



Meeting of the Parliament

Wednesday 7 January 2026

Session 6



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Scottish Parliament

Wednesday 7 January 2026

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

Portfolio Question Time

Constitution, External Affairs and Culture, and Parliamentary Business

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): Good afternoon. The first item of business this afternoon is portfolio question time, and the first portfolio is constitution, external affairs and culture, and parliamentary business.

Far-right Political Parties (Parliamentary Relations)

1. George Adam (Paisley) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government, regarding the potential impact on parliamentary business, what its position is on whether a rise of far-right political parties in the United Kingdom would cause issues in the relationship between the Scottish and UK Parliaments and could result in the diminution of the Scottish Parliament. (S6O-05323)

The Cabinet Secretary for Constitution, External Affairs and Culture (Angus Robertson): A very happy new year to you, Presiding Officer.

The Scottish Government is committed to forging and maintaining good relationships with Governments and Parliaments across the United Kingdom, as well as defending and enhancing the current devolution settlement. Any attempts to undermine devolution or to damage relationships between our Parliaments should be resisted robustly.

George Adam: Does the cabinet secretary agree that decisions about Scotland should be taken by the people elected here, who are accountable to the people of Scotland, and not by parties based elsewhere that have little understanding of our communities and no real stake in Scotland's future?

Angus Robertson: The public should be very concerned about all political extremists who oppose Scottish self-government, who seek to undermine community cohesion and who want to privatisate the national health service. It is important that, no matter the outcome of the Scottish Parliament elections, democracy is respected. That means defending against any attempts to undermine devolution and the powers of the Scottish Parliament.

Regional News

2. Richard Leonard (Central Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what its position is on whether regional news serves an important function in a democracy. (S6O-05324)

The Cabinet Secretary for Constitution, External Affairs and Culture (Angus Robertson): The Scottish Government strongly believes that regional news is essential to healthy democracy, and we value its role in providing scrutiny of local institutions, giving voice to underrepresented communities and ensuring that important civic information reaches those who need it most. That is why we support the creation of the Scottish public interest journalism working group to strengthen local journalism, and it is why we consistently stress the importance of sustaining high-quality, locally relevant news in our engagement with broadcasters, Ofcom and other stakeholders.

We remain committed to ensuring that Scotland's media landscape is robust, sustainable and representative of all communities across Scotland.

Richard Leonard: That STV has stepped back from a wholesale axing of its separate northern Scotland news programme is to be welcomed, but the STV group's latest accounts reveal that it made more than £20 million in profit and that, for the sixth year running, "STV News at Six" is the most watched news programme in Scotland.

In a recent survey, 83 per cent of the public opposed STV's proposals. The unions also oppose the proposals, which would see 60 workers made redundant, some of them compulsorily. That is why the National Union of Journalists is taking industrial action at STV today.

Will the cabinet secretary join me in backing the NUJ's strike action and in calling on the board of STV to listen to its viewers, listen to its unions, meet its public service obligation and withdraw these proposals altogether?

Angus Robertson: It would be appropriate at this stage to acknowledge that I am, by profession, a journalist and have been a long-standing member of the National Union of Journalists.

Although I recognise that STV, through engagement with Ofcom and as a result of the concerns that have been raised by stakeholders, has now reconsidered some of its proposed changes, the Scottish Government remains concerned that there would be a negative impact on news provision across Scotland if STV's plans were to go ahead. I have met STV, Ofcom and the National Union of Journalists on the issue, and the Scottish Government will continue to champion a strong and sustainable Scottish broadcasting

sector and will also continue, including through the current Ofcom consultation, to urge against any decisions that would result in further reductions in news reporting in Scotland or redundancies of Scotland-based staff.

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con):

The cabinet secretary will be aware of the network of local democracy reporters who are funded by the BBC through the licence fee and who provide a very valuable service across the country by reporting on, for example, local council meetings and activities that would otherwise not be brought to public attention.

In any engagement that the cabinet secretary has with the BBC on charter renewal, will he reinforce to the BBC the importance of the network to ensure that it continues after any charter renewal?

Angus Robertson: Murdo Fraser's question is very timely because of the BBC charter renewal process, which he raised in his question. I give him an undertaking that, through that process, I will reflect on his point about the support for local reporting, which provides a valuable service, particularly in communities and in relation to the covering of local government democracy. I will happily give an undertaking that I will keep him apprised of that.

The Scottish Government is involved in relation to BBC charter renewal, and I will definitely bear in mind the points that Murdo Fraser has raised today.

Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): I send my solidarity to all the STV workers who are on strike today. I hope that those on the picket line in the snow in Aberdeen have managed to keep warm.

STV's failure to rule out compulsory redundancies has provoked today's strike action. Its plans will reduce the broadcasting of local news. The current major weather incident in the north-east highlights the need for local information that serves local communities in ways that national coverage just cannot, and that is just one of the obvious impacts on local communities.

How will the plans affect democracy in the north-east, particularly in the age of disinformation? What more can the Government do to support quality journalism across Scotland, and not just national coverage?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We will need briefer questions.

Angus Robertson: I have already raised our support for the creation of the Scottish public interest journalism working group, which covers the general point that Maggie Chapman raises.

In relation to STV, the timely recognition of the regional impact of developments—which is clearly an issue in the north-east at the moment, given the weather situation there—underlines how important it is that we have public service journalism covering such situations.

I give Maggie Chapman an assurance that the Scottish Government continues to meet Ofcom regarding a range of broadcasting matters, including STV's proposals for regional news provision. I wrote to Ofcom regarding that matter, and I have met the chief executive to raise the Scottish Government's concerns. I have urged the regulator to ensure that regional representation in news coverage is safeguarded and that the public service broadcaster's service commitments to invest in news to help to tackle misinformation, which issue Maggie Chapman also raised, are upheld.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I now make the same plea for answers, too.

Artists and Creatives (Support)

3. Evelyn Tweed (Stirling) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what assessment it has made of initiatives used by other nations to support artists and creatives. (S6O-05325)

The Cabinet Secretary for Constitution, External Affairs and Culture (Angus Robertson): The Scottish Government develops approaches to supporting culture based on evidence of impact, including learning from other countries. A comprehensive evidence-based review of the structures surrounding culture funding is already under way, including analysis of the recommendations from the independent Creative Scotland review and the culture fair work task force.

In addition, as an example of lessons learned, the Scottish Government recognises the value that multiyear funding delivers for artists and creatives, which is reflected by more than half of the 251 organisations that are funded through multiyear funding this financial year receiving stability for the first time.

Evelyn Tweed: A pilot scheme in Ireland to provide a basic income to artists and creatives has seen great success and has now been made permanent. Every €1 invested in the pilot generated €1.39 in social value. What learning can the Government take from the success of such schemes?

Angus Robertson: The Irish basic income for the arts pilot demonstrates just one approach across a range of possible approaches to supporting our creative producers. I spoke about that with my Irish culture minister colleague when

he attended an event with me at the Edinburgh International Book Festival last year.

Undoubtedly, the Irish scheme has provided benefit to the 2,000 individuals who receive support, but it is not without its challenges with regard to the number of beneficiaries, the number of unsuccessful applicants and the relative sectoral impact.

A final point is that not all of the policy levers and powers that are open to the Irish Government in moving forward with that policy—specifically on tax, social welfare and addressing precarity in the workforce—are currently available to the Scottish Government. I give Evelyn Tweed a commitment that I am looking closely at the scheme and at whether there are learnings for Scotland.

Erasmus Programme

4. Annabelle Ewing (Cowdenbeath) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what discussions the constitution secretary has had with ministerial colleagues regarding the potential implications for Scotland's relations with European Union member states of the United Kingdom rejoining the Erasmus programme. (S6O-05326)

The Cabinet Secretary for Constitution, External Affairs and Culture (Angus Robertson): Rejoining Erasmus+ is essential. The Scottish Government has made a consistent demand for that since Scotland was recklessly removed from the programme under the UK's disastrous Brexit. We welcome the current UK Government's agreement that staying in Erasmus+ was always the right choice. We will now work with partners to maximise the benefits and take-up of the scheme.

However, every step to rebuild EU relations reminds us of what was lost through Brexit and what cannot be regained under the UK Government's current negotiations process. Therefore, Scotland's future is in Europe as a full EU member.

Annabelle Ewing: I share the sentiments of the cabinet secretary's concluding remarks. He will be aware of my particular interest in the Erasmus scheme, given the fact that my late mother, Winnie Ewing, was a key architect and proponent of it when she chaired the European Parliament's Youth, Culture, Education, Information and Sport Committee. Rejoining the scheme is great news for young people in Scotland and across Europe. It would therefore be helpful to know what discussions the various Scottish Government offices intend to have with their EU counterparts in relevant member states to ensure that Scotland hits the ground running and maximises the potential that the Erasmus scheme offers.

Angus Robertson: I join Annabelle Ewing in paying tribute to Winnie Ewing for her role in relation to the Erasmus scheme. Scottish Government offices in Brussels and European Union member states will be using their and our extensive network of formal and informal contacts across the European Union to ensure that Scotland's interest and engagement in the Erasmus+ programme is firmly registered. At the time of our last involvement, Scotland participated overproportionately in the Erasmus+ programme. We will also be working with our higher and further education sectors in Scotland, as well as with youth, schools and others in Scotland that are in the ambit of the programme, to encourage maximum participation.

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): Gavin Donoghue, the chief executive of Colleges Scotland, said in a statement that

"It's very welcome that the Erasmus student exchange programme will be returning in 2027."

That point was echoed today by the cabinet secretary. However, is he personally disappointed that the Scottish National Party Scottish Government could not fill the gap as it had promised to do, unlike what was done in Wales?

Angus Robertson: We looked closely at the Welsh scheme and came to the conclusion that there was no substitute for Erasmus. That is why we pushed so hard for the Erasmus+ scheme to be reintroduced. It might be of interest to Martin Whitfield and other members if I share a bit of information that I think is relevant. The United Kingdom Government has said that the UK and EU did not agree at the summit, nor as part of the deal, to home fee status for EU students. That would have been detrimental to students at Scottish universities. Students who participate in Erasmus+ placements are exempt from tuition and registration fees at their host institutions, but they may still be required to pay fees at their home institutions. It is important to understand that.

However, it should be clear to everybody that there is no substitute for the Erasmus+ scheme. That has now been acknowledged by Martin Whitfield's colleagues in the UK Government, and we can agree on the point that Erasmus+ is the best way forward for students in Scotland and for European students who want to come to institutions here.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I advise the chamber that, if I am to get in later supplementary questions, the questions will need to be brief, as will the responses.

Creative Scotland Review

5. Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what steps it has taken since

the publication of the independent review into Creative Scotland to implement its recommendations. (S6O-05327)

The Cabinet Secretary for Constitution, External Affairs and Culture (Angus Robertson): Since the publication of the review, on 25 November, I have been considering its recommendations alongside the recommendations of other related reports. Although the majority of the recommendations are for Creative Scotland to take forward, some are for other organisations, including the Scottish Government, or will require partnership work. As we continue to deliver our commitment to increase culture funding by £100 million per year, it remains vital that public sector partners do that partnership work as effectively as possible. The recommendations of the review will be key to that, and I will update the Parliament on progress in due course.

Sarah Boyack: The review recommended that Creative Scotland should reassess its internal structure to ensure that its four statutory roles are effectively delivered. Does the cabinet secretary intend to carry out such reviews on a regular basis, to prevent a repeat of the issues that were identified in the review of Historic Environment Scotland's internal structure?

Angus Robertson: In fairness—I am sure that Sarah Boyack will acknowledge this—the review into Creative Scotland reported its findings only a few weeks ago. I am sure that she will understand that we want to consider all those recommendations. I encourage her and people like her, who have a long track record and interest in culture and the arts, to be part of the process and feed in their thoughts.

We need to keep arrangements for public sector bodies under continuous review. Sarah Boyack is aware that reviews of Historic Environment Scotland are being undertaken. I look forward to any views that she might have on the specific question that has been posed today, because we are considering all options that flow from the Creative Scotland review.

Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): The independent review found Creative Scotland to be overbureaucratic, warned of a lack of transparency surrounding decisions on the use of public funds and highlighted poor leadership. How will the cabinet secretary ensure that the implementation of the recommendations delivers the meaningful reforms that are desperately needed and required?

Angus Robertson: First, I wish Alexander Stewart a happy new year. I take the opportunity to say that I know that the interest in the culture and arts sector is a non-party-political issue, and I look to colleagues who are very committed to the

sector. I know that any changes that we, as the Scottish Government, will seek to implement, or that Creative Scotland, which has received a lot of recommendations, will seek to implement, will be subject to parliamentary inquiry. The matter will go before committee, and I will be asked questions on that.

We are not yet at the stage of adopting and delivering on the recommendations, but I know that Alexander Stewart and other colleagues will look closely at how Creative Scotland and the Scottish Government deliver them. I will be happy to answer questions when we get to that stage.

Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab): The cabinet secretary has talked about the need for partnership working and has stated that he is open to suggestions. What consideration has he given to establishing an advisory board or task force to consider the recommendations and their implementation, in order to ensure maximum confidence across the sector?

Angus Robertson: I would be grateful if the member could send me any suggestions that he has. He knows that Creative Scotland already has a board and he is aware that the Scottish Government has a sponsorship team that works with Creative Scotland.

However, I appreciate and take on board the member's point about wanting to have maximum assurance. If he has any specific suggestion on how such a mechanism might work, I will look at that with an open mind. It is in the Government's and parliamentarians' interests that Creative Scotland is able to deliver, including on the recommendations that were made to it. We will be working jointly and severally to ensure that that is delivered.

Grant Lodge (Regeneration)

6. **Tim Eagle (Highlands and Islands) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government, regarding its work to support the historic environment, whether it will provide an update on its involvement in the regeneration of Grant Lodge in Elgin. (S6O-05328)

The Cabinet Secretary for Constitution, External Affairs and Culture (Angus Robertson): The Scottish Government provides support for our historic environment through sponsorship of Historic Environment Scotland. Regarding Grant Lodge regeneration, Historic Environment Scotland has been engaged on this work, including funding and planning inquiries.

Regeneration of Grant Lodge forms a key pillar of the Moray growth deal cultural quarter project, which will receive £16.9 million of investment, of which £12.84 million is Scottish Government funding and £4.06 million is United Kingdom Government funding.

The cultural quarter full business case was endorsed by both Governments in 2024. Moray Council recently submitted a planning application in relation to Grant Lodge, marking a significant milestone in delivery of the project.

Tim Eagle: The cabinet secretary knows well the importance of Grant Lodge to the local community. At the end of last year, it was great to see Moray Council submit its final proposals. However, working with historic sites is never easy. Will the cabinet secretary give some assurances that the Scottish Government and its agencies will provide support in finding solutions should any issues arise as this very important project for the local community develops?

Angus Robertson: I would be perfectly content to give Tim Eagle that assurance. As a former member of Parliament for Moray, I was involved with the project at the earliest stages when the potential future for Grant Lodge was being discussed. He knows that I know that this is a very important project. I can give him the assurance that, should there be areas in which the Scottish Government could provide potential solutions, I would be happy to take a close look at them.

Ukraine (Humanitarian Aid)

7. Michelle Thomson (Falkirk East) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government, regarding its provision of funding for humanitarian aid, what representations it has made to the United Kingdom Government in relation to humanitarian issues arising in Ukraine as a result of landmines and other explosive threats. (S6O-05329)

The Cabinet Secretary for Constitution, External Affairs and Culture (Angus Robertson): The Scottish Government resolutely condemns Russia's illegal war against Ukraine, as we have done since its invasion. We recognise the devastating impact that landmines have, killing and maiming thousands each year. They are indiscriminate and unpredictable, and their presence drives whole communities from their homes and land. The Scottish Government regularly discusses with the UK Government issues arising from the on-going war in Ukraine, and civil servants engage on the matter with their counterparts in the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office.

Michelle Thomson: I thank the cabinet secretary for that response. I also thank Savannah McCrum from the University of Stirling, whose recent research has revealed the critical role that local women are playing in Ukraine in undertaking the likes of active demining efforts, front-line volunteering and providing humanitarian support in communities. The research has also revealed the role that women are playing in capacity building

and community resilience, with 50 per cent of new businesses being founded by women.

When the cabinet secretary next meets his UK Government counterpart, will he raise the need to ensure support for the women of Ukraine in all their efforts? Will he consider how Scotland could partner with Ukraine to support female entrepreneurship?

Angus Robertson: I am very content to look at the suggestions that Michelle Thomson makes. In case she does not know, I point out that, as part of our support for Ukraine, the Scottish Government has provided £300,000 for the Scotland-headquartered HALO Trust, for mine clearance, risk education and the training of de-miners, with a focus on employing women to help make communities safe.

The Scottish Government will continue to advocate for support for Ukrainian women and to contribute to Ukraine's recovery and reconstruction, including through the UK-Ukraine 100-year partnership and initiatives such as the John Smith Trust's Ukrainian women's leadership programme.

Occupied Palestinian Territory Humanitarian Fund

8. James Dornan (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government how its £600,000 contribution in humanitarian aid to the occupied Palestinian territory humanitarian fund will support civilians and demonstrate Scotland's commitment to international solidarity and human rights. (S6O-05330)

The Cabinet Secretary for Constitution, External Affairs and Culture (Angus Robertson): At this crucial time, Scottish Government funding will support the scaling up of the humanitarian response in Gaza. The United Nations Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs—UNOCHA—fund helps to co-ordinate the humanitarian response by international and national organisations to those in the affected areas. The funding will support the delivery of life-saving health services, food and nutrition assistance, emergency shelter, water and sanitation, protection services, education support and cash for families. The Scottish Government takes seriously its responsibilities as a global citizen, and we continue to respond within our powers to provide assistance to those who are most in need.

James Dornan: What more can the Scottish Government do to support humanitarian efforts and alleviate the suffering of civilians in the occupied Palestinian territories?

Angus Robertson: The Scottish Government's £600,000 contribution to UNOCHA formed part of

a wider package of measures that the First Minister announced on 3 September 2025 in response to the crisis in Gaza. That included a further £400,000 grant to Kids Operating Room to establish the Gaza HOPES field readiness hub, which is a scale replica of a rapidly deployable field hospital. Those commitments bring the Scottish Government's total humanitarian aid for the Gaza crisis and wider middle east to £2.3 million.

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): It would be more factually correct to say that the cabinet secretary cannot say exactly how the £600,000 was spent, because it went into a greater fund. Can he confirm that none of the money from the fund will pass through organisations or intermediaries over which Hamas has influence or control? Can he explain how that is verified in practice?

Angus Robertson: That is not the first time that the member has raised those questions, and other colleagues have done so, too. Those questions are part of my considerations. We want to make sure that there is assurance on the delivery of humanitarian support in Gaza and through other projects around the world. I am assured by the advice that I have received. If Mr Kerr requires additional assurance, I would be grateful if he could write to me on the subject.

I have a high degree of trust in the United Nations and I hope that he does, too. Providing humanitarian support through the United Nations and its agencies is the right thing to do. If Mr Kerr has specific concerns, he should share them with me, and I will reply in greater detail.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes portfolio questions on constitution, external affairs and culture, and parliamentary business. There will be a brief pause before we move to the next portfolio, to allow members on the front benches to change over.

Justice and Home Affairs

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The next portfolio is justice and home affairs. I make the usual plea for members who are looking to ask for a supplementary question to be as brief as possible, and likewise for the responses.

Legal Aid (Rural and Island Communities)

1. Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what work it is undertaking to ensure that rural and island communities have access to legal aid. (S6O-05331)

The Minister for Victims and Community Safety (Siobhian Brown): The Scottish

Government is committed to ensuring access to legal aid in rural and island communities. Although private solicitors cannot be compelled to undertake legal aid work, we continue to invest in the system to ensure availability. Funding is available to allow solicitors to travel to rural and remote parts of the country to carry out work, which ensures that individuals do not have to rely on local provision alone when they seek publicly funded legal assistance. Through our on-going reform programme, we are considering making targeted interventions, including grant funding and capacity-building initiatives, to strengthen access to legal aid where it is needed most.

Alasdair Allan: I welcome the Scottish Government's work with the Scottish Legal Aid Board and others on those issues. Can the minister set out what more can be done to assist in attracting trainee solicitors to our islands to practise law and improve access to rural legal aid, and what the Government will be able to do in its next conversations with the SLAB and the Law Society of Scotland on those issues?

Siobhian Brown: Scotland's universities are rightly regarded as world leading in educating solicitors and legal professionals. The Scottish Government recognises the need to ensure that talent is deployed across all parts of the country, including in rural and island communities, where access to legal aid can be challenging. I am willing to consider all further measures with stakeholders—including trainees themselves—to find out what more can be done to attract trainees and newly qualified solicitors to rural Scotland and improve access to justice.

Furthermore, access to solicitors can be facilitated remotely in several ways, and funding is available to allow solicitors to travel to rural and remote parts of the country to carry out work, which means that individuals do not have to rely on local provision alone when they seek publicly funded legal assistance.

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): In 2024, United Nations human rights monitors warned that low fees and poor retention were hollowing out Scotland's legal aid system. Faced with that warning, the Government promised a legal aid reform bill and promptly abandoned it. Rather than addressing the fees issue, the minister has fallen back on the traineeships that start next year, even though there are only 20. Can the minister provide the data that shows that 20 new nationwide traineeships will arrest the workforce collapse in Scotland's legal aid representation, particularly in rural and island communities?

Siobhian Brown: Negotiations are on-going with the legal profession regarding an uplift. Two offers have been rejected. I hope that we will be

able to come to a conclusion shortly, but the budget is due next week. There are 40 traineeships, but we are looking at 20 initially, and we are also looking at progressing other initiatives that are not yet in the public domain but being negotiated with the Law Society. I will keep the Parliament updated.

Scottish Prison Service (Crown Immunity)

2. Colin Beattie (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on what discussions it has had with the United Kingdom Government in relation to Crown immunity and the Scottish Prison Service. (S6O-05332)

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs (Angela Constance): As Crown immunity is an entirely reserved matter, any legislative change requires action by the UK Government, which is why I have raised the issue with the UK Government several times in recent years.

Most recently, I raised the matter directly with the former Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice when we met in the summer, and I wrote to Stephen Timms, the UK minister who has responsibility for this area, in November 2025 to request further engagement. Following that, we are now making arrangements to discuss the matter in more detail, and I hope that such discussions take place in the near future.

Colin Beattie: Transparency and accountability are essential components of our justice system, so what assessment has been made of how the removal of corporate Crown immunity from the Scottish Prison Service will ensure that those values are upheld and that lessons can be learned?

Angela Constance: Transparency, accountability and learning are essential, particularly following a death in custody. Although the Scottish Government cannot remove Crown immunity, we recognise the arguments that reform could strengthen accountability and support learning and prevention. Any reform would require UK Government action. In that context, Scottish ministers have agreed in principle to the UK Government's Public Office (Accountability) Bill, which aims to strengthen accountability across public bodies.

In parallel, we are progressing reforms to strengthen oversight, scrutiny and learning across the prison estate, including work to establish a national oversight mechanism, so that improvements to accountability and safety do not need to wait for legislative change.

Campus Police Officers

3. Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what discussions the justice secretary has had with ministerial colleagues regarding any plans to deliver campus police officers across all schools. (S6O-05333)

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs (Angela Constance): The safety of our children, young people and staff in schools is paramount. The use of funding for campus-based officers is a matter for local authorities. Through the relationships and behaviour in schools national action plan, the Scottish Government works with local authorities and partners to support positive relationships and behaviour and to promote safe and inclusive learning environments for all children and young people.

Action is also being taken through the violence prevention framework for Scotland, which has been backed by £6 million since 2023. That supports the delivery of a range of targeted prevention and early intervention activities through work in schools, in hospitals and across communities.

Miles Briggs: The role of campus cops is incredibly important. Evidence shows that police being connected to schools leads to long-term benefits, including a reduction in antisocial behaviour and action to address the increasing levels of violence in our schools.

It is concerning that there has been a reduction of more than 1,000 police officers since the pandemic, and it is also concerning that local authorities across the country might be looking to take the decision not to fund school link officers. Does the Scottish Government want there to be a national commitment to all schools having access to school link officers? What is the Scottish Government's position on that? Are such decisions just being left to local authorities?

Angela Constance: I have seen for myself, in my constituency in years gone by, the impact that police officers who are attached to schools can make. The arguments are very similar to those relating to the value of having good community policing.

The importance of community policing is recognised in the Scottish Government's strategic policing priorities. Police Scotland's three-year business plan includes a number of measures that are aimed at enhancing community policing. As I said, the specific issue about officers attached to schools is a matter for local authorities. However, as well as increasing the police budget in this financial year, we have increased the resources available to local authorities across the country by more than £1 billion.

Bill Kidd (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP): Every pupil and member of staff deserves to feel safe in Scotland's schools. How is the Scottish Government working with the third sector, as well as with teachers and young people, to reduce the risk of young people engaging in violent behaviour?

Angela Constance: All young people and staff should feel safe in our schools. Our third sector plays a crucial role in supporting schools and wider communities to tackle youth violence. In my original answer, I noted our investment in the violence prevention framework, which includes work with Medics Against Violence and with young people in schools and youth clubs on the consequences of knife carrying. The Scottish Violence Reduction Unit works with police school liaison officers on training teachers, and YouthLink Scotland delivers the national no knives, better lives programme. That is in addition to the cashback for communities initiative.

Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab): Violence, sexism and misogyny are on the rise in schools across the United Kingdom, which is why the UK Government announced plans for specialist training courses, including on issues such as consent, for teachers and pupils who are classified as high risk. Will the Scottish Government work with key stakeholders such as Police Scotland and the education sector unions to introduce a cross-campus strategy to tackle violence, sexism and misogyny in our schools, including looking at the specialist training approach that the UK Government has set out?

Angela Constance: Through the cross-Government engagement that I have with justice colleagues, I am aware of the new strategy that the UK Government has pursued. It is important to put on record the work that already takes place in Scotland's schools, particularly on consent. Many of our schools work with the third sector, including Rape Crisis Scotland, in relation to the equally safe strategy.

It might also be of interest to the member that Police Scotland has a new strategy in relation to violence against women and girls. Since 2023, its response to tackling violence against women and girls has been driven by the VAWG strategy, which was captured in its VAWG implementation plan. That includes quarterly reports on 86 actions that were based on a variety of commitments.

The member's point about it being a cross-Government, cross-portfolio and cross-sector strategy is important, and I am happy to engage with her further on the matter.

Early Release (Victim Notification)

4. **Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government how many victims were notified in 2025 of the early release of an offender under any early release or temporary release scheme. (S6O-05334)

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs (Angela Constance): In response to the implementation of the Prisoners (Early Release) (Scotland) Act 2025 and the Early Release of Prisoners (Scotland) Regulations 2025 legislation, the Scottish Prison Service's victim notification scheme has notified 35 registered victims of a change of release date of a person in custody. That figure represents 100 per cent of registered victims where the offender's release date changed as a direct result of the implementation of the above legislation.

Sue Webber: We believe that victims should know if their assailants will not be completing their full sentence and will be at large in communities. We have been told that only 2 per cent of victims were notified of their offender's early release under the last emergency release scheme. That is, frankly, appalling.

The cabinet secretary gave the figure of 100 per cent figure in her answer, but the sum total of that figure is people who were registered with the victim notification scheme. Hardly any victims have registered with the victim notification scheme, and Victim Support Scotland has raised concerns about delays in reforming that. Can the cabinet secretary guarantee that the majority of victims, not only those who are on the VNS, will be notified in advance?

Angela Constance: In relation to any temporary process that involves the earlier release of prisoners, a process is in operation to enable victims who have not registered with the VNS to inquire whether they could be provided with the release date of an offender in relation to their case.

Other parts of the legislation bolster that process: victims can also get help to access information via Victim Support Scotland, ASSIST, Children First and Rape Crisis Scotland.

Restricted Regimes (Prisoner Welfare)

5. **Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con):** I apologise to the Presiding Officer and to the chamber for my late arrival. Despite the fact that I have been here for 10 years with a start time of 25 past 2, I had it today as 35 past 2. I promise to do better next term.

To ask the Scottish Government whether it has made any assessment of recent prison inspection findings on the use of restricted regimes and their

impact on prisoners' welfare and safety. (S6O-05335)

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs (Angela Constance): The Scottish Government and the Scottish Prison Service welcome all reports by His Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons for Scotland and understand that they provide an opportunity to learn, improve and consolidate practices in our prisons.

Although there has not been any formal assessment of regime restriction, the Scottish Government and the SPS recognise the impact that any regime restriction can have on those in custody. That is why the SPS applies regime restrictions only when necessary, and only to support a safe and secure environment for staff and those for whom it cares. The SPS ensures that, when there is a need for regime restrictions, such restrictions do not in any way limit contact with family or friends, whether via in-person visits or in-cell telephones. In all instances, restrictions are compliant with the Prisons and Young Offenders Institutions (Scotland) Rules 2011.

Brian Whittle: In written answers to the Parliament, it is admitted that, when regime restrictions are imposed, the Scottish Prison Service does not routinely record how long they last. Keeping prisoners isolated and not knowing the impact of that hardly screams rehabilitation. Does the cabinet secretary accept that that situation represents a serious failure of basic oversight and that ministers are currently making policy in the dark on some of the most restrictive conditions in Scottish prisons?

Angela Constance: No, I do not accept that. However, I accept that improvements can and should be made, particularly in the light of the recent HMIPS report. It has to be recognised that, when there are regime restrictions in any of our establishments, they are often put in place reactively and at very short notice rather than in a planned way. Part of the Scottish Prison Service's job is to manage situations, to care for prisoners and to ensure the safety of staff and prisoners in our establishments. However, I will give the matter further thought in my discussions with the chief executive.

Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab): A letter that was issued by the Scottish Prison Service last July referred to the "Focused Day", which I believe is the name for the restrictive regime that Brian Whittle referred to in his question. Its use is a serious casualty of overcrowding. The cabinet secretary said that she will give further consideration to the capturing of data. She should consider that issue, too, which is very important, given that we have obligations to the people we hold in our prisons, including to let them out and to let them have rehabilitation activities. Has the

cabinet secretary discussed with the Scottish Prison Service when it plans to end that regime, so that we can fulfil those obligations?

Angela Constance: It is important not to confuse or conflate regime restrictions. Regimes can be restricted in accordance with prison rules for a number of reasons. That is a different matter from the focused day approach, which has been discussed with establishments and the Prison Officers Association. The focused day issue has moved on. It has been agreed that each establishment must now consider adjustments to regimes and rosters at a local level in a way that is aligned with local needs. If Pauline McNeill wishes any further information, I would be happy to engage with her.

Family Support Services in Prisons

6. **Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what plans it has to improve family support services within the prison estate. (S6O-05336)

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs (Angela Constance): The Scottish Government and the Scottish Prison Service recognise the deep and positive impact that a strong family connection and support network can have on emotional wellbeing. The 2024 SPS family and parenting strategy promotes a healthy family relationship while recognising the complex and diverse nature of the family dynamic. Built on principles such as respect, dignity and inclusion, the strategy aligns with and complements other key SPS strategies and policies, such as the corporate parenting plan, the mother and baby policy and the vision for young people in custody. That is in addition to the family contact officers who work to support family contact in establishments.

Emma Harper: The cabinet secretary will be aware that HMP Dumfries is the latest prison estate facility to benefit from the funding that Early Years Scotland has received from the Scottish Government in order to bring its groundbreaking family support service to the south. Given the huge importance of maintaining family contact, improving rehabilitation rates and reducing reoffending, does the cabinet secretary agree that such initiatives more than pay for themselves in stopping what can sometimes, unfortunately, be a revolving door of incarceration?

Angela Constance: Family and strong societal relationships are a known factor in enabling a successful return from custody to families and communities. Prison visitor centres provide vital support to families affected by imprisonment, and I have been pleased to hear about the positive impact that Early Years Scotland has been making at HMP Dumfries.

We remain committed to providing funding for visitor centres to provide a range of practical and emotional help for families affected by imprisonment. The cross-portfolio approach taken to funding prison visitor centres reflects the impacts across health, justice and family wellbeing and supports our vision for justice.

Sharon Dowey (South Scotland) (Con): Evidence to the Criminal Justice Committee shows that drug misuse in prisons disrupts family visits and support services. The serious organised crime task force has noted concerns from the Council of Europe's anti-torture committee—the Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment—about the impact of drugs on staff and inmates in Scotland's prisons. Many families do not believe that the situation is improving.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: A question, please.

Sharon Dowey: With that in mind, will the cabinet secretary consider publishing those findings in full?

Angela Constance: You will have to forgive me, Presiding Officer: Ms Dowey is so softly spoken that I did not grasp all of the question. The point that she makes about the impact of drugs on families, communities and prisons should not be considered in isolation. I will look at the information that she has requested. We have certainly been engaging with the organisation, and we gave a full response to the independent inquiry.

Not Proven Verdict (Impact of Abolition)

7. David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government how it anticipates the abolition of the not proven verdict will improve victims' experiences of the justice system. (S6O-05337)

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs (Angela Constance): As part of the landmark Victims, Witnesses, and Justice Reform (Scotland) Act 2025, the not proven verdict has been abolished for all new trials from 1 January. That has effectively taken effect from Monday this week. Not proven verdicts have caused pain and distress for many victims and their families, denying them clarity or closure and undermining their confidence in our system's ability to deliver justice. They have also left stigma hanging over the accused.

I anticipate that the change will create fairer, more transparent decision making, with clear outcomes, as is crucial for a modern, effective and person-centred justice system that victims can trust.

David Torrance: The reform of our justice system has long been campaigned for by victims, families and support organisations. How will the change ensure clearer and fairer decision making while protecting the rights of the accused?

Angela Constance: I am very grateful to the victims, families and support organisations who have campaigned tirelessly for this historic change and who have expressed relief that others will not have to experience the pain and anguish caused by the not proven verdict.

Not proven is widely misunderstood and has no statutory definition. The verdict risks undermining public confidence, whereas the two opposing verdicts of guilty and not guilty are unambiguous and clear. However, the evidence tells us that we cannot abolish the not proven verdict in isolation without affecting the existing balance of fairness within the system. We have therefore moved from requiring a simple majority for a conviction to requiring a two-thirds majority. I believe that that strikes the right balance.

Judicial Judgments (Use of Artificial Intelligence)

8. Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what its position is on the use of artificial intelligence in the composition of judicial judgments. (S6O-05338)

The Minister for Victims and Community Safety (Siobhian Brown): The Scottish Government does not consider it appropriate to comment on the judiciary's use of artificial intelligence. That is because the judiciary is independent of the Scottish Government, in order to preserve the independence of the legal system and to protect it from political interference.

Legislation places a duty on all Government ministers, law officers and members of the Parliament to uphold judicial independence, barring them from trying to exert influence over judicial decisions.

Decisions about judicial processes, including whether to use AI in composing judgments, are solely for the judiciary to determine. As head of the judiciary, the Lord President is responsible for making and maintaining appropriate arrangements for the training and guidance of Scottish judicial office-holders.

Murdo Fraser: I thank the minister for her response, but I am astonished that Scottish ministers do not regard it as a serious matter that artificial intelligence could be used to compile judgments in our courts.

The publication of the recent tribunal judgment in the case of *Sandie Peggie v NHS Fife* raised serious concerns, given the number of manifest

errors in it and the unprecedented number of corrections that had to be made. That led to suspicions that artificial intelligence was used to produce the judgment. Should the Scottish Government not be speaking urgently to the Lord President about those matters, to ensure the maintenance of public confidence in our judicial system?

Siobhian Brown: As, I am sure, the member is aware, the Judiciary and Courts (Scotland) Act 2008 guaranteed judicial independence and established the Lord President as the head of the Scottish judiciary, responsible for the efficient disposal of business in the Scottish courts.

Although the Scottish Government supports the ethical and responsible use of AI in public services, it has no role in judicial decision making and cannot intervene in matters that fall within the remit of the courts and the judiciary.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes portfolio questions on justice and home affairs.

Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con):
On a point of order, Deputy Presiding Officer. Yesterday, in replying to questions about the independent advisers' report, which concluded that the Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs had breached the ministerial code on two occasions, Angela Constance was unable to answer a question that I put to her and she refused to engage with a second question at all. Following that session, I emailed the cabinet secretary at 16:52; that email was read at 16:53. The email asked for answers to the same questions that I had asked and had not received answers to in the chamber. So far, almost 24 hours later, I have received no response from the justice secretary. What requirement or expectation is there for ministers to promptly respond to questions that they were unable to answer in the chamber?

On a related point, yesterday, I outlined what seemed to be a case of party-political sources briefing newspapers on the outcome of the independent advisers' report before it had been shared with members of the Scottish Parliament and with the Parliament. Has the First Minister or any member of the Scottish Government indicated to the Presiding Officer that a leak inquiry is now under way? If it is not, what action can the Presiding Officer or this Parliament take to ensure that a leak inquiry is undertaken?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I thank Douglas Ross for advance notice of his point of order. In relation to the first part, he will be aware that, under standing orders, there is only a requirement for the Scottish Government to respond to lodged questions that were not taken in the chamber. However, as a matter of courtesy and respect, if a

minister is unable to provide information in response to a question, the expectation would be that they provide that information at the earliest opportunity.

In relation to the second part of his point of order, I am not aware of the particular briefing that he refers to; similarly, I am not aware of any leak inquiry. A leak inquiry of the type that he refers to would be a matter for the First Minister in the first instance.

With that, there will be a brief pause before we move to the next item of business, so that members on the front benches can change over.

Income Tax

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-20294, in the name of Craig Hoy, on lowering bills for Scotland's workers. I invite those members who wish to speak in the debate to press their request-to-speak buttons.

14:53

Craig Hoy (South Scotland) (Con): I wish you a happy new year, Deputy Presiding Officer.

This year, 2026, must be the year in which Scotland's politicians tackle the cost of living crisis. People across Scotland are under pressure, and many families are struggling to get by. Their bills are rising and everyday costs keep going up. In a matter of weeks, after years of Scottish National Party tax rises and wasteful spending, voters will face a clear choice. The SNP and Labour want people to keep paying more through higher taxes and they want to increase the benefits bill. Reform joins them in wanting to increase Scotland's soaring social security bill. All of that adds to the pressure on hard-working Scottish families.

However, there is a different way—a commonsense way that focuses on bringing bills down and making work pay. It is an approach that focuses on widening the tax base and not hitting the same people harder each and every year. That is what our motion sets out to do. At its core is the same call that we made in relation to last year's budget. We are calling for income tax on lower and middle-income workers to be cut by scrapping the Scottish basic and intermediate rates of income tax and replacing them with a single Scottish income tax rate—a flat 19 per cent rate on earnings up to the higher-rate threshold of £44,000.

However, we need to go much further than that to deal with the damaging effects of fiscal drag. In her first budget, Rachel Reeves said that freezing tax thresholds would hurt working people, but, barely 12 months later, she froze them for three years, following in the footsteps of the Scottish National Party.

Today, we propose to reverse that, to lift thresholds in line with inflation and to use a new zero rate to increase the point at which Scots start paying income tax, not just this year but in each of the five years of the next parliamentary session. I will tell members why we must do so. If the thresholds remain at their present levels, most Scottish workers will be paying the higher rate of tax by the end of the decade. A tax that is meant for high earners will be paid by workers on average incomes. Under Labour and the SNP, there will be higher-rate tax for the many, not the

few. That is the reality of the SNP's fiscal policy, which is, of course, aided and abetted by Scottish Labour.

We are talking about the pernicious effects of prolonged fiscal drag, which raises taxes on hundreds of thousands of Scots through the back door. Worse still, those stealth tax raids involve taking money from pay packets to fund billions in extra welfare spending. The benefits bill is set to reach £10 billion by the end of the decade.

When I met Mr McKee and the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government, Shona Robison rightly asked how we would pay for our proposals. Let me tell the minister how we would do it. In cutting waste in Government, we would go further than the £1 billion that Mr McKee has allegedly identified. We would cut the benefits bill while ensuring that those who are in genuine need would continue to secure proper support. We will set out specifically which benefits we would scale back once we hear from the Scottish Government in next week's budget, when we will discover just how much more the cabinet secretary is set to snatch from working households to blow on Benefits Street.

Let me be clear to workers and businesses. In recent years, the SNP has made the decision to increase taxes to pay for ever more benefits. It has the cheek to say that those tax increases fall on those with the broadest shoulders, when we all know that teachers and nurses are paying more. As my colleague Russell Findlay said this week, the Government is not asking workers to pay—it is demanding that they do so. They have no choice in the matter. They cannot just turn around and say, "Sorry, Shona—I'll skip paying your higher taxes this year." It is a non-negotiable one-way street to ever more tax to pay for ever more welfare.

However, it does not have to be that way, because reducing benefits incentivises work. It puts more money into people's pockets and generates more in tax receipts, which, in turn, delivers more economic growth.

Before I close, I will return to the frankly laughable SNP amendment that has been put before MSPs today, which says that the Government must

"respect Parliament by outlining its tax policy"

only when it publishes its budget next week. Let us reflect on that SNP culture of respect for this Parliament. What respect did it show when core details of last year's budget somehow found their way into the mainstream media before Shona Robison had even got to her feet? What respect did it show to this Parliament when, in 2022, Nicola Sturgeon's vitally important Covid update was reported by the press long before it was

announced to Parliament, which the Presiding Officer said was “disappointing” and “disrespectful”?

Just this week, what respect did the Government show to this Parliament when media reports suggested that the Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs was safe in her role even before the findings of an official probe had been published? It showed it absolutely no respect whatsoever, so let us take no lectures from a party that repeatedly treats this Parliament and the Scottish people with utter contempt.

The measures in our motion would go a considerable way to closing the corrosive tax differential with the rest of the United Kingdom. They would save average full-time workers more than £600 this year and, by raising thresholds by £1,300 by 2030-31, they would grow the tax base and deliver growth. They prove that the Scottish Conservatives are the only party that is serious about cutting tax and cutting waste, the only party that is serious about cutting the SNP’s bloated benefits bill and the only party that is committed to a fairer deal for Scottish workers.

I move,

That the Parliament calls on the Scottish Government to reduce income tax on working people in Scotland; commits to uprating income tax thresholds in line with inflation in the forthcoming Scottish Budget and in future Scottish Budgets; further commits to removing the Scottish basic rate and intermediate rate of income tax and replacing them with a single Scottish income tax rate of 19 pence on income up to the higher rate threshold, and believes that these fairer measures would begin to reduce the tax differential with the rest of the United Kingdom, put more money into the pockets of working families, and support economic growth by addressing the cumulative effects of current income tax policy.

15:00

The Minister for Public Finance (Ivan McKee): Let me begin with a point of consensus. We all want to ease the pressure on household budgets. Across Scotland, people are still feeling the strain of the cost of living crisis. Prices remain high, energy bills are still elevated and household budgets are stretched. Inflation may be easing, but the impact of years of rising prices remains. The Scottish Government understands that reality, and our priority is to support people with fairness and responsibility.

I will focus on three things—the Conservative proposal and its implications, our current income tax policy and the principles behind it, and the practical action that the Scottish Government is taking to support households across the country.

I will turn first to the Conservative income tax plans. Russell Findlay recently wrote to the First Minister about those. Our estimates show that

Conservative income tax asks would cost the Scottish budget more than £1 billion in 2026-27. That is the difference between maintaining essential public services and making deep cuts to the everyday support that people rely on. We are always willing to work constructively across the chamber, but that requires that proposals are credible, that they add up and that members are honest about what they would mean for services and for the households that depend on them.

Craig Hoy: If we come forward with fully costed proposals to meet the cost of our tax cuts, will the minister come forward with fully costed proposals to find the £10 billion that the Government intends to pay in welfare by the end of the decade?

Ivan McKee: If the member read the work that we have already published—the fiscal sustainability delivery plan and the medium-term financial strategy—he would find that the answers to that are clear. Unlike Conservative or Labour United Kingdom Governments, the Scottish Government manages to balance its budget every single year.

Our income tax policy balances the need to raise revenue with investment in health, education and social care. Households in the lower half of the income distribution are on average about £450 a year better off under Scotland’s tax and social security system.

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

Ivan McKee: I will if I have time.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: There is no extra time available.

Ivan McKee: I am sorry, but I need to make some progress.

Our approach is fair. We ask those with the broadest shoulders to contribute a little more so that families and public services are protected. In return, people benefit from support that is not available throughout the rest of the UK, including the Scottish child payment, free prescriptions and free access to higher education. Despite the naysayers, Scotland continues to attract positive inward migration from the rest of the UK and sees strong levels of inward investment from abroad.

The Conservative Party claims that its plans can be funded by reducing social security spending and making efficiency savings, but those claims are vague, and people rightly expect clarity. What cuts to social security are the Conservatives proposing? Would they be cuts to support for children, disabled people or pensioners?

The Scottish Government has already identified in the medium-term financial strategy around £1 billion of realistic efficiency savings that can be

made over five years while protecting front-line services, which is very important. Any efficiencies that the Conservatives are talking about would be in addition to those savings. The people of Scotland will not see that as being credible without cuts to public services in our hospitals, schools and social care. That is the difference between a workable, well-thought-out plan and something that is, frankly, little more than a slogan.

The Scottish Government is already delivering practical support that matters to households. We provide universal free school meals to more than 230,000 children in primary 1 to primary 5 and in special schools, as well as to eligible pupils beyond that. For families, that is a saving of around £450 per child each year.

We provide free tuition. Students in England face tuition fees of up to £28,600, but that education is free in Scotland.

We provide free prescriptions. Prescriptions are now £9.90 per item south of the border.

There is free bus travel for more than 2 million people in Scotland.

We have removed ScotRail peak fares for good. In doing so, we have helped people with on-going cost of living pressures while tackling the climate emergency by saving existing rail passengers money and encouraging new passengers to leave their cars at home and travel by train.

Our council tax reduction scheme cut bills for more than 450,000 people, which helps households to retain more of their income when every penny counts.

The Scottish child payment, which is one of the most important anti-poverty measures anywhere in the UK, now supports more than 320,000 families with children under 16 and it could lift 40,000 children out of relative poverty during this financial year.

Those are not vague ideas on a page; they are real measures that are already making a difference and they are all funded by a responsible tax policy that protects public services while easing pressure on families.

The Scottish Government's approach is responsible, progressive and deliverable. It protects services, supports families and is based on what Scotland can realistically afford. The Conservative alternative is none of that. It is expensive, vague and unfunded, leaving a £1 billion gap with no explanation of which services the Conservatives would cut. At a time when households need certainty, Scotland cannot afford unfunded promises. This Government offers a credible, fair and affordable plan for Scotland's future.

I move amendment S6M-20294.2, to leave out from first "reduce" to end and insert:

"respect Parliament by outlining its tax policy when it publishes its Budget on 13 January 2026, and ensure that the policy is progressive, fair to the people of Scotland, and supports vital public services like Scotland's NHS, schools, and blue light services."

15:05

Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): A happy new year to you, Presiding Officer.

People are feeling the burden of higher prices and of wages that barely increased in the 14 years of the Tories. Living standards were lower at the end of the last United Kingdom Parliament than at the beginning—the first time that that has happened since the Napoleonic wars. That is the record of the party opposite.

The cost of living crisis is far from over. Alongside the state of Scotland's national health service, it is the top issue for the people I speak to in Dundee each week. I therefore welcome the progress that the UK Labour Government has begun to make in tackling the cost of living.

Liz Smith: Will the member give way?

Michael Marra: Not yet, as I am just beginning.

Six interest rate cuts have brought the average cost of a mortgage down by £1,500. The average wage is up by £1,800, as the minimum wage is bolstered. The most recent UK budget took £158 off energy bills, with warm home discounts delivering £300 off bills for the most in-need households. Inflation is falling and wages are rising.

Those are very welcome steps, which will ease the pressure on hard-pressed households across the country, but we know that there is still much more to do, not least on the subject of today's debate: the pressure that the SNP's tax regime is putting on ordinary Scots. The majority of Scots pay more tax than they would elsewhere in the UK. I believe that the minister, in some form of wording, just tried to make a counterclaim to that, as have Shona Robison and John Swinney. Those spurious claims to the contrary are demonstrably false. As Professor Mairi Spowage of the Fraser of Allander Institute has pointed out in recent days, the SNP ministers' claim

"has turned out not to be true"

in the past two financial years.

Let us be clear: those in Scotland who are paying more and more tax each year are not those with the broadest shoulders, as the SNP has tried to claim and as the minister has just claimed again today in the Parliament. The bulk of additional tax revenue does not come from the ultra-rich; rather,

it comes from those who earn just over £40,000. Those are nurses, teachers and police officers who work hard in our overstretched public services. They are shop managers, information technology workers and salespeople who work hard in hard-pressed businesses.

Liz Smith: I entirely agree with what Michael Marra has just said, but where does Labour stand when it comes to the huge burden of the national insurance tax on employers? Surely that is increasing the cost of living.

Michael Marra: When it comes to the amount of money that has been invested in public services, the UK Labour Government inherited not just an economy that had flatlined for 14 years but public services in acute crisis and a significant black hole in the public finances. In order to address those, money had to be raised, and that money has to come from somewhere. The SNP continually claims from the Scottish Government benches that we can have an infinite amount of money and that it does not matter where that comes from—an additional £130 billion of borrowing, it has claimed, for across the UK. Money to invest in public services has to come from somewhere. We have to make sure that we raise taxes and we take tough decisions about how that can happen.

However, the personal tax bills that people are paying are considerable. As I have said, people on middle incomes are hard pressed and are struggling to make ends meet.

Craig Hoy: Will Mr Marra give way?

Michael Marra: No thank you, sir.

The public are more likely to accept paying a bit more in tax if they can see improvements in public services. One has to come with the other. However, in Scotland, our NHS is in chaos, with waits of more than 12 hours in accident and emergency departments continuing to rise; our education system is in crisis, with falling attainment and staff on the verge of burnout; and we have an SNP housing emergency with more than 10,000 children stuck in temporary accommodation and house-building rates among the worst in our history. Scots are paying more and getting less in return.

I move amendment S6M-20294.1, to leave out from “calls” to end and insert:

“understands that the Scottish Government’s incompetent approach to the public finances and failure to grow Scotland’s economy are leading to heightened budgetary pressures; further understands that income tax should not be used as a substitute for economic growth and believes that, given the pressure on household finances, income tax rates should not increase in the course of the next parliamentary session; welcomes the UK Labour administration’s Budget, which tackles the cost of living for households across Scotland by cutting costs on energy bills, lifting thousands of children out of poverty, and

increasing wages for hard-working people in Scotland, and believes that the Scottish Labour Party’s plan to establish a Scottish treasury with strategic oversight for spending in all Scottish Government departments is essential in order to put an end to waste and ensure that taxpayers’ money is treated with respect.”

15:09

Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): I always welcome the chance to debate the tax system and how to make it fairer, and I am proud of the Green record in achieving that. Our 2016 manifesto proposals became the basis of the five-band income tax system that Scotland adopted. We set the tipping point at which people should start paying a little more tax at roughly the average full-time salary, largely because we thought that people would see that as fair. The system has been tweaked a bit since then, but the six-band system that is now in place continues the same direction of travel, even if we think that it could go further. Although the SNP has relied too much, to my liking, on the argument that most people pay a bit less tax—which I think implies an acceptance of the right-wing framing of tax being a bad thing—it has continued to ensure that Scotland’s income tax system follows a progressive direction, with those who can afford to pay more doing so, because the alternative is cuts to services that fall heaviest on those who have the least.

In the 2025-26 budget, Scotland’s tax changes generated around £1.7 billion extra for public services, so Scottish tax policy unquestionably protects the services that are needed by those who do not enjoy high incomes and makes possible groundbreaking initiatives such as the Scottish child payment.

Let us compare all of that with the Tory plan for £1.1 billion in tax cuts. That is equivalent to the budget of the entire rural affairs, land reform and islands portfolio going in a oner. If the Tories do not want to scrap that, they might say that they prefer cuts to social security, so they could do away with the Scottish child payment—an internationally recognised initiative that is the single most successful measure that we have for cutting child poverty. However, no—sorry, but that would not be enough. It would not even meet half the cost of the Tory black hole.

How about cutting the affordable housing supply programme? That would get us closer. Scrapping that would save £768 million, leaving only a third of a billion of other cuts still to find, and I am sure that the Tories think that leaving people at the mercy of unregulated private landlords would be a reasonable alternative to delivering affordable housing.

However, it is not just the cuts that the Tory plan would rely on that nauseate me. My issue is also

about who gets the benefit. From the changes that are set out in the motion alone, we can see that the plan would benefit a young full-time worker on the minimum wage by something like £40 a year. Someone on a wage that is closer to an average income of £25,000 might save something like £100 a year. I am sure that that little bit of extra cash would be welcome to people on those incomes and that, if they were very lucky, their landlord would not just hike the rent and take it straight back off them again. However, let us look at someone on twice that income: £50,000. By my calculation, they would save something like £440 a year, and Craig Hoy suggests that that figure could be up to more than £600 a year. That same £600-a-year saving would go to people on 60, 80 or 100 grand a year under the plan. For someone on such high incomes, 400 quid or 600 quid a year is nothing. They would not even notice the difference.

A case can be made for cutting income tax further for low earners and for people on middle incomes, but it can be made only if we ensure that the high earners and the wealth owners are the ones paying for it. The Tory plan gives high earners the biggest tax cuts and pays for it all by slashing the public services that are most relied on by the least wealthy. That is no surprise from the Conservatives—it is their natural instinct—but it would be bad for our society and bad for our economy, and it would be a fundamentally uncivilised policy.

15:13

Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (LD): I agree with the notion that our current politics is defined by the cost of living and by people's perception of whether their Government or Governments are on their side—or not, as the case may be. That includes the question of tax policy. This Parliament has had tax-varying powers since its inception, but only since 2017 has the Scottish Government used them, to varying degrees of success and popularity. Over the next few weeks, particularly regarding the approaching budget, the focus will centre on the conversation about tax bands and rates and on the perceived doves and hawks in relation to taxation. However, we are completely missing the other elephant in the room, which we rarely debate: whether the tax differential north of the border actually generates the level of additional revenue that the public are led to believe that it does.

The answer to that question is that it does not. We are not seeing a proportionate net benefit as a result of paying more tax. In this financial year, as other members have mentioned, the Scottish Government expects to generate an additional £1.7 billion in Scottish income tax due to its policy

decisions. That is fine—that is its decision. However, the Scottish budget will benefit to the tune of only £616 million. Those are independently verified figures. To put it simply, for every £1 in extra tax that is paid by a Scottish taxpayer, only 36p will be available to the Scottish Government to spend on public services.

The Auditor General has been crystal clear about that disparity. He states why that is the case. I see the minister looking at me strangely. I can hand him the Audit Scotland report, which states that fact. We know that what is generated in revenue does not all come back to the Scottish purse. The reason why it does not is that we have an underperforming tax base, sluggish wage growth and productivity in Scotland, and sluggish overall economic growth compared with other parts of the UK. That is what is creating the funding gap.

I know that the fiscal settlement is complex—probably only a handful of people truly understand how it works—but the Government too often cites the tax intake figure as gospel in order to vindicate its tax policies. Audit Scotland has also criticised the Scottish Government for its complete lack of transparency on the issue.

If we ask people in the real world whether they are comfortable paying that wee bit more in tax to fund our precious NHS or to make sure that our teachers are paid well, as others have argued, some might very well say, "Yes, absolutely." However, I am not so convinced that they would sign up to an alternative tax regime if they knew how little of it benefited the Scottish budget.

Of course, we need to raise the size of the overall tax base—

Ivan McKee: Will the member take an intervention?

Jamie Greene: I have less than a minute; otherwise I would have done so.

Of course, we need to raise earnings across the board, because raised earnings will inevitably lead to higher tax intakes. However, here is a sobering statistic: in the year 2023-24, 20 per cent of all Scottish taxpayers paid 66 per cent of all tax. In fact, the top 1 per cent of all taxpayers paid 20 per cent of all tax. That is a sobering reminder that we need to grow the number of high earners. That should not be controversial; it is a necessity.

The Government will argue about our low unemployment rate, which sits at 3.8 per cent—that is great, but it ignores not just how many people are in or out of work but what their earnings are, how well off they feel and, to put it bluntly, their potential to pay tax into the Government coffers.

I am really nervous about how many well-educated, professional young Scots we will lose to the brain drain over the coming years. They are being attracted by glossy ads for the Gold Coast and Canada and by Spain's flat-rate tax for digital nomads. Our challenge will be to encourage them to remain in Scotland, and if they are not already here, to encourage them to consider coming and making a life here.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We move to the open debate, with speeches of up to four minutes.

15:17

Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I am pleased to speak in favour of our motion, which calls for lower bills for workers, who are suffering as a result of the cost of living crisis, and for an end to the SNP's high-tax agenda.

The devolution of extensive taxation powers to the Scottish Government was an opportunity to create a tax system that supports Scottish businesses, incentivises growth and delivers for the Scottish public. However, it seems that the current SNP Government only ever saw those powers as a chance to hike taxes on hard-pressed Scottish workers. Making Scotland the highest-taxed part of the United Kingdom is hardly a legacy that the Scottish Government would have hoped for, but that is exactly what it has created.

Stakeholders such as Scottish Financial Enterprise and the Confederation of British Industry continue to highlight the impact of those taxes on Scottish businesses. The CBI has said that higher Scottish taxes mean that businesses are struggling to compete for highly skilled staff, and that current income tax policy is acting like a "handbrake" on Scotland's economic growth.

The Institute for Fiscal Studies has called Scotland's income tax system "unnecessarily complicated", and that was before the SNP introduced the sixth band to the tax system. IFS analysis also shows that the behavioural changes caused by the tax policy mean that it is unclear how much revenue those changes have raised, and it says that the Government should be open to "reversing course" on its tax policy.

Regardless of what the Scottish Government might say, it is unlikely that it will be changing direction any time soon. Not content with keeping the higher-rate threshold significantly lower than elsewhere in the UK, the SNP raised the higher rate to 41 per cent and then raised it again in 2023. The SNP's income tax strategy has been a never-ending series of tax rises, with the tax burden creeping up year on year. Scotland is therefore left with a tax system that is too complicated, too damaging to growth and too costly to the taxpayer. The SNP has played this

game for many years, and it would be naive to believe that it will stop any time soon.

Our solutions to the problem are clear. We are calling for the SNP to increase income tax thresholds in line with inflation in the forthcoming 2026-27 budget and in future budgets. We also want to see a simpler Scottish income tax system with a single rate of 19 per cent applied up to the higher rate. Those are proportionate and reasonable policies that would bring us towards closing the current tax gap with the rest of the United Kingdom. They would ensure tax cuts—which could be up to £600—for the vast majority of Scottish workers. We should be trying to put more money back into the pockets of hard-pressed Scots and workers in our country to support them.

Our policies would help to undo the damage that the SNP's high-tax agenda has already done to the Scottish economy. They would also make Scotland an attractive destination for top talent. We should be trying to attract talent, not send it elsewhere, which is what we are doing on a daily basis.

Ivan McKee: Will the member take an intervention on that point?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The member is in his last minute.

Alexander Stewart: I am in my last minute.

I want Scotland's tax system to support growth, reward work and deliver lower bills for Scottish workers. As we have already heard, that would be achieved by cutting Government waste, cutting into the unsustainable benefits bill—which every other party in the Parliament wants to increase—and supporting hard-pressed taxpayers and householders.

I therefore support the motion in the name of Craig Hoy. These are sensible, forward-looking and pragmatic policies that we need in order to support our communities, constituents and businesses.

15:21

Jamie Hepburn (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP): I am happy to contribute to today's debate. The last time that I took part in a Tory debate, Mr Hoy happened to be closing it. He said that my speech was one of the worst that he had heard in his time in the Parliament. I look forward to disappointing him again, because, frankly, if that is his assessment, I think that I am on the right track.

It is interesting that we again heard the Tory refrain of "common sense", as if what they lay out is a commonsense approach. What we did not hear—although I thought that we might, because we often hear it from the Tories—is that the

approach that has been taken by the Scottish Government is an ideological approach, as if “ideology” is, in and of itself, a four-letter word. However, the Conservative approach of cutting taxes and disinvesting in public services is also an ideological approach. We should not pretend that it is anything other than such.

It is clear where the Conservative Party gets its inspiration from. The Tory leader in this Parliament was a great supporter of the Truss-Kwarteng budget in 2022. I do not know why he is laughing; maybe he has forgotten. I am happy to remind him that he supported that budget, which was utterly underpinned by Tory ideology. That budget was predicated on assisting with the cost of living, but it saw inflation increase from 2 per cent to 10 per cent and mortgage rates triple overnight. So much for assisting with the cost of living.

To be fair, the Tories accept that their approach to taxation would reduce the amount of revenue that is accrued to the public purse. Indeed, if they do not accept that, they should, because that is what would happen. It happened with the proposals in 2022, which are similar to the ones that the Conservatives are advancing just now. The Fraser of Allander Institute said that those proposals would have generated a potential revenue loss to the public purse in Scotland of approximately £420 million.

Despite that, we will still hear calls from the Conservative Party for increased expenditure in many areas. Mr Harvie made that point just yesterday during the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee debate on investment in swimming pools and swimming infrastructure, when we heard calls for more investment in that area. Just this week, we heard a call from the Tories for increased investment in legal aid. They have also said that more money should be put into the Scottish veterans fund, and we have heard them talk about creating a new affordable transition fund. All of those are perfectly legitimate proposals to advance, but they cannot be taken seriously or credibly if, at the same time, the Tories seek to cut taxes.

I turn to Alexander Stewart’s point about our having the highest taxes in the UK. In that respect, I slightly disagree with Mr Harvie, as I consider that there is nothing wrong with our making the point that most income tax payers in Scotland pay less in income tax than is paid by taxpayers in the rest of the UK. Further, I note that that is a very narrow analysis of tax liability. We know that the average band D council tax bill this year is £1,543 in Scotland but £2,280 in England. So much for Scotland being the highest taxed part of the UK.

We should focus on assisting people with the cost of living crisis. I am proud and pleased that we have a Scottish Government that is doing just

that, with its investment in abolishing peak rail fares, its continued commitment to free prescriptions and free eye appointments, and its commitment to funding childcare hours, which would otherwise cost more than £6,000 per eligible child per year. I am proud of, and stand behind, that record.

Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con): On a point of order, Presiding Officer.

Jamie Hepburn has just said that more than half of taxpayers in Scotland pay less income tax than is paid elsewhere in the United Kingdom. Mairi Spowage of the Fraser of Allander Institute has said that that claim has been false for the past two financial years. Will Mr Hepburn therefore use this opportunity to apologise for misleading the chamber and correct the *Official Report*? Perhaps if he does that, Government front-bench members, up to and including the First Minister, will stop using that spurious claim.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Ross will be aware that that is not a point of order. It is up to members to determine in what way they seek to contribute—[*Interruption*.] I say to members and Mr Findlay that I am speaking. I am addressing the apparent point of order that was made by Mr Findlay’s colleague. I would expect some respect to be shown to the chair and that Mr Findlay might manage to listen to my response to his colleague without interrupting.

As I was saying, it is up to members to determine how they deal with their contributions in debates. On making corrections, all members are aware of the procedures and how to do that.

15:27

Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con): The Parliament is designed to stand up for working people in Scotland. However, since the SNP took office, working people have been told—not asked, but told—to pay more, work harder and accept less in return. That is not fairness; it is failure.

Our motion is simple. We are calling on the Scottish Government

“to reduce income tax on working people”,

to uprate

“income tax thresholds in line with inflation in the forthcoming Scottish budget and in future Scottish Budgets”,

and to simplify a system that has become punitive, confusing and deeply unfair. We also believe that the Scottish basic rate and intermediate rate of income tax should be replaced with a

“single Scottish income tax rate of 19 pence on income up to the higher rate threshold”.

I do not think that those are radical demands. They are measures that are designed to put more money back into the pockets of everyday, ordinary, working Scots, to reduce the growing tax gap between Scotland and the rest of the United Kingdom and to begin repairing the damage that has been done by years of SNP income tax policy.

Middle earners—the nurses who care for us, the police officers who keep our communities safe and the teachers who are shaping our children's futures—are all paying more in tax than they would pay anywhere else in the rest of the UK. What do they receive in return? They get fewer services, longer waiting times, crumbling infrastructure and a childcare system that still presents a huge financial barrier for many families.

We have heard from Jamie Hepburn, the minister and others today about all the free policies that are offered in Scotland, but, of course, they did not mention that those free policies are paid for by taxpayers up and down the country. That is the SNP's record: higher taxes, lower value and broken promises.

Ivan McKee: That is the whole point: tax pays for those free things, which people would not get if we did what the Conservative Party wants us to do and reduced tax rates.

Meghan Gallacher: Well, they are not free then, are they?

That is the approach of the SNP and other political parties to taxation in this country. Their policy is, “If it moves, we're going to tax it,” but they must know that that punishes ambition and penalises progression. It hits hardest those who are trying to move up the career ladder, take on extra responsibility or secure a better future for their family. The SNP tells us to wait for the budget for clarity, but, as colleagues have conveyed, nothing prevents the SNP from putting out those messages before the budget. A different approach to the taxation system would be welcomed.

For working parents, the situation is even more stark. Too many families are forced to make impossible choices when it comes to childcare in this country—they have to reduce hours, turn down promotions or leave the workforce altogether. They have to choose what they can do, because they do not have the additional money in their pocket to be able to make those decisions of their own free will. For many younger people in this country, the dream of becoming a home owner or parent is made more difficult because of the choices that are made in this chamber.

I know that I am in my last couple of minutes—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: It is seconds.

Meghan Gallacher: Sorry. In my last couple of seconds, I want to say that it is time for a different

approach—one that backs working people, that recognises the real pressures that they face and that puts fairness, growth and opportunity back at the heart of Scotland's tax system.

15:31

Gordon MacDonald (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP): Nobody likes paying income tax, or any tax, but I believe that those with the broadest shoulders, including MSPs, should pay a bit more to enable Scotland to spend more on the things that matter most to people—better schools, lower crime rates, affordable housing, falling NHS waiting lists, lifting children out of poverty, and lower unemployment. What we pay in income tax is important, primarily because it is the Scottish Government's main source of revenue, after the block grant, for funding public services such as health, local government and education.

Craig Hoy: Will Mr MacDonald take an intervention?

Gordon MacDonald: No—I have only four minutes.

The Tory party's proposal would remove up to £1 billion from the Scottish budget. Currently, Scottish employees who are on the national living wage pay lower income tax than those elsewhere in the UK, as do people earning the real living wage. Individuals who earn the median gross pay in Scotland, which is higher than the UK median pay, are asked for an additional £94 per year, or £8 per month, and those at the top of the intermediate rate pay an extra £11 per month. That is based on the tax calculator that is provided by His Majesty's Revenue and Customs.

What do Scots receive in return? Public transport users who are aged under 22 and over 60 are receiving free bus travel, which in Edinburgh is a saving of £68 per month. For people who commute by train, the removal of peak fares has reduced the cost substantially, by up to 48 per cent, which is not available elsewhere. The council tax for band E properties in Scotland is around £700 per annum less than that for similar band E properties south of the border, which saves £61 per month. Water bills are lower than those in England and Wales, and the SNP record on affordable house building means that Scotland's average rate of affordable housing delivery per head has been around 47 per cent higher than that in England and 73 per cent higher than that in Wales.

Then there are the interventions to tackle poverty, starting with the baby box, which 360,000 families have enjoyed since the scheme started and which provides the support needed to give children the best start in life. The Scottish child payment supports more than 320,000 children

under 16 across Scotland, which is the only part of the UK where child poverty is falling. There are no student fees here, which supports many in our most marginalised communities to get out of poverty through further and higher education.

The cost of living increase has been made worse through food inflation, which has increased since Brexit and continues to rise faster than the inflation caused by the policies of Johnson and Truss. Then there is the job tax on employers that Labour introduced, which impacted employers' ability to give meaningful pay rises. As I said, the proposals in the Tory motion would be likely to cut the Scottish budget by up to £1 billion at a time when Tory MSPs are always asking to spend more money on whatever happens to be their pet project of the month.

If the Tory party wanted to alleviate the tax burden on Scottish workers, it could have done so when it was in Government at Westminster by unfreezing the personal allowance, but it did not, and Jeremy Hunt extended that freeze up to April 2028. This motion is nothing more than a Tory election gimmick that cannot be fulfilled without massive cuts to the current levels of services for our communities.

15:35

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab):

I will start on a point of consensus with the minister. I appreciate that we have the opportunity to debate the economy and tax. Unfortunately, such opportunities come all too infrequently in this place. To the extent that the economy is discussed here, it is done simply to point at other places and seek excuses, despite the fact that many of the levers that we have to impact the economy—concerning the skills system, the planning system, transport and infrastructure—are held here.

That approach has demonstrated that this place has not lived up to its potential. Economic growth has barely been mentioned. If we had economic growth, many of the difficulties that we have talked about would be alleviated. Our difficulties with public expenditure and the choices that we have to make would become significantly easier, but this Government has let Scotland down and not lived up to this country's economic potential. It is a fact that economic performance has lagged for the past decade. That is not a point of conjecture or a subjective opinion; we know that it is true because of income tax devolution.

Since 2016, our economic growth per head has been lower than that in the rest of the UK. We know that because of the way in which the fiscal formula works. Jamie Greene said that the formula is complicated and that not many people understand how it works in detail, but they do not

need to. The simple point is that the formula assigns income tax based on wage growth. When wage growth is faster in Scotland, we get more money to spend; when it is lower than in the rest of the UK, we get less money to spend. According to the Scottish Fiscal Commission, it is a fact that we have £1 billion less to spend, because economic growth has been slower in Scotland than in the rest of the UK since 2016. That is the cost of economic failure under the SNP's Administration over the past 10 years. It is not an opinion; it is an inescapable fact.

Not only has the SNP failed with regard to economic growth; it has failed in its administration of the tax system. SNP members are clearly in denial of the Fraser of Allander Institute's opinions when it comes to the tax burden with regard to income tax. However, the issue is not only whether Scots pay more on average but how the income tax system works in Scotland. We should highlight teachers, police and nurses, not only because of the excellent work that they do and their dedication but because they pay a 50 per cent marginal tax rate. If people earn between £43,662 and £50,270 a year, they pay a higher marginal tax rate than people in the rest of the UK who earn more than they do, which is a disgrace. That we think that teachers, police constables and nurses should pay a higher marginal rate than people who earn almost £100,000 a year is a scandal. It is a sign of economic and fiscal incompetence on the part of the SNP, but it does not have to be like that.

Other parts of the UK have higher rates of growth than Scotland despite having fewer economic powers. It is a fact that Greater Manchester has experienced a higher rate of growth than Scotland by more than 1 percentage point per year, and its gross domestic product per head is now higher than that of Scotland. A decade and a half ago, the GDP per head in Manchester was lower than that in Scotland, so it has had a superior economic performance with fewer economic powers. That is the difference that focusing on the economy can make.

Scotland is being let down under the SNP. In May, Scotland faces a choice between a Government that seeks to simply narrate problems and point in a direction and a party that seeks to confront problems, come up with solutions and make lives better for Scots.

15:39

Patrick Harvie: The Conservative Party has continually told us that its focus in today's debate is on tackling the cost of living. However, it is inevitable that, if we rolled back and reversed progressive changes to income tax, the biggest benefit would go to those on the highest incomes.

The Conservatives say that they want to tackle the cost of living, but they would give the biggest benefit to those on the highest incomes.

Craig Hoy: Will Mr Harvie take an intervention?

Patrick Harvie: With a four-minute speech, I do not have time to take an intervention.

The Conservatives want to fund their policy by cutting social security. Social security addresses the cost of living for those who face the worst challenges. Let us remind ourselves that most people who need support from the social security system are working—they are in working households. I know that there are people on the right who like to pretend that there is a hard and fast division between those who contribute to the economy and those who take from it, but that is spurious nonsense. The Conservatives' plan would devastate the public services that help people to cope with the cost of living.

The truth is that, even during this really difficult session of the Scottish Parliament and during the incredibly challenging period since Tory austerity was introduced, progress has been made on effective ways of cutting the cost of living. For example, in recent years, the Greens have cut public transport costs for buses, trains and ferries, and we could do so much more. We will set out plans for expanding free bus travel to under-30s.

We can cut rents. Extractive and exploitative rent levels are one of the biggest and most unnecessary costs that a great many people are landed with, but the Conservatives do not want to control rents; they want to let them continue to spiral.

As for giving households the benefit of cheap, clean energy, instead of leaving people dependent on high and volatile fossil fuel prices, the Conservatives want to rip up climate legislation and abandon the opportunities from that cheap, clean energy.

We can do so much more on all those effective ways of tackling the cost of living, but they all need investment, which is why they all depend on a progressive tax system.

Before I finish, I want to say something about the Labour amendment. I know that Daniel Johnson and others want to focus on growth. He is aware that the Greens are the only party that disagrees with the fundamentals of that. We are often alone in arguing that growth-focused policies sometimes fail to achieve progressive distribution in their outcomes. That is why history shows that there can be periods of growth—even booming growth—while poverty increases.

Even if we set aside that argument, the Labour Party's failure to support Scotland's move to more progressive taxation is striking. At first, Labour

gradually accepted it, but without any enthusiasm. More recently, it has actively opposed changes to make income tax more progressive.

Daniel Johnson: Will Mr Harvie take an intervention?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Harvie is in his last minute.

Patrick Harvie: I do not have time to take an intervention.

Just like the Conservatives, Labour often calls for more public spending, but, when the Greens do that, we at least match our calls for spending and investment with serious, deliverable and workable proposals for the tax policies that would be needed to raise the revenue to make the spending commitments possible.

Mr Marra must surely be aware of the problems that Labour has created for itself at the UK level. Ruling out changes to major taxes, alongside Labour's fiscal rules and self-imposed constraints, has left the Chancellor of the Exchequer with a choice of which promises to break. The idea that, without knowing future economic circumstances or UK tax changes, the Scottish Government could rule out tax changes until 2031 is extraordinary.

We need to maintain the commitment to progressive taxation if we want to provide investment in public services and real cost of living support for people.

15:43

Michael Marra: Having listened to the speeches from SNP members, I am more convinced than ever that they simply do not understand the mess that they have made of Scotland's finances, let alone have a plan to fix it. They have wasted more than £7 billion of taxpayers' money on ferries that do not sail, roads that do not get dualled and schools that do not get built. Their incompetent handling of our infrastructure has resulted in £1.3 billion of additional costs and 67 years of delays to vital projects. They have targeted middle earners—our nurses, teachers and police officers—with tax hikes to cover for their incompetence, and they have failed to be honest with the public about the complete and utter mess that they have made of Scotland's public finances.

Jamie Hepburn's contribution was rightly critical of the Liz Truss unfunded budget that crashed the economy. That was £45 billion of unfunded spending. However, would he be at all critical of the £95 billion of spending demands that have come from front-bench members of his party or of the SNP's opposition to the £45 billion of revenue raisers? That is a £140 billion fiscal adjustment. That is the kind of incredible position that the SNP is taking on the public finances.

In contrast, since the general election, Labour has delivered £10.3 billion of additional funding for Scotland. Lord only knows where we would be without it. What we will see next week is that any room for manoeuvre has been eliminated by the SNP's incompetence.

Craig Hoy: Will Michael Marra take an intervention?

Michael Marra: No thank you, sir.

We are all staring down a £1.6 billion black hole as we go into next week's budget. Added to the SNP's wasteful and incompetent approach, its abject failure to grow Scotland's economy, as Daniel Johnson set out, has cost the budget dearly—more than £1 billion this financial year alone, owing to what the Scottish Fiscal Commission has termed the "economic performance gap"—and there are real consequences in relation to public services. Patrick Harvie is not alone in his opposition to economic growth; that is shared by the Government. If we had a Government that was focused on growth, or that at least understood how to grow the economy, Scotland should have that money to spend. After years of chaotic short-term budgets from SNP Governments, they simply cannot be trusted with the public money. For Scotland's sake, we should all hope that this is the last budget that the SNP delivers.

After three consecutive years of emergency cuts budgets under the Government because it could not balance the books, the SNP says that next Tuesday's budget will have all the answers. However, if the SNP cannot be trusted with our money, how can we trust a word that Government ministers say on any of this? Why should we believe them?

In his speech, Daniel Johnson set out quite well the issue of people who earn just over £40,000 and pay a higher marginal tax rate than people who are far richer than them. Members on the SNP and Green benches, including Mr Harvie, should rightly question whether that is progressive.

It will fall to the next Scottish Government to fix the mess that the SNP has made; to spend taxpayers' money wisely; to account for every penny to ensure that the SNP's culture of waste comes to an end once and for all; and to rebuild the public finances, public services, our NHS, our schools and our local services. That is the choice that Scotland can take in May with a Scottish Labour Government.

15:47

Ivan McKee: At a time when public finances are under pressure, it is more important than ever that we engage in constructive, serious, evidence-

based debates about our nation's priorities. I am not sure how much of that we have had this afternoon.

The debate comes down to a clear choice: a responsible approach to tax and spending versus proposals that lack any semblance of clarity or a credible path to funding. I mentioned in my opening remarks that there must be an expectation that any party that proposes major tax cuts must be prepared to explain how they would fund them, but there has been an absolute absence of that this afternoon.

Craig Hoy: We will!

Ivan McKee: The Conservatives are shouting, "We will!", but they have not.

We all remember the turmoil caused by the Liz Truss mini-budget, with its promises of tax cuts without a clear plan to pay for them. Jamie Hepburn reminded us of that. I ask anyone who has taken part in the debate to consider whether they have heard a credible plan from the Conservative party to fund a £1 billion reduction to the Scottish budget next year. Patrick Harvie, among others, highlighted clear examples—in relation to the housing budget, the Scottish child payment and others—that would not even cover that £1 billion cut.

An area of consensus is the recognition of the importance of doing what we can to support household finances at a time when budgets are tight and demands on services continue to grow. The importance of the cost of living situation was a point that Jamie Greene made correctly—I think that it was the only correct point that he made. I do not know whether he was suggesting that it would not cost us £1.7 billion if the Scottish Government cut taxes to the same level as the UK Government, because of course it would. There is also the fact that, although people are leaving Scotland, more people are coming into Scotland from the rest of the UK than are leaving to go down south.

I want to mention Meghan Gallacher's points. There is now some clarity on where the Tories would save that money. They are against free things: free tuition, free prescriptions, free bus travel for 2 million Scots and the free baby box. Getting clarity on that has not been unhelpful.

Daniel Johnson talked about facts, so I have pulled up in front of me the data that I have on the economic growth rate of Scotland versus the UK's, which is the latest available three-month-on-three-month growth rates. In October 2025, Scotland's growth rate was 0.2 per cent, whereas the UK's was -0.1 per cent, but perhaps that was a one-off. However, we then see that, in September last year, Scotland's growth rate was 0.2 per cent and the UK's was 0.1 per cent—the rate in Scotland

was double. The month before, in August 2025, Scotland's growth rate was 0.5 per cent, which was more than double that of the UK's at 0.2 per cent. In July 2025, Scotland's growth rate was 0.5 per cent, which was more than double the UK rate of 0.2 per cent. I also note that Scotland's unemployment rate is consistently significantly lower than that of the rest of the UK.

Daniel Johnson: Will the minister give way?

Ivan McKee: Does Daniel Johnson have some numbers?

Daniel Johnson: The minister asks whether I have some numbers. Has he consulted the Scottish Fiscal Commission? How do the facts that he provided relate to 2016, which is the year that income tax devolution is baselined against?

Ivan McKee: I am talking about 2025 and not 2016. I have given him the numbers. If he is going to come to the debate, he should bring the numbers in order to have a proper debate about them.

Ultimately, governing is about making real decisions and not gestures. It is about balancing the need to raise revenues and fund essential services with the impact that that has on taxpayers and households. We have always been clear about the need for cross-party engagement on tax and spending. Credible and realistic alternatives are always welcome when put forward with honesty and transparency. I hope that we will see some of that in the discussions that we have in the chamber on this year's budget, but I am sad to say that we have not seen much of it this afternoon.

I ask the Parliament to recognise the importance of credibility in the tax proposals that are made by any other party in the chamber, and to support the Government's amendment ahead of our tax and spending plans being set out next week, on 13 January.

15:52

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): This afternoon's debate has shown not only why the tax issue is so critical to the forthcoming Scottish budget—I commend Daniel Johnson and Jamie Greene for their speeches in that regard, because that issue matters—but the clear blue water between the political parties. That is as it should be, because, aside from our general agreement about Adam Smith's principles of taxation, there is a much wider debate to be had about what we expect the tax system to do for our country. That debate could hardly be more important, given the fiscal situation that we find ourselves in.

I say to Mr Hepburn that it would be very helpful if we could all acknowledge the true facts about the extent of the tax burden.

The SNP gives us three defence lines when it comes to its tax policy. First, it tells us that it is progressive. I have to tell Ivan McKee that it is no different from many other tax systems around the world.

Secondly, it tells us that, in return for paying higher taxes in Scotland, we get far more benefits, such as the Scottish child payment, free university tuition and free prescriptions. The trouble is that the total funding for those so-called free benefits—which, of course, are not free at all—is, as the Scottish Fiscal Commission has pointed out time after time, completely unsustainable for Scottish taxpayers, not just now but over the long term. Worse still, the Scottish public sees no improvement in its public services.

The third plea, which we heard again from the First Minister just on Monday, is that Scotland would be far better off if it was independent. That is just plain nonsense, as every credible economic analyst tells us. If Brexit was so bad for the Scottish economy, as the SNP keeps telling us is the case, the SNP should recall its independent adviser, Mark Blyth, saying that independence would be “Brexit times 10”. That neatly sums up what the economic situation would be with independence.

The SNP's huge problem is that its long-term adherence to its current tax policy has not yielded the results that Scotland needs or that the SNP predicted. Higher tax rates have deterred economic growth and have acted as a disincentive to middle and higher earners, and our revenue has been less than it should have been had we had better earnings and employment growth, as happened in the rest of the UK.

Ivan McKee: Will Liz Smith take an intervention?

Liz Smith: Of course I will.

Ivan McKee: I just took the time to read out the past four months of data—and I could have gone on—showing that Scotland had higher economic growth than the rest of the UK. Has Liz Smith not looked at that data?

Liz Smith: Liz Smith has very much looked at that data, but she has looked at it in the round, and she has seen a whole lot of other economic statistics that are not really something that Mr McKee would like to talk about.

It is two decades since John Swinney was Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth, when he made several speeches about his concern over the weak pattern of growth in the Scottish economy. At the Finance and Public Administration Committee in February 2023, he flagged up to me that he thought that economic inactivity is the biggest challenge that the Scottish

economy faces. He told us that he wanted the focus to be on entrepreneurship, supporting business and the SNP's ambition to deliver a smaller and more effective Government for Scotland.

That was then and this is now. With regard to supporting businesses over the past two decades, it has been a dismal picture for the Scottish Government, which has witnessed a progressively higher tax burden being imposed on hard-working Scots over many years without the requisite improvement in public services or widening of the tax base. Unbelievably, three budgets ago, it saw an 8.3 per cent real-terms cut in the economy portfolio and real-terms cuts in the enterprise, trade and investment budgets, and it failed to pass on business rates relief in full.

Last year, the Deputy First Minister said that we should not overworry, as inward investment was strong and Scottish Enterprise was working very hard to stimulate growth in the business sector. In the same speech, however, she implied that the difficult choices of Government had had less success when it came to the skills agenda. I agree with her about that. That issue is writ large in the minds of our colleges and universities, which have for years been grappling with pernicious underfunding and financial models that are simply not fit for purpose.

Regarding John Swinney's promise in 2007 to ensure that Scotland had a smaller and more effective Government, the facts speak for themselves. The tentacles of the state in Scotland, particularly with regard to social policy, have only ever increased. The size of the state has burgeoned through the growth of quangos and a Leviathan and unreformed public sector—and we all know what has happened to the number of civil servants.

The forthcoming budget, just like its immediate predecessors, seems set to be stubbornly fixed on the so-called social contract, which cannot be paid for and which, as every economic forecaster tells us, is the main reason for a deeper fiscal hole, because of the exponential rise in the benefits bill. Ministers know from the Scottish Fiscal Commission, the Auditor General for Scotland, the Fraser of Allander Institute and several other bodies that there is a concern about a lack of consistency in the Scottish Government over fiscal strategy and how it should make its spending commitments.

The Scottish Government lacks fiscal credibility, its tax policies are punitive and disincentivising, and there is no coherent strategy across the Government. It lacks the necessary policies to create the growth that we so desperately seek and to achieve what John Swinney said in 2007 was his overriding objective.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes the debate on lowering bills for Scotland's workers.

Non-domestic Rates

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-20295, in the name of Murdo Fraser, on stopping the Scottish Government's business tax increases.

15:59

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Today, businesses across Scotland face an existential threat, with dramatic increases in rateable values as a result of the recent revaluation. The Scottish Conservatives are taking the issue to the chamber today due to its urgency and the very serious concerns that so many businesses have raised directly with us. This is an issue on which the Scottish Government must act urgently, before we see a whole slew of business failures.

The latest blow comes against a backdrop of difficult trading conditions for businesses across Scotland. The cost burden has risen dramatically due to a combination of inflation, increases in energy prices and wage pressures. Labour's tax on jobs—the increase in employer national insurance contributions—could not have come at a worse time.

The pressures are particularly acute in sectors such as hospitality and retail. In the area that I represent, across Perthshire and Fife, I can visit communities where once-thriving local hotels and pubs now lie empty and boarded up or have "For Sale" or "To Let" signs attached. Some of those businesses have been on the market for years without any significant interest. Some hoteliers tell me that they would bite the hand off anyone who came along with a serious offer to purchase.

The situation is not helped by the prospect of a visitor levy that adds further to the cost base. Those businesses that operate in the provision of self-catering accommodation for visitors are still dealing with the impact of short-term let licensing, with all the additional costs that that brought in. The latest blow is the non-domestic rates revaluation, with an average rise in rateable values of 123 per cent. Some businesses in the hospitality sector are facing rises that approach 400 per cent—a sum that is totally unrealistic.

I am sure that all members in the chamber can quote examples of such rises from local businesses that have contacted them. To give just a few examples from my own mailbag, there is one owner of a self-catering premises in Fife for which the rateable value is increasing from £4,850 to £16,000—nearly quadrupling in total. There is a holiday lodge park in Perthshire that has seen an increase from £12,000 to £26,200; for another, the

amount has nearly doubled, from £21,400 to £49,500.

Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): Rental valuations in the Borders are really worrying for local businesses. Does Murdo Fraser agree that the methodology for those valuations is completely wrong because it is based on the analysis of rents only? That data is so narrow that it is causing an increase of, on average, 150 per cent across the board, which is totally wrong.

Murdo Fraser: I absolutely agree with the point that Rachael Hamilton makes. There are serious issues with the valuation methodology, which relies on a small and questionable rental data set.

Fergus Ewing (Inverness and Nairn) (Ind): On that point, is Mr Fraser aware that the counterpart in England to the assessor is the Valuation Office Agency, and that the VOA has said that the method adopted by the Scottish assessors is not suitable for self-catering properties because they "are usually owned, rather than rented".

Does Mr Fraser understand why the assessors have ignored the approach of their counterparts in England in a way that is plainly wrong?

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): Mr Fraser, I can give you some of that time back.

Murdo Fraser: I am grateful to Mr Ewing for that intervention. It is a mystery why that should be the case about the assessors; perhaps, when he responds to the debate, the minister can provide some clarity.

The practical impact of those increases is that many businesses will struggle to survive. There are many that currently benefit from the small business bonus relief and, therefore, pay nothing. As a result of the increases, they will cross the threshold and face substantial bills for the first time.

I know that the assessors operate independently of the Government and carry out their work free from ministerial direction. However, it is the Scottish Government that sets the rules, guidance and protections, and, therefore, there is a role for the Scottish Government to intervene where there are such dramatic and draconian impacts from a revaluation.

A range of business organisations have spoken out about the threat to small businesses in the hospitality and self-catering sectors. The Federation of Small Businesses, UKHospitality Scotland, the Scottish Hospitality Group and the Association of Scotland's Self-Caterers—to name but a few—have called for Government

intervention and action. Today, we are backing those calls.

What we need from the Scottish Government is an immediate pause on implementation of the 2026 revaluation, to allow time for a review of the methodology, which is clearly not fit for purpose. That would give businesses a much-needed reprieve before any draft values are set in stone.

The bureaucracy needs to be looked at. I was contacted by one business in Lanarkshire with three sites, which has had 790 separate entries in the roll—that is 790 separate returns and 790 separate bills. That is a huge administrative burden for a business, and it shows that the system is broken.

We need meaningful transitional protections to be provided against any excessive bill increases; we need the Scottish Government, in its budget next week, to set a rate poundage that reflects the impact of the rateable value increases; and we need clarity on the future of the small business bonus scheme to ensure that the smallest businesses do not suffer the most.

I have set out the pressing and urgent issues that will affect businesses as a result of revaluation, but there are also broader issues in relation to non-domestic rates that the Government needs to address. In the past two years, retail, hospitality and leisure businesses in England have benefited from reductions in their rates bills that have not been reflected here in Scotland, even though the Scottish Government has had Barnett consequentials that would have allowed it to reflect those reductions. Since 2022-23, the Scottish Government has failed to pass on at least £700 million in business rates relief that has been received through the block grant.

Going forward, those same businesses in England are looking at a permanent 10 per cent reduction in their rates bills, but there are currently no proposals from the SNP Government to do something similar, and that needs to be addressed.

The businesses that I am talking about are at the heart of our communities, not least in rural areas. Many of them will simply be unable to survive the dramatic increases in rates bills that are coming their way. That is why the issue requires the urgent attention of the Scottish ministers. That is the point that is made in our motion, which I commend to the chamber.

I move,

That the Parliament recognises that businesses across Scotland are facing an acute and worsening cost crisis, driven by inflation, energy prices, wage pressures, supply chain disruption and weak economic growth; notes with serious concern the scale of proposed increases in rateable values arising from the 2026 non-domestic rates

revaluation, particularly in the hospitality and self-catering sectors; believes that sharp and unaffordable increases in non-domestic rates now pose an existential threat to business viability, employment, investment and local economic resilience in many parts of Scotland; notes the growing divergence between Scotland's non-domestic rates regime and those operating elsewhere in the United Kingdom, and the competitive disadvantage that this risks creating for Scottish firms; understands that, since 2022-23, the Scottish Government has failed to pass on at least £700 million in business rates relief received through the block grant; calls on the Scottish Government to act urgently to provide certainty and stability by pausing the implementation of the 2026 revaluation, introducing meaningful transitional protections against excessive bill increases, and matching reductions in bills for the retail, hospitality and leisure sectors in England, and affirms that a strong and thriving business base is essential to Scotland's economic recovery, public finances and communities, and that the tax system should support growth rather than accelerate decline.

16:07

The Minister for Public Finance (Ivan McKee): I am pleased to open the debate for the Government. It is a hugely important topic, on which we have had extensive discussions with businesses, not just recently but over a sustained period of time. It is very important that the Government engages with businesses across a range of sectors to understand their perspective on the issue.

The 2025 Scottish budget maintained a competitive non-domestic rates regime, which has meant that Scotland has had the lowest basic property rate in the United Kingdom for the seventh year in a row, and it provided a package of reliefs to support businesses and communities that, this year, are estimated to be worth £730 million. That includes the small business bonus scheme, which is the most generous scheme of its kind anywhere in the UK. As of June 2025, that scheme had awarded relief to 116,000 properties, reducing their non-domestic rates bills by more than £247 million.

Rachael Hamilton: I draw members' attention to my entry in the register of members' interests.

Has the Scottish Government done any analysis of the number of businesses that will be tipped over the small business rate threshold, with the result that the Government will not have that flag to fly any longer?

Ivan McKee: That will depend on the decisions that are taken with regard to the Scottish budget for next year.

We do extensive analysis of the impact of the policies that we take forward. We have estimated that, taken together, around half of the properties in the retail, hospitality and leisure sectors continue to be eligible for 100 per cent small business bonus scheme relief in 2025-26. In

recognition of the challenges that are faced by the hospitality sector, we have offered specific relief for eligible properties in that sector in 2025-26. We also have the most generous relief package for the energy-generating sector in the UK. Among the unique reliefs that are available only in Scotland are the business growth accelerator, fresh start and day nursery reliefs, which are targeted at specific aspects of the Scottish economy.

We recognise that thriving businesses are key to growing the economy, and we engage and communicate regularly with businesses, business representatives and trade organisations on a wide range of issues, including regulation, investment and non-domestic rates.

Fergus Ewing: Will the minister take an intervention?

Ivan McKee: Will I get the time back, Presiding Officer?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I can give you some time back.

Fergus Ewing: I am grateful to the member for taking an intervention. If those increases go ahead, even if they are ameliorated with a modest level of relief, thousands of businesses—perhaps tens of thousands—will close. Has the minister had any assessment from officials of whether the overall revenue would reduce because of the total loss of revenue from tens of thousands of businesses that simply would not be able to continue trading?

Ivan McKee: The Scottish Government does extensive analysis of the impact of all our fiscal policies.

The point about engagement with businesses is hugely important. Our engagement includes the non-domestic rates consultative group, which I chair and which met immediately following the UK budget. The group continues to explore how the non-domestic rates system can best support business growth, investment and competitiveness while acknowledging the important role that income from non-domestic rates plays in funding public services.

Local authorities ultimately retain all their non-domestic—

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

Ivan McKee: I will if I have time.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I can give you some time back, but not all of it.

Stephen Kerr: We are three minutes and 46 seconds into his speech and the minister has not addressed a single one of the concerns that were raised by Murdo Fraser. Is he going to talk about

the concerns that businesses have, or is his speech going to be one long liturgy of self-congratulation?

Ivan McKee: I cannot do right for doing wrong. I have taken three interventions in order to have a proper debate, and I am making progress through my remarks. If members would listen to what I have to say, they might hear the answers to those points.

Local authorities ultimately retain all the non-domestic rates revenue that they raise to help fund the local services that they provide, and the non-domestic rates income is forecast to raise more than £3 billion this year.

The principle of devolution allows the Scottish Government and the Scottish Parliament to take budgetary decisions to meet Scottish priorities.

Stephen Kerr: Still no answer.

Ivan McKee: This is an important point—listen and learn something. Decisions on non-domestic rates policy for 2026-27, including rates and reliefs, are considered in the context of prevailing economic conditions and other Government priorities, as well as affordability. As members well know, those decisions will be set out in the budget on 13 January 2026, so I urge them to contain their excitement until next week, when they will understand the Scottish Government's position and the policies that we are undertaking following our engagement with businesses to address the concerns that have been raised.

I am aware of the concerns regarding increases in rateable values following the publication of the draft valuation roll on 30 November. The final valuation roll for the 2026 revaluation will come into effect on 1 April, based on a tone date of 1 April 2025. The shorter one-year tone date responds to a recommendation of the independent Barclay review of NDR to ensure that rateable values better reflect property market conditions.

The valuation of all domestic properties is a matter for the Scottish assessors, who, as has already been identified, are independent of central and local government. Their independence in carrying out valuation judgments is critical to the credibility of the system. Evidence-based representations to the assessors on draft rateable values can be made—and are being made by many NDR payers—before the roll is finalised in March. I met the assessors before the Christmas recess to talk through that process.

Economic growth is at the heart of the Scottish Government's agenda, and we will continue to take that approach. That is why the economic growth numbers, which were ignored by the Conservatives, show that Scotland has been

growing faster than the rest of the UK during recent months.

We continue to make the right decisions to support businesses in Scotland. The Scottish Government has a strong track record of delivering a generous non-domestic rates package. Decisions on non-domestic rates policy will be set out in next week's budget.

I move amendment S6M-20295.1, to leave out from "are facing" to end and insert:

"have seen increased costs in recent years due to rampant inflation and increased energy costs; notes the reliefs and support that are currently in place on non-domestic rates, and recognises that policy decisions by the Scottish Government on these matters will be set out in the Budget on 13 January 2026."

16:13

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab): I remind members of my entry in the register of members' interests.

What we have just heard from the minister is quite extraordinary. It is extraordinary because the Conservatives have, quite rightly, brought to the chamber an issue that is of huge importance and great concern to many businesses right across the country and in every member's constituency and region.

In the weeks and months leading up to Christmas, many businesses in hospitality, retail and other areas were hit with a bombshell—an increase in rateable value of between 100 and 400 per cent—

Ivan McKee: Will the member take an intervention?

Daniel Johnson: Before I do so, let me finish my point.

That increase will have come as a devastating blow. I know that it is devastating because, more than 10 years ago, I faced exactly the same situation, when my rateable value went up, inexplicably, by 300 per cent. I had to face that down through the appeals process, at a cost of thousands of pounds, despite the fact that, based on the documentation that was provided by the assessor, I could see that the way that my rateable value had been arrived at was entirely synthetic. Businesses that neighboured mine saw no similar increases. The ultimate reason for the assessor putting up our rateable value was that a stairway had been blocked up, changing the entrance to that business. That stairway had been blocked up in 1972, but that revaluation took place in 2010.

That is the system that we are facing. The fact that the minister referenced the revaluation only in passing, and that he noted the concerns, is,

frankly, a slap in the face to many of the businesses that are facing an increase as well.

I am happy to give way now, if the minister wishes to address that point.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Minister, please be brief.

Ivan McKee: I know that the policy of the UK Labour Government is to leak everything in its budget in advance, then publish the full budget online before the speech has even been delivered. [*Interruption.*] However, in the Scottish Parliament, we do things differently. [*Interruption.*] As a Government, we are absolutely not going to release details of—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Minister, could you resume your seat for a second?

I can allow a little latitude of reactions to what is being said. I will not, however, tolerate the shouting down of the person who has the microphone. Minister, please be brief. Mr Johnson, I can give you the time back.

Ivan McKee: We do things differently in this Parliament—of course, with due respect to processes, procedures and the Presiding Officer.

I do not know whether Daniel Johnson is suggesting that, in advance of our budget next week, I should be giving details of what will be in that budget on the policy of NDR. That would be a ridiculous suggestion from someone who is supposed to be a front-bench spokesman for the Labour Party.

Daniel Johnson: Not only has the minister exposed this afternoon the fact that he does not understand how the fiscal framework works, he is now exposing the fact that he does not understand how non-domestic rates work. Either the assessors are independent—and the valuations are arrived at independently—in which case, he can, absolutely, make observations about the scale of the impact, say what analysis has taken place and tell Rachael Hamilton the calculation of the number of small businesses that will be taken out of the small business bonus scheme—or they are not. This is a nonsense.

Acknowledging the concern or the potential impact has nothing to do with the budget—absolutely, I would not expect those details to be released. The minister cannot seriously stand up and say that he can make no further comment other than to acknowledge the concerns. That is a nonsense.

It is true that Scotland has had the least generous business rate support in the UK. A licensed premises in Scotland with an RV of £35,000, entering the new year, faces a loss to the tune of £33,000 in support that it would have

received if it were in England. Likewise, a premises with a rateable value of £75,000 would have received £80,000, cumulatively.

However, it is not just about those individual impacts. Sectorally, it is a form of taxation that is unfair. Retail and hospitality share a burden of 22 per cent of the total rates bill, despite the fact that their economic contribution is just 10 per cent. Hospitality has an 8 per cent share of the rates bill, despite the fact that its overall contribution to the economy is just 4 per cent. That tax is unfair not just with regard to the most recent valuation; it is fundamentally irrational and does not land fairly with businesses.

We often quote the Adam Smith principles of equity, certainty, convenience and economy. Fundamentally, equity means that taxation should be based on the revenue that is raised. It strikes me that, given the contrast in the shares that are contributed by each sector despite their economic contribution, that tax is unfair and overdue for reform. It is exactly that reform—ensuring that sectors pay their fair share—that Labour is committed to introducing when we form the next Government, after May.

I move amendment S6M-20295.2, to insert at end:

“; believes that the current business rates system is not fit for purpose, and calls on the Scottish Government to create a new system that levels the playing field between the high street and online giants, better incentivises investment, tackles empty properties and supports entrepreneurship.”

16:19

Lorna Slater (Lothian) (Green): The Scottish Greens have no shortage of proposals for how our non-domestic rates system could be changed. Right now, we are not using the rates system as well as we could to achieve our social and economic aims. As Greens, we have fundamental disagreements with the Tories' position as set out in their motion, but we hope to get some consensus and agreement that our rates system can and should be made fairer.

Regular revaluation is a feature of the system, not a bug. We have designed a system of proportional taxation, with rates payers paying rates based on the value of their premises. Therefore, accurate valuation is a key part of that system. We need only look at our council tax system to see the distortions that are caused by the failure to undertake revaluations and having people pay taxes based on inaccurate valuations.

Revaluation simply reflects increases in the rateable values of the properties. It is a sound principle that, as the relative wealth of a business

is raised through the effect of inflation on property values, so, too, is its contribution.

The current system disproportionately benefits the owners of premises as opposed to the tenants of premises. That is why we, in the Scottish Greens, support a consolidated system of land value taxation. Land is an incredibly valuable asset and a source of wealth, yet it is not taxed fairly.

Let us take a step back and look at the big picture of the economy as it affects small businesses. Rents, rates and property values are going up, but spending and business output are not. If a small business is not bringing in enough money through the tills to pay the bills, that is much more to do with the economic disaster of Tory Governments and the reduction in disposable incomes, which means that people are simply spending less. That is why many small businesses, especially in retail and hospitality, are struggling. If a business owner is spending all their money on expensive rent, they are not going to the shops or pubs very often. That is the reality.

The Tories' motion seems confused. They are simultaneously asking for a pause on revaluation implementation and for the implementation of transitional reliefs. We have a system of transitional reliefs for revaluations. Would they be satisfied by the implementation of a revaluation that was paired with transitional reliefs? The whole point of the transitional reliefs for revaluations is clear: it is to stop that cliff edge from happening for anybody who may struggle to adapt quickly to their changed expenses. Why, then, do we pay transitional relief to those who have no issue with transitioning?

Under the current regime of transitional reliefs, we are giving public money to big businesses that have no issue with paying the higher rates. It makes no sense for us to be giving tax breaks to multinational companies with millions in turnover. That is money that could be better targeted towards genuine small businesses, especially in retail and hospitality, that are struggling to stay afloat. Surely there can be cross-party consensus on that.

Greens advocate for a fairer rates system. The current system uses sledgehammers to crack nuts, and some of the best, most worthy and most socially beneficial businesses miss out as a result. Our small business rates relief scheme goes to businesses that are anything but small, because we use a totally unfit definition of small. A fairer system, in which big businesses pay more and do so according to their ability to pay, would allow us to target rates relief at those who are most deserving.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I advise members that we have exhausted all the time that we had in hand, so they will have to stick to their speaking time allocations.

I call Jamie Greene, who has up to four minutes.

16:23

Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (LD): Running a small business is not easy. It often involves taking a chance. The rewards can be great, but the risk is great, too.

Small businesses are the backbone of our economy—I hope that, at the very least, that is something that we all agree on. Of course, that means that we also have a collective responsibility to tip the scales as far as we can to support small businesses right across the country. As a different SNP minister said to me, words matter, but so do actions. On this issue, I absolutely agree. Today's debate is urgent, as Mr Fraser says.

Businesses have had it tough since the pandemic. Many simply did not make it. We all know of examples of that. Small businesses are now estimated to be paying an extra £5,000 a year in energy costs. Commercial energy rates are brutal for small businesses. Changes to national insurance cost British businesses an extra £28 billion last year alone. An analysis shows that Scottish employers are the second-hardest hit by that rise, behind only those in London. Now, many will have to wrestle with an enormous hike in non-domestic rates. As has been mentioned, the FSB has warned that some will see their bills soar by 400 per cent. Examples from the Scottish Hospitality Group show that some businesses are looking at increases of more than 550 per cent.

I cannot see how we, as a Parliament, can sit back and say or do nothing on this issue. It absolutely merits time in the chamber today and it is absolutely serious. We all have small businesses in our constituencies and regions that will be affected, and some will close. That is the sad reality if we do nothing.

I have to say that the minister's response to others who have spoken today, that the valuation of a non-domestic property is solely a matter for the independent assessor, is a very technocratic response to what is a moral question for us. It just does not cut it, because we have seen egregious examples of how the reassessment is failing businesses. When many businesses are knocking on our doors and filling up our inboxes, warning about the damage that those rises will do, we have a duty to listen and to act. To just say that we are aware of those concerns does not cut it either, I am afraid—

Ivan McKee: Will the member take an intervention?

Jamie Greene: Not with the time that I have.

The perfect storm of rising bills and costs is proving too much. I will name one example from my region. There is a wee shop, the Pirate and Bluebelle in Gourock, which is closing its doors in just 10 days' time after 12 years in business. I am immensely sad about that. Rising costs and falling footfall have hit it hard. The two people who run it have chucked their life into this small business. That is just one example of many across the country. Woe betide anyone who knocks on doors during the election period and says that they backed doing nothing on the NDR reassessment. They will have to look those businesses in the eye.

Ivan McKee: Will the member take an intervention?

Jamie Greene: It is clear to me that, at the very least, one thing that we can do right now is put a pause on the implementation of the revaluation.

Ivan McKee: If the member is going to talk about that point, he could at least take an intervention on it.

Jamie Greene: The minister will have time in summing up to respond to my points, and, if we had had more time in today's debate, I would have been happy to take interventions.

We need to pause the implementation of the revaluation right now.

I note the many calls from others to cap the increases. There are also many calls to speed up the appeals process. Those calls all deserve serious consideration. Doing nothing is simply not an option—time is something that small businesses do not have. I fear that, for some, this will be the final straw and they will close their doors.

We must give them some breathing space. Let us look them in the eye and say that we, as a Parliament, on a cross-party basis, will give them every opportunity to succeed. I know that we can do that if we work together, but that involves some compromise and constructive conversation. I hope that we can finally have some of that in today's debate.

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

16:27

Roz McCall (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I rise to speak on the motion because I fully agree with my colleague and friend Murdo Fraser that the matter is, indeed, urgent. The Scottish Government must act before we see many

Scottish businesses fail and close, which would further add to the demise of our high streets.

The non-domestic rates issue is not only a double-edged sword; I would go so far as to say that it is a quadruple-edged sword, if that is even a thing. It has not only a detrimental impact on the businesses themselves, but a negative impact on the long-term tax revenue, on the visual in our high streets, on the economy and local jobs, and on the finances of our local authorities. This is such an important issue that I would go so far as to state that the consequences of inaction will have a dire effect right across the country.

Inaction cannot be a position of the Scottish Government. We can bandy around percentages, facts and figures, but I want to talk about how the issue affects real people in real communities. I will highlight a situation that is affecting Crieff in my region. It is in no way an isolated case; the same situation exists in towns, cities and high streets all across Scotland.

Crieff is an amazing rural town with many fantastic attributes, and it is a wonderful place to live. However, for many decades, Crieff has had a trifecta of dilapidated buildings. Three once-beautiful hotel and hospitality establishments were left to decay and rot. Those pubs and hotels were no longer viable. The cost of running the businesses simply outweighed the return, and they were closed. As businesses, they were no longer a going concern. They were unable to be bought by someone new as the business model would not secure a return. The major investment that was needed would be an instant loss, and any chance of providing local employment was a pipe dream. As investments for development, the properties were hindered by listed building status or local authority regulations. Again, the financial cost of regenerating the properties was prohibitive.

For years, those buildings, although they were privately owned, could not be repaired, sold, utilised or regenerated, and they therefore became dilapidated. Slowly eroding, the buildings became a breeding ground for broken glass and buddleia—a vandal's playground and a hazard for police and the local community. They are not only a worry for the local infrastructure but a literal blot on the landscape, bringing down the look of this stunning rural town.

This is the problem that we must recognise: forcing high street businesses into liquidation due to punitive rates increases will only result in more hotel, retail and hospitality businesses closing, while the buildings that they occupy will likely end up having a detrimental effect on the public purse.

That is exactly what happened in Crieff. The situation became an issue for the local authority, with Perth and Kinross Council having to step in to

spend millions of pounds to ensure public safety, support community buyouts and financially back town regeneration, which put additional strain on already stretched public funding. The police were often called to secure the properties or halt people trespassing in the dangerous buildings, or even to move on young people who found breaking windows to be an enjoyable form of target practice.

As I mentioned at the beginning of my remarks, inaction is not an option. If the Scottish Government does not use its position to intervene on the revaluations by reviewing and setting different guidance, creating a pause and changing the rules for the independent assessors, then more businesses will close, there will be more unemployment and more buildings will fall into dilapidation. Further interventions from police and local authorities will be needed.

Another fiscal catastrophe is looming. Running a business in Scotland is hard enough without these draconian revaluations, and we must stand together in the Parliament to support our high streets.

16:31

Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP): Although I do not agree with the framing of the Conservative motion, I thank the Conservatives for raising an important issue. This debate is about ensuring that Scottish businesses have a business taxation regime that supports their sustainability and growth as much as possible.

I will set out some unfortunate omissions from the motion that is before us. We talk about pressure on businesses. Rising business rates are a relevant factor, but the motion does not mention the impact of the UK Government's national insurance increase, which is estimated to take £2 billion out of the Scottish economy next year. That is surely a significant omission, although I note that Murdo Fraser partly mentioned it during his speech. Likewise, staff shortages and high energy prices will be of particular concern to the hospitality sector. Those concerns are omitted from the motion. Absolutely, let us discuss the pressures on our businesses, but it is important to do so in a well-rounded fashion. The motion does not allow us to do that.

I note that the motion suggests that, since 2022-23, a cumulative £700 million in Barnett consequentials deriving from business rates relief in England has not been passed on to businesses in Scotland. I will not get drawn on the numbers that have been cited, but I note that the minister said that, in this year alone, there was £730 million in business rates relief to support businesses.

When we cite such numbers more generally, we should compare apples with apples.

There is a more important point, which is that Barnett consequentials are deliberately not ring fenced. If Barnett ring fencing was how the Scottish budgetary process worked, I doubt that we would have found the resource to abolish prescription charges or tuition fees, or the nearly £500 million that is now spent annually on tackling child poverty in Scotland through the Scottish child payment, which is a core reason why child poverty continues to fall in Scotland while it increases to worryingly record levels in England.

However, let me make a wider point. There is a case to be made for further support for Scottish businesses—of course there is—and I acknowledge the case to be made for the hospitality, leisure and self-catering sectors. Whatever that support will be, it has to be costed and budgeted for. The imminent budget process in the Parliament is the appropriate time to do just that. I hope—this is a sincere plea—that the Conservatives will have a constructive dialogue with the Scottish Government, which is something that has not really happened in recent years.

Murdo Fraser: I wonder whether Bob Doris will take an intervention.

Bob Doris: Will I get the time back, Presiding Officer?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: No.

Bob Doris: Sorry.

Some 92 per cent of hospitality premises benefit from non-domestic rates relief of 40 per cent and are supported by the Scottish Government, but I appreciate that many would like to see the Scottish Government go further. As with any rates revaluation, there will be winners and losers. I am not surprised to hear suggestions for transitional protections and I am sympathetic to those suggestions. However, at the heart of this debate there is an opportunity to get agreement for broad support for businesses, if not a consensus on the specifics. I suspect that the Government will be constrained in providing detail about what will be in its budget next week.

I will make some suggestions, to float some ideas. I was very interested in Rachael Hamilton's comment about rates focusing on rents. That is a reasonable point, but I would also point out that a blanket approach to rates relief simply means that very profitable businesses get rates relief that they just do not need. There is a wider debate about targeting rates relief to those need it the most and applying broad rates relief across the board. We have to take that into account.

Finally, there is the process itself. Initial draft rates proposals were made last November, and

valuation officers are being consulted until February this year. However, people cannot appeal their rates revaluation until April, which will be after they have started paying the new rate. We must look at that and front load an appeals process so that people can make a proposal—that is, start an appeal—before they start paying that higher amount.

Those are just some suggestions, and I look forward to learning the details of the Scottish Government's support for business in next week's budget.

16:35

Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con): We are debating a crucial issue this afternoon, and I believe that every MSP from every part of the country, representing every political party, will have received concerning emails from businesses and constituents who are worried about the rates that they are facing in April.

However, the debate is not being held in Government time. The Government and the SNP are not saying that this is an issue and that we are going to debate it; rather, it is being dealt with in Opposition time. It should not take the Conservatives to bring forward this debate in order to get responses from the Government, because this is such a serious issue.

When the issue first hit our mailboxes, the Government should have responded. The issue was raised at First Minister's questions. There is clearly an issue here, but we are having a debate and a vote on it now only because the Conservatives have used their debating time to bring it to the chamber.

I must say that I was, frankly, appalled with the minister's contribution, which, as Stephen Kerr said, was six and a half minutes of nothing—it was absolute waffle on an issue of such importance. What was even more galling was him sniggering, smirking and laughing when it was put to him that he had not addressed the points.

Ivan McKee rose—

Douglas Ross: I will give way in a second. How does he genuinely think that the businesses that are appealing to their representatives in this Parliament to raise the issue with the Government will feel when they become aware that the responsible minister considers it to be a laughing matter?

Ivan McKee: It is not a laughing matter. I was very clear about the fact that we are engaging extensively with businesses and business organisations on the issue. What is ridiculous—frankly, it is political point scoring—is members suggesting that the Government is not taking the

issue seriously and is not doing work on it. We absolutely are.

I have got the—[*Interruption.*] I will tell the member what I have been doing. I met the NDR consultative group on 22 November 2025—[*Ivan McKee has corrected this contribution. See end of report.*]

Douglas Ross: Is this an intervention?

Ivan McKee: I met the airport sector—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: No, minister, you will have to use that material in your—

Ivan McKee: —and the Association of Scotland's Self-Caterers on 17 December—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Douglas Ross.

Douglas Ross: There is a ruling from the chair, Mr McKee. Sit down.

My time has been used up by a minister who had six and a half minutes to make those points. He has a summing-up speech to make those points. He also had an opportunity for weeks and, potentially, months to take the debate to the chamber, but he chose not to.

When businesses are urging us to get answers from the Government, we will use our time to get them, because those businesses are making very strong representation to MSPs across Parliament.

I want to tell the minister about some of the representations that I have received. Someone I met on the agritourism future farming programme told me in an email—which went to a number of colleagues—about their rateable value going from £3,300 to £9,000. What makes the situation even more concerning is that their rateable value, because of the circumstances in their business, was decided only last August. At the end of November, the rateable value increased by 170 per cent. However, their profits have not gone up by 170 per cent.

Richard Lochhead, the Minister for Business and Employment, is sitting on the front bench. I am not sure whether he is responding to the debate today, but he is certainly present. He will have received many of the same emails that I have received, including one just two days ago, which I noticed he was copied into. It is from a small campsite in Moray. It already had a high rateable value of £11,000, but that is going up to £30,000. The business is saying that

“A rateable value of £30,000 will unfortunately make the business completely unviable and will need to look at closing”.

That is what is going to happen—in Government ministers' constituencies, businesses will go bust. We are making a very simple plea: do not brush

that off, Ivan McKee, as a laughing matter. Treat it seriously. We need answers and resolution, otherwise businesses will be unable to continue and will fold. That would be disastrous for Scotland's economy.

16:39

Davy Russell (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (Lab): I agree with Mr Fraser's assessment that businesses are facing a long list of rising costs, and they are definitely not helped by the Scottish Government's current position of not passing on rate reliefs in the current financial year. Businesses are now threatened by the proposed revaluation from April.

I am sure that we are all aware of the declining and struggling town centres and empty high street shops. Constituents are complaining to me that the high street shops and town centres have lost their mojo as a result of underinvestment and neglect. The decline in town centres is further pushing people to drop the habit of spending time and money in town centres, which accelerates that decline and contributes to the silent epidemic of isolation and rising antisocial behaviour among young people.

From an economic perspective, between 2015 and 2025, more than 900 businesses closed, and nearly 25,000 jobs were lost as a result. At this time, we need more growth, greater investment, more entrepreneurial spirit and a helping hand from the Government. In addition, the retail and hospitality sectors present important opportunities for young people who are looking to take their first steps into the workforce. Without those opportunities, young people will suffer.

In the current financial year, the SNP has failed to pass on the full business relief that is offered in England and Wales, making it more difficult for Scottish businesses to compete with those south of the border. The proposed revaluation from April could be the final, deadly blow to many Scottish businesses. Members might ask what the SNP Government is going to do about that impending doom. Like the old Roman emperor Nero, it is going to fiddle while Scottish businesses and the economy burn.

The UK Labour Government has delivered an additional £10.3 billion in funding to the Scottish Government, so there is no need to go after small businesses. If the SNP Government could get over its addiction to wasting public funds, it would not need to shamefully plunder high street businesses in this way to cover its own failings. I heartily support Mr Fraser's motion and Daniel Johnson's amendment. We must face the fact that the current system is not in the interests of businesses or the public and that wholesale reform is required

to help, not hinder, hospitality and retail businesses to return Scotland's high streets to what our constituents want and deserve.

16:43

Paul McLennan (East Lothian) (SNP): I am glad to engage in the debate. My background is with the Bank of Scotland—I worked in business and corporate banking for more than 20 years, and for that period I engaged with businesses on a daily basis. What businesses need more than anything is certainty.

The Scottish budget in 2025-26 protects the small business bonus scheme, which is the most generous small business relief in the UK. I know that, over a number of years, it has helped many businesses in every part of East Lothian. We have talked about the proposed revaluation, which will have an impact on businesses in East Lothian. I have had businesses contact me on that point, and I would be keen to hear the minister talk about it, although he has talked about engagement on the issue.

Tourism and hospitality is a major sector in East Lothian and in other parts of Scotland, but let us try to have a balanced and nuanced discussion and debate about the issue. Economic growth is at the heart of the SNP Government's agenda. I know from discussions with the minister, the Deputy First Minister and the First Minister that they engage closely with business to drive economic growth in Scotland and to support consumers and local businesses.

On town centres, as we have heard, the Scottish Government supports funding for the Scotland loves local campaign, and more than £3 million has gone in to address retail crime, which we have heard about in the chamber. The Government also has the most generous business rates relief scheme in the UK. Of course, Scotland's competitive non-domestic rates regime in 2025-26 includes a freeze on the basic property rate, which delivers the lowest rate in the UK. As Bob Doris mentioned, for 95 per cent of non-domestic properties in Scotland, that maintains the lowest rate in the UK.

I want to raise another point that was mentioned. I am aware of an email that was sent to all of us and to ministers from the Scottish Retail Consortium and the business improvement districts in Scotland. In the press release, the BIDs state:

"Our ambition is for Scotland's cities and towns to continue to be great places to do business."

The key word is "continue". They state:

"Our cities and towns are the backbone of regional economies and communities across Scotland. The everyday economy drives footfall and provides local and

flexible jobs and career opportunities for hundreds of thousands of Scots."

I know that the minister has engaged with the Scottish Retail Consortium, as I and many others in the chamber have.

The BIDs add:

"Creating the best investment conditions for retail, hospitality and leisure premises is vital to keeping these businesses attractive to customers".

They are asking for delivery on

"pledges about business rates competitiveness"

and support for

"commercial investment and growth in our city and town centres and regional economies."

I am sure that the minister will address those points when it comes to the budget next week.

One key thing is that budgets are about priorities and achieving balance, which we need to have a nuanced debate on. We need to deliver a fairer and more progressive tax system, which is about raising additional revenue to invest in public services. In debate after debate, we have heard all the demands in the chamber. We need to protect the NHS, grow our economy and lift children out of poverty.

I will not take any lessons from the Tories on household bills, for example, given that they dragged Scotland out of the European Union against our will, made us poorer and reduced the funding that is available for public services. Nor will I take lessons from Labour, given its employer national insurance contributions tax on jobs.

Scotland's economy outperformed that of the UK as a whole in 2024, when significant growth was recorded in Scotland. For the 10th year in a row, Scotland is the top destination in the UK for foreign direct investment outside London. Nearly one in six inward investment projects in the UK are in Scotland. A new Confederation of British Industry report shows that business investment in Scotland has risen to a 20-year high. We cannot get away from the fact that that contrasts with the fall in business investment across the United Kingdom.

The success of Scotland's economy has come despite the UK Government's tax on jobs and its low-growth model, and that is alongside the fact that unemployment in Scotland is lower than that in the rest of the UK. Scotland has a strong record on business growth and will continue to do so in the future.

16:47

Fergus Ewing (Inverness and Nairn) (Ind): In February 2020, I became tourism minister for the

second time, expecting a fairly quiet period until the 2021 election. A few weeks later, the Covid lockdown occurred. Many of us will remember that time, when businesses, particularly in hospitality and tourism, went from thriving and optimistic—they were usually led by people with cheerful, pleasant, outgoing personalities—to having no business at all. They went from profitability to a cliff edge. Many of them were levered and had debt, and many have suffered enormously. I know that some business owners passed away because of the stress.

I spent a rather busy 12 months accepting every request for conference call meetings, and I heard tales of woe that I, frankly, never expected to hear again. The businesses are still recovering from that nightmare, yet little credence is ever given to that. However, they now face a second nightmare, which Mr Fraser has set out. The Government should debate the issue on its own time if it really cared about the Parliament coming up with solutions. We should have had more time to debate the detail.

The self-catering assessment for business rates has been carried out by Heather Honeyman, chair of the Scottish Assessors Association, on the basis of rental values. The VOA, the SAA's counterpart in England, says that rental values are "not suitable for self-catering holiday homes. Properties are usually owned, rather than rented on an annual basis".

In a response to a letter from me, Heather Honeyman said:

"Rental evidence would be where there is a landlord and a tenant relationship and legal obligations on the parties."

There are no obligations like that, apart from a few hundred out of 17,000. In England, assessors say that that method is wrong; in Scotland, the assessor maintains that it is correct. Neither Ms Honeyman nor anyone in her department has answered why on earth a methodology has been chosen that has in writing been entirely ruled out in England, which Ms Honeyman must surely be aware of. I call on her to come clean. Did she discuss the matter with the VOA? She should publish all the correspondence. Did she consult or inform Scottish ministers at all, or were they in the dark? I know that Mr McKee, as a former businessman, cares for business, and I take him seriously.

The valuations are just garbage—utter garbage. However, more than that, as we have heard from many members, the consequences are that people around Scotland are now writing to us to say that their health has suffered, that they are mentally unbalanced and that their families are suffering. I do not want to start being alarmist about this, but I am seriously worried about what happens when human beings who are working

hard in society—many of them in relatively modest businesses—feel that there is simply no way out, that their business must close and that their life has been ruined by a Government that says that it cares for them.

It is not good enough, minister. You have the powers to intervene. I do not have the time to specify them, but Fiona Campbell already has, as have many others. I hope to God that you use them.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, Mr Ewing. Always speak through the chair.

We move to wind-up speeches.

16:51

Lorna Slater: The Scottish Greens will support the Government amendment. Regarding the Labour amendment, we agree that business rates are "not fit for purpose", so the overall point is valid and one that we can support, but the amendment combines two separate issues in a rather awkward way.

Reform of property tax has been a long-standing priority for the Scottish Greens, and we have made the case for a unified system between residential and non-residential property taxes. Our preference would be for the system to be based on land values. In essence, non-domestic rates and council tax are still, however brokenly, property taxes, and they should remain so.

Labour has occasionally seemed open to that argument, which is welcome, but it has never followed through with active support for a reformed property tax. It was disappointing that Labour abstained on Ross Greer's proposals to tax vacant and derelict land during the debate on the Land Reform (Scotland) Bill, because that would have been a step in the right direction towards making the tax landscape fairer and incentivising the good use of assets as well as investment. Labour had a chance to do something in that space, but it chose to sit on its hands.

We should not be afraid of divergence from England. Doing things differently is good, and that is the point of devolution. We should be fine tuning rates based on what is done in the premises. Decisions about domestic rates can be used to implement wider social and environmental policies. For example, why do we give rates relief to businesses that use unfair labour practices? We can make different choices so that we can provide a better life for our people. For example, we provide the Scottish child payment, free bus travel, free school meals and so on. The Scottish Greens want to bring back the public health supplement and have big supermarkets pay more in rates in

recognition of the harms and costs of the products that they sell, such as alcohol.

The question of how to tax economic activity that does not rely on the occupation of property, such as online retail, can be dealt with only through other parts of the tax system, particularly those that are currently reserved. The Scottish Greens want that to happen. If Labour members want that, too, they need to speak to their colleagues in the UK Government at Westminster. They have the power to reform the system by using reserved powers or, better still, they could hand the powers to Scotland so that we can use them to level the playing field and make the system fairer.

16:54

Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): I think that there has been near unanimity that this is an issue of huge concern, and it is right that we are debating it. In his closing speech, the minister might read out his diary and set out the meetings that he has had in recent weeks, but the tenor of his initial contribution led some of us to despair. We must ensure that the minister recognises reality. Nobody is seeking for him to pre-empt the budget, but Parliament is seeking for him to recognise the reality that businesses are facing. There have been increases of up to 400 per cent through the revaluation in some sectors, and businesses risk losing access to reliefs, as members across the chamber have set out.

Businesses might have experienced an increase in turnover since the last revaluation, but other costs have increased. For example, since 2019, pubs have had an 86 per cent increase in utility costs and a 58 per cent increase in wages and salaries, resulting in a 54 per cent decrease in net income. According to UKHospitality, the revaluation will cost the Scottish hospitality sector £69 million in 2026-27.

Critically, the Scottish Government has also continually refused to pass on rates relief as a result of relief that has taken place in England. Scotland has the least generous business rates support in the UK. A licensed premises in Scotland with a rateable value of £35,000 is entering the new year with a cumulative support deficit of £33,000 versus a premises with the same rateable value in England. For a premises with a rateable value of £75,000, the deficit is around £80,000, and for a premises with a rateable value of £150,000, the deficit is £165,000. Those are the results of decisions that the Government has made on reliefs. We are not seeking to hear the budget today, but we are looking for some recognition of that.

The overall case for proper reform has now become overwhelming, as colleagues across the chamber have set out. The principal effect of non-domestic rates in Scotland is that the economic activity in our country is artificially skewed away from property-intensive production. We have a complex system of rates, bands and specific reliefs that creates administrative burdens and distorts business behaviour and investment. Although targeted business rate reductions such as the freeze for properties under £51,000 provide immediate support to occupiers, they might be less effective in the long term and they often result in higher commercial rents.

Local authorities have no incentive to encourage business as income from NDR is centralised, and businesses have less incentive to invest in properties, as their rateable value will likely increase. Davy Russell set that out very well in relation to his Hamilton constituency—I must say that, after last year, I know an awful lot about Hamilton's high street and the challenges that it faces. Davy Russell was right to say that, when our town and city centres become hollowed out, it has both economic and social consequences.

There is no doubt that the Scottish non-domestic rates system, in common with much of the tax system under the SNP Government, is a mess. The reason for that is quite clear: fundamentally, the SNP Government is disinterested in meaningful reform of our tax system. Whether on non-domestic rates, council tax or income tax, it prevaricates, obfuscates and sits on its hands, hoping that everyone else will get lost in the sea of consultations and working groups that are established with a fanfare and quietly closed with nothing done.

It is abundantly clear that the current business rates system is not fit for purpose. It is dysfunctional. A Scottish Labour Government will design a new system in true partnership with business to better incentivise investment, tackle empty properties and support entrepreneurship.

16:58

The Minister for Business and Employment (Richard Lochhead): I am not sure that the debate has been the balanced and nuanced debate that Paul McLennan said that he hoped for, but serious issues have been mentioned during it.

Although the motion includes areas on which we might disagree, we can all agree on the fact that many businesses in Scotland have faced tough trading conditions in recent years, with rising inflation, rocketing energy prices and supply chain disruption, as the motion outlines. Many of those issues are reserved to the UK Government. I gently remind Parliament that the party that lodged

the motion was in power for 14 years up to 2024 and it oversaw many of those pressures. Since then, we have had policies such as the hike in employer national insurance contributions, which the Labour Government introduced after it took over in 2024. All of that is happening against the backdrop of global uncertainty and international events that have impacted on trade, business and profitability, such as tariffs and Brexit, as Jamie Greene, Bob Doris and Fergus Ewing outlined.

Murdo Fraser: I wonder whether the minister will get round to addressing the key point in the debate, which is the issue of revaluations. I have heard everything that he and his colleague have said about the budget, which I am looking forward to, but that is not the issue here. The issue is the methodology that is being used to calculate revaluations. In some cases, the valuations are three or four times higher than previously, and that will potentially put businesses to the wall as a consequence. What is the Government doing about that issue?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Minister, I will give you the time back for the intervention.

Richard Lochhead: Thank you.

I was, of course, referring to issues that are in Murdo Fraser's motion. That is why I was responding on the pressures that are facing the business community.

As the minister said in his opening remarks, thriving businesses are key to growing our economy in Scotland. We are lucky that our economy is performing well on many indicators, particularly in comparison with the rest of the UK. One reason for that is that our business community is resilient. To give one example, I note that, in the four quarters leading up to Q3 of 2025, there was an increase in the number of businesses in the accommodation and food services sector in Scotland, with the number of births outweighing deaths.

As a Government, we take businesses' views on business rates and other issues very seriously. Over recent weeks, the minister, Ivan McKee, has had numerous meetings on rates revaluations, so any suggestion that we are not engaging with the business community is complete nonsense.

Daniel Johnson rose—

Richard Lochhead: I will take a brief intervention from Daniel Johnson if I will get the time back.

Daniel Johnson: The minister is right that many of those businesses are resilient, but they have not experienced a 400 per cent increase in their income, which is the potential increase in their bill. Will the minister at least acknowledge that disparity?

Richard Lochhead: I will soon have served in this Parliament for 27 years. I have been through various rates revaluations and have discussed those issues and percentages such as those several times. As others have mentioned, it is important that any conscientious MSP advises constituents who are facing those hikes to make representations before the roll is published in March and, going forward, to use the appeal system that is in place.

Stephen Kerr: Is that it? Is that an answer?

Richard Lochhead: The budget is coming up next week. Some members have asked why we are not bringing forward our own debates on the subject. It is because such issues are discussed when the Scottish Government presents its budget to the Parliament. As normal, analysis of the measures in the Scottish budget will be published on the day of the budget. That is normal practice and it will happen again.

We have a competitive rates regime in Scotland at the moment. The 40 per cent rates relief for the hospitality sector this year was warmly welcomed by the sector, as were the zero rates for island businesses and hospitality, for those that qualify. A number of measures have been taken. As the minister outlined in his opening remarks, there are more than £700 million of reliefs in the system at the moment.

Stephen Kerr: That is self-aggrandizement.

Richard Lochhead: We will listen very closely, but I urge members to look at the timetable for the revaluation and to advise the businesses in their constituencies of the timetable for making representations before the valuation roll is published in March and of the appeal system that will be in place thereafter. I advise members with specific cases—I have cases in my constituency, and a few other members will have cases in their constituencies—to adhere to that and to give that advice to those businesses. In the meantime, I assure the Parliament that we are listening and acting.

Stephen Kerr: No, you are not. You are not acting.

Richard Lochhead: We are going to support a thriving business community in Scotland. We will deliver our budget next week, which will support that. I commend the Scottish Government's amendment to the Parliament.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Kerr, you have made a number of interventions from a sedentary position. I now invite you to legitimately wind up the debate.

17:03

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): Winding up—that is what I do well, so I am glad to take the opportunity. [Laughter.]

First, the speech that Richard Lochhead just made was absolutely disgraceful. As Ivan McKee did, he hid behind the budget, saying, in effect, “We can’t talk about this. There’s a budget.” What is the best thing that the ministers, with combined voice, can tell the business community of Scotland? “Make representations.” People have made representations. That is why the Scottish Conservatives have listened and have brought this subject to the chamber today. We are the party that is listening to business, because we are, unashamedly, the party of business. But what do we hear from the SNP? “Tell them about the appeals process.” Really? That is the best that the Scottish ministers can come up with in the face of a debate on the subject of NDR revaluation.

People often say that the problem with the Scottish Parliament is that there is too much business illiteracy. Frankly, people could be forgiven for agreeing with that, given some of the things that have been said in this afternoon’s debate. The problem is that too many of us have never run a business. We do not know what it is like to get up in the morning and to have the responsibility not only of running a business but of employing people and keeping them in employment.

Daniel Johnson: I wonder whether the member might agree with me that it was somewhat odd for the minister to reply that the issues that we are debating always come up when the revaluation takes place. Does that not suggest that there might be something fundamentally wrong with the revaluation process?

Stephen Kerr: That is absolutely right.

What is the slogan of the SNP Government that has been in power for the past 19 or 20 years? “We’ll take no lessons.” That is what ministers often say from their front bench: “We’ll take no lessons.” They learn nothing from repeated disasters and from putting the Scottish business community through the wringer periodically. They learn nothing.

I expect better from Ivan McKee, because I think that he understands something about business. [Interruption.] Members dismiss that. Perhaps he does not know anything about business—I stand corrected. On the basis of his non-speech in this debate, we could be forgiven for thinking that he knows nothing about business.

We need to do something about our collective business literacy. Until you have run a business and hired people—and, sadly, until you have had

to make people redundant in order to meet a cost base—and until you have done the hard yards for what makes the economy tick and you understand something about it, then when you talk about some of the things that we have been debating, it is just at the level of theory, and it is at that level of theory that we are doing damage to the confidence of the Scottish business community.

Fergus Ewing: Does Mr Kerr agree that the Scottish Government has statutory powers to intervene and take action to order assessors what to do—that those powers have been conferred on the Government and it should use them rather than pretend that it cannot do anything?

Stephen Kerr: That is absolutely right. We have rehearsed the arguments really well, on the side of those of us who want the Government to take some positive action. Indeed, my colleague Murdo Fraser set out—as does his motion—specific actions that the Scottish Government could commit to, because they are general in tone; they are not specific.

There is no compromise of any kind of secrecy around the budget—at least, not until at least Tuesday morning, when we buy our copy of the *Daily Record*, where we will, no doubt, read most of the budget speech already leaked to it, which would be consistent with the pattern of this Government. Ministers take no lessons, but they love to give Paul Hutcheon whatever Paul Hutcheon asks them for, so that John Swinney can continue with his weekly column in the *Daily Record*.

As colleagues have made absolutely clear, what we have heard from the Government in response to some very carefully argued points by those of us who are in favour of Murdo Fraser’s motion is SNP ministers and members carefully deflecting or simply ignoring the issue—as ever. The reality is that businesses across Scotland are facing a genuine cost of business emergency, and the rates revaluation is just another layer of their concern.

In the spirit of trying to build a coalition around Murdo Fraser’s motion, I will resist the urge to say too much about Labour’s spokesman talking about how Labour has some kind of sympathy for business when it did more damage to the business communities of this country in a single stroke, in Rachel Reeves’s first budget, than any chancellor did for as long as I can remember—[Interruption.]

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

Stephen Kerr: Added to that is the blind ignorance of SNP ministers in relation to this matter.

Very sadly, I am running out of time, although I have so much more to say. These debates need to be much longer, just for me to be able to wind up fully. I will say this, however. If we think that we can go on abusing Scotland's businesses, particularly small and medium-sized enterprises, and if we carry on thinking of them as some kind of fatted calf that, come every budget, will be slaughtered to justify some extraction of additional revenues for the public purse, we are making a huge mistake. If we do that, we are in danger of killing the goose that lays the golden egg. We should not assume that those businesses will always be there to open of a morning. We should not assume that they will always be there to employ people. We should not make those assumptions. Our economy is a precarious thing—it is a living thing. We cannot treat it the way that this Government treats it.

A strong business base underpins employment. As Roz McCall said, it underpins community. It underpins public finances, too. A tax system that accelerates decline of the business base instead of supporting recovery represents not only bad economics but a fundamental failure of government.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes the debate on stopping the Scottish Government's business tax increases.

Business Motions

17:10

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item of business is consideration of business motion S6M-20313, in the name of Graeme Dey, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, setting out a business programme.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees—

(a) the following programme of business—

Tuesday 13 January 2026

2.00 pm Time for Reflection

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Topical Questions

followed by Ministerial Statement: Scottish Budget 2026-27

followed by Stage 1 Debate: Crofting and Scottish Land Court Bill

followed by Financial Resolution: Crofting and Scottish Land Court Bill

followed by Committee Announcements

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Wednesday 14 January 2026

2.00 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.00 pm Portfolio Questions:
Deputy First Minister Responsibilities,
Economy and Gaelic;
Finance and Local Government

followed by Ministerial Statement: A9 Dualling -
Programme for 2035 Completion

followed by Stage 1 Debate: Children (Care, Care
Experience and Services Planning)
(Scotland) Bill

followed by Financial Resolution: Children (Care,
Care Experience and Services Planning)
(Scotland) Bill

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.30 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Thursday 15 January 2026

11.40 am Parliamentary Bureau Motions

11.40 am General Questions

12.00 pm First Minister's Questions

followed by Members' Business

2.30 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions
 2.30 pm Portfolio Questions:
 Climate Action and Energy, and
 Transport
followed by Stage 3 Proceedings: UEFA European
 Championship (Scotland) Bill
followed by Business Motions
followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions
 4.10 pm Decision Time

Tuesday 20 January 2026

2.00 pm Time for Reflection
followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions
followed by Topical Questions
followed by Stage 3 Proceedings: Tertiary Education
 and Training (Funding and Governance)
 (Scotland) Bill
followed by Committee Announcements
followed by Business Motions
followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions
 9.00 pm Decision Time
followed by Members' Business

Wednesday 21 January 2026

2.00 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions
 2.00 pm Portfolio Questions:
 Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands;
 Health and Social Care
followed by Finance and Public Administration
 Committee Debate: Scottish Budget
 2026-27
followed by Business Motions
followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions
 5.00 pm Decision Time
followed by Members' Business

Thursday 22 January 2026

11.40 am Parliamentary Bureau Motions
 11.40 am General Questions
 12.00 pm First Minister's Questions
followed by Members' Business
 2.00 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions
 2.00 pm Portfolio Questions:
 Social Justice and Housing
followed by Stage 1 Debate: Wellbeing and
 Sustainable Development (Scotland) Bill
followed by Stage 1 Debate: Digital Assets
 (Scotland) Bill
followed by Business Motions
followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions
 5.00 pm Decision Time

(b) that, for the purposes of Portfolio Questions in the week
 beginning 12 January 2026, in rule 13.7.3, after the word

"except" the words "to the extent to which the Presiding Officer considers that the questions are on the same or similar subject matter or" are inserted.—[Graeme Dey]

Motion agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next item of business is consideration of business motion S6M-20314, in the name of Graeme Dey, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, on timetabling of a bill at stage 1.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees that consideration of the Non-surgical Procedures and Functions of Medical Reviewers (Scotland) Bill at stage 1 be completed by 6 February 2026.—[Graeme Dey]

Motion agreed to.

Decision Time

17:11

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

The first question is, that amendment S6M-20294.2, in the name of Ivan McKee, which seeks to amend motion S6M-20294, in the name of Craig Hoy, on lowering bills for Scotland's workers, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division. There will be a short suspension to allow members to access the digital voting system.

17:12

Meeting suspended.

17:14

On resuming—

The Presiding Officer: We move to the vote on amendment S6M-20294.2, in the name of Ivan McKee. Members should cast their votes now.

The vote is closed.

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs (Angela Constance): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I would have voted yes.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, Ms Constance. We will ensure that that is recorded.

For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Highland) (SNP)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Choudhury, Foysol (Lothian) (Ind)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don-Innes, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)

Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAllan, Mairi (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Ruskill, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Russell, Davy (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (Lab)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP) [Proxy vote cast by Fulton MacGregor]
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP) [Proxy vote cast by Jackie Dunbar]
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

Against

Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Eagle, Tim (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (Ind)
 Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
 Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)

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

Abstentions

Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Ind)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (LD)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on amendment S6M-20294.2, in the name of Ivan McKee, is: For 82, Against 28, Abstentions 6.

Amendment agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S6M-20294.1, in the name of Michael Marra, which seeks to amend motion S6M-20294, in the name of Craig Hoy, on lowering bills for Scotland's workers, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Choudhury, Foysol (Lothian) (Ind)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Russell, Davy (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (Lab)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)

Against

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Ind)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)

Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don-Innes, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Eagle, Tim (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (LD)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)

Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Reform)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP) [Proxy vote cast by Fulton MacGregor]
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP) [Proxy vote cast by Jackie Dunbar]
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

Abstentions

Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (Ind)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on amendment S6M-20294.1, in the name of Michael Marra, is: For 19, Against 97, Abstentions 1.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S6M-20294, in the name of Craig Hoy, on lowering bills for Scotland's workers, as amended, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Choudhury, Foysol (Lothian) (Ind)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don-Innes, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)

Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAllan, Mairi (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Ruskill, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Russell, Davy (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (Lab)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP) [Proxy vote cast by Fulton MacGregor]
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP) [Proxy vote cast by Jackie Dunbar]
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

Against

Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Eagle, Tim (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
 Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)

Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Reform)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)

Abstentions

Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Ind)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (LD)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on motion S6M-20294, in the name of Craig Hoy, on lowering bills for Scotland's workers, as amended, is: For 81, Against 29, Abstentions 6.

Motion, as amended, agreed to,

That the Parliament calls on the Scottish Government to respect Parliament by outlining its tax policy when it publishes its Budget on 13 January 2026, and ensure that the policy is progressive, fair to the people of Scotland, and supports vital public services like Scotland's NHS, schools, and blue light services.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S6M-20295.1, in the name of Ivan McKee, which seeks to amend motion S6M-20295, in the name of Murdo Fraser, on stopping the Scottish Government's business tax increases, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don-Innes, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)

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

Against

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Choudhury, Foysol (Lothian) (Ind)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Eagle, Tim (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (Ind)
 Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)

Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Russell, Davy (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (Lab)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Reform)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)

Abstentions

Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Ind)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (LD)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on amendment S6M-20295.1, in the name of Ivan McKee, is: For 64, Against 47, Abstentions 6.

Amendment agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S6M-20295.2, in the name of Daniel Johnson, which seeks to amend motion S6M-20295, in the name of Murdo Fraser, on stopping the Scottish Government's business tax increases, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

The vote is closed.

Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I would like to vote yes.

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

For

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Ind)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Choudhury, Foysol (Lothian) (Ind)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (Ind)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (LD)

Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Russell, Davy (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (Lab)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Reform)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)

Against

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don-Innes, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAllan, Máiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP) [Proxy vote cast by Fulton MacGregor]
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)

Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP) [Proxy vote cast by Jackie Dunbar]
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

Abstentions

Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Eagle, Tim (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green)
 McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on amendment S6M-20295.2, in the name of Daniel Johnson, is: For 27, Against 58, Abstentions 32.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The final question is, that motion S6M-20295, in the name of Murdo Fraser, on stopping the Scottish Government's business tax increases, as amended, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

The vote is closed.

Pauline McNeill: On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I would have voted no.

The Presiding Officer: I can confirm that your vote will be recorded, Ms McNeill.

For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)

Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don-Innes, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAllan, Mairi (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP) [Proxy vote cast by Fulton MacGregor]
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP) [Proxy vote cast by Jackie Dunbar]
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

Against

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)

Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Choudhury, Foysol (Lothian) (Ind)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Eagle, Tim (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (Ind)
 Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Russell, Davy (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (Lab)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Reform)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)

Abstentions

Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Ind)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (LD)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on motion S6M-20295, in the name of Murdo Fraser, on stopping the Scottish Government's business tax increases, as amended, is: For 64, Against 47, Abstentions 6.

Motion, as amended, agreed to,

That the Parliament recognises that businesses across Scotland have seen increased costs in recent years due to rampant inflation and increased energy costs; notes the reliefs and support that are currently in place on non-domestic rates, and recognises that policy decisions by the Scottish Government on these matters will be set out in the Budget on 13 January 2026.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes decision time.

Flood Defences

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The final item of business is a members' business debate on motion S6M-20235, in the name of Craig Hoy, on Scotland's flood defences. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament notes proposals for a number of flood defence schemes across Scotland, including in the South Scotland region; considers the impact and pressure caused by climate change on coastal and rural communities; recognises reported public concerns about the design and costs of flood defence projects, and notes the calls for the Scottish Government and local authorities to fully consult with local communities, partners, businesses, organisations and other stakeholders during the appraisal and consenting process.

17:29

Craig Hoy (South Scotland) (Con): As a nation, Scotland is shaped by water: it is central to our landscape, our economy and our identity. The world over, lochs, rivers and long, rocky and rugged coastlines are closely identified with Scotland—as, of course, unfortunately, is the rain. However, plentiful water is not only one of our greatest assets but one of our greatest challenges, and flooding is one of the most acute environmental challenges that Scotland faces today. It is an increasing threat to communities across Scotland, both coastal and inland, and the need for effective flood defences has never been more urgent.

Flooding in Scotland is not a new problem, but it is becoming more and more frequent and severe, with an impact on people and their homes, businesses and critical infrastructure. Scientific projections suggest that Scotland can expect wetter and warmer winters in the future, along with more extreme weather events. That will place even greater pressure on existing flood defences, putting homes, businesses, farm land and infrastructure at further risk.

Across the South Scotland region, which I represent, some advances have been made in developing better flood defences. However, in communities such as Peebles and Walkerburn there are serious concerns that a continuing lack of flood protection poses a risk to people and property, along with fears that successful funding applications to install schemes in places such as Galashiels, Selkirk and Jedburgh mean that there is now little cash left for further defence schemes in the foreseeable future.

In East Lothian, for example, in Musselburgh and down the coast, a debate is raging about what sort of flood defences the town and the wider

coastline area needs and how much those will cost. In other communities, plans for flood protection have not secured the necessary support of local communities—for example, that is the case with the recent proposals for a scheme in Langholm. In that instance, plans would have included the erection of walls and embankments along the River Esk and its tributaries, but those plans were shelved as a result of strong opposition from within the community, amid fears of spiralling costs.

I recognise the strength of local opinion in many instances, and I stress that it must be heeded as ministers and councils across South Scotland consider future flood defence plans. That is at the heart of what I want to say today. The need to fully consult local communities, partners, businesses, organisations and other stakeholders during the appraisal and consenting process for flood defence schemes is a crucial step, but, all too often, it has not taken place.

The most glaring example of that has been the failure to mount a meaningful consultation for the Whitesands flood defence scheme in Dumfries, which was recently given the green light by the Scottish National Party-run council. That there is a serious flooding issue at the Whitesands is not in dispute—it floods regularly, and it can cause severe disruption and damage to businesses and other properties in the area when the Nith bursts its banks. However, despite that, the proposed scheme, which is estimated to cost potentially a staggering £69 million and possibly even more, has not won the support of local people or of those in neighbouring communities—in fact, it is quite the opposite.

Over recent years, thousands of locals have signed petitions against the scheme, which would fundamentally and damagingly alter historic views along the Whitesands, as a raised walkway incorporating walls, glass panels and flood gates is planned to run from the former *Dumfries & Galloway Standard* offices downstream to Dock park, with additional measures over the river at Welldale and Kenmure Terrace.

Aside from the physical impact of the proposed scheme, there are widespread fears locally that it could lead to the loss of the Rood fair—one of Scotland’s longest-running festivals, which dates back to the 1500s and makes use of the Whitesands each year. There are also real concerns among local retailers about the disruption and the loss of revenues that their businesses will face during the construction phase.

There is an equally widespread view that the costly scheme will be ineffective—a £69 million white elephant on the River Nith that siphons off millions of pounds in investment that could have

supported vital local services, including provisions to effectively address other flood-related issues. The funding could have gone towards tackling the flooding that affects many roads in the rural southwest or towards the proper dredging of local rivers. It could have helped to replace the Diamond Jubilee bridge and the Cuthbertson memorial bridge, which were both washed away in 2021 when water levels along the River Annan reached a 50-year high. Those are practical measures that would command support in the community, rather than £69 million being squandered on a flood scheme for Dumfries in which locals simply do not have confidence.

Flood defences are essential to Scotland’s future. They protect lives, homes and livelihoods, and they help to ensure that communities can thrive despite climate change. However, they need to be taken forward with the necessary consultation of local communities, partners, businesses, organisations and other stakeholders, particularly when it is local authority and Scottish Government money that is at risk.

Water has shaped Scotland’s history and, with the right choices and the right flood mitigation measures that enjoy public support, it does not have to threaten the future of our country and our communities.

17:35

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): I thank Craig Hoy for securing the debate. I agree with much of what he outlined about the need to implement coastal and inland flood defences—as he said, water has shaped Scotland’s history. In my short time, I will focus my comments on the recent decision that was made by Dumfries and Galloway Council regarding the proposed Whitesands scheme.

People outside the Parliament who watched and listened to Craig Hoy’s speech would be forgiven for thinking that the council suddenly decided last month that it would be a good idea to build a flood protection barrier and came up with some plans on the back of a fag packet, probably inspired by Mr Hoy’s party and its approach to public policy. However, the vote by Dumfries and Galloway Council was the culmination of 15 years of planning, design, hydraulics reports, technical reports, planning applications and many consultations.

I agree that many people in the area, and further afield, are against the flood protection scheme, and there are some who are sceptical but open to persuasion. It will be a big change to the landscape of the town at the Whitesands, and any change on this scale—it is a substantial project

with a substantial budget—will inevitably split opinion.

The Whitesands has flooded more than 200 times since the 1820s, and the worst flooding has been witnessed in recent years. The proposal will provide a permanent once-in-75-years flood protection standard. If Mr Hoy had spent some time going through the public record on the Whitesands, he would have found more than a decade of consultations, planning submissions, council committee meetings, charrettes, open meetings, information evenings and so on.

Craig Hoy: Does Emma Harper acknowledge, however, the scale of local opposition at various stages in the consultation, including in the public inquiry? Is it not right that local representatives now reflect that public opinion instead of, as she is doing, selling the community down the river with this expensive, unwanted and deeply unpopular scheme?

Emma Harper: I thank Craig Hoy for that intervention, but I do not believe that I am selling people down the river. I have not been part of the votes or the decision making, but the local authority voted to move ahead with the project. I will come to some of those points.

The outcome of the consultations led to a decision that the majority of elected members supported, which was made ahead of recess. Over many years, we have seen a reluctance from the Conservatives to spend public money on protecting the public good. However, I take the view that we elect representatives to take such decisions, and the council has decided to move forward with the scheme.

Craig Hoy: Will Emma Harper take an intervention?

Emma Harper: I will not take another intervention.

The £55 million of Scottish Government funding is a huge boost for the local economy. Almost every day, we hear lectures from Conservative members about where our finite spending—which has been made more finite by those colleagues’ economically crackpot austerity agenda over the years—should go. However, we are looking here at transformational major investment in infrastructure in the south-west. To be clear, 80 per cent of that money is from the Government’s flood protection budget, and, if Dumfries does not spend it on flood protection, another scheme will take its place.

Are we seriously suggesting that, after 15 years of consideration, consultation and democratic debate—and, late last year, a democratic decision—we should tell the Scottish Government that Dumfries does not want that investment after

all? That economic boost will continue in the longer term. How much good, in reputational terms, does it do for inward investment if the major reason for Dumfries hitting the headlines every year is that the Whitesands is under water?

It would be useful if Mr Hoy had a plan for the local businesses and residents who suffer flooding year after year. Perhaps he could spell out exactly how long he thinks that they should wait and tolerate the disruption in their lives. Should it be one more year, or another five years?

I want to see the maximum amount of public consultation on any big infrastructure project; the days of far-off officials giving an aye or a nay belong in the 1950s. However, after 15 years of public consultation on the Whitesands, I do not think that it is too much to allow decision makers who were elected by the people to make a decision that, although it might not get 100 per cent approval, will transform the lives of the people in the Whitesands in Dumfries. We need to support their future.

17:39

Tess White (North East Scotland) (Con): More than two years have now passed since storm Babet devastated Brechin, but far too many families have still not returned home. What should have been a period of recovery has instead become a case study in delay, deflection and abandonment by the SNP Government.

Eighty-five council houses were ruined by flooding and might not be rebuilt until 2030 at the earliest. More than 30 privately owned homes were also affected. Empty properties are costing more than £6,000 a week in lost rent, while remaining residents feel trapped in uncertainty. Many have told me that, every time it rains, they fear that the nightmare will begin all over again. That constant anxiety is an often overlooked human cost of inaction.

The failure of the Brechin flood prevention scheme should have been a wake-up call. Built just seven years before it was overwhelmed, it demonstrated that existing defences are not fit for purpose or keeping pace with extreme weather, but the Scottish Government has failed to properly strengthen or fund Brechin’s protections. Ministers were quick to appear for photo opportunities in the aftermath, but they have been far slower to deliver the funding and decisions that are needed to prevent a repeat.

As a result, local government has been left to pick up the pieces. Angus Council wants to rebuild River Street and improve flood protection, but it cannot do so alone. The cost of a rebuild has been estimated at £15 million over 30 years, which is simply beyond the council’s means without

Government support. That leaves Angus Council in an impossible position: it is responsible for delivery but is denied the resources to act.

The economic damage has been just as stark. Flooding has crippled local businesses, none more so than Matrix International. The company, which once employed about 100 people, was so badly flooded that it was forced to scale back its operations, and it ultimately closed. The Scottish Government's flood recovery support amounted to just £3,000.

I heard Emma Harper criticise Opposition members. I say to her and her colleagues that they should look at Audit Scotland's report "Flooding in communities: Moving towards flood resilience", which is damning. It confirms that there are serious gaps in funding, skills and capacity, and it states that the system for allocating flood defence funding is "not fit for purpose". As a result, costs are rising, schemes are delayed and fewer communities are being protected.

What has sustained communities such as Brechin has been not Government strategy but community spirit, with volunteers, council staff and emergency services involved and neighbours helping neighbours. However, good will alone cannot replace leadership, and the Government should have matched the resilience of communities with real action and proper investment. At-risk communities such as Brechin deserve better.

17:43

Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab): This debate is crucial, so I thank Craig Hoy for securing it. The issue of flooding is not a distant concern but an immediate and escalating threat to communities across Scotland. A survey carried out in 2018, to which I have been referring for the past few years, estimated that 284,000 properties in Scotland are at risk of flooding, with projections showing the number rising to almost 400,000 by 2080.

However, last month, the Scottish Environment Protection Agency published the "National Flood Risk Assessment 2025" report, which makes it clear that the risks have escalated. The report states:

"Communities from the Borders to the Highlands and Islands have lived with the impact of flooding for decades", as colleagues have commented. It also notes that "as our climate changes, those impacts are accelerating. The National Flood Risk Assessment ... 2025 gives us the clearest picture yet of what lies ahead for Scottish homes and businesses—and why action to improve Scotland's flood resilience matters."

The report goes on to state that

"around 400,000 properties—homes, businesses, and vital services—are in areas at medium risk of flooding",

and notes:

"That's 1 in 8 properties across Scotland, a sharp rise from"

the 2018 estimate. Those figures are not abstract. We need to find ways to deliver for our communities, because the safety and livelihoods of families, businesses and entire communities depend on the decisions that are made.

The insurance sector is also raising the issue with us, and representatives of the sector came to lobby members before Christmas. However, we have not seen the sort of strategy that is needed to match the urgency of the situation being put in place. Funding is not keeping pace with rising costs and, as projects get delayed, increasing numbers of homes and parts of critical infrastructure are now exposed to flood risk.

What is in the current strategy is not sharp enough—it lacks clear timescales and the implementation plans that communities deserve now. Without defined timescales, there is delay, and, with every delay, the cost rises and communities are impacted.

I do not think that the draft climate change plan prioritised flooding resilience sufficiently.

The Cabinet Secretary for Climate Action and Energy (Gillian Martin): The draft climate change plan might not do so, but the Scottish national adaptation plan—SNAP3—does. That is where all the adaptation plans lie. I am sure that Sarah Boyack is familiar with that document.

Sarah Boyack: My point is that the issue needs to be much higher up the agenda. That is crucial in the climate change plan, because, when roads are shut and rail lines are disrupted, communities become isolated. Essential, reliable transport is vital to keep people safe and enable businesses to function.

As colleagues across the chamber have commented, the intensity of climate change is impacting on flooding, and it is going to get worse. That is why we need a comprehensive approach to flood defence. Hard engineering alone will not be enough; we also need investment in nature-based solutions that slow the flow of water before it reaches our towns and villages. That means restoring wetlands, protecting and expanding peatlands and supporting natural flood management projects that work with the landscape rather than against it.

We also need to accelerate the roll-out of sustainable urban drainage systems, both in existing communities and in new developments. Our communities have to be involved in the design of flood investment—from the start of the process,

not towards the end—because it matters to everybody. I have followed with huge interest the work that is being done in East Lothian. There is a real risk to people's homes and businesses, and they need confidence that the Scottish Government will deliver the scale of protection investment that is required to deal with the changing climate that people are now experiencing.

We have known about these challenges for decades. When I was a town planner, literally decades ago, the issue started to be on our agenda for places such as Grangemouth, but we have still not seen the investment that is needed. We can disagree with each other on all sorts of issues, but on this issue we must have political commitment in place across our parties, because not acting is going to risk people's homes, businesses and livelihoods. Decisions that are made now will determine whether our communities are protected or exposed in the decades ahead. We owe it to our communities to act with urgency and ambition and to involve them in the process, because we need to deliver action across Scotland.

17:48

Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): I thank Craig Hoy for securing the debate. At a time when extreme weather is very much on our minds, it is right that we consider how we build resilience in the face of growing uncertainty for many communities.

The debate is about safety, justice and community resilience. It is about how we ensure that people can live free from the fear and devastation that flooding causes. For too many communities, flooding is not an abstract or future risk but a lived reality that affects how people sleep, work, insure their homes and plan their futures. As we have heard, extreme weather events are no longer rare—they are the new normal. Such events are more frequent and severe, driven by the climate crisis that is already here.

That is patently clear in the north-east, particularly in Angus and in Aberdeenshire, where repeated flooding has exposed the consequences of having flood defences that are not future proofed and policies that are not properly joined up. In Angus, the experiences of residents in Brechin and at Castleton cottages are a stark warning. One Castleton resident said:

“We've done everything we were told to do, but the water keeps coming in. You can't relax when it rains—you're always waiting for the next flood”.

That constant anxiety takes a serious toll on people's mental wellbeing, on their family life and on their sense of safety in their homes.

The floods were not inevitable. A failure to properly connect land use, land management, planning decisions and flood defences has left communities exposed. When upstream land management, river engineering, housing development and emergency planning are treated separately and siloed, the result is repeated flooding, rising insurance costs and people feeling abandoned.

In Brechin, where homes have been inundated and defences breached, as Tess White mentioned earlier, a resident said:

“It's not just the damage, it's the stress. Insurance is harder to get, premiums go up, and some neighbours just feel trapped”.

That is not a fair price for people to pay simply for living in their communities. They need action, not just sympathy.

The same pattern is evident in Aberdeenshire. In Stonehaven, Inverurie and elsewhere, communities live with the memory and risk of flooding that damages homes and businesses, erodes lands and threatens vital services. One Inverurie resident said:

“The river doesn't just flood houses, it takes away paths, parks and farmland. It changes how the whole town works.”

That loss of shared spaces matters, especially when they are essential for health, for food production and for community connection.

Aberdeen has a long history of flood risk. Although recent protection works have brought some relief, we must ensure that flooding infrastructure is fit for the climate era that we are now in. This is about people's everyday lives—their wellbeing and their ability to work, sleep safely in their homes and plan for their future.

The climate crisis will only make flooding events more frequent and intense. Doing nothing—or doing the same things again—is not an option. Flood defences must focus on prevention as well as on protection, and on people as much as on infrastructure.

That means connecting land use, land management, planning policy and flood defence decisions. It also means genuine community engagement from the start: listening to local knowledge, supporting community networks and ensuring that, when disaster strikes, people have accessible facilities, clear information and trusted local support. People in Brechin, Inverurie and Stonehaven want to be partners in shaping the resilience strategies that affect their futures. We must deliver that partnership in every community that is at risk. It also means investing in nature-

based solutions, such as restoring wetlands, reconnecting flood plains, tree planting, protecting soils and practising sustainable land management, alongside engineered defences.

Fundamentally, this is about justice. Flood defence policy must be joined up, locally informed and rooted in the simple principle that everyone deserves to live a safe life in their own community, now and in the future.

17:53

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): I am grateful to Craig Hoy for bringing the debate to the chamber. If he will forgive me, I will broaden it out to cover North East Fife, where my knowledge of the topic derives from my direct experience and engagement with residents, landowners, farmers, various regulators and the local authority. It also derives directly from flooding experiences in Cupar in the winter of 2023, as well as those in Freuchie, Muchty, Strath, Kingskettle and numerous other communities up and down the River Eden that have been affected.

I know that we are in a tight financial situation. I know that big bang flood prevention schemes are incredibly expensive and that construction costs are growing. I know that it will be difficult to implement large-scale, hard engineering projects in every part of the country that is exposed to flooding. We need alternative solutions, some of which have been referenced today. The natural measures that we have talked about might not be the whole answer, but they are part of the answer.

I am grateful to the minister for meeting me and Alex Rowley to talk about water scarcity and flooding, because those two issues are equally important in some of our communities. When we had that discussion, I was particularly keen to see two things: first, a river catchment plan and, secondly, to go along with that, a grant scheme for landowners to introduce change. Those two things must go hand in hand.

However, in my experience, from discussions with farmers, the agri-environment climate scheme simply does not cut it when it comes to agricultural, arable land. The amount of money that they get in return simply will not pay for the conversion and for the sacrifice of that land. In North East Fife, that land is very valuable not only for arable farming but for fruit and vegetables. Therefore, if that is the only scheme that is available, we are asking farmers to sacrifice.

Farmers are people who are embedded in their communities. They understand the dramatic impact of flooding on their neighbours, when the water goes into their houses. They want to do everything that they can, but they still need to make a living and to make their farm work. We

know that farm incomes are struggling at this time, so we need an environment scheme that cuts it and that provides the necessary support for them to make that change.

There is then the issue of what kind of change we are looking to make. Despite numerous discussions, forums and conferences all over the country, there is a chasm between what farmers believe works and what many environmental organisations and the regulators believe should happen. We need to close that gap. We need to have an understanding of best practice and of what can work, so that we can make a difference and stop flooding in communities. If we carry on as we are and ignore that gap—it is a massive gap—we will get no further forward. We will simply be talking about the issue forever more.

My plea to the minister is to look at the issue in practical terms, because every part of the country is different. The Eddleston is different from the Eden, the Tweed and the rivers down in Dumfries. A bespoke plan is required for all those communities. My plea is for a grant scheme that works and that makes it possible for farmers to make changes, and we should close that gap through a river catchment plan, supported by Government agencies, to make that work. We might then have a chance of getting some of the natural environment measures to work.

17:57

Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): Climate change is not a distant threat. Our coastal and rural communities are already feeling the pressure, with heavier rainfall, frequent storms and volatile rivers. My Galloway and West Dumfries constituency knows that reality all too well. Newton Stewart endured damaging floods, notably in 2015, and Dumfries sees the Whitesands submerged annually.

Flood protection is essential. I do not oppose flood protection, only poorly managed flood protection. On that basis, let me make it clear from the outset that I, like many people across Dumfries and Galloway—there was some misrepresentation from Emma Harper—oppose the current Newton Stewart and Dumfries Whitesands flood schemes.

In May 2023, Dumfries and Galloway Council published its Newton Stewart flood protection scheme, promising a once-in-200-years standard for about 280 properties. That sounds reassuring, but its publication triggered 58 objections, many of which came from fisheries interest groups and environmental groups. The River Cree District Salmon Fishery Board was excluded from the environmental impact assessment screening—officers failed to meet that statutory duty. That negligence forced Scottish Government

intervention and the appointment of an independent reporter, and it required additional ecological surveys and scour modelling. As a result, the EIA process will not conclude until late summer 2026.

On the Whitesands scheme, after a decade, a public petition against the scheme, led by David Slater—now Councillor Slater—attracted well over 10,000 signatures. There has been a local public inquiry, and there was ministerial confirmation in 2020. Despite significant local opposition, the council has struggled to decide whether to proceed. In October 2023, a far from convincing knife-edge vote of 22 to 21 kept the eye-wateringly expensive scheme alive without significant public support. While Labour and SNP administrations put party politics ahead of public opinion, costs spiralled from £37.5 million in 2023 to £68.6 million by December 2025. That doubling demands hard questions about scope, control, risk management and officer accountability.

The delays are a direct result of poor governance. The SNP administration and previous Labour administrations have ignored repeated warnings from residents, businesses and the fisheries board. They have treated consultation as a tick-box exercise, not a genuine dialogue. Governance is about listening, not imposing. On that test, the SNP administration has failed. Consultation is not a bureaucratic hurdle; it is the foundation of good decision making. However, in Newton Stewart, consultation failures have pushed the processes back into 2026. In Dumfries, repeated changes and ballooning costs have eroded trust. People feel that decisions are being imposed, not co-designed.

Where do we go from here? In Dumfries, there should have been a plain-English comparison of all the options that have been considered since 2012, when, incidentally, the estimated cost of the flood prevention bund was £4 million. The comparison should have shown costs, benefits, environmental impacts and operational standards, and it should have explained why each alternative was rejected. We need to scrap the current scheme and develop a new approach with a locked scope, a published risk register and a monthly report on cost movements against the baseline. There should be no more exempt items or meetings from which the public are excluded.

With regard to the Cree, the council needs to commit to an enforceable timetable for completing the EIA, holding the hearing and, subject to the outcome, starting enabling works. We need to ensure genuine consultation and engage fisheries interests, businesses and residents before finalising designs, not after objections appear in the final stages. Critically, we need to improve officer accountability. It is unacceptable that the

council has neglected statutory duties, issued notices months late and reacted only under reporters' pressure.

A balanced approach should underpin every scheme. We should look beyond concrete and glass to natural flood prevention, tree planting, restoring wetlands, reconnecting flood plains, sustainable land management, pragmatic consideration regarding dredging and fair compensation for landowners. Hard engineering alone will not solve flooding problems on either the Nith or the Cree.

Climate resilience requires competence. Dumfries and Galloway Council has had years to get the schemes right. Our communities deserve flood defences that will protect them from the next storm, not defences that drown them with uncertainty. I believe in local democracy, decision making and accountability, but, given the failures in Dumfries and Galloway, I call on the Scottish Government to insist on tighter assurances for local schemes that receive national funding. I call on Dumfries and Galloway Council—the SNP administration, backed by Labour councillors—to stop blaming inflation and start demonstrating control on consultation, cost and delivery timelines.

The next storm will not wait for excuses. It will not wait for another committee meeting. Our communities need competent, transparent and accountable action now. Anything less would be a betrayal of public trust.

18:03

The Cabinet Secretary for Climate Action and Energy (Gillian Martin): I have listened carefully to the contributions this evening. This type of debate is important, and I congratulate Craig Hoy on securing it. I have a national policy that is associated with flooding, but it is important that I hear feedback on particular local considerations. I do not want to insert myself into decisions that local councillors make, because it is only right that they make decisions on what they do for their communities.

Craig Hoy: Will the member take an intervention?

Gillian Martin: Give me a minute to get going.

Although final decisions are made by councils, when we talk in the round about flooding strategy and anything strategic that we are doing, it is important that Scottish Government ministers of any flavour have the ability to hear feedback from around the country about where things have not worked, are not working or need a fresh look.

Craig Hoy: Given that, in this instance, the majority of local residents think that the council

has made the wrong decision with regard to the Whitesands scheme and that, ultimately, it is the Scottish Government that will be committing taxpayers' money to the project, what interventions can the Government make to ensure that the money is spent properly if the project proceeds? Alternatively, will the Government do the right thing, step back and remove funding for the project and direct those scarce resources towards other flood defence mechanisms?

Gillian Martin: I do not know whether Craig Hoy heard what I said, but I prefaced my remarks by saying that I am not going to insert myself into local decision making. We are having a members' business debate about flooding. We are not talking about one particular flooding project that relates to Mr Hoy's region; we are discussing issues in a lot of areas.

We have heard many important comments about the impact of flooding, and we have discussed in the round the mitigations and protections against it. The science is clear. Climate change means that we are facing record weather extremes, and that includes increased risks of heavy rainfall, more intense storm events and flooding. Sarah Boyack mentioned SEPA's "National Flood Risk Assessment 2025" report.

Oliver Mundell (Dumfriesshire) (Con): Will the member take an intervention?

Gillian Martin: I would like, first, to make some points about the general premise of the debate.

SEPA's figures reframed the issue by saying that one in eight properties in Scotland is now at risk of flooding. That is a sobering statistic, and it is something that we need to take seriously. I will go on to talk about flood resilience strategies, but SEPA's report highlights the importance of not just the climate change plan, which is about emissions reduction and so on, but the Scottish national adaptation plan. It is important that all members know about SNAP3, because it is a vehicle that has been rolled out throughout all agencies and councils across Scotland, and it provides a blueprint for action.

Oliver Mundell: I am not trying to draw the cabinet secretary into a discussion of individual schemes. However, given the points that Willie Rennie and others have made about changing weather patterns and the need for wider systems thinking about whole-river catchments, is the cabinet secretary not concerned about the fact that the various schemes that have existed for a long time and have been kicked about through various processes have not themselves adapted to the change in the weather patterns and the change in thinking and are not looking at the broader picture? Money will be spent on those schemes and they might not be effective.

Gillian Martin: I will not talk about any scheme in particular, but I note that a number of members made similar points to the one that Finlay Carson made when he said that hard engineering projects alone will not solve flooding. That is correct: there must be a range of interventions, and they must have a cumulative and complementary effect.

Willie Rennie mentioned natural flood prevention and the use of green space for a double purpose. I have visited the sites of a couple of such interventions that have been made around the country, including, a few years ago, one in Inverness—I think that I was with Finlay Carson on that visit—where I saw a site that was used as a football pitch for most of the year but, during floods, became a reservoir for floodwater. Inverleith park is another fantastic example of that approach. Again, for most of the year, it is a beautiful community garden and a space for people to enjoy recreation, but it also serves to take floodwater from Edinburgh in the event of flooding.

There are various other flood protection schemes. Tess White mentioned Brechin, which has a flood protection scheme that was funded with £13 million of Scottish Government investment. However, it was not able to withstand storm Babet, during which the floodwater overtopped and breached the flood prevention infrastructure. That demonstrates that we always have to have an adaptive process with regard to flooding and must build for circumstances that might be beyond what is seen as a once-in-100-years event. I remember the damage that storm Frank did in my constituency, which Maggie Chapman alluded to when she talked about what happened in Inverurie. We were told that that was a once-in-100-years event, but we are seeing flooding events of that nature in Scotland practically every year.

We have allocated £570 million to local authorities for flood protection schemes and flood resilience. Throughout the country, 21 flood protection schemes have been delivered so far. Also, since 2022, local authorities have received an additional £11.7 million to support coastal change adaptation, because flooding does not happen solely as a result of rainfall; it can be caused by the impact of coastal erosion. I think that Maggie Chapman mentioned Stonehaven, which has had its coastal resilience upgraded in the past few years.

I have listened to all the concerns that have been expressed today, and I will continue to listen. However, it is important that, as far as possible, ministers do not involve themselves in local decision making. I agree with Emma Harper's general point that we elect councillors to make those decisions. It is up to councillors to listen to

and consult the local community to determine what is best.

Sarah Boyack: SEPA estimates that the cost of flooding in Scotland is £500 million every year. What more can the Scottish Government do to support local authorities to make sure that lessons are learned and that we have the skills and expertise in every community across Scotland, so that the action that our constituents need can be taken?

Gillian Martin: There are a number of things to note in that regard, including the measures in the Flood Risk Management (Scotland) Act 2009, which laid out statutory obligations for local authorities.

Just before Christmas, Willie Rennie, Alex Rowley and I had a discussion about adaptation. I hope that Willie Rennie will be pleased to hear that, today, I had a comprehensive discussion with the chief scientific adviser for environment, natural resources and agriculture, who is working on creating formal partnership working groups between agencies such as SEPA, the Scottish Government and the farming community on a range of watercourses. I am very excited about that work. We also have river partnerships, one of which is being piloted in the Dee, which is near my constituency—it is largely in Alexander Burnett's constituency. It is important that river trusts, land managers, farmers and agencies work together, almost as a project team, because everyone has expertise and knowledge about their own areas and we must harness that.

On the engagement of communities and flood protection measures, the 2009 act lays out clear statutory obligations for local authorities. However, our communities need to be adaptive, and we need to listen to the ideas of the residents of those communities about how things can be managed better.

Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): As the cabinet secretary will be aware, Newcastleton has not yet had flood defences built, but it is at huge risk. There are 140 houses in the village, which is rural and has an elderly population, but the risk puts people off living in the area. Once people are moved out, they will not move back, because they are scared to. Does Gillian Martin believe that the societal impact and the community aspect of flooding in rural areas need to be considered as well as the safety aspect?

Gillian Martin: There are safety aspects, but, as Rachael Hamilton says, there is also a psychological impact on communities. I have constituents in Methlick, Ellon and Inverurie who were taken out of their homes at 3 am on 7 January in 2016—today is the anniversary of that

event—who still have lasting psychological scars from losing all their possessions and from waking up not knowing whether they were going to make it out of their house. We have to take those issues into account.

We also have to look at the massive societal and economic costs. If we do not put flood prevention measures in place, the cost of dealing with a flood event will vastly outweigh the cost of those measures. That is why I encourage everyone to support the interventions that are being made and not to prevaricate. We should all help to get them built, because the funding is available. I hear what Rachael Hamilton says about Newcastleton, whose residents clearly want flood defences.

I will leave it there, because I am well over my time. The decisions about flood prevention schemes are for local councillors, and it is only right they are made locally as much as possible. However, I have listened to the wider points that have been made.

Meeting closed at 18:14.

Correction

Ivan McKee has identified an error in his contribution and provided the following correction.

The Minister for Public Finance (Ivan McKee):

At col 65, paragraph 2—

Original text—

I met the NDR consultative group on 22 November 2025—

Corrected text—

I met the NDR consultative group on 27 November 2025—

This is a draft *Official Report* and is subject to correction between publication and archiving, which will take place no later than 35 working days after the date of the meeting. The most up-to-date version is available here: www.parliament.scot/chamber-and-committees/what-was-said-and-official-reports/official-reports

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