



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

DRAFT

Meeting of the Parliament

Thursday 6 November 2025

Session 6



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

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Scottish Parliament

Thursday 6 November 2025

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

General Question Time

Energy Profits Levy (Discussions)

1. Kevin Stewart (Aberdeen Central) (SNP):

To ask the Scottish Government what discussions it has had with the United Kingdom Government about the impact of its energy profits levy on business confidence, investment and jobs in Scotland. (S6O-05106)

The Cabinet Secretary for Climate Action and Energy (Gillian Martin): I have had multiple discussions with my UK Government counterparts on that issue, and I have also written directly to the minister on it.

As introduced by the Conservative Government, the energy profits levy was always supposed to be a temporary measure, and we must see the earliest possible end date for it, or a complete reform of it, as it is now affecting investment and jobs in the north-east, including in the low-carbon energy sector and the energy supply chain.

The fiscal regime for offshore oil and gas is reserved to the UK Government, but I will continue to raise those concerns with the UK Government and call upon it to bring forward at the budget a stable and long-term fiscal regime to replace the EPL and deliver business and investor certainty for the North Sea.

Kevin Stewart: Data from the UK Offshore Energies Association and Scottish Renewables shows that £40 billion of investment could be unlocked if the energy profits levy were to be replaced. That would deliver £137 billion of gross value added to the UK economy and safeguard 160,000 jobs, building on the 47,000 jobs and £15.5 billion of output that are already supported by Scotland's renewable energy industry and the supply chain. What is the Scottish Government continuing to do to persuade the UK Government to abolish the energy profits levy in its forthcoming budget and replace it with a successor regime that focuses on protecting and growing energy jobs?

Gillian Martin: The data that Kevin Stewart has cited is from a range of industry bodies, and it emphasises what I said in response to his first question. Alongside other parts of the UK economy, the offshore energy sector must be treated fairly to unlock investment and ensure that workers are at the heart of a just transition by

protecting their jobs for as long as possible. That is why we will continue to call on the UK Government to bring forward at the budget a stable and long-term fiscal regime that will replace the EPL and deliver much-needed business and investor certainty for the North Sea.

Douglas Lumsden (North East Scotland) (Con): The EPL is destroying the oil and gas industry, but so is the Scottish National Party's presumption against oil and gas, which the former First Minister Nicola Sturgeon was celebrating again last night. Does the cabinet secretary not recognise that, while the SNP has a presumption against oil and gas, and while it will not support Rosebank or Cambo, she has a brass neck to come here and pretend to support the industry?

Gillian Martin: Our view is that climate compatibility assessments and checkpoints should inform any decision that the UK Government makes on new licences, and that domestic energy security must also be a consideration.

I would ask Douglas Lumsden whether he agrees with his former leader, Theresa May, that the UK should be net zero by 2050, but we all know the answer to that.

Ayrshire Growth Deal (Update)

2. **Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on the progress of the Ayrshire growth deal. (S6O-05107)

The Minister for Public Finance (Ivan McKee): Significant effort is being made by partners across the Ayrshire growth deal to accelerate delivery of that important programme, which will see Scottish Government invest more than £100 million in Ayrshire. Construction is now under way on the £35 million Ayrshire innovation park, which will support the advanced manufacturing, engineering and food and drink sectors. Phase 1 of the £14 million great harbour project is nearing completion and the Scottish and UK Governments recently approved a request from partners to progress a new approach for the Prestwick proposition, which will pave the way for significant investment to support the Prestwick cluster.

Carol Mochan: Will the Government tell us why only 5 per cent of the £251 million that was allocated to the project in 2020 has been spent? We have also seen the recent cancellation of projects such as the Prestwick spaceport. Has the minister considered appointing an independent chair to push the project along?

Ivan McKee: The point of a growth deal is that local partners have a key role in making decisions. The Government will continue to make funds available for projects and will work with local

partners to do what we can to ensure that projects are taken forward. Local input is hugely important.

Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP):

This week, I met a community group with a particular interest in restoring the pilot house. Although the pilot house appeared in plans for the great harbour and the maritime mile in Irvine, I understand that an expected feasibility study on restoring it might not be funded. Does the minister, like me, recognise the potential in protecting such unique heritage sites? Further to that, does he recognise that, when communities' expectations and aspirations are raised in respect of growth deals, it is crucial that they are met?

Ivan McKee: I understand that the great harbour project, which has been led by North Ayrshire Council, intends to deliver improvements to the setting and facade of the pilot house as part of a wider project that aims to create a unique waterfront destination in Irvine. The Scottish Government has not been closely involved in the specifics of the support for the feasibility study on the pilot house, but I will instruct officials to speak directly with the council to learn more about the issue and provide the member with a response by correspondence.

Forth Valley College (Alloa Campus)

3. **Keith Brown (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on what action it is taking to safeguard the future of the Alloa campus of Forth Valley College. (S6O-05108)

The Minister for Higher and Further Education (Ben Macpherson): Last week, the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills and I met the principal of Forth Valley College and the Scottish Funding Council to discuss progress, next steps and how the Scottish Government can further help to safeguard the future of the Alloa campus. I am assured that the principal is committed to finding a solution, taking into account the needs of the community, local employers and the wider region.

The SFC is supporting those efforts by providing additional funding to support an urgent feasibility study to identify all possible options for the campus. We will ensure that all relevant public sector bodies play their part in that. I also plan to visit the Alloa campus soon, and I will endeavour to keep Mr Brown updated.

Keith Brown: Given the vital role that further education colleges such as Forth Valley College play in improving opportunities and life chances for people from our most deprived communities including Clackmannanshire, which has some of the most deprived communities in Scotland, will

the Scottish Government support the Scottish Funding Council's requiring colleges to ensure that there is a minimum level of course provision in those areas? For example, it could mandate that a set number of credits be delivered at campuses such as Alloa and that similar safeguards be applied consistently across Scotland.

Will the minister ask the Funding Council to meet me so that I can make clear the extent to which we are having to deal with a college board that is determined to end further education provision? What can be done to stop that approach?

Ben Macpherson: Keith Brown raises some important points and in recent weeks has advocated for his constituents in Alloa admirably on those issues. I am happy to impress on the Funding Council that it should meet Mr Brown, and I am also happy to meet him to explore the ideas that he has raised in the chamber.

The Scottish Government recognises the vital role that our colleges play in their local communities. We will sustain our investment in the sector, and we remain committed to giving young people and others who are retraining the opportunity to gain the skills that they need to succeed, with the ability to do so in their locality, as that will help our economy grow and prosper.

Alex Rowley (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab):

There has been a campus in the Alloa area since the 1960s, and it would be a disaster if it were to close. Does the minister recognise the massive financial pressures that colleges are under? Will he do more to ensure the future of colleges in Clackmannanshire and across the country?

Ben Macpherson: As I have recently been articulating in the chamber, the Scottish Government and I recognise the challenges that our college sector is facing and the various publications that there have been on that in recent weeks. I am keen to work with Mr Rowley and all members across the chamber on how we can create a sustainable future for our colleges, given the important role that they play in communities, in addressing poverty and in the future of our economy. I am grateful for the excellent and constructive engagement that I have had so far with Colleges Scotland on how we can support our college sector in the period ahead.

Council Tax Proposals

4. **Sandesh Gulhane (Glasgow) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government what assessment it has made regarding the number of households whose council tax bills could rise as a result of the proposals in its consultation on the future of council tax. (S6O-05109)

The Minister for Public Finance (Ivan McKee): The consultation on the future of council tax does not set out a specific proposal for change. The scenarios are not Government policy; the consultation instead seeks views on a range of illustrative options, with the aim of building a consensus. Independent analysis by the Institute for Fiscal Studies that was published alongside the consultation provides a detailed assessment of those models. The IFS also modelled a number of transitional and mitigation schemes that would each impact on the overall assessment of the different models. I encourage the member to read the IFS report.

Sandesh Gulhane: Glaswegians with a band E property have seen their council tax increase by 42 per cent since the Scottish National Party came to power. This SNP Government starves councils, which leads to serious cuts in services and people paying more and getting less.

These people are not rich, and many struggle to get by. In my constituency, Morag, who is a single, widowed pensioner who has been living in her home for 50 years, cannot afford to pay more on her fixed pension income. Does the minister think that it is right to continue to hammer those people?

Ivan McKee: The member might have forgotten that the Scottish Government implemented a council tax freeze for many years. Council tax bills in Scotland—[*Interruption.*]

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

Ivan McKee: Council tax bills in Scotland are many hundreds of pounds cheaper than those south of the border, where the member's party was in control for most of that period. There are significant savings for Scottish council tax payers. The member should reflect on that and on the fact that his party is never shy to stand up and ask for more investment, but always does so at the same time as calling for tax cuts, which clearly demonstrates its inability to understand fiscal matters.

Town Centres (Sustainability)

5. George Adam (Paisley) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to ensure the sustainability of town centres. (S6O-05110)

The Minister for Public Finance (Ivan McKee): The Scottish Government is committed to supporting vibrant, thriving towns and town centres and to putting them at the heart of investment and planning decisions through the town centre first principle and delivery of the town centre action plan. National planning framework 4 further embeds that approach by recognising town centres as national assets.

Over recent years, support for town centre regeneration has been backed by our regeneration capital investment programmes, as well as our support for Scotland's Towns Partnership and the Scotland Loves Local programme. That continues in 2025-26 with regeneration investment of more than £62 million, which includes support for town centres.

I was delighted to speak last night at the cross-party group on towns and town centres and to recognise the great work that is happening across the country, including in Paisley, which has been recognised as Scotland's town of the year.

George Adam: I was not going to mention that, as I mentioned it last week. The minister will be aware of the major regeneration work that is under way in Paisley town centre, including plans to explore future use of the Paisley Centre site. This week, Renfrewshire Council confirmed that it will work with the developer to move that important project forward. Will the minister commit to engaging with Renfrewshire Council, once its proposals are ready, to help to ensure the best possible outcome for Paisley?

Ivan McKee: We are always keen to ensure the best possible outcome for Paisley and other towns across Scotland. I am aware of the plans that have been put forward by the owners of the Paisley Centre, and the Scottish Government remains in close contact with the local council and the developer, Beyond Retail, on those ambitious plans. I understand that discussions are on-going between the developer and Renfrewshire Council to understand the feasibility and viability of the project and to seek assurance over the proposed development plans. As the member will be aware, any decision rests with Renfrewshire Council in the first instance, but the Scottish Government will closely follow the project as it moves forward.

Electricity-generating Stations (Planning)

6. Douglas Lumsden (North East Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government whether it plans to increase the current threshold of 50MW for approval by its energy consents unit of onshore electricity-generating stations, to allow more decisions to be taken by local planning authorities. (S6O-05111)

The Cabinet Secretary for Climate Action and Energy (Gillian Martin): The Scottish Government will consult on increasing the current threshold of 50MW for applications for onshore electricity-generating stations to be considered by local authorities.

We will also consult on our new regulatory powers over Electricity Act 1989 applications through the United Kingdom Government's Planning and Infrastructure Bill. Those new

powers will enable changes to be made to address many of the concerns raised by local communities and to provide earlier, more structured engagement opportunities and better alignment with local planning procedures.

Douglas Lumsden: Decisions such as those about the 500MW battery storage plant at Rothienorman should be taken by local planning authorities. Before the cabinet secretary jets off on her latest taxpayer-funded jaunt to sell Scotland's countryside to the highest bidder—[*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear Mr Lumsden.

Douglas Lumsden: Will the cabinet secretary explain to her constituents in Aberdeenshire East why local democracy is being ignored and energy projects are being decided by central belt, eco-zealot bureaucrats who are not answerable to local residents? [*Interruption.*]

Gillian Martin: Well—what to say to that? Decisions about energy consents are made by local authorities if they fall under the threshold and by the Scottish Government if they are over the threshold. Regulations are put in place to determine the processes that are followed, and those processes are regulated by the United Kingdom Government.

I was about to say that I am looking forward to reading Douglas Lumsden's submission to the consultation but, after that diatribe, I do not know whether I am. [*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Let us not be shouting at one another.

School Swimming Provision

7. Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what assessment it has made of school swimming provision, including the number of children who leave primary school unable to swim. (S6O-05112)

The Minister for Children, Young People and The Promise (Natalie Don-Innes): The Scottish Government believes that every child should be given the opportunity to learn to swim. Swimming is a life skill that can save lives. There is currently no requirement to report a child's swimming ability, either locally or nationally, but Scottish Swimming estimates that 25 to 30 per cent of children leave primary school unable to swim.

School swimming reduces poverty-related barriers for children and has a significant role to play in addressing inequalities. We are continuing to work with key stakeholders to ensure that all children have the opportunity to become confident, safer and competent swimmers.

Neil Bibby: Research from Scottish Swimming has found that only 16 per cent of community swimming lesson participants come from the most deprived 20 per cent of areas in Scotland, and the cost of lessons has more than doubled since 2018. Cost should not be a barrier to accessing a life-saving skill, yet thousands of children are missing out on crucial water safety skills.

Last year, there were 33 accidental drownings in Scotland. As well as each drowning being a tragic loss of life, each one is estimated by the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents to cost £1.7 million. It is estimated that investing in school swimming would cost only £6 million.

When will the Scottish Government take the matter seriously and make the national primary school swimming framework a priority, to ensure that every child in Scotland gets access to that life-saving skill?

Natalie Don-Innes: Mr Bibby picked out a couple of points. The Scottish Government continues to fund RoSPA's provision of operational support to Water Safety Scotland so that it can lead a co-ordinated and preventative approach to water safety.

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care and the Minister for Drugs and Alcohol Policy and Sport have met Scottish Swimming to discuss the school swimming framework. It remains an ambition to double the sports budget before the end of this session of Parliament. Should that be delivered, the Scottish Government will support the implementation of the school swimming framework nationwide. We understand how important it is for children to have those opportunities, given what they mean for both safety and future life opportunities.

Shawhead Coal Spoil Fire

8. Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what discussions it has had with North Lanarkshire Council regarding the reported coal spoil fire in Shawhead, Coatbridge, and any assurances that can be given to the public. (S6O-05113)

The Cabinet Secretary for Climate Action and Energy (Gillian Martin): My officials have been in touch with North Lanarkshire Council and have been updated on the progress that has been made towards safely resolving the underground smouldering at the site in Coatbridge. Work has been led by specialist environmental engineers, in close co-ordination with the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service.

Air quality monitoring is carried out daily. The latest monitoring results show that air quality levels remain well within safe limits, and

independent analysis confirms no exceedances of health-based thresholds.

Residents in the immediate area have received regular updates via letter, the council website and social media.

Fulton MacGregor: I thank North Lanarkshire Council and highlight its work in this fairly unusual and rare situation. It has been very proactive. I have an update meeting next week with the chief officer responsible and the local ward councillors.

Given that the situation is not common, the most pressing concern for people in the area is whether the emissions that they are experiencing are safe. Can the Scottish Government provide any further assurances that the treatment of such coal spoil fires does not impact on the health of residents? Does the cabinet secretary believe that there is scope for public education to prevent such fires from occurring in the future?

Gillian Martin: As I said in my first answer, those involved are doing everything to suppress the smoke. Additional sand continues to be used effectively to suppress smoke and smouldering. Thermal imaging and temperature mapping confirm that the smouldering remains contained. Contractors and geotechnical specialists remain on site daily, with regular meetings taking place between the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service as part of the process.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes general question time. Before we move to the next item of business, I invite members to join me in welcoming to the gallery Kenneth G Forslund, First Deputy Speaker of the Swedish Parliament, and Julia Kronlid, Second Deputy Speaker of the Swedish Parliament. *[Applause.]*

Remembrance Sunday

12:00

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): Before we move to First Minister's question time, party leaders will make some remarks before remembrance Sunday.

The First Minister (John Swinney): This Sunday, we will once again pause to remember the brave men and women who selflessly laid down their lives to protect our country and to provide us with the freedoms and security that we enjoy today. In our shared moment of silence, in the poppies that we wear, in parades and in solemn ceremonies, we honour their courage and their sacrifice. We will always remember who they were and what they did for us: countless men and women who fought to protect and preserve our democratic way of life. Alongside our acts of remembrance over the coming week, let us commit ourselves once again to the same fundamental values that define who we are as a nation. We do that so that their great sacrifice may never be in vain.

Russell Findlay (West Scotland) (Con): On remembrance Sunday, our nation will stand in collective silence to remember the men and women who made the ultimate sacrifice to defend our country and our freedom. The powerful symbol of our remembrance is the poppy that grew on the battlefields of the first world war. Recently, I had the privilege of visiting the Lady Haig Poppy Factory in Edinburgh. The veterans who work there have seen service in every British military campaign since the early 1970s. It was an honour to talk with them about conflict, loss and remembrance. They want us to remember not just on one day but every day, and to remember not only those who served in the past but those who are serving now. Our remembrance is about history and about respecting those who keep us safe today.

Anas Sarwar (Glasgow) (Lab): In the coming days, we will mark remembrance day, a time when we reflect on the heroic sacrifices by armed forces across world war one and world war two, and since those wars, in defence of our freedoms and democracy and to highlight the struggle against fascism in the second world war and against the forces that seek to divide us today. We should also remember those who continue to serve in our armed forces, and we should make a commitment to them that we will protect them and their families while they serve and after they retire from service. Remembrance day is also an opportunity for us to redouble our commitment to peace and freedom for all across the globe. Let us remember all those who have made the ultimate sacrifice. Let us

redouble our commitment to all those who continue to serve. Let us remember them and say that their service will never be forgotten.

Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): Sunday is a time to remember and to mourn every victim of war—we should always remember that civilians bear a particularly heavy price—but it is also a time for us to honour those who fought and died for us, particularly in the fight against fascism. It is a day to remember and to give thanks, but also to recommit to preventing a repeat of the darkest periods of our history. As has just been mentioned, the politics of hate and division are on the rise again today. We honour the sacrifice of those who were forced to defeat that by force of arms in our past, but we also need to work to ensure that no generation is ever forced to do so again.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): This moment must never be routine. As the years pass, it is natural that the sense of sheer enormity of the horror of the first and second world wars diminishes. However, the more years that pass, the more important it is that we all stand together to make the simple but powerful point that we will never forget their sacrifice, because it was horrific. Every family was affected right across the land. The more years that pass, the more we must stand together and never forget those sacrifices or our commitment never to repeat that again.

First Minister's Question Time

12:04

Tax

1. Russell Findlay (West Scotland) (Con): Rachel Reeves is going to raise taxes. Is John Swinney going to do the same?

The First Minister (John Swinney): There has been a huge amount of speculation about the United Kingdom Government's budget. The Scottish Government will set out our position on tax in the budget on 13 January, and we will consider all the issues and the implications of the UK Government's budget in November.

Russell Findlay: Labour is breaking promise after promise. Rachel Reeves called last year's budget a "once in a Parliament" event. She claimed that she would not be coming back with more tax rises this year. She claimed that she would stick to her manifesto promise not to raise income tax and not to hit working people with higher bills, but that is exactly what Labour is set to do. If John Swinney will not rule out tax rises, does he think that Labour is right to increase income tax?

The First Minister: Decisions on tax issues have to be taken very carefully. The Chancellor of the Exchequer will be accountable for the decisions that she makes, and the Scottish Government will take our decisions accordingly and respond.

I observe that the decision that was taken in last year's budget, to which Mr Findlay has referred, to increase employer national insurance contributions has had a profoundly damaging effect on the economy in a variety of areas, because it has increased the cost of employment. It was an absurd policy decision to take by a Government that is apparently focused on a growth agenda, because the decision is stifling growth in our country today.

Russell Findlay: I agree entirely with the First Minister about employer national insurance contributions, but he does not seem to know whether he supports Labour's tax rises. I remind him of what he said after last year's UK budget. He said:

"the UK Government should have increased income tax."—[*Official Report*, 14 November 2024; c 13.]

The tax rises will be a hammer blow to Scottish workers. We have two left-wing parties that only want to tax, tax, tax. Labour is doing the same as the Scottish National Party has done for the past decade. Most workers in Scotland pay more than those in the rest of the UK who do the same job

and earn the same amount. The SNP has increased taxes, driven away aspirational workers, damaged business confidence and held back Scotland's economy. [*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): Let us hear Mr Findlay.

Russell Findlay: People deserve a break, so will John Swinney give a cast-iron guarantee that there will be no further tax rises—whether it is income, business or property tax—in the Scottish budget?

The First Minister: Mr Findlay will not be surprised to hear me say that those questions will be answered in the budget when the Scottish Government sets out to the Parliament the commitments that we are going to make.

We have asked some people in Scotland to pay more in tax, but I note that the independent Scottish Fiscal Commission has confirmed that the majority of taxpayers in Scotland are set to pay less this year than they would elsewhere in the United Kingdom. That is the judgment of the independent Scottish Fiscal Commission.

Of course, the public finances that we provide as a consequence of our decisions pay for different provisions in Scotland. Our decisions mean that university students pay no tuition fees. They mean that there is free bus travel for under-22s. They mean that no prescription charges are levied in Scotland. They mean that the Scottish child payment is helping to keep children out of poverty, with the level of child poverty falling in Scotland. Yes, there are tax issues to be confronted, but there are also public expenditure decisions that are improving the lives of people in Scotland.

Russell Findlay: John Swinney is spinning like a washing machine. Last month, he accused me of misleading the Parliament in what I said, but, in doing so, he misled the Parliament. He is at it again today. I will say it once more: most Scottish workers pay more income tax than is paid by those in the rest of the UK.

John Swinney's answers today will not reassure any Scottish home owner or business owner. He will not rule out increasing the tax on buying a home, he will not rule out raising taxes on businesses, and it seems that he is plotting yet another income tax raid on hard-working Scots. On top of all that, the SNP's plans could result in massive rises in council tax—reportedly as high as £6,500 a year. Raising taxes every year is not sustainable. Workers and businesses cannot afford it. People deserve to keep more of their own hard-earned cash. Should John Swinney not be looking to bring bills down, not hiking them higher, year after year?

The First Minister: I simply point out to Russell Findlay that council tax in Scotland is lower on average than it is for properties in England. That is the position today: council tax is much lower. Furthermore, as I said in my earlier answer, the majority of taxpayers in Scotland are set to pay less than they would elsewhere in the United Kingdom this year, according to the independent Scottish Fiscal Commission.

My Government will do what we have always done, which is to bring forward orderly budget provisions relating to tax and spending commitments, so that we can fund our public services and our investments in the Scottish economy.

We have heard from Russell Findlay and the Conservatives for a consistent period that they are not prepared to engage in the tough judgments about delivering public services. They keep on asking for more money, but they will not take the decisions to enable money to be raised. That is pure and utter hypocrisy, and it is what we get from the Conservatives.

Scottish Ambulance Service (Waiting Times)

2. Anas Sarwar (Glasgow) (Lab): I start by welcoming the First Minister's change of heart on holding an investigation into Scotland's maternity services. Less than 24 hours ago, after hearing the heartbreaking testimony of mothers, he whipped his MSPs to vote against such an investigation. I am glad that he went home and thought again. Unfortunately, the situation in maternity services is just a snapshot of the crisis and chaos in our national health service. Scotland's ambulance service is also in crisis.

This week, we heard about Queen's Park Football Club defender Charlie Fox, who suffered a serious knee injury during a match at Firhill stadium that had a 3 pm kick-off. An ambulance was called, but it did not arrive until 1 am, nearly 10 hours later—10 hours lying in pain.

That happened just weeks after footballer Brooke Paterson was left abandoned on the pitch, waiting for an ambulance. What does John Swinney say to Charlie, Brooke and all other Scots waiting in pain?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I am very open with Parliament about occasions when public services do not meet the reasonable and legitimate expectations of members of the public. I looked into the Brooke Paterson case, and the examination of the information that was available to me showed that an error had been made in the classification of that call. That is regrettable, and I have apologised in writing to her.

In relation to the case of Charlie Fox, the length of time that he was left to wait appears to me to be

completely unacceptable. The Scottish Ambulance Service is investigating the circumstances behind the incident, and I apologise for the length of the wait that he experienced.

Our public services continue to operate under enormous pressure, but they also deliver a fantastic service to members of the public in most cases, although not in all cases. In those cases in which they do not deliver, people can expect the First Minister to address those issues and to apologise accordingly.

Anas Sarwar: Week after week, John Swinney apologises for the Government's performance and things continue to get worse. A month ago, he apologised for long ambulance waits, but apologies simply will not cut it any more. When Scots call 999, they expect help to come.

That is what David McClenaghan expected when he had a heart attack. He called for help and gave his address, but when the ambulance arrived, the crew never even got out. David was later found dead on the floor. That was seven years ago, and a fatal accident inquiry is now under way. Since then, response times have got worse. Ten years ago, 83 per cent of life-threatening cases saw an ambulance arrive in 10 minutes; when David McClenaghan died seven years ago, that figure had fallen to just 73 per cent; and now, it is 61 per cent. That is shocking.

Why is the situation continuing to get worse and worse on John Swinney's watch? Do not simply stand up and say that you are sorry.

The Presiding Officer: Always speak through the chair.

The First Minister: I recognise that there will be occasions on which public services do not meet the expectations of members of the public. I think that the right thing to do—I will do this no matter what Mr Sarwar puts to me or how he characterises my responses—is to be honest and open with the public and to apologise when those standards are not met.

I can say that Scottish Ambulance Service staffing has gone up by 31 per cent in the past 10 years and that we now have more paramedics—the number of paramedics has gone up by 57.6 per cent in the past 10 years. I can also say that, according to the most recent data that is available to me, the median response time for purple calls was 7 minutes 51 seconds. That information is relevant and important because it relates to the optimum time for the delivery of a response by the Scottish Ambulance Service.

Our staff are working with more resources, under incredible demands, to meet the expectations of members of the public, and, in the

overwhelming majority of cases in the country, that is exactly what they do.

Anas Sarwar: That is the First Minister's response to hearing that, 10 years ago, an ambulance arrived in 10 minutes in 83 per cent of life-threatening cases; seven years ago, that happened 73 per cent of the time; and, now, the figure is only 61 per cent. That is putting lives at risk right across the country.

John Swinney and the Scottish National Party are failing our national health service and failing the people of Scotland every single day. On his watch, we have an ambulance crisis that is putting lives in danger, a patient who has been waiting for more than four years for cardiology and neurosurgery consultations, another patient who has been waiting for six years for general surgery and a child who has been waiting for five and a half years for surgery. Shockingly, one Scot has been waiting for eight years to be seen—eight years. In that period, we have had five SNP health secretaries and three SNP First Ministers—we have even had a new King and a new Pope—but that person has still had no treatment. So, enough of the apologies, because they simply will not cut it any more.

Does that not prove that Scotland's NHS cannot risk a third decade of this tired and incompetent SNP Government?

The First Minister: As I have said, where there are failings in our public services, I will honestly and candidly accept them and be held to account for them, but, equally, I will set out to Parliament the progress that has been made under my leadership in improving the performance of the national health service.

Mr Sarwar has cited issues to do with long waits. I have looked closely at long waits, along with the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care. In a range of individual cases, there can be significant complexities and health implications that make it impossible for particular procedures to be undertaken because of the vulnerability of the patients involved.

In general, however, there are too many people who have been waiting for too long. That is why we are now seeing reductions in the size of waiting lists and in long waits, with the figures in all the long-wait categories of 12 months, 24 months and 36 months coming down. We are also seeing an increase in the number of procedures that are being undertaken within the national health service. That means that more people are being treated and more procedures are being delivered. Of course, last year—I have told Parliament about this before, but I will say it again so that Mr Sarwar does not forget about it—a record number of hip and knee operations were carried out. That

demonstrates the progress that the NHS is making under my leadership.

I am determined to deliver for the people of Scotland. That is what our initiatives and the investment that we are making are delivering, and we intend to ensure that that is applicable for people in every part of our country.

Equinor Application

3. Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): The fossil fuel giant Equinor has submitted a new application to drill for more oil in the North Sea, but—[*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Let us be courteous.

Ross Greer: This time, it has had to admit that the Rosebank oilfield will be 50 times more polluting than it first claimed. There will be 250 million tonnes of carbon emissions, which will accelerate climate breakdown and destroy our hopes of keeping our planet safe.

The First Minister's predecessors were crystal clear in their opposition to Rosebank. Nicola Sturgeon agreed that it would be

"the greatest act of environmental vandalism in"

her

"lifetime."

Humza Yousaf said that approving the field was the "wrong decision". However, so far, John Swinney has avoided taking a position. He has quietly ditched the Scottish Government's energy strategy, the first draft of which opposed new oil and gas exploration.

The science is clear: if we are to have any hope of changing course and preventing total climate breakdown, there can be no new oil and gas fields. Does the First Minister agree with Nicola Sturgeon that it would be the greatest act of environmental vandalism in our lifetime? Will he oppose the Rosebank oilfield?

The First Minister (John Swinney): The approach that the Scottish Government has taken consistently through my time as First Minister, and the terms of Humza Yousaf and Nicola Sturgeon, is to insist on the importance of a climate compatibility assessment for any development that is proposed. That is the position that has been adopted in legal judgments that require the United Kingdom Government to go through the process that it is currently going through in relation to the applications that are being made. That is the point of consistency.

Any development of oil and gas licensing has to be compatible with our journey to net zero. The importance of that—which is widely accepted, and I think that even members of the Green Party

accept it—is that, for some time, there will be a requirement to utilise fossil fuels as we transition from our current situation to net zero. The question that must be addressed, given society's requirements in that respect, is: can any of that activity be compatible with our journey to net zero? That is the policy position of the Scottish Government.

Ross Greer: I asked the First Minister a yes or no question, but I did not get an answer. Both his predecessors were capable of giving a clear answer to that question. He says that it is a question of climate compatibility, but Equinor has just admitted that Rosebank would create 250 million tonnes of new carbon emissions. That is clearly incompatible with any chance of meeting our climate ambitions.

However the First Minister spins it, approving Rosebank would be a disaster for people and planet. It will do nothing to reduce energy bills. All that it will do is funnel more money into the pockets of Equinor's super-rich shareholders. Every single penny that those mega-polluters and Governments sink into new oil and gas projects takes us even further away from the investment in renewables that we really need.

The two most recent former First Ministers were brave enough to say that but, today, the Scottish National Party's Westminster leader, Stephen Flynn, demanded that the UK Government—

The Presiding Officer: Briefly, Mr Greer. You must put a question.

Ross Greer: He demanded that the UK Government give those planet-wrecking corporations a tax cut. The First Minister needs to pick a side.

The Presiding Officer: Ask your question, Mr Greer.

Ross Greer: I asked him again: will he oppose the Rosebank oilfield?

The First Minister: I think that, generally, people will see me as being on Scotland's side in everything that I do. [*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: I am finding it difficult to hear the First Minister from here and I know that those who have gathered with us in the gallery would like to hear whoever is called to speak.

The First Minister: I have to be mindful of the fact that we are delivering a just transition—not any old transition, but a just transition.

A just transition enables me to look the staff of oil and gas companies in the eye and say that we are doing everything possible to manage the transition to avoid the industrial devastation that Scotland experienced under the mercenary

actions of the Conservative Government in the 1980s, which I will not repeat.

The Scottish Government recognises that, as I explained in my first answer to Mr Greer, there will be a need for the utilisation of some oil and gas resources for the foreseeable future. That has to be undertaken in a way that is compatible with our journey to net zero. That is the approach that the Scottish Government will take.

Military Homes (Renovation)

4. Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): To ask the First Minister what discussions the Scottish Government has had with the United Kingdom Government regarding the implementation of the proposed scheme for the renovation of military homes in Scotland. (S6F-04415)

The First Minister (John Swinney): When I provided evidence on behalf of the Scottish Government to the UK Government's strategic defence review, I raised the fact that the quality and maintenance of service accommodation are a major concern for service families based in Scotland, and said that the UK Government should ensure that our service personnel and their families live in accommodation that is fit for purpose.

Plans for investment were initially announced in the strategic defence review earlier this year but, to date, there has been no discussion of the renovation of Ministry of Defence-owned housing in Scotland.

Christine Grahame: I am delighted that the UK Government is, at last, set on remedying the state of some military housing. I represent Glencorse barracks, which is in my constituency, and am well aware of how tough it is already for the families of servicemen and women who do not have a settled home and are nomadic on account of their partner's postings. The very least that they deserve is decent accommodation, so I give a big tick to that.

However, the recently published 124-page UK "Defence Housing Strategy 2025", makes only four references to the devolved nations and the use of surplus MOD land for civilian housing takes us straight into the issue of devolved competencies. Paragraph 3.13 of the strategy says:

"It is important that the Defence Housing Service works in a collaborative way across the UK Government"

and

"devolved governments"

but it appears that there has not been any collaboration. Will there be any, or is that another trampling over devolved powers?

The First Minister: All I can say to Christine Grahame is that the Scottish Government would be very willing to take forward discussions with the UK Government but that there have been no discussions with the Ministry of Defence on its proposals on funding for the renovation of military housing. The Scottish Government stands ready to do that because of the important issues of community connection that Christine Grahame raises; I assure her that the Government is willing to take part in discussions.

A96 Dualling

5. Douglas Lumsden (North East Scotland) (Con): To ask the First Minister when the Scottish Government will announce a timetable for improvement works on the A96 north of Inverurie, following the publication of its corridor review consultation report. (S6F-04416)

The First Minister (John Swinney): The Scottish Government's position is that it is committed to fully dualling the A96. The feedback received following the publication of the draft corridor review outcomes, a summary of which was published in June, will help to inform the final decision on how best to take forward improvements, while recognising the current economic challenges. Future decisions will be shaped by the available and planned budgets, which will be influenced by the United Kingdom Government's autumn budget and by the forthcoming Scottish Government infrastructure investment plan, which will be published in the new year.

Douglas Lumsden: The north-east has been named Scotland's road death capital after 24 people were killed and a further 384 were injured across the region last year.

Since the Scottish National Party first promised to dual the A96 under Alex Salmond's Government in 2011, there have been no fewer than 16 transport secretaries and ministers, all of whom have kicked the can down the road. Will the First Minister give us an answer today, stop playing games with the lives of motorists in the north-east, and finally honour his party's 2011 promise to fully dual the A96?

The First Minister: A range of different measures have been taken by ministers to address the issue of safety on the A96. I recognise that significant challenges remain, but ministers are fully engaged in that particular question. In relation to the capital investment programme, the Government will set out to Parliament in January the infrastructure investment plans and the issues that we can take forward within the current fiscal context. That information will be shared with Parliament and subject to the usual scrutiny.

Consolidated Accounts (Report)

6. Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab):

To ask the First Minister what the Scottish Government's response is to the Auditor General's report, "The 2024/25 audit of the Scottish Government Consolidated Accounts", which indicates a £1 billion underspend by the Scottish Government. (S6F-04424)

The First Minister (John Swinney): I welcome Audit Scotland's unqualified opinion and the points raised by the Auditor General, which recognise that the underspend does not represent a loss of spending power to Scotland.

Michael Marra: This knackered Scottish National Party Government's handling of public money is a disaster for Scotland and the Auditor General could not be clearer on that point.

Labour has delivered an additional £5.2 billion for Scotland's services. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear Mr Marra.

Michael Marra: Mr Swinney ludicrously labelled that a continuation of austerity, but we now know that he underspent that budget by £1 billion while one in six Scots suffer in pain on national health service waiting lists. First Minister, where on earth has the rest of the money gone?

The Presiding Officer: Always speak through the chair.

The First Minister: If that was an explanation of the intellectual capability of the aspiring Labour finance secretary, Scotland has a lot of trouble coming its way if Mr Marra gets anywhere near the public finances.

Mr Marra is a member of this Parliament—indeed, he is a member of the Finance and Public Administration Committee—and he should have some idea of what he is talking about, but he has just demonstrated to Parliament that he does not have a clue about the public finances.

Not a single penny of the underspend announced in the annual accounts of the Scottish Government—on which I repeat that the Audit Scotland opinion was unqualified, as has been the case for every single year of this Government's term in office since 2007-08—represents a loss of spending power. Every year there has been an unqualified opinion. Mr Marra does not understand that the resources that are contained in the underspend are all used in this current financial year—they are allocated, supporting the reductions in waiting lists that I am presiding over and providing—*[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear one another.

The First Minister: They are providing for the expansion of social security, including the Scottish child payment. For absolute completeness, I also say to Mr Marra that £247 million of the underspend cannot be used for public services in Scotland because it is part of the United Kingdom's control of the budget.

I suggest that Mr Marra goes away and gets a book about elementary accounting before he asks me any more questions.

Eastern Airways

7. Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD):

To ask the First Minister what the Scottish Government's response is to the recent news that Eastern Airways, which runs lifeline regional services in the Highlands and Islands, has entered administration. (S6F-04425)

The First Minister (John Swinney): The decision by Eastern Airways to file a notice of intention to appoint administrators is a matter of significant concern, and it will have a significant impact on communities and businesses. I understand that this will be a worrying time for the airline's staff, including those who are based at Sumburgh airport in Shetland. Should individuals be facing redundancy, the Scottish Government will provide support through our initiative for responding to redundancy situations, which is partnership action for continuing employment. Individuals can access support online or by calling the helpline. Advice for affected customers is available on the Highland Council website.

Beatrice Wishart: The news about Eastern Airways will be devastating to the more than 330 workers who are facing redundancy, including nine people in my constituency. The Wick to Aberdeen public service obligation contract is a lifeline route for people in the far north, and passengers need assurances now about its future. The First Minister will be aware that Sumburgh airport, given its proximity to the offshore energy sector, is a vital part of the North Sea connectivity network. What discussions has the Government had about an alternative airline for the PSO route and transport for oil workers? Will he commit to a statement from the Scottish Government outlining its approach to the impact of the collapse of Eastern Airways?

The First Minister: I recognise the significant practical issues that Beatrice Wishart raises. The Aberdeen to Wick PSO is a Highland Council PSO. We are engaged with Highland Council in trying to find alternative solutions to the situation, and we are in regular contact with the council. Measures have been put in place for alternative transport arrangements, but I accept that the Aberdeen to Wick link is very important to the local community. We are working with Highland Council to establish what alternatives can be brought

forward. I will, of course, be very happy for members to be kept updated on the issue by the relevant minister.

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): One of the issues with the link was the unreliability of the aircraft. People were maybe not using the link as much as they would have done had it been more reliable. Has the Scottish Government given any consideration to doing the same thing that it did in Barra when the aircraft there was unreliable, by purchasing an aircraft and leasing it to an operator, so that the service is reliable and can be used?

The First Minister: I am very happy to explore particular issues. As I said in my answer to Beatrice Wishart, the Aberdeen to Wick PSO is a Highland Council PSO. The Barra PSO is a Scottish Government PSO, I think.

The Cabinet Secretary for Transport (Fiona Hyslop): No.

The First Minister: It is not—I am being corrected. I will take the issue away and we will explore the possibilities. I acknowledge that the connections are important and that the distances that are involved for other transport mechanisms are very significant for members of the public. We will explore the idea that Rhoda Grant has put to me.

The Presiding Officer: We move to constituency and general supplementary questions.

United Kingdom Government Local Growth Fund

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): The UK Government recently announced £547 million for Wales as part of its local growth fund, which is to be delivered directly by the Welsh Government. If this is a union of equals, surely Scotland must receive its consequential share. Will the First Minister confirm whether the Scottish Government has received any information as to whether that funding will be replicated in Scotland, or is Scotland being short-changed yet again?

The First Minister (John Swinney): This issue relates to the successor funds to European funding, which has been of great significance to Scotland for many years. That funding has helped us with a range of priorities, particularly in relation to employability and the delivery of local infrastructure. In essence, the UK Government has provided a sum of £547 million to the Welsh Government but it proposes to bypass the Scottish Government in not deploying those resources in Scotland. The finance secretary has raised the issue with the UK Government, but the responses have been unsatisfactory, as have the details from the UK Government about the direct connection

that it has established with local authorities. Frankly, the information is woefully presented to local authorities.

However, the key point that Mr Gibson raised is that the Labour Government in the UK is bypassing democratic procedures in Scotland. It is another example of how the Labour Government in the UK is determined to undermine the Scottish Parliament, and people in Scotland need to wake up to the threat from the UK Labour Government.

Dumfries and Galloway Council (Budget)

Craig Hoy (South Scotland) (Con): Is the First Minister aware of the swingeing budget cuts that are being proposed by SNP-run Dumfries and Galloway Council? Those include the closure of the Hillview leisure centre in Kelloholm, the removal of free music classes for children, and cuts that would result in the closure of the entire citizens advice bureaux network. Will the First Minister look the people of Dumfries and Galloway in the eye and answer the question of why those cuts are being proposed? Is it because the SNP Government in Edinburgh is not properly funding Dumfries and Galloway Council, or is it because the SNP-run administration is not properly managing its finances?

The First Minister (John Swinney): The local government settlement provides record funding of more than £15.1 billion, which is an increase of more than £1 billion, or 5.5 per cent in real terms, compared with the figure for 2024-25. Local authorities have to look at all the choices they have and at the issues that affect the delivery of public services, and that is exactly what Dumfries and Galloway Council will do. The administration in Dumfries and Galloway is led by my party, and I am very proud of the work of my party leadership in Dumfries and Galloway. It has taken over from the Conservatives, and everyone who takes over from the Conservatives has to clean up the mess that the Conservatives leave behind them.

Let me just say to Mr Hoy that it is a bit rich for him to come to this Parliament asking for more money for local government when he is not even prepared to vote for the money that we have put in place. That is yet more hypocrisy from the Conservatives.

Online Child Abuse

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): The First Minister will be aware of the chief constable's comments to the Criminal Justice Committee this week that reports of online child abuse have more than doubled in the past year. The chief executive of Children First, Mary Glasgow, has said that Scotland is sleepwalking into the digital destruction of childhood.

How will the young people of Scotland see the First Minister and his Government commit to meeting this crisis? How will the Scottish Government draw on children's services, education, child protection, justice, the third sector and technology companies to solve the crisis?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I acknowledge the seriousness of the point raised with me by Martin Whitfield and the comments made by the chief constable. Police Scotland has adapted and changed its presence and the composition of its staff to ensure that it has more capability to interrupt the networks that Mr Whitfield raises with us. I pay tribute to Police Scotland in that respect.

The child sexual abuse and exploitation national strategic group, which comprises operational partners including Police Scotland, is taking forward a series of priorities and actions to prevent and disrupt child sexual abuse and provide support to victims and their families. I assure Mr Whitfield of my Government's determination to work with all relevant partners—including Mary Glasgow, whom I met yesterday and who is a fantastic individual and advocate on behalf of children—to do everything in our powers to address the situation.

However—I do not make this point in any way pejoratively; I make it deadly seriously—the regulation of social media companies is the preserve of the United Kingdom Government and Ofcom. I will be the most trenchant supporter of the toughest measures that the UK Government puts in place to regulate those individuals and organisations. The UK Government is taking steps in the Online Safety Act 2023, but we will be prepared to work with the UK Government to maximise the effectiveness of those measures. I assure Mr Whitfield that we will take all the actions that we can, but we also need to take the toughest stance on social media companies, because there is lawlessness out there online. That lawlessness is damaging our children and must be arrested.

Jobs Cuts (North-East)

Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): A recent report from Aberdeen and Grampian Chamber of Commerce found that one in four businesses in the north-east has cut jobs as a result of the United Kingdom Labour Government's fiscal regime. Does the First Minister agree that the UK Labour Government must urgently change course to protect the supply chain and local jobs? What steps can the Scottish Government take to protect industry and livelihoods in the north-east?

The First Minister (John Swinney): As I recounted in my answers to Mr Greer, a significant economic challenge is coming to individuals who

are employed in the North Sea oil and gas sector, which is why the issues that Audrey Nicoll raises are so serious. There is an opportunity for us to build the renewable industries and clean energies of the future, and the Scottish Government is taking that forward. However, we have to ensure that that activity is aligned with activities in relation to the oil and gas sector.

The energy profits levy, which has been a key part of UK Government interventions, was always supposed to be a temporary measure. Anyone looking at the performance of the levy could demonstrate that there are significant issues with its performance in relation to the UK's public finances that are also having an effect on employment in the oil and gas sector. There has to be a careful reassessment of the energy profits levy, and I encourage the UK Government to do that.

Ambulance Response Times (Galloway)

Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): Last week, a receptionist in a local general practitioner surgery in Galloway in my constituency had to call 999 for an ambulance for a patient. It took more than 55 minutes for that call to be answered and, when it was answered, the receptionist was told that there would be a four-hour wait for an ambulance. That does not even take into consideration the one-hour drive to the nearest accident and emergency department. First Minister, can you imagine being with a loved one who has suffered a heart attack, a stroke or an asthma attack and having to wait almost an hour just to have your 999 call answered? What reassurance can you give my constituents that they can expect a fit-for-purpose emergency response, both in getting through to 999 and in receiving timely ambulance care? There is no way that 55 minutes is an emergency response. What urgent action will the First Minister take to stop such unacceptable delays?

The Presiding Officer: Through the chair, please.

The First Minister (John Swinney): If Mr Carson wants to furnish me with the details of the specific case, I will examine it, because waiting that length of time for a call to be answered sounds completely unacceptable to me. I will look at the case, if Mr Carson gives me the details.

The median response time for purple calls is 7 minutes and 51 seconds. The Scottish Ambulance Service will work extremely hard to ensure that it meets the public's expectations.

Accident and Emergency Wait Times (Glasgow)

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab): Last week, one of my constituents waited for more than six hours, after presenting at A and E with significant blood loss and severe pain. Not only was he left for hours, but he was kept on a plastic chair with no blanket or pain relief. Having lost blood, he was extremely cold and could have become hypothermic.

Another constituent attended A and E following gallbladder removal. She had been vomiting, was in agony and had not been to the toilet for ages. She was left sitting in a corridor without pain relief or medical attention for an entire day.

Those constituents do not need apologies—they need action. What specific action will the First Minister take to ensure that my constituents get seen quickly, are warm, comfortable and given appropriate pain relief, and are not abandoned in a corridor to fend for themselves while they wait?

The First Minister (John Swinney): The action that I take is the action that I take every single week, which is that I meet the leadership of the national health service to press for the strongest possible performance in our national health service. As I explained to Mr Sarwar a moment ago, the fruits of that activity are that we now see falling waiting lists, a reduction in long waits and more people being treated in our national health service. That will be the focus of my attention.

On Tuesday, the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care and I met the chief executives of all the national health service boards around the country to reiterate the importance of timely attention to scheduled and unscheduled care. It is unscheduled care that Pam Duncan-Glancy raises with me. That, along with maternity issues, was the subject of discussion with the health service leadership, and that will continue to be my focus.

Energy Prices (Sizewell C Nuclear Plant)

Michael Matheson (Falkirk West) (SNP): The First Minister will be aware that energy bills across Scotland have risen yet again. That increase has been partly caused by the United Kingdom Labour Government's costly nuclear tax that we are now paying for Sizewell C—the world's most expensive nuclear plant. It is estimated that it will cost Scottish households something in the region of £300 million over the next decade alone. What assessment has the Scottish Government made of the impact that that will have on Scottish households, and does the First Minister agree that further expansion of nuclear power will bring not only environmental risks but the risk of pushing up energy prices even further?

The First Minister: That issue lies at the heart of the choices that are to be made about our energy future. That is why I believe that expanding our renewables, storage, hydrogen and carbon capture activities will help us to build an affordable, resilient and clean energy system. That is why I do not support the development of nuclear power resources in Scotland: I think that they are expensive and we have alternative sources that are much cheaper.

The practical effect of all that is that a Labour Government that pledged to cut bills by £300 has presided over an increase of bills of £190 since the general election. Let us hear that again: the Labour Government promised to reduce bills by £300 but they have gone up by £190. No wonder the people of this country do not trust the Labour Party in Scotland.

The Presiding Officer: I will take two further brief questions.

Public Office (Accountability) Bill

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): Earlier this week, I wrote to the First Minister urging the Scottish Government to support the Public Office (Accountability) Bill—the so-called Hillsborough law—and to lodge a legislative consent motion so that its provisions can be fully applied to Scotland. The bill, which has now passed its second reading in the House of Commons, establishes a statutory duty of candour for everyone in public office and guarantees parity of legal representation and non-means-tested legal aid for families that are impacted by state failures. Will the First Minister ensure that families in Scotland are not left at a disadvantage in seeking truth and justice?

The First Minister (John Swinney): The Scottish Government is in dialogue with the United Kingdom Government about the bill. In principle, we support it. We obviously have to go through the process of consideration around legislative consent, which the Scottish Government will do in a timeous fashion, and Parliament will of course be engaged in that consideration. It is important that the principles and values that are enshrined in the bill are taken forward.

Asylum Seeker Housing (Cameron Barracks)

Fergus Ewing (Inverness and Nairn) (Ind): Cameron barracks in Inverness is close to the city centre, near two schools and lies in a residential area. Many constituents harbour serious concerns about the Home Office's plans to house up to 300 unchecked males of whatever colour—their concerns are not born of racism. Will the First Minister do something that he has not done so far and publicly and expressly call on the United Kingdom Government to rethink those proposals,

to abandon Cameron barracks as a location and to work positively with the Scottish Government to come up with a fair, reasonable and suitable location, which many people of compassion in Inverness feel is the right approach?

The First Minister: I assure Mr Ewing that we are engaging constructively with the United Kingdom Government on the housing of asylum seekers, and particularly on the Cameron barracks proposal. The social justice secretary answered a question in some detail on the issue in the Parliament, setting out the importance of dialogue in ensuring that the legitimate issues and practical concerns that I understand the Highland Council will debate today are properly and fully addressed.

The social justice secretary also had a conversation with the UK Government on Tuesday morning, in which she set out the range of practical questions that must be explored to address the issues that Mr Ewing is, understandably, raising on behalf of his constituents. However, I have to say—and I say this for transparency in the Parliament—that there has been no substantive, detailed response to the legitimate points that have been made. The starting point for any consideration of the matter must be substantive engagement on the issues of substance so that members of the public in the Inverness area, the Highland Council and the Scottish Government can come to a conclusion on a matter that must be addressed.

Asylum seekers are housed in the city of Perth, right in the heart of my own constituency, and they are supported with appropriate arrangements. I therefore recognise that the task must be undertaken, but there has to be good and substantive engagement with communities and public authorities. Regrettably, in relation to Cameron barracks, such engagement has been completely absent from the United Kingdom Government's approach.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes First Minister's questions.

The next item of business will be a members' business debate, in the name of Audrey Nicoll. There will now be a short suspension to allow those who are leaving the chamber and the public galleries to do so.

12:51

Meeting suspended.

12:53

On resuming—

Protecting Scotland's Rivers

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The next item of business is a members' business debate on motion S6M-19194, in the name of Audrey Nicoll, on protecting Scotland's rivers. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament believes that Scotland has abundant rivers and streams, which support a diverse ecosystem and are the lifeblood of the landscape and central to the nation's brand, economy and sense of place; considers that they are now one of the country's most nature-depleted and endangered habitats; believes that this has arisen from a range of factors, including major flood events, water scarcity and increasing temperatures; expresses its concern regarding what it sees as the devastating decline in the population of freshwater pearl mussels in Scotland's rivers, including the River Dee, which flows through the Aberdeen South and North Kincardine constituency; notes the commitment of organisations, including the James Hutton Institute, Dee Catchment Partnership, Dee District Salmon Fishery Board and Cairngorm National Park Authority, to make the freshwaters and freshwater pearl mussel population more resilient to extreme climate events; believes that there is an opportunity provided by the Natural Environment (Scotland) Bill to establish a legal framework for biodiversity targets, including in the freshwater ecosystem to ensure healthy invertebrate diversity as an integral part of a fully functioning ecosystem; welcomes the Programme for Government commitment to extend the Nature Restoration Fund to enable funding of multi-year projects to help deliver the priorities set out in the Biodiversity Strategy, and commends everyone working to restore and protect Scotland's rivers.

12:53

Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): I thank colleagues from across the chamber for supporting my motion on protecting Scotland's rivers. My thanks go, too, to Susan Cooksley from the James Hutton Institute, and Craig Macadam and Rebecca Lewis from Buglife for their support in developing the motion. I also commend the many organisations, some of which are referred to in the motion, and individuals who are working hard to protect our wonderful rivers.

As the motion says, our rivers provide Scotland with stunning landscapes and a huge ecosystem of animals, plants and micro-organisms. They flow from our mountains through our glens, they cross our lowlands and they eventually reach the sea. They are the lifeblood of the landscape and are central to Scotland's brand, economy and sense of place. However, our rivers are under threat, causing them to become more nature depleted than ever before. Flooding is among the largest threats to Scotland's rivers, eroding the soil from riverbanks and leading to the destruction of habitats.

As the nature champion for the freshwater pearl mussel, I draw members' attention to the findings of a 2023 NatureScot report centred on freshwater pearl mussels in the River Dee, which runs through my constituency of Aberdeen South and North Kincardine. The report found that the mussel population had decreased by 90 per cent since 2002. For context, more than 1 million freshwater pearl mussels have been lost, which is a truly shocking amount. The report links that decline to the devastating effects of storm Frank in 2015, which caused significant damage to the river bed, rendering it largely unsuitable for mussels. The River Dee is the only river in Scotland to have suffered such a loss. However, our other rivers are similarly vulnerable.

Although significant flooding is a natural and important feature of a river's hydrology, flood events used to be infrequent, occurring once in a generation. However, there has been a marked increase in the frequency and severity of floods. The same climate pressures that have led to increased flooding also contribute to water scarcity. During periods of drought, our rivers face severe stress. Reduced water levels, rising temperatures and lower oxygen concentrations combine to create harsh conditions for aquatic life. Additionally, pollutants become more concentrated, further degrading water quality. Although all river species are affected, those that are unable to move, such as mussels, are especially vulnerable.

Water scarcity poses a significant risk to Scotland's rivers, and the risk will grow as climate change accelerates. Just this year, we experienced our driest spring in 60 years, leaving the entirety of Scotland in varying degrees of drought. Rivers used to be able to rely on snowmelt from the mountains to ensure healthy and cooler water levels. However, due to rising temperatures, that is no longer the case. In summer 2018, it is estimated that 70 per cent of Scotland's rivers experienced temperatures exceeding 23°C. That figure is notable, as it is the temperature at which Atlantic salmon exhibit thermal stress. It is of concern that the Met Office is projecting that similar conditions could impact our rivers every other year by 2050.

Many of our native species require colder river temperatures in which to live. As such, riparian woodland expansion not only benefits biodiversity and the overall habitat but provides much-needed shade to cool our river waters. I commend the River Dee Trust on its work to expand riparian woodland along the river. That work is absolutely vital to the long-term survival of Dee salmon. Salmon, of course, host pearl mussel larvae until they drop off, sink to the river bed and grow into mussels. Many such projects are already supported through, for example, the Scottish

Government's nature restoration fund; the Riverwoods initiative, which co-ordinates nationwide efforts to restore and protect Scotland's riverbank woodlands; and the peatland action project, which supports the improvement of degraded peatlands across Scotland. The Natural Environment (Scotland) Bill offers an opportunity to establish a legal framework for biodiversity targets, including in the freshwater ecosystem. However, an even greater scale of action is urgently needed.

My call to action is to build on the work that is already under way and to develop a national approach to make our rivers and freshwater populations even more resilient to extreme climate events. Further still, considerations could be given to land management policies that drive evidence-based, prioritised catchment-scale management, development of riparian woodland and the diversification of upland land use to protect our natural water stores.

I believe that that aligns with the recently published Scottish Environment LINK report, entitled "Restoring Scotland's Waters", which highlights 10 key areas for improving Scotland's freshwater ecosystems, including adopting a source-to-sea approach, restoring natural processes to rivers and lochs and tackling invasive non-native species. I look forward to hearing the cabinet secretary's response to that proposition.

The future of our rivers depends on the actions that we take today. The devastating decline of freshwater pearl mussels in the River Dee serves as a stark indicator that change is urgently needed. Our rivers are crucial to sustaining Scotland's unique wildlife and biodiversity. More than that, they are central to Scotland's brand, economy and sense of place.

I again thank members for their support in lodging the motion for debate. I very much look forward to hearing colleagues' contributions.

13:00

Alexander Burnett (Aberdeenshire West)
(Con): I refer members to my entry in the register of members' interests regarding the River Dee.

I previously had the privilege of serving as the Scottish Environment LINK species champion for the freshwater pearl mussel, and I am delighted that Audrey Nicoll has taken on that role and has brought today's debate to the chamber. I support the motion, which addresses the urgent need to protect our rivers and the species that depend on them.

The River Dee is recognised as a special area of conservation for its efforts to protect Atlantic salmon, freshwater pearl mussels and otters.

Despite its protected status, the River Dee remains in crisis. Wild Atlantic salmon numbers have dropped to critical levels—NatureScot reports a 70 per cent decline in population over the past 25 years. Atlantic salmon are now officially classified as an endangered species in Scotland, yet they play a central role in our ecosystem and economy. Wild fisheries contribute more than £100 million annually to the national economy—supporting jobs, tourism and local businesses. The Dee alone accounts for £15 million of that, and it plays a vital role in the north-east economy and the constituency of Aberdeenshire West.

In 2022, the Scottish Government published its wild salmon strategy, but, since then, we have seen no meaningful action. External damage is caused by sewage spills, but monitoring of Scottish Water's activities on the Dee is almost completely absent.

Further damage is caused by the salmon farming industry. The recent storm Amy saw 75,000 farmed salmon escape, to the detriment of wild salmon. The dangers of salmon farming are clear, and I am glad to see this morning that, even if the Scottish Government will not act, the King has continued his purge of titles by removing his royal warrant from Mowi, Scotland's largest salmon farm. The move is described as “a wake-up call” by campaigners and is one that I hope spurs the Government into action. However, we need a positive strategy that focuses on restoring wild stocks through hatchery support and habitat restoration.

One of the most urgent threats that Scotland's rivers face today is seal predation. Seals are now frequently observed far upstream in the Dee, even as far up as Banchory, where they are causing significant damage to already vulnerable salmon stocks. I have received a substantial volume of correspondence from constituents, who raise serious concerns about the increased seal activity.

To understand the issue, we must first understand the numbers. Seals eat between 4,000 and 5,000 salmon on the Dee each year, and a salmon will lay more than 6,000 eggs; therefore, the river is losing about 24 million eggs each year. The Dee's catch this year was 1,500 salmon, and its population is only 11,000 salmon. Despite 45 per cent of the Dee's salmon stock being removed by seals, the Scottish Government has stated that seal control is unnecessary. That directly contradicts the commitments that were made in April 2024, when NatureScot, the marine directorate and Fisheries Management Scotland acknowledged the problem and pledged to find solutions by October. That deadline has passed, yet seal predation continues unchecked.

The Government's third review of the seal licensing system, which was published in September, recognises that even a small number of seals can have a damaging impact on wild salmon populations. The same review recommends clearer guidance and more flexible licensing options for conservation purposes, specifically to address seal-salmon interaction in rivers. However, feedback to an application this year showed that NatureScot views seal control as unnecessary. Will the cabinet secretary correct that and commit to real action? Will the cabinet secretary listen to Deeside and ensure that seal licensing is not just considered but progressed, before the conservation of Scotland's endangered salmon is added to the ever-growing list of Scottish National Party failures?

13:05

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): I thank Audrey Nicoll for her motion and for securing the debate this afternoon. As the Scottish Environment LINK nature champion for ponds and small lochs—I am the natterjack toad champion, as well—I have a particular interest in today's debate. Dumfries and Galloway is home to some of our country's most spectacular and important rivers and waterways, from the Ken and the Dee, whose power is harnessed through forward-thinking hydro schemes that were built nearly a century ago, to the Liddel and the Sark, which have formed the border with our neighbours to the south for centuries.

As Audrey Nicoll's motion makes clear, the biodiversity of our waterways is crucial to ensure not only that the areas they are in have a blossoming ecosystem but that we, as humans, are able to enjoy what they have to offer. That was not always the case. As a society, we have a lot to be proud of when it comes to the improvement of the cleanliness and sustainability of our rivers in the past years. Not so long ago, rivers such as the Clyde and the Carron could well have carried a Government health warning next to their lifebuoys. We had built industries—not just in the central belt but in our more rural communities—that used our waterways as dumping grounds and made biodiversity a bit of science fiction.

In my region, the work of organisations such as the Galloway Fisheries Trust has been hugely important and a local cornerstone of the wider work that is going on nationally. The existence of the trust is a demonstration of how our use of river resources and the conservation of our rivers go hand in hand. Without the coming together of local district salmon boards in Dumfries and Galloway, the trust would not exist.

The value of freshwater fishing to fragile, rural local economies is huge. We have a world-quality

offering of that, and anglers from around the world come to experience it. If our waterways and rivers become biodiversity deserts, we lose not only the natural resource but the economic benefits that it brings.

Groups such as the Galloway Fisheries Trust are not just helping to clean up water. They are working to eradicate invasive non-native species such as Japanese knotweed and giant hogweed, both of which can have huge and devastating impacts on the wildlife along the riverbanks as well as destroy riverbanks through degradation and erosion, forever changing the local environment. Anyone who has tried to buy or sell a house where Japanese knotweed has been found will tell you the huge challenges that it brings. Therefore, although the primary aim of such work might be to protect our natural environment along waterways, it can also bring big economic and social benefits that might not be immediately connected to biodiversity.

The on-going scrutiny and passage of the Natural Environment (Scotland) Bill will, I am sure, result in an act that will put nature restoration and biodiversity in our waterways at the heart of Government policy. As climate change figures increasingly in our public policy and decision making, we have to protect the balance in nature, which, as Audrey Nicoll's motion says, is,

"the lifeblood of the landscape and central to the nation's brand".

This debate reminds me of the work that Galloway Fisheries Trust is engaged in—lots of research and lots of projects. I have lodged a motion to recognise one of its recent initiatives, called flowing forward—restoring Galloway's rivers. When I recently met the trust's chief executive, Jamie Ribbens, and its chair, Mark Davies, they told me all about some of the work that was going ahead. Jamie described a local project in the River Bladnoch. A farmer there had said that the land was not productive. However, once Galloway Fisheries Trust started its work to remeander the river, do riparian repair and increase the area's biodiversity, the farmer changed his mind about what "productivity" means—in his mind, it had been only about farming rather than biodiversity and nature restoration.

Galloway Fisheries Trust has also engaged in a temperature-checking project for local rivers, which Audrey Nicoll described. Temperatures have reached more than 30°C in some of our waterways. There is lots to talk about, and I am celebrating Galloway Fisheries Trust today.

13:10

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): I congratulate Audrey Nicoll, the member for Aberdeen South and North Kincardine, on her excellent members' business motion and particularly for highlighting the concerns in relation to the River Dee. Those concerns give light to wider issues to do with the river basin management planning process in Scotland and how we are dealing with improvements to water quality and riverine protection in the country. The Government's policy seems to be centred around the Scottish Environment Protection Agency's management of river basin management plans, but there is a lack of clarity on how those integrate and on how SEPA can be held accountable for them, and that situation certainly requires improvement.

I had recent cause to engage with this somewhat esoteric issue through a public petition. One of the great aspects of the Scottish Parliament is that the public petitions process can bring to light a lot of issues that are otherwise obscured by the parliamentary agenda. I particularly commend author Louise Welsh and architect Jude Barber, who have recently produced an amazing award-winning podcast called "Who Owns the Clyde?" They set about establishing, in a fairly iterative way, the complex patterns of land and river ownership. A lot of interesting aspects have been unpacked, which precipitated and stimulated a public petition about the idea of creating legal personhood for the Clyde so that certain rights would be attributed to it. Sadly, the Government was not in agreement with that proposal, and the petition was closed last week.

Nonetheless, the process of discussion and the different stakeholder representations elicited a lot of interesting ideas. The fundamental issues are control and accountability. There is no formal mechanism for all stakeholders—there is a vast number of them—who might have a role to play in a river basin to be represented in a coherent manner. There is a real opportunity for further development. Myriad private owners with significant interests are in control of our river landscapes and hinterlands, but there are no formal obligations for them to engage or consult with stakeholders beyond fairly threadbare planning and statutory obligations, which often do not get considered in the round but are considered in little silos by different local authorities. There is a need for greater oversight. For example, the way in which we have developed the national parks process could be a benchmark for future arrangements for our rivers and river basin management.

The Clyde has a long, complex history. Responsibility for it was originally held by a trust

port that was established in 1770, before coming under the scope of the River Improvement Trust in 1809. It was then further developed by the Clyde Navigation Trust in 1858, which was subsequently privatised in the 1990s. Those bodies were primarily concerned with the development of industry on the river, but wider considerations now need to be brought to the fore.

In the greater Glasgow and Clyde area, we now have the Glasgow city region and its Clyde mission. They have made it clear that they do not have a role in dealing with the preservation and protection of the Clyde. That is not within their remit; they are purely concerned with economic development considerations. The question then turns to who is responsible for preservation and protection and whether that responsibility should be joined up.

Although the minister is likely to refer to the river basin management plan process, I ask her to consider in her response how those responsibilities, particularly in relation to the Clyde, can integrate better with the Glasgow city region that has been established in the past 10 years and its new role in adopting the Clyde mission. I also ask her to consider how we can bring all that together so that the environmental impact of development of the river, rather than just issues of economic development, are brought into the consideration.

Other rivers in the world have such guardianship arrangements, whether that is the River Ouse in England, the River Atrato in Colombia or the River Meuse in the Netherlands. In her 2025 book, "A Barrister for the Earth: Ten Cases of Hope for Our Future", lawyer Monica Feria-Tinta notes that rivers should have rights. We need to recognise that emerging reality and the fact that we need a much more considered approach to the development of our river landscapes in Scotland.

13:14

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): It will not surprise you, Deputy Presiding Officer, that, apart from congratulating my colleague Audrey Nicoll on securing the debate, most of my speech will be dedicated to the River Tweed and its tributaries.

First, however, I will take a wee detour to Galloway—to Rose cottage in Minnigaff. It is where I lived for more than a decade, with two rivers right at the bottom of my garden: the Penkiln and, just beyond it, the Cree. My early experience with rivers was close and observed, with the salmon run in the Cree—the poachers gaffing the fish at night—and the brown trout in the Penkiln when their dorsal fins were exposed to the air because the summer had reduced the river to a

wee stream. I saw scary flooding when the two rivers and the mill that lay beyond merged into a sea, with Rose cottage's garden disappearing below the muddy waters. I saw kingfishers and herons, and I encountered Japanese knotweed for the first time, which was not at that time considered to be an ecological predator.

My love affair with rivers was born then and continues today with the grand old lady: the River Tweed. I even made a point—you might call it a pilgrimage—of going to where it is reckoned the Tweed has its source, which is high above Tweedsmuir, inconspicuous and with not a hint of the grandeur to come.

Our villages and towns have naturally grown around rivers—back then, the rivers were their dual carriageways—but their source of power must not be taken for granted. Two issues that require our attention are pollution—deliberate and casual—and the real and recurring threat of floods where floods did not occur before. We have come to realise that, and not before time.

The Tweed flows 97 miles to the North Sea at Berwick-upon-Tweed, forming part of the boundary between Scotland and England. It travels in my constituency through Peebles, Innerleithen, Walkerburn and Galashiels. It is one of the most ecologically important rivers in the United Kingdom, supporting Atlantic salmon, otter, lamprey and water crowfoot vegetation. Much of the catchment is designated as an area of special conservation and a site of special scientific interest. To this day, even though textile industries, which once perched precariously on its banks, have all but disappeared, it still supports local economies including angling, tourism and agriculture. Of course, it is central to the entire cultural identity of the Borders.

However, the Tweed, like other rivers, faces pressures from diffuse agricultural pollution, invasive non-native species and river bank erosion. Protection and restoration are delivered through co-ordinated catchment management plans under the water framework directive, local action plans, the Scottish Borders habitat action plan and SEPA's Tweed area management plan. Those provide key policy frameworks to protect water quality and habitats.

Flood protection is major. Although sandbanks have not quite been consigned to a superfluous sandbank pile, other more creative methods are being implemented. I reference, as I have done before, the Eddleston Water project, which, by making it wind and through suitable waterside planting, has methodically changed the direction of the water and slowed Eddleston Water's flow onwards to join the Tweed. More of such flood protection is done upstream these days.

From Penkiln to Cree to Tweed, I confess that, for me, there is a romance about rivers. They dictated where we live today, what industries we once had and those that we have now. I am with Mr Sweeney: rivers should have rights, if that does not sound a bit strange.

Again, I thank my colleague Audrey Nicoll for giving me the opportunity to praise rivers and speak about their protection. I cannot have too many debates about rivers.

13:19

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): Christine Grahame is right—there is something about rivers that gets into one's soul. They are really important for the lifeblood of the nation. They are important for the economy, leisure, the environment, biodiversity and the climate—there is a range of sometimes competing demands on them. I like nothing better than running along a riverside, and I have run alongside many in the Borders, so I concur with Christine Grahame.

I congratulate Audrey Nicoll on opening the debate and lodging this motion. The Dee is one of the great rivers; it is a powerful river that contributes significantly not just to the economy of the area—as Alexander Burnett, rightly, highlighted—but its biodiversity.

If anybody is in any doubt that there is climate change, they just have to look at water. In the past few years, we have had everything from devastating floods to water scarcity. That scarcity has had a dramatic impact on the yields of farmers. I had thought that vegetables and potatoes would be impacted, but it turned out—bizarrely—that, in north-east Fife, it was barley yield, of all things, that was affected. That was at a time when the whisky industry was under quite a bit of strain and taking less of that commodity. Nevertheless, the impact of climate change is very clear.

What has come through from all contributions to the debate, including Paul Sweeney's, is the wide diversity of rivers. They are not all the same; they have different topographies, sizes, flows, soil types, economic value and surrounding populations. Therefore, we need different answers for every river.

I have heard people talk many times about Eddleston Water, which is a great project. They keep telling me that the same approach would apply to the River Eden in Fife, but there are so many differences between the Borders and Fife, and we should not think that simple, well-worked and successful solutions in one part of the country will apply without change to other parts of the country. I want a plan for every different type of area.

Solutions to flooding, for instance, are very clear. We have seen from infrastructure projects just how much money we are spending on flood prevention schemes—the cost is soaring. We cannot afford to do those things everywhere, so we need to look at natural flood management systems. However, I feel that we are not even at the races when it comes to discussing with farmers and landowners exactly what will work in their area. I know that it takes a lot of work to get down to that level, but river basin and catchment management plans are just so remote—they are way above everything else, and they do not involve discussions with landowners at ground level in the way that is needed to change their practice. Secondly, there are no incentives for them to change. Why would they? They know what they know about how to work their land, and they need to be encouraged and incentivised to make changes to the way in which they operate.

Just now, we are not making any such changes. Two years after the devastating flood in Cupar in my constituency, not very much has changed. We have lots of talk and lots of plans—a Cupar flood study is coming up—but I have not seen very much actual change.

I pay tribute to the River Eden Sustainability Partnership, which is working with landowners on removing invasive species from that river. It is doing some really good—and hard—work, and if we can get a partnership approach going between it, the farmers and all who have an interest in the river, we might be getting somewhere.

13:23

The Cabinet Secretary for Climate Action and Energy (Gillian Martin): What a great debate this has been about Scotland's rivers, and I thank Audrey Nicoll for it. I always like such debates, in which people champion things in their constituencies and regions, and I agree wholeheartedly with Christine Grahame and Willie Rennie about rivers being part of our identity and where we live.

Members will forgive me if I squeeze in some mentions of rivers in my constituency; I know that I am not really supposed to speak in terms of my constituency, but I cannot talk about rivers without occasionally mentioning the Ythan and the Don.

I am in no doubt that members recognise the vital importance of protecting Scotland's rivers and streams. The Tay, the Forth, the Spey, the Dee, the Don, the Ythan, the Eden and the Tweed have all been mentioned, and they support the nation's economy. Thousands of jobs in rural communities are directly dependent on the food, drink, tourism and recreation industries that our rivers sustain, so

any problems with the rivers will have massive knock-on effects.

I am very alive to Willie Rennie's discussion of water scarcity, its impact on yields and the additional stress that it put on farmers, who, basically, were told that they could not take any water from rivers over certain periods. Rivers on the east coast, in particular, were at very low levels until recently.

The case for biodiversity is beyond dispute. Rivers and their flood plains support the highly diverse habitats and ecosystems of otters, salmon, dippers and damselflies.

Humans thrive in rivers, too. I hope that members will forgive me for mentioning that one of my most treasured recent memories of my late sister is of our swimming in the frankly perishing River Dee at Cambus o' May two years ago. The water was not 23° on that summer day, I can tell you.

Indeed, I also want to mention wild swimming and how Scotland has become the destination for that activity, with people from across the UK coming to swim in our rivers. Swimming, wild or otherwise, is one of the best things to do in Scotland, and people are coming here for that new and trendy pastime. The fact is that Scotland's rivers are respected and loved by people from well beyond our borders.

I have heard today about the on-going threats to our river environments and the species that depend on them. The freshwater pearl mussel has been mentioned, as has the Dee salmon. I recently met representatives of the River Dee Trust to discuss some of its suggestions for protecting salmon in that area, and I was also very interested to hear what Emma Harper had to say in her speech about what the Galloway Fisheries Trust has been doing.

In fact, I want to note the importance of river trusts throughout the country and of the incredible work that volunteers do, particularly in tackling invasive non-native species. Giant hogweed is a real threat to our riverbanks; it is nasty stuff, and it is particularly difficult to handle. It seeds at an alarming rate; in fact, it is almost a Sisyphean task to deal with it, and I commend the work done by river trusts in keeping giant hogweed and other species down.

At this point, I want to mention the Scottish invasive species initiative, which is a groundbreaking partnership led by NatureScot to tackle the problem alongside rivers. It covers a third of Scotland's total area, and phase 2, in 2023, was awarded more than £2 million under the nature restoration fund.

I am pleased that so many people have mentioned the importance of that fund and the work that is being done on our rivers. The fund is a key lever in delivering our biodiversity strategy; it has funded numerous projects from the remeandering of rivers to the creation and restoration of ponds and wetlands, which enhance biodiversity. I was very interested in what Christine Grahame had to say about the tributaries coming into the Tweed, and I know of some particularly impressive work that has been done through the River Peffery catchment restoration programme near Dingwall.

Some members mentioned the Natural Environment (Scotland) Bill and the statutory targets. We will have plenty of time to talk about what we do in that regard over the coming months; the targets are challenging but achievable, and they will be developed using expert advice with significant stakeholder engagement. I do encourage volunteers involved in river trusts to get involved in the scrutiny of that bill.

I will take on board Paul Sweeney's comments about integrating river management with plans. A lot is happening in and around the Clyde—and Mr Sweeney might know that my parents are from Clydebank. The Clyde looks in a lot better shape now than it did in the 1970s.

Paul Sweeney: I certainly agree that the river has improved substantially. We now see much more wildlife, particularly on the upper Clyde, than one would have done half a century ago, given how poisoned it was with the effects of a century of heavy industry.

The petitioners I referred to in my speech were seeking for the role of the Clyde mission partnership board to evolve, purely to consider economic development projects around the city region and the wider issue of the integration of environmental protection. Perhaps the cabinet secretary could consider that opportunity with the city region.

Gillian Martin: Certainly, and that gives me the opportunity to mention that Glasgow City Council and its partners, have been shortlisted for a 2025 nature of Scotland award in the nature and climate action category, in recognition of the innovative work that the council has been doing to tackle flooding while boosting biodiversity through nature-based solutions. That also involves canals, of which Glasgow has many.

By anchoring the health of our rivers, streams, lochs and wetlands in our biodiversity strategy and delivery plan, the Government has demonstrated its commitment to tackling the biodiversity crisis and protecting our magnificent rivers, species and habitats that the strategy and delivery plan support.

A point that came out of the speeches by Christine Grahame and Willie Rennie—in fact, it came out of everyone's speeches, from Alexander Burnett to Audrey Nicoll—is that we cannot take the health of our rivers for granted, because the health of our communities very often depends on it. We can see the effects of climate change in water scarcity or in high levels of flooding in winter—indeed, Willie Rennie made that point, too—so we have to do everything that we can to protect and cherish rivers all the more.

I thank Audrey Nicoll for bringing this debate to the Parliament.

13:30

Meeting suspended.

14:00

On resuming—

Portfolio Question Time

Social Justice and Housing

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): Good afternoon. The first item of business this afternoon is portfolio question time, and, on this occasion, the portfolio is social justice and housing. I invite members who wish to ask a supplementary question to press their request-to-speak buttons during the relevant question.

Welfare Payments (Projection)

1. **Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government what projection it has made of the cost of welfare payments after 2030. (S6O-05114)

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice (Shirley-Anne Somerville): Social security spending is an investment in the people of Scotland, as it provides vital support to disabled people, unpaid carers and children and families in poverty. The current forecast for social security expenditure in 2030-31 is £9.3 billion. That is about £2 billion more than the funding that we will receive from the United Kingdom Government through the social security block grant adjustment. The additional investment is less than 3.5 per cent of the overall Scottish Government resource budget.

In April 2025, the Scottish Fiscal Commission published its “Fiscal Sustainability Report”, in which it set out long-term projections for devolved public spending through to 2074–75. By the very nature of those projections, which extend over almost 50 years, there are inherent uncertainties.

Stephen Kerr: The inherent uncertainties are down to the Government's whole approach, which was highlighted last week by the Auditor General for Scotland, when he warned that the Scottish National Party Government is papering over the cracks with one-off savings and underspends and is taking a short-term approach that is not supporting fiscal sustainability.

Audit Scotland has reported that, by 2029-30, there will be a £4.7 billion funding gap, £2 billion of which will come from rising welfare costs, and that the Government does not even have a clear plan to manage the £770 million overspend on adult disability payment. Scotland cannot afford that benefits bill. Does the cabinet secretary agree with the Scottish Conservatives that the only sustainable route out of poverty is work, not ever-higher welfare spending?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Not for the first time, Stephen Kerr fails to grasp the basic foundations of the social security system. Adult disability payments are provided to support people with the additional costs of having a disability or a long-term condition. A person's being in receipt of adult disability payments is not reliant on their being in or out of work. Indeed, adult disability payments support people by enabling them to afford to have transport to or support for their employment—that is what disabled people's organisations have told me.

Stephen Kerr referred to an overspend on adult disability payment. As the Auditor General has pointed out, that is because we have a system that supports people to apply for what they are eligible for and that provides for people who were too timid to come forward to the Department for Work and Pensions because they feared the DWP system. If Mr Kerr thinks that we should not spend that money on disabled people, it is up to him to explain that to voters. However, this Government will continue to support Scotland's disabled people.

Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): I am proud that, while Westminster Conservative Governments and Westminster Labour Governments clearly believe that cutting benefits for disabled people and carers is a vote winner, the SNP Scottish Government is leading by example and delivering a social security system that is based on dignity, fairness and respect. The delivery of such a system was supported unanimously by the Parliament.

Ahead of the UK budget, will the cabinet secretary commit to continuing to do all that she can to protect the most vulnerable from further Westminster austerity?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I again point out that Stephen Kerr's questions suggest that he and the Tories believe that we should take money away from disabled people, given that he seems to want cuts to be made to adult disability payment. That process is continuing under the current UK Government, which has already put in place cuts for disabled people through universal credit, which, of course, continues to be reserved. In addition, there is talk about threats of changing the tax on Motability cars in the UK budget, which would impact people in Scotland.

Disabled people in Scotland are greatly concerned that funding for the reserved section that remains in our social security system will be cut, which would put them at a disadvantage and could cause them extreme difficulties.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Rachael Hamilton.

Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): I am sorry, Deputy Presiding Officer—my question is number 6.

Two-child Benefit Cap (Impact on Children)

2. Marie McNair (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government, regarding its plans for mitigation, how the United Kingdom Government's two-child benefit cap is impacting children in Clydebank and Milngavie. (S6O-05115)

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice (Shirley-Anne Somerville): The latest data from the Department for Work and Pensions, in May 2025, suggests that about 1,500 children in Clydebank and Milngavie live in households that are affected by the two-child cap.

The Scottish Government's national mission is to eradicate child poverty, but the two-child cap has been a key driver of poverty among children and their families in Scotland. That is why, subject to parliamentary approval, applications for our two-child limit payment will be taken from March 2026. Our payment will help to keep thousands of children out of poverty and reduce the depths of poverty faced by many more.

Marie McNair: It is appalling that so many children in my constituency have been scarred by that brutal policy, so it is no wonder that our plans to mitigate it have been welcomed by so many. The Child Poverty Action Group estimates that 30,000 children have been pushed into poverty because of the UK Government's continuation of that approach. Put simply, it is Labour's policy that those children should never have been born.

Will the cabinet secretary continue to make representations to the UK Government in advance of the budget and call for it to find some compassion and end that policy, which is harming children and hindering their long-term opportunities and life chances?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Indeed. It should not be for the Scottish Government to have to, once more, mitigate the worst excesses of Westminster austerity—which is what we are seeing again under the Labour Government. The Scottish Government is not alone in asking the UK Government to end the two-child cap. We stand with the United Nations, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, Save the Children UK and the Child Poverty Action Group, all of which are making that call to ensure that the UK Government hears loud and clear that the two-child limit should be scrapped immediately. It must be remembered that, although we can mitigate, we cannot scrap the cap here and that, under Labour, the rape clause will continue to exist.

Glasgow Housing Supply

3. Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government whether it considers that housing supply in Glasgow will keep up with the predicted 10 per cent rise in population by 2032. (S6O-05116)

The Cabinet Secretary for Housing (Màiri McAllan): As the statutory housing authority, Glasgow City Council is responsible for assessing the local housing requirements of all tenures as part of its local housing strategy, as well as for keeping its strategy under review. The local housing strategy should be informed by a robust housing need and demand assessment that takes into account key evidence, such as existing need and supply, and future household projections.

Paul Sweeney: Glasgow declared a housing emergency and has been in that emergency since 2023. Unfortunately, the Government's decision in 2024-25 to cut funding for the affordable housing supply programme by a quarter has had a significant effect on the pipeline of housing in the city.

Today, Glasgow City Council has approved a five-year plan for the construction of almost 6,400 new affordable homes, 75 per cent of which will be for social rent. It has also identified an additional series of sites that will allow for a further 4,648 homes to be developed. At a stretch, the cost of that will be £1.6 billion in capital investment, but the core plan will cost about £890 million. Will the cabinet secretary confirm that she will support that baseline plan and do what she can to push further towards the stretch target of £1.6 billion of funding to get those additional homes? As a baseline, we need 11,559 homes to be built in Glasgow.

Màiri McAllan: I am pleased to hear that that approach has been confirmed by Glasgow City Council. It builds on Scotland's reputation for, and experience of, the delivery of affordable homes—for example, the Government has supported the delivery of more than 140,000 affordable homes since we came into office. Everything that the Government has been doing, particularly in relation to the housing emergency action plan, has been about understanding the need to step up that delivery and to put in place the funding to do that.

We have boosted Glasgow City Council's budget this year by more than £24 million so that it can acquire properties and bring them into use. That brings the council's total budget allocation for the affordable housing supply programme to more than £127 million in this financial year.

Pensioner Poverty (Social Security)

4. Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government how it is using the Scottish social

security system to alleviate poverty among pensioners. (S6O-05117)

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice (Shirley-Anne Somerville): We are delivering real support to pensioners across Scotland by investing about £157 million to help approximately 880,000 pensioners stay warm during the coldest months. Unlike in the rest of the United Kingdom, eligible low-income households across Scotland, including pensioner households, are also guaranteed support through our winter heating payment.

We have issued more than £33 million since launching the pension-age disability payment to help to mitigate the additional costs that are incurred by older disabled people and by those with long-term health conditions. Meanwhile, take-up rates for pension credit remain low, and I urge the UK Government to do more to promote that reserved benefit.

Bob Doris: I am glad that the cabinet secretary mentioned pension credit, which is key to supporting low-income households, including those with pensioners, but which often goes unclaimed, as she indicated. Benefit criteria are also too restrictive at times.

What can the Scottish Government do to assist with the take-up of pension credit, although it is a reserved benefit? Will the cabinet secretary say how the commitments on pension credit that are included in the Scottish Government paper "A Fresh Start with Independence" could ensure that pensioners get the support that they need?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Although the responsibility for pension credit ultimately lies with the UK Government and the Department for Work and Pensions, we will continue to explore the opportunities to raise the awareness of people in Scotland of that payment—once again, we are doing the UK Government's job for it.

The Scottish Government is delivering a benefit take-up strategy, and I hope that the DWP could have a similar strategy, to include pension credit. As Mr Doris has highlighted, our paper "A Fresh Start with Independence" demonstrated how the social security system could be improved. For example, steps could be taken in the early years to ensure that people receive the pension credit that they are entitled to, and those steps could include issuing invitations to apply for pension credit to everyone who is approaching state pension age, which would be a proactive role to increase the take-up of benefits by those who are eligible.

Housing (Fife Council)

5. Annabelle Ewing (Cowdenbeath) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government when it last met the

director of housing at Fife Council and what was discussed. (S6O-05118)

The Cabinet Secretary for Housing (Màiri McAllan): Following my appointment as Cabinet Secretary for Housing, I met representatives of the five councils that face the most sustained housing pressures, which included meeting Fife Council on 10 July. We discussed Fife's local housing emergency, its affordable home supply programme, temporary accommodation and homelessness pressures. Following the development of the housing emergency action plan, I will now meet local authority leaders quarterly, and those meetings will run alongside regular engagement by my officials.

Annabelle Ewing: I am pleased to note that there is indeed regular engagement, which is necessary at this time. However, although the Scottish Government has recently carried out a local adaptations policy delivery review and has more than doubled the funding that is available to local authorities, I fear that my constituents see no improvement whatsoever in Fife. In the recent case of a constituent who had been diagnosed with and treated for cancer, it took Fife Council more than a year even to carry out a survey, far less to install a wet room and shower. That is surely unacceptable. What can the cabinet secretary do to impress on Fife Council the need to bring its failing processes up to scratch, to ensure that people can live safely, and with dignity, in their own homes?

Màiri McAllan: I am sorry to hear of the difficulty that Ms Ewing's constituent has experienced and I personally send them my best wishes. The Government wants everyone who requires an adaptation to be able to access that quickly, easily and in a way that meets their needs, which is why we increased the adaptations budget for registered social landlords to £20.9 million this year, as Ms Ewing mentioned, and why we have committed to a general review of the adaptations system.

I would be pleased if Ms Ewing and I could discuss the details of her constituent's case, so that I can make representations to Fife Council to find out how that can be progressed.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: There are a couple of supplementary questions.

Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): One key solution to the housing crisis is to empower councils to purchase homes to create more social housing. A report last year found that Fife Council had purchased only four homes in the Dunfermline area and that the council's buy-back scheme was underspent by £3.5 million. What more can the Scottish Government do to ensure

that councils buy up more housing stock to create more affordable homes for their areas?

Màiri McAllan: Although we focus on creating the right conditions for the further development of affordable homes, we understand that we must deliver more now, while those homes are being built. Therefore, our focus in the past few years has been on directly funding councils to assist them both in turning round social housing voids and in acquiring homes on the open market, as Mr Stewart described.

We made £40 million available for that in the previous financial year, which delivered around 1,000 more affordable homes, and in the housing emergency action plan in September we doubled that to a further £80 million. If my figures are correct, that has translated into a further £2.2 million for Fife Council alone, and I would expect it to put the money to that use.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): I agree with Annabelle Ewing about the adaptations process. It takes a very long time for some people to get the adaptations that they need. When the cabinet secretary met Fife Council to discuss the affordable housing programme and other matters, did she give the council more foresight about how much money will be available to it, so that it can plan for the future? I have never seen the housing situation in Fife as bad as it is now, and Fife Council is keen to get on with the work. I hope that the cabinet secretary was able to give it some foresight.

Màiri McAllan: One of the main representations that have been made to me is that multi-annual certainty is needed on funding, because that is essential for people to plan things that are by their nature multi-annual, such as house building. In the housing emergency action plan that the Government produced over the summer, we committed to just that, coupled with a commitment of up to £4.9 billion over the next four years.

The affordable housing supply programme is funded to the tune of £808 million this year, and we have committed on a multi-annual basis up to £4.9 billion over the coming four years. I will be working very closely with councils to ensure that that added certainty results in increased delivery, because I know that our communities need that.

Permitted Development Rights Consultation (New Homes)

6. Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what recent discussions the Cabinet Secretary for Housing has had with the Minister for Public Finance regarding the consultation on permitted development rights to support the provision of new homes. (S6O-05119)

The Cabinet Secretary for Housing (Màiri McAllan): Scottish ministers have regular discussions regarding matters that affect our shared portfolio interests. There is clearly considerable crossover between the Minister for Public Finance and me. We meet regularly to discuss the planning system in respect of housing, and we did so most recently at the meeting of the housing emergency action plan oversight board on Thursday 30 October.

Rachael Hamilton: House-building rates have plummeted under the Scottish National Party. To reverse the decline, I have long campaigned for the extension of permitted development rights to unlock opportunities to grow the rural economy in places such as my constituency in the Scottish Borders by allowing redundant buildings, barns and steadings to be developed and transformed into much-needed homes. Has the cabinet secretary or the Minister for Public Finance assessed how many homes across Scotland could be created to address the SNP's woeful emergency crisis?

Màiri McAllan: On the contrary, the SNP Government has a very strong record on the delivery of affordable homes. I mentioned in an earlier answer that we have delivered more than 140,000 affordable homes since we came into government, 100,000 of which have been for social rent. That is 47 per cent more per head of population than in England and 73 per cent more than in Wales.

However, that is not to say that there is not work to be done. That is why, in my answer to Willie Rennie, I pointed out that we have, for the first time, offered multi-annual funding certainty. We have committed to an uptick in funding and to a suite of developments, including on planning and permitted development rights, which I hope will help to deliver the homes that we need.

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): I recognise that the recently announced housing emergency action plan commits to additional planning actions to accelerate housing delivery. Can the cabinet secretary speak to the positive impact that that is expected to have on the delivery of new homes in Scotland, including in Dumfries and Galloway?

Màiri McAllan: We need our planning system to ensure that the right houses are developed in the right places and to be a facilitator of progress and not a hindrance to it. As well as speaking with the planning minister, I have been having extensive conversations with house builders about their experiences of the planning system.

The Government's actions are being delivered—not least the 23 actions in the planning and the housing emergency delivery plan, which are all

now under way or completed. There are also a number of actions in the housing emergency action plan, which was published on 2 September—not least, my communicating to the heads of planning that I expect an emergency-led approach to be taken and proportionality when dealing with small and medium-sized enterprises, and an important ministerial oversight direction whereby I will observe the application of the national planning framework 4 and will be able to intervene where needed.

Refugees and Asylum Seekers (Community Support)

7. Michelle Thomson (Falkirk East) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what support it is providing to communities to promote cohesion and develop sustainable support networks for refugees and asylum seekers, to help ensure their full participation in civic and community life. (S6O-05120)

The Minister for Equalities (Kaukab Stewart): We are committed to supporting the integration of refugees and people seeking asylum into our communities through our new Scots strategy, which was developed in partnership with the Scottish Refugee Council and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities. We are funding the refugee support service to provide advice, information and resources to new Scots to help them to build networks and social connections.

In addition, the £300,000 of funding that I announced earlier will be used by organisations working across Scotland to strengthen community cohesion and ensure that our communities stand together to reject division and build solidarity by forging coalitions across a wide range of communities in Scotland.

Michelle Thomson: Falkirk has seen sustained anti-refugee protests and counter-protests, resulting in on-going tensions, disruption and division in the wider community. What actions is the Scottish Government taking to tackle the spread of misinformation? Will it work in partnership with Falkirk Council, Police Scotland and any other relevant agencies to mitigate the disruption that is caused by the persistent cycle of protests and counter-protests?

Kaukab Stewart: I am deeply concerned about the harmful rhetoric that we see across the United Kingdom, which has no place in our society. It is vital that we remain united in the face of division and uncertainty so that that narrative has absolutely no place and gathers no traction.

When our communities tell us that they feel unsafe and that they are under pressure, it is our collective responsibility to listen and respond. I outlined earlier the work that we are doing through

our new Scots refugee integration strategy, which has been held up far and wide as a very good example.

We are investing in strengthening our communities, but I call on members—and everyone else—to ensure that we all stand firm against falling for misinformation, check our facts, are mindful of our language and use our platform to ensure that we unite our communities.

House Building (Baseline)

8. Mark Griffin (Central Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what it anticipates to be the baseline figure for its ambition towards all-tenure housing delivery of a 10 per cent increase in house building each year over the next three years. (S6O-05121)

The Cabinet Secretary for Housing (Màiri McAllan): The Government has instituted a new all-tenure delivery ambition. Working with the house building sector through close collaboration, we will seek to increase delivery across all sectors by at least 10 per cent each year during the next three years. As I stated at the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee on 7 October, the figure on which the delivery ambition will be based is that for all-sector new build completions for the year to the end of June 2025. The figure was published on 30 September and is 18,869.

Mark Griffin: That is a welcome change in Government policy. We need to dramatically increase the amount of house building across all tenures. The Government could and should have been more ambitious than that 10 per cent to address the need. However, the key point is the baseline that the cabinet secretary sets out, because numbers in recent years have been so low.

As well as the completion figures, will the Government have targets on approvals and starts to give an all-round target to the housing sector? Can the cabinet secretary set out explicitly how many more houses the Government expects will be built as a result of the three-year target?

Màiri McAllan: I will take the latter point first. We expect 10 per cent increases on the figure each year during the course of the three years. The target is for completions. I will not set one for starts, although we monitor starts, and they will be a strong indication of the number that will ultimately be completed.

Willie Coffey (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP): Mr Griffin must surely recognise that one of the biggest barriers to delivering Scotland's housing fund is the dire economic mismanagement by his Labour colleagues at Westminster, which is about to be laid bare in the next few weeks. Will the cabinet secretary advise

how damaging United Kingdom Government policies, such as increases to employer national insurance and limits to legitimate immigration, are directly impacting on our housing and construction sectors?

Màiri McAllan: UK policies are indeed hindering progress. Immigration is absolutely vital to sustain multiple sectors of the Scottish economy, including construction, and the UK Government's approach has completely failed to recognise Scotland's needs. The same applies to the hike in national insurance contributions—I am sure that all members, when they make visits across Scotland, are being told how damaging that is to businesses and organisations, because it permanently uplifts labour costs.

All that comes atop the incredible economic self-harm of Brexit and the inflationary pressures that have led to construction costs being some 40 per cent higher this year than they were five years ago. I am afraid that that is, as has been set out, just another in the suite of reasons why it will always be to Scotland's detriment to be governed by remote politicians in London.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes portfolio questions. There will be a brief pause to allow the front bench members to change over.

Draft Climate Change Plan

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The next item of business is a statement by Gillian Martin on the draft climate change plan 2025. The cabinet secretary will take questions at the end of her statement, so there should be no interventions or interruptions.

14:27

The Cabinet Secretary for Climate Action and Energy (Gillian Martin): This Government's commitment to reaching net zero fairly remains unwavering. Responding to the climate emergency is both one of the most important challenges of our time and, done right, one of our country's greatest economic opportunities, with benefits for everyone. I am proud of the progress that Scotland has already made in reducing our carbon emissions and unlocking new low-carbon economic opportunities. Others might try to present economic growth and emissions reduction as opposing aims, but we have shown that they go hand in hand. We are now more than halfway to net zero and, in the same period, we have grown our economy by more than 67 per cent. Although we know that the most challenging part of the journey lies ahead, I am confident that, with Scotland's talent for innovation and skills, and the strengths of our people, we have what it takes to deliver.

Parliament can no longer sit on its hands. Since the previous climate change plan, we have seen parties in the chamber oppose even modest proposals for the sake of opposition when today's citizens, as well as future generations, need us to back those aims with action and take responsibility. I hope that Parliament will engage constructively with the draft plan.

Delivering the plan will take more than Scottish Government action alone. The United Kingdom Government must do more to support Scotland by, crucially, reducing the price of electricity, which will unlock so many critical climate actions and improve people's lives. I will continue to work constructively with the UK Government to make that happen.

That includes working on our shared commitment to decarbonise heat in buildings. It is an area where the Scottish Government has shown leadership, which is demonstrated by our legislative requirement for clean heat to be installed in new homes and our continued drive and ambition to promote investment and growth in heat networks. The plan maintains that leadership. It confirms our target to decarbonise the heat in Scotland's buildings by 2045 in a manner consistent with our commitment to reduce fuel

poverty by maintaining our support for those who need it most.

The UK Government must show similar leadership. The latest delay to its warm homes plan means that we still lack essential information on when and how the UK Government will use its reserved powers to make clean heat systems more affordable. I urge the UK Government to provide that clarity as soon as possible, and we remain ready to work with it to accelerate the transition to clean heat in our homes and buildings.

We will also continue to work collaboratively with other partners—local authorities, industry and the third sector—and we must bring people with us on that journey.

The voices of climate inaction are growing globally, and here at home. Some question the impact that a country of Scotland's size can make. However, Scotland has demonstrated how smaller countries can contribute to global change. We continue to accelerate the ambition and action of partners globally through our leadership positions as Regions4 president and Under2 Coalition European co-chair.

We increasingly feel the real-life impacts of climate change domestically. The growing frequency of storms, heat waves and flooding events is impacting our health, our livelihoods and the resilience of our communities. Indeed, the Scottish climate survey shows that most of us see climate change as an immediate problem for our country.

Tackling the climate emergency remains a priority for this Government and must continue to be so for Parliament in this and future sessions. The draft climate change plan that we have laid before Parliament today sets out more than 150 actions that we must take between now and 2040 to grow our economy and reduce our carbon emissions. As well as reducing emissions, the plan is about how we unlock economic benefits, strengthen our communities, tackle poverty, restore nature and improve health and wellbeing.

Many of those wider benefits are already being delivered. The number of low-carbon, sustainable jobs is growing faster here than in the rest of the United Kingdom, thanks to consistent Scottish Government investment. Low or zero-carbon industries, such as renewable energy and hydrogen, have expanded by more than 20 per cent since 2022, contributing more than £9 billion to the economy and supporting more than 100,000 jobs. Our electricity sector exemplifies that. Between 1990 and 2022, emissions from electricity generation fell by 88 per cent, driven by our natural resources, community involvement, supportive planning and falling costs, with wind

and solar now the lowest-cost forms of new generation. Today, Scotland generates more than half its electricity from renewables and, in 2020 alone, community benefit payments from renewables projects exceeded £30 million. There is still massive untapped potential in, for example, hydro, tidal and wave energy, anaerobic digestion and geothermal energy.

The transition and the action that we are taking are already ensuring major benefits for Scotland, with much more to come. However, as well as seizing those new opportunities, we have a particular responsibility to areas where change will inevitably be felt the most. That is why we have invested more than £120 million so far in the north-east through the just transition and energy transition funds, supporting workers into low-carbon jobs and enabling investment in offshore wind, port infrastructure and supply chains. We are also investing an additional £9 million in the oil and gas transition training fund to help North Sea workers to move into those low-carbon roles.

Those initiatives sit alongside the work that we are doing to support people through the transition and to deliver the wider benefits fairly. For example, the redesign of our energy and transport systems will also help to reduce household costs, improve air quality and enhance energy security. The draft plan includes new support for electric vehicle charging infrastructure and consumer incentives to encourage EV uptake. We will use commercial finance to support the decarbonisation of heavy goods vehicles. We are also introducing new energy performance certificate regulations and setting out proposals to boost heat network development by requiring large non-domestic premises, where they have the opportunity to connect to a heat network, to move away from fossil fuel heating systems. In that way, infrastructure and local places are being transformed to support health and wellbeing.

Our approach also focuses on nature-based solutions that will benefit communities, restore ecosystems and protect green spaces. In 2023, Scotland created more than 8,400 hectares of new woodland. To go further, we are supporting skills development in forestry management to increase farm productivity and tree planting.

We have restored more than 90,000 hectares of degraded peatland. Through the draft plan, Scotland's new light detection and ranging—LiDAR—data will help us to accelerate the amount of peatland that is restored year on year. The speed of our decarbonisation follows advice from the Climate Change Committee. Scotland is delivering on the moral imperative to end our contribution to global emissions.

However, we will also make important departures from the committee's policy advice,

including on livestock numbers and agricultural emissions. We will support farmers, crofters and other land managers to continue to produce high-quality food and protect rural livelihoods, while enhancing diversity, soil health and agricultural business productivity. We can do that because of emissions savings in other sectors, including high fuel supply decarbonisation in energy supply and emissions reductions in peatlands. The plan reflects a distinctly Scottish way of achieving this.

I am grateful to the many people who have shaped our approach to the draft plan, including the climate change plan advisory group, the Just Transition Commission and scientific advisory bodies.

We know that involving people in the policy-making process makes policy smarter and more effective, so I encourage anyone who has an interest to respond to our consultation on the plan. My door remains open to any member who wants to engage constructively on the draft plan so that the final version is as strong as possible.

It is the Government's responsibility to lead and, by doing so through the plan, we will enable others to act and innovate. However, we cannot reach net zero alone. People and businesses need to work with us on this shared national endeavour to fight against climate change and harness the possibilities that are before us. It is a national challenge that Scotland must win, because the prize is not only a healthier climate but warmer homes, cleaner air and happier, more equitable and prosperous communities.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The cabinet secretary will now take questions on the issues raised in her statement. I intend to allow around 20 minutes for that, after which we will need to move on to the next item of business.

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

The Scottish National Party has been promising for months that its draft climate change plan would lay out definitively how it intends to reach net zero by 2045, but today's plan just rehashes existing SNP policies that do nothing to bring down energy bills and it provides no clarity on how it intends to reach the 2045 target.

Families across Scotland are anxious about how much the SNP's net zero obsession will cost them. Will they be made to rip out their gas boilers in favour of heat pumps? Will they be forced to trade in their petrol vehicle for an electric car? Will the SNP lift its presumption against new oil and gas? The plan answers none of those questions; it is yet another SNP pamphlet that is heavy on rhetoric but light on solutions.

The carbon budgets that the Scottish Government adopted were made in line with the UK Climate Change Committee's recommendations. In order to achieve those budgets, the CCC claims that we will need to install 35,000 heat pumps a year by 2030, more than half of our cars will need to be electric by 2035, and cattle and sheep numbers will need to fall by 2 million.

When will the cabinet secretary come clean with the public about the true cost of achieving net zero by 2045? Will she commit to making a revised final plan that focuses on an affordable transition?

Gillian Martin: Right. Well, that is the tone that Douglas Lumsden normally adopts when he talks about climate change. It is plain for all to see that, when it comes to reaching net zero, the Tories do not have any plans. In fact, they are rolling back on the commitments that they made when they were in Government at Westminster.

Douglas Lumsden said that we have no new policies. Let us look at transport alone—

Douglas Lumsden: Are we getting our £200 million for north-east rail?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Cabinet secretary, please resume your seat.

Mr Lumsden, you get to ask a question, which you have done. We now need to hear the cabinet secretary respond to it without a running commentary.

Gillian Martin: Thank you, Presiding Officer.

On transport, we have: consumer incentives to encourage EV uptake by householders, sole traders and microbusinesses; draft targets in the first carbon budget to reduce emissions from cars by at least 16 per cent; investment in the replacement of heavy goods vehicles and the deployment of charging infrastructure; increased funding for the capacity and capability of local authorities and regional transport partnerships; additional support for the rapid roll-out of critical EV charging infrastructure; and support for skills development, with funding available for many things, including the skills required for offshore wind.

This is the thing about the Tories—they are trying to make it look as though achieving net zero is too expensive. The cost of climate action might look significant, but the economic benefits that are associated with all the policies that are laid out in the climate change plan—I stress that they are laid out there—are significant for the people of Scotland. If Douglas Lumsden had taken the time to even glance at the climate change plan, the text of which I gave to Opposition members a good hour in advance of my statement, he would be

able to point to a number of policies that will have those benefits and improve economic growth.

Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab): I thank the cabinet secretary for advance sight of her statement. I have tried to read the whole plan.

Climate campaigners are clear that we need a strong plan if we are to see the changes that are urgently needed. The SNP promised a publicly owned energy company, which did not happen. That was a massive missed opportunity. We have also not seen the manufacturing of renewables kit, even though there has been a big increase in renewable electricity production. We should compare that with the UK Government's action in delivering Great British Energy and the national wealth fund, and supporting communities to install solar panels.

We urgently need action across Scotland, including a ramp-up of support for communities that are already experiencing the transition. Why is there no information in the plan about how the £500 million that has been promised will be spent and how communities will benefit from it? The cabinet secretary referenced heat in buildings, but not did not link that to the need to retrofit homes so that they are energy efficient. She also did not say how councils will implement their local heat and energy efficiency strategy plans. Shawfair received £7 million from the Government for 3,000 houses and Aberdeen Heat & Power was created 20 years ago, but council budgets have been slashed. What support will the Scottish Government give to councils, including those in Edinburgh and East Lothian, to maximise the opportunities from projects such as Berwick Bank to create new jobs and invest in our homes?

Gillian Martin: I thank Sarah Boyack for reading the climate change plan that I gave to Opposition members in advance of my statement. She has legitimate questions about the detail of it, and I look forward to engaging with her throughout its progress. She mentioned funding of £500 million, which I presume refers to money from the just transition fund. She will know that we have also established a just transition fund for Grangemouth, given that it is a high-carbon area.

An analysis is done on the just transition fund year on year, and we receive a list of outcomes for job creation and job retention, as well as information on the ability for companies in the supply chain and academic institutions to pivot towards demand. Just transition funding is not distributed for the first year only, with criteria that remain the same throughout: it is adaptive to the needs of the north-east. In particular, it is delivering for companies that are have been reliant on high-carbon activity and are pivoting towards being able to service low-carbon activity too. Personally, I think that it has been one of the best

interventions from the Government, and I want to build on that work as much as possible. It also involves communities, who have their say in participatory budgeting rounds so that they can use the funds in their communities to reduce carbon and make them more resilient.

Sarah Boyack has asked me a number of specific questions about details including retrofitting and warm homes. I hope that she will join me in calling for the UK Government to bring forward its warm homes plan rather than delay it. Systematically across the UK, we all need to know what is being done at the UK level, because that will inform the decisions that are made in the devolved nations.

Michael Matheson (Falkirk West) (SNP): I am grateful to the cabinet secretary for her statement. I welcome the commitment to ensuring that we maximise the economic and environmental benefits of transitioning to net zero. Although good progress has been made, the cabinet secretary will recognise that there is a need to ensure that, in order to meet the 2045 target and the UK's 2050 target, policy actions on areas such as Acorn and carbon capture, use and storage need to be taken by the UK Government to support us in achieving that. Is the cabinet secretary satisfied that the UK Government has shown the necessary ambition and pace in such key areas to ensure that we can meet our 2045 target and that we can maximise the associated environmental and economic opportunities?

Gillian Martin: Michael Matheson knows the area well, so he will know that the UK will not meet its 2050 target without Scotland meeting its 2045 target, and vice versa. When I mention the UK Government, it is not to have a go, but is to say that we need to work together on those things. We have a Labour Government that has shared objectives on net zero, so we have a moment in time when we are able to work together and achieve our shared aims.

The Climate Change Committee's advice to the UK Government in carbon budget 7 was clear that between 30 and 60 per cent of the emissions reduction that will be required across Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland will be in policy areas that are mostly reserved. That emphasises just how crucial intergovernmental co-operation will be in reaching not only Scotland's net zero target but also the UK's.

I have engaged, and will continue to engage, with the UK Government across many different forums. This week, I wrote to the secretary of state to reiterate our asks of the UK Government with regard to the climate change plan, not least on rebalancing energy prices to reduce the cost of electricity, which intervention the Climate Change

Committee views as critical to delivering emissions reduction, as it does CCUS.

I wrote again yesterday with regard to the UK Government's carbon budget 6 response, which I thought was lacking in detail.

Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I thank the cabinet secretary for her statement and for finally publishing the 400-odd-page draft climate change plan, which I have to admit I have not read fully in the hour in which I have had it.

I remain seriously concerned that the Parliament does not have enough time to fully consider the plan before dissolution. However, I have briefly scrutinised annex 1, which covers the need to decarbonise our homes. It will cost the owner of a pre-1960s house in the region of £45,000 to decarbonise. What percentage of that cost will the Scottish Government make available to home owners to help them to achieve the Government's decarbonisation targets?

Gillian Martin: As Edward Mountain knows, the decision on spending is made at budget time. We are quite unusual in Scotland in that our climate change plan must include the costs and benefits associated with all the policies that it contains. No other country in the UK has to do that. The costs and benefits will apply not only to the Government but to everyone, including the private sector.

Edward Mountain said that we have finally published the climate change plan. I point out that, legally, I had until the start of December to publish it.

Edward Mountain: Should have done it last year.

Gillian Martin: I have published it so that we can have a finalised climate change plan by the end of this session of Parliament. Now that it is published, can we move on from the rhetoric around me taking my time to do things? I have been expediting work in this area, to allow Parliament the full period of time to scrutinise the plan—

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): There is no time left.

Douglas Lumsden: It is a year late.

Gillian Martin: —and have a finalised climate change plan by the end of this session of Parliament.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Can we also move on from making comments from sedentary positions during both answers and questions?

Paul McLennan (East Lothian) (SNP): A total of 24 climate action hubs were set up across Scotland, following a 2024 programme for

government commitment. The hubs are there to empower people to act in their neighbourhoods and have supported a range of projects, including those linked to local energy generation, flood mitigation and food growing. A total of £5.5 million was allocated in 2024-25 for the allocation of hubs. The cabinet secretary said:

“Communities are uniquely placed to play a key role in sharing and driving forward Scotland’s transition to low carbon and climate resilient living.”

East Lothian Climate Hub received more than £126,000 from the fund. I am meeting representatives of the hub tomorrow. What role will climate action hubs play in the climate plan? What message can I relay to East Lothian Climate Hub when I meet it tomorrow?

Gillian Martin: My message is to thank the hubs for everything that they do. I want to thank all the climate hubs across Scotland, which continue to innovate, inspire and achieve real action on the ground. Encouraging transformational change across our communities and supporting them to be climate ready is vital to delivering on the policies that are set out in the draft climate change plan.

I keep saying that the Government cannot tackle the issue alone, nor should it have a top-down approach to communities. Communities have the answers to what they need to do that suit them. We have provided £6 million of funding for the next year to the climate action hub network to enable communities to come together to engage in collective climate action and support the transition.

We have also ramped up the ambition for community energy, with additional funding going to the community and renewable energy scheme for funding and advice for community energy. Climate action hubs are pivotal in getting communities ready to invest and to apply for community energy projects. I thank them for what they do.

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): I thank the cabinet secretary for her statement and for publishing the plan, which will now sit for 120 days, during which consultations can take place.

With regard to the rhetoric, it is interesting to see the disparity between the Scottish Government and the UK Government. In particular, in her statement, the cabinet secretary sought to point the finger at Parliament, saying that it can no longer “sit on its hands” and that the plan needs to be a priority not just for the Government but for the Parliament in this and future sessions. How will she facilitate discussions within Parliament to ensure that we can undertake the role that she seeks for us?

Gillian Martin: I thank Martin Whitfield for that question, because it allows me to reiterate the approach that I always take to the legislation and the policies that I take through. I strongly believe

that in this portfolio we must have as much consensus as possible. I hope that those in all the parties who lead on this policy area agree that I genuinely have an open-door approach.

Ahead of the plan being put forward today, I made sure that my colleagues in the groups that are associated with the policy decisions on carbon budgets have been sent invitations. Those who have worked with me on bills will know that I have worked with them to bring their opinions and suggestions into the work that I do.

This is Scotland’s climate change plan. It is not the Government’s climate change plan—it is our shared climate change plan. At the end of this session of Parliament, we will all be thinking about what we want to put in our new manifestos. I look forward to seeing everyone’s manifestos to see how they can ramp up climate action so that, when we come to the next session, those of us who believe that climate change is a real threat can work together against the voices that are out there that might be coming in here and denying that climate action is a necessity.

Kevin Stewart (Aberdeen Central) (SNP): Given the levels of capital funding that are required to meet Scotland’s carbon reduction targets and, ultimately, to reach net zero, does the cabinet secretary agree that, since the Scottish Government does not have the full fiscal levers of an independent country, the UK Government must urgently reverse the cuts to Scotland’s capital budget and invest substantially more in delivering net zero?

Gillian Martin: It is true to say that Scotland, as a country, will be doing a great deal of the heavy lifting associated with emissions reductions for the whole UK, not least when it comes to electricity production, but also by restoring peatlands and providing carbon sinks. I have made the point to the UK Government many times that the funding that we get from it should reflect that.

One of the features of the consultation on the plan will be to build a dialogue on how the costs of the transition can be distributed. However, the lack of clarity from the UK Government on future funding and its repeated cuts to our capital budget make the task ahead of us in relation to this urgent need for action all the more difficult.

I take this opportunity again to call on the UK Government to set out clearly its plans for decarbonising homes and reforming electricity pricing and to provide clarity on the funding for carbon capture and storage. This is not a stick that I want to beat the UK Government with. This is me saying, “Here is an opportunity for the whole of the UK to decarbonise. Scotland can play more of our part if we get that funding released.”

Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): Scotland is years behind where we should be on climate but, instead of accelerating action, when the SNP ended the Bute house agreement, it decided to slow that action down. Its draft plan today contains no change.

The Government has rejected the Climate Change Committee's clear advice on agriculture. It has scrapped the road traffic reduction targets and replaced them with nothing. It has given no clarity at all on new fossil fuel extraction. It has filleted the heat in buildings bill and now proposes a target with no delivery mechanism. That has been tried and has failed many times before, on many different issues. How on earth can the cabinet secretary think that slowing down action will let the country catch up on lost ground?

Gillian Martin: I appreciate that members have not had a great deal of time to look at the climate change plan. Perhaps when Patrick Harvie has time to read it more fully over the weekend, he will spot that it includes a 16 per cent reduction from car-based emissions.

I also want to address Patrick Harvie's point about the Climate Change Committee's advice—it is advice. I have spoken to the Climate Change Committee since we made our decision to take a different path by putting more of our emissions reduction into transport, as opposed to reducing livestock numbers. It has warmly welcomed the fact that we have made our own decisions in that area, because it respects the fact that Scotland has to plough its own furrow, if I can use that metaphor. We are absolutely clear that we need to reach net zero in a way that works for rural Scotland and plays to our strengths. Cutting our livestock numbers would mean that we would import more produce from outwith the UK. That would not help to reduce emissions globally.

As someone from a rural area, I know very well the work that has been done on farms to reduce their emissions and to improve the livestock, plant and soil health associated with their work. We need to bring farmers with us. We need to realise that they are part of the solution and not work against them. We have so much scope, particularly in reducing emissions that are associated with heat and transport, that we do not have to put an additional burden on farmers and effectively destroy the industry, which is very much part of the fabric of Scotland and is critical to our economy.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): There are good things in the plan, but I think that the cabinet secretary knows that not much in today's plan is really new. I have read it, but it does not contain an awful lot that I did not know already. I would expect one group of people to be enthused by the whole climate change agenda: energy

efficiency installers. I go to their conference every year, but I have never seen them as downbeat as they were this year. That is because of the broken Home Energy Scotland system of grants and loans. I urge the cabinet secretary to change that system at last so that people are incentivised to put in new heating systems and the industry can get moving.

Gillian Martin: Willie Rennie puts a fair challenge to me, because Home Energy Scotland gets a lot of Government funding and it is our vehicle for encouraging people. Where things are not working—I am aware of some issues from my constituency work—I want to make sure that they are revised and reformed in order to get more people through the door and more energy efficiency measures into homes. I am happy to work with anyone in the chamber on—and I want to hear from people in the chamber about—any issues that their constituents have had with Home Energy Scotland. I will feed those issues back, because it has to be fit for purpose, and the job that it will do will be even more important over the next five years.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We have taken 20 minutes. A number of colleagues still want to ask questions. I will get them all in, because we have some additional time over the course of this afternoon, but I would appreciate a little more brevity in questions and responses.

Emma Roddick (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): The cabinet secretary has referenced the worrying increase in anti-climate rhetoric. Does she agree that, if we are to protect the lives of future generations, we all, especially in this chamber, have a role to play in rejecting climate science denial and the dangerous commentary that climate action is avoidable?

Gillian Martin: I thank Emma Roddick for that question, because we all need to reflect on that, particularly ahead of the dissolution of the Scottish Parliament and the formation of Parliament in the new session. It is a great shame that the political consensus that we once had on the need for climate action no longer appears as strong. We might have previously disagreed on specific actions—I am happy to have those conversations, because I think that it is a healthy debate—but I had taken comfort in the collective ambition to tackle the climate emergency. That consensus is at risk. We see the Tories trying to outperform Reform in that regard, there is a concerning rise in anti-climate rhetoric, and people who want to come into the Parliament with a regressive agenda are starting to make comments about climate change that have long been debunked.

People are also missing the fundamental point that the actions that are associated with reducing our emissions in Scotland are a huge economic

opportunity that cannot pass Scotland by. Although countries in the rest of the world are putting forward their own measures, they often look to what Scotland is doing. The consistency of our approach means that we are attracting inward investment, not least from Japan, which wants to invest in the cable manufacturing capacity that is associated with our offshore wind and floating offshore wind. Hitachi told me that the reason that it is basing its UK headquarters in Glasgow is that Glasgow has a 2030 net zero target, and Hitachi wants a piece of that action.

Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con): The plan offers little on the proposals and on how they will impact motorists. That will alarm car users at a time when the latest RAC report for 2025 shows that the cost of motoring is the top concern for UK motorists, whether they are driving an EV or a car with an internal combustion engine. The biggest challenge is the inequality in the cost of charging; it costs 9p per kilowatt hour at home and 81.2p per kilowatt hour when using public charging. The draft plan does nothing to address that inequality. I have not done speed reading, so, cabinet secretary, will you guarantee that hard-pressed motorists will not face any additional costs because of the plan? What reassurance can you give to motorists that their concerns will be listened to?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Always speak through the chair.

Gillian Martin: I have outlined quite a lot of the new policies for EVs that are in the plan. They include consumer incentives to encourage EV uptake and additional support for the rapid roll-out of critical EV charging infrastructure, including on public EV charging in rural communities and home charging at domestic properties, which includes cross-pavement charging. It is important that we recognise that a lot of people want to own an EV who do not have a driveway and the ability to have their own home charger. A great deal of work is being done by my colleague Fiona Hyslop in that regard.

There needs to be consistency in this. Look at the situation in London, where the former mayor—a certain Boris Johnson—put in place measures to encourage EV use, which were then whipped away from people who had bought EVs; they had to get rid of those cars because the charging associated with them went absolutely through the roof.

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): When Labour was previously in power at Westminster, it introduced transmission charges in Scotland while subsidising transmission elsewhere in the UK. The policy was continued by successive Westminster Tory Governments. An average 1GW Scottish offshore wind project could pay £38 million a year to Westminster, while an identical

project in England could receive a subsidy of £7 million. What impact has that had on attracting investment to the renewables industry? What discussions have Scottish ministers had with the UK Government about removing those discriminatory transmission charges?

Gillian Martin: Kenneth Gibson makes a very good point. Everything that he has just outlined is a major blocker to investment, yet such investment would have the knock-on effect of keeping Scotland as the UK's energy capital, providing all the energy jobs that we need and helping to achieve decarbonisation. The current system of transmission charges is unfit for purpose. It unfairly penalises Scottish renewable energy generators, putting them at a commercial disadvantage, and the UK Government needs to set out a long-term solution to the issue.

We are deeply disappointed that the Office of Gas and Electricity Markets has rejected the decision to implement a cap and floor mechanism in the short term. We have called on Ofgem to be open to feedback from the energy industry, which is most adversely impacted by the charges, and to guarantee that it will provide a short-term solution ahead of longer-term reform, given that Scotland's renewable sector is absolutely crucial to achieving the shared aims for clean energy of the UK and Scottish Governments.

Stephen Kerr: I am in awe of Willie Rennie having read all 410 pages of the report. I do not know how he does it; I will have to have a lesson from him on how that is done.

I am assured that the plan says:

"In reality, costs and benefits are likely to change as a result of economic and technological factors."

That is true, so will there be an independent economic assessment of the effects of the plan, at macro and fiscal levels, on Scotland's productivity and growth, sector by sector, and of its gross domestic product, employment and consumer cost burden impacts?

Gillian Martin: Stephen Kerr is calling for an independent assessment. I imagine that there will be many independent assessments of the costs and benefits as the plan goes through scrutiny. However, this is not just about the costs—that is where the Tories really get this wrong. They talk about costs, costs, costs, but it is about the benefits, as well. We estimate that the direct financial benefits that will result from the delivery of the draft plan and all the policies will total £42.3 billion for the Scottish economy over the period from 2026 to 2040. Many of those will be direct financial benefits that will go into households and businesses in Scotland, largely driven by action on transport. For example, the switch from internal combustion engine vehicles to electric vehicles is

expected to deliver lower running and maintenance costs.

We have everything to gain from the plan. We will make our towns, villages and cities more resilient; we will make our lives healthier; and we will create economic opportunities if we get behind the plan. I welcome economic assessments of the plan, because they might well show that I am being a bit small-c conservative in my estimation of the benefits.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes this item of business. There will be a brief pause before we move to the next item of business, to allow front-bench members to change over.

Strengthening Committees' Effectiveness

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-19436, in the name of Martin Whitfield, on behalf of the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee, on strengthening committees' effectiveness. I invite members who wish to participate in the debate to press their request-to-speak button now or as soon as possible.

I advise members that we have a bit of time in hand this afternoon, so I will be generous with the speaking allocations and you will certainly get the time back for any interventions.

I call Martin Whitfield to speak to and move the motion. You have a generous nine minutes, Mr Whitfield.

15:05

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): It is nice to stand in this Parliament with a little time to debate. I am sure that we will have lost that by the end of the afternoon.

The late Donald Dewar, in response to criticism of the Scottish Parliament, once said,

"Cynicism, together with unrealistic expectation, are the two great bugbears of politics."

We have tackled those two great bugbears head on in our report on our inquiry into strengthening committees' effectiveness. The cynicism involves thinking that there is nothing that can be done to address the perception that committees are not fulfilling their potential. The unrealistic expectation involves thinking that members can leave their party roles at the committee room door, because, although there is merit in that idea, it is not always appropriate, desirable or even realistic for members to put their party roles entirely to one side.

I thank all those who have engaged with our inquiry and acknowledge the collective will that has been shown by all to improve the effectiveness with which committees operate. I thank our witnesses, colleagues across the chamber and beyond, and the institutions that lodged submissions and made contributions. I also specifically extend my thanks to Dr Danielle Beswick, who was appointed as an adviser to assist the committee with its inquiry into effectiveness—a role that she undertook with passion, intellect and an expectation that the committee would rise to be its very best.

In our report, the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee brings to the

Parliament a package of comprehensive, practical and deliverable recommendations to reform and renew the work of committees. In opening this debate, I wish to set out the main conclusions and recommendations that we reached.

Turning first to the issue of culture, we heard that, if a committee has a strong culture, it works effectively. Committee members play a pivotal role in setting that culture. I ask all members of committees to recognise the magnitude of our responsibilities in that regard. How we behave and how we approach our role is fundamental not only to what committees do and how they do it but, potentially, to how it is viewed by the public and what it can achieve. Our recommendations aim to bring a sense of cohesion and collective endeavour to a committee. They include a recommendation that committees set objectives for individual pieces of scrutiny and inquiry work and seek to assess their effectiveness in their annual reports.

We recognise the importance of having an induction programme and on-going training for members, which need to be aligned with support from clerks and the Scottish Parliament information centre, which is well resourced. There is also a need to ensure that external expertise is utilised, whether through the use of committee advisers, holders of SPICe fellowships or academic and sector experts.

We have also recommended that informal fact-finding sessions and away days be seen as important components of that approach, as they ensure that members get to know each other beyond the political realm, which will foster a sense of collective working.

Turning to whether size matters in relation to the number of members on a committee, we believe that it does. We have recommended a reduction in the maximum number of members for subject and mandatory committees from 15 to 10, and that committees should normally have a maximum of seven members.

We believe that that change will help to address the concerns that larger committees are exacerbating the issues of members serving on more than one committee and the high churn of membership on committees. We consider that our proposals still leave flexibility to ensure that smaller parties can be represented on committees, and that committee places can still be allocated broadly in line with the balance of political parties in the Parliament.

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): Does the member recognise that, by sheer dint of numbers, the fact that a large minority of the Parliament's 129 members are Government ministers makes it

very difficult, from a workload perspective, for large committees to function?

Martin Whitfield: In some of our evidence, it was suggested that that was one of the consequences of having large committees. As far as the role of Government ministers—"the payroll"—and their accountability is concerned, I think that that would be an interesting discussion to have in the chamber and beyond, this afternoon and in the future.

I turn to the issue of achieving a gender balance on committees and how that might be supported. The inquiry has afforded the committee the opportunity to explore in more detail the suite of recommendations in the gender-sensitive audit on committee membership. We recognise the importance of having a gender-sensitive Parliament and support that goal. We will propose changes to standing orders so that, in the next session of Parliament, there will be no single-sex committees.

On the question of whether to go further, we suggest that a balance must be struck. The proposals are aspirational and ambitious, but they also must be practically deliverable. We do not consider that it is fair to place a disproportionate burden of work on women if proportionality in parties and across the Parliament is not in place. We have therefore recommended that, when committees are established, the Parliamentary Bureau should ensure that their membership normally reflects the gender balance of the whole Parliament, and that, when that has not been achieved or is not achievable, the bureau must make a statement, when the relevant motion is moved, to explain why that has occurred.

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind): Will the member give way?

Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP): Will the member give way?

Martin Whitfield: I will give way to my deputy convener and then I will come to Mr Mason.

Ruth Maguire: I am grateful to Martin Whitfield for giving way. I should say that I make this intervention not as the deputy convener of the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee, but as an individual MSP.

Martin Whitfield referred to the recommendation that the bureau give a statement when it has not been possible to achieve a gender balance on a committee. Like me, he will have received a letter from the group this morning, which suggests that that statement should be made in the chamber. Does he agree that that would bring a level of accountability and scrutiny to whether we are achieving the aspiration of gender equality on our committees?

Martin Whitfield: I am grateful to Ruth Maguire for her intervention. I think that accountability is very important. On my first reading of the letter, I have the sense that any way in which we can demonstrate accountability and bring it to the notice of the public will be crucial in underpinning the move in the next session towards what the gender-sensitive audit has shown needs to happen.

I give way to Mr Mason.

John Mason: On the point about committees reflecting the gender balance of the whole Parliament, would Mr Whitfield accept that there is a particular problem if, as has happened under the Scottish National Party, the governing party creates an equal balance of male and female Government ministers, because that puts extra pressure on the remaining members of that party, which becomes, in effect, more male?

Martin Whitfield: John Mason is right, because the challenge with committees is that they are established at a stage when we are already aware of the gender balance within the Parliament and within political parties. The Government's very laudable and correct aim of having a gender balance in its ministerial portfolios places the pressure on the remaining members. We heard a substantial amount of evidence on the challenge for the Parliament with regard to the workloads of female members.

I agree that there is a tension in relation to where, upstream, that has to be put right so that what comes out in the committees by way of a gender balance can most easily be achieved.

I turn to the key role of the convener, the person who sits at the helm of the committee and plays a crucial role in its effectiveness. We heard that a good convener creates a culture of interest, curiosity and collaboration. To enhance their role, we recommend that a programme for support for conveners is put in place from the start of session 7 of Parliament, which could be co-ordinated by the Conveners Group.

On the question of elected conveners, we learned that that system has operated effectively in other legislatures and that being elected by the whole Parliament can bring confidence and visibility to the role. It also gives a sense of legitimacy and accountability for a convener for the activities of their committee. It can also assist in the perception by the public that committees operate independently from the Government and have a distinct identity.

John Mason: Will the member give way?

Martin Whitfield: I will give way again.

John Mason: I apologise for intervening again. Does Mr Whitfield think that there is a need for

conveners to be trained? Chairing any meeting—including this one, but also committees—is not something that everybody is naturally good at. It takes certain skills.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): Thank you for that comment—I think. I call Martin Whitfield.

Martin Whitfield: When MSPs come into this place, they quickly realise that they need an extensive skill set. There is certainly a need to provide support—that could be done through training—to conveners, to other members of committees and, indeed, to MSPs more generally, to allow them to operate in an environment in which many of them will have had no experience. I agree whole-heartedly that there needs to be training and support; what that looks like must be tailored to the individual who seeks the support.

Jackson Carlaw (Eastwood) (Con): I hear all that about training, but I have a reservation, which is that we will end up producing little identikit people. That is my worry. Who trains the trainers? Who decides what the training should be? I am full of horror: I read Ross Greer going on about all that in the committee report. I do not want to be trained by Ross Greer on what he thinks my responsibilities as a convener of a committee should be. Who is responsible for that?

I do not want a whole lot of identikit conveners. I want a range of personality and function. Yes, they have to understand some basic things, but let us not start straitjacketing what the job is with the definition of somebody with whom I might not agree.

Martin Whitfield: I would also be afeared of the member being the judge of that. However, Jackson Carlaw is right that, at no stage, should any of that be orientated to create an identikit committee in an identikit Parliament that just does identikit things.

To go back to my answer to John Mason, if MSPs who come into this place bring a skill with them, it is the skill of understanding and knowing themselves. They need to rely on that strength, as they will have done throughout campaigns and their political careers—however long or short they have been. They should have confidence to say, “No, that is not for me—but I do need this.” An open, two-way discussion about where someone can be supported does not necessitate an identikit product. Far from it.

Jackson Carlaw: The problem that I have with that is that it is not the experience of the Parliament. In my experience, when people initially suggest something, it is just that—a suggestion. However, as time goes on, it becomes embedded as a practice that everyone must follow. I can think of other examples in parliamentary life where that

has happened and discretion has gone out of the window.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I will give you another minute and 40 seconds, Mr Whitfield.

Martin Whitfield: In the politest terms, let me suggest that that discussion is crucial but that it might be one for this venue at a different time. It speaks to real challenges that the Parliament has.

We are aware of concerns about how having elected conveners would operate in practice and whether the size of the Parliament and, potentially, the small size of parties would mean that whips would still control who stands for nomination. Some felt that parties should be able to decide who their own representatives are as conveners.

As a committee, we believe that the time is right to allow an opportunity for the whole Parliament to consider whether there should be elected conveners in the next parliamentary session. Our report sets out a model procedure, which broadly mirrors the one that is used in the Senedd. We consider that the model represents a proportionate approach to solving the problem of such elections, particularly in relation to the use of chamber time. We are keen to gauge the views of other members on that proposal before we make our formal recommendations for changes to standing orders.

In relation to convenerships and remuneration, as I have previously set out, we do not consider that conveners need to receive an additional payment in order to enhance their status.

I am conscious of time—ironically, I would have liked to have talked about the capacity and workload of committees and, indeed, about the capacity and workload in relation to the chamber.

Finally, I turn to the role of committee stakeholders and to the role that the public can play in helping to ensure that committees deliver effective scrutiny. The Parliament has always valued its relationship with the public and recognised its importance—I recommend the deliberative democracy proposals from the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee, specifically those regarding the embedding of people's panels in the work of committees.

I look forward to listening to the views and reflections of other members from across the chamber, and I apologise to members for having used up all the spare time that we had earlier.

I move,

That the Parliament notes and welcomes the conclusions and recommendations in the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee's 4th Report, 2025 (Session 6), *Strengthening committees' effectiveness* (SP Paper 878); further notes that the Committee wishes to gauge the views of other Members on the introduction of a procedure for the election of committee

conveners by the Parliament, and agrees to consider a proposed rule change for the election of committee conveners based on the procedure set out in annexe B to the report.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call the minister, Graeme Dey, to open on behalf of the Scottish Government.

15:20

The Minister for Parliamentary Business and Veterans (Graeme Dey): Last year, Parliament celebrated its 25th anniversary, which was a significant milestone and prompt for reflection on how the institution has evolved over the years. Our procedures and ways of working have adapted over time as we have learned what works well and what does not. That process of adaptation as we learn from experience should never be considered complete, which is why the committee's report is so welcome. Ensuring that Parliament operates effectively is essential to ensuring that the people of Scotland are well represented by those they have chosen to act on their behalf.

Given the importance of protecting the constitutional principle that ministers are accountable to Parliament, I hope that members will understand the need for me to avoid giving any impression that the Government is directing how Parliament discharges its responsibilities, because it is always for this Parliament to decide how best it operates. My principal interest today lies in considering how any changes that are being deliberated might impact on the delivery of Government business, and that is reflected in the Scottish Government's response to the committee's report, in which we acknowledge that many aspects of that report are not for the Government to offer a view on.

However, there are a few areas in which we have shared views and are supportive of the committee's proposals. I hope that everyone here will agree with the following two principles. First, the Government must have the freedom to bring forward the proposals that it considers necessary to give effect to its democratic mandate. Secondly, Parliament must have the freedom to scrutinise those proposals and to hold the Government effectively to account.

It is in that context that we must consider the concerns regarding Parliament's workload. I assure members that the Government takes parliamentary capacity into account when making its legislative plans. It is no accident that the volume of legislation during this session is comparable to the volumes in previous sessions, and I do not think that it is tenable to suggest that the Government should scale back its ambitions. Instead, the question for Parliament and its committees is how best to balance efficiency and

effectiveness in the scrutiny of Government activity, and it is for Parliament to ensure that there is adequate support for members to conduct their duty as legislators.

Martin Whitfield: The minister and I have discussed a number of times the fact that there are a few more Government bills than in the previous session and that we still have the pressure of time. Does he recognise that a committee will need substantially more time when more than 500 Government amendments are lodged at stage 2 than it would need if more thinking had been done beforehand, so that bills came to committee with those amendments already built in?

Graeme Dey: I accept that criticism to a degree, but I hope that the convener will accept that Parliament has got into a situation in which a great many amendments that have been debated at stage 2 come back at stage 3, which leads to extended stage 3 proceedings and puts pressure on parliamentary time. I absolutely accept that there is something to look at.

I also hope that we can all agree that it is neither efficient nor effective for Parliament to adopt a one-size-fits-all approach. When a subject is significant or controversial, or when it is of particular interest to a committee, that committee should, of course, spend more of its time on that issue, but I hope that it would not be controversial to suggest that committees could take a different approach when something is technical or minor.

As our response to the committee's report noted, the Government is supportive of the proposed earlier deadline for the introduction of members' bills, which would ensure that there was sufficient time available to consider them in full. The ability to bring forward legislation is the core function of the Parliament, and it is important that members can do that, but that ability is meaningful only if time is available for scrutiny. Bringing forward the deadline for introduction for members' bills should help to ensure that time will be available. I note that 11 such bills were introduced within six months of the 2 June deadline this year, with five of those being introduced in the final month. That means that 26 per cent of all members' bills across the whole session were introduced in the final available month.

The Scottish Government notes the committee's recommendation on better use of time-limited committees. Such committees are already possible within the Parliament's current structures, although they are rarely used. Although the Government is supportive of such committees being used more often, clear timescales and remits and expected outputs are key to ensuring that they are fit for purpose.

Although I am speaking primarily on behalf of the Scottish Government, my 15 years as an MSP will shortly come to an end and I want to share some of my thoughts on committee effectiveness while I still have the opportunity to do so. In that vein, I will first reflect on the proposal to reduce committee sizes. I bear the scars from attempting to do that previously. The Government contends that committees, like the Parliament itself, should reflect the democratic choices of the Scottish people, so there should be no move away from the d'Hondt system for committee formation. However, there is no doubt that, for conveners, large committees can be unwieldy, and they are not conducive to optimising committee outputs.

In my time as Minister for Parliamentary Business, I have been there and bought the T-shirt when it comes to seeking to make committees less unwieldy. I recognise that, at the time, there was a real willingness to at least consider that, and I had an ally in Maurice Golden, the then Conservative business manager. Between us, and with the support of our parties, we were able to address the matter to an extent, at least on a one-for-one basis between the SNP and the Conservatives. In the end, all told, we reduced the size of three committees. However, owing to the unwillingness—it was understandable unwillingness, to be fair—of smaller parties that did not wish to surrender their single representation on some committees, that is as far as we got.

I heard the convener of the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee indicate that it might have a cunning plan for cracking that. I wish the committee well, because reducing the maximum size of committees was a good idea back in the day, and it remains a good idea.

On behalf of the Scottish Government, I welcome the committee's consideration—

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): Will the minister take an intervention?

Graeme Dey: Do I have time, Presiding Officer?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Yes.

Stephen Kerr: The minister is giving us his reflections. One of the themes of the committee's report—and of many other reports that have been commissioned and produced over time—is the effect of party management on committees. We did not really hear about that in the convener's speech. What does the minister's experience tell him we would need to do to change the culture in the committees so that there is less party dominance and more evidence-led parliamentarian activity?

Graeme Dey: I will try to cover that in my closing speech, if Stephen Kerr will bear with me. In passing, I hope that his point is not simply directed at the Government but is reflective of the whole Parliament. I see that he is nodding his head to indicate that.

On behalf of the Government, I welcome the committee's consideration of how the Parliament's processes can be adjusted to improve effectiveness, and I look forward to hearing the views of members across the chamber. We—or, perhaps more accurately, those individuals who are elected to the next Parliament—will have a chance to come together and deliver more productive and effective ways of working.

The Government will support the motion on the basis that it is ultimately up to the Parliament to decide how it structures and organises itself. I note that the motion asks the Parliament to agree to consider a proposed rule change for the election of committee conveners. I want to be clear that the Government has no formal position on the election of committee conveners, but it recognises that the Parliament should be able to consider the matter further if there is a desire on the part of members to do so.

15:28

Jackson Carlaw (Eastwood) (Con): It is a pleasure to participate in this debate. I see that Richard Leonard is leading for the Labour Party. It is a kind of dinosaurs-R-us outing of the ancien régime of happy times past.

Over the time that I have been in the Parliament, I have come to like it. I have come to admire it when it is at its best although—like others, I imagine—I have despaired of it at times. I do not believe that anything can ever be perfect, because every institution has its imperfections, but I have come to believe that there are potentially ways in which things can change. However, there are obstacles in the way of every change. Sometimes the obstacle is a vested interest, sometimes it is a protocol or a practice, and sometimes, as I said earlier, it is the fact that the architects of a particular guideline move on and the guideline becomes a rule that people are then obliged to follow. It becomes a straitjacket rather than something that can be amended.

I will not repeat the bulk of the submission that we made as a party, because it was a serious enterprise, but I will touch on a number of themes. I am supposed to be leading for my party, but I might stray from that strict responsibility a little bit from time to time.

I commend the report, but the first thing that I want to talk about is continuity and committee sizes. I notice that the SPPA committee is a

committee of five; my Citizens Participation and Public Petitions Committee is also a committee of five. Page 1 of the committee report highlights one of the big difficulties. It states:

“Evelyn Tweed left the Committee on 6 March 2024 and was replaced by Jackie Dunbar

Stephen Kerr left the Committee on 28 March 2024 and was replaced by Oliver Mundell

Ivan McKee left the Committee on 6 May 2024 and was replaced by Ruth Maguire

Jackie Dunbar left the Committee ... and was replaced by Joe FitzPatrick

Oliver Mundell left ... and was replaced by Sue Webber

Joe FitzPatrick left the Committee ... and was replaced by Emma Roddick”.

If I am right, that means that in practice only two of the people who initiated the inquiry were there at the end, when the committee published its report. That was exactly the same experience that I had on the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee when we were looking at the issue of public participation.

Where is the continuity in the narrative that emerges at the end of a process if those who have been party to the investigation have all gone? The only two people left on my committee—David Torrance and me—had to overcome the wave of indifference from colleagues who joined later, and who had nothing to do with the investigation about which we were about to write a terribly important report. Lack of continuity is fundamental.

Paul Sweeney: Will the member take an intervention?

Jackson Carlaw: I will take an intervention from Mr Sweeney—one of the members who left me.

Paul Sweeney: As someone who was bereft of overseas visits as part of the committee's work, I regret that change in committee role.

The member made an important point not only about the practicality of institutional memory but about the culture that we have a loyalty to our committee and a sense of purpose in serving on it. If that is upended at any moment, surely that means that the culture of the committee is fundamentally undermined.

Jackson Carlaw: Why is it always colleagues who were formerly at Westminster who are fond of overseas trips?

Notwithstanding that casual observation, what are the obstacles to continuity? In the first session of Parliament, the Government had about 18 ministers but, in this session, it has about 25. We have taken out about seven people who might be available to participate in committees. We have a lot of committees with large memberships and potentially too many people competing on them.

To return to the point that I was about to make about convenerships, we were a bit lukewarm about that. The proposal is interesting, and we will support the motion tonight, because it suggests the investigation of the possibility of how all that might happen and how conveners might be remunerated. One argument for remuneration might be that the committee convener commits to convening the committee for the entire length of the session and sets aside any other ambition. Therefore, they would not see the convenership of the committee as a stepping stone to anything else and would instead be totally focused on that. They would be able to do it independently and their effort would be recognised.

Ruth Maguire: Do the points that Jackson Carlaw made about the continuity of the committee speak to the importance of the convener? I do not want to cast aspersions, but there was no lack of enthusiasm from the members of my committee when we were doing the inquiry. That talks to the importance of the convener in holding everyone together and delivering enthusiasm. However, I am not casting aspersions and suggesting that the member was not doing that.

Jackson Carlaw: I would hope not, but I understand the point. That is why there is an argument for the role of the convener being one that people value and something that they will adhere to for the duration of the session of Parliament.

Gender is an interesting issue. The only female that I had on my Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee was pinched by Martin Whitfield, who is recommending that single-gender committees should not exist. He stepped in and took away the female representative that we had on our small committee of five and then refused to replace her.

The committee recognised in the evidence that it submitted to the inquiry that, on some issues, because of the committee membership, the questioning of witnesses when interrogating certain petitions might not have been what we wanted. However, it is difficult, because if a party were elected with responsibility to represent on various committees but did not have full gender balance, that would mean asking the female members of the group to undertake the responsibility of sitting on more committees. I am not sure how reasonable it would be if they were tied down to having to do that and other colleagues were not. However, we certainly want to adhere to that objective.

Gosh, I have hardly managed to touch on anything, and my time is almost up. The issue of conveners is an important one that we want to reflect on.

In relation to experts and engagement, I welcome the fact that the report embraces the idea of citizens panels. We had an evidence session with Brussels on the European Parliament's use of a people's panel to work with parliamentarians. It was fascinating to hear about the exchange of views. They all got in the room, and the parliamentarians looked at the members of the people's panel and said, "Why should we listen to a thing you say? You're not elected. We have a democratic mandate. We are the people's representatives," and the people on the people's panel said, "Yes, but we actually know what we're talking about, and you don't." After they got over that, they worked very well together.

The use of experts and, potentially, people's panels to inform committee members on the detail of certain subjects in a productive way would assist committee members, who ultimately have responsibility for determining what the outcome will be, to do so on the basis of informed opinion from a wider scope of people. That would be a useful thing to do.

Finally, post-legislative scrutiny has been the perennial talking point of the Parliament. Our recommendation is that a sunset clause on a number of pieces of legislation would actively force post-legislative scrutiny, because the Parliament would be required to consider the issue afresh.

As I said, we will support the report tonight. There is a lot of good content in it. I just hope that it does not end up being wishful thinking and that it can help to ameliorate some of the imperfections in our system, which could be better still. That will require momentum and commitment from all concerned.

15:36

Richard Leonard (Central Scotland) (Lab): I thank the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee for producing this thorough and important report into committee effectiveness.

We must be clear this afternoon that we are serious about democratic renewal and that we recognise that the balance of power between Government and Parliament, and between Parliament and the people, needs a new vitality, because that is what this debate is about. It is about how Parliament can better hold the executive to account, but we should never lose sight of the role of the people in holding Parliament to account. By that, I do not mean some kind of elective dictatorship; I mean a much more participatory style of democracy—a form of government that not only functions for the people but functions through the people.

All of us must be vigilant to the rise of a new authoritarianism in the midst of democratic politics. Make no mistake: our civil liberties, our human rights and our constitutional settlement are not sacrosanct or inviolate. We cannot take them for granted. That is what history teaches us—that we have to fight for them.

Today, I am invited to contribute as the opening speaker on behalf of the Labour Party, although members must take it as read that I am no longer necessarily and at all times on message. *[Laughter.]*

As I reflect on the committees that I have been privileged to serve on in this Parliament, it remains my firm belief that, among those, the Public Audit Committee has been the most effective, but it is a rare spirit of a parliamentary committee. It is chaired by a member of an Opposition party as a matter of rule. It is a mandatory committee in which representatives of the party of government are, by that same rule, in a minority. It is a small committee, with just five members, and that is not a weakness; that is its strength.

Among that small number, we also have experienced a turnover in membership. Let me say for the record that, since Sharon Dowe stepped down as deputy convener in 2023, and Roz McCall and then Stephanie Callaghan stepped down as substitute members, the Public Audit Committee, in all its incarnations for the past couple of years, has been all male. Do not get me wrong—all the members have made a valuable contribution, but there is no getting away from the fact that, without a broader range of life experience around that committee room table as we scrutinise our major public institutions, their spending, their governance, their leadership and sometimes even their conduct, that important diversity of perspectives is missing. It is my firm belief that we must rule—legislate, even—for that not to happen again on any parliamentary committee.

I am also convinced that accountability to Parliament, not to party or the patronage of party leaders, through the election by Parliament of committee conveners would help in the separation of the executive and the legislature. I was struck by Lorna Slater's point in the last debate on this back in May, which is also reproduced in the committee's report, that these convenership elections would need to be about a commitment to rigorous scrutiny, which, of course, they must, but when Lorna Slater says that we need to "avoid popularity contests", I disagree. Popularity is surely what democratic elections are about. It is the same principle that we accept when electing Parliament's Presiding Officer and Deputy Presiding Officers.

On other recommendations in the report, there should be greater powers to compel witnesses to attend committees to give oral and written evidence, and, of course, on the question that we have already covered, there should be training for committee members.

Stephen Kerr: Under the Scotland Act 1998, we already have formidable powers to compel witnesses to appear before committees. I hope that, before Richard Leonard finishes his speech, he will return to his first theme, which was about why change in this Parliament rarely seems to happen, because that is the kernel of the issue. We all agree that things should improve, but why does that improvement not happen?

Richard Leonard: I will do my level best to answer that question in the time that I have left.

I was addressing the issue of training, and I was bound to say, when listening to the earlier part of this debate, that every convener should be issued with a copy of Walter Citrine's "The ABC of Chairmanship", which was widely circulated in the trade union movement.

To counter the point that Jackson Carlaw made, in my case, especially in the early days of being convener of the Public Audit Committee, I was able to draw on the wisdom of Hugh Henry, who had previously chaired the Public Audit Committee in an earlier session. His knowledge and his political judgment were things that I set a great deal of store by and relied on. However, I am to be persuaded that there should be remuneration for the role of committee convener. I simply do not accept the argument that some have deployed that getting paid extra would boost the profile of committee conveners or increase the significance of their role. We are, in my view, already well paid. I cannot help but reflect that, when I led the Scottish Labour Party, the honour of doing so was reward in itself—the greatest honour of my life—and there was no additional payment. In fact, the only perk in that sense was a guaranteed car parking space.

In the end, a healthy democracy rests on the twin pillars of consent and dissent. This debate is not about and cannot be about the efficiency of the bureaucracy; it has to be about the restoration of trust in politics, in politicians and in this Parliament. This is no time to be conservative—or moderate, even. It is time, in my view, to be radical.

15:43

Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con): I am pleased to speak in the debate on strengthening the effectiveness of our Parliament's committees. I joined the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee right at the beginning of

the inquiry. There was a bit of shoogling of chairs and stuff, but I remember hearing most of the evidence.

The report goes right to the heart of how we serve the people of Scotland. The Scottish Parliament's committees are an essential part of the legislative process, and hard-working Scots deserve a Parliament that examines evidence and legislation carefully. When the Parliament was created, the committees were meant to be its engine room. They were meant to be where legislation was tested, where evidence was properly examined and where the voices of the public could be heard. Those principles are as important now as they were 25 years ago, but I think that we can all acknowledge that they have all been stretched thin in recent parliamentary sessions.

Too many bills have been rushed—we are certainly feeling the pain of that now—and too many important details have slipped through the net. Too often, the Parliament has been asked to sign off on legislation that was simply not ready. That is not what good government looks like and it is not what the people we represent expect from us. Hard-working Scots do not want politics for its own sake. They want us to be competent at what we do and they want decisions that are thought through, not thrown together to meet a deadline or make a headline. That means that our committees must be able to do their job properly.

The committee's report sets out sensible, practical recommendations that would help us to get there. Reducing committee sizes, for example, from 15 members to around seven would make a difference. Smaller committees can get into detail and have some real discussions, rather than just managing speaking lists. Having been the convener of a large committee, I understand the pressures that members felt when I had to cut them short and not allow them to follow a train of thought that might uncover a nugget of important evidence.

The report also highlights the problem of constant churn, as we heard from Mr Carlaw and Mr Leonard. Members are moved on just as they start to understand their brief. However, to counter Mr Leonard's comments about the lack of gender equality on his committee, I note that when some female members from the Conservatives moved on, some people stayed put, so positions could not be changed. That also contributes to the inability to get a woman into the room. The lack of continuity makes it harder to build expertise and develop the kind of trust in cross-party working that committees need to function well. If we want better scrutiny, we need more stability.

I welcome the discussion about elected conveners. The Conservatives' submission stated

that we do not believe that elected conveners alone will improve the situation in Parliament unless they are accompanied by wider reforms. We welcome the investigation into how that could move forward. When I was a convener, none of my powers or influence in that role was hindered by the fact that I was not elected to be there.

Our submission also raised practical concerns about the approach to electing conveners, which links to the use of the d'Hondt method and questions about how to deal with in-session vacancies. A lot of the churn happens when members from the governing party find themselves in ministerial roles. We find that that contributes significantly to churn.

Letting Parliament choose who leads a committee could strengthen a committee's independence and improve accountability, but I agree with the committee's view that that should not come with extra pay. My position is that, at a time when public finances are stretched, that would send the wrong message, because leadership is about responsibility, not necessarily remuneration. However, being convener was a lot of work and more effort than anyone can realise until they are in that role.

It is also clear that time is one of the biggest barriers to proper scrutiny, and we all feel that pressure. Committee members are juggling legislation, inquiries and constituency work, and there are just not enough hours in a week, especially if the committee sits on a Thursday. Allowing committees to meet while the chamber is sitting or to use Monday afternoons and Friday mornings for evidence sessions makes sense, because, after all, it is about giving committees the space that they need to do the job well.

My party made an important suggestion about committee witnesses. We suggested that they should have to declare where their funding comes from, including the amount of public funding, to further aid transparency about the potential influence of the Scottish Government.

The idea of committees reviewing their own performance each year is a good one. In any other workplace, teams look back on what they have achieved, what worked, what did not work well and how they might change their approach going forward. There is no reason why Parliament should not do the same. That is how we keep improving and making things better.

I referred to gender balance. I support the principle that our committees should reflect the diversity of the Parliament and of Scotland, but we must be careful not to turn that into a tick-box exercise where the women have to take on an extra workload just to fulfil the criteria. I know that the female parliamentarians who are on the

gender-sensitive audit advisory group have made that point clear.

What matters most is that committees are made up of people who have the right experience, knowledge and commitment to hold the Government to account. They should also be interested in the topic, because then we would get genuine engagement. Let us aim for balance, while keeping a focus on merit and effectiveness.

The report gives us a clear route to better balance. The Scottish Parliament's committees are an essential part of our legislative process, but scrutiny could be improved. Let us make sure that we do not have poor legislation that is rushed through in this session; we really need to get into the detail. We need to let our committees be more effective, so that our scrutiny is more meaningful and our Parliament is much more accountable to the people it serves.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I take the opportunity to remind members who wish to speak, including those who are online, that they need to press their request-to-speak button.

15:50

Evelyn Tweed (Stirling) (SNP): I thank the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee for bringing this important debate to the chamber, and I thank Jackson Carlaw for highlighting my previous role on the committee, which I enjoyed.

Our committees are a vital part of the parliamentary system. The report makes excellent recommendations on how to improve committee effectiveness, but they generally focus on what happens during parliamentary sessions. Some issues, however, will require on-going scrutiny beyond the next election. There are many public bodies and non-ministerial offices in Scotland that are ultimately accountable to the Parliament and our committees. The scrutiny that is undertaken by committees is key to ensuring the proper and efficient running of those bodies, but the current model prevents strategic, long-term oversight.

The Scottish Housing Regulator is a useful example. The regulator is a non-ministerial office that is directly accountable to the Scottish Parliament for the discharge of its statutory functions. Scrutiny currently takes the form of an annual report that is compiled by the regulator, followed by one committee meeting per year during which the chief executive and the chair are questioned by members of the relevant committee.

Concerns about the regulator have circulated almost since it assumed its full functions in 2012, and they have been raised consistently in the Parliament. At the Infrastructure and Capital

Investment Committee in November 2014, representatives from the housing sector highlighted the regulator's use of informal interventions to pressure housing associations into commissioning consultants that it favoured, at costs exceeding £1,000 per day. Witnesses also raised concerns about the heavy-handed and disproportionate use of the regulator's powers. Nothing changed.

In 2020, following press reports of a culture of fear within the housing sector, members of the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee raised concerns with the regulator during the annual scrutiny session. Again, nothing changed.

In 2024, a decade after the first complaints were made, the committee heard similar allegations regarding bullying and inappropriate interventions by the regulator. On that occasion, other stakeholders from the sector were invited to give evidence and the concerns were not so easily dismissed. Although more headway was made then, my concern is that, following the next election and the subsequent changes in committee membership, the issue will again lose momentum. In the past decade, at least 16 smaller housing associations have merged with others, largely as a result of regulator intervention, which seems a disproportionate loss to the sector. I do not believe that the Parliament has sufficient oversight to be satisfied that that loss of community-based organisations was justified.

My wider point is that I do not believe that the current committee system provides sufficient scrutiny of the bodies that report to the Parliament. There are two parts to that. First, a report and oral evidence at one meeting per year are not sufficient to explore complex concerns. I know that members have various concerns about the amount of time—

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Will the member take an intervention?

Evelyn Tweed: Yes.

Liz Smith: I entirely agree with what the member is saying. Is she also concerned about the fact that some of our agencies that have to report to the Scottish Parliament, particularly commissioners, cite that they are very seldom—if at all, in one case—brought before a committee?

Evelyn Tweed: I entirely agree with Liz Smith on that point. We have many pressures on us as members, but we need to get people in here so that we can scrutinise those bodies and commissioners appropriately. I absolutely agree.

As members, we often deal with highly paid professional representatives of the very bodies that we are charged with scrutinising. Sometimes,

we need more time and more independent expert support. We get a lot of support in Parliament, but sometimes, on very niche issues, we need more.

Secondly, there is a real danger that transitions between elections and changes in committee membership lead to important issues being forgotten or momentum in inquiries lost. As I see it, there is at present no mechanism for passing on work in stronger terms than a recommendation in a legacy report. Even locating minutes from previous sessions, which I have tried to do, is really difficult.

Although we must allow flexibility, effective scrutiny of public bodies is too important to be lost or delayed during those changeovers. At present, standing orders and framework agreements with non-ministerial offices are not at all prescriptive. I know that there are good reasons for that—flexibility is important—but I would be interested in exploring the introduction of good practice guidance or a similar mechanism.

I also echo the concerns that were expressed by the Greens about post-legislative scrutiny. They made some really good points. In written evidence, they said to the committee:

“Many laws are passed, targets set and then forgotten, resulting in a failure to assess their effectiveness.”

The same applies to newly formed public bodies and non-ministerial offices, for which there is limited follow-up, which allows problems to go unchecked.

We are stewards for a brief time, but we must think longer term. Proper scrutiny protects our communities. We must develop an approach that is both robust and adaptable to ensure that organisations work in a transparent and effective manner.

15:57

Davy Russell (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (Lab): As the newest member of the Parliament, I am uniquely qualified to share my very limited experiences—I have only ever been on one committee, but I have been nurtured to the highest level by its convener, Jackson Carlaw.

I welcome the work that has been done by the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee. I recognise that one of the stand-out points from the report is that the importance of a committee’s culture surpasses the importance of its structure. I know that from my experience on the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee. I cannot speak for all its members, but I feel strongly that when we are in the committee room, we have a role to play in hearing the public’s voice and in the facilitation of that voice being heard, which is paramount.

For members who sit on committees that have a greater legislative scrutiny role, the balance between party politics and the more objective work of the committee is harder to find. That point is reflected in the report. The culture of the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee is that we leave our party hat at the door and pick it back up on the way out. The citizen is first in that instance.

I acknowledge that that committee is singled out in the report as being particularly guilty of lacking gender balance, and I agree with the report where it calls for an end to “single-sex committees”. That might not always be possible, but where such change is practical, it should happen.

My main criticism of the committee system is that it seems to be overburdened. Most of us are here until 10pm, and if there is a committee meeting in the morning, we start at 9am. Although oversight from the chamber through debate is required, cross-party scrutiny should also be taking place in the committees, where it can eliminate some of the minutiae.

My view is that the Parliament is doing too much at stage 3 because the committees lack capacity. That sentiment applies doubly when it comes to post-legislative scrutiny, which we do not do enough of. Therefore, I welcome the proposals to increase the capacity of the committee system. The introduction of sub-committees, for example, might help in some instances. Compulsory attendance for public officials and ministers when they are summoned by a committee would definitely help. Also, chamber meeting times could occasionally be altered to make way for committee business, instead of the other way round—although doing that might be less practical.

The committee system remains a strength of the Scottish Parliament, and I support the proposals to further strengthen the good work that is being done here.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Rona Mackay, who is joining us remotely.

16:01

Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): As a former member of the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee who was present during the evidence taking for this inquiry, I am pleased to be able to contribute to the debate.

As I said in the previous debate on the inquiry, I believe that committees are “the engine rooms” of this Parliament, whether they are taking evidence on important legislation or carrying out vital inquiries on subjects that affect the people of Scotland. In today’s debate, we have heard from

speakers on the core questions of the inquiry and the many responses from the many excellent witnesses who were called to help us carry it out. *[Interruption.]* I am sorry—I am having some technical issues here.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Ms Mackay, I am sorry to interrupt, but you do have not have your camera on. You are expected to have your camera on, so please put it on.

Rona Mackay: Apologies—it has been a long time since I have done this. *[Interruption.]*

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Ms Mackay, I propose to come back to you. I will take the next speaker now.

Rona Mackay: Thank you. I am having technical issues in getting—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Maybe you could work with broadcasting to get your camera on, and I will call you when that is worked out. Thank you for your understanding.

I call Stephen Kerr.

16:02

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): I begin with a simple observation: it is a pity that we are having another of these Thursday afternoon debates on a subject that goes to the very heart of the effectiveness of our Parliament. I am very grateful to the colleagues who are here, but I would have hoped that a few more colleagues from all of our parties would have come along and taken an interest in how this Parliament works. That is what is at the heart of the excellent report that has been put together by Martin Whitfield's committee.

The bottom line of the report, which is a bit uncomfortable to read, is that the Parliament's current committee system is not working to its optimum level—and that is putting it diplomatically. Some of the committees produce excellent work, and some work really well. That is down to, as Davy Russell said, our taking off our party hats at the door, and I genuinely believe that that is how Parliament should work. I believe that we should go into the committee room with a robust mindset, but we should not necessarily—in fact, we should not at all—go in with a particular party agenda. Sometimes, colleagues accuse each other of doing that—sometimes, I think, unfairly. It is possible to be robust and also to be evidence led.

John Mason: I agree with the member to some extent, but does he not accept that there are certain fundamentals that our parties believe in, and which we are not going to leave at the door? For example, the Conservatives would like to reduce tax, while some of us would like to either

raise it or keep it the same. We cannot leave that at the door, can we?

Stephen Kerr: That is not what I am saying—of course we bring our principles into the committee room with us. Martin Whitfield said something to the effect that we know ourselves best, and that is what we bring to the Parliament. I agree with him on that. However, we often divide clearly along party lines when we should be led by the evidence.

Some committees in the Scottish Parliament are genuinely led by the evidence, and the Finance and Public Administration Committee is a very good example of that. Kenny Gibson is not here, but I want to pay tribute to him. Sometimes we clash in the chamber—chamber activity is a different thing—but in terms of its structure and the reports it produces, it is a really good and very valuable committee. That is because the rosettes are taken off at the door. Of course, principles remain with us, but when the facts change, we have to be willing to be open-minded enough as parliamentarians to change our minds, too. That pragmatism should be at the heart of all of our politics as Scots.

Ruth Maguire: Will the member give way?

Stephen Kerr: Of course I will.

Ruth Maguire: I appreciate the member's giving way, and I enjoyed working with him on the Education, Children and Young People Committee. I wonder whether, when he talks about our party rosettes coming off, rather than meaning our principles, he is talking about how we interact with folk who have different views in committee. What he means, I think, is that it is not about our party policies or our fundamental political beliefs but about negotiation and the valuing of other people's beliefs and views.

Stephen Kerr: If I may say so, Ruth Maguire was a brilliant colleague on the committee, because she did exactly that, and it was often the way in which our committee gelled. I am talking about individual members—irrespective of whether they are the convener, although conveners do play a very important role in creating the environment—being on board and willing to listen to each other and move towards each other, without compromising. John Mason is right; I do not expect colleagues to compromise their basic political principles but to approach this in a grown-up, mature way as parliamentarians.

Our Parliament needs more parliamentarians. We need to take the view of what is best for our country rather than what is best for our parties. Since my arrival in the Scottish Parliament, my fundamental problem has been that it is a party-managed Parliament, and, frankly, I find that objectionable.

George Adam (Paisley) (SNP): I have been listening to everything that Mr Kerr has been saying. We have had our disagreements, but we have always kept everything open and friendly when discussing things.

In my time in the Scottish Parliament, though, I have never faced a situation in which a convener, regardless of political party, has been so objecting—to me—and so difficult, until now, when there is someone on the Education, Children and Young People Committee with whom I cannot work and who is extremely difficult and partisan. The colleague sitting in front of Mr Kerr—Sue Webber—was excellent in her time, but her replacement became difficult.

I come back to the leadership issue that was mentioned by the convener of the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee. The problem with having someone in that role is that they need to have the leadership in order to be able to work with everyone.

Stephen Kerr: I have worked for a long time with the convener of that committee. When one gets to know him, one understands how he works. Ultimately, it is because of his particular way of questioning that things often come to light that otherwise might not have.

Paul Sweeney: Will the member give way?

Stephen Kerr: I will, in a second.

What is necessary for committees to be effective, particularly with witnesses who are in the category that Evelyn Tweed described in her excellent speech, is that there is constructive tension in the room. Douglas Ross, to whom George Adam was referring, is very good at that. We have to see people in the round, and I would say to George Adam that we all have aspects to which other members might object, but often there are other parts of the same person that people will admire. That is true of how I feel about George Adam, for example. That is how we gel as a committee.

I will now give way to Paul Sweeney.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I will briefly say that I appreciate that Stephen Kerr has been very generous with his interventions, so I will give him up to 8 minutes and 30 seconds.

Paul Sweeney: I have noted Mr Kerr's point about convenership. Perhaps it comes back to his point about the need to seek election, build a mandate across the chamber and command the confidence of everyone. That would be a self-regulatory check on overly partisan behaviour.

Stephen Kerr: Paul Sweeney knows that I believe very strongly in directly elected conveners.

That is one way for us to get the Scottish Parliament's levels of scrutiny back up.

I also think that it would be a good idea if conveners made a commitment to stay in post. Similarly, I do not think that the turnover of committee memberships is good at all, because members do not develop a feel for the subject matter. If someone stays long enough, they begin to love the subject matter, even if they did not really have much interest in it when they first ended up on the committee.

The whole way in which committees are constructed and the nature of the role of the convener are so important. Last week in *The Times*, Alex Massie described something that happened in the chamber last Thursday. I will not name names, but I think that he has a point. The nature of what we do in committee involves holding ministers to account—indeed, that is what we come here to do, to a very large measure. Last week, in Alex Massie's column in *The Times*, he described something that he witnessed at First Minister's question time, when, basically, the convener of a very powerful committee in effect asked the First Minister—and I quote—

"why are you so good?"

For some members, that might be fine, but I think that conveners should have the self-respect to know that they have an official role to play in this Parliament, meaning that, occasionally, they cannot indulge in some of the stuff that might be quite enjoyable and even pantomime-like. Some people find that edifying or even entertaining, but we should expect something different from a convener. That is why we need directly elected conveners—and I also believe that they should be paid.

Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): Will Stephen Kerr give way?

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

Stephen Kerr: I would love to take an intervention, and there are many more things that I would like to say.

I think that the minister was waving the essay by my colleague James Bundy and me, which has just been published in the University of Edinburgh's *Scottish Affairs* journal. It contains 10,000 wonderful words about what we feel we could do to make our Parliament what it should be, because Scotland needs a robust, strong and vibrant Parliament as never before.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call John Mason.

16:11

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind): Thank you, Presiding Officer. I was not sure whether you were first bringing in Rona Mackay again.

Many thanks for the opportunity to speak and many thanks to the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee for its excellent report. I very much agree with the first point in its overall conclusion, which is that

“it is essential that the ... Parliament has a strong and effective committee system.”

I hope that we are all committed to that.

I am also in agreement with the original decision to have one set of committees at Holyrood instead of the Westminster system of separate select and bill committees. I have had experience of that system as well, and I definitely think that that is one aspect in which ours is the better system.

Over my 14 years at Holyrood, I have served on—if I remember correctly—finance committees, economy committees, the Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee, a transport committee—

Stephen Kerr: Will John Mason give way?

John Mason: Let me finish this wonderful list. I have also served on the Delegated Powers and Law Reform Committee, the COVID-19 Recovery Committee, the Equal Opportunities Committee, the Social Justice and Social Security Committee and the Education, Children and Young People Committee.

Stephen Kerr: As a former member of the Westminster Parliament, John Mason would acknowledge that there are limitations when everything goes through one committee; it is an issue of capacity. The stuff that Evelyn Tweed and other members have talked about—subject inquiries and all the other things that committees are expected to do—hardly gets done. If you are on some of the committees in this Parliament, you spend a lot of time on stage 2s. Just dismissing the idea that we should have bill committees would be a mistake, and I ask him to consider that point of view.

John Mason: Actually, I have considered it, Stephen Kerr will be surprised to hear. My main argument is that on a matter such as the Scottish Fiscal Commission—I cannot remember whether Liz Smith was on the Finance Committee at that time—we might spend a huge amount of time, as we did in that case. It was quite a technical issue, and then we dealt with the Scottish Fiscal Commission Bill. That was better than if a bill committee had come to it cold, but I accept that there are different issues.

I turn to some of the specifics covered by the report. On the size of committees, I very much agree that smaller committees generally work better. Currently, I am on one committee with seven members and another with 10, and I think that the one with seven members is better, although that means that there are only four parties in it compared with five.

On the culture of committees, the point is made that MSPs and their attitude are more important than the structure. However, structure has its importance, as well. The convener is important in setting the tone. However, I have seen that, if even one member who is very tribal in their attitude joins a committee, that can change the whole culture of the committee. Therefore, I agree that it is best if MSPs are not too party political at committee, but we cannot forget that we are elected for particular parties—although I am not currently in a party—with all that that entails.

On meeting times, the committee rightly notes that Thursday mornings are particularly difficult, as there is a requirement to finish by 11.40—I was going to intervene during Sue Webber’s speech to make that point, but then she mentioned it anyway. In contrast, the two committee meetings that I have been in this week—on Tuesday and Wednesday—both ran until at least 1.30, and I suggest that Thursday meetings could run until at least 12 o’clock.

I note the comments about the disadvantages of members being on more than one committee, but I think that there are also advantages to that. I have experience of being on three committees, meaning that I was in a meeting every sitting day of the week, which was hard to prepare for and was a bit of a challenge. However, I think that membership of two committees should be manageable and could be advantageous. For example, the Finance and Public Administration Committee often feels that other committees leave everything financial to it, but having MSPs who are on the Finance and Public Administration Committee and on another committee can bring a financial angle to that other committee’s decision making.

We have spent a bit of time on the gender mix already, and I think that the committee correctly makes the point that it is difficult to get gender-balanced committees if Parliament as a whole is not gender balanced. Previously—not, as Keith Brown pointed out, in this session—achieving gender balance on committees was made more difficult because of the idea, originated by Nicola Sturgeon, of having equal numbers of male and female ministers in the Government, which put pressure on the back benches. Clearly, as I think that Mr Whitfield agreed, we need to focus on getting Parliament sorted as a whole, and that will benefit the committees.

I do not think that the issue of committee trips has been mentioned. I question whether committees should be away on overseas trips while Parliament is sitting, and I certainly do not think that the whole membership of a committee should be. Three or four members of a committee should be enough to make the trip worth while, and it should be possible to make those trips happen during recess. However, I very much favour committees having away days and going on fact-finding visits within Scotland. Those can have multiple benefits, as they can create a more collegiate feel in the committee and I know that many residents in island and rural locations especially have appreciated a committee making the effort to visit them instead of their having always to come to Edinburgh.

Liz Smith: I take Mr Mason's point about overseas visits, and I think that we have to be very careful that we are accountable for the use of taxpayers' money in that respect. Nonetheless, to use the example of the Finance and Public Administration Committee, to which he has referred quite a lot, it is helpful for that committee to see how other jurisdictions handle various aspects of financial management. Therefore, I think that those visits can be seen as something that is very useful to the evidence-gathering process in this Parliament and can ensure that we work better.

John Mason: I am not questioning the value of trips altogether, but when the Finance and Public Administration Committee was in—I think—Estonia, an issue came up in the chamber that someone from the committee had to speak to. Fortunately, I had not gone on that trip and I was able to handle that, although I am not the convener or the deputy convener, but that is an example of one of the challenges.

I want to spend a bit of time on the role of conveners. I am not personally convinced that electing or paying conveners would make much of a difference. What I think is that chairing a committee—or any meeting, for that matter—is a skill. I am afraid that I have been at countless meetings of community councils, council committees, parliamentary committees, church groups, cross-party groups and so on that have been very poorly chaired. Most people could probably learn to chair or convene a meeting, but I have seen very mixed convening in my 14 years in the Scottish Parliament, and I would recommend training for conveners when they start. That said, I take Jackson Carlaw's point that we do not want all conveners to be the same.

Some of the problems that I have seen include conveners who dominate meetings and can take up to half the session with their own questions and comments. Of course, it is right that the convener

should lead from the front, but there is a balance to be struck in allowing other members in. Secondly, there is a problem with conveners not allocating time fairly between committee members, which can mean that loud and pushy MSPs get more time while quieter members get less. Thirdly, some chairs, on the other hand, are too laid back and let the committee just drift along. Managing time is an important part of convening any meeting, and there is a need to keep MSPs and witnesses within reasonable time limits. Fourthly, some conveners have an issue with getting the balance right between robust questioning and bullying witnesses. Witnesses are likely to open up more if they do not feel that they are being beaten into pulp, and, in the long run, future witnesses are more likely to engage with Parliament if they know that they will be treated with a degree of respect. However, I accept that many people among the public and the media enjoy seeing witnesses being treated aggressively—indeed, ideally, they would probably like to see them bursting into tears.

We, as members of committees, need to decide whether we are primarily at the committee playing to the gallery or whether we really want to find solutions to problems. I guess that there is a balance to be struck in that regard, but I do not think that we always get it right.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Mason, on the important issue of timekeeping, to which you referred recently, and exercising my skills as the chair of this meeting, I say that I can give you one more minute.

John Mason: I will not even need that; I have only two paragraphs left.

Overall, I am a strong believer in our committee system, linked to a unicameral Parliament system. Yes, there is certainly room for improvement, but let us not be overly negative, as we sometimes tend to be.

I commend the committee on its report, which I think is thorough, but I remain convinced that, although the structure is important, the real key to how well our committees operate is down to the behaviour and attitudes of the committee members.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, Mr Mason. We have not been able to get Rona Mackay's camera to function, for whatever reason, so I am afraid that, on this occasion, I will not be able to call her. Instead, we will move directly to closing speeches. I call Paul Sweeney to close on behalf of Scottish Labour.

16:20

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): I congratulate the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee on its fine report, and I thank the committee's convener, Mr Whitfield, for outlining its findings succinctly at the outset of the debate and for his summation of Donald Dewar's comments about cynicism and unrealistic expectation and how those were the key challenges that we all have to overcome, as parliamentarians, when it comes to how we maintain public confidence in this institution after a quarter of a century.

There are many issues that we must contend with, and we have an abundance of opportunity but a massive dearth of time in which to do so. It is a question of rationing that time effectively so that we can give the Parliament the ability not only to be effective, but to manage the tension between consent and dissent, which Mr Leonard mentioned, in conducting effective scrutiny of Government and all other aspects of the public functions of this country. It is a real challenge for us to do that strategically and to put some of our more partisan instincts to one side in the interests of the country.

Stephen Kerr's point about putting party before country must be a central part of the ethos of a parliamentarian. Notwithstanding our ideological positions or our perspectives on how the country should function and how things should be done, we should pursue a truthful outcome, as far as that is possible.

Often, rather than being to do with the politics, the issue can simply be to do with the bureaucracy. We must remember that, while Scotland has had bureaucratic devolution for more than a century, it has had legislative devolution for only a quarter of a century. It is a question of how this young legislature can hold to account an old bureaucracy up on Calton Hill whose approach to things is often very ingrained. We must recognise that distinction as we perform our functions as a legislature.

In a unicameral legislature such as the Scottish Parliament, the role of the committees is essential to our performing those functions. Some excellent points about the committees have been made in the debate. I am pleased that, although the committee did not take a firm view on the role of elected conveners for committees, it has opened the door for the full Parliament to consider that prospect.

I think it is essential that we have elected conveners. Indeed, I made a written submission to the committee in the course of its inquiry in May last year, in which I highlighted why I thought that committee convener elections would be useful.

As members who have served in the House of Commons will know, the process of elections of conveners, which takes place at the start of the session, is a bit like a student union election, in that lots of flyers suddenly appear in members' offices as part of the canvassing process. People were perturbed to see lots of Conservative leaflets appearing in Labour offices in relation to members who were seeking election as chair of a certain committee. There was a sudden realisation that the role of committee chair is allocated to a party, but all members have to come together to decide who the best parliamentarian is. It was a steep learning curve for me to learn that it was necessary to put party affiliation to one side and look at an individual's background, what they had said in the Commons before, what their parliamentary record was like, what campaigns they had been involved in and what their attitude was to working with colleagues, in order to determine who the best—or, at least, the least worst—option was to elect to the role.

Such a process serves as a useful check. It tempers behaviour, reduces the idea of party entrenchment and brings members closer together as a Parliament.

Graeme Dey: I am interested in hearing Paul Sweeney's perspective on the election of the Presiding Officer when he came to Parliament as a brand-new MSP and how he found that experience of coming to a decision on the best candidate.

Paul Sweeney: In fact, I had already had the opportunity to do that because, just before I left the House of Commons, we elected the Speaker, Lindsay Hoyle. When I came here, I took part in the election of the Presiding Officer and the Deputy Presiding Officers. That was a really good moment, because it involved the Parliament coming together to think about who the best candidates might be.

There was some consideration of parliamentary arithmetic and who could best afford at key moments to lose a member to the chair. Sometimes, in a carefully balanced Parliament such as the Scottish Parliament, the parliamentary arithmetic can be important and it drives behaviour.

Martin Whitfield: I have been in the same situation as Mr Sweeney. Purportedly, one of the reasons for voting for the Speaker before the general election was that those members of Parliament who were voting for the Speaker knew more about them. However, was that not one Parliament trying to dictate to a future Parliament what it should look like? Meanwhile, we have the benefit that each Parliament elects its own Presiding Officer, who can create the structure

and—as we have talked about—the environment that we want the Parliament to be.

Paul Sweeney: That is an interesting point. The convention in the House of Commons is that the Speaker's seat is not contested at elections so they have the privilege of being able to carry over to the next session without much fuss. Here, it tends to be that the Presiding Officer retires from the role at the end of the session.

Stephen Kerr: In the case of our Parliament, would it not have been better if the candidates for the office of Presiding Officer had had to pitch themselves for the job? We did not hear anything from them before we got into the voting process.

Paul Sweeney: That is a fair point. Reflecting back, that would have been useful because, as new members, we were flying blind. We were rabbits in headlights. To have had a hustings of some kind would have been a useful exercise to understand more about the individuals involved and the process. Perhaps it might have produced a different outcome. Nonetheless, it is an important point.

I have considered the issue in the round and have worked with colleagues—most notably Declan McLean, an academic at Cardiff University—on constitutional reforms. I know that Mr Kerr has worked with James Bundy and other people outside the Parliament to look at opportunities for improvement. They all have really good ideas. One academic review on changes to the United Kingdom Parliament's committee system referred to an MP who said:

"Elected chairs made all the difference. They're elected by the House, so they can't be too partisan or cliquey."

That is important. By directly electing conveners, parliamentarians could seek to build a reputation for themselves, enhancing the committees' status.

Lots of other points have been made. The member for Stirling, Evelyn Tweed, made the important point that it is not just the Government that is being held to account but the agencies that are created by the Parliament. Too often, there is perfunctory engagement—maybe one evidence session, without much scrutiny. We need to look at that in the case of the Scottish Housing Regulator.

Evelyn Tweed: Do you agree that a spotlight needs to be shone in scrutiny of organisations such as the Scottish Housing Regulator, to make sure that they are performing well and in a transparent way?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Always speak through the chair.

Paul Sweeney: I agree. There should be much more regular engagement with those very powerful bodies that are in control of, potentially,

billions of pounds-worth of public or community-owned assets. Understanding what is going on and engaging with the community is the essence of this Parliament.

Maybe there should be extra powers to call in decisions. For example, if there was a contentious takeover of a housing association and that was a cause of alarm to a committee, it would have the power to call in that decision. In the planning system, ministers have the power to call in contentious planning decisions made by local authorities. Maybe the Parliament should exercise greater functions through its committee system. It could be a good evolution of devolution if the Parliament could do more of that rather than leaving it to the executive or the bureaucracy at St Andrew's house.

There is also a great opportunity for interparliamentary committee work. We do not do enough of that in this country. We have 25 years of devolution, devolved legislatures and House of Commons committees. We could do a lot more together, including in areas that straddle devolved and reserved competencies such as drugs, housing issues, asylum and immigration. We could have much closer working across committees and Parliaments to get more coherence in public policy and hold all the Governments to account where they have interlocking roles. That could all be useful.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Sweeney, could you bring your remarks to a close.

Paul Sweeney: I have barely scratched the surface of the potential, but I hope that I have made my view on the election of committee conveners clear.

16:29

Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con): Uncomfortably, I find myself in the same boat as Richard Leonard in that I am going to give own my views, which do not necessarily tie in with those of my party.

I have been convener of a committee for all but one year of my time in the Parliament. It is a role that I have considered to be important—more so than holding a shadow cabinet position in Opposition, for example—because I think that members can make a difference in it.

I have listened to today's debate and think that we have missed, or should consider, a couple of aspects.

When I started being a convener, I was incredibly lucky to have a good senior clerk who enabled me to bounce ideas off them and allowed me to fight over certain points. That allowed me to be educated, as a new convener, about what I

could and could not do and what was in the committee's best interests. To my mind, the role of the clerks is absolutely critical. When we look at our committees we must bear in mind that it is really important to ensure that we have the right clerks supporting them.

I have also gone through quite a few business managers in my time as convener. It is absolutely critical to have a relationship with them to allow the committee to work out its future programme. I know that almost all committee conveners do that, but that relationship is particularly important for a new convener. I will not embarrass the one business manager with whom I struggled, but I will say that he never gave me a biscuit when I came to meetings. He knows who he is, and I see that he is smiling.

On the issue of committee size, my first committee had 11 members, which to me seemed unwieldy and almost too difficult to manage. To be honest, those members' experience and depth of knowledge, and the length of time that some of them had spent in the Parliament, made things virtually impossible. I would sometimes benefit from the knowledge of Richard Lyle and Stewart Stevenson, but sometimes I could not, and an 11-person committee can be difficult and unwieldy to manage.

John Mason: Will the member accept an intervention?

Edward Mountain: I will give way to Mr Mason, on the basis that I hope he is going to recall being on a committee that I was on—an experience that he ignored earlier.

John Mason: I did mention that it dealt with transport, which is what I wanted to raise. Would Mr Mountain agree that the committee to which he referred—of which I, too, was a member—had too wide a remit? We dealt with all the rural stuff, such as crofting, as well as all the transport stuff.

Edward Mountain: I agree with Mr Mason on that point, which I will come back to in a minute.

In the second of my sessions in the Parliament, I was on a committee of seven people and found it to be an easy one to get round. It is really important to me as a convener that a committee is not too big. I like to talk to members before meetings to find out their views and ascertain their direction of travel, because that makes it far easier then to reach decisions.

I agree to some extent that members cannot always leave party politics at the door, but, in my time as a convener, I have seen committees being whipped over decisions. During work on the bill that became the Transport (Scotland) Act 2019, I was told that members would vote in a certain way. However, it then became clear that that was

not the party way and members changed their views, which I thought was incredibly sad. I have also found it quite sad to have evidence of questions being leaked to ministers prior to evidence sessions with a committee. At one point, we had a private session on aquaculture, but when I left I found myself being doorstepped in my office by a journalist who asked me about something that had been said in that private session. That means that I am not keen on questions being shared ahead of meetings and that I always encourage committee members to make up their own minds.

Keith Brown (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP): Every time I hear that said, the speaker is always having a go at the governing party and is always talking about the partisan nature of back benchers from that party. Would Mr Mountain agree that partisan party politics can apply to anyone? I know of an Opposition member who cannot wait to scurry out when a meeting concludes, so that he can send a press release to his favourite newspaper. That practice happens on both sides, and it will stop only if both sides stop doing it.

Edward Mountain: I agree with Mr Brown. I can think of one committee member who used to leave a committee meeting early to ensure that they could get their press release out before anyone else. I say to Mr Brown that I am just making observations. I am not pointing the finger at anyone; I am just speaking from my experience as a convener.

It is also right to get more balance in committees so that the governing party does not have an absolute majority. There are very few committees in the Parliament where that is the case.

I totally agree with Mr Mason's point about the size of committees' subject areas. The Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee's remit includes matters that I do not believe are about any of those areas. Land reform is one of them. I am sure that the Minister for Parliamentary Business and Veterans would have been delighted had I not got so involved in that. *[Laughter.]* However, the point is that committees are sometimes given additional work that falls outside their areas. For the REC Committee, trying to deal with ferries, trains, motorways and so on became virtually impossible.

Paul Sweeney: Will the member give way?

Edward Mountain: Do I have time to give way, Presiding Officer?

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): Absolutely.

Paul Sweeney: I did not get to the subject of bill committees versus select committees in the UK Parliament, but in some instances there may be a

case for specialised bill committees where a particularly complex bill with many facets does not fit neatly into a silo.

Edward Mountain: I am not used to bill committees. However, I note that the majority—or potentially the whole—of the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee’s deliberations between now and the end of the current session will be on the climate change plan, even though there are other matters that we must consider, including a member’s bill and other important issues that fall within the transport portfolio. Therefore, I can see that there might be an argument for having bill committees.

In session 5, there was a chance for our committee to be far more independent in relation to the work that we could undertake. I remember working with the current Minister for Parliamentary Business and Veterans, who at that time was the convener of another committee, on an aquaculture inquiry that was conducted by two committees. In that session, we had the ability to do that. As a convener in the current session, I have felt a bit like a dog who is thrown a ball and chases it all over the place. Whether it be in relation to land reform or the climate change plan, the committee has had so little time in which we could consider matters outwith the legislation that has been introduced.

I absolutely believe that electing committee conveners is the right way forward, and I hope that the Parliament will consider doing so. I would have no problem with standing up and trying to justify why I should be a convener. It might be that a convener should be a member of a particular party, but I do not think that it is right for the party leader to decide who they will be. Although I am a beneficiary of the current system and have enjoyed every moment of my tenure, I think that the approach is ripe for change.

It is also important for conveners to stay in post. As I alluded to earlier, there is nothing wrong with a member being a parliamentarian and concentrating their career within the Parliament. If a member is a convener or leading member of a committee, they should be applauded for that, because it is important.

On conveners being paid, I do not want extra money, but I would have liked some additional staff budget to assist me with getting ready for meetings. Conveners are ably assisted by committee clerks, but when we have to read all the papers and delve down into findings it would sometimes be extremely helpful to have someone to look over them and flag things up.

Jackson Carlaw: The point has been made previously that it would be helpful for committee conveners to have additional staff resource. That

also points to the importance of continuity and of conveners being there for the whole of a parliamentary session. If they were to move, we would be left with the difficulty of reallocating that resource. That is one of the functions that might come out of having a commitment that, once elected, conveners will be there for the duration of the session.

Edward Mountain: As always, Mr Carlaw thinks through the issue and comes up with a justification for a decision that I think is the right one.

On witnesses, in my time as convener of the REC Committee and the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee, I have seen the same old people coming in and giving us almost the same old evidence. I know that the clerks sometimes struggle to find people to appear, and I applaud them for their efforts, but sometimes we need to go further afield. That is why it is important that committee members should get out of the Parliament and visit other areas. For example, the REC Committee went to Mull and various other places to hear from people on the ground.

Stephen Kerr: Will the member give way?

Edward Mountain: I will, in just a minute.

If witnesses are getting money from any sources, it is important that they ensure that that is declared before they appear at a committee meeting.

I will take Stephen Kerr’s intervention.

Stephen Kerr: That was exactly the point I was going to make, so I do not need to intervene.

Edward Mountain: I will wind up my remarks on that note. However, I encourage the taking of such an approach when the next parliamentary session begins.

I agree that teaching people how to convene is probably not the best way forward, but teaching them how to use the assets that they have at their disposal—in particular, the skills of the clerks and the staff in all the other parliamentary departments—is important, because it will make them more effective.

16:40

Graeme Dey: The SPPA Committee’s inquiry drew on a range of perspectives, including from conveners past and present. In closing, I hope that I can add to the perspectives of Richard Leonard and Edward Mountain without quite joining their ranks—valuable as I felt their contributions were.

The points that I am going to make are not made from the perspective of the Scottish Government, which rightly takes the view that how the Parliament organises itself to carry out its

scrutiny functions is a matter for the Parliament. Instead, they are some personal reflections from my 15 years in the Parliament, during which I have served on parliamentary committees as a member, deputy convener and convener.

I served for three years in the role of Minister for Parliamentary Business and Veterans, which coincided with the pandemic, when the Parliament and its committees faced all sorts of never-before-encountered issues in scrutinising and passing legislation. I contend that I rose to that challenge. I therefore hope that my comments will be taken in the constructive manner in which they are intended.

If I had to choose one takeaway from the pandemic period experience, it would be the determination that was shown by committee members and conveners to function as best they could, in quite extraordinary circumstances, to get through the work programme that was before them. I give particular credit to Adam Tomkins, who led the Justice Committee, and Lewis Macdonald, who led the Health and Sport Committee. Both were from non-Government parties and both placed their responsibilities as convener ahead of party politicking when fulfilling their convening role.

There was much to-ing and fro-ing between me, as the minister, and them to reschedule deadlines or to schedule SSIs in a way that aided the committees in their efforts to complete their work programmes during those unprecedented times. I recount that because it highlights that being a truly effective convener requires the individual concerned to rise above their party political instincts—whatever their political persuasion—and seek to bring a team ethos to the committee, recognising the leadership role.

I made it clear in my opening statement that the Scottish Government does not take a position on the election of committee conveners. I want to stress that point again before I move on to offer further personal views. I have seen the evidence that the committee received that electing conveners might give the job added standing. However, I disagree with Richard Leonard. If the Parliament was to decide to go down that road, the process of electing conveners should not be a popularity contest, nor, when the convener is to be drawn from the ranks of the governing party or parties, should it be about picking the person who is viewed as most likely to be a thorn in the side of the Government.

Paul Sweeney: Does the member agree that the role should be rooted in respect and having authority on the subject? The Constitution Society reviewed the system in the UK Parliament and concluded that

“changes in the system have elevated the profile and status of select committees in Parliament and government”.

If we did it in that way, it would be a great opportunity.

Graeme Dey: I am not sure that it is about experience, because someone can build their experience. It is about the skill set of the individual.

Ruth Maguire: Will the member take an intervention?

Graeme Dey: I will make a little bit of progress.

I reflect with pride on the fact that, during my time as convener of the Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform Committee, we required a division only once. We did some important work that sometimes challenged the Government, and I do not think that Roseanna Cunningham, the environment secretary at the time, reckoned that she got an easy time from the committee. Indeed, she often told me—in her inimitable way—that the opposite was true. The close working between my committee and the Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee, which was led by Edward Mountain, to deliver a joint report on aquaculture placed me at odds with the then rural secretary. However, that was as it should be.

To answer Stephen Kerr's question, the right leadership of committees can foster an environment in which all members become better focused on doing the work of a member of a committee as opposed to the work of a party member.

Ruth Maguire: I understand why the minister might balk at the concept of a popularity contest, but will he reflect on whether the skills that mean that a member can convince their colleagues to vote for them—that make them the most popular choice—are the skills that a member requires to be a good convener who can reach out to people with different views and bring folk together?

Graeme Dey: That would require the members who were making the choice to consider that to be the optimal factor in the decision-making process. I served a three-year apprenticeship as a deputy convener, and I would not have been as effective a convener as I—immodestly—think that I was without that experience behind me. However, I do not say that to suggest that only seasoned MSPs ought to be in the frame to be conveners, as people will enter here with the skill set required and suitable experience gained elsewhere. I saw that during my brief spell on the Education, Children and Young People Committee under Sue Webber, whom George Adam rightly commended for her approach to chairing.

I suggest, from my own experience—again, I stress that I am not speaking on behalf of the

Government here—that if the Parliament is to elect its conveners, the approach to be taken should be similar to that which underpins selecting a Presiding Officer, which is getting the best person for the job. The qualities that are needed include the ability to foster the right culture and atmosphere in the committee, so that the outcomes of its work are evidence based rather than partial.

In the report, there is a reference to innovative working, and the committees of the Parliament could build on the foundations established here over the past 25 or 26 years. A moment ago, I spoke about the joint inquiry into aquaculture in the previous session of Parliament, which was carried out by the Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform Committee and the Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee, and which was led by Edward Mountain. That combined effort really added to the status of the report, because it was two committees of the Parliament coming together.

I also think back to my time as the deputy convener of the Rural Affairs, Climate Change and Environment Committee, when we conducted an inquiry into the way in which supermarkets treat Scotland's food producers. One leading supermarket indicated that it would not attend the committee. Under the leadership of Rob Gibson, we explored how we could seek to compel its attendance—something that had never been done by the Parliament at that point but that had unanimous cross-party support in the committee. In the end, we settled for advising the supermarket concerned that it would be empty-chaired, which was a bit unusual for a parliamentary committee. The supermarket attended, and the session was much more productive in shining a light on the issue.

It is important that committees see their role not just as scrutinising legislation and holding the Government to account, because there is so much more for them to do. I hope that the focus on committee effectiveness that the inquiry has instigated leads to the committees in the next session of Parliament kicking on. However, in order that the conveners of those committees, elected or otherwise, are able to oversee the committees and be at their best, the assistance of an optimal induction process for new members will be required.

This session of Parliament has been different from the session when I entered Parliament, in 2011. In the early years of that period, I found myself working constructively on committees with cross-party colleagues such as Alex Fergusson, Jim Hume, Claudia Beamish and John Scott. Friendships were forged, some of which survive to this day. This session has been a more

combative—some might say toxic—setting than previous sessions, and I know that I am not alone in thinking that the inability to have an extended, wide-ranging cross-party induction process as a consequence of Covid laid some of the foundations for that. I am aware that Parliament has plans to ensure that the offering for new members will be far better. That will surely help our committee conveners and this institution as they seek to ensure that our committees become as effective as they have the potential to be.

The Presiding Officer: I call Ruth Maguire, on behalf of the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee, to wind up the debate and take us to 5 pm.

16:48

Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP): I thank the clerks of the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee, whose expertise and diligence are absolutely key to the successful output of our committee. We heard from across the chamber about the role that clerking plays in all committees. The committee is grateful to members not only for their engagement in the debate but in that of our inquiry more widely. This has been an interesting debate.

As we make clear in our inquiry report, the purpose of our work has been to ensure that committees are well placed to operate effectively in the next parliamentary session and beyond. In this inquiry, we undertook a thorough examination of how committees work. We have looked at all aspects of committee operations, including the structure of committees and the role of committee members. We believe our recommendations to be practical, deliverable and focused on giving committees the necessary tools to fulfil their potential.

There were a couple of recommendations that the convener did not quite get to, due to his generous giving way to other members, so I will take a minute to draw attention to them. One of those was to bring forward the deadline for when members' bills must be introduced in a parliamentary session. Colleagues will be aware that we have a bit of a jam of private members' bills at the moment, and it is important that all members' bills are given the full hearing that they require.

John Mason: I notice that the committee did not make the same recommendation for Government bills. Some Government bills, such as the budget, are time bound, but should the Government not also be introducing bills earlier?

Ruth Maguire: I think that the committee would recognise the balance between the Government's

mandate and Parliament's role in making recommendations.

Jackson Carlaw: Is there not a slight worry, though, that putting that block in place would favour returning members in a new parliamentary session? They would be in a position to introduce bills because they had prepared for them in the previous parliamentary session, but new members would be disadvantaged in that they would not be prepared in time to introduce a bill within the timeframe.

Ruth Maguire: That is not something that we discussed as a committee, but I recognise the point. In counter to that, having a well-prepared idea and a developed notion of what you are going to legislate on is also quite valuable.

One of the other things that the committee recommended was giving committees more flexibility to meet in private when the chamber is sitting and to utilise Monday afternoons and Friday mornings for some committee business. Perhaps most significantly on structural changes, one of the proposals was that the Parliamentary Bureau should be able to propose time-limited committees. Those committees could look at specific bills, specific inquiry issues, whether of a topical or cross-cutting nature, and undertake post-legislative scrutiny.

Our report also reflected on the suite of tools that are available to committees—committee reporters, sub-committees and joint committee meetings. We added hosting to that, where one committee would be formally invited to participate in another committee's meetings, including access to private evidence sessions and meeting papers.

It has been helpful to hear positive examples of committee work and the factors that have contributed to that success.

Paul Sweeney: I put it on the record that my participation in the cross-committee work on drug deaths has been particularly rewarding. That is a synthesis of the work of two committees—the Criminal Justice Committee and the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee—and it has been really useful in getting to the nub of a major emergency in Scotland, so perhaps more of that could be a good thing.

Ruth Maguire: I thank Paul Sweeney. That is a helpful contribution; it is good to get that on the record.

Forgive me—I have a lot of sheets of paper here.

Many of the contributions in the debate were on the importance of culture. In opening, the minister recognised the workload of committees and the balance between the Government's mandate to take forward legislation and the freedom of

Parliament and committees in their approach to the scrutiny function and, importantly, how they hold the Government to account. The report acknowledges that committees should have the ability to choose for themselves how they wish to go about their work. It is about ensuring that there is flexibility and capacity in the system for all committees to develop their own approach.

Jackson Carlaw spoke to his concerns in relation to creating identikit conveners and identikit committee members. The committee's report discusses providing members with confidence and knowledge to forge their own path and carve out their own identity and role. It also acknowledges that different conveners have different interpretations of their role and different styles of working.

Richard Leonard referenced the successes of the Public Audit Committee. As we heard from others during our inquiry, it is sometimes easier for committees to operate more effectively when they are scrutinising organisations and public bodies and not Government ministers—I think that Richard Leonard would agree with that.

On culture, we heard about the importance of conveners. Sue Webber reflected on her experience of convening a large committee, how its size sometimes affected the time that individual members had to make contributions and the implications that that could have. If someone is allowed to continue with their scrutiny freely, they might unearth some gem of information that will be helpful in the committee's work.

Evelyn Tweed highlighted an important issue that perhaps was not touched on in depth in our report, which is holding to account bodies that are accountable to the Parliament, and the challenge of having one report or one meeting in a session to do that. On behalf of the convener and I, we would welcome further discussion on that topic and what we can do about it. It is crucially important.

We appreciated the contribution of Davy Russell as a fairly new member of a committee. Unfortunately, all I wrote down was that he found Jackson Carlaw's convenership to be nurturing, which made me smile. As sweet as it sounds, that gets to the nub of what a good convener can do to help people to perform their best on committee by sharing their knowledge.

Stephen Kerr spoke about the importance of cross-party working, which is a subject that has shone through throughout the debate. He also paid tribute to the Finance and Public Administration Committee, which is often held up as a good example of working. He specifically mentioned my Ayrshire colleague, Kenneth Gibson—I probably should put his name on the

record—and the importance of our role as parliamentarians, not just as politicians. That is a point of view that everyone would share.

John Mason also made a thoughtful contribution in sharing his 14 years of experience in service. On culture, he pointed out that, even with an excellent convener, one member being hostile or tribal can sometimes throw things off. He also spoke about the importance of fact-finding visits and away days. Such opportunities to gel as humans are important and contribute to good working. That was particularly true this session, when new members were not together for induction.

When there are differences of views on where the solutions to issues might lie, it adds further weight to ensuring the recognition of a common resolve that committees are equipped to fulfil their potential. I have been struck by the support from members across the chamber today for the crucial function that committees play in our democracy, which is to hold the Scottish Government to account and to reflect the interests of the people whom we serve. We need to ensure that committees are prepared to meet the expectations of voters and that they can demonstrate what they can achieve.

As the convener set out at the start of the debate, there is a collective will to improve the effectiveness of committees, and that has been evidenced by the contributions to the debate. Following today's debate, the committee will reflect on what we have heard and will propose specific standing order rule changes that we will bring to the Parliament for consideration. That will ensure that any changes can be made in advance of the start of the next parliamentary session.

However, standing orders are only one part of the answer to strengthening committees' effectiveness. Ultimately, it will be for everyone in the Parliament and the new colleagues who will join them next year to decide to make our committees work. It will be up to them to embed a culture of interest, curiosity and—importantly—collaboration, so that that is a success.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes the debate on strengthening committees' effectiveness.

Motion without Notice

16:58

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): I am minded to accept a motion without notice, under rule 11.2.4 of standing orders, that decision time be brought forward to now. I invite the Minister for Parliamentary Business to move the motion.

Motion moved,

That, under Rule 11.2.4, Decision Time be brought forward to 4.59 pm.—[*Graeme Dey*]

Motion agreed to.

Decision Time

16:59

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): There is one question to be put as a result of today's business. The question is, that motion S6M-19436, in the name of Martin Whitfield, on behalf of the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee, on strengthening committees' effectiveness, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament notes and welcomes the conclusions and recommendations in the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee's 4th Report, 2025 (Session 6), *Strengthening committees' effectiveness* (SP Paper 878); further notes that the Committee wishes to gauge the views of other Members on the introduction of a procedure for the election of committee conveners by the Parliament, and agrees to consider a proposed rule change for the election of committee conveners based on the procedure set out in annexe B to the report.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes decision time.

Dying in Poverty at the End of Life in Scotland 2025

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The final item of business is a members' business debate on motion S6M-18624, in the name of Paul Sweeney, on dying in poverty at the end of life in Scotland 2025. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament welcomes the publication of the Marie Curie report, *Dying in Poverty in Scotland 2025*; understands that the report is based on research carried out by Marie Curie and Loughborough University; notes that it found that end of life poverty in Scotland remains unchanged since 2024; understands from the research that one in four working age people and one in six older people still die in end of life poverty; considers that terminal illness exacerbates existing inequality and deepens the inverse care law where people in the most need of support are least likely to receive it; notes the report's findings that symptoms of terminal illness and diagnosis can result in higher energy and housing costs; believes that a terminal diagnosis can force both a dying person and their carers to reduce their working hours or give up paid work entirely; notes the view that more must be done to target support to people at the end of life and their carers, and further notes the calls for the Scottish Government to take action to prevent people, including those in the Glasgow region, from dying in end of life poverty.

17:01

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): I thank everybody in the chamber who supported my members' business motion. During the week that saw the start of stage 2 proceedings on the Deputy Presiding Officer's Assisted Dying for Terminally Ill Adults (Scotland) Bill, it is good and proper that the Parliament takes a moment to consider end-of-life poverty in Scotland. Regardless of members' views on the bill, it has been made clear from the discussions in the Parliament and across the country that we are all united, by a massive majority, in wanting the best possible support for those who are suffering with terminal illness.

Ensuring dignity in the final months and days when someone is suffering from a terminal illness should be a paramount consideration for the Parliament. No one needs to die in poverty, spending their final moments worrying about bills, how to afford their final meal or the implications for their loved ones. Unfortunately, as the preliminary data from Marie Curie's 2025 report shows, dying in poverty is still the norm in too much of Scotland. We want to believe that we live in a land where everyone dies in the comfort of their own bed, surrounded by family and friends, in a peaceful, dignified and pain-free way, but a staggering one in four working-age people and one in six pensioners with a terminal illness die in poverty

every year in this country. We can all agree that that is completely unacceptable.

Scotland remains such an unequal society in so many ways—most notably, in relation to income—and a closer look at the figures shows that areas such as my home city of Glasgow are affected the most, with one in three working-age people dying in poverty. A legacy of deindustrialisation, austerity and social neglect has led to too many of my constituents spending their whole lives, from the cradle to the grave, in poverty—indeed, it is a life sentence before they are even born. Where there should be dignity and support, instead, there is a constant, exhausting and overwhelming battle that does not end until their untimely passing.

In the past couple of weeks, there has been news of a credit union's funeral plans being pulled at a moment's notice by a completely unscrupulous provider, which shows that, even in death, some people are stripped of the dignity of the funeral that they might have planned. The fear of the pauper's funeral still looms large in this country. It is the final indignity—a funeral being stripped from elderly, low-income Scots with no recourse. I hope that we can at least change that.

The terrible overlap of class and health inequalities was brought home to me, as I have mentioned previously, when I visited the Marie Curie hospice at Stobhill hospital—the hospital where I was born. I met a lady there who was suffering from terminal throat cancer. She had grown up in Bridgeton and had had a difficult upbringing—she had been involved in drug taking and various other things. She had two young boys and had just got her life back on track, or so she thought. She had had a persistent cough and a sore throat, and she went to the doctor umpteen times to try to get help. She was sent away with painkillers and told that it was just an infection. By the time she got a referral and was diagnosed, she had incurable throat cancer. She was in her late forties.

I walked around the hospice—as members of the Scottish Parliament, we often visit such places—and was suddenly confronted with this most horrendous, shattering story. What do you even say to someone in that situation? She felt that she had been robbed of her life because, due to her upbringing, she was not taken seriously and was unable to advocate for herself. She was suffering a terminal illness; she was going to die.

What were the implications for her? What about her young kids? It was a really difficult conversation, but we tried to turn it into something positive by talking about the impact that she had had on her children and how they were doing really well. We tried to gather some degree of positivity from the situation. She made the point that, if she had grown up in Bearsden rather than

Bridgeton, she might still be alive today. I got a call just the day afterwards to say that she had passed away.

In many ways, we need to think about the reality of the avoidable deaths that happen every day in Scotland because of this economic and social problem, and about the lack of equality.

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): I am very grateful to Paul Sweeney for his incredibly powerful speech. Does it not speak to the disparity between what we believe to be the social contract among us all here in Scotland and the reality that many constituents face? I compliment Marie Curie on its powerful report, which provides an opportunity to look at the issue and to recommit to a full social contract that reaches out to people, including the woman Paul Sweeney has spoken about so powerfully.

Paul Sweeney: I thank my friend for his intervention. I could not agree more. Despite all the immense work that hospices and our national health service do, too many people are simply stripped of dignity at the end of their lives. Too many people are robbed of the ability to die at home, rather than in a horrible clinical setting in a hospital.

That does not have to be the world that we live in. Marie Curie made a number of recommendations in its report that would help us to alleviate poverty and dying and to take the burdens off those in their end-of-life journey. One way would be for the Scottish Government and local authorities to work together to exempt terminally ill people from paying council tax, similar to the Manchester discretionary council tax support scheme. That would lift the financial burden for those close to death and would be a small step in creating a state that cares actively for those who are dying and recognises the struggles that they are going through by minimising the stress of what is an already impossible situation to come to terms with.

I realise that I have only touched on the initial findings of this fine report. I am sure that colleagues from across the chamber will highlight its other important findings during the debate.

It is important to stress that we in the chamber have the power to end the scourge of end-of-life poverty. It could happen to a family member or a friend of ours, or it could be us—who knows? We can build a social security system that is once again a truly cradle-to-grave system of protection. If we do not do that, the consequence will be that large numbers of our fellow Scots will continue to suffer the humiliation and indignity of suffering at the end of life.

I thank Marie Curie and Loughborough University for releasing the preliminary findings

ahead of the publication of the full report, “Dying in Poverty in Scotland 2025”, to enable us to have the debate this evening. I look forward to hearing contributions from across the chamber that show a united resolve to end end-of-life poverty in Scotland once and for all.

17:08

Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP): I thank Paul Sweeney for bringing this issue to the chamber. It is important that we discuss the preliminary findings of the “Dying in Poverty in Scotland 2025” report by Marie Curie.

The report is another significant contribution from Marie Curie in raising awareness of the issue and setting out the lived experience of those who are approaching the end of their life. Marie Curie also produced the “Dying in the Margins; The Cost of Dying” report, which was published not that long ago, and the organisation has made a series of other immense contributions.

As the chair of the cross-party group on palliative care and as deputy convener of the Social Justice and Social Security Committee, I see the report as vital in driving forward some of the work that I would like to do in this Parliament.

Paul Sweeney: I thank Mr Doris for referencing the “Dying in the Margins” study. It is really important, because the dead cannot advocate. The power of that study and exhibition, which diarised people at the end of their lives and told their stories—which might otherwise have been completely lost—was incredible. People who are coming to terms with the grief of losing a relative are not necessarily going to turn around and advocate for them. That was a powerful point to make.

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

Bob Doris: I am pleased that Mr Sweeney put that on the record. I agree.

The most powerful thing about the preliminary report is that it suggests solutions and provides recommendations for change, rather than putting up with things as they are now. It shows us that one in four people of working age who are approaching the end of life are in poverty, while, for pensioners, that figure is one in six—which is still too high, of course. The report recommends that the state pension should be accessible to everyone of working age at the point at which they receive a terminal diagnosis. That is a powerful recommendation that we should come together to look at.

The report identifies the understandable impact on families when a family member has a terminal

illness—it often pushes them below the poverty line because of childcare issues, housing issues and energy costs. More needs to be done. The Scottish Government should be maximising the uptake of disability and childcare benefits as speedily as possible. If the Scottish child payment was a stand-alone benefit instead of being attached to universal credit, we could perhaps be more flexible in how we deploy that payment for families in which someone has a terminal illness. We could absolutely do that, too. We should also fast-track benefits—more than we do already—for those living with disabilities who have a terminal condition.

Marie Curie also talks about sharing innovation and possible best practice. I, too, name-check the Manchester experience, where council tax has been zero rated for households in which someone has a terminal illness. That is certainly worth considering in Scotland. It would not be easy, and there would be financial challenges, but, if that can be done in Manchester, let us see what we can do across Scotland’s local authorities.

Given that one in five people who have a terminal condition live in fuel poverty, we need to look at energy costs. Marie Curie suggests that, given that people who are living with a terminal condition are at home more, rely on medical devices more and are often already in poverty, a social tariff across the United Kingdom, with at least a 50 per cent discount on energy costs, could be applied. It would take political will in the UK Parliament and in Scotland to deliver that, but, together, we could do it.

I will make one or two other observations. Marie Curie spells out—I find this important as the chair of the cross-party group on palliative care—that we spend £2.3 billion investing in people with a terminal condition in the last year of their life. Only £0.5 billion of that is spent on social security. About £1.1 billion is spent on care in hospital, and 59 per cent of that is for unplanned visits to accident and emergency departments. What is left over—only 14 per cent—is spent on community care.

It is hardly surprising that one of the main things that we can do for those living with a terminal illness to make the last year of their life as dignified, pain free and poverty free as possible is to take a whole-systems approach. It is not just about the money in their pockets.

Finally—in the tiny bit of time that I have left—there has been some action in Scotland regarding the social contract, but we need to go further. Folk approaching the end of life often worry not about themselves but about those they will leave behind. We have invested in a run-on for carer payments in Scotland, so that payments can still be received once a loved one has passed away, and we have

also introduced funeral support payments. Those are concrete investments in the social contract to make people's lives better.

I attended—as you did, Deputy Presiding Officer—the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee when it was looking at your Assisted Dying for Terminally Ill Adults (Scotland) Bill. Everyone, irrespective of their perspective on assisted dying, agrees that we all must do better for those who are approaching the end of their lives. Together, irrespective of party or Parliament, let us get together and do all that we can in that regard.

17:13

Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I am pleased to speak in this evening's debate, and I thank Paul Sweeney for bringing this important issue to the chamber. As someone who previously served as my party's spokesperson on older people, and as the current shadow cabinet secretary for social security, I am delighted to speak on this topic and to congratulate Marie Curie on its work.

Marie Curie has raised issues that are important not just to the communities that I represent but to areas across Scotland. Its report, which comprises research by Marie Curie and by Loughborough University, shines a light on the reality for thousands of people across Scotland who are spending their final months in poverty.

The basic statistics are quite grim—more than 6,500 people with a terminal illness are in poverty at the end of life. In 2021, more than 56,000 people in Scotland died with a palliative care need, and the Scottish Government's analysis shows that that figure could increase to 63,000 by 2040. I have no doubt that members on all sides of the chamber can agree that no one who is at the end of their life should have to spend their final days worrying about financial issues.

As with many health-related issues, the problem does not affect all parts of Scotland equally. The Government's palliative care strategy, which was published last year, identified that levels of palliative care services vary significantly across different health boards.

In areas such as Glasgow and Dundee, the figure is one in three, but this is not just an urban problem; it affects rural communities such as the ones that I represent across Mid Scotland and Fife. In Clackmannanshire, which is in my region, transport barriers can limit access to specialist healthcare, and energy costs can make it very expensive for mains-powered medical devices to be plugged in at home.

For those who are living with a terminal illness, such pressures can be overwhelming. They can also be challenging for unpaid carers, who remain the backbone of the social care system.

Marie Curie rightly highlighted that local authorities have a role to play in tackling the issue. It identified the example from Manchester of discretionary council tax support, which is helping to support those with a terminal illness. Individual councils are well placed to decide how to provide extra support. Councils need to be properly funded in order to provide the right level of support. The onus is on the Scottish Government to discuss how the issue could be dealt with and how funding could be provided.

Marie Curie's report shows us that dying in poverty is far more widespread than we think. It is also difficult for us to solve the problem. As we have seen, very little has happened to reduce the statistics between the surveys that came out in 2019 and those that came out in 2024.

The suffering is not inevitable, nor is it necessary. Through access to all levels of Government, solutions can be put in place to tackle that. For all those who have suffered with end-of-life poverty in the past and for those who might be suffering as they go into the future, I hope that the Scottish Government can work constructively towards solutions in order to help to give people security. I look forward to hearing from the minister in his summing up what steps the Scottish Government is taking to achieve those goals.

As we have said, nobody should be put in such a position at the end of their life. We—the Government and us as a Parliament—have a role to play in ensuring that we do all that we can to help to end suffering. I commend Marie Curie and Paul Sweeney for what they have done on the issue so far.

17:17

Richard Leonard (Central Scotland) (Lab): I thank Paul Sweeney for lodging the motion and so, for the second year running, leading this debate in Parliament. It has become a significant annual debate about an important annual report published by Marie Curie—and this year once again produced in collaboration with Loughborough University. The report is above all else about the way we live with terminal illness, and I say “we” because it could happen to any of us at any time—and I say “we” because we do not live as individuals or as consumers in a market; we live as citizens in a society, in a community where we look out for each other.

The preliminary findings also compel us to examine the world in which the Assisted Dying for

Terminally Ill Adults (Scotland) Bill, which has been back before Parliament again just this week, is conducted. I cannot help thinking about the inverse care law—that those in the most need of support are oftentimes the ones least likely to receive it—and about how poverty and deprivation fuel conditions like clinical depression, how the suicide rate in our most deprived communities is two and a half times that of our least deprived communities and how, as the Association for Palliative Medicine has warned,

“palliative care is underfunded and unevenly available.”

Assisted dying, it concludes,

“risks deepening inequalities for vulnerable groups”.

That is why its members overwhelmingly oppose it, as do I.

Replying to the debate on the 2024 report by Marie Curie last December, the Minister for Public Health and Women's Health told us that

“The Scottish Government is assessing the report and looking at where we can make changes.”

But the preliminary findings from this year's report are absolutely clear—that end-of-life poverty has stagnated and has not improved between 2019 and 2024, despite some policy efforts, and in some areas, it has worsened. In the local authority areas that I am elected to represent in this Parliament—North Lanarkshire, South Lanarkshire and Falkirk—it has stagnated, with an average of one in four people of working age and one out of six people of pensionable age still dying in poverty. As we know from the findings of previous years' reports, if you are from a black, Asian or minority ethnic background and living in Scotland, you are twice as likely to die in poverty than if you are white.

Last year in the debate, the minister also proclaimed:

“I believe that we have to approach the issue from a very non-political perspective and work together to get the best results for the people of Scotland.”—[*Official Report*, 5 December 2024; c 45, 47.]

Now, I am happy to work together, but this is highly political. We have grotesque poverty in the midst of obscene wealth.

These findings are not just about poverty; they are about inequality—a sordid inequality of not just income and not just wealth but a sordid inequality of power, which is class based. As long as we have an economy largely driven by the market and primarily run for the accumulation of wealth, and as long as we have a society that is self-evidently riven with class divisions, we will never end poverty.

That is why we need not just welfare interventions as amelioration; what we need is a

decisive, an irreversible and a permanent shift in the balance of wealth and power, because these inequalities are structural. So we need radical action and fundamental change—economic as well as political change—with a change in economic relations and so power relations. We need a new equilibrium. That is the only way we will change the material conditions, the quality of life and the fate of the people we are sent here to represent.

17:22

Elena Whitham (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP): I thank Paul Sweeney for securing the debate, which is on a topic that is hugely important to us all. As Richard Leonard pointed out, many of us in the chamber today spoke on the topic last year, and I think that many of us who return after next year's election will talk about it again.

In my constituency of Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley, I see every day the quiet strength of communities that look after one another, especially when times are hard. However, I also see something that should trouble each and every one of us: people who are terminally ill and people at the very end of their lives spending their last precious months and days in poverty.

The preliminary findings from the invaluable research from Marie Curie and Loughborough University paint a devastating picture. More than 6,500 people in Scotland die in poverty each year, and more than 7,700 die in fuel poverty. Those are not just numbers on a page in a report—they are our neighbours, our parents, our friends or perhaps even our children. We know them, and we love them.

In rural constituencies such as mine, where we already face economic hardship, higher energy costs and an ageing population, the burden is even heavier. Families speak of loved ones who will put on another jumper and coorie under as many blankets as they can while they ration their heating so that they can afford food; they tell us of children taking on caring responsibilities while their parents skip meals to make ends meet; or, as the research tells us, family members give up work to look after a dying loved one and end up resorting to taking out costly loans just to survive. That is not dignity, it is not compassion and it is not the Scotland that we want to be.

The research makes it clear that one in four working-age people with a terminal illness die in end-of-life poverty. Imagine that. After a lifetime of work and of paying into a system, people spend their final days worrying about bills instead of spending time with those they love. It is

heartbreaking and unjust. For me, this is a social justice issue as well as a health issue.

We must be bold enough to act. Marie Curie has called for people of working age who are living with a terminal illness to receive a guaranteed state-pension-level income, as my colleague Bob Doris pointed out. I fully support that call. No one should have to beg for financial security at the end of their life. Although we might not have all the levers when it comes to social security, I wonder what the Scottish Government can do within the scope of the powers that it has and how it can apply pressure at UK level and perhaps work together with the UK Government to find a solution to that problem.

Alongside financial justice, we must look at how we care for people. For too long, our model has defaulted to hospital admission, when what people truly want, and what research shows us leads to better outcomes, is to be cared for in their own communities, surrounded by familiarity and love.

In my constituency, we see that alternative approach working in practice. Dalmellington care centre is a shining example of community-based palliative care; it is a place where compassion and professionalism meet. The centre, which is located in an area that is having to deal with entrenched poverty and which hosts one of Scotland's deep-end general practitioner practices, allows people to receive the care that they need close to home, supported by staff who know them, who understand the realities of rural life and who work hand in hand with the families, the communities and the community services. That is an innovative alternative model of care that should be replicated everywhere.

I was proud to see that the recent Care Inspectorate report recognised the outstanding work that is being done in Dalmellington. It praised the commitment, the warmth and the dignity that are offered to every resident. That report shows what is possible when we invest in care that is local, integrated and rooted in community values. The outreach and the follow-on support that are provided are second to none, and they ensure that all incomes are maximised.

As we debate how to tackle end-of-life poverty, let us also talk about dignity in care. Let us ensure that every person in Scotland, whether they live in a city, a tenement or a small Ayrshire village, has the right to a warm home, the right to financial security and the right to a peaceful, supported death.

A society is judged not by its wealth but by how it treats its most vulnerable. If we can find the compassion to act, to guarantee financial dignity, to expand community palliative care models such as the one that is offered in Dalmellington, and to

support families who give so much, we will truly build a Scotland that cares, in every sense of the word.

17:27

Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): I thank Paul Sweeney for again securing a debate on this important subject. I have spoken in previous years' debates on the issue, and it saddens me that, once again, we need to raise our voices to speak out for those who are dying in poverty.

This year's report tells us that we have not moved the dial one bit, so all our efforts must remain focused not on talk, reports or briefings but on the delivery of services and the redistribution of wealth. My colleague Richard Leonard put that so much better than I have done. The issue is about how, as a society, we can redistribute wealth and power.

As with so many things that we encounter in the course of our lives, the process of death is influenced by the poverty and inequality that are experienced by so many. That one in four working-age people and one in six older people still die in poverty should shame us all. I have said this before in the chamber, but I feel compelled to say it again: everyone deserves as pain-free and peaceful a death as possible, surrounded by those who love them, in a place that comforts them and that they have chosen.

Little attention is paid to working people and the strain that often comes with working multiple jobs or living in forgotten communities. What makes me say that? I grew up in a coalfield community. It is almost 40 years since the rapid closure of the mining industry began in coalfield communities in the South Scotland region, yet we are still seeing the consequences. Figures that I found last year suggest that 44 per cent of the working-age population in the Scottish coalfields are claiming some form of benefits, compared with a Scottish average of 23 per cent; 40 per cent of people in the Scottish coalfields have no qualifications, compared with a figure of 27 per cent for Scotland as a whole; and the mortality rate in the Scottish coalfields is 25 per cent higher than the Scottish average. That is why I feel that we do not prioritise the issue enough.

Poverty is the root of the injustice that permeates our society, and that injustice is often suffered from the cradle to the grave. I simply cannot accept that, which is what has driven me to speak in today's debate. We must do more to stop so many having so little while the few have so much. The reality is that, at the end of life, the rich can often afford to stay at home and receive direct daily care in the places where they have lived and prospered. At a time of their choosing, they can

move to a place that is more suitable to support them. However, for those who have suffered through a life of struggling to make ends meet, often, no such options exist. Their lives end, as they proceeded, with a sense of powerlessness.

Paul Sweeney: Carol Mochan makes a powerful point. In the exhibition “The Cost of Dying”, there was an older woman who was dying and who had been so house-proud that she was photographing all her rooms to show how she had kept her house really nice. One thing that struck me was the humiliation of everything slowly falling apart around her as she was struggling to care for herself, and then that she was not even able to stay in her house at the end. It was devastating to witness that in that exhibition. It speaks powerfully to the point that Carol Mochan just made.

Carol Mochan: I was fortunate to see that exhibition in Glasgow and then in the Scottish Parliament. It brought home what is the reality for so many people who wish to stay in their own homes but who are struggling to do so. We must not forget that they do that throughout their lives. That injustice must be made right.

That powerlessness is the final injustice and we should be doing everything that we can to limit it. I am going to say some words again because, when I think about the issue, I think that we all need to understand this: everyone deserves as pain-free and peaceful a death as possible, surrounded by those who love them, in a place that comforts them and where they can make choices. Those choices should never be dictated by what can be afforded. I cannot accept that someone who is dying cannot get the care and comfort that they deserve in a time of need such as the end of life. Surely, we must be looking for solutions to providing all the care and comfort that are necessary. I will close on that point, Presiding Officer.

Bob Doris: On a point of order, Deputy Presiding Officer. I apologise to my colleagues for making a point of order, but I inadvertently misled the Parliament during my contribution, when I mentioned the £2.3 billion that Marie Curie estimated was spent on the last years of people's lives, the vast majority of which was in the acute health service. I said that half a billion pounds was spent on social security payments. It is not half a billion pounds—if it was thus, that would be fantastic—it is half a million pounds. It is important to put that on the record. I apologise for cutting in to the flow of the debate, which so far has been superb.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, Mr Doris. That is not a point of order, but it is now on the record.

17:32

Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Ind): Like others, I thank Paul Sweeney for securing the debate.

Just over two years ago, my father died of a terminal illness. It was a really hard time for my mother and for us as a family. We were fortunate: my father was in his own home, well off and able to have the care that he required. I find it almost impossible to imagine going through such circumstances when there is financial poverty in the family as well.

It has been said that the moral test of any society is how it

“treats those who are in the dawn of life, the children; those who are in the twilight of life, the elderly; and those who are in shadows of life,”

people who live with disability or long-term illness. Today, we have heard a sobering truth: that in Scotland, each year, more than 6,500 people living with a terminal illness die in poverty. That is not simply a number. That is mothers, fathers, grandparents, neighbours, friends and, sadly, sometimes children, whose final months are overshadowed not only by illness but by financial hardship and anxiety. Instead of dignity, too many experience cold homes, empty cupboards and mounting bills. For those who face the end of life, every moment should matter, yet poverty steals away that precious time and replaces it with fear, exhaustion and indignity.

I fully accept that the UK and Scottish Governments are trying to deal with those issues and that there are tireless campaigns on end-of-life poverty but, as we have heard from others, the dial is not moving and, in some communities in Edinburgh and the Lothians, things have become even worse. That is a shame, because it is not inevitable. Poverty at the end of life is a policy failure, not a personal one. Every person, no matter their circumstances, has equal dignity, worth and purpose. Our duty as parliamentarians is to care for one another, and especially for the most vulnerable.

Organisations such as Marie Curie have shown that there is a better way. Its research with Loughborough University has highlighted both the scale of the problem and, as Mr Doris pointed out, the practical steps that can be taken, including support from the Scottish Government, Social Security Scotland and local authorities to ensure the maximum uptake of disability benefits through a values-first approach that removes any stigma from receiving those benefits.

That is not simply a matter of numbers or budgets; it actually defines what sort of country we are and what sort of nation we want to be. I want to live, as I am sure we all do, in a Scotland that values life not based on productivity alone but on

its inherent worth. Because I am human, I have inherent worth.

When someone reaches the end of their life, our collective responsibility is clear. We must deliver dignity and care without the burden of bureaucracy or delay. That is why I am so pleased that this Parliament was the first in the UK to introduce the six-month rule for social security benefits, which has made a big difference. I am also thankful for the work of the Marie Curie and St Columba's hospices in this city.

Like others, I call on members to unite behind the simple moral goal that no one in Scotland should die in poverty. The true measure of a compassionate society is found in how it treats those who have the least, especially when they have the least time left.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I invite the minister, Tom Arthur, to respond to the debate.

17:37

The Minister for Social Care and Mental Wellbeing (Tom Arthur): I thank Paul Sweeney for bringing this important debate to Parliament and join others in placing on record my appreciation and gratitude to Marie Curie for its incredible work day in, day out to support people who are terminally ill, as well as their families and loved ones.

As has been noted, the report highlights, unfortunately not for the first time, some of the real financial challenges people face at the end of life. It cannot be right that, at that most difficult of times, families must also face that additional pressure. I also acknowledge the work of Barnardo's, Age Scotland and the Poverty and Inequality Commission, which also provided helpful information and insight on the issue.

I thank members from across the chamber—Bob Doris, Elena Whitham, Carol Mochan, Alexander Stewart, Paul Sweeney, Richard Leonard and Jeremy Balfour—for their contributions. I noted a link between the contributions from Mr Balfour and Mr Leonard. Mr Balfour spoke about the inherent dignity and value of life and the true measure of a successful society, an idea that I felt was very much at the heart of Mr Leonard's contribution. He spoke powerfully, as did Carol Mochan, about the structural inequalities and wider economic determinants that still too often characterise people's experience not only of their life and their economic and social circumstances but of the end of life.

While we consider what further specific interventions we can make and what further support we can provide, it is important that we do

not lose sight of that more profound question, which is becoming more and more pertinent and inescapable.

I want to respond to the point that Mr Sweeney and Mr Stewart raised about what is happening in Manchester. The advice that I have received is that that is being undertaken under the provisions of section 13A of the Local Government Finance Act 1992. My understanding is that the territorial application of those provisions extends to England only and, as such, we do not have discretion under the act to do the same thing in Scotland. However, I reassure Mr Sweeney and the wider Parliament that we will consider the matter as part of the Scottish Government's wider work on looking at council tax reform, because it is a very important point.

I turn to the Government's broader work. We continue to take important steps to address the challenges that are highlighted in the report, and we do so in the context of the powers that we have under the devolution settlement and the constraints of the budgets under which we operate.

The social security system in Scotland quite rightly takes a different approach, fast tracking disability assistance applications from terminally ill people to ensure that they automatically receive the highest rates of disability assistance that they are entitled to. Importantly, there are no time limits included in the definition of terminal illness, and the decision is rightly made by clinicians. The person-centred definition of terminal illness applies to all of our disability assistances—child disability payment, adult disability payment and pension-age disability payment.

Within the constraints of the powers and budgets, the Scottish Government is also committed to mitigating winter heating costs and supporting people to access all support that is available to them. In the coming winter—winter 2025-26—we will provide an estimated £28.3 million for winter heating payment, £11.4 million for child winter heating payment and £157 million for pension-age winter heating payment. Those benefits provide guaranteed support to people who have an identified need for additional heat over the winter months, including low-income households, pensioners and families with disabled children and young people.

The Scottish Government whole-heartedly agrees with the report's recommendation that the UK Government should introduce a social tariff. Mr Doris touched on that in his remarks. In the Scottish Government's view, a social tariff mechanism is clearly the best way to ensure that energy consumers are protected against higher bills. We called on the previous UK Government to introduce such a tariff, which was, in part, to

ensure that people with terminal illnesses, whose bills can be thousands of pounds higher than that of the average household, would not have to make the horrendous choice between powering vital medical equipment, heating their homes and buying food.

We are also taking meaningful steps to address racial inequality, which members touched on with reference to the report, as it remains an unwelcome reality that communities across Scotland experience health, quality of life and even life expectancy differently depending on their circumstances. We are committed to addressing the significant and persistent health inequalities that are experienced by minority ethnic communities in Scotland. Those inequalities have unfortunately widened in recent years due to the impacts of austerity, the economic consequences of Brexit and Covid, and the subsequent cost of living crisis.

In his September 2024 anti-racism statement, the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care identified racism as a key driver of those health inequalities and a “significant public health challenge”. The statement sets the expectation that anti-racism will be embedded across the health and care system.

In order to tackle the socioeconomic inequalities that are the root of health inequalities, we are complementing our health efforts with wide-ranging cross-Government action. On 17 June, with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, we published “Scotland’s Population Health Framework 2025-2035”, which is our refreshed 10-year cross-Government and cross-sector approach to population health. The framework, which is focused on prevention, sets a clear evidence-based aim to galvanise the whole system to action to improve Scottish life expectancy while reducing the life expectancy gap between the most deprived 20 per cent of local areas and the national average by 2035.

We want everyone in Scotland, regardless of age, race, diagnosis or location, to have access to timely, high-quality and person-centred palliative care. Our five-year palliative care strategy includes measures to better integrate specialist palliative care into hospital and community services and improve public information about living with life-shortening conditions. The strategy will help to ensure that people of all ages with life-shortening conditions, their families and carers should receive the right care and support in the right place at the right time and from the right people. Those are only some of the steps that the Scottish Government is undertaking to prevent people from dying in end-of-life poverty.

Again, I thank Paul Sweeney for bringing the debate to Parliament and all members for their contributions. I also thank Marie Curie for its report and for the brilliant and invaluable work that it undertakes day in, day out.

Meeting closed at 17:45.

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The deadline for corrections to this edition is:

Thursday 4 December 2025

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

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