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Scottish Parliament

Thursday 11 September 2025

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

General Question Time

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): Good morning. The first item of business is general question time.

Nuclear Safety Event (Faslane)

1. Bill Kidd (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government, regarding any potential environmental impact, what its response is to reports that a category A nuclear safety event occurred at Faslane naval base between January and April this year. (S6O-04914)

The Cabinet Secretary for Climate Action and Energy (Gillian Martin): Defence, including the operation of the Faslane naval base, is a reserved matter. However, the Scottish Government places great importance on the safe, secure and responsible management of radioactive substances while protecting people and the environment. Therefore, repeated reports of serious incidents at Faslane are extremely worrying.

Of course, the only way to get rid of Trident is with independence. The Scottish National Party Scottish Government's long-standing position is that nuclear weapons have no place in an independent Scotland.

Bill Kidd: Has the Westminster Government made any information available to the Scottish Government on addressing the radioactive waste that was released by the nuclear safety failure and on the work of cleaning the affected area and ensuring the physical health of local residents following the event?

Gillian Martin: In short, the answer is no. It is regrettable that the Ministry of Defence has not released details of the reported category A nuclear site event report, given that the MOD defines category A as the most serious. It has informed us that the incident posed no risk to the public and did not result in any radiological impact to the environment. However, the Scottish Government has not received any further information on the nature of the incident. Given that nuclear weapons are an ever-present danger, that is disappointing and it does not provide the public with the reassurance that they need. The MOD has also informed us that the incident that was reported was handled in accordance with the extant policy

and in collaboration with the defence nuclear safety regulator, but that is the sum of it.

Ash Regan (Edinburgh Eastern) (Alba): I agree with the cabinet secretary that it is extremely concerning that there has been a category A safety event at Faslane. It certainly brings Scotland's environmental risks from nuclear weapons into sharp focus.

With the Nuclear Decommissioning Authority's draft strategy 2025 proposing a transfer of defence nuclear liabilities, including the Vulcan naval reactor test establishment, into the civil sector, will the Scottish Government step up to ensure that Scotland does not inherit Westminster's nuclear legacy in secret? Will the cabinet secretary make a commitment to have a full debate in the Parliament so that we can scrutinise things such as risk assessments before any decisions are made?

Gillian Martin: I need to go into the detail of what Ash Regan has just put forward, but I am always willing to have a debate on the issue, as it concerns many people throughout Scotland. Although there is an agreement between the Scottish Environment Protection Agency and the Ministry of Defence on reporting such incidents and the impact that they have, it is worrying that such events happen in the first place.

I believe that Bill Kidd has lodged a motion for a members' business debate on the issue. I hope that it will get the support across the chamber that it deserves.

Entrepreneurship

2. Maurice Golden (North East Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government how it is supporting entrepreneurship. (S6O-04915)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Economy and Gaelic (Kate Forbes): Recent Tech Nation data shows that Scotland's start-up economy is booming, with our 19 per cent growth rate among the fastest in Europe. Our ambition is to establish Scotland as one of Europe's fastest-growing start-up economies. That is backed by a record £30 million of investment this year, including a £2.9 million proof-of-concept fund translating research discoveries into commercial propositions.

We also continue to support Techscaler, which is among Europe's best start-up incubators, and one of this Government's finest achievements.

Maurice Golden: The NatWest accelerator programme has already supported more than 10,000 new businesses, created 12,000 jobs and driven £700 million-worth of investment, which should be celebrated. However, businesses throughout Scotland consistently raise concerns

about a fragmented funding landscape, overly complex procurement processes and the sheer number of agencies that they are expected to navigate—more than 300 in total. Does the Deputy First Minister agree that business support must be simplified and streamlined to ensure that entrepreneurs are better supported to make their ambitions a reality?

Kate Forbes: The very principle that underpins Maurice Golden's question is what prompted Mark Logan to design the blueprint that we have been putting into place over the past few years. For example, the compound annual growth rate of key European start-up economies shows that the approach taken to streamlining is working. I mentioned Scotland's 19 per cent growth rate, and I would compare that with the United Kingdom's rate of 12.5 per cent, France's 12 per cent, Sweden's 10 per cent and the 10 per cent rate in the Netherlands. There is still work to be done, but bringing everything together into Techscaler is one example of what we are doing.

Equally, in an adaptable and innovative market, we do not want to micromanage the process. I believe that our approach is working, but we need to collaborate with NatWest and others. NatWest's figures from earlier this year showed, again, that we are continuing to grow one of the highest start-up rates in the United Kingdom.

Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): I welcome the record funding for entrepreneurship that the Scottish Government is investing this year, which comes alongside the news that Scotland is now the fastest-growing start-up nation in Europe. Can the Deputy First Minister say any more about the renewed support that the Scottish Government is providing to start-ups and about any collaboration with the private sector?

Kate Forbes: I thank Audrey Nicoll for the point about collaboration with the private sector. One of the best examples in recent weeks has been the commitment to co-invest in Scottish EDGE. We have committed to investing £3.6 million in Scottish EDGE over the next three years, which means that leading entrepreneurs have committed additional funding to Scottish EDGE, too. Moreover, our risk capital market grew 19 per cent to £704 million, with significant private sector participation. All those are examples of what is actually happening; in other words, it is all about looking at outcomes and outputs, instead of focusing just on the inputs.

Motorway Gantry Signage

3. **Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government what discussions it has had with Transport Scotland about motorway gantry signage. (S6O-04916)

The Cabinet Secretary for Transport (Fiona Hyslop): The messages displayed on electronic signs on gantries are part of the Traffic Scotland service that is provided by Transport Scotland. Traffic Scotland gathers real-time information on Scotland's trunk road and motorway network, which informs the messaging displayed on gantries.

Messages can include information on reduced speed limits, on implementation of lane restrictions or on incidents or congestion ahead. Those messages are deployed as soon as possible after verification and aim to reduce the disruption caused by trunk road closures, congestion, events, roadworks, adverse weather, accidents and other incidents.

When gantry signs are not being used to support high-priority operational responses such as those that I have mentioned, background safety information is displayed to coincide with topical events or other areas of road safety focus. Those messages are reviewed annually by Traffic Scotland.

Liz Smith: I asked the same question of the cabinet secretary in June 2023 and of her predecessor, Humza Yousaf, in 2017, and I am asking again on behalf of my constituents in Mid Scotland and Fife who make extensive use of the M90 and M9 motorways. There are still issues with gantry signs that are not time sensitive—indeed, I have seen that for myself—and about information being displayed about congestion or queues ahead when there are no such things. That is unhelpful to drivers, who have to make a decision about which roads they are going to take. This time of asking, I ask the cabinet secretary this: will she assure those constituents that she will press Transport Scotland to do something about this on-going problem?

Fiona Hyslop: It is important that dynamic messaging is timely and accurate, because driver frustration, whether it be Ms Smith's or that of others, should be avoided. Thousands of messages are displayed and removed daily in response to changing and dynamic situations.

When Ms Smith last wrote to me on this issue, we asked for specific occurrences, because that information can help improve quality control. Traffic Scotland undertook quality checks in November 2023 following Ms Smith's intervention, and my officials have recently instructed Traffic Scotland to undertake further sample checks of sign setting and removal on the motorway network, including between Fife and Edinburgh. That process is on-going. Traffic Scotland welcomes reports, which are helpful, as any specific examples, particularly during weekdays, allow it to pinpoint the exact issues.

I should say that Traffic Scotland's website will be unavailable between 13 and 16 September due to essential building work at the national control centre. The information has already been advertised, but I just add it here as a public information notice.

Community Facilities

4. Tim Eagle (Highlands and Islands) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what support it can offer to help local authorities protect council-run and arm's-length external organisation-run community facilities. (S6O-04917)

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government (Shona Robison): The Scottish Government recognises the critical role of community facilities across Scotland and provided a record local government settlement in 2025-26. That record funding helps local authorities to support their local priorities, which includes both council and external-led community facilities. We will continue to work in partnership with local government to ensure that the people of Scotland continue to receive the high-quality public services that they expect and deserve.

Tim Eagle: The Scottish National Party will tell me that council funding has gone up, but that only brings a wry smile to the face of councillors in Scotland, because the truth is that cliff-edge finances are leaving some vital community facilities in wrack and ruin. That includes facilities that are in or close to the First Minister's constituency, such as the Dewars centre, where the ice rink is still under threat, and, more importantly, those in Moray, where Moray leisure centre has temporarily closed its ice rink, to the shock of local users. Curling, ice hockey and ice skating are all sports that we should be encouraging. Will the cabinet secretary ensure that councils do all that they can to find new ways to support vital facilities such as Moray leisure centre to remain open?

Shona Robison: Let me put a couple of facts on the record. First, local government funding has increased.

Tim Eagle: So has demand!

The Presiding Officer: Let us not shout across the chamber.

Shona Robison: The Accounts Commission has confirmed that, for the past two years, there has been a real-terms increase to local government funding. That is a fact. Moray Council has received an additional 6.6 per cent compared with its funding for 2024-25. I point out to Tim Eagle that the Tories run Moray Council, so perhaps he should have a word with the Conservative leadership of the council.

On ice rinks, I appreciate that the curling community in Elgin in particular will have significant concerns. We are aware of the challenging financial circumstances that face energy-dense sports and leisure facilities. Moray leisure trust has stated that the closure of the Elgin ice rink is a result of increasing energy costs. The United Kingdom Government has the ability to provide appropriate energy bill relief to facilities that require it. We will consider how we can continue to raise such concerns with the UK Government, and sportscotland continues to engage with Moray leisure trust, Scottish Curling and key partners to understand the current situation locally. Those discussions will continue.

Scotch Whisky Industry

5. Gordon MacDonald (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what recent discussions the economy secretary and business minister have had with the United Kingdom Government regarding tariff exemptions and other support for the Scotch whisky industry. (S6O-04918)

The Minister for Business and Employment (Richard Lochhead): My ministerial colleagues and I regularly meet those in the sector to discuss the challenges and opportunities that they face. In July, I wrote to the responsible UK Government minister to call for action on several trade issues that the Scotch whisky sector faces, as do those producing other iconic Scottish products. As members will be aware, the First Minister has been leading from the front on our intensive engagement with the sector. He has also raised the important issue with the Prime Minister and, this week, directly with the US President. Removing the 10 per cent tariff barrier between the US and Scotland would, of course, deliver economic benefits for both countries.

Gordon MacDonald: The Scotch Whisky Association recently released new data that shows that more than 1,000 jobs have been lost in the Scotch whisky industry since the most recent United Kingdom budget. In addition to the excise duty increase, the UK Labour Government introduced a national insurance increase, and energy prices remain too high, impacting energy-intensive industries that can access no support.

Ahead of the next UK budget, what representations will the Scottish Government make to the UK Government to ensure that our economy and businesses are better supported to weather difficult economic headwinds?

Richard Lochhead: Gordon MacDonald raises good points. Last night, along with many other members, I was at an event that was hosted by the Scotch Whisky Association in Edinburgh, and I can say that the First Minister's standing up for the

sector and taking its case directly to Washington went down like a fine dram with the industry. We now need the same approach from the UK Government to deliver on the tariff deal—it now has an opportunity to do that—and to address issues such as the alcohol duty, because the reduction in draught duty in the last budget increased the disadvantage that the spirits sector faces in our country and the inherent unfairness in the alcohol duty system.

Other issues, such as the rise in national insurance contributions, also affect the hospitality sector and, in turn, the Scotch whisky industry. Like Gordon MacDonald, I hope that the UK Government will now stand up for the whisky industry and address those issues in its forthcoming budget.

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I remind members of my entry in the register of members' interests in relation to hospitality that I have received from the Scotch Whisky Association.

I join my fellow co-convenor of the cross-party group on Scotch whisky in welcoming any moves to reduce damaging tariffs and costs on the industry. However, I am surprised that the minister cannot see the contradiction in the Scottish National Party position. If we were members of the European Union, as the SNP demands, we would currently be facing 15 per cent tariffs on Scotch whisky exports, not the 10 per cent that we have as part of the United Kingdom. It is only Brexit freedoms—which we would not have if we were in the EU—that give us the opportunity to negotiate away those tariffs. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear one another.

Murdo Fraser: When is the SNP going to rethink its damaging policy on rejoining the EU, which would cause such destruction in the Scotch whisky sector?

Richard Lochhead: If Murdo Fraser was paying attention, he would know that the Scottish Government does not want any tariffs on Scotch whisky, be they 15 per cent or 10 per cent. Just as his Government for many years failed the Scotch whisky industry in relation to the 75 per cent duty that was placed on every bottle of Scotch whisky, thanks to his party, the current UK Government has a lot to do if it is going to stand up for the Scotch whisky industry. It can address that in its forthcoming budget, as well as by following in the footsteps of the First Minister by raising the tariff issue with the United States and concluding the deal, now that the First Minister has set the scene for it.

High Street Businesses

6. Evelyn Tweed (Stirling) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what measures it is taking to develop year-round support for, and promotion of, high street businesses, in light of the recent Scotland loves local week. (S6O-04919)

The Minister for Business and Employment (Richard Lochhead): Scotland loves local week was a fantastic opportunity to spotlight the year-round campaign that encourages people to shop in their local businesses. Mechanisms such as the Scotland loves local gift card scheme and awards encourage people to think about what they are spending so that they spend more locally. The campaign also recognises that local businesses are crucial in retaining wealth in our local economy and encouraging vibrancy in our town centres.

Evelyn Tweed: Over the past year, Go Forth Stirling BID has reported 26 new business openings in Stirling, including international brands and small independents. Will the minister join me in celebrating those new openings and say what steps the Government is taking to reduce the number of long-term empty units on our high streets?

Richard Lochhead: I join Evelyn Tweed in celebrating the new businesses in her constituency. It was fantastic to see last week that the statistics for new businesses being created in Scotland were much higher in the first half of this year than they were in the first half of last year. It is also striking to note that the largest share of that increase was in hospitality. That is good news for that sector and for the Scottish economy.

The Scottish Government will continue to work with local authorities on our competitive rates regime, which gives flexibility to local authorities to address the issue of empty and vacant units on our high streets.

University of Dundee (Finances)

8. Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on its discussions with the University of Dundee and the Scottish Funding Council regarding the university's financial situation. (S6O-04921)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Jenny Gilruth): Since my statement to the Parliament in June, I have visited the university and held several meetings with the university's leadership and the Scottish Funding Council, and I have also engaged with trade unions and local MSPs, including Mr Rennie. My officials are holding weekly trilateral meetings with the SFC and the university.

A university recovery plan was submitted to the SFC in August, and the SFC wrote to the university a week later with an alternative approach. All parties are now urgently working towards an agreed way forward that will ensure a long-term managed recovery.

Willie Rennie: Ministers continue to say that the situation is urgent, but we are almost a year on from when we first discovered the depths of the problem at the University of Dundee. We need a sustainable recovery plan for the university. When will that happen?

Jenny Gilruth: I thank Mr Rennie for his interest. He will be aware of my engagement with him and with the university's leadership and the Scottish Funding Council throughout the summer recess. We will meet again next week.

We are working at pace with the SFC and the university, but it is for the university to come back with an alternative approach. We expect to receive that alternative approach next Monday.

I have committed to meeting Mr Rennie and colleagues from across the affected region next week, along with the Scottish Funding Council. It is imperative that we find an approach for Dundee university that has the buy-in of the wider university community, including staff and students—they are fundamental to that—and, of course, the approach must have the backing of the court, leading with a clear mandate. I look forward to our engagements next week.

First Minister's Question Time

12:01

Victims, Witnesses, and Justice Reform (Scotland) Bill

1. Russell Findlay (West Scotland) (Con): Next week, members of the Scottish Parliament will vote on the Government's Victims, Witnesses, and Justice Reform (Scotland) Bill. During my time here, I have tried to help crime victims whose suffering is far too often compounded by a justice system that is slow, secretive and unjust. My party has campaigned to give victims a meaningful voice and greater rights to basic information. We campaigned to end the not proven verdict, which is addressed in the bill, and it is welcome that John Swinney listened to our concerns about the plan to remove juries from some trials, which has now been dropped.

The Government has shifted its position on the bill, and we truly welcome that, but it has not gone far enough. Does John Swinney really think that the bill will make a material difference to victims?

The First Minister (John Swinney): Yes, I do, because of the very careful engagement of the Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs in taking the bill through Parliament.

Mr Findlay and I spent some time when I was on the back benches—as he was—scrutinising the bill when it came to Parliament. Much of the evidence that we heard during that process persuaded me, when I became First Minister, that there had to be changes to the bill.

The Government listened to the evidence that was put in front of us. We will continue to do that, and many of the proposals and reforms that have been suggested in the bill are designed to achieve the objective that Mr Findlay has put to me, which is to make sure that the interests of victims are better protected by our justice system. I am confident that, after the scrutiny that Parliament gives it next week, the bill will be in a position to do that.

Russell Findlay: Liz Shanks campaigns for victims' rights since her truly horrific domestic violence ordeal, which was featured in a BBC documentary. We agree with her that all crime victims should be told—must be told—when secretive plea deals are struck in criminal cases. To be fair, the Government has given some ground on plea deals, but the changes fall far short of what is needed.

Liz and the other women met the justice secretary, who appeared to say all the right things, but this is what Liz told me today:

"They are pretending to listen, but crime victims will continue to be badly let down by the bill, which could have done so much more."

For the sake of Liz and all other victims, will John Swinney back my plea deal amendments?

The First Minister: First, I pay tribute to the courage of women such as Liz Shanks. It is invariably women who have had the courage to come forward and talk about their experience so as to ensure that victims are more central to the criminal justice system. I know that the justice secretary has engaged substantively on all those issues.

We have will have amendments in front of us in Parliament on Tuesday, and the Government will consider all the amendments that are submitted to come to the right conclusion.

I assure the Parliament and Liz Shanks that we have listened to the opinions that have been expressed to us, we are making changes to the bill, and the Government is absolutely committed to ensuring that the voice of victims is central to the way in which the criminal justice system proceeds.

Russell Findlay: Of course, the engagement is welcome, but it has to be meaningful. Plea deals are not the only part of the bill that does not do what it should. My colleague Liam Kerr has lodged an amendment that would instigate a Scottish grooming gangs inquiry. Although we believe that there should be a full public inquiry, our amendment would at least guarantee an investigation. Those predatory criminals raped vulnerable girls, and the Government should want to properly examine the scandal; however, so far, it has been resistant. Will John Swinney fix the bill so that it gives grooming gang victims the voice, the inquiry and the justice that they truly deserve?

The First Minister: The Government has taken a number of significant steps in this area of policy, not least of which is the establishment of the continuing Scottish child abuse inquiry, led by Lady Smith, which has been sitting since 2016. That inquiry is providing the welcome and significant scrutiny that is required on the issue.

Separate work by Police Scotland and the Crown is under way to explore individual cases, some of which are the cases that Mr Findlay has just raised with me, to establish whether further detailed scrutiny is required on grooming gangs. From my reading of the information that I have seen, I am not persuaded of the necessity of that further inquiry, but work is under way in Police Scotland and the Crown Office to advise ministers on that point. We will consider that and discuss it with Parliament in due course.

It is important that I make it clear that the criminal justice system has taken very hard and

significant action to bring people to account for utterly unacceptable behaviour, and that will remain the case.

Russell Findlay: The truth is that the Scottish child abuse inquiry will not look at the grooming gangs, or even at industrial-scale abuse in Scottish football. The bill could give victims real transparency over plea deals and much greater involvement in the parole process, and it could put a spotlight on the grooming gangs scandal. It could do so much more, but it will not meaningfully change the justice system. It is a letdown for victims.

If the First Minister wants to support victims and have the support of my party, he must do more. We could back a bill that makes a real difference, but, as it stands, this is a victims law in name only. Will John Swinney listen to victims, show some ambition and make more changes before next week's vote?

The First Minister: I do not want for one moment or in any way to signal to Parliament that I want to do anything in the bill that does not address the legitimate concerns of victims about our criminal justice system. That is why the Government has introduced the bill. I had the privilege of sitting and hearing evidence in the Criminal Justice Committee when I was on the back benches. As a result of listening to victims, when I came into office as First Minister, and working with the justice secretary, we revised the bill to make sure that the interests of victims are ever more central to it. I do not accept the characterisation of the bill that Mr Findlay has put to me.

Legitimate issues will be raised that members will want to press the Government on. That is entirely appropriate parliamentary scrutiny, and I welcome it. However, I say to Parliament that the Government has introduced legislation to do exactly what is required in the criminal justice system just now, which is to put the voice of victims more centrally into that system. I am confident that the bill that Parliament will consider next week will do exactly that.

Criminal Justice (Retail Crime)

2. Anas Sarwar (Glasgow) (Lab): The Scottish National Party has a soft-touch approach to crime in our country. Since the last election, shoplifting is up 124 per cent. Shop staff are going to work fearing for their safety, and communities are being undermined by criminals who feel that they can get away with it. Will John Swinney and his SNP Government apologise for effectively legalising shoplifting in Scotland?

The First Minister (John Swinney): Mr Sarwar is at the bottom of the barrel today. The

accusation that there is a soft-touch justice system in Scotland might have some validity if we were not incarcerating more people than any other western European country and if our prisons were not facing the increase in population that they are. The charge that Mr Sarwar has put to me is a baseless charge that is unworthy of the Labour leader in the Scottish Parliament, and he should withdraw it.

In the budget—which Mr Sarwar never voted for—we put in money to tackle retail crime and to support and work with the retail sector. Mr Sarwar could not even bring himself to vote for that provision. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): Let us hear one another.

The First Minister: This is another example of Mr Sarwar coming into the chamber, ramping up the rhetoric and failing to deliver on the reality for the people of our country.

Anas Sarwar: John Swinney is living on another planet. He wants to focus on inputs when the reality is that shoplifting is up 124 per cent and that clear-up rates show that less than half of all shoplifting crimes are even solved.

I spoke to shop workers in Glasgow yesterday. They told me that, after years of SNP police cuts, officers will now investigate an incident of shoplifting only if shop workers can give them the suspect's name. If the shoplifter is not already known, there is almost no chance that they will even be investigated, let alone that the criminal will be caught.

The situation is so bad that businesses in Edinburgh have had to form a ShopWatch scheme to try to investigate crimes against their own businesses. Victims of crime are being forced to investigate offences that were perpetrated against them. Is that really the best that we can do, all while so many crimes go unreported?

The Retailers Against Crime director, Maxine Fraser, has described the situation as being “out of control”. Will John Swinney admit that, like with so many other issues, he has given up on keeping Scotland's communities safe?

The First Minister: In the budget that Mr Sarwar never voted for, this Government put in record investment of £1.64 billion for policing, enabling us to deliver police services across the length and breadth of the country. The Government has also put in resources to work with the retail sector to tackle the issue of retail crime. In addition to all of that, the Government is working to ensure that we have an effective police presence in every community in Scotland so that these issues are addressed. If he is not prepared to vote for the Government's budget, Mr Sarwar is

not in any position whatsoever to come to the chamber and complain about any other issues.

This Government is determined to work with different organisations in Scotland to protect the public in a country in which crime is at one of its lowest levels in 40 years. *[Interruption.]* I will say that again, with all the heckling: crime in Scotland is at one of its lowest levels in 40 years. That is because of investment by this Government, which the Labour Party failed to support.

Anas Sarwar: John Swinney is not living in the real world. The SNP's record on justice is nothing short of criminal, and it is no wonder that communities across Scotland feel abandoned. Police want action just as much as victims, but the truth is that they are just another victim of SNP incompetence. Under the SNP, there are 800 fewer police officers on the streets and police station after police station has been closed. The bill for Glasgow's new prison has soared 10 times over to £1 billion and violent crime is on the rise. It is no wonder that he is running a million miles away from his own record.

John Swinney's SNP Government has failed workers, failed businesses and failed the police. Why is John Swinney allowing a tiny minority to make life difficult for Scotland's hard-working majority?

The First Minister: Mr Sarwar challenges me about the record of my Government. I am very proud of that record and defend it. On Thursday last week, I said to Parliament, in response to a question from Mr Greer, that if anyone wanted an idea of what a Labour Government would look like, they need only look at the chaos in London. That was on Thursday, before we got to Friday, with the resignation of the Deputy Prime Minister and chaos added to chaos, and the beautiful and unjust moment of the sacking of Ian Murray as the Secretary of State for Scotland.

How on earth can Labour challenge me on my record when a Labour Government is presiding over a shambles in Westminster? The Labour Party has nothing to offer Scotland. This Government is delivering for the people and we are going to carry on doing exactly that.

Israel

3. Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): The President of Israel, whose statements have been cited by the International Court of Justice as plausible evidence of Israel's genocidal intent, was welcomed to the United Kingdom with open arms by Keir Starmer this week. He is the same President who signed his name on bombs that were dropped on homes, hospitals and schools. He is the same President who said that there are no innocent civilians in Gaza. Keir Starmer is

treating peaceful protesters like terrorists, while rolling out the red carpet for the head of a genocidal apartheid regime.

This is not just about visits from Israel's heads of state. British citizens and residents have travelled to serve in Israel's occupation forces, making them complicit in war crimes. This Parliament passed the International Criminal Court (Scotland) Act 2001, making genocide and war crimes offences in Scots law, regardless of where they are committed. I ask the First Minister to confirm that that law will be applied in full and that anyone in Scotland who has served in Israel's occupation forces will be investigated and, if necessary, prosecuted for the part that they have played in the crime of genocide and occupation.

The First Minister (John Swinney): First, I understand the depth of Mr Greer's concern about the visit of the President of Israel to the Prime Minister. I also understand the Prime Minister's argument that there is a need for dialogue with the Israeli Government to try to bring about a resolution of the unjustifiable assault on Gaza. I understand that point. What I would want to be more confident of is that the President of Israel heard from the Prime Minister a series of actions that the United Kingdom Government will take to bring Israel to account for the disproportionate attack that has been made on Gaza. I would feel happier if that was the case.

On Mr Greer's specific point about any individuals from this country who are involved in the work of the Israeli Defense Forces and whether there would be any consideration of that behaviour, those judgments would be made independently by the prosecutorial authorities. It would be wrong for me, as First Minister, to indicate what should or should not happen in those circumstances. However, I understand the seriousness of the point that Mr Greer puts to me on that important question.

Ross Greer: More than a third of the 60,000 Palestinians who have been confirmed to have been killed by Israel since 2023 were children—shot, bombed and starved to death, with no way out. No company profiting from that apartheid and genocide should be allowed to profit here in Scotland.

Last week, Palestinians celebrated when this Parliament took the historic decision to pass a Green proposal that Scotland boycott, sanction and divest from Israel. I thank the First Minister for his Government's support, but now we must act to deliver on it. The very least that the Scottish Government can do is to take the same actions against Israel that it already has taken against Russia. In 2022, Scottish ministers rightly made an immediate call for every business here to sever links and cease trading with Russia. Palestinian

lives are worth no less than those of Ukrainians or Scots, and this Parliament has voted for an economic boycott. Will the First Minister now call on Scottish businesses to join the global movement against apartheid Israel?

The First Minister: In my statement to Parliament last Wednesday, I set out a range of interventions that the Government will take forward to address those issues. I recognise the importance of following through on the commitments that have been given to Parliament, and I give Mr Greer the assurance that that is exactly what the Government is doing and the action that we are taking.

The appalling situation in Gaza has been escalated by the unwarranted and unjustifiable attack on Qatar—a state that is working to try to bring some degree of peace to the situation in the middle east. The attack on Qatar was intended to undermine the very peace process that we all want to see happening. That brings me back to the starting point of Mr Greer's question, which is that there is a necessity for the United Kingdom Government to use its diplomatic influence with the Government of Israel, and to work with other partners, in order to make it abundantly clear that the conduct of the Israeli Government is completely and utterly unacceptable. There needs to be an immediate ceasefire and the flow of humanitarian aid, and we need to start the process of recovery for the people in Palestine, whose lives have been absolutely devastated by the unwarranted attack.

Best Start Grant and Best Start Foods

4. Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP): To ask the First Minister, in light of reports of the rising rate of poverty for families with a baby under one and new evidence from Save the Children that increasing best start grant and best start foods payments could significantly reduce the child poverty rate for this priority group, whether the Scottish Government will consider increasing these payments. (S6F-04281)

The First Minister (John Swinney): Ending child poverty is my Government's top priority. We constantly look for measures that we can take to advance that agenda. The delivery of our five family payments is making a real difference to families. The payments in Scotland are worth around £25,000 by the time a child turns 16, compared with less than £2,000 in England and Wales. That is another example of why the Joseph Rowntree Foundation projects that Scotland will be the only part of the United Kingdom where child poverty levels fall next year.

We are also taking forward other measures, such as the lifting of the two-child limit. If that action was taken by the United Kingdom

Government—and it should be—up to £150 million would be freed up in Scotland, which could be spent on additional measures to address child poverty in our country.

Ruth Maguire: I know how committed the First Minister is to eliminating child poverty. The work that the Scottish Government has done to date has made a difference. Lots of things give babies and their parents a good start—love, information and support, and play opportunities—but there is strong evidence that where parents experience the psychological, emotional and material impact of poverty in their baby's first year, it can have a deep and lasting impact on a baby's development. Does the First Minister recognise how much income matters to a baby's development, that spending on our youngest citizens is a crucial investment and that preventing the harms of poverty from taking root in the first year of a child's life is transformational not just for individual babies and families but for our society as a whole?

The First Minister: I unreservedly accept the point that Ruth Maguire puts to me. It is a joy to have her putting pressure on me after her return to the Parliament. *[Applause.]* I encourage her to continue to champion such issues and to put pressure on the Government to do more, and I very much welcome her contribution to that. I accept her points about the importance of the first year in a child's life. The Government is actively exploring what more it can do.

In my earlier answer, I said that we are constantly looking to identify additional interventions that we can make. Obviously, I have to be mindful of the resources that are available, but the plea that is made by Ruth Maguire is heard loud and clear here on the Government bench. I will do everything that I can to ensure that the Government's ambitions to eradicate child poverty and to make that difference in the first year of a child's life are central to our thinking in the period to come.

Nursing and Midwifery Vacancies

5. Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): To ask the First Minister what urgent steps the Scottish Government is taking in response to reports that nursing and midwifery vacancies have risen by 60 per cent in six months. (S6F-04284)

The First Minister (John Swinney): NHS Scotland vacancies follow a seasonal pattern. Mr Whittle compared June data with December data, but vacancies typically go up in the spring as people retire and decrease again over the summer and autumn as new graduates join the workforce.

Nursing and midwifery vacancies are 4 per cent higher than they were at the same time last year. However, that must be seen in the context of new

investment by the Government in our national health service, which has meant that the workforce grew over the past year.

Overall, nursing and midwifery staffing is up under the Scottish National Party Government by 18.6 per cent since 2006, and we saw a 100 per cent increase in funded places for training between 2012 and 2022. Scotland has the best package of support in the UK for nursing and midwifery students.

Brian Whittle: The vacancy figures are just the latest in a long line of warnings about the perilous position of Scotland's healthcare workforce. Despite promise after promise from the SNP, the warnings keep coming and progress never arrives. There is no NHS workforce plan and no end to delayed discharge, and there are nearly a million Scots on NHS waiting lists. Meanwhile, NHS staff are crying out for investment in facilities and technology to improve working conditions and patient care.

Last week, the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care declared that a target to end waits of longer than a year is now just an aspiration. Aspiration will not solve the escalating staffing crisis, so when will the First Minister take real action to deal with the staffing crisis in our NHS?

The First Minister: On the substance of Mr Whittle's question, I note that there are more nurses and midwives working in our NHS now—more than 67,000 nurses and midwives—than when this Government took office. Mr Whittle asks when the action will come; I say to him that the action has come, and it is being delivered. He asks about performance in other aspects of the health service; I have to tell him that the number of operations performed in July was the highest in five years—there was an 8.9 per cent increase. More people are being treated at our national treatment centres this year than ever before. Our rapid cancer diagnostic services mean that people are getting faster diagnosis after referral. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear the First Minister.

The First Minister: The number of hip and knee operations reached an all-time high in 2024. Mr Whittle asks me when I will take action, and I say to him that I am taking action. The health secretary and I are working day in, day out to make sure that the health service is delivering for the people of Scotland. That progress is taking place the length and breadth of the country.

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): Our tireless and dedicated workforce is the greatest asset of our national health service so, while the Tories and Labour consistently talk down our NHS, will the First Minister reiterate how the

Scottish Government continues to support and grow our NHS workforce?

The First Minister: As I said to Brian Whittle—there was so much shouting that I will say it again, so that members hear it this time—there are more staff working in our NHS now than there were when this Government took office. Through record levels of investment, we have delivered 13 consecutive years of workforce growth, general practitioner numbers are going up and our agenda for change staff, including our nurses and midwives, remain the best paid in the United Kingdom.

This Government is prepared to invest in the workforce of our national health service because they are doing an excellent job. I pay tribute to them. Despite the points made by the Labour and Conservative parties, this Government will take action to put the budget in place to pay for those staff, to deliver the health service's performance and to deliver for the people of Scotland.

Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): Scottish Labour warned the Scottish Government about the consequences of poor NHS workforce planning. I am absolutely clear about Scottish Labour's position on NHS staff: they are hard working and dedicated, and we owe so much to them.

However, our staff are under intense pressure because of the SNP Government. Agency spending is unsustainable, and vacancy rates are rising to alarming levels. In rural areas such as Dumfries and Galloway, in my region of South Scotland, the consequences of those issues and the recruitment and retention of staff are a key challenge, and that has been the case under the SNP Government.

Apprenticeships offer a good way of expanding the workforce and providing flexibility to people who live in those areas. Has the Government made any progress at all in developing apprenticeship models for healthcare workers, as recommended by the nursing and midwifery task force?

The First Minister: That action is coming through the work of the midwifery task force. That is under way—I reassure Carol Mochan on that point.

Carol Mochan offered to make clear the Scottish Labour position. Let me make clear what Scottish Labour's position is on all those issues. Scottish Labour members' position is that none of them—not a single one—was prepared to put their support towards the Government's budget, which pays for NHS staff the length and breadth of the country. That is a pathetic contribution from the Scottish Labour Party.

I will tell Parliament what the other Scottish Labour position is. The Scottish Labour Party is umbilically linked to the Labour Party in London, and what is the Prime Minister doing? He is making it more difficult for healthcare workers to come from other countries to work in this country. Twenty-six per cent of our social care staff come from other countries, and the Prime Minister is shutting the door on all of that. The Scottish Labour Party has got nothing to offer the Parliament on the health service. Scottish Labour is delivering a lack of support to the NHS, and this Government is delivering for the NHS in Scotland.

Public Dental Service (Support)

6. Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): To ask the First Minister what additional support the Scottish Government is giving to the public dental service, in light of reports that there has been a 10 per cent rise in spending over the last two years due to increased demand. (S6F-04287)

The First Minister (John Swinney): It is inaccurate to conflate an increase in public dental service spending with an increase in dental access issues. The main role of the public dental service is to treat patients who have more complex needs that cannot be managed by independent dentists. Scotland remains the only country in the United Kingdom to offer free regular dental examinations for everyone, and 95 per cent of people in Scotland are registered with dentists. More than 7 million courses of national health service dental treatment have been delivered to patients since November 2023.

Paul Sweeney: The First Minister says that those things should not be conflated, but my question reflects what public dental service dentists are telling us. Although the First Minister correctly observed that the public dental service is meant to be a safety net for emergencies and for those with vulnerabilities, it is increasingly filling in the gaps where routine NHS dental provision has collapsed. In areas such as Fife, Moray and the Borders, dentists no longer treat NHS patients, even if they are on their lists, so the only options are for people to seek care from the public dental service safety net or to use their savings to pay for private care. That is not good enough. What is the First Minister doing to tackle the scourge of dental deserts in Scotland and to end the growing overreliance on the already overstretched public dental service?

The First Minister: The Government is putting in place additional financial support to areas where access is particularly challenging, especially rural and island areas. That funding has recently supported the opening of five new surgeries, which has created space for thousands more new NHS registrations.

I will tell Mr Sweeney what is not helping, and this goes back to the point that I have just made to Carol Mochan. We cannot escape the practical reality of the damage caused by the UK Government's approach to migration. We have to work with other countries to bring dental practitioners into this country to supplement the other training work that we are undertaking. In July, the Labour Government in Westminster removed dental hygienists, dental technicians and dental nurses from the skilled worker sponsorship scheme. The Westminster Government is making it more difficult for us to deliver public services in Scotland.

I encourage Mr Sweeney to work with the Scottish Government to ensure that we have a rational debate on and approach to migration, rather than the chase to compete with the Reform party that has consumed the Starmer Government in London.

Public Sector Settlement Agreements

7. Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (LD): To ask the First Minister whether the Scottish Government will review its policy on public sector settlement agreements, in light of reports that £4 million of public money was spent on public sector pay-offs in 2023-24. (S6F-04291)

The First Minister (John Swinney): A review of the severance policy for Scotland concluded in 2023. Its findings were reflected in robust controls being put in place to scrutinise expenditure in line with the Scottish public finance manual. Settlement agreements address specific employment issues in individual organisations, and the number and nature of those can vary across sectors. It should be noted that settlement agreements are used rarely and only in very limited circumstances.

Jamie Greene: I beg to differ. The figure of £4 million was last year's figure. The year before, the figure was £1.5 million. In fact, over the past five years, there have been 300 such settlements, which have cost £10 million of public money, and a third of those came with confidentiality clauses attached to them. That sum of £10 million would go some way towards funding, for example, the Schools (Residential Outdoor Education) (Scotland) Bill introduced by Liz Smith, would it not?

My primary concern here is that there seems to be a growing trend of reward for failure among senior public sector executives, whether at Ferguson Marine, the Water Industry Commission for Scotland, the national health service or the Scottish Qualifications Authority. Well-paid civil servants are walking away from failure with a large cheque in return for a gagging order, while those at the bottom of the pay ladder are struggling.

Does the Scottish Government think that such huge pay-offs are appropriate? When will we see an end to the secrecy around such deals?

The First Minister: In the pay deals that the Government has presided over we have put much more emphasis on increases for people on lower levels of pay than for those on higher levels. Mr Greene shakes his head, but I invite him to look at the pay deals that the Government has presided over. If he does, he will see that that is exactly what has happened in countless cases.

I have a lot of sympathy with Mr Greene's point that such arrangements should not be made in response to failure; they should not be. There should be proper accountability in the way in which they are exercised, which is why the Scottish public finance manual is constructed so that that point is central to decision making.

The figures vary from year to year, but it is important that it is recognised that we have rules on how such agreements can be put in place. Those rules must be rigorously applied in all circumstances, and in all the Government's actions there must be a culture of delivering on the expectations of ministers and the public.

The Presiding Officer: We move to constituency and general supplementaries.

Alexander Dennis Ltd

Michael Matheson (Falkirk West) (SNP): The First Minister will be aware of the on-going concern about the important manufacturing jobs in my constituency at the bus manufacturer Alexander Dennis. Today, the company has announced a final extension to its consultation period, which will now conclude on Monday next week. The fact that the introduction of a furlough scheme has been overwhelmingly supported in the trade union ballot is to be welcomed.

However, the First Minister will recognise that the securing of new orders is critical to the securing of those manufacturing jobs for the future. Will he set out what action the Scottish Government has taken to support Alexander Dennis in securing new orders? If the negotiations on such new orders have progressed sufficiently in advance of Monday, when the consultation closes, will the outcome of those negotiations be announced?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I thank Mr Matheson for his assiduous representation on behalf of his constituents. The Government has been working intensively with partners, including the trade unions, Scottish Enterprise, Transport Scotland and Alexander Dennis. A process of full and active co-operation, which has involved a number of ministers, has been under way for the past few weeks and months. It has been an

entirely constructive period of engagement, and I very much welcome the positive developments that have taken place.

Mr Matheson referred to the extension, until Monday, of the current consultation period, which is very welcome. I also welcome the decision of the trade unions to take forward the modernisation operations that Alexander Dennis has put in place. Those are all encouraging signs, and we are working collaboratively with the company and others on the sourcing of orders.

I expect that we will be able to provide a further update on the situation next week, and that the Deputy First Minister will be able to update Parliament accordingly on the steps that we are taking with ADL on a salary support scheme and other relevant issues in relation to new orders.

Schools (Residential Outdoor Education) (Scotland) Bill (Financial Resolution)

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Does the First Minister agree that, when a bill is agreed to at stage 1, thereby reflecting the will of Parliament that it should proceed to stage 2, the Scottish Government has a democratic obligation to lodge a financial resolution to that bill?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I understand the importance that Liz Smith attaches to the issue that she raises about her current bill. I am mindful of that support and of Parliament's position. However, as I have rehearsed on a number of occasions in exchanges during this question time, the Government is obliged to be mindful of how we can put in place resources to enable us to fund the commitments for which Parliament legislates. That is an absolute obligation for the Government when it introduces legislation, and we must be satisfied that such an approach applies to all legislation.

Paisley Disability Resource Centre

Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab): Some of the bravest people who I have the privilege of representing depend on the disability resource centre in Paisley, which is just one of the services facing closure next week as the local health and social care partnership tries to fill a multimillion-pound black hole in its budget. My constituents who go to the centre tell me that it gives them a purpose in life and a reason to get up in the morning. One told me that he has struggled to eat due to the worry caused by the proposed closure and that he feels a sense of hopelessness. The First Minister will be aware that the Scottish Government funds both Renfrewshire Council and the local health board, which are the bodies that make up the health and social care partnership. The people who rely on Paisley's disability

resource centre want to know whether the First Minister will come to their aid. Will he?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I understand the importance of services such as the one affected by the issue that Mr Bibby raises with me. The Government has, in its budget provision, put in place increased support for both Renfrewshire Council and Greater Glasgow and Clyde NHS Board and those bodies fund the integration joint board that will consider the issue.

The Government's outlook and the policy position that we take encourage the provision of early intervention services because, by supporting services of the type that Mr Bibby raises, we can invariably reduce the demand on far more expensive acute services, while also giving purpose and meaning to the lives of the individuals who are affected by those services. I encourage the Renfrewshire IJB to consider all those questions, because it is important that services and support of that type are available to individuals at local level.

Ferguson Marine (Capital Investment)

Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP): The First Minister will be aware of concerns about the delivery of capital investment to Ferguson Marine. I would be grateful if the First Minister could provide an update on that capital investment, which was proposed by the Scottish Government and was included in the budget passed earlier this year.

The First Minister (John Swinney): The Government has committed to invest £14.2 million in Ferguson Marine over a two-year period, subject to due diligence and to commercial standards being met. That investment has already commenced with targeted early action to address essential repairs, health and safety improvements and upgrades to facilities and equipment that directly support the yard's current projects. The Government will continue to support the business to secure new work and to deliver a sustainable future for the yard and its skilled workforce, which also involves a commitment to investing in the yard.

Hospice Funding (Edinburgh)

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): In July, the Scottish Government announced £5 million to help with the recruitment and retention of skilled staff and the provision of sustainable services in the hospice sector. Scottish ministers have still not released that funding, but the Edinburgh health and social care partnership has decided to reverse a 3 per cent inflationary uplift in funding for hospices here in the capital. St Columba's Hospice Care and Marie Curie Edinburgh are warning that essential palliative end-of-life

services are now at serious risk due to that funding decision. Does the First Minister agree that it is totally unacceptable for hospices to be given funding with one hand and then to see it being taken away with the other? Will he ask the health and social care partnership to reverse that decision and will he investigate why Scottish Government funding for our hospice sector has not been delivered?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I will look into the question about the timing of delivery. If a commitment has been made, delivery should be put in place. I do not have the answer at the front of my mind just now, so I will take that away and explore it.

St Columba's hospice is particularly precious to me because my dear and beloved late mother was a volunteer there for many years. That institution is close to my heart, so I will take that question away and find out what the situation is.

I do not approve of giving with one hand and taking away with the other. If the Government gave a commitment to the hospice sector that was merited and necessary—which it was—that should not be used by other organisations as an excuse to take away funding at local level. That really is just not on.

Let me take that issue away. I am very sympathetic to the point that Mr Briggs makes to me and I will try to establish what the situation is.

Eljamel Inquiry

Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): At the preliminary hearing of the Eljamel inquiry yesterday, counsel to the chair of the inquiry revealed deep concern about the status of the independent clinical review process, which is stalling and threatens the progress of the inquiry. Lord Weir is clearly very concerned that the Scottish Government has refused to attend meetings with his team to progress that crucial issue. The Government is not a participant in independent clinical reviews. It establishes them and sponsors them, and it is incumbent on the Government to make them work. What will the First Minister do to break the impasse and deliver justice for the victims in Dundee and across Tayside, given that they have suffered so much already?

The First Minister (John Swinney): As Mr Marra knows, I have constituents who are involved in the issue. I am anxious to make sure that not just their interests—although they are my constituents, so I care deeply about them—but the interests of all those who are affected in the Eljamel inquiry are properly supported.

I am going to explore the issue that Mr Marra raises with me. This is an independent clinical

review, so it has to be independent of the Government in order to command the confidence of those who are affected, and pressure for the Government to get involved might undermine that independence. I need to take the issue away and see what we can do to try to make sure that nobody loses confidence in the method of engagement.

Obviously, if an inquiry chair such as Lord Weir makes comments of that type, I have to take that deadly seriously, which I will, but I suspect that there is something, possibly in the governance of all of this, that needs to be looked at. I will take that away, explore it and write to Mr Marra.

Pavement Parking (Scottish Government Guidance)

Pam Gosal (West Scotland) (Con): I have been flooded with emails from constituents who have expressed concerns about the poor enforcement of the pavement parking ban. The ban went live in East Dunbartonshire on 1 September. However, there seems to be confusion about how it has been implemented. Constituents, including disabled constituents, have said that cars are now pushed on to road parking, making it difficult for blue-light services to pass. On the other hand, other constituents have written to me saying that cars are still parked on pavements, making access difficult. Why has the Scottish Government's guidance led to such a poorly executed plan?

The First Minister (John Swinney): This is a matter for local authorities. I know that I am responsible for everything, but the parking arrangements in Bishopbriggs are just a little bit beyond me, perhaps.

This is a matter for East Dunbartonshire Council to sort out. It has the responsibility. The Government sets out the guidance, and it is up to councils to get on with it. I see the application of the pavement parking ban in my constituency. Folk are just getting on with it, and councils are getting on with it, so there is no reason why East Dunbartonshire Council cannot get on with it. I invite Pam Gosal to take the matter up with East Dunbartonshire Council and see what she can do about the parking.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes First Minister's question time. There will be a short suspension before the next item of business to allow those who are leaving the chamber and the public gallery to do so.

12:47

Meeting suspended.

12:49

On resuming—

Scottish Youth Parliament (Work on Transport)

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The next item of business is a members' business debate on motion S6M-17147, in the name of Sarah Boyack, on the Scottish Youth Parliament's work on transport. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament acknowledges the efforts of the Scottish Youth Parliament's Transport, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee to remove barriers to young people accessing public transport; notes the view that public transport should be affordable, accessible and reliable for young people across Scotland, including in the Lothian region; further notes the view that particular action should be taken for young people in rural and island communities who, it considers, currently benefit less from the Young Persons' (Under 22s) Free Bus Travel scheme due to limited bus services and infrastructure in their areas; recognises what it sees as the benefits that affordable, accessible and reliable public transport have for young people's access to social, educational, youth work and employment opportunities, and notes the support for further action to be taken to improve young people's access to public transport.

12:49

Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab): It is a real honour to open this important members' business debate on the contribution of the Scottish Youth Parliament to our evolving transport system. I extend my heartfelt thanks to colleagues who supported securing time for the debate, because ensuring that Scotland's young people have access to safe, affordable, accessible and sustainable transport is vital to their wellbeing, social inclusion and future opportunities.

I was motivated to lodge the motion after attending a meeting of the cross-party group on sustainable transport. At that meeting, MSYPs shared first-hand experiences, especially from rural, island and Lothian communities, highlighting barriers that relate directly to the lived realities of young Scots.

One young person's words resonated deeply with me:

"The young people's free bus pass is great, but it's not much use if there isn't a bus to use it on."

All of us should reflect on that comment.

The SYP's transport, environment and rural affairs committee has been working hard on the matter, championing issues such as rural infrastructure deficits, accessibility for disabled

young people and safety at bus stops and on vehicles. Its timely and considered interventions remind us that policy must be grounded in lived experience if it is to serve our communities well. That committee truly represents the voices of our future in terms of transport and how much is needed to give young people the access that they deserve.

Young people need access to transport to live their lives to the full, whether it is to access education, to access sports and leisure, to visit friends or family, or to get to and from work. For all of those activities, they need accessible, affordable and reliable public transport.

This week, we have had a Scottish Youth Parliament stall that MSPs have been able to visit. MSYPs have been giving us copies of their manifesto, "Dear Scotland's Future: For Young People. By Young People.", which reflects the voices of nearly 5,000 young people across all 32 local authorities, including a strong input from the Lothians. The manifesto places sustainable transport and a "just and fairer Scotland" at its core, not as an aspiration, but as an immediate priority. The manifesto says:

"Transport Scotland and public transport companies should ensure that public transport services are accessible and reliable for young people across Scotland, particularly those living in rural areas."

We had an excellent debate in the chamber this week about Scotland's railways. We need to build on the successes that we have had over the Parliament's life, such as the Airdrie to Bathgate railway, the Larkhall to Milngavie railway, the Stirling to Alloa railway, the Borders railway and the reopening of the Levenmouth rail link in June 2024, which has reconnected communities to Edinburgh and promises young people in Fife improved access for commuting, study and social participation—something that can happen only if we get safe and reliable transportation throughout the country.

There are also plans to progress the decarbonisation of the network, but we know that there is much more to be done to increase capacity in our public transport services. Hundreds of bus services have been lost in recent years. As reports from Audit Scotland and the Climate Change Committee have stated, Scotland's ambition to reduce car usage by 20 per cent by 2030 is off track. However, achieving that is critical if we are to deliver the change that young people need for a safe future, given the increasingly negative impacts of the climate and nature emergencies that we see in extreme weather, wildfires, excessive heat and flooding.

Some progress has been made, with 203 miles of walking, wheeling and cycling routes having been added last year, but overall funding for active

travel has fallen significantly in the 2025-26 budget. It is precisely in that context, where policy ambition, climate commitments and young people's lived experience intersect, that the SYP's work becomes essential. Its advocacy on accessibility, safety, affordability, inclusion and co-design is not just relevant—it is vital.

Young people need bus services that they can use in their communities. As the SYP's manifesto says,

"Supported public transport is essential for young people to live their lives freely."

I know that I need to move towards a conclusion. Let us reaffirm the critical message: the Scottish Youth Parliament has not just identified failings in our transport system; it is calling for action with practical, inclusive and future-focused solutions. Young people need to be involved in shaping our transport services. I found it inspiring to hear from the Welsh Youth Parliament at our recent Commonwealth Parliamentary Association regional conference in Cardiff, and from young women at our CPA regional women's conference in the Scottish Parliament earlier this year.

The SYP's manifesto calls for accessible, equitable transport, safer infrastructure, more reliable rural services and the extension of free travel to under-26s, all underpinned by youth participation at every stage. The SYP also asks to be involved in local and national decisions to create a public transport system with equal access for all, reducing geographic inequalities and barriers that prevent young people from accessing the system. It challenges all parties to translate that energy and evidence into action to invest in reliable and local rural services, active travel and inclusive design, to ensure that safety and accessibility are built in and are core to public transport planning, and to have staff to keep people safe across our bus and rail services. It challenges all parties to embed youth voices in co-design, policy, delivery and oversight in order to bridge the gaps that are holding young people back—from the Lothians to our islands, and from urban to rural communities—and to create joined-up and sustainable transport.

I urge the Scottish Government, in the final months of this parliamentary session, to say what will happen following our cross-party group's recommendations in "Mind the Gap: Tackling Transport Inequalities in Scotland", from earlier this year, and to listen to the SYP's manifesto on what can be done now. We need to listen to our young people's experiences in order to build transport not just for them but with them and to create a system that unlocks opportunities, builds bridges and advances decarbonisation. That would enable them to use low-carbon travel

options on a daily basis, and it would deliver the fairer Scotland that is called for by the SYP and that our young people richly deserve.

12:57

Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): I thank Sarah Boyack for bringing this important debate to the chamber, and I congratulate the Scottish Youth Parliament on its work. The local representatives for the Western Isles, Ellie Denehy and Alannah Logue, are each at their respective ends of my constituency.

As I am the MSP for an island constituency, issues such as flights from island airports, ferry services and rural bus services are often raised with me, but the debate reminds us that issues of connectivity have a specific impact on Scotland's young islanders. I express my thanks to the Scottish Youth Parliament, especially the rural and island representatives, for their hard work in producing the 2026 to 2031 manifesto, which sets out, *inter alia*, the Scottish Youth Parliament's transport priorities on behalf of all young Scots.

I am certainly encouraged by the fact that many of the Scottish Government's transport policies have been welcomed by the Youth Parliament. In my constituency, policies such as the introduction of free interisland ferry travel and two free round-trip ferry crossings a year to the mainland for under-22s have been welcomed. I realise that the Youth Parliament would like to see that entitlement grow and develop, and perhaps the minister, in summing up, will respond to the asks made by the Youth Parliament on that.

Improving connectivity and tackling island depopulation are closely interlinked challenges. Understanding the challenges that young people face is essential not only to improving our current transport network in the islands, but to building a future transport network that will help to encourage younger islanders to stay in or return to their island communities. Getting our transport infrastructure right can make the islands a more attractive place for young people once they finish university or college, and it can help them to think about entering the workforce or starting a business. I hope that today's debate will encourage young islanders to get involved in local conversations and debates about transport services at national and local levels.

Later this month, HITRANS will launch its rural transport strategy in Holyrood, and I hope that members will find ways to bring the Scottish Youth Parliament's views on transport issues into our discussions. In my constituency, the Western Isles ferries group meets monthly to find solutions and to work constructively to sustain and improve ferry connectivity. Following recent conversations and

its attendance at this debate, I hope that the group will share my view that inviting a young representative to a forthcoming meeting would be a good way to kick off the conversation.

To summarise, young islanders require good connectivity links. Members of the Scottish Youth Parliament can provide us with unique insights into how we can continue to improve our transport network and make our islands, as well as the whole of Scotland, a more attractive place for young people in the future.

13:00

Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con): I extend my thanks to Sarah Boyack for securing the motion for debate in the chamber and congratulate the Scottish Youth Parliament on its work, which is about reinforcing the importance of youth voices in discussions about our country's transport needs. We cannot disagree with the statement that public transport should be affordable, safe, accessible and reliable, not just for young people, but for everyone across Lothian and Scotland. In Edinburgh and the Lothians, we are lucky enough to have an award-winning, first-rate bus service, Lothian Buses. However, other parts of the country are not so fortunate and suffer from extremely limited bus services and infrastructure. In some cases, there are no bus services.

We all know the importance of good transport links for the Scottish economy and businesses, but they play a key role in our social development. Dr Allan outlined some specific challenges in our island and rural communities, and some of my colleagues in the Scottish Conservatives tell me about the limitations in rural areas because of the lack of public transport. That inequality is not acceptable. We need good transport links to form the backbone of our communities. They link people to work, education and leisure, and they offer a direct alternative to car travel. The benefits of good public transport are particularly important for young people's access to social, educational and employment opportunities, while it also gives them independence. Access to colleges, universities, apprenticeships and work is so important for young people as they grow into young adults.

The young person's under-22 bus travel scheme has attracted a huge number of participants and has increased our young people's mobility. However, I will talk a bit about the challenges. Most people who use the under-22 scheme exercise their participation thoughtfully, but some groups of youths are abusing the scheme to engage in antisocial behaviour. The actions of the very disruptive minority are unacceptable and we must be prepared to tackle antisocial behaviour head on. As the shadow cabinet secretary for

transport in the Scottish Parliament, I spent an evening on patrol with Lothian Buses and Police Scotland, and I witnessed at first hand the growing problems of antisocial behaviour and heard the views of drivers and passengers.

Alasdair Allan: I agree entirely with what the member has said about the need to tackle antisocial behaviour and the problem that it causes on transport. However, I am sure that she would wish to put on the record that antisocial behaviour on public transport is not restricted to people who are under the age of 22.

Sue Webber: Lothian Buses has done an awful lot of study and data analysis—it is the only bus company to have done that—and its research shows a direct correlation between the increase in antisocial behaviour and violence on the buses and the introduction of the under-22 bus pass. I cannot hide from that.

Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): Will the member take an intervention?

Sue Webber: With due respect, Mr Ruskell, I have only 30 seconds left and I have tons to say.

I have no doubt that the removal of the free bus pass for under-22s would make a difference. Therefore, I would like the pass to be taken away from those who are responsible for significant antisocial behaviour. I hope that the minister will provide an update on where we are with that. The First Minister has said that work is under way to develop a system that would strip under-22s of their entitlement following repeated bad behaviour, and I look forward to that being implemented.

First—I was going to call you First Minister, Presiding Officer.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Do not do that.

Sue Webber: Right now, there is a great opportunity to allow our young people and their voices to influence our transport for the future, and I am delighted that the debate has taken place this afternoon. I again thank Sarah Boyack for the opportunity to speak on this important issue.

13:05

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): I, too, thank Sarah Boyack for securing the debate on what is an incredibly important motion in a week when we are joined by MSYPs in the gallery for today's debate and in the garden lobby, where people can meet them and discuss the Scottish Youth Parliament's manifesto.

That manifesto, entitled, "Dear Scotland's Future", is based on the voices of more than 5,000 young people. It makes it clear that transport is about much more than convenience. It is about reaching school and college; it is about travelling

safely to youth work and community groups; and it is about the opportunity to take up jobs and apprenticeships. It is also about staying connected with family and friends, because, if that is impossible, we will hold young people back.

The manifesto sets out some clear priorities. It calls for cheaper and fairer ticketing systems, a joined-up network across buses, trains and ferries, and real accessibility for disabled young people and those with additional needs. It presses for better provision in rural and island communities, which we have already heard about in the debate.

The free bus travel scheme for under-22s is a welcome step, and it has made a massive difference to thousands of young people. However, as MSYPs have said, there are issues for people who live in rural communities, on islands or, indeed, in cities, where, at certain times of the day, services are cut. What is the point of a free bus card if there is no bus? The services must be there.

We hear stories from across Scotland about buses that never arrive, services that are cancelled at short notice and connections that do not link up. We hear about wheelchair users who are abandoned at stops. Those are not isolated cases but everyday barriers for our young people.

The manifesto highlights safety. Young people, especially young women and girls, want public transport to be safer, with better lighting and working closed-circuit television. They want a culture in which harassment is never tolerated.

The Scottish Youth Parliament is right to be ambitious. It is calling for a properly integrated network where timetables connect and for transport that disabled young people can truly rely on. It is also calling for an expansion of the free travel scheme, because a 22-year-old apprentice on a minimum wage faces exactly the same barriers as they did only a few days earlier when they were 21. Those are bold demands, but they are rooted in real experience.

Transport is not just about moving from A to B; it is about opportunity, fairness and dignity. If young people cannot rely on public transport, they cannot rely on us as their decision makers. Let us do more than just acknowledge their voices; let us listen to them and act on what they are telling us. If we want young people to believe in politics, they need to see that, when they speak, we hear and we deliver.

13:08

Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): I join others in thanking Sarah Boyack for her motion and the Scottish Youth Parliament for its excellent manifesto. I was struck by the amount

of work that has gone into the manifesto, so I commend the MSYPs who have been involved and the staff and volunteers who have helped them with it. The process of producing my party's manifesto for next year's Holyrood election is under way, and I am looking forward to discussing with MSYPs how their asks can be delivered in the next session of the Scottish Parliament. I give a special mention to Islay Jackson MSYP, who has been a regular contributor to the Scottish Parliament's cross-party group on sustainable transport.

Two areas are covered in the transport section of the manifesto: accessible and reliable public transport; and the need to maintain and expand free travel for young people. We need to take on board the challenge of making public transport fit for purpose for all. That does not just mean able-bodied people in the central belt, so we must invest in transport that provides opportunities for young rural people to have equity of access to work, education and socialising. Disabled young people across the country need services on which they can rely, with joined-up timetabling and ticketing.

When I visited the ScotRail customer service centre recently, I heard about the excellent work that it does using platform information to ensure that people are not left isolated at stations. I commend that work, but I have also been told by constituents with physical disabilities about how, at times, they feel let down that ScotRail has not been there for them, and how vulnerable that makes them feel when they are on a platform.

When we think about the people who are most dependent on public transport, we think most often about the vulnerable, who might also be young and, in some cases, disabled. That is why having staff available when they are needed is critical. It is important to empower people to feel safe and welcomed on our whole public transportation network.

I am also aware that we are now seeing innovation across the United Kingdom. A number of English councils are trialling transport safety officers on buses, for example, because there has been a rise in antisocial behaviour on buses in England. I would point out to Sue Webber that they do not have free bus travel for under-22s in England. We need to take a joined-up approach to this.

Earlier this week, I spoke of the Green Party's ambition to abolish first-class tickets on ScotRail. Today's debate underlines why we need such a measure. We all deserve to have reliable, cheap and safe services. People do not want to be squeezed like sardines on to a busy commuter train while 98 per cent of first-class tickets go unsold.

I appreciated the acknowledgement in the SYP manifesto of the success of the under-22s free bus travel scheme that my party pushed so hard for. I enjoyed reading about the impact that the scheme has had on the lives of young people across the country, and I agree that we should look to extend the scheme up to the age of 26 and that, ideally, it should not be limited to buses.

The policy originated from the Scottish Young Greens, whose members lodged a motion to our party conference asking our members of the Scottish Parliament to make progress on delivering it. I was pleased that, in 2020, we were able to agree with Kate Forbes that, as part of her first budget, free bus travel for under-19s would be delivered. At the time, I was able to discuss with her the findings of the Callander Youth Project report, which highlighted the isolation and the lack of opportunity that results from young people having to spend so much of their income on unreliable rural buses. Although the Covid pandemic delayed the delivery of free bus travel, we now have a hugely successful scheme that has been expanded to all young people under the age of 22.

I thank the Scottish Youth Parliament for its continued inspiration and hard work, and I look forward to further conversations ahead of the next Holyrood election.

13:12

Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): I thank Sarah Boyack for bringing the debate to the chamber. Throughout her time in the Parliament, she has long been a champion of affordable, accessible and sustainable transport, and it is welcome that she brings the voices of the Scottish Youth Parliament to the Scottish Parliament debate today.

It has been a great delight to read through the work of the Scottish Youth Parliament on transport. I congratulate the convener of the group, David McGilp MYSP, who represents my home area of Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley, which is in my South Scotland region. It is tremendous to see that.

Public transport is an asset to many of our constituents, none more so than our young people. Within my region, there are many remote and rural towns and villages whose connections with larger towns and cities rely completely on good public transport. Whether it is for employment, attending hospital appointments or even visiting family and friends, constituents depend on timely, reliable and regular transport. From the young to the elderly, public transport is a vehicle for social connection, and that must be considered when making decisions on provision.

For young people, affordable and accessible transport is a key factor in enabling educational and employment opportunities. The under-22s free bus travel scheme has been a welcome step in improving the affordability of public transport, and it has been fantastic in improving access to travel for many young people.

In my region, the distance between towns and villages can be tens of miles, so the scheme is welcomed by the young people who are completely reliant on bus services. In the rural community where I live, pupils from about 15 schools came together to go to the school that I went to. We could be connected with our young friends at school, but it was really difficult when we were out of school in the long holiday periods, for example. My children have made really good use of the under-22s scheme, which allows them to have a real connection with their friends over the holidays.

I note the committee's research. The young people have said that the scheme is a great thing to have but that having limited services limits the opportunities. That is certainly true in my region.

Finally, I want to recognise the human rights aspects of the issue. Under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, children and young people have the right

"to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities"

and the right

"to participate fully in cultural and artistic life".

It is the responsibility of the Government and all of us in the Parliament to encourage the provision of appropriate and equal cultural, artistic, recreational and leisure opportunities. Access to affordable and reliable transport plays a huge part in ensuring that right. We must all work together to ensure that the experiences of young people are as good as they possibly can be and that the opportunities work for everyone, particularly for those in rural areas. I hope that the minister has some information and feedback for us in that regard.

I thank Sarah Boyack again for bringing the debate to the Parliament. I wish the Scottish Youth Parliament more successes, and I hope that it continues to push us to make sensible decisions around accessibility, infrastructure and affordability for young people in all aspects of our community, so that no one is left behind.

13:16

Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Reform): I thank Sarah Boyack for bringing the debate to the chamber. The background to it was a great piece of collaboration between the cross-

party group on sustainable transport and the Scottish Youth Parliament. It was a really good example of how a cross-party group can be effective in the Parliament.

The cross-party group held an inquiry into inequalities in transport. Transport has a vital role in delivering a fairer society and enabling everyone in Scotland to have equal access to daily life, work, education and community wellbeing. However, there are gaps in the current system, which mean that women, children, disabled people and low-income households do not have equal access to transport. Those groups experience barriers that are related to cost, availability, safety and convenience of the transport network. We must create a fair and reliable transport system that everyone can access.

We held a series of valuable evidence sessions to consider those different experiences when it comes to accessing transport. Each of the groups raised issues, which included unaffordable fares, poor transport connectivity, inaccessible services and safety concerns. All those issues have been mentioned during the debate already.

Our report made a number of recommendations to the Scottish Government and transport authorities to achieve a transport system that works for everyone. Those include

“defining transport poverty and better data collection and metrics to facilitate better monitoring”.

We also called for

“transport authorities to implement lived experience participation with those most affected by transport inequalities.”

The Scottish Youth Parliament and Sustrans presented to the CPG meeting in October 2024, and they both highlighted the critical role of transport in shaping the lives of younger people. As we have heard, we had great presentations from David McGilp MSYP and Islay Jackson MSYP—two fantastic and impressive young people. They outlined the youth perspective on public transport, building on their all aboard campaign, which helped to secure free public transport for under-22s. They emphasised the importance of making transport accessible to all young people, especially those in rural and island communities. They called for the extension of the free travel scheme to people up to the age of 26—they did not put a cost on that, I have to say—and recommended improvements in affordability, accessibility and frequency of public transport services. A key theme that emerged from the question-and-answer session was the critical need to involve young people in transport decision-making processes.

The free bus travel scheme for under-22s has made a significant difference to the lives of young

people, but challenges remain around the availability and reliability of services. Earlier this year, I joined the Transport, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee of the Scottish Youth Parliament to discuss transport and young people. It called for more reliable and frequent services, safer waiting areas, better route planning and the ending of negative attitudes towards young passengers.

It has been fantastic to work with members of the Scottish Youth Parliament and it behoves us all to listen to young people when we are designing public services such as transport.

13:20

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind): I am thankful for the opportunity to speak in the debate, and I thank Sarah Boyack for raising the topic.

I, too, am a member of the cross-party group on sustainable transport, which is led by Graham Simpson. We were united in being impressed, as members have heard, by the Youth Parliament's work on the subject of transport, and we wanted to give it more of an airing in this older people's Parliament.

In the first place, we should have more interaction and mutual working between the Youth Parliament and this place, whether it be in cross-party groups, committees or elsewhere. Over the years, I have appreciated meeting MSYPs—especially, in the present period, the members for YMCA Scotland, Andrew Will and Jonah Brooks, the latter of whom is active in Tollcross YMCA in my constituency.

I support, as others do, the Youth Parliament's aims for affordable, accessible and reliable public transport. I appreciated reading its briefing for today's debate, as well as hearing from David McGill and Islay Jackson at the CPG last October. I fully accept that there is a particular challenge with public transport in rural and island areas, where the more spread-out population almost inevitably makes frequent and affordable public transport more difficult. However, the fact that it is difficult does not mean that we should ignore it. Perhaps we need to use a bit more imagination as to where we go on that.

For example, when I was younger, the post bus was a great asset, carrying both mail and passengers. I think, sadly, that the last one ran in 2017. Hitchhiking, too, used to be a great way of getting around for young people—I did it myself. It was not entirely reliable, nor did it run to a timetable, but at least it was free.

Graham Simpson: How old were you?

John Mason: Pass.

However, times have moved on, and I saw hardly anyone hitching when I drove in the Highlands and Islands this summer.

As for some of the specifics in the Youth Parliament paper, I agree that the under-22s bus travel scheme should be maintained. Expanding it to 26 or to cover trains, too, would certainly come at a cost, but perhaps there is room for compromise, for example by making the young person's railcard more attractive.

Safety in public transport is definitely an issue, and not just for young people. We could do with ScotRail staff being a bit more proactive in managing passenger behaviour on trains, not just referring everyone to the British Transport Police, who, clearly, are not present on many trains at all.

We are considering transport today, but I would also mention the Scottish Youth Parliament's recently published manifesto for 2026 to 2031, which contains 31 policies. In this debate, we are focusing on society policies 4 and 5, but I was particularly intrigued by education policy 2, which is on financial education.

Some policies, such as listening more to young people, should be happening anyway and should come at minimal cost. Others, such as reduced or free train fares, will clearly cost money. Again, that brings up the question of taxation and the kind of country that we want to live in. Do we want to be a low-tax country with poor public services, including poor public transport for younger people, or are we willing to pay more tax on income, property, savings and so on so that our young people get a better deal and a better quality of life?

Those questions are primarily for our young people to decide on. It is all very well for me, aged 68, to say that I want higher taxes and quality public services; however, it is for our young people to make those choices for the future, and they should absolutely be listened to right now.

Part of what we need has to be increased financial education. Actually, I would say that the whole population—including, perhaps, some MSPs—needs that, but if we focus on young people to start with, we will not go far wrong.

I congratulate the Scottish Youth Parliament on all its work, particularly on the subject of transport, and I look forward to continuing engagement with it.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I invite Jim Fairlie to respond to the debate. You have around seven minutes, minister.

13:24

The Minister for Agriculture and Connectivity (Jim Fairlie): Members can see from the papers

scattered in front of me that I want to get through a whole load of things, but I think that time will be absolutely against me.

I genuinely thank my colleague for bringing the debate to the chamber. It is a brilliant debate to have, and I was really taken by the member's enthusiasm. The enthusiasm of the Youth Parliament has clearly rubbed off, as the member is clearly excited by what it has brought to the debate.

John Mason just mentioned the Scottish Youth Parliament's manifesto, which I note is called "Dear Scotland's Future". I absolutely love that title; it captures the spirit of the debate and the fact that we in the chamber all have a responsibility and a duty to consider these issues, because we are legislating for that future. It brings everything back into sharp focus.

I will pick up a couple of points that Sarah Boyack made. She pointed out that, although free bus passes are great, they are no use if there is no bus. She is absolutely correct, and I take her point on board. We have discussed it on numerous occasions, and we are looking at how we make that better.

We need to remember, though, that we are still dealing with a deregulated industry, and it is private operators who are working in these areas. That is why we introduced the Transport (Scotland) Act 2019. Everything in that legislation is now in play, so local authorities have the ability to make the interventions that are right for their areas.

Sarah Boyack: Will the minister take an intervention?

Jim Fairlie: I will just finish this one point.

As someone who lives in a rural constituency, I am acutely aware of the problems facing rural Scotland. I am, therefore, excited about the extension of the plugged-in communities funding; we are just about to announce a £4 million fund for plugged-in communities to allow local communities to get the buses and the infrastructure that they need in their area. After all, they know their areas better than anyone, and they will know what routes to drive and how to deliver them. It is all about the community working together.

Sarah Boyack: A key issue for local authorities is having the capacity to use the legislation that we in the Parliament have supported. We have been seeing these issues for years. Lothian Buses is fantastic, but there is a challenge in how we ensure accountability when it comes to local buses in an area. Local authorities are key—the issue is what more the Government can do to support them.

Jim Fairlie: I take on board Sarah Boyack's point. That is the whole point of the legislation. It does not have to involve a one-size-fits-all approach—there is a range of options for local authorities to take advantage of.

When we look at how Lothian Buses has taken that legislation and run with it, with a direct link back into the local community, we see that there are benefits there. However, I would not want to criticise private operators to any great extent. All I will say is that they have a business to run, and they have to be profitable to make the investments that are needed. We also have funding through the network support grant to allow the operators to put in place and run routes that are clearly not viable at that time.

Alasdair Allan talked about some of the Youth Parliament's asks around extending funding. I would just reiterate that the network support grant is important in maintaining rural routes. We do not have any funding available to increase the under-22s scheme as it stands, but we have increased ferry provision, including the number of ferries that are available to our young travellers. When I was in Orkney and Shetland over the summer, people came to me and said that the provision that we have made is absolutely brilliant. If we could extend it, that would be great, but the budget does not allow us to do so right now. However, it demonstrates the importance that the Government places on ensuring connectivity.

A number of members have stated the value of that connectivity, not just in enabling people to get to their workplace and to education—there is the social aspect, too. Indeed, I picked that up when I was in Orkney, in particular: young people were travelling to some of the outer isles in ways that they would not have normally done, as a direct result of the free ferry travel that we have put in place.

Mark Ruskell: One thing that the Government has committed to and which is very welcome is a trial introduction of capped bus fares. Will the Government consider how that works with free bus travel, to help people who have reached the age of 22 and therefore no longer get free travel? How will the pilot's findings feed into wider consideration of how we make more travel free and affordable?

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

Jim Fairlie: We are considering capped fares, and we are still working up where that pilot will be. A number of members across the Parliament have been asking for it to be in their area—I accept that everybody wants it to be in their area. As for what happens beyond the age of 22, I have asked officials to consider that, too. Do people simply

drop out of using buses? How does it work? There is constant evaluation of our travel system in Scotland.

Another thing that was asked for was to have things linked up—that is, to have connectivity between modes of travel. We have our eyes set on that, too. For example, how do we ensure that ferries are timed with trains and buses, ensuring connectivity across all sectors?

Graham Simpson said that we must create a fairer system. I go back to the fact that all the powers of the Transport (Scotland) Act 2019 have now been delivered to local authorities, in order to deliver exactly that. It is all about the fairness in the system, so that the local authority, or the transport authority, that desires to do something in its communities has the ability to do so.

In 2024-25, we committed more than £100 million across a number of infrastructure programmes involving walking, wheeling and cycling. One of the other asks from the Youth Parliament has been about active travel, which is really important. "Dear Scotland's Future" provides a vision in that respect; in the future, there will be far more walking, wheeling and cycling. That is why there has been a commitment of £180 million-plus for the active travel budget—to ensure that we make that future available to the young people who are telling us what they want.

I cannot commend those young people highly enough for their engagement, and I encourage every member across the Parliament to keep that engagement going, because they are the future of Scotland.

13:32

Meeting suspended.

14:30

On resuming—

Portfolio Question Time

Social Justice and Housing

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): Good afternoon. The next item of business is portfolio question time. The portfolio this afternoon is social justice and housing—

Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): We cannot hear you.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, Mr Stewart. I do not think that the sound is working.

Housing Emergency Action Plan

1. **Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government how the steps set out in its housing emergency action plan will support its work to tackle the housing emergency, particularly for young people and first-time buyers. (S6O-04922)

The Cabinet Secretary for Housing (Màiri McAllan): The plan delivers on three principal objectives: ending cases of children living in unsuitable accommodation; supporting the housing needs of vulnerable communities; and building our future by investing up to £4.9 billion in multiyear funding. As well as investing significantly in a boosted affordable house building programme to support young people and first-time buyers in particular, we are expanding the scope of the open market shared equity scheme, increasing the targeted acquisition fund from £40 million to £88 million, working with councils to flip temporary accommodation and providing financial support for women to leave an abusive partner. Furthermore, subject to the Parliament's approval, we will introduce a long-term system of rent controls via the Housing (Scotland) Bill.

Bob Doris: I welcome those measures, including the expansion of the open market shared equity scheme. Guidance shows that the scheme is available to those on lower incomes based on affordability and that the Scottish Government can take up to a 40 per cent stake in the property purchase. However, the scheme is not open to younger people outwith certain priority groups, and applicants must be social rented tenants. Given that younger people, including families, often stay with friends and relatives and do not have any form of tenancy, will the Scottish Government consider reviewing the criteria in order to enable that group to apply? More generally, what further support can be offered?

Màiri McAllan: I am pleased to say that, from 2 September 2025, the OMSE scheme is available to all qualifying first-time buyers, as well as to priority access groups. That policy change has been implemented to ensure that the maximum number of people are able to access the scheme, and it will help many who would not otherwise have been able to secure a home. I will consider the specific point that Mr Doris has raised and see whether anything can be done in that regard.

Pension Age Disability Payment (Redetermination of Assessments)

2. **Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government what percentage increase in redeterminations of pension age disability payment assessments there has been since January 2025. (S6O-04923)

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice (Shirley-Anne Somerville): Social Security Scotland's priority is to make the right decision on applications first time and to do so as quickly as possible. As it is a new benefit, pension age disability payment application volumes are still increasing, but the number of redeterminations has remained low since the launch of the benefit in October 2024. Out of 2,575 processed applications for pension age disability payment, only 45 redeterminations had been requested up to 30 April 2025.

Jamie Halcro Johnston: The figure that the cabinet secretary was looking for was a 221 per cent increase. Although that represents a small number of actual cases, it also largely covers the short trial period before the wider roll-out of pension age disability payments. Since April 2025, the benefit has been extended to 14 more councils, including Edinburgh, North Lanarkshire, South Lanarkshire, Glasgow, Renfrewshire and West Lothian, which are some of our largest council areas. Given the rapid expansion in eligibility, does the cabinet secretary anticipate further increases in self-determinations? How does she expect that to affect the time that it takes to process applications across the system? Could we see significant delays as a result?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: No, we will not see significant delays, because processing times are being kept under close review. That is very different from what happens with a redetermination, which is, I think, what Jamie Halcro Johnston meant in his question.

I appreciate that, when the member and the Scottish Conservatives are preparing a press release, they want to go for the percentage figure, but if we genuinely want to talk about how to get the right decision first time round, it is important that we have a sensible conversation about the fact that, strangely enough, as a benefit goes from

being rolled out in three council areas to 32, the number of applications—and, therefore, the number of redeterminations—will go up. That is why it is important that we look at the proportion of redeterminations overall, which is still exceptionally small. As I said in my earlier answer, the absolute figure remains small. That is the important aspect in getting perspective on and context around the matter, rather than going for a cheap headline.

Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): Recipients of disability benefits in Scotland will, understandably, be concerned following the United Kingdom Government's recent proposals to cut social security, given the implications for disability benefits in Scotland. Will the cabinet secretary provide an update on the Scottish Government's engagement with the UK Government on those proposals? In addition, what reassurance can she provide to disabled people and those living with long-term health conditions that their interests are being protected?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: It is very important that we provide reassurance for disabled people. As I said, we are prioritising getting the decision right the first time for all benefits. It is also very important that we give reassurance that the Scottish Government will not undertake the cuts to disability benefits that are, unfortunately, still happening at Westminster. There was, rightly, great pushback on the threat to take away personal independence payments for people. The Scottish Government clearly laid out that it would not follow suit on that. However, cuts are still being made to the incomes of disabled people because of what is happening with universal credit, which is part of the reserved benefits system. I will make clear to the new Secretary of State for Work and Pensions the impact that that has, not only on disabled people but on child poverty levels.

Disability Equality Plan (Funding and Timelines)

3. Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what funding and timelines will support the new disability equality plan to ensure that its aims deliver real change for disabled people. (S6O-04924)

The Minister for Equalities (Kaukab Stewart): I was delighted to attend the launch of the disability equality plan over the summer and to see the energy and commitment behind it. It is encouraging to witness progress and to know that real change is being prioritised. Timely and targeted funding is essential to the plan's success and to disabled people's organisations across Scotland, which play a vital role in advancing

equality and inclusion. To support the plan, we are investing £2.5 million in key services and initiatives, including a new £1 million improving access fund to enhance advice, digital inclusion, mental health support and access to health and social care.

Rona Mackay: I thank the minister for that encouraging reply. Many disabled constituents struggle with accessible transport, housing adaptations and local mental health services. How will the plan directly improve support and accessibility in communities throughout Strathkelvin and Bearsden and the rest of Scotland?

Kaukab Stewart: We believe that Scotland should be a place where disabled people can live the lives that they choose with the support that they need to do so. Everybody should be able to participate in society, access their rights, take advantage of opportunities and thrive in their communities, including in Rona Mackay's constituency.

In addition to the £1 million improving access fund to enhance digital inclusion, mental health support and access to health and social care, the disability equality plan directly links to and aligns with the work of the mental health and wellbeing strategy and delivery plan. We are focused on improving access to care and support, including through grass-roots projects that are supported by our communities mental health and wellbeing fund for adults.

We have successfully reopened the independent living fund for new applicants for the first time since 2010, enabling up to 1,400 disabled people in Scotland who face the greatest barriers to independent living to access the support that they need. We continue to work on ensuring that disabled people can travel with the same freedom, choice, dignity and opportunity as other citizens.

Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): The Scottish Government says that it is committed to improving the lives of disabled people, but, for many people living with disabilities, there are still far too many barriers to getting into employment. In particular, people in rural areas have a huge issue, which we have seen in Moray, Orkney and the Highlands, where disabled employment gaps are much larger than those across the United Kingdom. What is the Scottish Government doing to ensure that those gaps are closed, particularly in rural areas?

Kaukab Stewart: It is unfortunate that UK Government leaders are backing cuts in that area, which is not helpful. Due to my extensive engagement with disabled people's organisations, I am well aware of the variance in availability and

access across rural and urban areas. One measure to address that is the launch of the pilot scheme in which funding is provided to enable companions of people who are blind or partially sighted to travel on trains. That helps people to access not only work but leisure activities and to be connected to communities. That has never been so important across areas where it takes longer to travel.

The delivery of targeted financial support, including the pension age disability payment, provides between £290 and £434 per month to eligible disabled people over state pension age. Measures such as the child winter heating payment also help in that regard.

Small and Medium-sized Home Builders (Support)

4. Michelle Thomson (Falkirk East) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government, in light of Scotland's population being around 5.5 million and the reported need to expand the housing sector capacity, whether it will provide an update on what targeted support it is providing to address the reported decline in small and medium-sized home builders. (S6O-04925)

The Cabinet Secretary for Housing (Màiri McAllan): Over the summer, I worked extensively with partners, including small and medium-sized enterprise house builders, to inform the housing emergency action plan, which I presented to the Parliament last week.

A key pillar of the plan, as I said in response to an earlier question, is creating the optimal conditions for confidence, investment and growth in our sector. The actions in the plan which speak to that aspect include specific cross-Government interventions to better support SME builders and Scotland's housing sector, including by working with the Scottish National Investment Bank, with investment over four years of up to £4.9 billion. That is complemented with an all-tenure delivery ambition across all sectors to grow by at least 10 per cent each year over the next three years.

Planning is another area that has been raised with me as being critical. As I announced, we will shortly write to planning authorities to set out our expectation for proportionality when dealing with SME house builders. We will extend the forthcoming planning consultation on accelerating the build of new homes to specifically cover measures for SMEs. I am very pleased that some of the actions that I announced were welcomed by Homes for Scotland, among others.

Michelle Thomson: I thank the cabinet secretary for her full reply and agree that all steps must be taken to support SME house builders, particularly around planning and certainty over

access to finance. House building is part of the picture to address pent-up demand; another part is retaining existing stock. I welcome the cabinet secretary's recent warmth to the removal of rent caps to mid-market rent and build to rent, but will she extend that to all types of provisions, such as private landlords, or, as a minimum, will she allow rent rises between tenancies? My concern is that the Government could be at risk of legal action in differential treatment or, even worse, mass exit, which would inadvertently exacerbate the current undersupply of housing stock.

Màiri McAllan: I reiterate that one of the principal concerns in responding to the housing emergency is about creating confidence in the sector. I hope that responding to key calls for multi-annual certainty, for an uplift in funding and for an all-tenure target will create optimal circumstances.

In respect of Ms Thomson's specific question on exemptions from rent control, I was able to confirm last week our intention in principle to exempt from rent control build-to-rent properties and mid-market rent properties. That was informed by consultation, as well as by our housing investment task force. Included in the consultation was the question of exemptions for, for example, rents that have been below market rent or where repairs and investments have readily been made. I will confirm our position in respect of those exemptions as part of stage 3 of the Housing (Scotland) Bill.

Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con): The cabinet secretary will be aware of the report that was published by Homes for Scotland on 17 June. In it, Homes for Scotland recommended an overhaul of Government regulations to reduce the cost and complexity for SMEs that are trying to build more homes across the country.

However, I will ask the cabinet secretary about planning hold-ups, specifically. I was appreciative of the cabinet secretary's previous commentary in response to Michelle Thomson's question, but 96 per cent of SME house builders still believe that the planning process is slow. Is the cabinet secretary working cross-Government, with different portfolios, to ensure that we speed up the planning process and that SMEs are not disadvantaged when they try to build more homes?

Màiri McAllan: In general, regulation and planning are good things. Regulation provides us with some of the best homes in the country. For example, those that are being built under our affordable housing supply programme are warm, modern and efficient. However, regulation needs to facilitate progress and not hinder it. I am very mindful of the cumulative effect of regulations in respect of house building, as I am with planning.

In response to the point about cross-Government working, absolutely; I am undertaking that, not least with Ivan McKee, the Minister for Public Finance. He and I are very closely engaged in the suite of planning adjustments that are being made as part of the Government's programme for government, and also in those that I included in my statement last week—specifically, the new planning direction that ministers will give for the monitoring of the application of national planning framework 4, which will give us the ability to intervene in that process. That will sit alongside our expectations of proportionality, customer service and delivery.

Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD): It is no real surprise that, in recent years, 100 per cent of houses in Orkney have been SME built. Although it is clear that SME firms across the country face challenges of the sort that Michelle Thomson alluded to—including, ironically, the availability of housing for those working in the sector—there are specific barriers for those that are operating in island communities, with increased development costs, a one-size-fits-all approach to planning requirements and a lack of sufficient funding to take forward key projects. The cabinet secretary has helpfully committed to visit Orkney to meet those involved in housing development in the islands. Ahead of that visit, will she commit to looking at what further tailored support might be made available for small house builders to address the concerns that they have raised?

Màiri McAllan: As housing secretary, I will remain in on-going contact with SME house builders, as I will with other representatives in the sector, because it is very much in my interest to understand the barriers as they see them and to seek to overcome them. Aspects of the plan that I set out last week intended to do exactly that, not least in respect of planning and my clear expectation of proportionality in the treatment of SMEs.

Mr McArthur is right that not only is supporting our SME house builders important in and of itself, but it also supports the development of much-needed housing in rural and island Scotland, where we know that SME house builders have an important part to play. I assure Mr McArthur and other members that the needs of SME house builders have been a very important consideration for me and my team as we have developed our housing emergency response. It has been informed by collaboration with them and it will continue to be.

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): The number of SME house builders in Scotland has fallen to its lowest level in 20 years. According to the Homes for Scotland report that was published in June, nine in 10 SMEs say that it is their

perception that the Government's policies make building harder. I listened carefully to what the cabinet secretary said about her forward direction in addressing that. Is it her intention to intervene in the local government planning process to speed things up? If it is, how will she go about that?

Màiri McAllan: Local authorities are independent corporate organisations, and planning is a semi-judicial process. I would not propose to seek to usurp or take the place of the planning authority's job in carefully considering all that has to be weighed up. However, we have been clear about the Government's expectation of a significant uplift in the development of housing and affordable housing.

Through the new notification direction, which I will set out, we will monitor how NPF4 is applied on housing across the country. That will give us the opportunity to intervene in the normal way when we believe that that is needed.

Housing Development (Inverclyde)

5. **Stuart McMillan:** To ask the Scottish Government what discussions it has had with Inverclyde Council, private developers and registered social landlords operating in Inverclyde regarding housing development activity planned for the current financial year and for 2026-27. (S6O-04926)

The Cabinet Secretary for Housing (Màiri McAllan): My officials hold regular meetings with key housing stakeholders in Inverclyde to discuss progress, to share updates and to engage on key aspects of the affordable housing supply programme. At the most recent meeting, which took place in August and involved Sanctuary Scotland Housing Association and Inverclyde Council, the discussions focused on current priorities and future programme planning. This financial year, we are making £9.6 million available for affordable housing in Inverclyde.

Stuart McMillan: The cabinet secretary is aware of the on-going discussions between RSLs in my constituency and Inverclyde Council, which are aimed at improving the local housing stock, but she might not be aware that River Clyde Homes currently has more than 400 void properties, some of which will be razed to the ground shortly.

Given that it already has a significant number of properties, River Clyde Homes is in a unique position in relation to the housing emergency. With targeted funding and support, some of those properties could be brought back into use to help to address the national housing crisis. Would the cabinet secretary be willing to meet senior officials from River Clyde Homes to discuss that opportunity?

Màiri McAllan: Stuart McMillan is absolutely right to identify that how we deal with voids is a critical part of how we respond to the housing emergency. I am very much of the view that, in the same way as we must invest in new affordable housing and seek an all-tenure development uplift, we must also work closely on existing stock. That means returning social voids to use and bringing long-term empty private homes back into use.

My officials are in regular discussion with River Clyde Homes and Inverclyde Council, and I am sure that they would be happy to meet the association to further discuss how properties in its ownership might be brought back into use. I thank Mr McMillan for his invitation, and I would be happy to take it forward.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I advise members that question 6 has not been lodged, and nor have questions 7 and 8. Therefore, that brings portfolio question time to a close. There will be a short pause before we move on to the next item of business, to allow the front-bench teams to change over.

GFG Alliance Business Operations

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The next item of business is a statement by Ivan McKee on GFG Alliance business operations in Scotland. The minister will take questions at the end of his statement, so there should be no interventions or interruptions.

14:53

The Minister for Public Finance (Ivan McKee): I make this statement today to provide an update to Parliament on the status of the Scottish GFG Alliance businesses at Lochaber and Dalzell. As the nature of the statement is such that it touches on subjects that are commercially sensitive, I will be careful in my responses to members' questions to avoid saying anything that breaches commercial confidence or that might cause harm to the businesses in question and their workforce. We all want the same outcome, which is to see those Scottish businesses thriving and providing good-quality jobs.

It is no secret that GFG Alliance has been weathering a storm since the collapse of Greensill Capital in 2021 or that it has been working to refinance its debts since the collapse of its main investor.

In Scotland, GFG owns several businesses, including Alvalde British Aluminium and SIMEC Lochaber Hydropower, which operate the aluminium smelter and the hydro power plant in Fort William respectively. The company also owns the Liberty Steel Dalzell steelworks in Motherwell and a related site at Clydebridge in North Lanarkshire, which are not operational at present.

Liberty Speciality Steels is an English business that had an insolvency case raised against it by creditors late last year. I understand that GFG Alliance was able to settle with some creditors and wished to run a sale process for the company. There was an intervention on 20 August by the United Kingdom Government, which provided a letter to the court advising that, if the court was minded to appoint the official receiver, the UK Government would back that. On 21 August, the official receiver was appointed and took control of the business.

Lochaber and Dalzell have limited exposure to the Liberty Speciality Steels business and their management teams have confirmed that the insolvency of that business has no impact on their operations in Scotland.

We are monitoring with interest the steps that the UK Government has taken in relation to Liberty Speciality Steels and my officials are engaging

with the relevant UK Government departments to understand their plans for the business. I assure members that we have contingency plans in place to cover any eventualities for the Scottish businesses and that our priority is to see them being operational, employing skilled staff and providing economic benefits in their respective regions and across Scotland.

The then Minister for Employment and Investment, Tom Arthur, and I met Sanjeev Gupta on 12 January this year and pressed him for information on GFG Alliance's refinancing. We discussed the global challenges faced by Mr Gupta's business and he reaffirmed his commitment to the businesses in Scotland. I spoke with Jeff Kabel of GFG Alliance on 9 September and he advised me that GFG is working hard to support Lochaber's growth and has a credible plan for restarting operations at Dalzell in the coming weeks.

I have also met the Community trade union, which represents workers at Dalzell, to hear its concerns and I agree with it that we want to see the plant back up and running and to see people back at work. The union also told me that speculation about the future of Dalzell has an impact on workers' morale.

I attend the steel council held by the UK Government and I am eager to see the steel strategy that is expected this autumn. Given the level of intervention that we have already seen for steel businesses in England and Wales, I hope that there will be an equal sharing of the £2.5 billion that is being allocated to support the steel industry in the UK. The industry has repeatedly raised the issue of energy pricing and how that impacts the competitiveness of the Scottish plants and I am also seeking clarity on that from the UK Government.

I say to members today that it was right for the Scottish Government to intervene to support the businesses at Lochaber and Dalzell. We provided Lochaber with a guarantee to protect those skilled jobs in the west Highlands, underpin additional investment at the site and promote industry in Scotland. Lochaber has more than 90 years' experience of aluminium production and is a national strategic asset. Under the ownership of GFG Alliance, the business has created 40 new jobs since 2016 and a total of 204 people are employed there today, supporting a valuable supply chain with hundreds of associated jobs. Our intervention has sustained the business for almost a decade.

The guarantee—including its full value and total exposure and securities—was disclosed to Parliament's cross-party Finance and Constitution Committee on 22 November 2016 and was approved unanimously by that committee. The

total original exposure of the undiscounted guarantee was £586 million. That figure has reduced over the past nine years and all payments due to the Lochaber investors are up to date. The amounts guaranteed vary between £14 million and £32 million per annum over 25 years, with 16 years remaining.

We hold a robust set of securities, including the smelter, the hydro power station and extensive landholdings from which we could seek recovery if there was a call under the guarantee. The Scottish Government continues to earn the expected income in the form of guaranteed fee payments from GFG Alliance and has earned many millions in fees since 2017, an income that would not have existed without the deal. No public funds have been spent under the guarantee.

Lochaber is operating well and producing aluminium. The business has recently announced that it has sold 1,000 tonnes of its output to the United States of America, benefiting from the introduction of new US tariffs, and has committed £1 million to a summer maintenance programme that will see new equipment installed and improved efficiency measures.

The Lochaber businesses have had a combined turnover of more than £816 million since 2017. Lochaber has produced more than 300,000 tonnes of aluminium since then and the power station has produced 4,480 gigawatt hours of electricity during the same period. An upgrade to its grid connection during that period means that the power station is in a position to sell more effectively into the national grid. It has spent an estimated £52 million with Scottish suppliers and a total of £112 million across UK suppliers since 2017, providing an economic benefit to its region and beyond.

The business has seen £37 million of capital expenditure since 2017. It has a strong management team that is committed to the business and the local community and has an emphasis on providing benefits to that community, including the planting of 250,000 trees and 988 acres of peatland restoration since 2017. It has also spent £250,000 on donations and sponsorship. I know that members have been to the smelter to meet the workforce and see at first hand the good work that is done there.

I turn to Dalzell. We intervened to facilitate the sale and ensure the continued operation of this important industrial asset for Scotland, as the last remaining rolling plate mill in the UK. Dalzell received public sector support in respect of a £7 million loan from Scottish Enterprise to facilitate working capital, and Scottish Enterprise is currently in discussion with Dalzell regarding repayment of the loan. The Scottish Government's intervention resulted in the continued production of steel and maintained skilled employment at Liberty

Steel Dalzell. The plant has produced over 400,000 metric tonnes of metal since 2017, and it generated revenue of over £280 million during the same period.

Dalzell paused production in August 2024, with the staff being placed on a furlough arrangement that was agreed with the unions. That important step by GFG allowed staff to be retained and put the business in a strong position for recommencing operations. I have spoken with members of the workforce recently and I thank the entire workforce for its commitment. GFG Alliance has plans to recommence operations at Dalzell to supply plate for naval warship building and it has been awarded a contract by Navantia, with the opportunity to bid for more work in the near future from other customers.

I will summarise, Presiding Officer. There are no immediate risks to Lochaber and Dalzell from the court cases in England. We took steps to retain these historic businesses and ensure that Scotland preserves the ability to produce aluminium and steel. Lochaber continues to perform well and be a major employer in Fort William, and Dalzell has plans for a restart that will see it deliver steel plate for shipbuilding. We will, of course, continue to monitor developments closely, and I will update Parliament if a further significant development takes place.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The minister will now take questions on the issues that were raised in his statement. I intend to allow around 20 minutes for questions, after which we will move on to the next item of business. It would be helpful if members who wish to ask a question were to press their request-to-speak buttons.

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I thank the minister for advance sight of his statement. Indeed, I thank him for issuing the statement, which the Scottish Conservatives requested due to concerns among both the workforce and the wider communities around Dalzell and Lochaber that were caused by negative media publicity about GFG Alliance's financial viability.

Sanjeev Gupta has a track record of broken promises. He said that none of his steel plants would close and that he would not give up on the workforce—a promise that has clearly already been broken. At the time when he acquired the Fort William complex, he promised not to break up the assets and that he would transfer parts of the estate to the local community. Those are two more broken promises. At the time, he promised what turns out to have been a pie-in-the-sky proposal to create 2,000 new jobs in an aluminium car wheel factory, with apparently no thought as to where the workforce would come from—or, for that matter, where they might live. That is yet another broken

promise. Can we really trust a word that this man says? Should Scottish ministers put much reliance on his statements?

Let me ask three specific questions about the content of the minister's statement. First, the minister stated that the original exposure of the guarantee was £586 million, which has now reduced. What figure does the guarantee now stand at?

Secondly, what is the current value of the securities and how does that relate to the outstanding guarantee?

Thirdly, the minister referenced contingency planning for the future of Dalzell and Lochaber. Is that a guarantee to workers at both plants that their jobs are secure?

Ivan McKee: I reiterate that, if the Government had not taken the steps that it took in 2016-17, the plants would now have been shut for almost a decade. I might be wrong, but I think that Murdo Fraser was on the Finance and Constitution Committee with me at the point when we unanimously agreed that the deal was a good one and should be taken forward.

On the value of the guarantee, I have indicated that payments of between £14 million and £32 million have been made every year. They have been made for the past nine years. The £586 million value has therefore reduced, and it is clearly moving on a quarterly basis. As I indicated at the beginning of my statement, there are some commercially sensitive issues here, but I will seek to be able to provide further information on the guarantee value.

The same applies to the securities. As Murdo Fraser will be aware, that data is published every year through an audit process and the value of the securities is identified. That changes depending on a range of factors, but that is published information.

I have been working on the contingencies in various ministerial roles over a number of years. Extensive work has happened, within Government and using external advisers, to ensure that we have contingency plans in place for a range of options if some of the guarantee payments were to be defaulted on or for other situations in which we felt that we had to take further steps.

Our commitment is demonstrated by our actions over the past nine years in keeping the workforce at both plants in employment. As I indicated, if we had not taken those steps in 2016, that would not now be the case.

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab): I, too, thank the minister for advance sight of his statement and agree with him that our focus has to be on securing the sites and the jobs. I also

remind members that I am a member of the Community trade union.

In his statement the minister said that there is no immediate risk to the taxpayer. However, given the meetings, the fact that a statement has been given, and the fact that 15 GFG entities across nine jurisdictions are in insolvency, there are clearly concerns, particularly about Dalzell. Given that there are orders on the books but the site is furloughed, there is clearly a working-capital issue.

Will the minister confirm the likely forecast for the repayment of the loan to Scottish Enterprise? Will it be extended to provide the lacking working capital? Would that be contingent on some sort of equity in return?

If the site were to cease operations, there would be significant contingent liability for the Scottish Government, so will the minister provide an updated statement on the scale of the contingent liability for clean-up?

Ivan McKee: The order for Navantia, which had been placed with the Dalzell plant and which Daniel Johnson referenced, is moving forward. Commercial discussions are happening but, according to the latest information that we have, the business has secured the working capital to enable it to start production. As I said in my statement, we hope that that will happen in the next few weeks, so there is no plan or need to put more Government money in to support it.

Discussions continue on the loan from Scottish Enterprise to GFG—the £7 million plus interest payment—but it is in everyone's interest to get the plant back up and running so that it is in a position to generate revenue and not only support jobs but, in time, repay the loan from the public purse. I think that we would all agree that it was right to keep the plant operating and paying wages.

With regard to the future, as contingency plans are developed, GFG is in discussions about the sale of the Clydebridge plant. I stress that, although GFG Alliance has been working through challenges, that has not impacted on the Scottish plants. However, should something happen to GFG, we have contingency plans in place to continue operations at the Dalzell plant and to seek alternative routes for the Lochaber and Dalzell sites.

Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): The minister mentioned the morale of the workforce at Dalzell. Can he provide any update regarding what steps the Scottish Government has been taking to support and communicate with the workforce and trade unions?

Ivan McKee: As indicated, we have been in contact with the Community trade union. I met its general secretary, Roy Rickhuss, in the past few

days. I also met representatives of the Dalzell workforce and heard from them that they were eager to return to work. People recognise that being on furlough for that length of time is not an entirely comfortable situation.

We all agree that it is a priority for us to see the Dalzell plant up and running, and we recognise that it is an important strategic asset for Scotland. I thank the workers for their commitment to the business despite the challenges over the past 12 months. They have seen Dalzell through different owners and difficult times. They remain committed to their local business. My officials and I will continue to work closely with them as the plans for the operational restart develop.

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): I ask the minister to readdress the questions that Murdo Fraser asked, because he did not give us any numbers. I think that the number that he was looking for on current exposure is £286 million, but the valuation of the assets, which form the security against that, is from 2019. That is the most recent valuation, and it is in the company's accounts. I must refer the minister to Murdo Fraser's comments about the reliability of some of the information that we are working with.

In the event that something does befall the GFG businesses in Scotland, does the contingency that Ivan McKee refers to involve us in making a commitment to the jobs through the Scottish Government funding the business? If that is the case, which budget line would cover the cost in that eventuality?

Ivan McKee: As I have indicated, repayments against that guarantee will continue to be made over that period. In relation to the quarterly amounts, with every quarter that goes by we are reducing the guarantee that is in place, which is obviously in everybody's interest. It is also in everybody's interest to keep that plant running, not least because of the workforce, but because it reduces that liability on Government. The value of the securities changes, and that data is published, but I can seek to provide more up-to-date information on that. There is an audit report every year that produces information on the extent of the value of those assets compared with the guarantee.

We have developed contingencies to cover a range of scenarios. Depending on what happens for each of those plants, we would have different options at that point in time. We keep that information up to date so that we can choose the most appropriate option should something happen. As I said, those worked-through options are available to deploy in the unfortunate situation that they are required. It is in everybody's interest to keep the plant running under the current

arrangement, which has continued over that period.

On the workforce, I reiterate our commitment to ensuring that those plants continue to operate. That has been witnessed by the fact that, over the nine years since the original guarantee was put in place, we have secured those jobs and, indeed, grown the number of workers employed at the Lochaber site, and we will continue to do so.

Clare Haughey (Rutherglen) (SNP): The Clydebridge works, which the minister referenced in his statement, is in my Rutherglen constituency. It has not been fully operational for a number of years, but it occupies a substantial footprint in Cambuslang. Constituents have raised with me their concerns about various issues, including historical land contamination and the impact that that could have on alternative use of the land and on the local environment. Will the minister advise what, if any, discussions have taken place on the future of the site?

Ivan McKee: I appreciate that Clare Haughey's constituents will be concerned about the status of the Clydebridge site. We engage regularly with GFG at group level and management level on Clydebridge, and I discussed the matter with Geoff Cable of GFG Alliance when I met him on Tuesday. I understand that GFG is considering its strategic options for the site and recognises the environmental responsibilities associated with it. We will carefully consider that when assessing its options for the future of the site.

Richard Leonard (Central Scotland) (Lab): In March 2024, I asked the then Cabinet Secretary for Wellbeing Economy, Net Zero and Energy to make a full statement to Parliament on the Government's exposure to risk as a result of its arrangements with Sanjeev Gupta. I also called on the Government, in the interests of transparency, to finally publish, in full, details of all the deals that it has done with Mr Gupta, the GFG Alliance and all of its subsidiary companies. Now, with a continuing investigation by the Serious Fraud Office into fraud, fraudulent trading and money laundering by the GFG group, with further financial meltdown and with no audited accounts lodged with Companies House for years, will the Government now publish the details of those deals?

Ivan McKee: First, I am obviously not in a position to comment on the SFO investigation. It is not for us to comment on that. The business is taking steps to audit accounts, but, as Richard Leonard knows, company law is not a devolved matter. We have published information on the deals as far as we can within the limits of commercial confidentiality. Indeed, my statement included a series of numbers on that.

However, the important point is that the plants continue to employ the workers and add value to local economies. Back in 2016, the Government took proactive steps to prevent their closure. If we had not done that, I think that Mr Leonard would, along with the rest of us, be facing a situation in which those plants would not be operating. Obviously, none of us would have wanted that. We have done the right thing, and we will ensure that those plants continue to employ workers.

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): Given the level of intervention in steel businesses in England and Wales and the news that the UK Government has taken control of Liberty Steel in Yorkshire, can the Minister for Public Finance provide an update on his discussions with the UK Government and his calls for equal sharing of the £2.5 billion that has been allocated to support the steel industry in the UK?

Ivan McKee: I met the former Secretary of State for Scotland, Ian Murray, and the former Secretary of State for Business and Trade, Jonathan Reynolds, on 22 July, and we all agreed at that meeting that the Dalzell steelworks has a unique position as the last plate mill in the UK. I raised the issue of the £2.5 billion funding available to support steel across the UK, and we all agreed that it was in the best interests of the workers and for steel production in the UK that the business got back up and running.

As I mentioned in my statement, my officials regularly engage with the UK Government's Department for Business and Trade to understand the steps that it is taking with regard to Liberty Speciality Steel UK. I also attended the steel council meetings that were chaired by the UK Government and advocated for fair sharing of the funds in that forum. I will be writing to the newly appointed Secretary of State for Business and Trade, Peter Kyle, and the newly appointed Secretary of State for Scotland, Douglas Alexander, to ensure that they are as committed to Dalzell's future as their predecessors were, and as the Scottish Government is, and that Scotland receives its fair share of the funding, given that Dalzell is the UK's last plate mill.

Lorna Slater (Lothian) (Green): The metals industry in the UK has been described as being in paralysis, as the GFG companies face criminal prosecution for years of failing to disclose their accounts. It is surely a cautionary tale of allowing key industries to be concentrated in the hands of a single, powerful, wealthy man. The minister says that contingency plans are in place to cover any eventualities. Does that mean that Scottish public money might be required to bail out this possibly criminal billionaire, or would the minister propose nationalising key assets under new management?

Ivan McKee: As I have indicated, contingency plans are in place. It is also worth noting that, far from public money being spent on the Lochaber site, we have received many millions in fees as a result of the guarantee that we have put in place, and up-to-date payments have been made against the payments to the bond holders. As I have indicated, we have been watching the situation closely for a number of years and, if something were to happen, we have contingency plans that would allow us to step in and take appropriate measures. I do not want to talk through the detail of that now, because of commercial confidentiality, but I hear Lorna Slater's comments clearly, and she can rest assured that we have taken into account all the issues that she has raised.

Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (LD): The problem is that the Scottish Government has never been up front about its dealings with Mr Gupta. We still do not know whether the £7 million loan from Scottish Enterprise will be repaid, and we have no idea when the plant will be operational again. There are still far too many unanswered questions from the minister's statement, which I am afraid has told us nothing.

First, will the minister be willing to publish the minutes of his meetings this year with Mr Kabel and Mr Gupta? Secondly, does he believe that the company has the funds necessary to buy the materials needed to fulfil the Navantia order, which seems to be the reason for the current impasse and why the workers have been furloughed? Finally, I heard no mention of the new billet facility at Lochaber, which, as we all know, is much needed for the future success of the business at that site.

Ivan McKee: Scottish Enterprise is in discussions with GFG about the £7 million loan. Again, I think that we would all agree that that was the right thing to do, otherwise we would not be having those conversations, because the plant would have been shut for many years now.

As I indicated earlier, it is important that the business gets up and running, operates and generates revenue so that it is in a position to repay that loan. I also stated in my response that the company is expecting to reopen the plant within the next few weeks to supply plate to Navantia, and it has indicated that it has resolved the working capital issue to allow it to do so.

Of course, we would all like further investment in Lochaber, but we have to recognise that, had it not been for the steps that the Government has taken—again, I repeat that we have not spent any public money and, indeed, we have received fees worth many millions in addition to all the guaranteed payments that have been made over that nine-year period—we would not be having this

conversation, because that site would not be here, either.

Willie Coffey (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP): The Scottish Government has previously provided much-needed financial assistance to prevent the closure of the site at Dalzell. Can the minister say any more about how we are working to ensure that both the workforce and the financial interests of the Scottish Government are being protected?

Ivan McKee: As I have indicated, in 2017, Liberty Steel Dalzell received public sector support in the form of the £7 million loan from Scottish Enterprise, which was vital to ensuring that the business had a future. We engage regularly with GFG Alliance at group level and at management level in relation to Lochaber and, alongside Scottish Enterprise, in relation to Dalzell to understand the on-going performance of those businesses, the challenges that they face and the steps that are being taken to deal with them.

As I outlined in the chamber previously, following the collapse of Greensill Capital as GFG's main investor, we have put in place well-developed continuity planning in respect of eventualities that might arise for either of those businesses. Given the importance of the businesses locally, and because of our financial interests, I meet regularly with my officials to review those contingency plans.

Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I hope that the minister agrees that the defence industry represents a vital potential opportunity for the Dalzell plant, which is encouraging. However, more clarity is needed before we can have confidence in that hope. What is the credible plan for restarting operations at Dalzell in the coming weeks, given that the plant has previously been unable to operate due to high costs? How can we be assured that the plan will meet the requirements of the new plate contract? Surely, workers' morale will benefit more from clear transparency than from continued uncertainty.

Ivan McKee: As I have said, I met the union and representatives of the workforce just in the past few days. They continue to engage with GFG and are provided with information to their satisfaction on developments as things move forward with that deal.

Clearly, as the member will be well aware, there are confidentiality issues to be taken into account in relation to the commercial contract, and there are a number of other issues that need to be resolved. However, the company's position, which is credible, is that it will restart production in the next few weeks. As I have indicated, issues around working capital have been resolved, and

the company has a number of other plans that it is working to execute to further increase production at the plant once the first contract from Navantia is in production and is being shipped.

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): I welcome the announcement, after a year's impasse, of the impending restart of production at Dalzell because of the contract, via Navantia, for the fleet solid support ships. It is great news, but we need to build on it.

The minister referred to the £2.5 billion fund for steel investments that was set aside by the UK Government in the National Wealth Fund. I would like the Scottish Government to take a more proactive approach. We know from recommendations from the community and others—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Can we have a question, please, Mr Sweeney?

Paul Sweeney: —that there is a need for an electric arc furnace and a direct reduction ironworks. Can the minister assure the chamber that the Government is working to try to proactively develop those assets and is not just standing by?

Ivan McKee: Yes. We are keen to have conversations about the future of those plants and the technologies that the member is talking about—electric arc furnaces and so on. However, members cannot have it both ways: they cannot complain about the fact that we have put public money in there and then complain that we are not putting enough public money in there. That said, we will continue to work to secure a share of UK Government investment in the steel industry across the country.

The first priority is to get the Dalzell plant back up and running, but once that has been done and we secure orders from other customers, we will be keen to talk to all parties—as we are doing with the UK Government—about the potential future of the plants.

Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): The recommencement of operations at Dalzell will indeed be welcome news for my Motherwell and Wishaw constituency. The minister has mentioned the Navantia contract, but can he say more about other prospects for bids for work from Dalzell?

Ivan McKee: Navantia is a well-established company that has other investments in Scotland. The output of Dalzell and its workforce is well known in the market; it is good that Navantia recognises that and, on the back of that, has placed an order with the plant.

Given that Dalzell is one of the last remaining plate mills in the UK, it also has an important role

to play in manufacturing supply chains across the industry, including clean energy, defence and shipbuilding. We will be working closely with GFG, which is considering its engagement both with previous customers and with new markets, as it has done with Alvalde British Aluminium in the United States, with favourable returns for that business.

Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I am sure that the 2,500 new trees and the 1,000 acres of peatland restoration will be welcome. As Murdo Fraser has highlighted, Sanjeev Gupta promised 2,000 new jobs at Lochaber in 2016, but only 40 have been delivered. Will the minister outline in more detail the growth that is envisaged for Lochaber, as discussed with Jeff Kabel on 9 September? Did Jeff Kabel make any promises about potential new jobs?

Ivan McKee: The important thing to recognise is that not only have we secured the jobs that would not otherwise have been in place, but the number of jobs is growing. All the payments have been made as required by the business over that period. Indeed, the Scottish Government has received as a consequence of that deal a significant amount of revenue—many millions—on top of the payments that have been made. We should celebrate the situation that we are in, with the business continuing to contribute to the local economy.

The discussions with the business continue. It is seeking to open things up to other markets and to generate more business for and revenue from the plant as well as further investment, which we would all like to see going forward.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes the statement. There will be a short pause before we move on to the next item of business to allow front-bench teams to change positions, should they so wish.

Exports

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-18795, in the name of Kate Forbes, on supporting Scottish exports in response to global uncertainty.

15:27

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Economy and Gaelic (Kate Forbes): Scotland is a trading nation. We have a long and rich history of producing goods and services that are highly regarded and sought-after across the world. Many of the goods that we export are instantly recognisable and symbolic of the high quality of Scotland's produce and natural resources. Scotch whisky and Scottish salmon, for example, have long-standing and well-established places in food and drink markets around the world.

Our products and services are also reflective of international demand for the innovative nature and future potential of the Scottish economy. However, the global economic and trading conditions within which Scotland seeks to grow its exports are incredibly challenging. The nature of that challenge is multifaceted.

Craig Hoy (South Scotland) (Con): Will the minister take an intervention?

Kate Forbes: I have high hopes for a well-informed debate that looks at all the issues this afternoon, starting with Craig Hoy.

Craig Hoy: I thank the minister for giving way and I welcome her commitment to global free trade. Can she therefore point to a single global free trade agreement that her colleagues at Westminster supported?

Kate Forbes: The member will recall how warmly I welcomed the India free trade agreement and how strongly I commended it because of the opportunities for growth, in particular for whisky.

I will get back to the challenges—from the continued drag on trade with the European Union post-Brexit, which Scotland did not vote for, to the turbulence and uncertainty created through the introduction of and response to new US tariffs this year. I will say more on those later.

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): I hate to disappoint the Deputy First Minister, but if she looks at the robust performance of British business in terms of exports to the EU from 2015 to 2024, she will notice that there has been substantial growth in real terms. Taken at 2022 prices, our total exports to the EU in 2015 were £319 billion and, in 2024, they were £349 billion. Any doom

and gloom around the issues that the Deputy First Minister has raised is misplaced.

Kate Forbes: That cues me up very nicely to commend the results from Scottish Enterprise-supported businesses last year. Scottish Enterprise supported £2.46 billion in planned international sales, which is a record high, and facilitated more than 15,000 new and safeguarded jobs and £442 million in innovation investment.

It is the support for exporters that is most commendable in those figures. What Stephen Kerr does not take into account is the fact that Brexit had a particular impact on smaller businesses, in particular on the export of perishable goods—the Scottish salmon figures speak for themselves in terms of the reduction in sales that the industry saw in the immediate aftermath of Brexit.

In this informed debate, I am happy both to commend the work that Scottish Enterprise does and to point to particular industries that have talked about the immediate impact that they have seen through Brexit.

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab): I am very grateful to the Deputy First Minister for giving way—she is always very generous in that way.

The original paper “A Trading Nation: a plan for growing Scotland's exports”, which came out after Brexit, set a clear target of raising exports to 25 per cent of gross domestic product. How is Scotland faring against that clear target?

Kate Forbes: If it is okay to do so, I will come on to talk about “A Trading Nation” and will set out a little more of the details.

Our analysis has shown that, as a result of Brexit, our trade in goods with the EU was 12 per cent lower in 2021—the first year of the United Kingdom-EU trade and co-operation agreement. We have worked really hard to continue—

Stephen Kerr: No wonder—it was during Covid.

Kate Forbes: I hear the member saying, “No wonder”. I think that that makes the point that it was—

Stephen Kerr: Will the cabinet secretary take an intervention?

Kate Forbes: I am four minutes in and that would be the fourth intervention, so I will keep going.

We can all agree that exporters need additional support, and we are providing it through a six-point export plan that was announced in the most recent programme for government. We have been explicitly clear on the crucial contribution that export growth makes to Scotland's economic prosperity. As Daniel Johnson said, in 2019, we

published the first export growth plan—“A Trading Nation: a plan for growing Scotland’s exports”. At its core, the plan was clear that we best increase the percentage of exports comprising Scotland’s GDP by focusing on those companies, sectors of the economy and international markets that offer Scotland the greatest export growth potential.

Of course, the world evolves and changes, and so does the work that we do within the framework of “A Trading Nation”. Since 2019, we have flexed our delivery to meet the challenges of the pandemic and Brexit, but also to seize emerging opportunities. We have published a series of sector export plans, including for the renewables and hydrogen sectors, to take action now to seize the opportunities of the future. Earlier today, we published an update to the priority international markets for Scottish exports to ensure that those efforts and activities abroad continue to be targeted at areas with the greatest potential return for Scotland’s economy.

It is always worth looking at the impact of particular support. In 2023, an independent evaluation of Scotland’s export support and promotion delivery showed that supported companies achieved £1.6 billion in additional exports; companies that received support grew exports by 140 per cent more than similar firms without support; 53 per cent of companies created or safeguarded jobs; and more than half introduced new products or improved processes, which shows strong wider economic impact.

Building on all that, on 1 September, Scottish Enterprise announced the highest-ever forecast sales figures, which I mentioned, of almost £2.5 billion.

I turn to the six-point export plan, which, specifically, increases our business support offer to exporters from Scottish Enterprise, increases our investment in sector export plans, and increases the scope of our international trade partnership programme, which members will know that we run in collaboration with the Scottish Chambers of Commerce. The plan increases the number of inward trade missions to showcase Scotland’s export strength to international buyers, and it will increase the number of outward trade missions that we deliver, exposing even more Scottish companies to new and emerging international markets. We will publish an export plan specifically for the United States to allow us to focus on the specific areas of that vast critical market that present Scottish companies with the greatest opportunity.

With an additional £1.6 million of investment, building on the existing annual support for the “A Trading Nation” strategy and Scottish Enterprise’s work on international growth, we will deliver a 33 per cent increase in the number of chambers trade

missions and help an extra 100 exporters to find new customers in order to generate an additional £75 million of forecast export sales.

We have also set out actions that we are taking to close the export gap among women-led businesses. Taken together, those actions will help Scotland to maintain its place.

As of August 2025, more than 11 per cent of Scottish businesses reported that they were being affected by new US tariffs. That rises to nearly 23 per cent among goods exporters, who also noted that the most common issues were increased costs and supply chain disruption. A quarter of goods exporters were expecting to be affected in this month of September. The issues that we seek to address are real and are affecting businesses right now.

Just yesterday, Richard Lochhead and I met business leaders to discuss their concerns on trade, share some of the details of the additional support that we are providing and take on board any further suggestions that they had.

When Scottish Enterprise announced its highest-ever forecast export sales results, it did so at Piramal in Grangemouth—a fantastic example of how a company exporting from Scotland can support jobs and the local economy.

We want to work constructively with others—even others in this chamber—as we advance Scotland’s export ambitions. When the First Minister met the President of the United States earlier this summer, he reiterated the Scottish Government’s strong support for efforts to finalise the remaining elements of the UK-US deal and provide long-term certainty and stability to our transatlantic trading partnership. He put issues such as whisky on the trade deal agenda during that meeting and, of course, in a meeting with the President earlier this week, he continued to press for a better deal on whisky tariffs, which are currently costing £4 million per week.

We have also worked closely and collaboratively with the UK Government as we support our exporters, including recently in the assessment and response to the impacts of US tariffs.

On some levels, that has been effective. However, on other levels—as was demonstrated through the lack of engagement on the publication of the UK Government trade strategy in June this year—there is a risk that we are not harnessing our collective capacity as we could.

More fundamental issues persist. We continue to call on the UK Government to fully address the continuing damaging impacts of Brexit on Scottish and UK trade. In that regard, the Government remains firm in its view that the best means of

growing Scottish trade in the EU is by rejoining the EU.

Presiding Officer, I note that I am out of time. I have not quite finished—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I can give you a bit more time.

Kate Forbes: Thank you.

I am very confident that Scotland and our exporters have the capacity, potential and ambition to continue to take advantage of the shifting opportunities in international trade, both now and in the years ahead.

During recent engagements—for example, on trade and investment in India and with the United Arab Emirates—I have been struck by both the scale of the opportunity and the incredibly positive feedback that I get about Scottish products and Scottish businesses.

We want to continue to lead on seizing the economic opportunities for Scotland abroad.

I move,

That the Parliament recognises that demand for Scottish exports is strong due to Scotland's high-quality products and services, and its excellence in sectors such as food and drink, professional, scientific, and technical activities; notes that global trade challenges, including geopolitical uncertainty, Brexit, and trade tariffs, are having a detrimental impact on Scottish businesses; welcomes the Scottish Government's Six Point Export Plan, which is supporting Scottish businesses to respond to these challenges; notes that the additional support being provided, builds on effective and continued delivery of A Trading Nation, the Scottish Government's export growth strategy, as indicated through Scottish Enterprise's highest ever level of forecast export sales in 2024-25; acknowledges that meaningful collaboration between partners to promote Scotland internationally, using the Scottish Government-led award-winning Brand Scotland collateral, will boost awareness of Scotland's strengths and increase opportunities for export growth, and calls on the UK Government to fully address the continuing impacts of Brexit on Scottish and UK trade by rejoining the European Union, and reverse its damaging decision to increase employers' national insurance contributions, which is harming business confidence and Scotland's economy.

15:39

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I remind members of my entry in the register of members' interests—specifically in relation to the hospitality that I have received from the Scotch Whisky Association.

Since the parliamentary session started, this is the first proper chance that I have had to say that we are going to miss Kate Forbes in the chamber. I think that we all understand the reasons why she will step down from Parliament next year, but I genuinely think that she will be a loss to the Parliament. That view is reflected across the great

majority of members—perhaps not every member—of the Parliament and by members of the business community, too. She will be a loss to the Government and to Parliament, and we wish her very well for the future.

In that tone, I agree with what the Deputy First Minister said about the need to celebrate the success of Scottish exports. She was right to highlight the tremendous success of exports such as Scotch whisky and Scottish salmon, which are flagships for the Scottish economy and are being exported around the globe. They are recognisable Scottish products that are growing our global brand. That is all to be celebrated.

We also need to acknowledge, as Kate Forbes did, that there are serious challenges with tariffs in the US and elsewhere, which I will come to later. Between 2018 and 2022, global trade rose by 10 per cent, and in the same period, Scottish onshore exports fell by 12 per cent. Not everything in the garden is rosy.

There were some glaring omissions in the Deputy First Minister's comments. Scotland's largest export by far is oil and gas, which represented 32 per cent of overall international exports in 2023. Curiously, though, there was no mention in her speech of the oil and gas sector.

However, the even more significant omission was of the defence sector, which is, to be frank, astonishing in the context of recent news about support for Scottish shipbuilding. It was announced just last week that Norway has agreed a £10 billion deal for anti-submarine warships to be built in the UK, which will secure thousands of jobs at BAE Systems in Glasgow—investment that was possible only because the Royal Navy had already contracted with BAE Systems for the construction of type 26 frigates. That investment will support an estimated 103 businesses in Scotland.

Daniel Johnson: I agree with the member about the importance of defence contracts. Does he agree that we need to extend every possible support to Babcock in its efforts to export frigates to Denmark?

Murdo Fraser: Absolutely. Indeed, Mr Johnson has pre-empted my very next sentence, because I was about to talk about Babcock in Rosyth, which is part of the area that I represent. Babcock hopes to secure a contract, which is worth more than £1 billion, to build four frigates for the Danish navy. That is a real tribute to the expertise in naval vessel construction that we have established in Scotland, which is, again, based on Royal Navy contracts, and which shows the quality of the highly skilled workforce that we have in Fife and on the Clyde.

There was no mention from the Deputy First Minister of all the remarkable good news that has been all over the media for the past week, and nor can I see a single mention of it in all 18 pages of the document that the Scottish Government published today—"A Trading Nation: Updating Scotland's Country and Sector Prioritisation". The document is full of colourful pictures—I congratulate the school student on work experience who had a happy week in the Scottish Government, colouring in all the pages—but there is not one mention of the defence sector, which is doing so well for Scottish exports. There is reference to a sector called "Engineering and Advanced Manufacturing"—I wonder whether that is some sort of code for defence. I do not understand why the Scottish National Party Government is not shouting from the rooftops about the tremendous export deals that have been agreed by Scotland-based companies. I fear that, once again, student politics is at play, rather than any serious recognition of the Scottish economy's strengths.

The Deputy First Minister referred to the First Minister's visit earlier this week to the United States to meet President Trump to discuss the unreasonable tariffs on Scotch whisky and other Scottish exports. That is a welcome intervention by the First Minister. I am sure that he now realises how unwise it was to back so publicly Mr Trump's opponent in the presidential election last year.

As I pointed out in the chamber earlier, there is something of an irony in the stance being taken by the First Minister, reflected in the motion, which calls for Scotland to rejoin the European Union. The European Union currently faces a tariff on exports to the US of 15 per cent, whereas in the UK we currently face a tariff of only 10 per cent.

As part of the UK, we have an opportunity to negotiate that tariff down, as the First Minister was trying to do. That opportunity would simply not be available to us if we were part of the EU, so the Scottish National Party's plans to leave the UK in order to join the EU would be devastating for Scottish exports. We need to remember that our biggest export market for Scottish goods and services is the rest of the United Kingdom. The value of our exports to the rest of the UK is three times that of exports to the European single market. To leave the UK single market in order to rejoin the EU would be cutting off our nose to spite our face.

We also see opportunities from the free trade agreement with India, which was progressed by the previous Conservative Government and is now being taken forward by Labour. At lunch time, I had the pleasure of meeting the Indian high commissioner, who is visiting the Scottish

Parliament, and talking with him about the real benefits from that trade deal to both countries. It would have particular opportunities for the Scotch whisky sector, given the enormous marketplace that India represents for future growth. It is a market of a billion people, many of whom are interested in purchasing Scotch whisky, which is currently suffering from extremely high tariffs that will reduce under that trade deal.

That trade deal with India would never have been possible if Scotland was part of the EU. There was no interest in the EU in doing a deal with India. The deal was possible only because of Brexit. In her response to Mr Hoy, the Deputy First Minister said that she had welcomed the trade deal with India, and she did indeed. However, it is not the Scottish Parliament that votes on such trade deals but the House of Commons, and I will be very interested to see how her SNP colleagues there vote on that trade deal, given that that is where the support really matters.

I am aware that I am over time, but I will get to the end in a moment. There is an economic backdrop to exports. Scottish businesses continue to be held back by higher taxes, including income tax and VAT; the level of business rates; and excess regulation. Without a more business-friendly environment in Scotland, Scottish exporters will continue to struggle to compete. Addressing all those issues is within the gift of the Scottish Government. If it is serious about supporting exports, it needs to start reducing the cost burden for Scottish business and supporting growth.

We wish to join the SNP in celebrating the success of Scottish exports, but its policy solutions are simply doing more damage. It needs to wake up to the strength of the defence sector in Scotland and the value to our economy of exports from that sector, rather than being ashamed of such an important part of the Scottish economy. Those points are made in my amendment.

I move amendment S6M-18795.3, to leave out from first "notes" to end and insert:

"recognises that Scottish exporters operate in a competitive global market and benefit from the UK's ability to secure strategic trade deals and participate in global trading blocs, including the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership; recognises that agreements with India and the US mark a positive start in expanding opportunities for Scottish businesses in these important markets, alongside deals with partners such as Australia, Japan and Singapore; highlights that Scotland's key sectors, including engineering, advanced manufacturing, food and drink, energy, chemical sciences, and financial services, thrive because of enterprise, innovation and private investment rather than government brand campaigns; welcomes the strength of Scotland's defence sector in winning major export orders, exemplified by the £10 billion Type 26 frigate agreement with Norway for Scotland-manufactured

warships that will sustain thousands of skilled jobs and growth across Scotland's wider manufacturing base; rejects calls to rejoin the EU, which would risk regulatory uncertainty and distract from delivering meaningful support; regrets that the Scottish Government continues to use trade policy to promote constitutional division, rather than business confidence, and calls for both of Scotland's governments to focus on cutting costs for employers, reducing unnecessary regulation, simplifying trade routes and working in genuine partnership with industry to grow Scotland's exports and secure jobs."

The Deputy Presiding Officer: As colleagues will have picked up on, we have a bit of time in hand, so members will get time back for any interventions and probably latitude over and above that.

15:48

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab): Thank you, Deputy Presiding Officer—I always enjoy a bit of latitude.

Given the rekindled enthusiasm for independence that we have seen from the Government in recent weeks, it is a bit brave to bring an export debate to the Parliament, given that, in my broad view, frontiers put barriers in the way of trade. However, I might be doing the Government a disservice. Given that 70 per cent of our trade is with the rest of the United Kingdom, the Government might think that, with a stroke of the cartographer's pen, it can treble Scottish exports. The problem with that is that it is clearly bonkers.

As reasonable as the Deputy First Minister tries to be, a fundamental stumbling block is that, as long as the Government pursues its constitutional obsession, it will seek to put barriers between Scotland and its biggest market—and to create uncertainty for business, which is undoubtedly damaging for the economy. Unfortunately, what we are seeing from the Government all too often—to be fair, I do not accuse the Deputy First Minister of this—is selective use of data and grandstanding, whereas what we need for trade is pragmatic action, which is what we have seen from the UK Government to date.

The India trade deal, which has been referenced in all the speeches so far, is very important. I acknowledge that it was initiated by the previous UK Administration, but it has been taken forward as a priority by the incoming Labour Government, because it is worth £4.8 billion to the UK economy and 2,200 jobs. Of that £4.8 billion, £1 billion is the value to the whisky industry. Under the deal, tariffs have been reduced by half immediately—to the world's biggest whisky market—and will be reduced by half again in 10 years' time.

There is not just the India trade deal. The UK Labour Government has prioritised bilateral deals

and discussions with France and Germany, and we have secured the frigate exports worth £10 billion that have already been mentioned. There has been a renewed approach from the Scotland Office, which is seeking to support trade and investment and promote brand Scotland. I see that Kenny Gibson has enthusiastically got to his feet to agree with me.

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): Actually, first, I thank Daniel Johnson for taking an intervention. Today's *Financial Times* reported that US pharmaceutical giant Merck has cancelled a £1 billion investment in London and that 125 scientists will lose their jobs, with Merck saying that the Labour Government has made the UK "uncompetitive". Surely Westminster is damaging not only Scotland but the wider UK with its trade policies.

Daniel Johnson: Kenny Gibson's party seeks to introduce new frontiers and barriers. It is very difficult to talk about stability and certainty from the position of the SNP benches.

The document "A Trading Nation", which was published in 2019, was important. It was a serious bit of work, and it sought to set out clear steps. That is why I was genuinely surprised when I saw the latest update, because it has more maps in it than numbers. That is a problem.

In the 2019 document, which came after Brexit, there was a clear articulation of what had to happen. The strategy sought to increase from 11,000 the number of jobs that are derived from exporting, but there has been no update on that number. It sought to integrate Scottish Development International with the rest of the business support regime, including Business Gateway. To be fair, I thought that the Deputy First Minister set out some useful things in her speech, but we could use more clarity about how that integration will be carried forward. The strategy discussed expanding the GlobalScot network to 2,000, which is another bit of information that it would be useful to get a progress update on. Furthermore, a ministerial trade board was set up but, unfortunately, it met most recently 18 months ago, as far as I can tell.

If the Government is serious about trade, it has to be serious about the progress that it is making against what was a substantial bit of work. As I alluded to in my intervention on the Deputy First Minister, on page 13 of the 2019 document, under "Monitoring and evaluation", the bottom line is very clearly set out, and it says that the approach sought to increase exports as a proportion of gross domestic product to 25 per cent.

Kate Forbes rose—

Daniel Johnson: Just a moment.

The reality—according to the numbers that I have seen—is that that proportion has risen to only 21 per cent, and there has been no progress in that over the past four years. The world has been experiencing economic difficulties and headwinds, but there has been no substantive progress in the past four years against that key target.

I am happy to give way to the Deputy First Minister.

Kate Forbes: I apologise that I failed to respond to Daniel Johnson's intervention. He just cited 21 per cent, but I was going to go with 20 per cent, so it is currently 20 per cent against the target of 25 per cent. The two biggest impacts on that have been Brexit and the pandemic.

We have a lot of good data, which we could share in more detail—I would be happy to do that. For example, we know that 36.7 per cent of EU exporters in Scotland reported direct costs, with Brexit being one of the biggest impacts. We could perhaps share a bit more data.

Daniel Johnson: I would be grateful for that. I say to the Deputy First Minister that there might well be interesting phenomena and dynamics—or even initiatives—but we have not seen progress against the fundamental target. Interestingly, there was progress immediately after the pandemic, but it has stalled since then.

A final aspect of the report that we have seen no further examination of is its useful segmentation of exporters into four categories: top 100, solid performers, sleeping giants and global by birth. I would like to know what progress has been made against those key segments, because that would give the sort of strategic clarity that we need.

The document “A Trading Nation” was a serious bit of work, and I would like to see some robust reporting and measurement against it. It set out a good pipeline. Unfortunately, as ever with this Government, its intention is good, but its follow-through and consistency are poor.

I move amendment S6M-18795.1, to leave out from first “notes” to end and insert:

“welcomes UK Government action to strengthen international alliances and reduce trade barriers with economies around the world through diplomacy and the delivery of trade deals with India, the US and the EU; calls on the Scottish Government to stop contributing to instability for business through its repeated calls for an independence referendum, and believes that exporting to the rest of the UK, Scotland's biggest trading partner, is a key stepping stone for international exports, and that both should be imbedded in business support from day one.”

15:54

Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (LD): I am pleased to be speaking in my eighth debate this

week—it has been quite a week. I will try to stick to exports and not confuse it with any of the other topics that we have spoken about.

This is quite a good debate. Thursday afternoon slots are not always well occupied, but this slot—the graveyard slot in the Parliament—is a good one, because it gives us a chance to air issues such as this one in a constructive and often good-humoured manner.

As has been said, Scotland's exports are some of the finest in the world. We talk about that often, particularly in cross-party groups that have an interest. Whisky and salmon often come up when we meet people overseas and talk about great Scottish products. However, over the years, I have tried to look beyond the traditional Scottish exports of tartan and tweed and look at some of our emerging markets.

Scotland is leading the way in many markets. Undoubtedly, financial services—our expertise and product—is one of our biggest exports. We do not talk about life sciences often. Perhaps it has had a controversial past, but the pharmaceutical industry and other such industries are doing incredibly well in the west of Scotland, too. Our space and satellite industry is another booming area that we should be very proud of. We are producing—and soon we will be launching—satellites that are smaller than a microwave. All that ingenuity originated in Scotland, and that manufacturing is going on in Scotland as well. It should be exported, but not enough of that is happening.

Then there is our green energy production. Some of our experts are going all over the world on business-class flights to teach people in other countries how best to manage offshore wind, carbon storage and capture and battery technology. We should be leading the way in hydrogen and in other forms of renewable energy. Again, there is so much potential in that area, but the conversation too often focuses on the one or two big-ticket items—although I have nothing against the oil and gas industry.

Let us look at some other industries, such as gaming, animation and film production. Those industries are booming, too. Just across the street from the Parliament, there is a company that has done incredibly well in the gaming industry, and parts of Scotland are growing in the media landscape with Hollywood film studios producing films here.

All that is to be admired and acknowledged, because those businesses have got on with it without the intervention of Government. We have talked a lot already this afternoon about where we need the Government to intervene on failing businesses, but those businesses tend to be the

businesses of old, the industries of old and the technologies of old.

A small country such as Scotland has an opportunity to be at the forefront—the avant-garde—of new and emerging technologies. That means having a Government strategy—and a strategy is not the same thing as spin. I agree with quite a lot of what is in the Government motion, but it does not contain a huge amount of substance on the wider strategy. There has already been some critique about those lovely coloured-in documents, as Murdo Fraser referred to them.

Businesses are looking for two things from their Government. One is a wider strategy, because a strategy in one sector has to be part of a much bigger picture. It also has to fit in with the transport and infrastructure strategy, the digital connectivity strategy and the energy strategy. How do we keep companies' costs down as best we can? It needs to sit in the round and be part of the whole.

I will talk about whisky exports, because we have talked a little bit about trade deals, and I want to mention them. We are facing international headwinds. There are things outside of the SNP Government's control—I understand that—and there are even things outside of the UK Labour Government's control. We are in an extremely volatile world market. Costs are rising and we are affected by decisions that are being made by other politicians thousands of miles away. When I speak to businesses that export, the two big things that they say they face are rising insurance costs and shipping costs. We all know what is happening in the Red Sea. We have to face up to and work together on those international out-of-control things.

The other thing that I hear from businesses is that what they are absolutely sick and tired of is both of Scotland's Governments being at constant loggerheads with each other. I understand that some good cross-party working is taking place behind the scenes, but businesses want to see Government ministers from Scotland and Westminster going out into the world hand in hand to say publicly that Scotland is open for business.

There has been a little bit of critique of the six-point export plan, which feels a bit more like a relaunch.

Kate Forbes: Will the member take an intervention?

Jamie Greene: I will be happy to, in a second.

The target was to increase the value of international exports to 25 per cent of GDP by 2029. Of course, we took a hit on exports in the Covid years, when the figure dipped to 19 per cent. In 2019, it was 20 per cent. I believe that the

cabinet secretary has just said that we are still at 20 per cent. Six years on from 2019—I have noted the issues that we had during Covid—we are five percentage points away from hitting the target. We need to ramp up our activity in that area. I still think that we can get to 25 per cent by 2029.

Kate Forbes: I should have made this intervention in Daniel Johnson's speech. We published a formal review of the export strategy in 2023. I want to clarify that, today, we are discussing only our international priority markets. That is what the update document relates to. We thought that we would make sure that the maps were colourful, so that members knew exactly what we were talking about. However, the point has obviously been missed, so I will repeat it: today, we are simply considering our priority markets.

Jamie Greene: I would say that every market should be a priority, even those that are least visible on our radar. For example, the value of Scotch whisky exports to the Taiwanese market alone has gone up by 45 per cent to £290 million. That is nothing to do with any bilateral trade deals; it is simply a result of the good relationship with the buyers there.

I have two final points to make. First, let us not underestimate the value of the Commonwealth, which has a GDP of £15 trillion and 2.5 billion consumers. Secondly, small and medium-sized enterprises make up 99 per cent of Scotland's businesses, but only 10 per cent of those are exporting. That figure must increase, and I would like the Government to produce a co-ordinated strategy for how we do that.

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

16:01

Emma Roddick (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): With my region being what it is—it includes Orkney, the Highlands, Islay and Moray—I represent a lot of areas with distilleries, and I have tried to engage with the staff and owners of many of them. Each of them is very different, but there are some patterns.

I recently visited Tomatin distillery, which is an excellent example of a key local employer in a rural area. Last year, I heard a similar story in Raasay. Folk have moved back to that island community to take up jobs in the distillery, and some of them have even been supported with new housing. Communities should never be reliant on one sector to survive, but the whisky industry is often a great option for young people who want to explore hospitality, marketing or tourism roles.

During my tour of Tomatin distillery—which, incidentally, is a nice option for anybody visiting the Highlands who would like a short respite from the very welcome disruption caused by the ongoing A9 dualling works on the Tomatin to Moy section—I heard the business's values coming through very strongly. It hires locally and grows its own, and the result is a valuable product with a great story. It provides an opportunity for folk in the area to take up well-paid skilled employment and stay locally.

Those are the kind of success stories that we are seeing thanks to local investment and a focus on quality. Imagine how much more those communities could thrive without the handbrake of Brexit slowing them down. People across the world love those success stories, and they will pay for them. Our whisky industry must be supported to reap the rewards of its own success, which has been built up over decades.

According to the Scotch Whisky Association, the current 10 per cent tariff is costing the whisky industry £4 million a week in lost exports. That is a large number, but it is more than just a number. Take the example of Raasay: how many more homes, even given the extra cost of building in island communities, could that money fund? In Tomatin, what exciting new venture could the distillery have the time and the space to explore as a business? I do not envy the First Minister his role in engaging with the current US Administration, but, as a Highlands and Islands MSP, I appreciate the value of having a leader who is willing to work hard, engage and do what he can to get a good deal for whisky.

However, the reality is that there is no deal with Trump that could undo the damage of Brexit. The Tories and Labour are stubbornly ignoring that reality as if it were ancient history, rather than a set of extremely damaging daily realities that constantly hammer key industries in this country.

Jamie Greene: I agree with some of what the member is saying, but the problem is that we are talking about the volatility of geopolitics. Mr Trump might agree to reduce the 10 per cent tariff to 5 per cent, but, equally, he might wake up tomorrow and increase it to 15 per cent or even 50 per cent. We would have to deal with that. Therefore, is it not more important that the Scottish Government does not put all its eggs in one basket?

Emma Roddick: That is very much what I am getting at. There is no one deal that can undo poor decisions such as Brexit. I would much rather that the decisions on engaging and negotiating deals were taken here in Scotland, where we know what our needs and priorities are. That goes beyond big industries such as whisky. I have heard from numerous small businesses that are struggling with red tape and confusion related to the post-

Brexit realities—and that is before we even get to the nonsense that is Labour's national insurance hike, which has caused further expense and uncertainty at an already difficult time.

Businesses in Scotland deserve better. They deserve a little consideration and reflection from the UK Labour Government. Does it really believe that Brexit is going well, that the national insurance hike is beneficial and that the tariffs are fair, or will it follow the First Minister's example and take action to support businesses through all that?

Daniel Johnson: First, I believe that the Prime Minister spoke with the President when he was first elected a number of months ago, so the First Minister is following his example. The member has now called twice for the increase in employer national insurance contributions to be reversed. What would she cut, especially given that that increase led directly to £5.4 billion being added to the Scottish budget?

Emma Roddick: I would cut the funding that the UK Government itself has had to pay out for the national insurance hike. Those hikes are cyclical and we are not seeing any benefit from that at all.

The stories from Tomatin and Raasay show us what is possible when we invest in our people and in our products. The Scottish Government's export plan is helping businesses to thrive despite all the challenges, but we must be clear that it is not a fair fight. Our businesses are being forced to run the race with a significant weight around their ankles, with that weight in the form of Brexit and damaging economic decisions from Westminster. The UK Government must stop ignoring reality. It is time for the Government to start listening to Scottish businesses and the Scottish Parliament, to reverse those damaging policies and to fully address the continuing impacts of Brexit by rejoining the European Union.

16:06

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): I hope that SNP members will eventually overcome their Brexit derangement syndrome. I already read out some figures, but many other bits of available data show that the genius and the driven energy—the animal spirit, if you like—of Scotland's businesses and of the UK business sector have meant that we are making a success of the new arrangements that are now well in place after five years. I hope that the SNP will catch up with the rest of the country and with the Scottish business sector.

Kate Forbes: Stephen Kerr mentions the business sector, so what would he say to the third of Scottish businesses that responded to the business insights and conditions survey in

November 2023 that listed Brexit as the main cause of export difficulties?

Stephen Kerr: There have been many issues in those years—Covid, for example, was one. No one denies the bumpiness of the exit from the European Union and no one ever projected a smooth transition, but it has gone exceptionally well, and the numbers are there. As I did yesterday, I encourage members to look at the evidence that is available, instead of just chuntering on with the mild prejudice that some members suffer from.

Enterprise is Scotland's engine. The SNP Government must realise that and stop behaving as it often does, which is as a regulatory monster that burdens businesses instead of backing them. Murdo Fraser was absolutely right to say that Scotland's single biggest export market is not the EU or Asia but England. Our trade with the rest of the UK amounts to more than £52 billion a year—two thirds of all Scottish exports. I say to Labour members, too, that that is why the United Kingdom Internal Market Act 2020 is so indispensable and why any attempt to tinker with it would damage jobs and investment.

Gordon MacDonald (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP): Stephen Kerr has referred to Scotland's trade with England. Did he read the third annual report on the operation of the UK internal market, which said that England's trade with Scotland is worth £75 billion?

Stephen Kerr: It is, of course, a mutual arrangement—that is the nature of business. We sell and we buy, which is exactly why UKIMA is such an important piece of legislation. It guarantees Scotland and Scottish businesses frictionless access to the UK market, which sustains most Scottish livelihoods.

We should be celebrating the landmark £10 billion order for type 26 frigates from Norway. That order was years in the making and was secured because of the UK's national shipbuilding strategy, which was launched by a Conservative Government. It will sustain more than 1,200 jobs directly and thousands more in the supply chain. Critics scoffed at the national shipbuilding strategy when it was launched, but today those critics owe an apology to the men and women on the Clyde, given the delivery of that order.

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): Does Stephen Kerr not find it rather odd that, despite the national shipbuilding strategy having been around since about 2019, there has been very little engagement from the Scottish Government on delivering it, despite the bulk of the UK's shipbuilding industry being in Scotland?

Stephen Kerr: This is another one of the Scottish Government's derangement syndromes.

It is not prepared to face up to the realities of our country's economic make-up and to the strength of our defence sector, because it is ideologically opposed to so much that the defence sector represents.

The Minister for Business and Employment (Richard Lochhead): Will the member take an intervention?

Stephen Kerr: I am probably straying into time problems, but—

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

Stephen Kerr: I am happy to give way to the minister.

Richard Lochhead: I do not want to disturb the better together co-operation that is going on in the chamber, but I point out that the Scottish Government has worked very closely with the defence sector since we came to office in 2007. Indeed, more than £90 million-worth of support has been given to the sector, and we recognise its importance to the Scottish economy.

Stephen Kerr: That will be why some ministers and many MSPs and MPs will not even meet representatives of the defence sector. I find all of that horribly inconsistent.

We should praise that incredible £10 billion export order, and we have other things coming along, as well. Murdo Fraser mentioned that that order alone benefits more than 100 Scottish businesses and 54 small and medium-sized enterprises. We also have the type 31 frigates, which present another fantastic opportunity. Denmark and Sweden are also interested, as are Poland and Indonesia—and we are not just talking about the construction of these wonderful products; selling the design to Canada and Australia has brought in more than £1 billion. That also directly benefits Scotland.

There is much to talk up when it comes to the defence sector, but I know that there is a split personality at work in the SNP. SNP members cannot bring themselves to celebrate Scotland's successes in the sector for ideological reasons. Frankly, they are hostile to the defence sector. They have derided such companies for years and have neglected, ignored and boycotted them, but those companies are building the very technology that keeps us safe.

There is much more that I could say. I hope that members will agree that I have been willing to engage in a debate, but, instead of debating at the level of student politics, this Parliament should champion Scottish enterprise, back innovation and open the doors to the world.

16:12

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): Next Wednesday I will celebrate, if that is the word, 46 years as a member of the SNP. Frankly, I recognise absolutely nothing of the nonsense that we have just heard from Stephen Kerr. My grandfather worked in the shipyards, and the SNP has always supported a strong conventional defence policy. I am delighted that a small independent country with a population lower than Scotland's has the resources to be able to invest £10 billion in conventional weapons, just as it covered the north Atlantic after the Tories, within weeks of coming to office in 2010, scrapped more than £4 billion of Nimrods that had just been upgraded by the Royal Air Force.

Colleagues have highlighted the indispensable role of our iconic trade exports such as salmon and whisky, and I include Isle Of Arran Distillers, in my constituency, in that. In that vein, I welcome the First Minister's visit to Washington to press the US President for a better deal on whisky tariffs, which are currently costing £4 million a week, as Emma Roddick pointed out. The ball is now firmly in the UK Government's court to make a deal with the US, which is the single largest destination for Scotland's international exports, accounting for about 17 per cent.

The picture for Scottish exports is positive. Excluding oil and gas, Scotland's exports remained stable in real terms at £18 billion between 2016-17 and 2023-24, despite the many challenges that those exporters faced. Those challenges are complex and, in many cases, are the result of global events such as trade wars, conflicts and energy spikes. However, there are also home-grown, self-inflicted problems, such as the hard Brexit that was inflicted on Scotland by the Tories and, of course, Labour's damaging jobs tax. It is a delusion to say that Brexit has not impacted the Scottish economy. *The Economist* talks about it almost every single week, for example.

Despite those headwinds, Scotland's exporters will be reassured that we have an economy secretary who is determined to protect and grow Scotland's business interests around the world.

DSM-Firmenich's Dalry site in North Ayrshire has been producing and exporting vitamins since 1958. It happens to be in my constituency and is the only vitamin C factory in the world outside China. Following a £300 million-plus investment backed by £12 million from Scottish Enterprise, DSM is scaling up production of Bovaer, a methane-reducing feed additive for cattle, to be sold in the US, the EU, Australia and South America. That factory was chosen from 35 DSM factories worldwide because of the quality of the

workforce and their ability to deliver for the company and its customers.

DSM is part of Scotland's thriving life sciences industry, and I am proud to be the chair of the cross-party group on that sector. The Scottish Government's life sciences strategy for Scotland, which was published in February 2017, had a vision of making Scotland the location of choice for the life sciences community. Its mission was to increase the industry's contribution to the Scottish economy to £8 billion by 2025. That was achieved in 2020—five years ahead of schedule—and life sciences exports are now worth £4.3 billion, which is not far off Scotch whisky exports of £5.3 billion. We should be proud that Scotland has one of Europe's largest life science clusters and that our companies, universities and research centres have an international reputation for excellence. The sector is forecast to continue to grow. Much of that will be driven by increased exports.

I am encouraged that increased funding for exporters and life sciences, among other sectors, was specifically mentioned in the Scottish Government's six point export plan. I am just as delighted that the Scottish Government has increased funding for our international trade partnership programme to expand access to business membership organisations, which can bid for support for trade missions to become established in emerging markets.

With the assistance of Scottish Development International—the international arm of Scottish Enterprise—Scottish businesses delivered their highest-ever level of planned international sales, reaching an unprecedented £2.46 billion during 2024-25. That is a 20 per cent increase on the previous year. Therefore, it is disappointing when some Opposition MSPs criticise those hard-working trade and investment specialists. However, it is not only MSPs. The Labour MP for Dunfermline and Dollar described our international offices as

“a vanity project”

and said that they

“serve little practical purpose”,—[*Official Report, House of Commons*, 2 July 2025; Vol 770, c 106WH.]

while the Liberal Democrat MP for Edinburgh West referred to them as “largely unnecessary” mini embassies. However, she is on record as saying that it is not Scotland's oil but Britain's oil, so we know where her loyalties lie. The Tories' anti-business stance when it comes to exports facilitated by Scotland's international offices is well documented.

I encourage all Opposition colleagues to, as some have done, join my party in celebrating the great success of Scottish international exports, which were worth £31 billion last year, and their

vital contribution to jobs, growth and the prosperity of our country. We should be proud of how attractive Scottish products and services remain to consumers across the world. That success is based on innovation, quality, hard work and exporters' ambition to enter new markets, underpinned by a Scottish Government that is focused on delivery and assisted by our magnificent overseas office staff around the world. We have success in sectors such as financial services, aerospace, defence, photonics, energy, food and drink and life sciences. Scotland is globally competitive. Let us work together to ensure that that remains the case.

16:18

Richard Leonard (Central Scotland) (Lab): In my lifetime, from working as an economist at the Scottish Trades Union Congress to bearing personal testimony to the damage inflicted by the neoliberal experiment on my own family—the direct, deliberate and despicable result of Government policy which closed factory after factory, mine after mine, shipyard after shipyard—there has been no economic doctrine more dominant than the doctrine of free trade. Of course, it was then, and has always been, a fallacy—a fool's gold. We do not really have free trade at all. Most markets are rigged, managed or monopolised. They are not free.

In recent months, we yet again witnessed its grim toll with the closure of the Grangemouth oil refinery and its replacement with an import terminal. And in recent weeks, the United Nations has warned that the Trump trade tariffs

“risk disrupting deeply integrated production networks”,

a recognition that, while we talk of nation-to-nation international trade, increasingly trade flows are dominated by intra-company transfers—circular trading within transnational corporations. So much so, that an index of manufacturing intra-industry trade produced by United Nations Trade and Development and revealed just last week said that the UK is second only to Canada in its exposure to this disruption, that we are twice as much at risk of Trump's trade wars as China and India combined.

So what are the solutions? Well, this afternoon, the Government is asking us to put our faith in its updated export strategy, but since “A Trading Nation” was launched in May 2019 with its stated aim of growing international exports from 20 per cent of GDP to 25 per cent of GDP, our international exports have not risen. In fact, according to the Scottish Parliament information centre, they slumped to just 18.6 per cent of GDP in 2021. Neither will we find the answer in the Government's latest six-point export plan, which calls for, among other things, an ever-greater

dependency on foreign direct investment, when our economy is already overcolonised by a small number of transnational corporations. Just 60 firms now account for half of the total value of all our international exports.

As for the Deputy First Minister's claim at the weekend that independence is an “economic necessity”, that is a soundbite that wilfully ignores the economic facts of the extent of our industrial integration, of the depth of our economic, fiscal and monetary interdependency, of the pattern of our trading relationships—that we export one and a half times more to the rest of the UK than we do to the whole of the rest of the world put together. But neither do I think that the answers to global uncertainty and declining exports are to be found in growth deals based on military rearmament, the war machine and the arms trade. The very idea of a defence dividend is misleading. What about the opportunity cost, and what kind of dividend is it when the international development aid budget is put to the sword to pay for it?

I remain more convinced than ever that the answers lie in greater economic planning; the development of an industrial strategy; on fair trade, not free trade; on the diversification of our export base, the diversification of our producers and our markets and not an intensification in the United States; on greater self-reliance and a strategy of import substitution as part of our response to climate change; more co-operative and employee ownership; and genuine community wealth building and democracy in our economy. In this Trades Union Congress week, that means stronger trade unions and a radical extension of workers' rights.

Politics remains at its core a choice, a division between left and right—tackling economic inequality and injustice and a redistribution of power on the one hand or relying on trickle-down, the free market and free trade on the other. Members of this Parliament need to decide which side of that division, which side of that choice they are on.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We have eaten into some of the available time, so the generosity will be scaled back just a little.

16:23

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): I will use my short time in the debate to recognise the work that has been done over the years by the Scottish Government and the long-term commitment that pays bigger and bigger dividends to our agribusiness sector as time goes on. I particularly want to pay tribute to Richard Lochhead's tenure as the first cabinet secretary for rural affairs, which started in 2007. His work to

identify the huge potential of Scotland's high-value and high-quality food and drink sector and get the Government behind it has changed our rural economies very much for the better. That work has been continued by his successors, including Mairi Gougeon.

This weekend, I will be heading along to Stranraer oyster festival, which is another success story of our food and drink sector. Many thousands of people will visit Stranraer to celebrate and taste that success but, before and after that festival, our world-class seafood will be exported to plates and kitchens around Europe and the rest of the world.

That is a tribute to the work that has been done both by the Scottish Government and the industry as a whole over the years to make Scotland's exports an international leader. That success has been achieved in spite of the barriers, hurdles and blocks that have been imposed on Scotland because of Brexit. We will all have constituents whose businesses have experienced huge challenges when trading with the rest of Europe thanks to the Conservative Party and its failed Brexit, which is now being ably cheered on by Keir Starmer and his chaotic crew. It is a incredible tribute to the determination of our exporters, whether in food or drink or other industries, such as space tech and gaming, which Jamie Greene spoke about, that they have, for the most part, weathered the storm of Brexit and worked out new ways to survive and prosper, despite the forced isolation that has been imposed on them by the UK Government.

We can see in real time the huge impact that isolationism in trade policy is having across the Atlantic. Tariff barriers that have been put in place at the whim of a leader are having a crippling effect on many sectors, and even healthy industries, such as our whisky sector, are counting the cost, with £4 million per week in lost exports, as others have mentioned. Distilleries in my region, such as Crafty Distillery, Annandale Distillery, Borders Distillery and Bladnoch Distillery, are being hit by those tariffs. They are major employers in their communities across Dumfries and Galloway and the Borders and they are part of our world-leading food and drink offering. Over the summer, my former work colleagues from Los Angeles visited me and enjoyed a few drams from our local distilleries. A good-news story from their visit is that they agreed to help to support Scotland's future whisky industry exports when they return to Los Angeles.

It is important for us to recognise our strengths. I am pleased that we have a First Minister who will stand up for jobs and industry in Scotland and who will use every tool at his disposal, including an audience with the US President, the man who has

all the power to give Scotland's whisky industry a bye when it comes to tariffs. However, the simple fact is that, if Scotland were a member of the EU, we would enjoy the benefits of belonging to that trade bloc. This country voted to remain part of that international bloc, yet we were torn out of it anyway. *[Interruption.]* I can hear Conservative members yitterin on at the other side of the chamber, but we know that Brexit has been damaging. For some reason, they just want to put their heids in the sand.

Our ultimate destination as an independent country must be as a full member of the European Union and the single market. We need to regain our place alongside our allies and partners on these isles and across the continent. In the meantime, I am proud that we have a Scottish Government that is investing in and supporting the industries of the future that will deliver greater exports and greater prosperity to our country and our communities. Innovations such as carbon capture, which is being rolled out by the Carbon Removers at Crocketford, and the green hydrogen facilities that are being built at Chapelcross are making Scotland a world-class exporter of the high-tech products that will drive the future and our economy. We need to turbo-boost that with independence and our rightful place as the EU's 28th member state.

16:28

Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): The debate is a welcome opportunity to acknowledge the high standard of Scottish exports, which span many different sectors from food and drink, including whisky and salmon, to the tech sector, arts and culture, and financial services. The debate could have been an opportunity to debate some of the challenges that those sectors face in a challenging global context. However, instead of having a meaningful debate, we have heard what we would expect from the Scottish Government and the SNP in that they have chosen to grandstand about constitutional issues.

Last week, the First Minister tried to rerun old debates about Scottish independence. This week, the Deputy First Minister has rerun old debates about Brexit, and, in today's motion, the SNP demands that the United Kingdom rejoin the EU.

Kate Forbes: What does the member say to businesses that say that Brexit has continued to have an impact on them because of complexity at the border?

Alexander Stewart: We have said many times before that Brexit had some difficulties to start with, but exporting opportunities were achieved and continue to be achieved through our support

for the wonderful businesses that we have across the country. Those businesses adapted, and they continue to adapt to ensure that they get those opportunities. That is very much the case.

As I said, the Deputy First Minister is demanding that the UK rejoin the EU. However, the First Minister went to the United States this week to lobby for a reduction on whisky tariffs—something that is possible only because the UK is no longer a part of the EU.

The demands to rejoin the EU are therefore quite ironic. In fact, it is the whisky industry that demonstrates the potential that now exists for Scottish exports. Earlier this year, the UK signed a free trade deal with India that will see the current tariffs on Scotch whisky slashed, and they will be slashed again within 10 years. That will deliver countless opportunities for the industry and will create jobs right across the country. The deal is expected to boost whisky exports by as much as £1 billion over the next five years, and the Scotch Whisky Association has called the deal “transformational”. The Scottish Government has barely commented on it.

The opportunities for increased exports are not limited to India. We have opportunities the length and breadth of the country and the world. I hoped that I might hear some balanced views today and that the Government might acknowledge the fantastic opportunities that are already opening up for some of Scotland’s export industries. We have heard today from Murdo Fraser, Stephen Kerr and others about the winning of the defence contracts, including the £1 billion contract for frigates for Norway, the manufacturing of which will sustain thousands of skilled jobs and grow Scotland’s economy and wider manufacturing base.

We on the Conservative benches are fully supportive of Scottish exports, and we stand ready to support any measures that can help in that regard, including speaking out about the removal of regulatory burdens and working constructively with industries to support innovation and private investment.

Business wants stability; it does not want to rerun 10-year-old constitutional debates, which would only create further uncertainty and instability in the marketplace. Nor does it want to separate Scotland from the rest of the UK, which accounts for more than 60 per cent of Scottish exports.

In conclusion, there are many possible solutions to boost Scottish exports and to empower Scottish industries in the global marketplace. However, once again, judging from this debate, it appears that the SNP Scottish Government is simply not interested in finding those solutions.

We export defence, we export whisky, we export salmon and we export financial services. All of

those sectors are important to our economy, our stability and our prosperity.

16:32

Gordon MacDonald (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP): Before I begin my speech, I say to Alexander Stewart that data from His Majesty’s Revenue and Customs shows that, as a result of Brexit, the number of UK companies exporting to the EU has dropped from 120,000 to 100,000.

I should also mention that I am the co-convenor of the cross-party group on Scotch whisky.

As Kenny Gibson indicated earlier, in the past week it has been announced that Scottish Enterprise-supported companies have reported a planned increase in international sales of more than £2 billion, which is among the highest annual growth figures ever achieved. That builds on the HMRC’s UK regional trade figures for quarter 1 of 2025, compared with the same time last year, which highlight that Scotland is the only country in the UK to have experienced an increase in the value of exported goods while all the other UK countries have experienced decreases. To be clear, England had a 3 per cent drop in exports, Northern Ireland had a 3.7 per cent drop and Labour-run Wales had a drop of more than 20 per cent. Scotland is also the only country in the UK where exports exceed imports, giving us a positive trade surplus in goods, which helps to support our economy.

That comes after a difficult period when our economy has faced the effects of Brexit, Covid and the war in Ukraine, which have impacted our ability to trade seamlessly with our European partners. Many sectors of our economy, despite struggling with Westminster’s national insurance hikes, are making record export sales. For example, Scottish salmon, which is now the UK’s top food export, had sales worth £844 million in 2024. However, those industries that are energy intensive, such as the whisky industry, have no access to UK Government support, despite the high excise duties, job tax hikes, high energy costs and £4 million per week of tariffs. The Scotch Whisky Association’s global export figures for 2024 show that the value of whisky exports stood at £5.4 billion, which is a decrease of 3.7 per cent on the 2023 export value.

I therefore welcome the Scottish Government’s six-point export plan, which will include more overseas trade missions and exporter showcase events, including a US export plan to identify states that offer the best markets for Scottish products, as well as increased funding for exporters in the technology, life sciences, renewables and hydrogen sectors. In addition, Scottish Development International has more than

30 offices around the world, with staff ready to help international companies to buy goods or expertise from Scottish suppliers, ranging from digital expertise to high-quality food produce. The Scottish Government is acting to support our exporters, but we also need the UK Government to act in those areas that are reserved to Westminster.

Despite the volatility in the export market, our service industries are also weathering the storm. Our financial services sector, including banking, insurance and asset management, is the largest hub outside London and it has delivered more than £10 billion in exports, with Edinburgh as a primary driver. Edinburgh's tech sector, which is centred around CodeBase, the UK's largest technology incubator, supports a dynamic software and information technology industry. The Scottish sector is worth almost £7 billion to the Scottish economy, and more than 60 per cent of those companies are now exporting across the world.

It is not all good news, however.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You need to conclude.

Gordon MacDonald: In the year ending March 2025, Scotland's goods exports to the EU decreased by 8 per cent on the previous year.

I will finish with a phrase from the office of the chief economic adviser, which concluded that Brexit trade barriers were a "large negative economic shock" that cost Scotland's economy £4 billion.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We now come to the closing speeches. I call Paul Sweeney. You have up to five minutes.

16:37

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): It is a pleasure to contribute to today's debate by closing for Labour. I express my best wishes to Kate Forbes for her future endeavours. It has been a pleasure to work with her in the past few years of this parliamentary session. It is a small world. I discovered that we apparently grew up on the same street—Sinclair Gardens in Bishopbriggs—and it is good to know that it has exported a disproportionate share of parliamentarians over the years.

This has been an interesting debate that has reflected a common mission for everyone in the Parliament, which is to grow our national prosperity. That is a consistent endeavour. I remember that, when I worked at Scottish Enterprise, looking at assessments of Scotland's position relative to trade in other parts of the world, in 2015 we were around 33rd out of the 36

countries who were then members of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. Unfortunately, that position has not really changed. We can talk about absolute numbers but, relatively speaking, Scotland still has a lot of work to do. The process cannot be reduced to exchanging political arguments. Parliament needs a common framework and a common mission for developing our country's prosperity.

Members are engaging in the debate in a spirit of co-operation on how we deal with that, because, ultimately, there are external factors that we have to confront. The most notable of those is the increasingly complex and volatile geopolitics that we are encountering in the shift away from a unipolar world order to one that is more fragmented, with greater competition between great power blocs and a beggar-thy-neighbour approach to protectionism in trade. We cannot be industrially naive—we have to be alive to emerging situations and deal with them accordingly. We must bolster our domestic supply chains, and we have to be more interventionist in that regard. Mr Leonard mentioned the need to be more geared towards industrial planning, and I share that sentiment.

The current situation is counterproductive, of course. We know that tariffs are ultimately a tax on consumption and that they reduce economic prosperity. They have never worked, and it is deeply disappointing that the United States has taken that course. However, it was welcome news to see the First Minister join the Scotch Whisky Association on its trade mission to Washington DC to press for a more favourable deal for Scottish whisky distilleries, which have been dealt a significant blow since the President announced the tariffs on imports to the United States.

According to the most recent survey of Scottish businesses, around 11 per cent have reported being impacted by the rise in American import tariffs earlier this year, which figure rises to 27 per cent for manufacturers. Therefore, we are seeing particular exposure in our manufacturing sector, in which businesses have cited impacts including increased additional costs, supply chain disruptions and reduced demand. Some 13 per cent of businesses in Scotland that were surveyed expect those tariffs to impact their business negatively.

It has been mentioned in the debate that the tariffs are costing our country £4 million a week, so it is important that both the UK and Scottish Governments exercise whatever influence they have to secure a better deal. It is to be hoped that, in time, the Americans will see the folly of introducing such tariffs.

It is a shame that our single biggest export—our national drink, Scotch whisky—is so affected by the situation, but it is also important to note that the industry itself is dominated by foreign ownership, with many of the profits from Scotch whisky leaving Scottish shores. Indeed, in 2021, a study found that nearly 70 per cent of malt whisky distilleries are owned by companies outside Scotland. We must look at our domestic ownership and investment in assets.

We have seen a recent decline in Scottish international goods exports. Last year, there was a 2 per cent drop to £18.4 billion. We have also seen a shallow exposure of Scottish firms to exporting activity, which has not changed substantially in the 10 years since I was at Scottish Enterprise. There are around 2,300 foreign-owned companies in Scotland that disproportionately take up the share of export activity, because they are already multinational in nature. That in itself is not a problem, but it signifies a lack of indigenous smaller firms in Scotland that are exporting. Consequently, the Scottish economy overrelies on foreign-owned companies to generate export growth. Indeed, large firms dominate exporting, in that they account for around 54 per cent of our export activity.

Richard Lochhead: I regularly meet businesses, and in particular small businesses, that have simply stopped exporting to Europe since Brexit. Does the member agree that it is pretty ridiculous to try to divorce Brexit from Scotland's export track record?

Paul Sweeney: I agree that Brexit was a disaster—it has been the single biggest geopolitical mistake that this country has made, certainly in my lifetime. However, we are where we are, and we have to move forward together as best we can to minimise the frictions that the situation presents. I hope that we can do so together, because it has affected our ability to trade.

In 2019, of the 346,000 businesses in Scotland, only 11,000 exported. Of those that exported, 100 businesses accounted for 60 per cent of our exports, and 60 firms accounted for half of them. Therefore, there is a real shallowness in the entrepreneurialism of Scottish firms. We need to encourage greater activity and greater sales around the world. We can do that in practical ways, but ultimately it is about individual business behaviour. We need to look at how we can address that.

Our performance relative to that of other countries signifies how much work we have to make up. We are still rattling around the 20 per cent mark while other countries are way ahead of us. As I mentioned, Scotland is ranked in the

bottom quartile of exporters in the developed world. If this country were to have the same level of exports as a proportion of GDP as other countries that rank in the top quartile, such as Denmark, Scotland would have an additional £35 billion of exports annually. If we can encourage our firms to be more ambitious in that regard, that will be a massive prize.

There are practical ways to do that. When I was at Scottish Enterprise, I worked on placing native foreign-language master of business administration students with Scottish firms to do business development. Within a few months, they were winning millions of dollars-worth of orders overseas. Even simple practices such as working with universities and with our foreign-language and international students can significantly change business opportunities. There are a lot of quick wins to be had.

The recent shipbuilding contract with Norway has certainly been a big win. It is to be hoped that the Government will get more involved in that project. I know that it has been reluctant to get involved thus far, but the project represents a huge prize for Scottish firms. There are opportunities for both small and medium-sized enterprises and the big primes to build on that contract with Norway—there is £10 billion of value to unlock.

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): Thank you, Mr Sweeney. I call Craig Hoy, who has a generous six minutes.

16:44

Craig Hoy (South Scotland) (Con): I join colleagues in paying tribute to Kate Forbes before she heads for the hills. I always enjoy listening to the Deputy First Minister. In my experience, she always talks the talk but, on occasion, she does not quite walk the walk. As she prepares to leave the Government, I invite her to do some walking of the walk and to perhaps join us in considering some common-sense policies that we would like the Scottish Government to adopt—most notably, to tackle the visitor levy. That would be a very sound legacy for the hospitality industry in Scotland, which is at serious risk from that and a number of other SNP policies.

I also thank Kenneth Gibson for his contribution and for his reference to the life sciences industry, which is vital for Scotland as we pursue a growth agenda. If we get things right, the industry could be a critical part of that. I commend him for being a brave soul as one of the few SNP back benchers who mentioned the defence industry, which is another critical aspect of growth for our country, in a positive light.

As I always do, I commend Alexander Stewart, who rightly identified the fact that the SNP simply cannot move beyond the constitutional debate.

Since we are talking about trade, one of the key negative impacts in that area is political instability. If we are seeking to sell more goods—and, in particular, services—overseas, where we might be looking at signing 10 to 20-year contracts, undoubtedly, long-term constitutional instability and risk would be factors in trading deals going south of the border rather than being done with Scottish companies, which might fall out of tariff-free trade with countries with whom we have trade agreements.

Daniel Johnson: I wonder whether Mr Hoy agrees that we should go further than that and recognise the opportunity to export to other markets in other regions of the United Kingdom as a platform for growth in exports to the rest of the world. That is the opportunity that Scotland has, and it is one that the current Government does not like to look at or seek to exploit.

Craig Hoy: Absolutely. Although I am not 100 per cent behind the concept of metro mayors, I have talked to metro mayors south of the border who are actively competing with one another for Scottish investment. That is the kind of culture that we would like to see in what is still a unitary state.

I commend Richard Leonard, who is also leaving the Parliament at the next election. I do not agree with much that he says, but his words are proof that Tony Benn is still with us, even though he has passed, and that idealist, misty-eyed Marxism is still alive and well on these benches. Even though we disagree on what the basis of free trade should be, I commend him for recognising that the SNP Government's six-point plan is not fit for purpose.

Emma Harper talked about the impact of tariffs and trade barriers on the food and drink sector, and she referenced Annandale Distillery, which I will visit next week. However, we cannot escape the simple fact that imposing a trade barrier between Gretna and Carlisle would do undoubted damage to the economy not just of the south of Scotland but of the whole of our country.

Gordon MacDonald was quite right to deploy the statistics that he did. He mentioned data in relation to goods but, if he were to recast his speech to include services, the statistics would paint an entirely different picture.

Trade is an opportunity for growth. If we look to the near horizon of the Scottish budget, we can all see that growth is what the Scottish economy badly needs. Despite their rhetoric and their vain attempt today, we know that SNP members are no real friends of trade. Time and again at Westminster, the SNP has voted against free

trade agreements. As we said earlier, it will be interesting to see what it will do in respect of the India free trade agreement. If it votes against that, it will effectively vote against tariff-free access for Scotch whisky to that huge potential market.

An illogicality runs through the Scottish Government's position. It effectively says that it wants to remove us from an open and free market—where we do 61 per cent of our trade and we are a net beneficiary fiscally—to take us into a market where we do only a third of that trade and would be expected, from the get-go, to be a net contributor fiscally. It makes absolutely no sense to argue to remove us from the UK if that would only take us back into the EU.

The truth of the matter is that British exports are rising while Scottish exports are declining. That is the harsh reality of the situation, and that is why we probably want to rely on external commentators rather than on ourselves. It is no wonder that London School of Economics researchers have argued that

“Rejoining the EU cannot make up for the income lost to independence”

and that

“rejoining dismantles the barriers created by Brexit”—

and I accept that there are barriers there—

“only to erect them again at the border with the rest of the UK.”

There is another issue, which is that rejoining the EU would mean that we simultaneously turn our back on the free trade agreements that have been made since Brexit. That would mean, for example, losing the blanket 10 per cent tariff with the US and entering an EU trading arrangement, where tariffs are 15 per cent. I am absolutely certain that the First Minister did not discuss that when he donned his “Make America Great Again” hat and entered the Oval office.

It is also important that we look beyond the slow-growth markets of Europe and towards the tiger economies of Asia Pacific. That is why the most recent Conservative Government worked so hard to deliver a comprehensive and progressive agreement on the trans-Pacific partnership, which gives us membership of a vast trade area spanning the Indo-Pacific region. When the minister speaks, perhaps he could explain why the Scottish National Party did not vote at Westminster for access to those markets. The bloc is home to more than 500 million people and will have a total GDP of £11 trillion when the UK joins. Joining the bloc has boosted the Scottish economy by improving access to some of the world's largest markets. For example, we will be removing 80 per cent of tariffs on UK exports of whisky to Malaysia over the next 16 years. We can

access new and dynamic markets overseas—that is what the principle of free trade is all about.

On the basis of what we have heard from the Scottish Government today, it will have to do much better than it has done in recent years if it is to drive up trade and make Scotland a global powerhouse. That will require a mind shift and a gear shift, and it will require the small number of SNP MSPs who are truly committed to free markets and open trade to stand up and speak out.

I add that it is nice to see at least one Green member in the chamber. The Greens were notably absent from a debate about trade—the very trade that raises the tax to pay for the public services that we all want.

16:51

The Minister for Business and Employment (Richard Lochhead): I welcome the debate, because it is important to discuss Scotland's exports. I note that Opposition spokespeople started off on cordial notes by paying lovely tributes to my colleague and friend Kate Forbes, the Deputy First Minister. Of course, those tributes are well deserved. I also note that not one person said that they would miss me when I am gone. I will not take that personally, even though I did not even notice that they ignored me. That was not a plea for sympathy.

Craig Hoy: Can I say how much the minister will be missed in the chamber when he goes? He has Scotch whisky interests in his constituency, so I hope that he, too, can be a voice of reason for that industry and that, between now and the election, he opposes any measures to introduce further restrictions on alcohol marketing and sponsorship.

Richard Lochhead: I am enjoying this, Presiding Officer, and I am happy to take an intervention from Daniel Johnson.

Daniel Johnson: I am grateful—I will miss you, too.

The Presiding Officer: As you are clearly speaking through the chair to me, I thank you, Mr Johnson.

Richard Lochhead: I feel so much better now, Presiding Officer, and I am happy to proceed with my speech.

There were times when the debate descended into speeches about defence, which I thought was rather unfortunate. As Kenny Gibson referred to, the Tories are not in a great position to say that they are champions of the defence sector. I am the MSP for Kinloss, which David Cameron effectively shut when he came to power in 2010,

causing misery for families and hundreds of households in my constituency and wasting billions of pounds of public money. The Tories are certainly not in a position to champion the defence sector.

Murdo Fraser: I am grateful to Mr Lochhead for giving way. I will miss him, too, for the record.

Has the minister completely missed the massive investment that there has been—and continues to be—in RAF Lossiemouth in his constituency, which is supporting jobs at the base?

Seeing as the minister has raised defence, I go back to the question that I posed earlier. Why is it that, in the motion from the Scottish Government, in the Deputy First Minister's speech and in the 18-page document, which is full of lots of lovely illustrations, there has been not a single mention of defence? I see that the Deputy First Minister has just passed you a helpful note.

The Presiding Officer: Through the chair, Mr Fraser.

Richard Lochhead: In my initial intervention, I made clear the support that this Government has provided for the defence sector in Scotland, which we value greatly. A trading nation is about international exports, and that will involve aerospace, space, defence and a number of other sectors that I will come to as I progress with my remarks.

It is important that Scotland supports exports. We are a smaller nation of 5.5 million people and, like our counterparts around the world, we therefore have an extra reliance on exports if we want to grow our economy as a country. That is why this is such an important agenda for Scotland's future and economic growth. We know that exports lead to companies growing fast and making greater profits. Companies that export perform better. That is why we want to promote exporting to more companies in Scotland.

It is also important to say that we want more women-led companies to export. I recently commissioned the "Gender export gap in Scotland" report, which estimated that Scotland's trade could increase by between £3.4 billion and £10.3 billion over two years—think of that—if women-led businesses exported at the same rate as those that are led by men. That is why we are taking action to introduce more targeted trade missions for women, training programmes and so on. A working group on that is up and running. I welcome the fact that Scottish Chambers of Commerce, as I saw on social media, recently led an all-women delegation on a trade mission—I think it was to Brussels. I warmly welcome that.

Fresh statistics were released this morning on the state of exports. I remind members that

exports in Scotland are worth £24.1 billion at the moment—that only covers goods, as is the case with HMRC statistics. It represents an increase in value of exports over the past year of 6 per cent. At the same time, the UK has experienced only a 1 per cent increase in the value of exports over the past 12 months.

EU statistics show exports of £8.4 billion to the EU. That is a real-terms reduction of 5 per cent over the past year. Indeed, since 2018, that is, before the pandemic, the decline in EU exports from this country is 21 per cent in real terms—remember that the EU is our biggest market. For those who are arguing in the debate that Brexit has had no impact on Scotland's exports or on Scotland's businesses and their track records, please pay attention to the statistics, which speak for themselves. Northern Ireland, which has arrangements to export to the single market, has seen exports rise. That is no coincidence; it is because it has access to the single market of Europe, and we, of course, do not.

Daniel Johnson: I will make two important points. First, the plan was produced after Brexit, that is, in 2019, which somewhat diminishes some of those points. Secondly, and more importantly, does he recognise that the plan has had only two updates—one in 2022 and one that has just been published? Given the numbers that are flying around, does the minister consider that we need more regular updates on the plan and on how we are progressing against the very solid numbers that were set out in 2019?

Richard Lochhead: I am very keen to find ways to have regular updates. We largely rely on HMRC data on goods exports. There are calculations that we can make, but there is sometimes a time lag, which is why we cannot always give the updates that we would prefer to.

The “A Trading Nation” document that was updated, refreshed and published this morning says that, despite the headwinds that have been caused by Covid, Brexit and, of course, the war in Ukraine, Europe and North America remain key markets for Scotland. The US is the single biggest country that we export to, and the EU is the biggest market that we export to—it is very important to keep that distinction in mind. Trade with the middle east and Asia is also offering strong potential. We have added special interest markets to our existing top 20 markets to give us flexibility to engage with fast-growing emerging markets such as Brazil, Mexico, Indonesia, Singapore and South Korea. We are proud to have added Ukraine as a special interest market, allowing our enterprise agencies and all our partners to support bilateral trade in Ukraine's hour of need.

I return to some of the challenges and global headwinds that our businesses face when it comes to exporting around the world. Brexit has had huge ramifications for Scotland's businesses. As I have said before, I often meet small businesses, particularly in Scotland, that do not export to Europe any more because of Brexit. We welcome the non-EU trade deals that have been referred to by Opposition members in the debate, and there is an exciting opportunity in the Indian market, particularly for whisky, as has been mentioned by others.

Despite that, Scottish GDP will take a hit of 2 per cent because of Brexit, costing this country more than £4 billion. One member is shaking his head, completely denying the link between Brexit and this country's export performance in international trade—it beggars belief.

We now also have the issue of tariffs with the US. As we saw this week, the First Minister is leading from the front and has taken on the case of whisky, in particular. It is not the only sector that is affected, but the impact on whisky is huge, at £4 million a week. The First Minister took that case directly to his engagement with the US President in America. The US whisky market is huge, so we must break that down, as well.

I pay tribute to team Scotland. We have trade envoys, GlobalScots, Scottish Government offices and Scottish Development International offices. We have the fantastic performance of Scottish Enterprise, as the Deputy First Minister said, which is achieving record-breaking additional export sales for the companies that it is working with.

We have so many people out there with good will for Scotland. We have a strong brand and strong products. Scotland is responsible for the biggest UK food export in Scottish salmon and the biggest UK drink export in the form of Scottish whisky. We have exciting high-growth sectors in this country that are export dependent, and they are fast-growing economic sectors for this country, as well.

We have a lot of optimism when it comes to growing exports in the years ahead, but we have to overcome some of the obstacles that we have spoken about today. I commend the motion to the Parliament.

Decision Time

17:01

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

There are three 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-18795.3, in the name of Murdo Fraser, which seeks to amend motion S6M-18795, in the name of Kate Forbes, on supporting Scottish exports in response to global uncertainty, 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.

17:04

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-18795.3, in the name of Murdo Fraser, which seeks to amend motion S6M-18795, in the name of Kate Forbes, on supporting Scottish exports in response to global uncertainty. Members should cast their votes now.

For

Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Ind)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Eagle, Tim (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
 Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
 McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)

Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)

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)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Choudhury, Foysol (Lothian) (Lab)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don-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)
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (LD)
 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)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 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) [Proxy vote cast by Ross Greer]
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 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) [Proxy vote cast by Michael Marra]
 Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (Alba)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Russell, Davy (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (Lab)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (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)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on amendment S6M-18795.3, in the name of Murdo Fraser, is: For 26, Against 88, Abstentions 0.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S6M-18795.1, in the name of Daniel Johnson, which seeks to amend motion S6M-18795, in the name of Kate Forbes, on supporting Scottish exports in response to global uncertainty, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

The vote is closed.

The Cabinet Secretary for Climate Action and Energy (Gillian Martin): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. My voting app would not refresh; I would have voted no.

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

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I am in the same position: my app would not refresh. I would have voted no.

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

Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. My app would not refresh; I would have voted no.

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

For

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Ind)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Choudhury, Foysol (Lothian) (Lab)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (LD)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (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) [Proxy vote cast by Michael Marra]
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Russell, Davy (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (Lab)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD) [Proxy vote cast by Willie Rennie]

Against

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (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)
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (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)
 Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (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)
 Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green) [Proxy vote cast by Ross Greer]
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 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)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (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)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (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-18795.1, in the name of Daniel Johnson, is: For 23, Against 91, Abstentions 0.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The final question is, that motion S6M-18795, in the name of Kate Forbes, on supporting Scottish exports in response to global uncertainty, 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)
 Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don-Innes, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 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)
 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)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

Against

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Ind)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Choudhury, Foysol (Lothian) (Lab)

Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Eagle, Tim (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (LD)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
 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) [Proxy vote cast by Michael Marra]
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Russell, Davy (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (Lab)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 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) [Proxy vote cast by Willie Rennie]

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) [Proxy vote cast by Ross Greer]
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on motion S6M-18795, in the name of Kate Forbes, on supporting Scottish exports in response to global uncertainty, is: For 60, Against 49, Abstentions 7.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament recognises that demand for Scottish exports is strong due to Scotland's high-quality products and services, and its excellence in sectors such as food and drink, professional, scientific, and technical activities; notes that global trade challenges, including geopolitical uncertainty, Brexit, and trade tariffs, are having a detrimental impact on Scottish businesses; welcomes the Scottish Government's Six Point Export Plan, which is supporting Scottish businesses to respond to these challenges; notes that the additional support being

provided, builds on effective and continued delivery of A Trading Nation, the Scottish Government's export growth strategy, as indicated through Scottish Enterprise's highest ever level of forecast export sales in 2024-25; acknowledges that meaningful collaboration between partners to promote Scotland internationally, using the Scottish Government-led award-winning Brand Scotland collateral, will boost awareness of Scotland's strengths and increase opportunities for export growth, and calls on the UK Government to fully address the continuing impacts of Brexit on Scottish and UK trade by rejoining the European Union, and reverse its damaging decision to increase employers' national insurance contributions, which is harming business confidence and Scotland's economy.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes decision time.

Meeting closed at 17:10.

This is the final edition of the *Official Report* for this meeting. It is part of the Scottish Parliament *Official Report* archive and has been sent for legal deposit.

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