the premises in relation to which the

investment is made is taken into account in order to ensure that public funds are applied most effectively and efficiently.

National Security (Infrastructure Policy)

6. **Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD):** To ask the Scottish Government, as part of the cross-Government co-ordination of infrastructure, what discussions the finance secretary has had with ministerial colleagues regarding what consideration is given to national security in its infrastructure policy. (S6O-04391)

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government (Shona Robison): National security is a reserved responsibility of the United Kingdom Government. However, there are also devolved powers that are relevant to national security. Critical national infrastructure are the facilities, systems, sites, information, people, returns and processes that are deemed necessary for a country to function.

There are currently 13 official designated critical national infrastructure sectors, where responsibility is split between devolved Administrations and the UK Government. National security concerns are brought forward and given appropriate prominence in budget negotiations and infrastructure prioritisation.

Alex Cole-Hamilton: The European Union is currently investigating Chinese renewable energy manufacturers on the grounds of interference by the Chinese Communist Party, and Norway has rejected their involvement in Norwegian offshore wind projects. However, the Scottish Government, through its Scottish offshore wind energy council, has ignored that and listed Mingyang Smart Energy Group as a priority bidder for infrastructure in our North Sea wind farms.

Scotland is already worryingly dependent on Chinese money, particularly in our universities. We need to be very careful about China's involvement in renewable energy. What thought has the Scottish Government given to the risks of inviting Chinese companies into the heart of Scotland's energy infrastructure?

Shona Robison: As a broad response to Alex Cole-Hamilton, I say that I recognise the issue that he raises, and we should all be very vigilant and cognisant of the points that he makes.

In relation to the offshore wind infrastructure projects, I would prefer that Alex Cole-Hamilton gets a written response that specifically addresses his points. The matter sits slightly outwith my direct ministerial responsibility, but I want to make sure that he gets an accurate response, so I will make sure that he gets that in writing.

Private Finance Initiative and Public-Private Partnership Payments (Support for Local Authorities)

7. **Marie McNair (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government how it is supporting local authorities, such as West and East Dunbartonshire Councils, that have to make PFI and PPP payments. (S6O-04392)

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government (Shona Robison): The Scottish Government provides funding to support local authorities with payments relating to their PFI and PPP contracts by way of the annual local government settlement.

Marie McNair: In my constituency, the equivalent of 37.9 per cent of council tax in East Dunbartonshire and 41.2 per cent of council tax in West Dunbartonshire goes on PPP repayments. That is a shocking amount. Labour's financial mismanagement has clearly had severe consequences, and those wasteful deals are being paid back by the council tax payer. Does the cabinet secretary agree that that highlights why the Labour Party cannot be trusted to manage Scotland's finances?

Shona Robison: I agree with Marie McNair—this Government has always made it clear that the PFI approach that was used by Labour has not delivered best value for the taxpayer. That is why we brought it to an end and introduced more affordable schemes in order to reduce the drain on the public purse and stop excessive profits.

Unfortunately, we are still paying for the legacy of those mistakes, and we will be doing so for many years. It is a timely reminder of the incompetence of Labour in government on those matters.

Local Government Funding

8. **Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government how the total funding that it has provided for local government has changed over the last decade in real terms and as a proportion of total spending. (S6O-04393)

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government (Shona Robison): Given the changes in the Scottish Government's devolved powers over the past decade, we must be cognisant of the fact that it is not possible to apply direct like-for-like comparisons in Scottish Government funding levels, notably due to the devolution of around £5.6 billion for the administration of social security benefits. However, the local government finance settlement has increased by 41 per cent since 2015-16, which is a real terms increase of 2.4 per cent.

Finlay Carson: It can be easy to focus on short-term developments as the cause of issues that Scotland faces instead of looking at the full picture, but we must look at the full picture because we need to know why councils are struggling to provide key local services, as we can see they are.

Despite the shameful spin from Shona Robison, the real picture of the past decade shows how, under the Scottish National Party, real-terms funding for local councils in the form of general revenue grants has stagnated. It has not increased by even 1 per cent, despite the Scottish Government's budget increasing by nearly 20 per cent. Local authorities such as Dumfries and Galloway Council are still having to grapple with rising staff costs, inflation and pressures on services such as children's residential placements, all of which has resulted in a 9 per cent increase in council tax.

Can the cabinet secretary explain why the Government has consistently decided to make local government funding one of its lowest priorities?

Shona Robison: We have not. The Accounts Commission has confirmed that, over the past three years, there has been a real-terms increase in local government funding. As I said in my first answer, the local government settlement over the past 10 years has increased by 41 per cent, which is a real-terms increase of 2.4 per cent. Those are the facts.

The other fact is that, if we had listened to Finlay Carson and had unfunded tax cuts of £1 billion, local government would be getting less money, not more, to fund local services. That is the reality of the situation. [*Interruption*.]

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Hoy, I called you for a question earlier, but I have now heard at least three attempts to intervene since then. Please be quiet.

Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP): I welcome the record level of funding for local authorities in this year's budget, which passed last week with cross-party support. Will the minister outline how that will support local authorities across Scotland to increase and improve services for their communities, in contrast with the 30 councils in England that are in dire need of a total of £1.5 billion of emergency funding for 2025-26 just to keep them afloat?

Shona Robison: That £1.5 billion in emergency funding is the Tory legacy for local government funding. The local government finance settlement provides local authorities with an additional £1.1 billion in funding, which is a real-terms increase of 5.5 per cent, along with full discretion over council tax. We will continue to work in partnership with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and with local authorities to make sure that local authority finances are sustainable and that communities across Scotland continue to receive the high-quality front-line services that they expect and deserve.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes portfolio questions. There will be a brief pause before we move to the next item of business to allow members on the front benches to change seats.

United Kingdom Economy

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-16667, in the name of Kate Forbes, on achieving a fair balance in the United Kingdom economy. I invite members who wish to speak in the debate to press their request-to-speak buttons.

14:51

The Minister for Business (Richard Lochhead): We are discussing the future of Scotland's economy against a backdrop of international uncertainty. Right now, it can feel that the world is walking backwards rather than striding confidently forward into better times. It is therefore more important than ever that we focus on how to improve the quality of life for the people of Scotland, make the most of the significant economic opportunities that Scotland enjoys, and contribute to the rest of the world by realising those opportunities.

I will begin by affirming and celebrating Scotland's huge economic potential. Scotland consistently ranks as the top investment destination in the UK outside London and the south-east of England. We are world leading in the development and deployment of renewables and green technology, and we have some of the world's best universities, a world-class food and drink sector, a highly educated population and a diverse and open economy.

Despite the challenges that have been caused by 15 years of austerity from Westminster, and the challenges of recovering from the economic impacts of Brexit and Covid, the Scottish economy is well placed to take advantage of the huge economic opportunities that come from the transition to net zero and the revolution in critical technologies.

However, realising the opportunities that lie ahead will require dynamic partnership between the Government, business and academia, and it will require government at every level to work towards common goals. We are at a moment of inflection for Scotland's economy. If we get things right in the next few years, the prizes for the people of Scotland and their country will be huge—more well-paid jobs, greater prosperity and greater tax revenues for our public services.

We have opportunities to grab the first-mover advantage in a number of areas and to solidify our progress in others, such as renewable energy, semiconductors and advanced manufacturing. However, we are not the only country that is seeking to do that, so we need to ensure that the opportunities are not missed.

Part of our strength is our diverse economy, which is spread across all our regions. We can take many examples of that. In 2021, Glasgow city region produced approximately £48 billion of gross value added, making it the largest city region economy in Scotland and the fourth largest in the UK.

The Edinburgh and south-east Scotland city region is equally remarkable, having produced 30 per cent of Scotland's total economic output and ranking top for investment attractiveness in the UK outwith London. The work of Aberdeen city and Aberdeenshire with Opportunity North East is a model for how the private sector can be a partner within regional structures.

However, I am not just talking about our city regions. In October, the south of Scotland region was designated as Scotland's natural capital innovation zone, which recognises that the region is ideally positioned to address the twin crises of biodiversity loss and climate change through innovation and responsible investment.

Craig Hoy (South Scotland) (Con): I thank the minister for referring to the south of Scotland—particularly the south-west.

Is he not aware that what businesses such as Stena Line really want are roads that are fit for purpose so that vital commodities can be moved around our country?

Richard Lochhead: Roads are, of course, important—all transport links are important. The Scottish Government is doing all that we can with our limited resources to push forward that agenda. It is a pity that inflation has rocketed for all road-building materials. That is thanks to the then Conservative UK Government's budget a few years ago, which caused inflation to rocket and the cost of everything to go through the roof, which has made it a lot more challenging for the UK and Scottish Governments, and many other Governments, to deal with such issues.

The Highlands and Islands Regional Economic Partnership covers 51 per cent of Scotland's landmass, encompasses 99 per cent of Scotland's community-owned land and has more than 22,000 registered businesses and more than 1,200 social enterprises. It has undertaken work that shows that tens of billions of pounds in investment could come to the region in the years to 2040. The Scottish and UK Governments should be engaging and supporting it in that.

Across our regions, Scotland has huge opportunities in offshore wind, carbon capture, energy storage, hydrogen and decarbonisation of heat and transport.

We also have a rapidly growing space technology sector, which is expected to be worth £4 billion by 2040.

Digital technology is Scotland's fastest-growing sector for inward investment, with excellent opportunities across cybersecurity, data, fintech, games, global business services and many other areas. As of 2021, we had more than 10,000 registered businesses in the technology sector, and we have 15,000 new graduates every year in digital technology fields from Scotland's universities. According to the investment firm Beauhurst, a record £454 million of equity fundraising was announced in Scotland's tech sector in 2021.

Scotland also has one of the largest life sciences clusters in Europe, with around 770 life science organisations that employ more than 42,500 people.

We are committed to doing everything that we can to support opportunities in those sectors. We need the UK Government to match that and we welcome constructive partnership working with the UK Government. It is fair to say the current UK Government is more constructive than the previous Tory Government, but we have to be honest and say that that was a very low bar.

However, the work on green freeports is a positive example of our working together on some issues—even with that previous Tory Government. In that case, a UK Government policy was tailored and amended to fit the Scottish context with our addition of fair work commitments, for example.

Inverness and Cromarty Firth Green Freeport Ltd will focus on the green industrial transition and has already seen a commitment of £350 million by Sumitomo for a subsea cable factory. In fact, the green freeport has ambitions to attract £6.5 billion of investment, which will result in more than 11,000 jobs for the Highlands.

Our green freeport in the Firth of Forth also has huge economic ambitions. It is aiming to bring in £7.9 billion of investment and to support more than 34,000 jobs across the UK. Forth Green Freeport Ltd has a footprint in Grangemouth, which is rightly the focus of a great deal of attention at the moment. The First Minister recently announced a further £25 million of Scottish Government support for the just transition of the site, thereby taking our total investment to £87 million. We welcomed the Prime Minister's announcement of the availability of investment from the UK's National Wealth Fund Ltd. We hope to hear, in due course, more details of how that investment will be taken forward and support the cluster.

I must also repeat the First Minister's call about carbon capture and storage at Grangemouth. Although the UK Government recently announced support for projects in Teesside and Merseyside, no green light has been given for the project involving Grangemouth, despite promises from previous UK Governments.

Another positive example of collaborative working with the UK Government is through our city and region growth deals. We have 12 growth deals in Scotland, with the Scottish Government's total investment amounting to more than £1.9 billion, which more than matches the UK Government's £1.5 billion investment.

We are also working with the UK Government to deliver two investment zones, which are in the Glasgow city region and in the north-east. Those will be supported by up to £320 million of investment.

The prospects in Scotland are significant, and we are ready and willing to work with the UK Government to capitalise on the opportunities that are ahead of us. Where there are UK-wide schemes, we will work on delivering the Scottish end of those schemes: I have given examples of where that has happened with the previous UK Government and the current one.

However, the crux of the debate is about recent signals from UK ministers that are causing, in business groups and elsewhere, concerns that the lion's share of investment and resources will continue to be disproportionately unfairly focused in London and the south-east of England—the golden triangle of Oxford, Cambridge and London. That is despite the fact that recent data shows that Scotland outperformed the UK on economic growth last year. If we want greater investment in Scotland, we need our colleagues in Westminster to recognise the significant opportunities that we, in Scotland, have to offer.

In January, the Chancellor of the Exchequer unveiled plans to deliver the Oxford to Cambridge growth corridor and stated that the region is the "home of British innovation". As you can imagine, Deputy Presiding Officer, Scotland's reaction to that claim was not particularly positive. Our innovations in Scotland have shaped and advanced the world consistently, continually and remarkably. Even more important is that we are home to the innovations that will shape the world of tomorrow.

We recently had the Prime Minister's speech on the "AI Opportunities Action Plan", which he delivered at University College London and in which he spoke about opportunities in Oxfordshire, Liverpool and Northumberland. In fact, he name-checked all four corners of England but made no mention of Scotland, in delivering a high-profile and much-anticipated speech on the artificial intelligence action plan for the whole UK.

Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): I wonder whether the minister listened to the speech that the Prime Minister made in Glasgow just last weekend, when he announced £200 million of investment in Scotland.

Richard Lochhead: I did, and I have already mentioned it in my speech and welcomed it. Of course, that was after a bit of a backlash from the Labour Party's member of the UK Parliament for Grangemouth. I hope that we will see the details of that investment sooner rather than later, because it is important.

The Prime Minister's AI announcement, in which he did not mention Scotland—for the record, I point out that Labour members are shaking their heads—was despite the fact that seven of our universities in Scotland have AI courses, and despite the fact that Edinburgh is a major hub for data and AI jobs in the UK and is consistently ranked among Europe's leading cities for data and AI capabilities. In fact, last year's Nobel prize in physics went to an alumnus of the University of Edinburgh for outstanding work on machine learning. We do not need a quantum computer to see that the Prime Minister missed something quite important and should have mentioned Scotland and AI.

The Prime Minister pledged to increase the UK's computer capacity twentyfold by 2030, including by building a new supercomputer, just months after the new UK Government pulled back on plans to build a high-tech exascale supercomputer in Edinburgh.

Members of the UK Government have ignored Scotland's leadership on AI and data in speeches about AI policy. They have claimed that Oxford and Cambridge are the home of British innovation, said that the UK's new silicon valley should be in the so-called golden triangle, and talked about making that area the flagship of UK economic growth. Those are all important insights into the UK Government's mindset and priorities. We must see more high-profile promotion of Scotland's innovation strengths from the UK Government. We do not want Scotland to continually be an afterthought. The UK Government needs to work with us to drive investment in innovation in Scotland and should not give disproportionate focus all the time to the south-east.

For instance, look at how Scotch whisky has been treated. The decision to further increase duty on Scotch whisky is a broken promise by the Prime Minister, who publicly committed to

"back Scotch producers to the hilt".

On top of that tax rise, we heard last week that the UK Government was considering, at the time, allowing English whisky makers to use the term "single malt", which would devalue the products that are produced in Scotland. We have now had an announcement that that will not happen, and we are pleased that the Labour Government has dropped its plans for that after a big backlash from the Scotch whisky industry and, of course, pressure from the Scottish Government and many others.

We need the UK Government generally to back, and not to undermine, our successful industries. The UK Government's recent green paper "Invest 2035: the UK's modern industrial strategy" stated that the "primary objective" of the UK industrial strategy is to

"drive growth, by taking advantage of the UK's unique strengths and untapped potential, enabling the UK's world-leading sectors to adapt and grow, and seizing opportunities to lead in new sectors, with high-quality, well-paid jobs."

Of course, we welcome that and we have no doubt that the UK Government is serious in its intention to translate that ambition into real and sustainable economic growth. However, for that to happen, its ambition needs to be matched by a commitment to collaboration and co-operation.

The UK Government must develop its industrial strategy and determine its investments to deliver it. In doing that, it must recognise Scotland's regional strengths and the catalytic opportunities that exist in this country. The UK Government must recognise the world-leading reputation of our universities and growth sectors, including advanced manufacturing, AI and life sciences.

Again, I see that Labour members are laughing and shaking their heads. In the past couple of days, I spoke to a senior representative of Scotland's university sector who said that their heart sank when they heard Rachel Reeves's speech about the new silicon valley being in the south-east of England and about the growth corridor between Oxford and Cambridge being the solution to the UK's economic challenges. That is what is happening out there, so it would be wise for Labour members to recognise how people in the innovation, research, university and wider business communities are responding to those announcements. They are very concerned by the tone of, and the mindset that has been echoed in, all those speeches from UK politicians.

We need our unique advantage in Scotland to be recognised and promoted. The Parliament must urge its Westminster colleagues to ensure that decisions and the mechanisms of delivery respect devolution. The UK Government must work with us to leverage the power of our enterprise agencies and regional structures that are already delivering in Scotland.

I want to offer all members across the chamber who share those ambitions the opportunity to work

with the Government in order to attract investment, drive growth, deliver sustainable economic success and make sure that UK Government economic policy takes into account Scotland's massive economic opportunities.

I move,

That the Parliament recognises that Scotland's many high-growth sectors, which are driven by world class innovation, deserve greater recognition from, and promotion by, the UK Government, which must not unfairly focus investment in the south-east of England, or the so-called golden triangle of Oxford, Cambridge and London, or treat Scotland as an afterthought, especially when announcing or developing policy.

15:05

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): It is going to be a long afternoon, given what we have just heard. However, I am pleased that we are having another economy debate—the second in a week. I hope that the trend will continue, because I like nothing more than discussing the Scottish and UK economies. I am going to enjoy these exchanges if we are going to more have more of them. In particular, I look forward to debating the vital role that the UK Government and its spending play in supporting the Scottish economy.

In last week's debate, the Deputy First Minister accused me of being "relentlessly negative"—I think that was the term she used. It sounds like the tables have turned today, because the relentless negativity is coming from the Scottish National Party front bench in terms of what the UK Government has done. I would like to bring a little light, balance and positivity to the debate, for the benefit of the SNP front bench.

I hold no candle for the current UK Labour Government and will let my Labour colleagues who are sitting opposite defend what it is doing. The biggest concern that I hear from the business community is about the increase in employer national insurance contributions that is coming in just next month. I want to concentrate my efforts on what Conservative Governments did over the previous 14 years, from 2010 onwards.

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Economy and Gaelic (Kate Forbes): Will the member give way?

Murdo Fraser: Of course.

Kate Forbes: I recognise that the member will want to set out what his Government did. I start by commending it for announcing the supercomputer for the University of Edinburgh. Does he share our negative disappointment about the current Government's decision not to come through on that?

Murdo Fraser: Yes—I agree with the Deputy First Minister on that point.

A range of other projects were proposed by the previous Conservative Government, not least projects that were funded through the towns fund, which affected, for example, Dunfermline and Perth, in my region. That funding has now been cancelled, which is very regrettable.

Let me talk about what the previous Conservative Government did, and put some of this into context. According to the Scottish Government's own "Government Expenditure and Revenue Scotland" figures, the Barnett formula delivers nearly £2,400 extra for every man, woman and child in Scotland compared with what is spent elsewhere in the United Kingdom. That is money that would not be available if this Government got its way and separated us from the rest of the United Kingdom.

In addition, we saw a programme of direct investment in Scotland from the previous UK Government, totalling nearly £3 billion of its spending. We saw £1.5 billion investment in city, region and growth deals—money coming into vital projects in Scotland delivering key infrastructure, innovations and projects in the culture and tourism space.

I can mention two examples in my own region. The excellent new Perth museum is drawing many more visitors than expected to the centre of Perth, helping the local city centre economy. It showcases the city and surrounding area's history and is home to the stone of destiny. If members have not visited the museum yet, I encourage them to do so and, while they are, to spend some money. In Invergowrie, the James Hutton Institute, which is world leading in crop innovation, is benefiting from growth deal investment and is creating jobs and delivering world-beating science.

Direct investment does not stop there. We have seen a further £1.4 billion in levelling up investment, and the freeports that the minister referred to. Let us not forget that, initially, the Scottish Government was against the freeports, perhaps due to the influence of the anti-growth Greens who were in government at the time. Fortunately, the Deputy First Minister stepped in and good sense prevailed—and now, thank goodness, we have the freeports. However, that was a UK Conservative Government initiative.

We have seen the investment zones and projects to regenerate town centres. On top of that, we see vital local community projects being directly supported by levelling up funding: funding for local sports clubs and cultural projects, all of which have benefited from direct UK Government investment.

I want to focus on two sectors in particular. The first is the defence sector, which is relatively more important to the Scottish economy than it is to that of the UK as a whole. The sector employs more than 13,000 people in Scotland and accounts for £2 billion in economic turnover. That number of people—13,000—employed in defence is higher than the number of defence employees in London.

The Ministry of Defence spends more per head in Scotland than in the rest of the UK: an average of £380, which is higher than the UK average of £370. That spend in Scotland grew 13 per cent from 2018 to 2021-22. The jobs created by it tend to be highly skilled, in sectors such as shipbuilding, engineering, science and technology. We saw the benefit of the spend on the two new UK aircraft carriers, which were built on the Clyde and the Forth. Babcock in Rosyth, in my region, continues to benefit from the UK Government's shipbuilding programme.

Looking at the uncertain world that we now face, there will be a need—recognised by the Prime Minister—to increase our defence spending. That has already been signalled and I expect that it will have to go yet further. That is a tremendous opportunity for Scotland. It will support our economy, develop skills and provide careers and opportunities to expand on what is already a very successful defence sector, in which we lead the world with some of our technology. For example, Leonardo provides radar systems for Lockheed Martin that are sold across the world, supporting thousands of jobs in the Scottish economy. That should have the whole-hearted support of every party in this chamber.

Of course, that happens only because of UK Government spend. Scotland benefits from that spend, and if the spend increases, Scotland will benefit even more. There will need to be positive engagement from the Scottish Government to make sure that that happens: a celebration of our defence sector, which, frankly, too many colleagues in this chamber seem to be embarrassed about.

Yesterday, when the First Minister made his statement on Ukraine, he spoke positively about the opportunities for defence in Scotland. I wish that that positivity was reflected among all the SNP back benchers. Unfortunately, too many of them seem to be ashamed of our defence sector.

Some of us will remember the dreadful event that took place more than a year ago in the Parliament, when young apprentices from the defence industries came in and were subject to abuse—they were heckled as they arrived, simply because of the sector in which they worked. That was a disgraceful and shocking set of scenes, cheerleadered by a member of this Parliament from the Green Party—frankly, that was disgraceful. If we are to see more opportunities in the defence sector, we, in the Parliament, must be positive about it, otherwise young people will not be encouraged to take up apprenticeships, which are vital.

I hope that we will have some leadership from the SNP Government on this issue. We have already seen, for example, the entire Royal Navy submarine fleet relocated to the Clyde, bringing with it jobs. There will be other opportunities for Scotland, too, but we must make sure that the Scottish Government is welcoming of those new jobs and that investment.

I will mention one more sector: energy. We are seeing huge investment at present—we debated that just yesterday afternoon—in green technologies and the renewable energy sector. That is very welcome and it is funded by electricity bill payers right across the United Kingdom. It is the UK energy market that provides the money that we need for huge developments, particularly in offshore wind, that drive economic regeneration in the Highlands and across other parts of Scotland. UK Government support underpins the regulatory framework and makes sure that those jobs are coming and developing a new economy for the future.

It is just a pity, as I highlighted last week—indeed, this issue came up in yesterday's debate on Scotland's renewable future—that the SNP Government's anti-nuclear stance means that we cannot benefit from jobs in that sector.

In the same vein, we need to ensure that there is a viable future for oil and gas. Labour has already set its face against oil and gas, and the SNP equivocates when it comes to the proposed new Rosebank and Jackdaw oil fields. We in the Scottish Conservatives are very clear that we need to continue with the extraction of oil and gas from the North Sea, not least to provide energy security and reduce our reliance on imports. The UK Government should be supportive of that approach.

There is much to celebrate in the record of the previous UK Government in investing directly in the Scottish economy, and there are great opportunities for the future in energy and defence. We should be seizing those opportunities for Scotland and not carping from the sidelines. Those are the points that I make in my amendment, which I am pleased to move.

I move amendment S6M-16667.3, to leave out from "deserve" to end and insert:

"benefit significantly from an abundance of direct investment initiatives established under the former UK Conservative administration, including £3 billion in Levelling Up funding, City Region and Growth Deals, Green Freeports, the UK Shared Prosperity Fund, and the British

Business Bank; recognises that the importance and significance of these investments demonstrate the commitment that was held by the former UK Conservative administration to supporting economic growth in Scotland; acknowledges the full responsibility that is held by the Scottish Government for economic outcomes deriving from its devolved powers, and calls on the UK Labour administration to hold to the critical pledges made by its predecessors to level up Scotland's economic prosperity."

15:16

Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): It was with genuine disappointment that I read the motion that we have been asked to discuss. That said, I agreed with almost every word in the first half of the minister's opening speech. There is huge potential in the Scottish economy, whether in the vast opportunities in innovation or the strength of many of the institutions in our university sector and the knowledge that is learned there, although, at the moment, too many of those institutions have been weakened by the 22 per cent real-terms cut in funding for Scottish students and the financial situation that they continue to find themselves in.

However, the second half of the minister's speech was far below par in that regard. It was a sad indication of a lack of a change of mindset on the part of the governing party, members of which have frequently told me that they have seen a transformation in the attitude of the UK Government over recent months with regard to its ability and willingness to work with the Scottish Government. When I speak to members of the UK Cabinet, they say to me that they simply think that they are doing their jobs. The comparison there is with their predecessors, who, frankly, were not doing their jobs. We need to work together and make sure that we have the best interests of Scotland ahead of us.

Last July, the whole of Scotland voted to put years of grievance and division behind us. It rejected the symbiotes of shared grievance, who are invested in mutual failure and rancour. I suggest that today's debate is timely, because it gives a very good example of what can be done. In the past two hours, the UK Labour Government has announced a major investment of more than £55 million in the port of Cromarty Firth. That will drive growth and create hundreds of jobs in floating offshore wind. The expansion of that port will make it the first port in the UK that is able to make floating offshore wind turbines on site and at scale. That is exactly the kind of first-mover advantage that the minister said that Scotland should be securing as a country and as an economy.

Richard Lochhead: I am pleased that the member agreed with 50 per cent of my speech—I would have been worried if he had agreed with 100 per cent of it. When he reflects on how his party has plummeted to around 18 per cent in the opinion polls since the UK general election in July, and on the fact that the UK Chancellor of the Exchequer has said that the key to UK economic growth is to focus on the south-east of England—Oxford, Cambridge and London—does he agree with that philosophy?

Michael Marra: I simply do not recognise that description of the chancellor's approach, and I can set out exactly why that is the case. As the chancellor for the whole of the UK, she makes speeches in different locations across the country, so she will not constantly speak about Scotland. Clearly, that is the role of ministers here. It is right that she supports Scotland, and I will set out exactly how she does that.

Craig Hoy: Will the member take an intervention?

Michael Marra: No, thank you, sir.

I will set that out in some detail. The investment that I have just mentioned will support up to 1,000 skilled jobs in the construction, installation and operation of offshore floating wind. Far from deprioritising Scotland, as the minister has suggested Labour is doing, we have put the clean energy mission that defines so much of the animating purpose of the Scottish economy at the front and centre of the UK Labour Government's economic plans. When I speak to businesses across Scotland, it is clear to me that it is that mission that is driving their focus, their investment globally and what they are doing as businesses here, in Scotland.

Let me give some further examples. There was the budget boost of an additional £5.2 billion for Scotland, with £60 billion being the largest settlement in the history of devolution, and the provision of more money for public services and infrastructure, all of which will help our economy to grow.

Craig Hoy: Will Michael Marra take an intervention?

Michael Marra: No thank you, sir.

There is a further £1.4 billion for local growth projects—at least £200 million for specific Scottish towns, including £20 million for growth and regeneration in my home city of Dundee. Just last month, I was with the Secretary of State for Scotland at the V&A in Dundee, announcing another £2.6 million of funding there, which will help to drive the city economy with tourist footfall and keep the Dundee tills ringing.

Just a few days ago, £200 million was announced from the national wealth fund to secure the future of the Grangemouth economy—a significant investment that was announced by the Prime Minister in Scotland, talking about Scotland

and Scottish jobs and answering the call for Government to support the workers in that area. There was £125 million for Great British Energy, which is to be headquartered in Aberdeen, helping to attract investment for our clean energy future in the nation's—and Europe's—energy capital. There was £25 million for the 10-year investment in the Argyll and Bute growth deal—and there is much more.

However, we have to be clear that none of that was inevitable. In our debate last week about the budget and the budget process, we said that we cannot just will the ends; we have to will the means. The taxes that we often discuss are the cost of being able to invest in our economy.

The scale of the mess of the public finances has made some of those decisions difficult. Labour inherited not just a black hole but public services that were in crisis and zero growth in an economy that had flatlined for more than a decade. The disastrous and inept Tory Government had made to Scottish towns and areas many promises that it had no intention whatsoever of keeping. The evidence of that is in the fact that it had spent the annual national reserve three times over in the first quarter of the year.

Difficult decisions were involved in how to raise the money that I spoke about, but it is right that we invest. UK Labour Government colleagues stand ready to work in partnership with the Scottish Government and other stakeholders to deliver for the people of Scotland. That has been very clearly demonstrated, as I have started to set out, in the first eight months—only eight months—of the Labour Government. However, will it find a willing partner in the Scottish Government? By the tone of much of what the minister has said, it does not sound as though that will be the case.

I suggest that the SNP Government should start, in part, by putting its own house in order when it talks about investment. We can look to the report from the investor panel that was commissioned by the Scottish Government. I do not think that the Government expected that to be quite so excoriating. The report found that

"There are few visible opportunities for scale investment"

and

"Planning decisions are slow and sit in the system for unacceptably long periods".

We could illustrate that by talking about Berwick Bank, which has just passed its second anniversary of sitting on the desks of the Scottish Government, and the huge impediment that that means for investment in the supply chain in Scotland, given the potential squandering of such a signal investment.

The investor panel goes on:

"It is not apparent that the Scottish Government considers the impact of its actions on investment appetite".

All of that is a damning indictment of the prevailing approach—if we can call it that—of the Government as a whole. We can also look at its approach to the housing market and other areas.

Today's grievance motion comes to us from an era that should have ended last July. The UK Labour Government, with Scottish Labour MPs at its heart, is possible because the people of Scotland willed it. Today's announcement about the port of Cromarty Firth serves to underline that. Rightly, the Government stands ready to work with the Scottish Government for the good of Scotland's economy and people. It is for the SNP to decide whether it wants to do that or to retreat back into the grievance, chaos and decline to which I hoped we had said goodbye last year.

I move amendment S6M-16667.1, to leave out from "deserve" to end and insert:

"must gain greater recognition in order to reach their potential, attract investment and deliver growth and opportunity across Scotland; welcomes the UK Government's commitment to investing in Scotland since July 2024, which includes £200 million to secure the future of Grangemouth, £125 million for Great British Energy, based in Aberdeen, £5 million to support the Scotch Whisky industry, £1.4 billion in important local growth projects of which there is at least £200 million to revive specific Scottish towns, support for Glasgow City Region and North East Scotland Investment Zones and a commitment that Glasgow will be one of the four initial regions to benefit from strategic partnerships with the new National Wealth Fund; notes that these measures have been announced within months of a Labour administration, and, by contrast, the Scottish National Party administration took 16 years to convene an investor panel to make recommendations on how Scotland can attract international capital investment; understands that the investor panel for mobilising international capital to help finance the transition to net zero highlighted significant issues, including that the 'prevailing perception is that the Scottish Government and wider public sector is not supportive of business' and that 'the current investment pipeline is too diffuse. A pipeline needs to be formed of projects that are properly costed, shaped and prioritised. It needs to be a real pipeline, not a wish list'; further understands that addressing these concerns will be key to unlocking the potential of Scotland to attract investment, and calls for the Scottish Government to use all levers available to it, and to work constructively with the UK Government, to achieve the shared ambition of delivering growth and prosperity across Scotland."

15:23

Lorna Slater (Lothian) (Green): When it comes to the motion and the debate, if London is stripped out of the economic data, the performance report for the UK looks different. Certainly, a lack of investment generally in anything north of Cambridge becomes visible, and the signs of the regions dealing with the endemic poverty that was ground into place during the Thatcher years become obvious.

However, if we are to speak about really rebalancing the economy, both Scotland and the wider UK have a bigger challenge ahead of them. The fever smell in the air and the sound on the wind is a drive for growth, because growth will magically solve all our problems, right? Never mind that the USA, which has had the largest growth for the longest time, has lower life expectations, more citizens who do not have access to healthcare, a higher rate of maternal mortality, more violent crime and poorer work-life balance than European countries that have lower rates of growth. The US child poverty rate is more than double that of the UK, Sweden and France. The average American has a carbon footprint of around 16 tonnes, which is one of the highest in the world, while the average European has a carbon footprint of around 7.25 tonnes. Clearly, growth is not everything.

Craig Hoy: Can the member explain the causal link between economic growth and violent crime?

Lorna Slater: The causal link is that a focus on economic growth, instead of on tackling inequality, results in crime. We know that societies that have gross inequality, such as America, have more crime. Where societies are more equal and people feel that they have a greater opportunity in life, as is the case in Europe and in European countries that have higher taxes and more opportunity for people, there is lower crime. The member is shaking his head at me, but crime rates in Europe are lower than those in America. The inequality that we see in America is part of that story.

Growth is not everything—it does not solve all your problems. Even when you have high growth, you still need redistributive taxation, including wealth taxes, and you have to invest money in public services and in reducing carbon emissions. Maurice Obstfeld, the former chief economist at the International Monetary Fund, wrote yesterday in the *Financial Times,* in an article on the ills of the American economy, about

"appropriate economic policies to help America."

He said that

"Better targeted policies could include a more redistributive tax system, limits to corporate market power, further healthcare reform, and workforce development."

It does not matter if you have the highest growth in the world, you still need to do those things. Even with the lower rate of growth that Germany and Japan had between 1980 and 2023, gross domestic product per capita grew at a rate of 1.4 and 1.5 respectively, compared to America's rate of 1.8. With that lower growth, Germany and Japan managed to provide full-coverage public healthcare and had lower poverty rates and significantly greater longevity. The differences in outcomes for these countries are down to the policy choices that they are making and not to how much growth they have or have not achieved.

To rebalance the economy, we need to be clear about what we are trying to achieve. Increasing pollution, cutting back on the social safety net and cutting back healthcare and benefits might increase your GDP number, but at what cost? The cost is that of lives cut short, of health ruined and of damage to the environment that cannot be undone or that it will be very costly to reverse—the cost of allowing the rich to get richer while the poor get poorer.

When you take the costs for essentials out of the public domain and put them into the private domain, inevitably, the rich can buy them and the poor cannot. That is sometimes called cost savings, but an essential service is not optional. People who are forced, through poverty, to go without heat, timely healthcare, good-quality education and training and good-quality food still need those things and they are harmed by not having them.

Even if the heartless discount the cost of human suffering, they cannot discount the cost to society. Poverty is expensive. People who experience poverty have higher mental and physical medical needs and they are able to contribute less due to lower achievements in work and study. We hear a lot of nonsense about this or that public service or benefit being unaffordable. Rubbish! What we cannot afford is billionaires. We cannot afford to let a few individuals hoard the wealth of millions. The rebalancing of the economy that I would like to see would be a move away from enriching a few people while constantly whittling away at the services that everybody else needs. It would be a move away from subsidising polluters and high-emission industries and investing that money into environmentally sustainable sectors. It would be a move away from a fanatical obsession with GDP growth and a move to a broader focus, ensuring that everyone in society can thrive.

History will tell the tale in the end, but I am sure that the lurch to the far right in America and the distrust of institutions, and even of democracy, that has led to the second election of Donald Trump is, at least in part, due to the disconnect that Americans feel about the story that they are being told about their economy—"Look at that growth"—and the reality that they face every day of not being able to get affordable, good-quality healthcare, food, education or public services.

We need to rebalance the economy towards ordinary people by taxing extreme wealth and the pollution that the very wealthy produce at a rate that far exceeds that of any ordinary person, with private jets, luxury cars and frequent flying. We need the UK to remove the subsidies and tax breaks for high-polluting industries, crack down on

tax avoidance and ensure that global corporations pay their taxes and their employees properly. To rebalance our economy, we need to defund the billionaires.

15:30

Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD): The motion makes an important point about ensuring that investment does not unfairly focus on one area. I understand the sentiment that is contained in the motion, and, although I recognise the point that it is trying to make, I observe that many of my constituents consider that the central belt of Scotland is often the national focus of the SNP Government. Much of what I am about to say will focus on the islands.

Visitors often remark on how much enterprise there is throughout the northern isles. Regardless of size, there is an enormous amount of enterprise, which is driven in part by geography and a can-do attitude.

Members need look no further than Scotland's growing space sector. Situated right at the top of the UK, Unst is hosting Europe's first fully licensed vertical launch spaceport at SaxaVord, which is well placed for low earth orbit satellite launches. Its development grew from the vision of an entrepreneur who recognised the potential of the location and who, with support from the community and local authority, has made it happen. The spaceport recently gained a significant endorsement by way of rocket manufacturer Orbex, which moved from the Scottish Government-backed Sutherland spaceport to SaxaVord.

Shetland is at the heart of energy generation, whether it is oil and gas—which have contributed enormously to the wider economy—or new technologies and renewables such as wind and tidal. One of the world's most successful wind farms, Burradale, is in Shetland. In Orkney, the European Marine Energy Centre has attracted wave and tidal developers from around the world for the last 20 years.

People often gloss over the contribution that women make to the economy, but during this week of international women's day, I will not. In my constituency, the long history of Fair Isle knitwear has global reach. Today, we see innovation from new designers who have modernised the world-renowned product, such as French textile artist Marie Bruhat, who has made her home in Fair Isle. There is also production from local factories who export to the far east. Orkney fashion designer Kirsteen Stewart said in an interview that she was

"inspired by the island's female role models"

to build her successful fashion and design business—women's enterprise putting the northern isles on the map.

The northern isles can contribute even more to the national economy with investment in infrastructure that is taken for granted on mainland Scotland. Ferries are our roads, and tunnels should be considered national infrastructure and not simply a link for those who live on the islands. Tunnel action groups from Unst and Yell have instructed Norwegian consultants to carry out sonar investigations to progress the ambition of a tunnel network in the northern isles. Funds for that have been raised through private donations—not public money—and the final report should contribute to the determination of potential tunnel alignments. It is another demonstration of the can-do and enterprising attitude, which recognises where the future lies.

A tunnel network is important, as it would speed up delivery of time-sensitive seafood products, including from the growing salmon industry, which is another example of rural and island enterprise. Decades ago, crofters started small-scale salmon farming, and it is now a multi-million pound industry that reaches markets far beyond our shores and contributes to Scotland's economy.

The UK Government committed levelling up funding for a new Fair Isle ferry and harbour infrastructure, but the external ferry service between Shetland and Aberdeen is under considerable pressure and disruption. Although weather and pump-room flooding may not have been foreseen, the annual dry-dock periods are known yet little has been done to ensure that there is any kind of backup resilience so that businesses and passengers are not left on the quayside.

Digital connectivity across Scotland lags in the areas that are furthest away from our major cities, yet it is essential to conduct business today. The radio teleswitch shut-down is the latest example of a raw deal for rural and island Scotland. Areas of high fuel poverty and poor weather are causing concern and alarm in my constituency as the fundamentals of heating technology change. There is a lack of forthcoming answers from the industry, and no pragmatic, can-do attitude is forthcoming to resolve the issue for rural and island Scotland.

There are many more examples, but with limited time I will conclude. Scotland is overly centralised, and that has got worse over the past 18 years. Too often, island and rural communities are at the back of the queue, and the failure to provide the core connections that they need—broadband, ferries, tunnels and roads—is holding back their economies and businesses. It is important that they are given better infrastructure and more power so that Scotland can reach its potential in

renewables, food and drink, forestry, tourism and other critical industries that are rooted in rural and remote areas. It is time that the Scottish Government faced up to that.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We move to the open debate. I advise members that one of the SNP speakers has had to pull out at the last minute in the light of illness. It has been agreed that two of the three SNP speakers shall have nine minutes and the third shall have six minutes. I call Kevin Stewart to speak for up to nine minutes.

15:35

Kevin Stewart (Aberdeen Central) (SNP): Scotland has extraordinary economic potential. We have been inventors in the past, we have innovated in oil and gas and we have key sectors such as renewables, food and drink, tourism and high-technology research that would do even better if investment was put into play by the UK Government.

Let us look at current regional inequity in the UK. Although the subject of economic regional inequity in the UK can descend into heated public debate, what is not up for debate are the plain facts. For those facts, we need to turn to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, whose data should be beyond political debate. It comes as no surprise to me that, according to OECD official data, the UK ranks 27th out of 31 countries for income equality. Quite simply, the UK is a country where the top 10 per cent are lapping it up while the rest of us are falling behind.

That, by itself, is shameful, but it does not tell the whole story. Inequality in the UK also occurs at a regional and national level. Again, we can turn to the OECD for the plain facts. On GDP per capita, Greater London ranks 11th out of 419 regions in the OECD database, but the median UK region ranks only 179th.

The gulf between London and the rest of us is not an accident. We have been told for years that a pound that is spent in Croydon is worth more than a pound that is spent in Scotland—a Boris Johnson catchphrase, if I remember rightly.

Craig Hoy: Is Mr Stewart aware that one of the engines of the London economy is the financial services sector? Will he therefore take the advice of Scottish Financial Enterprise and urge his Government to cut income tax in Scotland and recruit some of those skilled workers to Scotland, so that we can grow at a similar pace to the rest of the UK?

Kevin Stewart: Funnily enough, I was just going to come to the London financial sector. We have been promised that Scotland's wealth flowing south to be invested in London would pull the rest of us up, and that, thanks to the broad shoulders of the UK, we would all march into the sunlit uplands of imperial splendour, but the exact opposite has happened. Since Thatcher began the campaign of using Scotland's wealth to turn the City of London into a global financial centre, the cold war has ended and we have watched the iron curtain fall. However, it is the small eastern European nations that strode on to the world stage as independent countries that are marching to the sunlit uplands, and not the UK nations and regions. The GDP per capita of the median UK region now sits snugly between the median regions in the former eastern bloc countries of Lithuania and Slovenia. It is a plain fact that, over the past decades, we have been dragged down while those independent European nations have pulled themselves up.

However, the new Labour UK Government, rather than accepting that the policy of London and the south-east first has failed, is just as determined as Thatcher was to continue down the path of failure that will see Scotland's potential continue to be smothered. What Thatcher began with miners and steelworkers, Starmer is determined to finish with oil and gas workers, with little investment in a just transition.

Last year, we began with a promise of £28 billion of investment in the new green economy. However, the investment—and the jobs that go with it—has disappeared like sna aff a dyke. The much-vaunted GB Energy commitment to Aberdeen has now been reduced to a shared office and the promise of a few hundred jobs that will arrive some time in the next 20 years. Of course, we can also ask: where is the money for the Acorn carbon capture and storage project?

Meanwhile, investment in London continues apace, with the total UK capital spend per person in London being £2,237 last year, in comparison with the figure of £1,789 per person in Scotland. Can we really be surprised that decades of starving investment in Scotland to fund even higher spending in the London bubble results in London increasing its lead at the expense of Scotland?

Although the data from the OECD undeniably shows that years of investment in London has not served Scotland or other UK nations and regions well, it does not tell us why. For that, we need to look at the factors involved in production, which include land, labour and capital. Quite simply, land and labour in London are among the most expensive in the world, and that requires ever-increasing amounts of capital investment to compensate. That means that vital capital investment is going not towards actually growing

the economy but simply to cancel out the negative factors of costly land and labour.

That is because, fundamentally, London does not have the land to support its economy, and every natural resource, from energy to food and water, must be shipped there from somewhere else. Given that Scotland is the source of much of the natural resources that London uses, London is benefiting from our fruits of production in a way that we are not. It gets worse year on year, with every bit of growth that is eked out of London making the resource deficit worse.

We can debate the historical merits—although I would rather not—of investing in London during the days of empire but, either way, those days are gone. It is clear that, for many years, investing in London and the south-east has been a long-term drag on Scotland and other UK nations and regions. Given that, would it not be better to use our own fruits of production to grow our economy in Scotland?

I understand that long-term steady growth in Scotland is not that attractive to politicians in the Westminster bubble, with their eyes on the imperial capital and the next election, and their desperation to stay in their jobs. For them, the quick buck from throwing ever-increasing amounts of money into London and the south-east is much more attractive, but that is exactly why we are in the position that we are. Years of Westminster short-termism have been causing long-term pain for no gain. It is time for independence.

15:44

Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): As we all know, throughout the centuries, Scotland has produced an army of great inventors whose boundless imagination and inspiration have set us apart from everybody else. Scots are responsible for the television, penicillin, tidal energy, turbines and Dolly the sheep, and let us not forget the telephone or the regrettable deep-fried Mars bar, ATMs, daily disposable contact lenses, the blast furnace, the steam hammer and threshing machines, to name but a few inventions. Scotland has always been at the forefront of world-class innovation. I agree that we must do all that is in our power to ensure that that amazing trend continues, which means that greater resources must be found for the education sector and our colleges and universities, where groundbreaking ideas are spawned and, I hope, ultimately brought to life.

I ask members to forgive me but, like my colleague Murdo Fraser, I will not be shouting from the rafters about the performance of the current Labour Government, which is woeful. Its pre-election promises are simply turning to dust, which is a great pity, given the vital role that the UK Government plays in supporting the Scottish economy—or it certainly did when the previous Conservative Government was in power.

As Craig Hoy has already mentioned—and, no doubt, as members will be aware—I have been campaigning relentlessly for the upgrading of the A75 and A77. Those are two of the most critical roads in the country and are responsible for transporting more than £6 billion-worth of trade between the UK and Ireland and beyond every year. Since devolution, investment in those roads has, sadly, been neglected by the Scottish Government. It was only under the Conservatives that £8 million was allocated to the A75 on the back of Sir Peter Hendy's connectivity review. Incidentally, the Scottish National Party Government refused to take part in that review, unlike the other devolved Administrations and, indeed, the Republic of Ireland. The review highlighted the importance of the A75 out of all the roads in the UK. Although, commendably, Labour remains committed to improving the A75, the party has trimmed down the initial investment to £5 million, which I suppose is better than nothing, particularly considering the SNP Government's lack of investment, despite infrastructure being a devolved matter.

Often dubbed the forgotten or ignored corner of Scotland, the south-west benefited enormously under the previous UK Government, particularly through the levelling up scheme, under which projects in Scotland shared £122 million in funding. Indeed, nearly £23 million was invested in the south of Scotland, while an additional £14 million will go towards improving transport links in Dumfries and Galloway, the provision of new electric vehicle charging points for cars and electric buses, and the creation of new transport hubs in five towns in the region. In previous rounds of the levelling up scheme, £343 million was earmarked for Scotland, meaning that a total of £465 million has been allocated. In addition, 12 projects in Dumfries and Galloway benefited from £3 million as part of the UK shared prosperity fund.

The late First Minister Alex Salmond promised £8 million of investment in Stranraer during a visit to the then new port at Cairnryan, and in 2016, the former minister and MSP for the South of Scotland, Aileen McLeod, committed to prioritising the A75 and A77 before losing her seat. Regrettably, those election promises have failed to materialise and, despite more recent, similar, promises from the SNP Government, they will happen only after a funding commitment made by the UK Conservative Government during the previous parliamentary session. Some £18 million will now be spent regenerating the underused waterfront at Stranraer to create a vibrant marine

leisure destination, mostly thanks to funding for the Borderlands inclusive growth deal, which totals £450 million. It is also hoped that the Stranraer and Cairnryan area could capitalise on the Northern Ireland enhanced investment zone, which aims to provide grants and tax breaks to the region. Again, that is an initiative of the previous UK Government.

It is crucial to recognise that Scotland already enjoys significant autonomy in economic development. The Scottish Government has the power to tailor policies and investment to suit the unique needs of the Scottish economy. That autonomy allows Scotland to leverage its strength in sectors such as renewable energy, life sciences and fintech, and it should ensure that those industries receive the attention and support that they deserve.

The SNP Government's motion focuses on regional investment and risks creating division that pits different parts of the UK against one another, which is par for the course for the nationalist Government. Instead of fostering unity and collaboration, the motion leads only to a fragmented approach to economic development. We must remember that the strength of the UK economy lies in its diversity and interconnectivity. By working together and sharing resources, we can achieve a more balanced and prosperous economy for all.

The latest survey carried out by South of Scotland Enterprise, which involved more than 600 businesses, revealed that the biggest challenge facing them is economic uncertainty, which is influencing some decisions around investment and growth. A significant reason for that uncertainty is the on-going constitutional grievance that this nationalist SNP Government continues to peddle in ridiculous debates such as this.

I suggest that both the UK Government and the Scottish Government would do well to follow the example set by the previous Conservative UK Government if they want to see the Scottish economy grow and high-growth sectors continue to prosper.

15:50

Foysol Choudhury (Lothian) (Lab): I am disappointed that the Scottish Government chose to lodge the motion, which is based on a selection of recent UK Government announcements, and to play a blame game, rather than working collaboratively with the Labour Government in Westminster to deliver positive changes for Scotland.

I do not disagree with the premise that, for too long, wealth and investment have been concentrated in the south-east of England. We should ensure that all areas of the UK benefit from growth, especially Scotland. Devolution is a key mechanism to achieve that. In last week's debate on investment, members, including me, discussed the importance of investment in infrastructure, including housing and transport, as a catalyst for growth. Many of the announcements made by the UK Government were in those very areas, such as transport and housing. The Scottish Government's motion is confusing, given that it has control of those areas.

I repeat—

Kevin Stewart: Will Mr Choudhury give way?

Foysol Choudhury: I have a lot to get through.

I repeat my remark that, if we want to have growth, we need investment in infrastructure, and the Scottish Government should show ambition and use the power that it has in those areas.

Regardless of recent news in England, we also have to be clear that the Labour Government in Westminster values Scotland and has invested in Scotland, and it has made it clear that it intends to continue to do so. To secure the future of the site and retrain workers, £200 million has been invested in Grangemouth. There has also been more than £125 million for GB Energy, creating jobs with offices in Glasgow, Edinburgh and Aberdeen, and the national wealth fund, which meets our strategic goal by de-risking private investment, has just made its first investment in Scotland. Both the Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology and the Prime Minister, Sir Keir Starmer, have said that Glasgow could be an AI growth zone. On a smaller scale, North Edinburgh Arts is receiving money from the community ownership fund, creating a community hub that will contain council services, spaces for artists and cafes. Today, of course, ministers rejected an English bid to change the definition of single malt whisky. Those are not the actions of a Government that considers Scotland to be "an afterthought". When that investment in Scotland was put to a vote in the UK budget, the SNP voted against it.

However, Government investment alone is not enough to deliver economic growth. Our planning system must be reformed to expedite the progress of applications and get businesses building, not waiting. The Scottish Government's investor panel was clear that unacceptable delays in the planning system are making investment more uncertain and increasing costs, contributing to the perception that Scotland is simply not open for business. Issues with planning contribute to the housing emergency, which is eating away at the disposable income of the public, who are spending

more and more of their salary renting or saving rather than boosting other areas of our economy.

Finally, I will touch on another issue that was raised by the investor panel. The current landscape for attracting private investors is cluttered with various Government agencies that have different roles and funds. Our investment agencies should be easy to access and involve businesses in strategy and decision making, with a pipeline of projects ready for private investment.

Ultimately, members will repeat Scotland's strengths, and we are right to be proud of our advantages, but we need to see those strengths put to work and deliver economic growth because, regardless of any recent UK Government moves, Scotland has lagged behind the rest of the UK in growth for 10 years.

The Scottish Government should be focusing on tackling the issues that we face rather than bickering with a UK Labour Government that is interested in investing in and collaborating with Scotland.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): I call George Adam. You have around nine minutes, Mr Adam.

15:56

George Adam (Paisley) (SNP): Thank you, Presiding Officer. I am happy to stand here for nine minutes to talk about how the imbalance in our economy affects the people of Paisley and the people of Scotland in general.

I say at the beginning that my politics are not the politics of grievance, as others have said. I get angry and disappointed because I have been in Parliament and in politics long enough to see that UK Governments come and go, promising the earth but never delivering for Scotland. We end up hearing about the golden triangle of Oxford, Cambridge and London and about other areas that get investment, but it never seems to be in our areas and in our communities. That is why our focus should be on Scotland. It is more about disappointment than about the politics of grievance.

Today's debate is on a matter of fundamental importance. The economic imbalance in the UK and the urgent need for Scotland's vast potential to be recognised and fully supported are important for us all, whether in Paisley or in the rest of Scotland. Scotland's economy is rich in innovation, industry and ingenuity, yet, time and again, Westminster neglects our contributions and stifles our opportunities.

The UK Government continues to pour resources into the so-called golden triangle of Oxford, Cambridge and London, leaving Scotland as an afterthought. That has to change. The minister, Richard Lochhead, was right when he said that there is much uncertainty in the world, and it is my belief—I think it is also his belief—that now is the time for us to grab the opportunity. It is for us here in Scotland to make sure that Scotland does not miss the opportunities that are available.

I believe that the UK Government is failing Scotland now, has failed us in the past and will continue to do so, but I am willing to work with anyone who can make a difference, because this is about people's jobs and future financial stability. I will work with anyone, and I know that the Scottish Government thinks that way, too.

When we hear about Oxford, Cambridge and London, it is highly concerning to me. I have heard it a million times before and, once again, investment is being taken away from Scotland as the UK Government focuses on down south. We need to focus on excellence up here in Scotland and what we can provide. Locally, Paisley international airport—known to others as Glasgow international airport—is one of the clearest examples of how we can move things forward. In the future, Grangemouth could be a hub for sustainable aviation fuel.

Paul O'Kane (West Scotland) (Lab): I, too, represent the community to which George Adam refers, including Glasgow airport. Does he share my concern that it is possible to get a direct train from Glasgow central station to Manchester airport but not possible to get a direct train to Glasgow airport, which is a significant challenge to achieving the growth that we need in our area?

George Adam: I did not notice Paul O'Kane at the recent Strathclyde Partnership for Transport Clyde metro hub meeting—SPT is working on that for the future as we speak. This is about a positive way of looking at the future. Let us leave the negativity to others and look at what we can do.

The future for Grangemouth is as a hub for sustainable aviation fuel. One of the clearest examples of the economic imbalance in the UK is the lack of UK Government investment in Grangemouth. It is an industrial site that is primed to become a leader in sustainable aviation. Fuel production studies have confirmed that Grangemouth is ideally placed to support that transition, yet Westminster has focused its funding efforts elsewhere. If you are Manchester United, you can get £1 billion for the redevelopment of Old Trafford, but there is nothing for the people of Grangemouth.

Michael Marra: Will George Adam give way?

George Adam: I wonder whether Mr Marra will want to answer that.

Michael Marra: It is bizarre that George Adam has missed in the earlier speeches and my exchanges with the minister the fact that, just last week, an additional £200 million was announced to support the people of Grangemouth. Does he call that "nothing"?

George Adam: I will say only that there was £1 billion given to Ineos, which is an owner of Manchester United, and there was also £600 million given to Ineos for a place in Belgium. Come on—who is on the side of the people of Grangemouth? It is definitely not the Labour Party.

When we talk about transport infrastructure, we need to make sure that Glasgow airport is part of the sustainable aviation fuel future, which is why we need to look at Grangemouth as the site for that. Sustainable aviation fuel produces up to 70 per cent less carbon emissions, and it is made using materials from household waste, agricultural residues, used cooking oils and green nitrogen. Grangemouth is perfectly sited for that.

Michael Marra: That is why it is getting £200 million.

George Adam: There are people shouting from the side, and they are almost as irrelevant as some of the things that they have tried to provide. I return to the £1 billion that is being given to a chancer who is shutting down Grangemouth, as opposed to the people we are trying to represent.

With the right backing, Grangemouth could supply the aviation industry with sustainable fuel, strengthening the role of Glasgow airport and reinforcing Scotland's commitment to net zero. Instead, we have a Labour UK Government that is following in the footsteps of the Tories by overpromising and underdelivering for Scotland. That is why the SNP will continue to demand the investment that Scotland deserves.

There is innovation in Paisley—as everyone will know, I am always the first to talk about that—and the University of the West of Scotland has research on economic growth as one of its prime ideas. Paisley is not just a town of heritage and history; it is a centre of innovation. UWS is leading the way in cutting-edge technology and research. During a recent visit, I met Professor Naeem Ramzan of the university's school of computing, engineering and physical sciences. Some of the work that is being done there is incredible. Let us invest in that excellence and in what UWS is doing.

I will highlight one innovation that UWS researchers have developed: artificial intelligence technology that is capable of rapidly detecting serious health conditions from X-ray images. Originally designed to detect Covid-19, that AI can now identify tuberculosis, pneumonia and even certain cancers with remarkable accuracy. That breakthrough could revolutionise healthcare not just in Scotland but worldwide, reducing pressures on our national health service and improving outcomes for patients.

In addition, UWS's partnership with Kibble is delivering pioneering remote health monitoring, which provides real-time support for vulnerable young people in crisis.

Those innovations show the immense potential for Scotland's knowledge economy, yet, once again, we see a lack of UK-wide investment in our research institutions, as the Labour Government prioritises investment elsewhere. Those examples are the type of innovation that Scotland needs and that we need to continue with in the future.

Scotland's economic strength and Westminster's failure are on-going. Under the SNP Government, Scotland has received record foreign direct investment, outperforming the rest of the UK outside of London. We are leading the way in renewables, life sciences and data-driven innovation, yet Westminster continues to hold Scotland back.

Just look at the chancellor's recent economic plans. They offer nothing for Scotland, they fail to replace the European Union structural funds, they fail to deliver the promised £1 billion for carbon capture and they fail to secure Grangemouth's future—no matter what Labour MSPs say in here today, they have failed to secure Grangemouth's future. Those failures show that Labour is no different from the Tories when it comes to prioritising Scotland's needs.

Scotland's economic success is not just a possibility but a certainty, if we are given the right tools and investment. We have the industries, the talent and the drive to build a fairer, greener and more prosperous nation. To do that, we need a UK Government that recognises Scotland's worth. The SNP will continue to fight for a fair balance. We will continue to push for investment in Grangemouth, Glasgow airport, UWS and all of Scotland's economic centres. Ultimately, we will continue to make the case that Scotland's best future lies with independence, where decisions about our economy are made here, in Scotland, for Scotland.

16:05

Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con): This debate has been dreadful; it has been truly awful. Perhaps it is one of the worst, but—to quote the minister—that is given that there is quite a "low bar". Just look round the chamber: we are calling it a debate, but it is not really a debate. Members are reading their scripts and everyone else has got their heads down. They have been responding to emails and reading correspondence because

there is not much enthusiasm for the motion. That is not to do with the topic's being the economy. We could have spoken about the economy in a positive way and about how the two Governments could work together. However, we have a motion that is couched in grievance and that is inviting opposition against the UK Government rather than looking at what could be done more positively.

Let us remember that this is Scottish Government debating time, so this is seen as an easy topic for Government ministers to trot into the chamber to speak about, rather than speaking about the more important issues that our constituents would, I think, like us to be discussing in the chamber today. It might not have been comfortable for the Scottish Government, but we could have had the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care speaking about issues to do with people in the north-east waiting in ambulances for 12 hours outside accident and emergency departments. We could have had the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills, with her team, speaking about rising levels of violence in schools, or we could have had the Cabinet Secretary for Transport speaking about a point that I put to the Minister for Employment and Investment about the A96 corridor review earlier. Until my question this afternoon, we did not know how many people had responded to that review or when the Government was going to outline its response.

Richard Lochhead: Will the member give way?

Douglas Ross: I will give way to the minister in a moment.

As Craig Hoy said in his intervention on the Minister for Business, roads are so important to our economy. However, the A96, connecting Aberdeen with Inverness, is still not fully dualled. The promise to do that by 2030 is now an absolute fantasy. I am absolutely certain that, if the A96 ran between Glasgow and Edinburgh, it would have been fully dualled, but, because it connects Inverness and Aberdeen, it is not.

Richard Lochhead: I know that Douglas Ross likes his soapbox and likes to chase local headlines—I am very familiar with that—but does he not think that it is important for the Scottish Parliament to discuss and debate the fact that the UK economic strategy is, according to Rachel Reeves, to build up London, Cambridge and Oxford? Does he not think that, in a few years' time, if that has happened, we will look back and think that perhaps we should have said a lot more about that and tried to stop it happening?

Douglas Ross: The minister should look behind him. It is not me he should be criticising about being slightly dismissive and despondent about the debate. Look at the empty SNP seats behind him: his is the governing party of Scotland and its members cannot even be bothered to turn up to the debate, because of the grievance that the minister and the Scottish Government have put in the motion.

I do not know why the minister is suggesting that I am trying to grab a headline—it is already a headline that the SNP has failed to dual the A96. That has an impact on our local economy in Moray, in the Highlands and across the north-east. Ministers might not like to listen to that, but it is the reality.

I also think that we have to accept that there has been good working between the previous Conservative UK Government and the SNP Government in Holyrood, and between the new Labour UK Government and the SNP Government. I disagree with a lot of what the Labour Government has done, but there is the £200 million investment in Grangemouth.

Prior to that, the Conservative UK Government made significant investments in Scotland. I remember the Moray growth deal, which I was part of as one of the local representatives. When it was signed, the funding in it was the highest per head of population for a growth deal anywhere in the country. That welcome funding came from the UK Government, the Scottish Government and other bodies that are investing in the local economy.

We had the levelling-up funding of £18.2 million, going from the UK Government to Moray Council for local projects and delivering in its area.

Then we had the Elgin town fund. A couple of years ago, I was very proud to see the announcement of £20 million for the Elgin town fund. That is a huge amount of money going to Moray Council in just a few years, which shows that there can be investment from both of Scotland's Governments.

I was delighted that the Labour Government recently reannounced the towns fund. Interestingly, the towns that the Labour Government announced last week, or earlier this week, were exactly the same ones as were selected by the previous Conservative Government. I am delighted that Jenny Urquhart, who I suggested should chair the board for the Elgin town fund, will continue in that role, working with local partners in order to see local projects in Elgin make a difference.

Surely no Scottish Government minister can stand up and say that that is not UK Government money coming to communities in Scotland and delivering. That is what we should be celebrating and seeking more of.

The Minister for Employment and Investment (Tom Arthur): I recognise the investment from the

UK Government. As regeneration minister, I welcome that and the city deals.

In all seriousness, does Douglas Ross not recognise that one of the real strategic problems that successive UK Governments have wrestled with for decades is the significant imbalance? I applaud London: it is a great city that makes a significant contribution to the UK, Europe and global economies. However, we have appalling levels of regional inequality and variation in productivity across the English regions and the nations. Although transfers are welcome, it is vital to create new industries and economic opportunities in different parts of the UK.

When there is a real opportunity with cutting-edge new technologies such as AI, we need to use the comparative advantage in places such as Oxford and Cambridge, but we need to share the opportunity equitably right across the UK so that the whole UK can prosper.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I can give you time back for both interventions, Mr Ross.

Douglas Ross: I am grateful, Presiding Officer.

I agree with much of what the minister said. However, I gently say that the UK Chancellor of the Exchequer not mentioning Scotland in a speech does not mean that Scotland will not get benefits from resources. It is a bit petty to say that Scotland's not being mentioned in one place, or another bit not looking at the north of the United Kingdom, means that Scotland is not being considered. It clearly is: we have seen investment in Scotland from the previous UK Conservative Government and the UK Labour Government.

I agree with the point about regional inequality. As a representative of the Highlands and Islands and as someone who lives in Moray, I do not believe that the Scottish Government delivers for the whole of Scotland. I think that the Government has a central-belt bias and that we are poorer for it in the north-east. [*Interruption*.] Richard Lochhead can laugh at that, but I go back to the fact that the A96 has not been dualled. That dualling was a promise that has been made by successive SNP Governments, but has not been delivered.

Our maternity unit was downgraded in 2018 for one year, but it is still downgraded and is not a consultant-led unit. That is another inequality in Scotland that is within the responsibilities of the Scottish Government, and is something that I would like to change. If we have debates on such matters, the chamber will be fuller and we will be a better Parliament for it.

16:12

Gordon MacDonald (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP): Investment in growing the Scottish economy is important for the future of our country. I want to mention two issues, the first of which is Brexit.

Post-Brexit, the UK Government introduced the UK shared prosperity fund, which was meant to replace EU structural funds, including the European regional development fund and the European social fund. Those were EU funds that provided Scotland with significant financial support of about £100 million per year. However, the shared prosperity fund has been widely criticised as being inadequate for Scotland, because the funding is roughly 60 per cent smaller than the EU equivalent.

The gap is even more pronounced when we consider additional programmes such as LEADER and European territorial co-operation, which further bolstered rural and regional development under the EU framework. Once again, that is Scotland being let down by Westminster Governments that promise much but deliver little.

Just 15 months ago, the then Tory Secretary of State for Scotland, Alister Jack, issued a press release that began:

"The UK Government's levelling up funding in Scotland has now reached £2.92 billion".

That included funding for the 12 city deals of £1.5 billion up to the year 2034. In January, the Economy and Fair Work Committee, of which I am a member, heard from the Labour Secretary of State for Scotland, Ian Murray, that

"at the moment in terms of the money that is being put in ... We have given the commitment to the 12 city region deals."—[*Official Report, Economy and Fair Work Committee,* 15 January 2025; c 8.]

Why use the words "at the moment"?

One reason might be that the spending review that is due later this month is likely to include spending cuts, and many experts predict significant reductions being made across Government departments due to the current economic climate, defence spending increases and pressure to balance the budget. The so-called levelling up agenda, which was heralded with fanfare by the previous Tory Administration, dangled a carrot of £2.9 billion for Scotland. Such funds were meant to breathe life into our towns, regenerate our high streets and bolster our local economies, but the agenda was not fully funded. The Tories overpromised and Labour has, so far, underdelivered, which is leaving Scotland to pick up the pieces once again.

We are told by Ian Murray that major decisions have to wait until the spending review, at the same time as Rachel Reeves, his Labour chancellor, is announcing plans to transform the Oxford-Cambridge-London triangle into a major economic

hub by investing in rail and road upgrades, research hospitals and digital tech, and by delivering high levels of research funding in order to drive collaboration between Oxford, Cambridge and London universities as hubs for life sciences. What happened to the inherited financial black hole and awaiting the spending review outcome?

I want to focus the remainder of my remarks on the broken promises in relation to the exascale supercomputer at the University of Edinburgh. In the spring budget of 2023, it was announced that funding would be made available for that next-generation AI computer. The University of Edinburgh was well placed, as it had just celebrated 60 years of computer science and artificial intelligence research. The university is already home to ARCHER2, the country's current national supercomputer, and it has been home to the United Kingdom's high-performance computing services for more than 30 years. It is also a partner in the National Robotarium, which is based in my constituency.

Therefore, it was no great surprise when, on 9 October 2023, the University of Edinburgh issued a press release that stated:

"The UK Government has announced the University as the preferred location for the exascale supercomputer, which will be able to perform one billion billion calculations each second.

Once operational, it will provide high-performance computing capability for key research and industry projects across the UK ... Exascale will be housed in a new £31 million wing of EPCC's Advanced Computing Facility, which has been purpose-built as part of the Edinburgh and South East Scotland City Region Deal."

Then, on 15 January 2025, Labour's Ian Murray stated:

"When we came into office, there was a £900 million commitment to the University of Edinburgh for the exascale supercomputer but there was not a penny attached to that commitment. Therefore, some difficult decisions had to be made ... the exascale computer issue has been rolled into the spending review."—[*Official Report*, *Economy and Fair Work Committee,*15 January 2025; c 15.]

Less than two weeks later, on 28 January 2025, the Labour Government issued a press release that was headed, "Chancellor unveils new plans to deliver the Oxford-Cambridge Growth Corridor that will boost the UK economy." Part of that included a new "AI growth zone", which was announced for Culham, Oxfordshire, in order to

"speed up planning proposals and build more AI infrastructure ... This starts immediately with work starting on a brand new supercomputer."

What happened to waiting for the March spending review—or does that apply only to Scotland?

Then, on 29 January 2025, the previous day's announcement was amended to remove the following sentence:

"The chancellor today announced a call for expressions of interest from regional and local authorities and industry to inform the next stage of the AI growth zone programme."

Why remove that sentence? Will the University of Edinburgh get that supercomputer? We do not know, but what we do know is that we do not need Westminster's crumbs to be dangled and then snatched away. We need control of our own resources and destiny.

The SNP has long argued for independence. Let us decide how to level up our own communities, and let us not wait for a Labour chancellor in London to wield a red pen. My message to the UK Government is simple: honour your commitments or step aside and let Scotland build the future that our own people deserve.

16:19

Paul O'Kane: Today is Ash Wednesday, the first day of Lent, and I think that I can chalk most of this afternoon up for my penance, which is useful.

I welcome the opportunity to discuss the need for investment, both public and private, in Scotland to achieve the goals on growth, on which I think that there is a consensus across the chamber. I welcome having time this afternoon to set out much of the investment that has happened since July, the UK Labour Government's focus on it and its importance to growth.

I begin by agreeing with at least part of the Government's motion: there are high-growth sectors in Scotland and there is scope for them, and for many others, to go further and faster. Our energy, technology, whisky and manufacturing industries—to name just a few—possess world-class innovation and have the potential to drive significant economic growth in Scotland.

I was struck by something that George Adam said in response to my intervention, which was:

"Let us leave the negativity to others".

It seems that those on his party's front bench did not get that memo when they were developing the motion for this afternoon. This is a Scottish Government debate; the Scottish Government chose the topic and drafted the motion, yet it did not include in it any details of real, tangible progress that it could be making to attract greater investment into our economy, and it has failed to provide a pathway for meaningful action.

Instead, it seems to me that we are back to the same old grudge and grievance debates in this place, in which the Government throws up its hands if it feels like it is not getting exactly what it wants. I thought that those days were behind us, because we were promised a new era of working together with the UK Government. It is very

disappointing to see the Government motion react to headline investments and ignore, as usual, the detailed and significant investment that is coming to Scotland.

We have heard much about that this afternoon. Today, we had the announcement of the £55 million expansion of the Port of Cromarty Firth, which will make it the first port in the UK that is able to make offshore floating wind turbines on site and at scale. That will be backed by a grant from the floating offshore wind manufacturing investment scheme, which will allow it to attract match funding from private investors.

That investment from FLOWMIS joins a long list of investments to Scotland, which are worth hearing about once again. They include removing connectivity black holes through project gigabit and the shared rural network, boosting 4G coverage in the Highlands and Islands, funding two electrolytic hydrogen projects in Cromarty and Whitelee, confirming £25 million of funding for the 10-year investment in the Argyll and Bute growth deal, and extending the innovation cluster in the Glasgow city region for a further year. That is without mentioning the headline investments in GB Energy—which, with its headquarters in Aberdeen and the investment that goes along with it, is a clear statement of intent—or the £200 million committed by the Prime Minister—

Kevin Stewart: Will the member give way?

Paul O'Kane: I will just finish this point, because I want to ensure that the complete list is on the record. The Prime Minister committed to £200 million for Grangemouth.

Kevin Stewart: The commitments to Aberdeen and GB Energy have been diluted by the day. First, it was said that there would be up to 1,000 jobs. Now, it is a couple of hundred jobs, maybe in 20 years. The investment has also been absolutely cut to pieces. Does Mr O'Kane believe that the pledges that were initially made to Aberdeen, and the original GB Energy investment, should stand?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr O'Kane, I can give you the time back for the intervention.

Paul O'Kane: It never fails to amaze me that Kevin Stewart cannot bring himself to support a publicly owned energy company that is being invested in by the new UK Government, after years of inaction from the Tories and a lack of investment in that. Mr Stewart well knows the potential that will be unleashed for jobs in the supply chain and in the development of new offshore wind—and for jobs in Aberdeen, which Michael Marra rightly described as the energy capital of the UK and of Europe. It would be good to hear Mr Stewart come with the positivity that George Adam said in his contribution that he was looking for.

It is important that we do not lose sight of the fact that other parts of the UK have also faced chronic underinvestment in 14 years of Conservative austerity. It was disappointing to hear the minister talk about Liverpool and Tyneside as though those communities do not deserve investment and support from the new UK Government.

Today, I was speaking to someone in Manchester who contrasted the growth and investment in Scotland with that in Manchester with Andy Burnham as mayor. Manchester has fewer powers than this Parliament has, but there has been a huge amount of growth and development in those communities, and work has been done hand in hand with them.

In the Glasgow city region, we have not seen similar growth and expansion. That is why I made my point about Glasgow airport. I agree that Glasgow airport is a key part of our infrastructure and a key part of what we can do to get growth, but the fact of the matter is that it was the SNP Government that cancelled the Glasgow airport rail link, back in 2007, when it took office. There is another proposal from SPT to develop a plan for a light rail link to the airport. The Government has been in power for 18 years, yet people cannot get a train to Glasgow airport. That is extraordinary. The Government needs to reflect on the action that it has taken—or, rather, its inaction.

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

Paul O'Kane: I will, once I have made this point.

The point about airports was well made. The expansions at Heathrow and Gatwick—which I think were tentatively welcomed by the First Minister—will have a knock-on impact on the supply chain for our very important industries, such as Scottish salmon.

Stuart McMillan: On GARL, does Mr O'Kane recognise that the rail link that was proposed would have had a negative effect on people who travel between Inverclyde and Glasgow because, if it had gone ahead, it would have reduced the number of trains per hour between Inverclyde and Glasgow?

Paul O'Kane: Those arguments were well rehearsed at the time. It was abundantly clear that the Scottish Government abandoned Glasgow airport. Quite frankly, that is what happened. We have seen a lack of investment in and support for Glasgow airport.

I think that the motion is disrespectful to the good partnership working that has taken place

between the Scottish and UK Governments over the past seven months, which has represented a constructive change and has sought to deliver for people and communities who need investment. I am thinking, in particular, of the partnership working that we have seen on a sustainable future for Grangemouth, the Grangemouth industrial cluster and the wider Falkirk and Grangemouth growth deal.

We need to be clear about the fact that the UK Labour Government is taking what are sometimes very difficult and tough economic decisions and making investments that are necessary after what has been a lost decade in Scotland's economy, while the SNP and the Tories seem to want to continue the story of grudge and grievance. I do not think that that does a service to the people of Scotland.

It is clear that the job is not done. As I have said, we cannot rectify a lost decade after only seven months in office, but the new UK Government has made a significant start. Earlier, I mentioned my disappointment about the return to grudge and grievance that the motion represents, in spite of the significant co-operative work that has been undertaken by the two Governments. It is important that the Scottish Government reflects on that. I hope that this afternoon's debate is a momentary blip in the constructive relationship and the debates that we have in the chamber.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We move to closing speeches. There is a little time in hand.

16:28

Lorna Slater: Like Murdo Fraser, I had been enjoying—up until that last speech—having another debate on the economy, although my staff have forbidden me from rolling out my Meatloaf joke again. I was a bit distressed by that last speech because of its focus on airports. We are a long way into the climate emergency for members not to understand the role that aviation plays in global climate emissions or the status of aviation in the future. Aviation is one of those industries that must decline. The Climate Change Committee has said that there will always be some role for aviation, but it is not a growth industry. Therefore, investing in airports is not a sensible thing to do unless that investment is in decarbonising and shrinking those airports.

I cannot agree with what Craig Hoy said in his intervention on Kevin Stewart. He seemed to imply that people in the financial services sector are not very good at maths. The Chartered Institute of Taxation has calculated that someone in Scotland who earns the whopping salary of £150,000 will pay £3,857.88 more in income tax than someone in the rest of the UK, which is less than 3 per cent of their gross salary. In exchange for that, they will get a baby box if they have a baby, free prescriptions, free bus travel for their kids, free university tuition for their kids, more police officers per person, a greater ratio of general practitioners per person, free social care should they or any of their family require it, and—although this is not something the Scottish Government can take credit for, with or without the Greens in government—significantly lower housing costs. Anyone who ran the numbers on that would find that living in Scotland is a really good deal. John Cullinane, director of public policy at the Chartered Institute of Taxation, noted:

"the divergence created by devolution has not led to any noticeable changes in taxpayer behaviour".

I also challenge Murdo Fraser on freeports, which are an excellent example of exactly the sort of compromise that ends up being made in the pursuit of growth at all costs. In a freeport, some taxes and regulations are suspended in the hope that companies that do not want to contribute to their country and communities and that have a cavalier attitude to regulations can be lured into those locations. Even assuming that that leads to the creation of new companies instead of just causing businesses to relocate, what message does it send to companies that pay their employees properly, follow the rules and pay their taxes? It sounds as though the Conservatives do not value them. Instead of creating a level playing field for all businesses, the Conservatives would like to hand out sweeties to companies that do not want to pay taxes or follow regulations.

I also challenge—again—the claim that North Sea oil and gas contribute to Scotland's energy security. North Sea oil and gas are extracted by private companies and sold on the open global market. They are in no way reserved or set aside for Scotland's use, and, far from their creating security for us, climate change is creating significant risks for our future. Everything from food shortages to species extinctions, storm impacts, flooding, fires and droughts will increase if global emissions do not drop quickly enough, and large parts of the Earth will become uninhabitable to humanity. The mass human displacement that is caused by that, along with global food and water shortages, is an enormous risk to our security. The security of our future depends on our reducing emissions on a very rapid trajectory.

As always, I am a bit concerned about the Scottish Government's focus on carbon capture and storage and the Acorn project. It appears to be looking for an easy way out of the climate emergency. We know what is needed to reduce emissions urgently, and nearly all of that includes proven technology that we already have. However,

instead of implementing road charging, announcing a road building moratorium as Wales has done, bringing forward an ambitious heat in buildings bill or publishing a new energy strategy with a clear presumption against new oil and gas, the Scottish Government points to the UK and the Acorn project again and again.

Carbon capture, utilisation and storage is a very risky investment. Even if it can be made to work—and no one has done that yet—it is frightfully expensive. It lets polluters off the hook by imagining that they can just hoover up their emissions, instead of us all having to make significant changes to how our economy works.

I will conclude by joining Michael Marra and others in calling out the explicitly political and constitutional nature of the motion for debate. Despite the fact that Scottish independence is supported by roughly half the population of Scotland, the UK Government—which is so fanatically unionist that it refuses to defend the union in a new referendum on Scottish independence—maintains the Tory line that, if it does not allow a democratic process of self-determination for the Scottish people, we will all just forget about it and it will go away.

The UK Government is therefore in a bit of a bind. If it invests in Scotland, it risks stoking Scottish economic confidence and, therefore, confidence in what an independent Scotland might achieve. That undermines project fear. However, if it does not invest in Scotland, it risks stoking Scottish resentment, allowing those of us who support independence to say how much better off we would be as an independent country.

Unchecked, climate change will force changes into our economy. We can either make changes in how our economy works, to ensure that everyone benefits from our success in reducing emissions, or have changes forced on us by the collapse of global systems—climate, food production, precipitation patterns, disease and extreme events.

Action is not optional. Members might want to opt out of the costs and difficult choices of achieving net zero, but they cannot opt out of the costs and effects of catastrophic climate change.

16:34

Michael Marra: There is a very important debate to be had about spatial economics in the UK and in Scotland. Unfortunately, this was not it. We have been slightly bedevilled by the motion that is in front of us from the Government and by the tone taken variously, and rather depressingly, by the front bench, but, rather hysterically, by the SNP back benchers in some of the quite fantastical warblings that we have had of grievance, grudge and, frankly, an aggressive tone about anything good that happens anywhere else than Scotland. It is not a tone that builds an atmosphere of partnership, which is what we hope to see and which can help the whole country.

One area that could have been a focus today—in relation to the kinds of issues that we talk about as representing a genuine investment in our economy—is ScotWind. In 2022, the ScotWind auction realised £756 million in fees. The then First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon, said that ScotWind money

"will help deliver the supply chain investments and high-quality jobs that will make the climate transition a fair one".

Three years on, precisely none of that has happened. The money has shifted in and out of budgets over the years. Frankly, it has become a fund to be used as a backstop for an increasingly chaotic Government that is losing control of the public finances, with three consecutive emergency in-year budgets. There was an announcement in the 2025-26 budget that around £300 million will be spent on long-term investment for the energy transition—the kind of investment that Kevin Stewart was calling for. However, yesterday, at the Finance and Public Administration Committee, the Minister for Public Finance could not tell me a single project that any of the money would actually be spent on in the next financial year, when it is meant to be Invested. Therefore, how the Government will use the money to invest in our energy future remains a complete mystery, including to the Government, and the clock is ticking.

That is the kind of area that the Government could have been talking about today—things that, frankly, it needs to get in order—

Stuart McMillan: Will Michael Marra take an intervention?

Michael Marra: No, thank you.

Stuart McMillan: It is on that point.

Michael Marra: No, thank you.

After that, we strode, bizarrely, across a range of cod economic theorising—none worse, I have to say, than the bizarre Malthusian fantasies of Kevin Stewart, recalling the worst warblings of physical resource constraint, based on, frankly, pre-technological views of the world. For all his railing against empire and the East India Company, his view is profoundly ahistorical and, frankly, it is irrelevant to the people of the north-east and of Scotland today. What they want to know is what the money will actually be spent on.

Kevin Stewart: Will the member give way?

Michael Marra: I certainly will, sir.

Kevin Stewart: What is entirely relevant to the people of the north-east and people throughout Scotland is the capital spending difference—the per capita capital spending of £2,237 in London compared to £1,789 in Scotland. That situation is of the Treasury's making, and London sucks up capital.

Michael Marra: As I said at the outset, there is a fair point at the core of the issue that Mr Stewart raised about investment on a spatial basis. We heard the example that my friend Paul O'Kane gave about Manchester. Andy Burnham is a frequent and loud campaigner for investment in his region. The question is whether we want to do that in partnership and try to deal with some of the issue.

What has happened in the most recent budget is that an additional £610 million of capital has been invested by the UK Labour Government in Scotland but we have no capital plan to tell us how that will be spent. We were promised one for the past two years, and, as the investment cost rises, we are none the wiser as to how any of the money should be spent.

Lorna Slater went on to tell us that growth is not everything, although I am afraid to say that I do not believe that anyone claimed that it was. Ms Slater rightly referred to distributional questions and inequality, but I continue to fail to see the relationship between an end to growth and the political means by which we can find the space to redistribute the money. That is a singular failure in Tim Jackson's work on the end to growth, if I am honest.

Part of the spatial question is the fact that we are all advocates for place and for local people, about which we are all rightly passionate and positive. Beatrice Wishart gave the best example of that. She will be a sad loss to the Parliament in 2026. She gave the best examples of the centralising tendency of the Government, and she could have given the same speech that Scottish National Party back-benchers gave—that money spent anywhere other than where it wants it to be is an illegitimate affront.

George Adam claimed that the £200 million for Grangemouth is nothing, which is an insult, frankly, to the local people who have campaigned for jobs and investment. In his view, the people of Manchester should have no investment whatsoever.

George Adam: I do not know whether the member is intentionally misinterpreting what I said, or if he is doing so for political effect, but I was questioning whether it is right to give £1 billion to someone who is already destroying the lives of people in Grangemouth. That is what I was questioning, and that is what the people of Grangemouth want to know. We do not know what the £200 million is actually going to do, where it will come from or what it is going to deliver. Let us get some balance in this debate and some reality.

Michael Marra: I am happy to defend the idea that, after eight months, the UK Labour Government has brought £200 million to the table to invest in the local community, whereas the Scottish Government sat on its hands for 18 years and did absolutely nothing.

Beatrice Wishart continued by making an articulate case for her community rather than against other communities. I will close on a quote from Beatrice. She said that it would be better, frankly, for people to bring a "can-do and enterprising attitude, which recognises where the future lies."

If only, sir—if only.

16:41

Craig Hoy (South Scotland) (Con): This grim, grievance-laden debate has underscored how wide the gap is between reality and the SNP's rhetoric when it comes to Scottish business, the Scottish economy and Scottish growth.

It goes to show that, having put her name to this lamentable motion, Kate Forbes stayed for the first five minutes of the debate and then ducked out to spend her time more productively. If she had remained in the chamber, she would have learned more about the SNP's record, which, on this occasion, my colleague Murdo Fraser did not take the opportunity to eviscerate. However, her action reveals that it is not the UK that treats the Scottish economy as an afterthought. Bizarrely, the SNP Scottish Government repeatedly does so.

I accept the minister's point that Labour has badly let down Scottish business and has all but snuffed out the prospects of growth that we had restored to the Scottish economy, but it is more than only a bit rich for the SNP to use the debate to slam anyone else for treating Scottish trade and Scottish industry as an afterthought.

Let us take a moment or two to reflect on the SNP's record. The oil and gas sector in Scotland has repeatedly been hung out to dry. Scotland's pub and hospitality sector has been given only a tiny share of the vital rates relief that it is due. Scotland's retailers have been given no additional rates relief at all. Our farmers are seeing the agricultural resource budget cut this year. Our fishing communities are crying out for support, which is not forthcoming.

The Scottish nuclear energy industry—what is left of it—faces shutdown due to SNP dogma. The defence manufacturing industry is losing jobs due to a lack of Scottish Government support.

Recruitment to the financial services sector in Scotland is at risk due to John Swinney's high-tax Scotland. I say to Kevin Stewart that we are not losing financial services jobs to London; we are losing them to Manchester, Birmingham, Newcastle and other places in England. That is the reality of the situation.

Our universities are being undermined as engines of innovation and economic growth by SNP disinvestment for a decade or more. The Scotch whisky industry faces repeated threats, such as the proposed ban on marketing. Our world-class food and drink sector is hit hard by the failed deposit return scheme, which Lorna Slater still defends. Scotland's free ports were delayed as the SNP played political games. Globally recognised brand Scotland brewers are now scratching their heads in disbelief at proposed restrictions on sponsorship. Our island businesses are undermined by the on-going ferries failure. Remote and rural businesses—some as large as Stena Link, in Stranraer—have been hit by the Government's failure to upgrade roads such as the A75.

As Douglas Ross said, this has been a lamentable debate, and I will never get back the nine minutes that I spent listening to Kevin Stewart. The SNP Government is actively hostile—nothing that I heard in the debate tells me otherwise—to many of the very industries that it relies on for skills development, employment and tax receipts. The SNP talks about economic growth, but its actions in the Parliament and beyond often run completely counter to achieving it.

Despite Michael Marra's flight of fantasy, Labour is no better. Let us admit that the party's national insurance hike is a broken-promise tax on jobs and workers that will cost the Scottish economy billions of pounds. It will lead to lower wages and lower levels of employment, and it will undermine companies' capacity to invest further in growing their businesses.

Let me recap, as Murdo Fraser did, the performance of the Scottish economy in recent years under a Conservative Government in what were challenging economic times. Between 2011 and 2022, the UK economy grew by nearly a fifth, yet Scottish growth lagged behind that by 7 per cent. The Scottish economy underperformed what was perceived to be an underperforming UK economy. That is the true cost of the SNP's economic incompetence and its policy decisions. Had ministers got their act together and swung in behind Scotland's businesses, the economy would now be £10.2 billion bigger than it is.

For this budget, we set out plans to reduce tax—tax on workers, tax on home buyers and tax on businesses—which would have restored long-term growth to the Scottish economy. However, that fell on deaf ears with this SNP Government, and it appears that Labour also lacks a credible plan, as this debate has proven. In many respects, Labour has been defending indefensible decisions that are doing real damage to the business community and public services in Scotland.

The previous Conservative Government was serious about boosting the Scottish economy to the tune of £3 billion. As Murdo Fraser said, there was £1.5 billion in city, region and growth deals and £1.4 billion in levelling up funds, including for the freeports that the SNP sought to block, which would have supported jobs in key industries including the oil and gas sector, for which they would have acted as a supply chain.

However, it is not only in those areas that the Scottish Conservatives backed the UK Government in delivering for Scotland. As Murdo Fraser rightly said, the Ministry of Defence spends more per head in Scotland than in the rest of the UK—an average of £380 more—and its spending in Scotland grew by 13 per cent between 2018 and 2021-22. That was a vote of confidence in the Scottish aerospace and defence industries.

As our amendment makes clear, we should not ignore the significant contributions that other organisations have made. The British Business Bank's investment fund for Scotland will deliver £150 million of new funding to the country to drive sustainable growth by supporting innovation and creating local opportunities for new and growing businesses in Scotland.

Action under a Conservative Government delivered real support for Scottish investment in Scottish businesses and Scottish jobs and, ultimately, for growth in the Scottish economy. Our commitment to the Scottish economy and the industries that support it is unwavering and ambitious. Sadly, based on our experience not just in this debate but in many recent debates, the SNP—now alongside Labour—does not believe in the same principles of driving growth in the Scottish economy.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Richard Lochhead to wind up the debate. Minister, I would be grateful if you could take us to as close to 5 o'clock as you can.

16:47

Richard Lochhead: I shall speak slowly and, of course, welcome any interventions that members want to make. I always like to hear members' views, and I am sure that they are already thinking of what they could say.

First, it is important to say—and I said this at the beginning of the debate—that we are debating the

future of the Scottish economy and, to a certain extent, the future of the UK economy against a backdrop of challenges and uncertainties. Domestically, there is a lot of concern in the business community about the impending increase in employer national insurance contributions, energy costs, inflation and the on-going impact of Brexit.

There is a range of domestic issues, and the international situation is also uncertain. We have seen what has been happening across the pond and the ramifications of that on our television screens and on social media. We do not quite know where that is going to go, and I am sure that every member of every party in Parliament is very concerned about that.

The Scottish and UK business communities will likewise be very concerned about the potential impact of what may be down the line over the coming months and years—we simply do not know at this point what that will be. I mention that simply because it makes this kind of debate even more important. We absolutely have to grasp the economic opportunities that are before us; we cannot afford to miss them.

We are at a moment of inflection for the Scottish economy. I am very lucky that, in my post, I get to go around the country and meet businesses, entrepreneurs, universities and a wide range of representatives in the business community. There is a lot of excitement at the moment, despite the challenges. Many wells are about to spring in the business and innovation communities. Exciting things are happening in Scotland.

We cannot afford to miss this moment of inflection. The decisions that we take over the next few years will lead to our capturing the giant prize—as I mentioned—of prosperity and more equality in Scotland. Conversely, if we, or other people, take the wrong decisions, we will miss some of those opportunities. It is a crucial time for Scotland, which makes this debate even more important.

Murdo Fraser: On that very note, the minister will recall that, at the start of the debate, I referred to the importance of the defence industries to Scotland. We are going to see more defence spending in the UK and internationally, which creates an economic opportunity.

Does he agree, therefore, that the Scottish Government has to be welcoming of the defence industries? Does he agree that if, on a future occasion, we welcome to the Parliament representatives of, and young apprentices in, the defence sector, we should be welcoming them and not abusing them?

Richard Lochhead: I put on record that I very much value the contribution to the Scottish economy that is made by the companies in the defence sector that are based in Scotland. There is a diverse range of companies that build everything from naval ships to drones and other technologies that are being used.

Of course, the space industry in Scotland is crucially important, too. As the world prepares to invest billions of extra dollars in the space industry, there are opportunities for Scotland to get a slice of the action. That will lead to high-value jobs in our country and the further expansion of our space industry. We should not limit our ambitions to building small satellites—which we are very good at—and rockets; we have to look at the global situation and what that means for Scottish opportunities. I think that apprentices, and the opportunities not just in defence but in diversification within those companies, are important for the Scottish economy.

In many ways, the debate has been quite predictable. The Conservatives have said that things were much better in their day. Labour Party members have said that things are much better now, because Labour is in Government. Douglas Ross has said that he does not want to be here, which we all know, and he gave us his views on various things—

Douglas Ross: Will the member give way?

Richard Lochhead: Oh, I suppose that I will have to give way, as I name-checked him.

Douglas Ross: It is not so much that—the minister said that he would be happy to give way to any colleague, so I am taking him up on that.

Does the minister accept that my issue was more with the structure of the debate? I am happy to speak about the economy, but we knew how the debate would go—as he has just said, it was very predictable—because of how the SNP framed the motion for debate. Surely he must agree, having listened to the debate, that, while we could have had a positive and constructive debate about Scotland's economy, we could not do so with his party's motion?

Richard Lochhead: As the member will be aware, we occasionally disagree over the future direction of the Scottish and UK economies, and today we are having a vigorous debate on that very subject. SNP members have our views on the future of the Scottish economy, and other parties are here defending their views on it, too.

However, it is important that we address the big picture, which is that the UK Government's Chancellor of the Exchequer has said that she sees the golden triangle of London, Oxford and Cambridge, and in particular the Oxford-Cambridge corridor, as the key to the economic

success of the UK. She also views that area as the home of British innovation.

That has huge ramifications for our business community in Scotland. I know that other members would rather not talk about that, but—to be honest—if my party had plummeted to 18 per cent in the opinion polls, I would perhaps be asking myself why the people of Scotland currently have a certain view of the UK Government. It is important to reflect on what is happening with the big picture.

Last week, I met Douglas Alexander, when we both spoke at an exports event in Edinburgh called "Made in Scotland, Sold to the World". We co-operate on issues like that—we have discussed in this debate how we have co-operated on freeports and the fact that there is other funding coming from the multibillion-pound national wealth fund, with £200 million earmarked for Grangemouth. We have also discussed the growth deals as a good example of how the Governments have worked together.

I do not understand why the other parties are trying to conflate the Scottish Government's willingness to work in partnership with the UK Government with the fact that we have concerns over the UK Government's direction of travel in promoting the south-east of England.

Michael Marra: The minister will recognise that, instead of what he has described, what we got from some back-bench SNP members was talk of what happened in the days of empire and the East India Company. That is an illustration of where, unfortunately, the Government's motion took us.

With regard to speeches that UK Government ministers have made, I draw attention to what the Prime Minister said just last week, when he was announcing the £200 million for Grangemouth, about how integral Scotland is to our ambition for a clean power mission to transform the energy sector by 2030. Scotland is the energy capital of Europe and it is integral to those plans, and it will be invested against on that basis. Surely the minister sees that that is a positive signal of the UK Labour Government's view of and vision for Scotland.

Richard Lochhead: First, we recognise that, in some cases, UK Government money and investment is coming to Scotland, which is important. However, the member suggests that we should be thankful and celebrate the fact that Scotland has a share in UK projects. Of course, we should be getting a share of those projects. The big picture is the UK economy's direction of travel.

Kevin Stewart made an important point about inequality and how we are repeating past mistakes. The new UK Labour Government is, once again, emphasising that the golden triangle of Oxford, Cambridge and London, in the south-east of England, will drive the UK economy forward. Even the Tories, who introduced the levelling up agenda—albeit 10 years late—accepted that too much was happening in the golden triangle in the south-east of England. That may have turned out to be a slogan, but it identified a debate that needed to be had in the UK. Now, the Labour Party is talking about how the Tories got it wrong, but it is doing exactly the same thing. Labour colleagues are talking up the golden triangle as the future for UK investment.

Paul O'Kane: In my contribution, I made the point directly to the minister that, throughout the debate, he has referenced investment in Liverpool, Tyneside and Manchester. Does he not see that a lost decade cannot be overturned in seven months and that investment in every part of the UK is vitally important and is at the core of the UK Government's agenda?

Richard Lochhead: Yes, but the thrust of UK economic policy is causing concern in the Scottish business community. The BBC reported that Rachel Reeves said that she

"vowed to build 'Europe's Silicon Valley' between Oxford and Cambridge".

Even Terry Murden of *Daily Business Magazine*—who is not the biggest friend of the Scottish Government, it has to be said—described the speech as

"Southern comfort, but no help for Scotland."

The issue is that embassies around the world and UK agencies take their lead from what the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the Prime Minister say, which is, "Drive investment into the golden triangle in the south-east of England." That is what will be happening behind closed doors around the world. Thank goodness we have Kate Forbes as our champion for investment in Scotland and that the Scottish Government is making an effort to attract investment into Scotland.

When I went to Singapore on a trade mission, a senior businessperson in Singapore said to me that it was refreshing to have a Scottish minister arguing for investment in Scotland, because, usually, UK ministers make the case for investment in the golden triangle in the south of England. That is what is happening around the world. Others are taking a nod from the UK Government's policy direction.

Michael Marra: What would the minister say to the investor panel that was commissioned by the Scottish Government, which said:

"It is not apparent that the Scottish Government considers the impact of its actions on investment appetite"

and that

"Planning decisions are slow and sit in the system for unacceptably long periods".

That is what the business community is saying to his Government about its record. Why are we not having a discussion about that and fixing it?

Richard Lochhead: I pull the member back to the big picture. I know that planning is important for the Scottish business community, and it is really important that we get that right and listen to the recommendations, but we are talking about the future direction of the UK economy and the implications for Scotland. That is what we must have at heart.

When the Prime Minister delivered a big speech about the AI action plan and the future of AI in the UK, despite the fact that Scotland leads internationally in many areas of AI, he mentioned four areas down south, but not Scotland. That is why the business community and our innovation sectors are concerned; they are reading reports on that and seeing it happen. We need a UK Government that recognises what is happening in Scotland. People have written books about how Scotland invented the modern world but, meanwhile, the UK Government has cancelled the supercomputer in Edinburgh. The Prime Minister mentioned every other part of the UK—or, at least England—in his big talk about the future of AI, despite the fact that, just last year, a Nobel prize winner who is an alumni of the University of Edinburgh won an award for machine learning. He is one of the world's leaders in AI and studied at the University of Edinburgh, and that must be recognised by the UK Government. We have to do something about that.

If you were in one of the many exciting companies in Scotland that are often referred to in the chamber, whether that is in life sciences, the space industry or fintech, and you read that the UK Government's official view is that Oxbridge and the golden triangle is the home of British innovation, how do you think you would feel? Those companies are inventing cures for diseases and new technologies for space, and they are looking at ways to protect the planet and provide the best possible data. All of that has been invented, developed and innovated here, in Scotland. The Labour Party's Chancellor of the Exchequer then stands up and says in her big speech on the future of the UK economy that Oxbridge is the home of British innovation. That is unacceptable.

We have to get that fixed. We need the UK Government to stand up for Scotland, represent us around the world and work in partnership with us, not drive UK policy, resources, time and effort into the south-east of England, promoting even more inequality and not allowing Scotland to realise our economic ambitions.

We will do our bit here, in Scotland, but it is about time that the Labour Party started doing its bit as well. I commend the motion to Parliament.

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): That concludes the debate on achieving a fair balance in the UK's economy.

Business Motion

17:00

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): The next item of business is consideration of business motion S6M-16686, in the name of Jamie Hepburn, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, setting out a business programme.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees—

(a) the following programme of business—

Tuesday 11 March 2025	
2.00 pm	Time for Reflection
followed by	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
followed by	Topical Questions (if selected)
followed by	Scottish Government Debate: Supporting Households with Cost of Living Pressures and Rising Energy Bills
followed by	Appointment of Chair to Environmental Standards Scotland
followed by	Committee Announcements
followed by	Business Motions
followed by	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
5.00 pm	Decision Time
followed by	Members' Business
Wednesday 12 March 2025	
2.00 pm	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
2.00 pm	Portfolio Questions: Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands; Health and Social Care
followed by	Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party Business
followed by	Business Motions
followed by	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
followed by	Approval of SSIs (if required)
5.10 pm	Decision Time
followed by	Members' Business
Thursday 13 March 2025	
11.40 am	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
11.40 am	General Questions
12.00 pm	First Minister's Questions
followed by	Members' Business
2.30 pm	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
2.30 pm	Portfolio Questions: Social Justice
followed by	Ministerial Statement: Scottish Hospitals Inquiry Interim Report on the Royal Hospital for Children and Young People and Department of Clinical Neuroscience Edinburgh
followed by	Scottish Government Debate: Adoption of Innovation in Health and Social Care
followed by	Business Motions
followed by	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
5.00 pm	Decision Time
Tuesday 18 March	
2.00 pm	Time for Reflection
followed by	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
followed by	Topical Questions (if selected)
followed by	Scottish Government Business
followed by	Committee Announcements
followed by	Business Motions
followed by	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
5.00 pm	Decision Time
followed by	Members' Business
Wednesday 19 March 2025	
2.00 pm	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
2.00 pm	Portfolio Questions: Constitution, External Affairs and Culture, and Parliamentary Business; Justice and Home Affairs
followed by	Scottish Labour Party Business
followed by	Business Motions
followed by	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
followed by	Approval of SSIs (if required)
5.10 pm	Decision Time
followed by	Members' Business
Thursday 20 March 2025	
11.40 am	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
11.40 am	General Questions
12.00 pm	First Minister's Questions
followed by	Members' Business
2.15 pm	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
2.15 pm	Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body Questions
2.30 pm	Portfolio Questions: Education and Skills
followed by	Rural Affairs and Islands Committee Debate: Salmon Farming in Scotland
followed by	Business Motions
followed by	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
5.00 pm	Decision Time

(b) that, for the purposes of Portfolio Questions in the week beginning 10 March 2025, in rule 13.7.3, after the word "except" the words "to the extent to which the Presiding Officer considers that the questions are on the same or similar subject matter or" are inserted.—[*Jamie Hepburn*]

Motion agreed to.

Parliamentary Bureau Motions

17:00

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): The next item of business is consideration of six Parliamentary Bureau motions. I ask Jamie Hepburn, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, to move motions S6M-16687 to S6M-16691, on approval of Scottish statutory instruments, and S6M-16692, on designation of a lead committee.

Motions moved,

That the Parliament agrees that the Regulated Roles with Children and Adults (Scotland) Amendment Regulations 2025 [draft] be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that the Disclosure (Scotland) Act 2020 (List A and B Offences) Amendment Regulations 2025 [draft] be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that the Disclosure (Scotland) Act 2020 (Incidental, Supplementary and Consequential Provision) Regulations 2025 [draft] be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that the Provision of Early Learning and Childcare (Specified Children) (Scotland) Amendment Order 2025 [draft] be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that the Rehabilitation of Offenders Act 1974 (Exclusions and Exceptions) (Scotland) Amendment (No. 2) Order 2025 [draft] be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee be designated as the lead committee in consideration of the Natural Environment (Scotland) Bill at stage 1.—[*Jamie Hepburn*]

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

Decision Time

17:01

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): There are four questions to be put as a result of today's business. I remind members that, if the amendment in the name of Murdo Fraser is agreed to, the amendment in the name of Daniel Johnson will fall.

The first question is, that amendment S6M-16667.3, in the name of Murdo Fraser, which seeks to amend motion S6M-16667, in the name of Kate Forbes, on achieving a fair balance in the United Kingdom's economy, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

There will be a short suspension to allow members to access the digital voting system.

17:01

Meeting suspended.

17:03

On resuming—

The Presiding Officer: I remind members that, if the amendment in the name of Murdo Fraser is agreed to, the amendment in the name of Daniel Johnson will fall.

We come to the vote on amendment S6M-16667.3, in the name of Murdo Fraser, which seeks to amend motion S6M-16667, in the name of Kate Forbes, on achieving a fair balance in the UK's economy. Members should cast their votes now.

The vote is now closed.

Ben Macpherson (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. My apologies—I lost connection. I would have voted no.

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

For

Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
Eagle, Tim (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scotland) (Con)
Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)

Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)
Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)
Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)

Against

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
Choudhury, Foysol (Lothian) (Lab)
Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
Don-Innes, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green)
Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP) [Proxy vote cast by Rona Mackay]
Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind)
Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP) [Proxy vote cast by Jamie Hepburn]
McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
McKelvie, Christina (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP) [Proxy vote cast by Jamie Hepburn]
McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (Alba)
Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)
Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on amendment S6M-16667.3, in the name of Murdo Fraser, is: For 27, Against 87, Abstentions 0.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S6M-16667.1, in the name of Daniel Johnson, which seeks to amend motion S6M-16667, in the name of Kate Forbes, on achieving a fair balance in the UK's economy, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
Choudhury, Foysol (Lothian) (Lab)
Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)

Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)

Against

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
Don-Innes, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
Eagle, Tim (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scotland) (Con)
Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)
Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)
Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green)
Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP) [Proxy vote cast by Rona Mackay]
Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind)
Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP) [Proxy vote cast by Jamie Hepburn]
McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
McKelvie, Christina (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP) [Proxy vote cast by Jamie Hepburn]
McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (Alba)
Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)
Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)
Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on amendment S6M-16667.1, in the name of Daniel Johnson, is: For 20, Against 94, Abstentions 0.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S6M-16667, in the name of Kate Forbes, on achieving a fair balance in the UK's economy, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
Don-Innes, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)

Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP) [Proxy vote cast by Rona Mackay]
Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind)
Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP) [Proxy vote cast by Jamie Hepburn]
McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
McKelvie, Christina (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP) [Proxy vote cast by Jamie Hepburn]
McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (Alba)
Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

Against

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
Choudhury, Foysol (Lothian) (Lab)
Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
Eagle, Tim (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scotland) (Con)
Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)
Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)
Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)
Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)
Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)

Abstentions

Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green)
Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on motion S6M-16667, in the name of Kate Forbes, on achieving a fair balance in the UK's economy, is: For 59, Against 47, Abstentions 7.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament recognises that Scotland's many high-growth sectors, which are driven by world class innovation, deserve greater recognition from, and promotion by, the UK Government, which must not unfairly focus investment in the south-east of England, or the so-called golden triangle of Oxford, Cambridge and London, or treat Scotland as an afterthought, especially when announcing or developing policy.

The Presiding Officer: If no member objects, I propose to ask a single question on six Parliamentary Bureau motions.

As no member has objected, the final question is, that motions S6M-16687 to S6M-16691, on approval of SSIs, and motion S6M-16692, on designation of a lead committee, in the name of Jamie Hepburn, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, be agreed to.

Motions agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that the Regulated Roles with Children and Adults (Scotland) Amendment Regulations 2025 [draft] be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that the Disclosure (Scotland) Act 2020 (List A and B Offences) Amendment Regulations 2025 [draft] be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that the Disclosure (Scotland) Act 2020 (Incidental, Supplementary and Consequential Provision) Regulations 2025 [draft] be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that the Provision of Early Learning and Childcare (Specified Children) (Scotland) Amendment Order 2025 [draft] be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that the Rehabilitation of Offenders Act 1974 (Exclusions and Exceptions) (Scotland) Amendment (No. 2) Order 2025 [draft] be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee be designated as the lead committee in consideration of the Natural Environment (Scotland) Bill at stage 1.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes decision time.

Ukraine

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The final item of business is a members' business debate on motion S6M-16524, in the name of Colin Beattie, on three years of solidarity with Ukraine. The debate will be concluded without any question being put. I invite members who wish to speak in the debate to press their request-to-speak buttons.

Before I call Colin Beattie to open the debate, I welcome the consul general of Ukraine to the public gallery. [*Applause*.]

Motion debated,

That the Parliament renews its solidarity with the people of Ukraine, three years on from what it understands was Russia's illegal full-scale invasion on 24 February 2022; praises the bravery and resilience of the Ukrainian people as, it believes, they continue to resolutely defend their sovereign nation from Russian aggression; condemns absolutely the reported war crimes that have been committed in Ukraine by the regime of Vladimir Putin; notes the support for the European Parliament resolution of 23 January 2025, which called on the Russian Federation to immediately terminate all military activities and withdraw from Ukraine; welcomes the news that European neighbours, including the Baltic states, have made what it sees as significant progress in detaching themselves from dependence on Russian energy; reinforces Scotland's place among the democratic nations of Europe in their support for Ukraine against what it considers is Russian authoritarianism; notes that a reported over 28,000 displaced people have arrived in the UK from Ukraine with a sponsor in Scotland, and that over 21,000 of them came through the Scottish Government's Super Sponsor Scheme; praises the hard work and compassion of communities, including in Midlothian North and Musselburgh, as they welcome displaced Ukrainian people to settle in Scotland; considers that these Ukrainian people have made a rich contribution to Scotland's communities; notes the support for a warm Scottish future for displaced Ukrainian people, including through continued investment by the Scottish Government and local authorities in longer-term resettlement for displaced Ukrainians; further notes the call on the UK Government to provide security and clarity through further extensions to the Homes for Ukraine schemes, as well as provide the fair and proportionate allocation of "thank you" payments to hosts in Scotland, and celebrates what it believes has been Scotland's long history of solidarity with displaced people, refugees and asylum seekers from around the world.

17:12

Colin Beattie (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP): I thank everyone who supported this members' business motion, which gives the Parliament an opportunity to reaffirm our solidarity with Ukraine during these particularly difficult times.

I need to refer to the recent shambles in Washington when President Trump and Vice-President Vance deliberately tried to publicly humiliate their guest, President Zelenskyy. It was

an appalling performance by two weak and unstable bullies. President Zelenskyy came out of that stronger in the eyes of the world. Europe must be unwavering in its support for Ukraine.

It is clear that the US has become an uncertain friend and an unreliable ally. Europe must pull together and invest heavily in its armed forces and, most importantly, sever the post-world war two reliance on the US for weapons and logistics. That will not be cheap, but the alternative would be to place our safety and security in the hands of those who may not have our best interests at heart. The report that the US is suspending military aid to Ukraine merely underlines the urgency of the need to no longer be held hostage by an unstable world power. We must be realistic and see the real world as it is: dangerous, unpredictable and predatory.

Last month marked three years since Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine. That is three years of brutal hurt for the people of Ukraine, three years of barbaric war crimes and three years of unbreakable solidarity between Scotland and Ukraine. This war is an attack on not only Ukraine's sovereignty but the very principles of international law, democracy and human rights. The activities of the Russian military, which has raped and murdered indiscriminately, apparently with the sanction of its superior officers and the Russian Government, have caused contempt. They have been rightly condemned by civilised nations.

Let me be clear: this war was launched by Russia without provocation. It was not a result of western aggression or NATO expansion. It was a deliberate act of imperialism by President Vladimir Putin, whom many regard as a war criminal and who intends to erase Ukraine's independence and even its existence. Over three years, we have seen indiscriminate bombings and untold horrors inflicted on the Ukrainian people. There is never an excuse for harming innocent civilians, no matter what lies the Russian propaganda machine tells the world.

To say that war is tragic is to minimise the truth. The impacts of this war will live with the people of Ukraine for the rest of their lives, and probably for generations to come. The tragedy of it was put on full display when I co-sponsored the Little Hope Gallery art event in the Parliament in January. The gallery showcased artwork from children who had been forced to leave their family and friends behind and subsequently channelled their emotions into extraordinary art. I would encourage everyone to view that artwork to fully understand the heartbreaking circumstances that those children have been brought up in. That is why we must continue to support Ukraine whole-heartedly.

When I think of Ukrainian children, I have to remind us of the many thousands who have been kidnapped and sent into Russia to become good Russians. That is ethnic cleansing and a war crime in itself. Those children must be returned to their families.

I am pleased to see that Europe is uniting on the issue, with the European Union announcing further military aid for Ukraine and the United Kingdom Government increasing defence spending, even if by insufficient amounts. For some, the invasion may seem far away, but Russian aggression is a direct attack on our way of life and on our democratic values and freedoms. We cannot allow Russia to claim sovereign Ukrainian land as a result of naked military threat, bluster and brutality.

I have already expressed my concern at the United States' position on the conflict. In particular, newly elected President Trump is looking horribly weak and vulnerable in his dealings with brutal dictatorships such as Russia. His fear and lack of backbone are imperilling the future of the free world as we know it. Although the global community agrees that the war must end, it cannot be on Putin's terms. We must be clear that President Zelenskyy is not a dictator; that title should be rightly reserved for Vladimir Putin.

Against overwhelming odds, Ukraine has stood firm, thanks to its brave military and the Ukrainian people, together with support from the world community. Here, in Scotland, we should be proud of the support that we have provided to Ukraine—both financial support and the successful supersponsor scheme for displaced Ukrainians.

In my role as convener of the cross-party group on Ukraine, I am fortunate to have met a number of extraordinary Ukrainians who inspire me every day. Their resilience and courage, with such unwavering community spirit, should be an inspiration for everyone in the Parliament. They have left their homes, and some have had to leave their families—yet, as soon as they arrived in Scotland, they immediately began working together to ensure that their new communities were safe and welcome.

The Ukrainian community centre in Edinburgh is running an initiative to deliver packages to Ukrainian soldiers on the front line. Those packages are shoe boxes filled with small items such as woolly hats, thermal socks and sanitary products. Those small acts of kindness make a real difference to those brave soldiers. If any of my colleagues in the chamber would like to contribute, they should let me know, and I will share the details with them.

We should be proud that, as a country, we have made tens of thousands of Ukrainians welcome in our homeland. There is, however, still more that

both the UK and Scottish Governments can do to support Ukraine. I call on the UK Government to extend the homes for Ukraine scheme and to allocate fair thank-you payments to hosts in Scotland. That would ensure that displaced Ukrainians will continue to be able to call the United Kingdom and Scotland their home.

Once again, I thank everyone who supported the motion and who continues to show their absolute solidarity with Ukraine. I look forward to hearing members' contributions.

17:19

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): I congratulate my colleague Colin Beattie on securing this timely debate.

America's blunderbuss, broken-bottle-in-the-face approach to diplomacy has shocked the democratic world, as has its appeasement of Russia. Russia's forces have committed countless atrocities, from Bucha to Mariupol, and it continues to bomb Ukraine indiscriminately and kidnap and Russify Ukrainian children. It is an aggressor set to be rewarded for its vicious, unprovoked invasion with land and trade. Peace, security, territorial integrity and Ukraine's independence must be the aim, not a 21st-century equivalent of 1938 Czechoslovakia after it was shorn of the Sudetenland and left open to annexation.

Few nations have suffered as Ukraine has since the beginning of the 20th century, with the ravages of world war one, occupation, revolution, pogroms, civil war, conflict with Poland, Bolshevik oppression, forced collectivisation, millions starved to death in the Holodomor, the Stalinist purges, Hitler's onslaught, the Holocaust, an insurgency in the decade following the second world war, mass deportations to Siberia and the Russification of formerly majority Ukrainian communities, from the Kuban to Kursk.

In 1991, after decades of Soviet stagnation, 92.4 per cent of Ukrainians voted for independence. However, in 2004, Russian meddling led to the near-fatal poisoning of presidential candidate Victor Yushchenko. Following Ukraine's revolution of dignity, Russia seized Crimea and backed pro-Russian insurgents in eastern Ukraine—a conflict that began in 2014, and not 2015, as the US President ignorantly asserted.

Can Europe afford to deter Russian aggression? More pertinently, can it afford not to? Russia's economy is actually very weak. The International Monetary Fund says that Russia's economy is smaller than that of Italy, Canada or Brazil. It is only three and a half times bigger than Ireland's economy, much less than half of that of Germany and not even two thirds of that of the UK. Russia's economy is only a fourteenth of Europe's economy, with a quarter of its population and a tenth of the population of China—a country that has long cast envious eyes over Siberia.

Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): Does Mr Gibson share my disgust that much of Russia's fossil-fuel export economy is being propped up by companies such as Seapeak Maritime Ltd, which is based in Scotland?

Kenneth Gibson: Yes—I certainly share that view.

Europe fears a Russia that has suffered 860,000 casualties in three years of fighting a Ukraine that has long been denied fighter aircraft, high-end missiles and the armour that is needed to liberate its conquered territory. Europe, which is more technologically advanced, spends $338 billion a year on defence, but it must invest more.

Moscow is only 523 miles from the Ukrainian border. It is as likely to use nuclear weapons as Britain was when Argentina invaded the Falklands, or Israel when it was attacked last year by Iran. Fear of escalation was the previous US President's excuse for keeping Ukraine drip-fed with equipment for three years, supplying only enough weaponry to stop it losing, rather than enough to enable it to defeat and expel the aggressor.

Europe must speak with one voice and refuse to be intimidated by gun-to-the-head threats. The sight of some European leaders mimicking the sycophantic behaviour of the US President's inner circle is truly nauseating. The White House, in its boorish arrogance, has seemingly tried to alienate, upset and destabilise as many allies as possible.

The usual threats and bluster include Canada becoming America's 51st state and the imposition of 25 per cent tariffs. King Charles is Canada's head of state, yet we saw the Prime Minister confer a state visit on a US President who threatens and bullies his subjects. Actions must have consequences—the royal invitation must be withdrawn. One-sided respect is demanded by Washington, but respect must be earned. Sadly, America is led by a petulant, vituperative narcissist who demands fealty masquerading as respect—an affront to the dignity of his office.

California Senator Adam Schiff summed it up last Friday when he said:

> "A hero and a coward are meeting in the Oval Office today. And when the meeting is over the hero will return to Ukraine."

The Vice-President was described by Alastair Campbell as a "vile human being".

America's leadership wants to milk Ukraine dry of its resources while refusing to provide any form

of security guarantee and kowtowing to Moscow. Ukraine has shed too much blood, its land ravaged, to suffer such a fate. We must back Ukraine with weapons and money—taken from frozen Russian assets, if necessary—until a just peace is secured.

Slava Ukraini!

17:24

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in the debate, and I am grateful to Colin Beattie for lodging the motion and for his speech. In addition, it is always a pleasure to follow Kenneth Gibson.

The resilience, courage and determination of the Ukrainian people in the face of an unprovoked invasion by Russia have inspired the free world. Three years on, we must ask what we have learned from the lessons of history, and whether we have understood what is at stake. This war is about not just Ukraine but the principles that underpin peace and security in Europe.

We must also acknowledge the harsh truth: the war is, in part, the result of the west's inaction over Russian aggression in Georgia, in Syria and in Crimea and eastern Ukraine. Each failure to act decisively only emboldened Vladimir Putin further, and we cannot afford to repeat those mistakes now. If we fail to act decisively and stand united, we send a dangerous message: that the international order can be torn apart by brute force. That is a message that we simply cannot afford to send. The cost of inaction now is far greater than the cost of standing firm.

That is why Britain has been unwavering in its support for Ukraine. That is not just in solidarity—clearly, it is in our direct national interest. A Europe where Russian aggression is left unchecked is a Europe that is less safe for Britain. That is why we must never waver, and why we must continue to provide Ukraine with the military, economic and diplomatic support that it needs to win.

Vladimir Putin's regime has shown total disregard for its treaty obligations, violated international law and committed atrocities and war crimes in Ukraine. Only strength—of purpose and of arms—will maintain any peace that is worth having.

I commend the leadership of the British Prime Minister, Keir Starmer, in reaffirming our unwavering commitment to Ukraine. It is only right that Britain, as the last remaining faithful signatory of the Budapest memorandum, leads by example. I therefore welcome the increase in defence expenditure that has been announced, but it must be increased further. NATO remains the bedrock of our security, and we must ensure that we, in Europe, have the capabilities to deter—and, if necessary, defeat—any threat to our freedom.

Yet, I cannot, and will not, ignore the muddled thinking of those in the chamber who speak in praise of Ukraine and even call for greater defence spending while decrying the very existence of our armed forces and of the very industries and workers on whom we rely to produce the materiel of war. If we are serious about our security, we must be serious about supporting the people and businesses that equip our armed forces.

Just last week, at the Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee, we heard from the consul general for Ukraine in Edinburgh, who expressed how deeply grateful the Ukrainians in Scotland have been for all that has been done to make them feel welcome. However, he also reminded us of something crucial: how much those Ukrainians in Scotland long to return home.

The Ukrainian people fight not just for their country but for the very principles that keep us all safe. If we do not stand with Ukraine today, we may find ourselves standing alone tomorrow.

17:28

Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab): I welcome the debate that Colin Beattie has brought to the chamber.

These are troubling times. Three years ago, Putin began his full-scale invasion of Ukraine, attacking its people and its sovereignty. Over the past three years, the Ukrainian people have displayed immense bravery, strength and resilience in the face of a tyrannical aggressor. We can see that resilience from pictures online and on our televisions.

That resilience was also on display at the "Invicta Ukraine"—unbroken Ukraine—event that I attended last week at Glasgow cathedral, where the Ukrainian community in Scotland commemorated three years since Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

When Ukraine was attacked, so too were the values of democracy, freedom and human rights. We must remain steadfast in our support for Ukraine to ensure that those treasured values are upheld. We must also maintain our condemnation of Putin and his unlawful war. I pay tribute to President Zelenskyy for his strong leadership throughout the war and to the people of Ukraine.

I know that that solidarity with the people of Ukraine is felt by members across the Parliament and people across these isles. Yesterday, with Anas Sarwar, I had the privilege of meeting, once again, the consul for Ukraine in Scotland. I reiterate the points that he made last week before

the Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee. He said:

"Ukraine ... needs three powers ... the power of weapons .... economic sanctions and ... diplomacy."—[*Official Report*, *Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee*, 27 February 2025; c 2.]

I therefore welcome the fact that the Prime Minister, Keir Starmer, and the British Government have already taken further action on all three of those points and have committed to increase defence spending, as Stephen Kerr said, to 2.5 per cent of gross domestic product to secure and strengthen Britain's national security.

On weapons to Ukraine, a £2.26 billion loan has been given by the UK Government, and a deal worth £1.6 billion has been signed with defence manufacturers to supply thousands of advanced air defence missiles to Ukraine. That is being funded through the largest package of economic sanctions on Russia since 2022, with 107 new sanctions announced. Those sanctions will disrupt Russia's military supplies and financial support.

The Prime Minister has also shown leadership on the international stage, working effectively with our allies in the interests of Ukraine. That diplomacy has involved holding regular and constructive conversations with world leaders to try to reconcile differences and support Ukraine. That is why the Prime Minister hosted a summit in London with 18 leaders from around Europe and from Turkey and Canada. Those efforts by the Prime Minister have embodied the phrase "actions speak louder than words". Peace will come for the people of Ukraine. However, it is imperative that the United Kingdom plays its role in ensuring that that is a just peace.

Finally, I want to say a word about the Ukrainian refugees who have made our country their home over the past three years. I pay tribute, as Colin Beattie did in opening the debate, to the good people of this country and the many organisations that have been incredibly welcoming to Ukrainian refugees fleeing the war. Ukrainian refugees of all ages have been able to integrate into Scottish society. We must continue to support them and recognise, as Stephen Kerr said, that many of them wish to return to their homeland as soon as possible.

I understand that there are 78 Ukrainian pupils attending Renfrewshire high schools. I welcome the work that Renfrewshire Council is doing to assess how many of those young people are planning to sit Scottish Qualifications Authority exams this year and to support them throughout that process.

Although nothing can undo the horrors that many have had to endure, I hope that the warm and hospitable environment of this country has offered some comfort. As a country, and as a Parliament, we should again unite and resolve to support Ukraine so that it can find a just and lasting peace.

17:32

Lorna Slater (Lothian) (Green): We condemn, in the strongest possible terms, Putin's war of aggression against Ukraine. As in all conflicts, it is ordinary people who bear the brunt of brutality—dead family and dead friends; no medicine, food, water or electricity; loss of homes; and living in constant fear and danger.

The Geneva conventions require parties in a conflict to

"distinguish between civilian objects and military objectives."

Attacks on civilian objects are forbidden, but some civilian-owned infrastructure can be military objectives. Needless to say, the daily pictures and videos from Ukraine clearly bear out that those basic tenets are being broken continually and without a shred of concern.

It is essential that support remains consistent at the international level. That includes financial support, medicine and munitions. Ukrainians are giving up their lives, and the west must continue to provide that material support if they are to have any chance of survival.

We all know that we live in a different world today from the one that we lived in before 20 January this year. We now live in a world where America cannot be trusted to uphold treaties, and where the President of the United States is embracing Vladimir Putin, a ruthless dictator and the traditional and historical enemy of American democracy and free markets, and throwing Volodymyr Zelenskyy, the elected leader of a democratic allied nation, under the bus. The US President rewrote history in his own mind to make Russia a victim and to deny what Russia has done, and is doing, in Ukraine. I, too, think that the invitation for a state visit must be rescinded. Donald Trump and his politics are not welcome in Scotland.

I do not think that any of us yet know what kind of world we are living in and what kind of future we will have, but difficult times can bring out the best in people. This is Europe's moment to step up—its chance to become stronger and to renew its commitment to a common economic future, to democracy and to co-operation between nations.

I am glad that the UK is participating in that project. Although I remain deeply sad that we are no longer a full member of the European Union, I would like to think that finding common cause in the defence of Ukraine may start us on the journey

of finding our way back. Perhaps, in the not-too-distant future, we and Ukraine may both be members of the EU.

My sincere thanks go to everyone in Scotland who made space in their homes for Ukrainian refugees, and my sincere welcome goes to everyone who has come to Scotland to escape war and persecution. I thank colleague for their contributions to the debate, and I associate myself with all their words of solidarity. It is so important that we come together with one voice in the Parliament to call out Russia's aggression and reaffirm our support for Ukraine, and I thank everyone for doing so tonight.

Support for Ukraine is wide and deep. Not since the end of the cold war have Europe's values been tested as they are being tested now. In the face of Russia's aggression, however, we are resolute. Today, members in the chamber speak with one voice—for peace, for security and for a Europe, and a world, bound by the values of decency, democracy and human rights.

Scotland stands with Ukraine. We stood by Ukraine at the beginning of the war, and we stand by Ukraine now.

17:36

Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD): Like other members, I start by acknowledging not just Colin Beattie's contribution in bringing the debate to the chamber but his efforts over the past three years or so, through the cross-party group on Ukraine, in coalescing unwavering cross-party support for Ukraine. I thank him very much for that.

I welcome the consul general and our visitors in the public gallery. It would be remiss of me—I am sure that the consul general would agree—not to also pay tribute to the work of his predecessor, Andrii Kuslii, who formed very strong friendships with members across the Parliament and, in the most challenging of times, built the relationships on which that solidarity is now founded.

Colin Beattie almost certainly lodged the motion ahead of recent events, which I think all of us have found so depressing and have made us feel despondent. Those events have, undoubtedly, upended many of the certainties to which we were—perhaps naively—still clinging, but which now feel further away than ever. The global alliances on which we have come to rely in the post-war era now appear to be in peril like never before.

I think back to Putin's illegal invasion three years ago. It is important to draw a distinction between Vladimir Putin and the Russian people—it was Putin's illegal invasion, built on his imperial ambitions. He was denied the lightning victory that he expected, and I think that he was not alone in having his predictions of what would happen confounded. Stephen Kerr was absolutely right to talk about the inspirational Ukrainian response to that attack—the inspiration of the Ukrainian people, of the Ukrainian military and, in particular, of President Zelenskyy, who has shown such dignity throughout, especially in more recent times.

Stephen Kerr and all other contributors to the debate have pointed to the need for continued military, economic and diplomatic support. That support will be manifested in many different ways. The issue of the assets that have been frozen for some time—to which Kenneth Gibson and others referred—now needs to be addressed in a different way, and with more urgency than there has been to date. As I understand it, there is about £25 billion-worth of frozen assets in the UK, and action needs to be taken to release those funds to support the on-going efforts to support Ukraine. More widely, Europe has similar funds, which now need to be deployed to support the Ukrainian people.

Lorna Slater was right to talk about the way in which the transatlantic alliance has now shifted. That has only underscored what a lot of us have, for some time, been suggesting is necessary: Europe needs to step up and play a more prominent role. That will include the increased defence spending that the Prime Minister announced, which I very much welcome. However, as other members have suggested, that is almost certainly just the first step in a trend that needs to continue into the future.

I point to something else that has featured in contributions from colleagues: the position of Ukrainians who now find themselves in this country. The way in which Scots have opened their homes and their hearts to Ukrainians who have come to this country is right and very welcome. Ukrainians have made significant contributions to communities around the country, such as the one that I represent in Orkney, and to our country as a whole. However, that does not mask the tragic circumstances that led them to be here in the first place, and I think that it will be true that very many, or most, of them will wish to return home as soon as possible. Nevertheless, for as long as they are here, they are most welcome, and we need to continue to acknowledge the value of the contributions that they make to our country.

These are dark days. We need to redouble our commitment to, and our solidarity for, a just and lasting peace. Like others, I stand united, as do the Scottish Liberal Democrats, with the people of Ukraine.

Slava Ukraini!

17:41

Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): Last week, I attended the "Ukraine Forever!" concert at the Usher Hall—along with many of my colleagues, including Audrey Nicoll, who is sitting beside me—to see Scotland and Ukraine come together in cultural exchange, in solidarity with the Ukrainian people and in fundraising for the war effort. There were performances from Old Blind Dogs, Elzara Batalova, James Robertson, the Culture Code orchestra from the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland, Oksana Mavrodii and the absolute powerhouse diva Karina Chervakova. It was a wonderful evening of talent and culture, but it was profoundly sad for all of us there, in the circumstances.

Last week, I had the pleasure of welcoming the consul, Andrii Madzianovskyi, to the Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee to give evidence and to explain the position of the Ukrainian people. He spoke with passion and dignity, and he expressed his thanks to the Scottish people—so-called world leaders could learn a lot from him. He told us:

> "For several years now, my country has been bleeding innocent victims because the aggressor state of Russia, a terrorist country led by war criminal Putin, has been bombing and destroying Ukraine and its people."—[*Official Report, Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee*, 27 February 2025; c 1.]

Members have mentioned that Putin thought that the invasion would be over in three days—as Mr McArthur said, many other people thought so, too. Nevertheless, we should pay tribute to our own Professor Phillips O'Brien, of the University of St Andrews, who was a lone voice in saying, "No—this will not happen" and that the Ukrainian people would resist and dig in. That is what we have seen from a very proud and very brave nation.

Of course, we are Ukraine's partners and, after all, unity among allies is what Ukraine needs right now. Unity is key, and that view is common to all of us. I must impart in the chamber the words of the consul, who asked in the committee for three things. He asked for "three powers"—"the power of weapons", which we have discussed at length in the chamber this evening; the power "of economic sanctions", on which, although it is perhaps outwith our control in this Parliament, we all have a voice with colleagues in Westminster; and "the power of diplomacy."

I have talked a little about cultural diplomacy. A few years ago, the Society of Scottish Artists held an exhibition that included Peter Howson's triptych depicting the illegal invasion of Ukraine and the strength and determination of the Ukrainian people. We, in Scotland, need to keep working, in our way, to support that cultural diplomacy, as well as diplomacy at all levels.

At that meeting of the Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee, Keith Brown mentioned Hibernian Football Club's long-standing association with the charity Dnipro Kids. It was wonderful to hear about the work of Steven Carr and the welcome for the 50 children who, through that charity, came to make their home in Scotland. We heard about how well their lives in Scotland were going and how grateful the Ukrainian people were for our support for those young people from Dnipro.

Kenneth Gibson mentioned the history of the Holodomor, which we have talked about many times in the chamber. We could also go back to the 1700s, when Ukrainian religious texts were first banned and Peter II mandated the translation of all state documents into Russian. On the fall of the Russian empire, Ukraine was absorbed into the Soviet Union, and we know about the purges and the Holodomor. We should make no mistake about it: Putin sees himself as implementing an extension of that shameful legacy.

Today, therefore, we say that we stand with Ukraine. I will quote Ukraine's national anthem, because this is what I see in the bravery of Ukrainians every day:

> "The glory and freedom of Ukraine has not yet perished
> Luck will still smile on us brother-Ukrainians.
> Our enemies will die, as the dew does in the sunshine,
> and we, too, brothers, we'll live happily in our land.
> We'll not spare either our souls or bodies to get freedom".

Slava Ukraini!

17:47

Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I thank Colin Beattie for lodging the motion that we are debating this evening, which offers us a chance to speak of our three years of solidarity with Ukraine. Of course, that solidarity goes back much further than three years. I will touch on that, but I first want to make it clear that the events of 24 February 2022, when Russia invaded Ukraine, go down in infamy with the events of 4 November 1956, when Russia marched into Hungary, and with the events of 24 December 1979, when Russia marched into Afghanistan. There are similarities.

Why does our solidarity with Ukraine go back further? Let us go back to the Budapest memorandum of 5 December 1994, when Russia, Belarus, Ukraine, the US and the UK agreed to stand together to guarantee the sovereignty of Ukraine in order to get rid of the nuclear weapons that it had. The Americans did just that. At that

time, we said that we would guarantee Ukraine's security.

What happened? I will tell members what happened. On 18 March 2014, Putin decided to invade Crimea. What did we do about that? Absolutely nothing. President Barack Obama stood by and said that he did not think that it was a serious event. Let me tell you: it was a serious event—it emboldened Putin and gave him the scope to do what he is doing today. That started the creeping war, as I call it, in the Donbas in eastern Ukraine and in Luhansk, where Putin pushed and pushed at the door to see how far he would get—and we did not do anything. To our eternal shame, we stood back. We had the ability to do something, and we did nothing.

That resulted in the lightning strike by Putin to capture Kyiv airport. I have to say that, as an ex-soldier, I am incredibly impressed by the fight that the 200 soldiers there put up, which basically prevented Ukraine from falling to Putin. They did one hell of a job, and we should be proud of them. We, from all parties, should understand and accept that that is why we need armed forces: to prevent people like that from coming in.

What has Ukraine had to face since then? It has had to face the Wagner group. I do not think that I have ever come across a more disreputable group of people in my life—not that I am aware that I have met any of them. It has also had to deal with North Korean troops being shipped across, and it has had to cope with arms and weapons coming from Iran and Syria. We were prepared to let that go. We have not done enough to stop all those countries arming Russia and standing up for Putin against Ukraine.

As the United Kingdom, however, we have done a considerable amount. I think that we have spent nearly £12 billion in supporting Ukraine. I am proud that we have done that. I know that there is a cost involved, but I understand why we had to do it. I also support Sir Keir Starmer's plans to build up the British Army again. We need to. I have made no apologies for my Government, which hollowed out the armed forces and took the peace dividend from the cold war. That was wrong. I am glad that he has seen that, and I am glad that the west is now standing on its own two feet and will do something about it.

It would be wrong if I stood here and did not comment on the appalling behaviour that I witnessed, to my eternal shame and embarrassment, going on in the White House. On JD Vance's behaviour, he should have known better. He was a marine—or it says in his service record that he was a marine; if we dig down into it, we find that he was a journalist with the United States Marines and given the honorary rank of corporal to boot. He should not have been trying to ambush somebody who has lived in fear for their life for three years. It was wrong and disgraceful, and, if no-one is prepared to call him out, we should stand here and do that.

Ukraine will face a huge battle at the end of this invasion, when its people win—we must ensure that they win—as they rebuild their country. It has been suggested that half a trillion dollars will be needed to rebuild that country. Let us not forget or shy away from the fact that Russia took repatriations from East Germany up until the day that the wall came down. If Russia is going to pull out, it can pay for the damage, injury and loss of life that it has caused to Ukraine. To let Russia get away with anything less would be unacceptable.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Before I call the next speaker, I advise members that, due to the number of members who wish 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. I invite Colin Beattie to move such a motion.

Motion moved,

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

Motion agreed to.

17:52

George Adam (Paisley) (SNP): I was concerned for a moment, as my friend and colleague Colin Beattie seemed to struggle to move that motion. I thought that it was because he knew that I was next—in which case, all the nice things that I was about to say about him, including thanking him for the debate, would have been gone. However, I thank him for bringing the debate to the chamber and for finally standing up and moving the motion to extend the time for us to have it.

When we get to this stage of the debate, all that I can talk about is the emotion and how I feel about the situation. A lot of people are asking themselves how they feel about the situation. I will give a perfect example. Members will be surprised to know that I was at St Mirren Park on Saturday to watch the football. At half time, the conversation was about what happened in the Oval office. It was not about Scottish football referees or the video assistant referee system, which is a disgrace, but about the disgrace of JD Vance and President Trump and what they did to someone who has stood against Putin over the past three years. That shows how this has got into the psyche of everyone in the world.

There are pivotal moments in history when what we—Scotland, the UK, Europe and the world—do is important. We need to be really careful. As I

have mentioned to the Cabinet Secretary for Constitution, External Affairs and Culture before, there is €300 billion frozen from the Russian central bank in the EU. What Europe decides to do with that money in the future, and how we discuss that, is extremely important. At the end of the day, that has made a difference to an aggressor. That money could be gotten, because it is from the Russian central bank and it is frozen; it is not from the Russian oligarchs and all their mates who have been on the take in Russia for the past 20-odd years. That could be done and dealt with quite easily.

I will speak about someone I know, Stevie Blythe, a former soldier in the Black Watch who served in Iraq and Afghanistan and who got a military cross. He is not from Paisley; he is originally from Dundee but lives in Paisley. Stevie is now an ambulance driver. He takes ambulances over to Ukraine to drive them on the front lines and puts videos on his Facebook page to show us everything that is happening there. Stevie is a really close friend. When I asked him why he does that he said, "It's the right thing to do."

That is very similar to what the Ukrainian consul told the Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee last week. He said that the Ukrainian people have to stay positive all the time. He literally likened the war to light against darkness and good against evil. Some people think that we are using hyperbole when we talk in that way, but he is 100 per cent right. This issue, at this time, is a fight between good and evil and between right and wrong. There is no middle ground.

We saw what happened with Trump and Vance last week. Incidentally, Stevie is quite annoyed about JD Vance saying that British soldiers have no idea how to fight a war when he was involved in quite a lot of skirmishes—he did not get his military cross for nothing. They took someone who is fighting the good fight, against a dictator, for the free world and created a theatre—a pantomime—in the Oval office. They diminished America and the office of the President of the United States, and we all felt a bit dirty afterwards. Why would they do that in diplomacy? Even if their narrative was correct, which I do not believe, they should not go into a room and say, "Don't do that again. Here's what we're going to do." No one should do that in front of the world's press. What happened was done purely to humiliate and embarrass.

I do not think that the American people will fall for that, because they still see Russia as the aggressor and many of Trump's supporters will see Russia as the aggressor in that situation. I think that he will be found out. He sat there in a discussion with a world leader and said, "You don't have the cards." He was with someone whose people have been fighting for their lives and he talked about playing cards. That is a joke, and he is a joke as a president.

I will follow the consul's advice. If he says that this is a fight of light against darkness and good against evil, that is good enough for me and I will support Ukraine in everything it does in this good fight.

17:57

Paul O'Kane (West Scotland) (Lab): I am pleased to speak tonight and to lend my voice, in support and solidarity, to the defiant people of Ukraine. I thank Colin Beattie for securing the debate and for all the work that he has done in establishing the cross-party group on Ukraine, of which I am a deputy convener. That has been a great innovation in this Parliament, allowing all parties to come together and to stand in solidarity with the consul and with representatives of the Ukrainian community in Scotland. I think that we are doing valuable work, and I hope that the Ukrainian community feels that value. I am grateful to Colin Beattie for his leadership on that.

No discussion of events—not only in the past three years but since the annexation of Crimea in 2014—can be had unless we recognise that Russia is the aggressor and that Ukraine is the victim. That is not a dispute between two equals; it is a war of aggression and of Putin's imperialism. We have heard that plain and simple fact resolutely from members across the chamber. In that context, it is right to echo the sentiments that have been expressed by the Prime Minister and by colleagues from all parties and Governments in the past three years. We stand shoulder to shoulder with Ukraine and we will continue to do so for as long as it takes. I also express my gratitude to all those who have welcomed Ukrainians into their homes and communities.

In the many debates that we have had in support of Ukraine, I have reflected the efforts across Renfrewshire, which Neil Bibby referenced, and East Renfrewshire—in particular, those by faith communities and groups that have come together to set up a welcome hub for people from Ukraine. That has been vitally important, and long may it continue.

I will focus this evening, as many colleagues have done, on the events of the past week. The latest developments on Ukraine demonstrate that we face a once-in-a-generation moment for the collective security of our country and our continent. Global instability, Russian aggression in Ukraine, increasing threats from malign actors, climate change and rapid technological disruption have all contributed to a rapidly deteriorating security landscape. It is clear that we must protect

Ukrainian sovereignty as we seek to resolve the reality with which Ukrainian people have lived for three years and longer. In that context, it is right that the UK steps forward as a leading partner to ensure our continental and global security.

In working with Ukraine to come to what we hope might be a just and lasting peace, there can be no getting away from the volatile shifts in the halls of diplomatic power. As things change rapidly, it can be all too tempting to react to every piece of news by taking to social media, or expect a running commentary from the many Government representatives and diplomats who are involved in difficult and intense negotiations. However, it has been refreshing and reassuring to see the United Kingdom Government, led by the efforts of Keir Starmer, reject that approach, roll up its sleeves and take the lead in serious diplomatic efforts to pull together our allies. Diplomacy often requires conversations and statements that are deeply uncomfortable—there is no getting away from that—and there will be many more of those to come in the days, weeks and months ahead.

Stephen Kerr: Will Paul O'Kane join me in paying tribute to the King for the way in which he has handled his responsibilities in the past few days, and for the messaging through which, undoubtedly, he is giving support to the people of Ukraine and to the people of Canada?

Paul O'Kane: I associate myself with Stephen Kerr's comments. Britain has an important role in the world in what is often termed "soft power". His Majesty the King has very clearly demonstrated his support for Ukraine and his desire to play a role in the diplomatic process as we move forward.

As I have mentioned, we must now reckon with fundamental challenges as the situation in and around Ukraine takes on a new phase. In that spirit, I greatly welcome the First Minister's statement and comments yesterday, particularly the comment that there has been a shift in the need to prioritise our security interests, and his willingness for the Scottish Government to work with the UK Government in whatever support is required to drive forward the diplomatic and defence efforts that the Prime Minister is taking forward.

In that sense of working together, it is important that we continue to focus on how Scotland can play its role. Many direct questions that were asked in the chamber yesterday deserve further explanation. For example, my colleague Paul Sweeney touched on the aerospace, defence, marine and space industry leadership group in Scottish Enterprise, and called for a re-examination of the investment rules of the Scottish National Investment Bank on how we might drive forward defence production in Scotland.

Presiding Officer, I am conscious of the time. This has been an important debate. For the rest of our lives, none of us will forget the bravery and resilience of the Ukrainian servicemen and women, and the people of Ukraine, over the past three years. They have shown an unshakeable determination to defend their lives, their country, their way of life and the total commitment in that country to the values of democracy and the rules-based order that we all, as democrats, hold dear. They are an example to follow, and I hope that the decisions that we take in the coming period will honour their example.

18:04

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind): I thank Colin Beattie for securing the debate and for chairing the cross-party group. I suspect that he did not foresee quite how events would unfold between his lodging of the motion on 18 February and where we are today.

Clearly, there are a number of aspects to the war in Ukraine. First, I will touch on some of the impacts in Glasgow. Across from my office, near Parkhead Cross, is St Michael's church, which is the base for Father Andriy Chornenko, whose very long title I shall abbreviate to Vicar for Scotland of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church. Mass in Ukrainian takes place there every week. Partly as a result of that, I have attended a range of events over the years at both St Michael's and Glasgow cathedral, often with Kaukab Stewart in attendance, including the marking of Ukrainian constitution day and the memorial service for the fallen defenders of Ukraine.

If there is one thing that I can say about the Ukrainians whom I have met, it is that they are very persistent. We have also seen that persistence in President Zelenskyy, in the armed forces on the front line and in civilians still living in Ukraine, and we have seen it, too, in the many Ukrainians whom we have been pleased to welcome to Scotland. I think that persistence is a very good trait, and it is especially valuable given the present circumstances.

One issue that my staff and I were happy to help with was finding suitable premises for the Glasgow branch of St Mary's Ukrainian school. It is a Saturday school for young people from Ukraine to allow them to keep up with their language, music and culture, even though they also attend Scottish schools every Monday to Friday. Some of the families travel quite a distance to attend St Mary's school, and it is extremely important to them. The school has limited funding and could not afford what Glasgow City Council was charging for the use of a school each week, so we were very grateful to Glasgow Clyde College when it came

forward with the offer of premises at its Langside campus.

I had the privilege of being given a tour of the classes and seeing the enthusiasm of the young people, who range in age and have a range of abilities in the English language. While I was there, they were making wristbands, alongside other craft activities, and I have to say that I failed dismally to make my wristband, as did Father Chernenko. However, I was given a completed one, which I am wearing tonight, and which is in good shape.

Another example of persistence is that of a constituent whom I share with Stuart McMillan. She has impressed us both by how often she turns up at our surgeries.

On the wider issues and the war itself, it is now three years since Russia invaded. Many of us thought that Ukraine might be able to hold out for only a matter of days before being overrun. If my memory serves me correctly, the Americans offered to airlift the President and others out of the country, but Volodymyr Zelenskyy stayed on and is still there. Clearly, Ukraine is a much smaller country than Russia, and the odds were always going to be stacked against it. Even with more weapons supplies, it lacks the manpower to match its larger neighbour.

Personally, I think that war is seldom the ideal solution to disagreements between nations, which is why I wear a white poppy each November. However, there does come a time when, either as an individual or as a nation, we have to say, "Enough is enough" and take a stand, whatever the consequences might be.

When I was a youngster, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, there was a television series called "The Flashing Blade", and the theme song still sticks in my mind. One of the lines is:

"It's better to have fought and lost than not have fought at all".

That is a value that Donald Trump does not seem to understand.

I hope that there can be peace negotiations that lead to a fair and just settlement. Whatever happens, though, President Zelenskyy and the people of Ukraine should know that, by standing up to Russia as they have, they have won the greatest respect from Scotland and from the rest of the democratic world.

18:08

Keith Brown (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP): I thank Colin Beattie for bringing the debate to the chamber. As the deputy leader of my party, I am proud that more than 40 of his colleagues have joined him for the debate, which, to my recollection, is a record for a members' business debate. That shows the interest in and the gravity of what we are discussing.

It is also very good to see the consul once again. As Clare Adamson mentioned, we met the consul last week at committee, when he revealed that he is a Hibs fan. That is not because it is a fantastic football team or because of Sunday's result, but because he is aware of Hibs fans having visited Ukraine in about 2004 and of their work with orphans in Ukraine since then, as well as the work that was done for Dnipro Kids. Hibs also has a very good Ukrainian player playing for the team just now, which helps.

I am not going to deliver the speech that I had intended to deliver, because much of it has been said already. I will just pick out a few points, perhaps a little bit at random. First of all, in relation to the Ukrainians who have come to this country, members will know that I hosted a Ukrainian family for a number of months. We must acknowledge that their presence here has enriched our country in many ways.

It is important to Ukraine that many of those people go back when, hopefully, we get the just peace that we all want. Many Ukrainians will want to go back, but anybody who wants to stay should be allowed to. They add to our country—their country has added to our country. I would hope that that would happen and that they are not forced to have to apply for visas continually as time goes on, because that can be very disruptive. The family that I had had school-age children, and trying to plan a future while waiting for the next tranche of visas is not sensible.

We have talked about the armed forces in Ukraine, but we must remember that many in its armed forces were nurses, doctors and plumbers shortly before they were forced to take up arms. What they have done is utterly remarkable given that they were not trained soldiers.

As for helping Ukraine, we have to look at what the EU and Ursula von der Leyen have said. They are talking about a potential £600 billion of borrowing being brought to bear on rearmament and other defence aspects. I should say that I am not necessarily speaking for either the Government or my party when I say that, before we get into all the stuff about budgets, borrowing is perfectly legitimate when the security of one's country is at stake. Whether it be for production lines for armaments or whatever, it is perfectly legitimate for Governments to borrow for those purposes.

We cannot access those funds, because they are EU funds, but I hope that we will do something similar in the UK to ensure that we can bring the

maximum possible support and the maximum possible deterrence to bear. It should be about deterring Russian aggression.

What we are seeing from the United States is something akin to a protection racket. It is saying, "We will defend you from a bully if you give us money." It is absolutely appalling. There has not been a counterpart to that in international relations that I can remember.

This, too, is true: given all the stuff that has been demanded of the Ukrainians, where is the demand on the Russians—that is, the aggressors? The US has told Russia that it will no longer be subject to cyber activity from the US. It has been rewarded for its behaviour. It is unbelievable how the world has changed.

Edward Mountain: Does the member agree that, when the war is won and Russia is kicked out of Ukraine, repatriations from Russia will be the only sensible way of resolving the rebuilding that will be needed afterwards?

Keith Brown: I agree with the spirit of what Edward Mountain says. Liam McArthur made a point about the need to distinguish between Putin and the Russian people. We have learned the lessons of applying overly punitive sanctions, given what happened after the first world war, so I would be careful about that. However, the principle that Russia should pay is a very good one.

It is not true to say that JD Vance was a Royal Marine—that would be a bit of a stretch of the imagination. He was apparently a marine, but I am not sure that he would have completed the course at Lympstone had he tried to do so.

We have to bear in mind that we are still grappling with the significance of what is actually happening. Today, we have heard China say that it is ready for any kind of war. We are seeing a war in Europe. Article 5 of the NATO treaty has been completely undermined. If we think through the consequences, it should be clear how urgent and huge the task in front of us is. It is for those reasons that I agree with the comments made by all the other members who have said that we have to treat this situation extremely seriously. We have to be deal with it urgently.

The pax Americana, as it has been called, is coming to an end. The world is being upended. Australia and New Zealand are concerned for their security because of the changes that we have seen.

Given all of that, we have to concentrate on what we can do. The one thing that we must do is acknowledge that the fight of the Ukrainians is the fight of all Europeans, as the consul told us last week. We are in this fight and we have to play our part in it.

I am very supportive of all the comments that have been made by members. I am also pleased that we had a statement on the issue yesterday and are having this debate today, and I hope that we continue to do that sort of thing. I should also say that, prior to the leader of the Conservative Party asking whether the President of Ukraine could come, I mentioned the same thing last week in committee. I hope that we can do that. Such a request would rightly come from the Presiding Officer, but I hope that it can happen. In the meantime, we certainly stand with Ukraine.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call cabinet secretary Angus Robertson to respond to the debate.

18:14

The Cabinet Secretary for Constitution, External Affairs and Culture (Angus Robertson): I thank Colin Beattie for bringing the debate to the chamber and, as ever, for his long-standing and steadfast support for Ukraine. As other members have done, I acknowledge the presence of the Consul of Ukraine, Andrii Madzyanovski, and other members of the Ukrainian Scottish community. As Liam McArthur has done, I share our appreciation for his predecessors, Andrii Kuzlii, and, before him, Yevhen Mankovskyi, who also played such an important role after the full-scale Russian invasion.

It is important to remember that, as a number of colleagues have pointed out, the Russian aggression started not three years ago but way before that. That is the Ukrainian experience. If you want to know about Russia's imperial ambitions, speak to the Georgians in Abkhazia or South Ossetia, or to the Moldovans—the list goes on. We have been reminded about 1958 in Hungary and 1968 in Czechoslovakia. The Soviets and the Russians have form in all this.

The statement from the Prime Minister in the House of Commons on Monday afternoon, reflecting on the European leaders' summit, was extraordinarily welcome. Given the literally dangerous situation that we find ourselves in, the fact that there is cross-party support not only in this debate but more widely—which is perhaps too rare—is a reflection of our understanding of how important it is that we work together.

That was echoed yesterday by the First Minister's statement in the Parliament. The First Minister emphasised a number of themes that I think have come through in the contributions that we have heard. We have heard all about the courage and determination of Ukraine's democratically elected President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and, indeed, of all Ukrainians, not only since Russia's full-scale invasion but since the

invasion of Crimea, in the east of the country, years previously.

Rather than single out any particular speech, I pay tribute to everybody who has spoken, because everybody has spoken in support of Ukraine this evening.

Neil Bibby: I absolutely welcome what the cabinet secretary has said about the cross-party support for Ukraine that we are hearing here this evening. We need to maintain that and to consistently support Ukraine for the long term. Will he join me in welcoming the 100-year co-operation agreement between the United Kingdom and Ukraine and in saying that we should steadfastly support Ukraine for the long term?

Angus Robertson: Absolutely. That is really important. I agree with Neil Bibby.

I want to reflect on a number of things that members raised. We cannot countenance the warning of inaction in the face of aggression. We should give consideration to what happens with Russian assets, €300 billion-worth of which are deposited in Europe. We should also consider the growing European commitments to defence and security.

There has not been much mention today, either here or in the UK media, of what I consider to be the historic announcement by Germany yesterday—probably the biggest single financial announcement that has been made by a German Government since the second world war—of new spending of €500 billion on defence and infrastructure. Germany understands the scale that we will have to aim for. That lesson about the scale of the challenge that we are facing needs to be learned by other Governments, including our own.

We have heard about the importance of a just peace a number of times. When I hear some people talking about securing peace for Ukraine, I fear that it sounds a lot like surrender with a bow on top. We need to remember that Russia can end this war tomorrow; it just needs to withdraw its troops and leave. I agree that it should pay for what it has done to Ukraine. [*Applause*.]

Last week, we marked three years since Russia's brutal full-scale attack on Ukraine. How much we owe to the Ukrainians who resisted at Hostomel right at the start. Just imagine what would have happened if the Russians had managed to take that airfield and proceeded with their plans. The Ukrainians resisted, they stood, they defeated the Russians at Hostomel, and the rest is history. They have been able to withstand the Russian aggression at great cost.

We are repulsed by the appalling and shocking violence that we have seen, but we remain inspired by the on-going strength, resilience and bravery of the Ukrainian people and the Ukrainian armed forces. That includes all those who are fighting on the front lines, the families who have had to leave their homes and loved ones behind in search of safety elsewhere, and the people who are having to go to the bunkers for safety because of the daily rocket attacks on cities throughout Ukraine.

We must realise the significance of the moment that we face.

Stephen Kerr: I know that the cabinet secretary was a member of the Intelligence and Security Committee at Westminster for a number of years. Will he reflect on the pervasive nature of Russian misinformation and propaganda, which is currently flooding all the social network platforms and having a regrettable influence on the direction of public opinion?

Angus Robertson: We most certainly should be aware of that danger, and we should counter it. We should make sure that we can rely on reliable news sources. However, it should surely be obvious to anybody that Russia invaded Ukraine. There is no doubt about that, regardless of some of the revisionism that we have heard in recent weeks and months. Let us never tire of pointing out the fact that Russia invaded Ukraine. Russia is the aggressor, Ukraine is the victim, and we stand with Ukraine.

Thousands of Ukrainians who have made Scotland their home will be deeply concerned by recent developments. As members across the chamber have done, I offer an assurance of our continuing commitment to securing a strong and durable peace that ensures that Ukraine has a secure future. We are clear that there can be no negotiations about Ukraine without Ukraine being at the heart of the talks. We all wish a speedy victory for Ukraine and a resolution that restores peace to the Ukrainian people and ensures Ukrainian sovereignty, democracy, independence and its territorial integrity.

Ukrainians continue to stand firm and are defending their country, their homes, their culture and their independence. Their spirit serves as a powerful reminder of the importance of freedom and the lengths to which people will go to protect it. It is a moment not only to acknowledge the horrors of war, but to celebrate the enduring hope and courage that persist even in these darkest of times.

Now more than ever, we need to emphasise the importance of global dialogues and unity across the political spectrum. As the First Minister has emphasised, we all need to find a cool and rational way through the current challenges that we face.

Throughout the three years of war since the full-scale invasion, the Scottish Government has repeatedly condemned Russia's illegal war against Ukraine. We must continue to show that we are steadfast behind Ukraine and alongside our partners in Europe. There were strong signs of European unity and solidarity on display in London at the weekend. I was encouraged to see the shared commitment to stepping up to support Ukraine.

As part of our on-going solidarity, we will continue to support our friends from Ukraine to settle well in Scotland. We will endeavour to do everything that we can to provide a warm future and to support them to build a new life here. Since the war against Ukraine began, more than 28,000 people with a Scottish sponsor have arrived in the UK, and 21,000 of those arrivals have come through the Scottish Government's successful supersponsorship scheme. That has enabled us to offer sanctuary to more Ukrainians than any other part of the UK. I am incredibly proud of the kindness and friendship that have been extended by people across Scotland to those who are fleeing war. Many people have opened their homes to Ukrainians, offered them a safe place to stay and helped them to settle into life here.

I would also like to take a moment to acknowledge the work of our local authorities and our third sector partners across Scotland, which continue to ensure that Ukrainian people are able to access the services that they need. Ukrainian communities are now flourishing across Scotland, from the Western Isles to Dumfries and Galloway, and from Orkney to the Scottish Borders.

In my role as cabinet secretary, I have had the pleasure and the honour to meet so many Ukrainian people across Scotland and to hear at first hand their personal stories. The past three years have allowed so many Ukrainians to become our friends, our neighbours and our colleagues. While many Ukrainians have been helped by the Scottish welcome, we, in turn, are rewarded by the Ukrainian families who have come here. I say "Thank you" to those from Ukraine who have made Scotland their home for now.

As we continue to hope for peace in Ukraine, our message remains the same. We will continue to stand with the courageous people of Ukraine. We will continue to take an approach that is shaped by our compassion and the need to stand up for democracy, human rights and the rule of law, and we remain fully committed to supporting Ukraine's long-term future and playing our full part in helping to deliver it.

Slava Ukraini. Heroyam slava. [*Applause*.]

Meeting closed at 18:24.

Published in Edinburgh by the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body, the Scottish Parliament, Edinburgh, EH99 1SP

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