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Scottish Parliament

Tuesday 26 May 2026

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

Time for Reflection

The Presiding Officer (Kenneth Gibson): Our first item of business this afternoon is time for reflection. Our time for reflection leader today is the Rev Stewart Goudie.

The Rev Stewart Goudie (Church of Scotland): Good afternoon to you all. Presiding Officer, First Minister and all MSPs, I congratulate you on winning election or re-election to your roles in the Parliament. Thank you for putting yourselves forward to represent the members of your constituencies or regions and to serve the people of Scotland. I pray that you will know the wisdom, compassion and blessings of Jesus Christ as you serve in the Parliament.

In my first career as an electronics designer, I served five different employers, which were all in or around the Edinburgh area. We tackled design projects that had never been attempted previously. No one could tell us how to do it. We had to use the components and systems that were already available to produce something new that would improve on previous products. Some designs succeeded; some did not.

Such resourcefulness served me well as I then trained to be a church minister. I served as minister in two rural parishes on the edges of mainland Scotland, one in the far north and the next on the west coast. I retired just over 18 months ago and came back to live in Edinburgh, close to my family. People who live in such small rural communities, like those who live in my two parishes, soon learn that they need each other. Everyone needs help in one way or another. You get to know most of the people who live in your community. Some of my people lived on islands where the ferry comes only three or four days a week, less often in winter and not at all if the weather is bad or if the ferry is broken. It is a very different life from living in a town or city. Please remember the many people in our nation who live in such communities.

Here in the Parliament, you also face issues that are new to you. You will not always have someone to tell you what to do. Your assistants and advisers might offer advice, but it is you who must decide. Take time to consider what is best for your constituents and for the nation. What can you do to improve the lives of the people you represent? Who can help you to achieve those goals?

Jesus told his followers, "Only do to others what you would want them to do to you." That can be reworded as, "Don't do to others what you don't want done to you."

Many people need our help these days: people who are ill, those who cannot work, homeless people, workers whose income does not feed their families, and so on. As you make your decisions here in the Parliament, remember those who need your help. Please also consider the people who live at the edges of our nation, socially and geographically.

God bless you all in your service for the people of this nation. Thank you for listening.

Ambitious for Scotland

The Presiding Officer (Kenneth Gibson): The next item of business is a statement by John Swinney on being ambitious for Scotland. The statement will be followed by a debate, and there should be no interventions or interruptions to the First Minister.

14:03

The First Minister (John Swinney): During the election, I promised a Scottish Government that works for Scotland, and that is what I will deliver. I will be a First Minister for all Scotland, leading a Government that is always on Scotland's side. It will be a Government that is ambitious for Scotland with a stronger national health service, building on the progress that has already been made in order to make it even easier for our fellow citizens to access NHS services when they need them. It will be ambitious for Scotland with the best cost of living support in the United Kingdom protected and expanded and with new ways to help our fellow Scots with their weekly costs.

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This was a cost of living election—that was the number 1 issue for voters across Scotland—so I give this guarantee: I will be a First Minister focused on the cost of living, leading a Government that is on the side of fairness—a Government that will work to deliver a fair deal for all in our land who struggle to make ends meet.

The Government is ambitious for Scotland because we have a vision that can truly transform our nation and its prospects—the one real change that can take us from more than a decade of political chaos and economic stagnation within the United Kingdom to greater security and prosperity as an independent member state of the European Union. That is the fresh start that Scotland so badly needs, and it is the future that this Parliament can endorse today.

Prosperity, fairness and security—as we begin the new journey of this new session of our nation's Parliament, those will be my watchwords. I want greater prosperity for our nation, with a relentless focus on supporting innovation, on enterprise and on doing all that we can to maximise Scotland's productivity and increase our levels of sustainable economic growth. That will mean rethinking the structures of the state, with more strategic regions empowered to make the most of the many economic opportunities and advantages that they enjoy—and there are many: diverse and vibrant cities, the breathtaking beauty of our landscape, fertile farmland, iconic industries and resource-rich seas.

I want to reimagine the state as an enabler, with overly complex and cumbersome bureaucracy removed and unnecessary regulation that gets in the way of investment and job creation simplified. Regulation serves a vital purpose but, to work, it must be regulation that protects and permits—regulation that provides pathways, not obstacles, to investment, opportunity and growth.

At the outset of this parliamentary session, I want to emphasise the centrality to the Government that I lead of achieving higher levels of sustainable economic growth. To do so, we will invest in our young people, who are the source and foundation of future success, and we will empower our educators. We will put in place 150,000 apprenticeships, teacher-pupil ratios will be kept the best in the UK, and more schools and colleges will be rebuilt or upgraded.

We will invest in essential infrastructure: necessary road improvements, including the dualling of the A9 and the A96, which we have committed to complete; new stations; and the ongoing electrification of our rail network. There will also be investment of £4.9 billion to build thousands more homes—homes that people can afford.

We will expand our successful Techscaler programme to new sectors—such as the creative industries, food and drink, climate and agricultural technologies, advanced manufacturing and space technology—and we will introduce a new national network of pre-start centres to support our brightest and best to test and refine their ideas before progressing to the Techscaler programme. We will also establish a high-growth unit to identify and support businesses with the potential to grow—and to grow significantly.

Have no doubt that Scotland knows what it means to lead the world. We were at the forefront of the industrial revolution thanks to our wealth of natural resources, thanks to a spirit of enterprise and an openness to the world, and thanks to a skilled and determined workforce with a pride in the many wonders of engineering that those workers produced.

As we stand at the beginning of a new age of economic transformation, Scotland has the necessary resources, with an abundance of clean, green energy; we have the innovators, thanks to world-class research universities; and we have a workforce with practical and technical skills, and young people who are among the very best educated in Europe. This new technological revolution is made for Scotland to succeed in sectors such as biotech, space, precision engineering, fintech and more.

Scotland has what it takes to prosper in the decades to come, and Scotland has a Government that is determined to make that happen. Our programme is for a more prosperous Scotland, but it is not about wealth generation for its own sake. Under my leadership, this is and will always be a social democratic Government. That means that wealth creation will be for a purpose—to make our nation fairer, with those with the least given a helping hand by those with the most.

Greater prosperity will be felt in people's pockets, including through driving our commitment to cap bus fares at £2 nationwide to help people to get to work or get into town more affordably. We will legislate to help people with the cost of the weekly shop, so that hard-pressed households can have the peace of mind that a basket of healthy essentials for their kids and their family will be available at a fair, affordable and reliable price.

Greater national prosperity will be felt directly by the people we serve, and it will be underpinned by our pledge to deliver more, and more flexible, childcare and the provision of additional, more targeted support through an increase in the Scottish child payment to £40 a week for babies under one. Raising children takes

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not only love but time and money. I give this clear promise to Scotland's young families: you have a Government that is determined to help ease the burden and give you that bit more breathing space.

Because we know the challenges that many renters experience in our society and the struggles that they face as they seek to take the first step on the housing ladder, we will be there to offer a helping hand, with support for first-time buyers of up to £10,000 towards their deposit.

Those are policies with the real-world needs of our citizens at their heart—policies that will make life easier for many and our nation fairer for all—with fairness through a progressive taxation system and a compassionate social security system, both of which are possible because of new powers gained by the Parliament in recent years. The more powers that we have—and there will be more—the more we can achieve. I include fairness because we will not rest until every child in Scotland has the opportunity to succeed, regardless of the circumstances into which they were born. That is a big ambition, but child poverty has been a scourge in Scotland for far too long. It has been a weight around our necks, holding us back as a society, because too many people are unable to reach their full potential. Let us be absolutely clear: to have such deep, intergenerational poverty in a land of such plenty is morally wrong.

We have made progress, and we should be proud of that progress, but we must now redouble our efforts so that child poverty can be eradicated from our land—eradicated because our public services are working together effectively to support those in greatest need, because our economy is growing and new resources are becoming available to invest, and because of targeted interventions to increase income, reduce cost and create new opportunities for work and learning.

There is fairness also because we are resolute in our determination to pass on to the next generation a land that is more resilient in the face of climate change. Climate change and its effects remain the greatest challenge that our planet faces. Scotland has a part to play here, in our own actions to reduce emissions, but also, and more so, through our expertise and innovation and through our ability to export carbon-free electricity. In those ways, we can help other nations to reduce their carbon emissions, too.

Scotland may be small by some standards, but our contribution has always been great and our ambition even greater. Let us be clear: given all the horrifying consequences of climate inaction, there is no fair future for our country or for our planet—there is no prosperous or secure future for either—if we do not take the necessary steps to make our nation carbon neutral once and for all. Fairness must be given effect in a just transition that, right now, is under threat as a result of dangerous and damaging Westminster policies on energy and industry—Westminster policies that, once again, treat Scotland as little more than an afterthought.

Westminster control over Scotland's energy resources has been an unmitigated disaster for our nation. What is being done to the north-east today is just one example. There can be no doubt that the old ways of the Westminster Government have failed Scotland, so let us say loud and clear: for a just transition and for Scotland's energy wealth to fully benefit Scotland's people and communities, Scotland's energy must be in Scotland's hands. For Scotland, energy is a source of opportunity, prosperity and security. At a time when energy prices are rising and a time of energy scarcity, Scotland, as an exporter of energy, should have less to fear. We produce more oil, more gas and more electricity than we need, yet the prices that we pay, as households and businesses, are among the highest in Europe. It simply does not add up. We have the energy, and we have it in abundance, but we do not have the power, so I repeat—and Parliament will have the opportunity this week to agree—that Scotland's energy must be in Scotland's hands.

These are times of great global uncertainty. Wages have stagnated and costs have risen, with the threat of a new round of inflation, higher interest rates and lower growth. Technology is fuelling rapid, unpredictable change. Parents are worried about what the future holds for their children. I know that, for many, perhaps even for most, it can feel as though very little can be relied on any more. That is why we must give our citizens confidence that there is solid ground on which they can stand; more financial security, because they can see that help with costs is at the very top of this Government's agenda; and a sense of security that comes from knowing that the right health and social care will be available when it is needed, from cradle to grave.

Our NHS has weathered a storm—a decade of unprecedented pressures, from Covid to austerity and from rampant inflation to Brexit. Dealing with the pandemic was a generational challenge and one that our NHS staff rose to. We have faced the very worst, and we have proved ourselves to be resilient. A corner is being turned: operations and general practitioner numbers are up, and in-patient, out-patient and day-case waits are all down. Progress has been made and progress will continue, with a renewed focus on driving down waiting times by increasing capacity.

We will invest an additional £90 million in elective capacity and increased investment in specialist recruitment and training places. Over the next 100 days, we will deliver at least 50,000 operations and procedures. By the end of this parliamentary session, we will ensure that no one waits longer than 26 weeks

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for treatment. We will reduce demand on acute services by investing more in prevention and early intervention, including one-stop shops in communities to provide lung and heart health MOTs.

There will be a clear shift in the balance of care, with more delivered in the community. Over the next three years, general practice will receive an additional £531 million, meaning that even more family doctors can be recruited as part of our plan to make it easier to access a GP and end the 8 am rush. That plan will be turbocharged with more GP walk-in clinics. In the next 100 days, we will open at least five more and confirm locations for another 14; they will be open in the evenings and at weekends, with no appointment needed.

There will be greater security for women and girls, with a misogyny bill to outline misogynistic harassment and abuse in Scotland; a ban on the use of technology to create and possess deepfake intimate images; a ban on the possession of online material containing sex offences against women and children; and a ban on mobile phones in our schools.

Fairness will be built into the very foundations of the new nation state that we aim and seek to build, with a Scottish constitution that protects our NHS and guarantees the fundamental human dignity of each and every person in our land—a Scottish constitution that is rooted in the values that speak to the very best of who we are.

Security will come from being in charge of our own destiny. This is the true security that we have all experienced and that we all strive for when we know that our future is in our own hands and when we know, no matter the challenge, that we are able to choose and chart the right course. It is the security that will come from a renewed partnership with our neighbours in the European Union—a true partnership of equals with 27 other nations, friends and peers. We share a continent and we share a future.

We will have greater prosperity because, with the opportunity of independence, we will have control over our own energy wealth and will be able to trade freely with the biggest single market in the world as a member, once again, of the European Union. Together, those offer a golden opportunity, which is one that I believe people will vote for resoundingly when our nation again has the ability to decide our own future in an independence referendum. Of course, that is why Westminster currently says no. However, to build on the words of one of the fathers of our self-government, we are the people, we are the people's Parliament and we say yes.

Today is the start of a process that I believe will lead Westminster to say yes to a referendum and Scotland to say yes to independence. Today, I seek confirmation from this Parliament that it is a voluntary union and that the people of Scotland have the right to decide whether we remain in that union. That principle should be accepted by all those in the chamber who believe in independence, as well as by those who believe in the union.

What is at stake is the democratic wishes of the people of Scotland. The people have elected a new Parliament. This new Parliament has the opportunity today to make its position clear. I invite the Parliament to put Scotland's future in Scotland's hands.

Independence Referendum

The Presiding Officer (Kenneth Gibson): The next item of business is a debate on motion S7M-00105, in the name of John Swinney, on being ambitious for Scotland. I invite members who wish to speak in the debate to press their request-to-speak button, and I call John Swinney to move the motion.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament welcomes the emphatic democratic mandate for bold and ambitious reform backed by the people of Scotland at the Scottish General Election; further welcomes the Scottish Government's clear commitment to eradicate child poverty, deliver a stronger NHS and public services, build a more prosperous economy and help people in the cost of living crisis and tackle climate change; recognises that the people of Scotland have returned the largest pro-independence majority ever elected to the Scottish Parliament; believes this majority affirms a clear mandate that decisions about Scotland's future are best taken in Scotland and that mandate must be respected; calls on the UK Government to make a Section 30 order under the Scotland Act 1998 to devolve the powers to the Scottish Parliament to hold a referendum on Scottish independence, and agrees that the Parliament is at its best when it works together in pursuit of a country that can be confident in its future.—[*John Swinney*]

14:19

Anas Sarwar (Glasgow) (Lab): I say first that although I welcome much of the content of the First Minister's opening statement, the reality is that the contrast between that statement and the motion for debate is stark. The majority of the statement focused on issues that I think people would want the Scottish National Party Government to concentrate on, but the balance of the motion that we are being asked to vote on is

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overwhelmingly about one issue alone, which is the Scottish National Party First Minister's only ambition and obsession: the issue of independence. That is a missed opportunity for the first debate of a new Parliament.

I will make a broader point. One of the big challenges for our politics in Scotland is that, far too often, the instinct of the SNP Government and of the SNP as a party is to talk about Scotland as if it is one homogeneous unit with one mind and one view and not to talk as if there is a mix of views across the country. In reality, Scotland does not have one voice or one view on a referendum or on independence and there are differing views right across the country. If Mr Swinney truly wants to be a First Minister for all of Scotland, he cannot deny those varying views.

I will say more about ambition in a moment, but to hear someone who has been in Government for 20 years pleading for some sort of fresh start is to hear something that people will not believe in. This Government and First Minister have spent more time in the past 20 years telling Scotland what they cannot do than what they can do. Ultimately, the First Minister's party plays on the very same fears and blame that I spoke about last week. There are those who want to create fear in our communities in order to divide us and there are those who want to pass the buck by pointing the finger of blame somewhere else instead of taking responsibility for their own actions in Government.

Much of what John Swinney said in his opening statement is an attempt to correct a record that he has helped to build over the past 20 years. In those 20 years, the SNP has created layer after layer of bureaucracy and public sector bodies that he now says he wants to strip away. Yet, year after year, for the past 20 years, the SNP Government has taken power away from Scotland's regions—it has centralised the power that he now says he wants to push back out to those regions.

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice (Neil Gray): We have had a test of some of Mr Sarwar's theories in recent weeks because we have had an election and the people have decided. Would it not be better if Mr Sarwar were to allow power to be in the people's hands and to allow them to decide on their own future by supporting the motion?

Anas Sarwar: Mr Gray will argue his view and I am going to argue mine—that is democracy. The reality is that there is a mix of views across the country, as was clear during the election. That was clear from the First Minister's own statement. He did not say that we had had an independence election; he said that it was a cost of living election. People voted in the election based on what was happening in their pockets and in their public services.

He also mentioned energy, but the reality is that the SNP Government sold our energy wealth on the cheap. This Parliament must redefine community benefit and community ownership across the country. We also need a different kind of Government—not one with more gimmicks and grievances, but one that actually gets things done.

There is another area where I agree with John Swinney: there is global insecurity and instability. At the time of such insecurity and instability, people across the country need a relentless focus on the issues that matter to them right now. Those issues include access to vital public services, seeing their bills brought down and ensuring that they do not keep paying more and more while getting less and less in return.

That is the ambition that I will speak about today. There is no shortage of ambition in our country. Families are ambitious about what happens to them and are ambitious for their children and their communities.

Where is the ambition to return the national health service to its founding principles of being free and available at the point of need? That principle has been broken by the SNP Government. The record shows that people are paying £12,000 for a hip replacement, £8,000 for a knee replacement and £5,000 for cataract surgery under the SNP Government. That is how it returns that ambition.

Where is the ambition to make Scotland's schools the best in the world again? They are falling down the international league tables under this Government. Where is the ambition to make people feel safe and secure in their communities?

The reality is that, when the SNP talks about ambition, what it really means is its own party's ambition or its own individuals' ambition. We got a really stark example of that this week. People who are its most vociferous supporters were asked to put their hard-earned cash into a movement that they believed in and that they support—which is their democratic right—and what did the people who were charged with the responsibility do? They robbed them of that opportunity. They embezzled that opportunity. The reality is that countless opportunities for people across this country have been embezzled by this SNP Government for 20 years.

We need ambition and we need to deliver for people across this country, but that requires a different kind of Government. It requires honesty and transparency and it requires actually putting into words what the First

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Minister said in much of his opening statement, rather than using those issues to divide us and set Scot against Scot. We need real ambition to bring down waiting lists, real ambition to end the 8 am rush for a general practitioner appointment, real ambition to make life more affordable for families, real ambition to bring down bills, real ambition to return police to our streets, real ambition to build the homes that this country needs, real ambition to make sure that we have economic growth for every part of our country, real ambition so that every child gets the opportunities that they need to succeed, and real ambition to end homelessness and eradicate poverty in this country.

We need a Parliament and a Government that have ambition to match that of the people of this great country. That can be achieved only if John Swinney focuses on the issues at hand and the issues that matter every day, rather than looking for reasons to divide us.

I move amendment S7M-00105.4, to leave out from “welcomes” to end and insert:

“recognises the need for bold and ambitious reform in Scotland following the Scottish General Election; acknowledges that the majority of people in Scotland want the Scottish Government to focus on the issues that impact their day-to-day lives; considers that the priority of the Scottish Government should therefore be to improve the NHS and public services, make life more affordable, support communities and high streets, grow a fair and prosperous economy, which tackles inequality, and ensure that every child has the opportunity to succeed; believes that this ambitious future can and should be achieved through the devolved powers of the Parliament and rejects any attempt by the Scottish Government to delay this work by dedicating resources towards returning to divisive arguments of the past.”

The Presiding Officer: Members who take interventions do not have the time taken from them, but it is still up to members to decide whether they take interventions.

14:27

Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): I see that Mr Sarwar’s constructive and collaborative tone lasted about a week in this place. Clearly, no lessons have been learned from the election.

Every Green MSP who was elected to this Parliament was elected on a mandate to support the cause of independence. Our gains have made the biggest-ever majority for independence in this Parliament, and we are here to assert that mandate. It is, of course, normal in a democracy that a parliamentary majority can pursue the issues on which it has won a mandate from the voters. However, we saw throughout the campaign—as we are seeing in Parliament this afternoon—increasingly desperate mental gymnastics from unionist parties that claim that we somehow do not have that mandate. During the campaign, we heard from the Labour Party that its win in the 2024 general election in Scotland was a mandate against another independence referendum. However, that only has any credibility if we ignore the fact that it rejected the SNP’s equivalent mandates in 2015, 2017 and 2019.

We have also heard the “once in a generation” line—that it has not yet been a generation since the referendum.

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh North Western) (LD): Will the member take an intervention?

Ross Greer: Not quite yet.

I ask those who use that particular line to reflect on the fact that 800,000 people who were old enough to vote at the election just a few weeks ago were not old enough to vote in the referendum in 2014. Is it really credible to continue with the line that it has not yet been a generation since the referendum?

I absolutely respect the cause of unionism and I respect those who disagree with me and my party on independence. It is important that unionists are well represented in this Parliament. However, whether we are for or against independence, surely everyone who sits in this place should be a democrat, and democracy is not a one-off event. The public are no more bound by the vote in 2014 today than this Parliament is bound by its predecessors. Democracy is a system that we live in every day of our lives.

This debate requires some honesty. Is this a voluntary union? Was it a voluntary union only until 2014, and is it not one any more? We have to wonder why people are so angry and cynical. Is it because of the anti-democratic games that are being played? I do not expect the Labour Party, in particular, to have some kind of Damascene conversion to the cause of independence, but I would expect respect for Scottish democracy and Scottish voters. I credit Paul Sweeney for making suggestions and being open to a conversation about how we can move forward on the constitutional question. I would say that the best time to have that particular debate was a decade ago, but I welcome that there are some in the Labour Party who are open to having it now.

Craig Hoy (Dumfriesshire) (Con): If Ross Greer believes in democracy and giving voters a choice, why did the Scottish Green Party stand in so few constituencies?

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Ross Greer: Mr Hoy may have missed the fact that the Scottish Greens gave every voter in Scotland the opportunity to vote for us, and far more of them chose to do so than chose to vote for the Scottish Conservative Party.

As I said, I respect the arguments for the union and against independence, but I cannot respect the increasingly desperate means that are being used to justify denying the people of Scotland a choice over our future.

The Scottish Greens have always believed that independence is the best choice for Scotland, not as an end but as a means to a greater end. It is our route back into the European Union to undo the incredible damage that Brexit has done and to regain our European citizenships. It would give us the power to tackle poverty through things such as minimum wage laws. It would give us the full fiscal powers that we need to invest in the infrastructure for thriving communities and a successful economy. It would give us power over our energy systems, whereby we could make the switch from an energy regulation system that maximises the profits of a handful of companies to a system that provides affordable energy for everyone.

The independence movement of 2014 grew support for our cause by focusing on that vision and on what we can achieve with the powers of a normal nation. In the 12 years since then—I have to be honest—I think that far too much of our focus as a movement has been on process rather than on the cause and on that vision. We know that much of it is in Westminster's hands. We believe that that is wrong, but it is the reality. We should focus on what we can change, which is public opinion. There is currently a marginal lead for independence in the polls, but we can concede that the issue is basically 50:50.

Stephen Kerr (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Will Ross Greer give way on that point?

Ross Greer: No.

The best way to grow support for Scottish self-government is to do self-government well—to maximise the use of the powers that we have. That is the focus of today's Green amendment. The powers of this Parliament are limited, but we have not yet exhausted them.

In 2014, we grew support for independence by tying it to a sense of hope and optimism. I do not feel that there is a lot of hope and optimism in Scottish politics right now. There is a deep sense of frustration with our public services.

We have a lot to be proud of from the era of devolution. For example, Scotland is the only part of the United Kingdom in which child poverty is falling. However, too many reforms have been delayed and deferred—most obviously, council tax reform.

On housing, if we had the borrowing powers of a normal nation, we could build far more. However, what we can do right now is set standards to cut bills through energy efficiency—for new builds in particular. We can use the rent control powers that this Parliament passed just a few months ago to help people to save and keep a roof over their heads.

Our health service is crying out for reforms, some major and structural but others very simple. People just want the services on which they rely every day to work. They just want someone to pick up the phone at their GP surgery when they call.

When it comes to our environment, there is no need to wait for independence to clean up our rivers and our lochs.

We can do all those things to demonstrate that, when decisions are made here, they benefit people and the planet. We can grow support for full self-government through independence by maximising the use of the self-governing powers that we have right now, but we should also do it because it is the right thing to do, here and now, regardless of constitutional objectives.

I will close on that note. There is a majority for independence in this Parliament, but not a single-party majority. Every progressive party in the Parliament has the opportunity to work with others—to co-operate, collaborate and move Scotland forward on the areas on which we agree. The vast majority of members of the Parliament agree on the need to eradicate child poverty, and a vast majority agree on the need to take action to tackle the climate emergency.

As Gillian Mackay noted last week, the Greens and the Liberal Democrats—the two Opposition parties that co-operated with the Government to secure progress on the areas that we cared about—gained at the last election. There is something for every party to learn from that.

The Greens will be proud to support the motion, although we will also push for our amendment, because we believe in the cause of independence—putting Scotland's future in Scotland's hands—and we also believe

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that the Parliament has a duty to act here and now to give our children the best possible future that they can have, to help people to save money on their bills, to lift families out of poverty and to tackle the climate emergency. The Parliament is more than capable of pursuing Scotland's constitutional future and taking action on the issues that affect people in their lives here and now.

I move amendment S7M-00105.3, to insert at end:

“; believes that the most effective way in which to grow public support for Scottish independence and to meet the scale of the challenges currently facing Scotland is through more effective use of existing devolved powers; recognises that meeting the Scottish Government's stated ambitions will require a significant escalation in action and ambition; notes that no one party holds a majority in the current parliamentary session, but that there is a clear majority for progressive values, and agrees that, if all progressive parties work constructively and collaboratively, Scotland can be a fairer, greener and kinder country where household costs are reduced, where wealth is distributed more equally and where climate and natural environment are protected.”

The Presiding Officer: Before I call the next speaker, I remind members who wish to speak to press their request-to-speak buttons—not everyone has done that so far.

14:34

Russell Findlay (West Scotland) (Con): Here we go again. This is the first debate of the new parliamentary session, but it is not about the NHS, in which patients are stuck waiting for years in misery and agony; it is not about education, where pupils are told to accept mediocrity and classroom violence; it is not about Scots being forced to pay more and more tax to bankroll the Scottish National Party's out-of-control benefits bill; and nor is it about the betrayal of Scotland's oil and gas workers by two Governments—SNP and Labour.

The debate is not about any of those important issues because, of course, John Swinney believes in only one thing: breaking up the United Kingdom. He is holding Scotland back, stuck in the grip of constitutional paralysis. His party is not actually interested in improving people's lives or fixing the public services that it broke. For his party, that is too much like hard work. Of course, the SNP will never be honest about the financial cost of independence. If the SNP ever got its way, Scotland would face a funding gap of £26 billion. Scots would face extreme tax rises while public services would be cut to the bone.

The timing of today's debate is comical. Today of all days, John Swinney is banging the independence drum when the news agenda is dominated by his party stealing money from its own members and supporters—money that the SNP promised to ring fence for independence. Here we are just 24 hours after Nicola Sturgeon's husband, Peter Murrell, admitted using more than £400,000 of stolen money to fund their lavish lifestyle. In 2021, John Swinney went on the BBC and publicly dismissed valid concerns about the SNP's finances. Nicola Sturgeon also told those with concerns to stay quiet. When questioned by police, she repeatedly said, “No comment”—the tactics of organised crime.

Today of all days, John Swinney reckons that the SNP can be trusted to take full control of an independent Scotland and our nation's finances. This is the same John Swinney who did not have a clue that his childhood friend, whom he appointed SNP chief executive, was plundering their own party. You would need to have a heart of stone not to laugh at the painful lack of self-awareness on the SNP benches. Does John Swinney not see how this sounds to people who despair at what the Parliament has become?

The sad truth is that John Swinney is never, ever going to change—we should not hope for any change at all. However, the Scottish Conservatives will always stand up to and call out this nonsense. In 2014, the people of Scotland said no, and John Swinney has never respected their vote. He should know that the law is clear that the Parliament does not have the power to hold a referendum. Nicola Sturgeon went to court on that. She spent hundreds of thousands of pounds—taxpayers' money this time—and she lost. In the most recent Scottish election, more voters backed unionist parties than parties supporting separation. However, none of those facts matters to John Swinney and the SNP.

I recently spent time in Aberdeen along with our UK party leader, Kemi Badenoch, and we see the damage that is being inflicted on Scotland's oil and gas sector, with thousands of jobs being lost. Labour does not care, and it remains against new drilling. Here is my challenge to John Swinney today. His party still has a presumption against new oil and gas licences, so let us send a message of support to the oil and gas workers and give a call to action. Let us end the SNP's opposition, get Britain drilling again and drop the damaging independence obsession.

I move amendment S7M-00105.2, to leave out from “welcomes” to end and insert:

“believes that its seventh session should be focused exclusively on resolving the issues that matter to most people in Scotland, such as dealing with NHS waiting times, reversing Scotland's falling educational standards, tackling the growing benefits bill and

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delivering value-for-money for Scotland's taxpayers; urges the Scottish Government to drop its demands to hold a second independence referendum, and calls for the Scottish Government to drop its position of a presumption against new oil and gas licences, as outlined in its Draft Energy Strategy published in the last session of the Parliament."

14:40

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh North Western) (LD): Members will be delighted to hear that I do not plan to take all of my time this afternoon. I intend to cede some of it to Duncan Dunlop, who will be making his first speech later.

In the time that I have, I remind members that debates such as this used to be marquee occasions. There were times when the galleries would be full, the press gallery would be absolutely stuffed and we even had the cameras of the world trained on this Parliament, because the question of Scotland's future in the union was so unpredictable. However, there is a muscle memory now—a performative element—to debates such as this, because a section 30 order will be requested this afternoon and it will be declined. Why? Because John Swinney has manifestly failed the test that he set himself just a month ago. I will quote from *The Scotsman* what John Swinney said—he could not have been clearer—on 28 April:

"I'm ... saying that we need to make sure we get an SNP majority to make sure we can take forward an independence referendum".

Presiding Officer, 59 per cent of the public—the voting public—disagreed with that assertion and voted for parties that did not back a second referendum. It is only because of the vagaries of our voting system and the gaming of the system by the parties of independence that we are now in this situation.

Ross Greer: I remember that, in the last session of this Parliament, we pointed out that the pro-independence parties had won not just a majority of seats but a majority of votes, and Mr Cole-Hamilton had to come up with a whole new reason against a mandate for a referendum at that point, so why do the goalposts keep shifting?

Alex Cole-Hamilton: Ross Greer is celebrated as one of the brightest members of this Parliament, yet basic arithmetic seems to be escaping him; 59 per cent of the public is bigger than 41 per cent. I think that he should consult his maths teacher.

Because the SNP failed in that effort, the covenant that the First Minister tried to establish with the people must be set aside, because a section 30 order is not going to build a new hospital in Shetland; 18 months of campaigning around the constitution is not going to dual the lethal A9 any faster; identifying offices for embassies and high commissions overseas for a future independent Scotland is going to do nothing to reduce child poverty; and the interminable debates about what currency an independent Scotland would or would not adopt are going to do nothing to instruct an independent review that is so vitally needed for maternity services in the far north of Scotland.

In all truth, as a chamber, since the SNP came to power, we have never fully flexed the muscles of devolution—as one of the most empowered devolved nations in this world—to address the things that all our constituents have decidedly sent us to Parliament to discuss.

I will give him credit—the First Minister touched on the cost of living emergency. This was a cost of living election, but nothing about 18 months of debate around the constitution is going to make people's homes warmer by instructing the emergency programme of home insulation that we need. It is not going to address the crisis in our social care system, which is keeping 2,000 Scots in hospital who neither need nor want to be there but who cannot get home for want of a social care package. It is not going to lift up education, and it is not going to—

The Minister for Business and Fair Work (Tom Arthur): Will the member give way?

Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): Will the member give way?

Alex Cole-Hamilton: I do not have time—

The Presiding Officer: You do have time.

Alex Cole-Hamilton: Okay—I will take an intervention from Tom Arthur.

Tom Arthur: One of the fundamental challenges that we face in social care is the recruitment and retention of workforce, and that challenge is particularly conspicuous in our Highlands and rural communities. Is that not a convincing argument for powers over immigration to be devolved to this Parliament?

Alex Cole-Hamilton: I do not disagree with Mr Arthur that Brexit has been a disaster for social care, but it would be a lot easier to fix social care if his Government paid people more to work in social care or gave them

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key worker housing to address the shortage of housing in the Highlands and Islands that he discussed, so he has got a nerve to raise that with me.

We need to get Scotland moving again. Just last week, the nation was embarrassed when the technology of the 19th century came to the aid of passengers of the 21st century—the Clyde paddle steamer, the Waverley, had to rescue passengers because a Caledonian MacBrayne vessel had broken down. That is a microcosm of the inadequacies of the SNP Government, and taking time for parliamentary debates such as this one does nothing to serve our constituents. It is no wonder that they do not pay the attention to, or have the trust in, the Parliament that they used to, because they just do not believe that it can deliver for them.

I move amendment S7M-00105.1, to leave out from first “welcomes” to end and insert:

“notes that the Scottish National Party’s stated objective prior to 7 May 2026 was to secure an overall majority in the Scottish Parliament elections in order to pursue independence, but that the party achieved fewer votes and seats than in the previous elections, whereas the Scottish Liberal Democrats achieved gains across Scotland from the Borders to the Highlands, and believes that the Scottish Government must now focus on fixing the NHS and care, helping people with the cost of living crisis, fixing the roads and the ferries and getting Scottish education back to its best, in order to deliver the change that Scotland deserves.”

The Presiding Officer: I call Malcolm Offord.

14:45

Malcolm Offord (West Scotland) (Reform): So, here we go again—welcome back to groundhog day. Doesn’t the SNP just love debating matters that are reserved to Westminster instead of doing the day job? Is it any wonder that 2 million Scots did not vote—

Members: We cannot hear—turn the microphone round.

Malcolm Offord: I will start again.

Is it any wonder that 2 million Scots did not vote in the election on 7 May?

Holyrood controls 60 per cent of the spending in Scotland. Moreover, with control over devolved matters in this chamber, it controls 80 per cent of daily life in Scotland: our schools, hospitals, roads, policing and communities. That is what hard-working Scots want this Parliament to focus on—how to build prosperity for families and communities, not endless debates on the neverendum question.

So, why does the SNP indulge itself by continually debating matters that are reserved to Westminster? We all know why. It is a deflection strategy, because the SNP does not want to focus on the track record of what it has done in the day job: the fact that our economy is anaemic and promotes welfare over work; the fact that our taxes are too high and provide a disincentive to productivity; the fact that our planning is so bad that small and medium-sized enterprises are shutting down; the fact that 93 per cent of Scots say that healthcare needs reform; and the fact that, in education, our schools have gone from outstanding to average, and the attainment gap is widening; the fact that in jobs and skills, we have three quarters of a million adult Scots not working, yet we bring in 300 welders from the Philippines to work in our shipyards; and the fact that community cohesion is breaking down in our most vulnerable communities.

That is why 2 million Scots did not vote. There is no point, because nothing changes. All we get is managed decline and mid-table mediocrity—they are scunnered by the SNP. Things are never its fault—it is always the victim.

Let us turn to the motion on indyref 2. The First Minister asked a question: is the UK a voluntary union? There has never been any doubt that it is a voluntary union. Margaret Thatcher made it very clear to Alex Salmond that the UK was a voluntary union; she said to him that she did not want the UK to break up, but that if he delivered a democratic mandate from the Scottish people to leave the UK, they could leave the UK. The Tories have got themselves in a mess on this, because all they ever say is no—it is always no—to another referendum.

Neil Gray: What is the democratic mandate?

Malcolm Offord: I will address that in my next point—I will give the exact numbers on that, because it is a key point that we will come to in the discussion.

Even in 2016, after the EU Brexit vote, the leader of the Tories, Ruth Davidson, said that it was unconstitutional to say that there will never, ever be another referendum. We cannot sit in this chamber and say that there will never ever be another referendum, but we can say that, right now, there is no appetite from the Scottish people to have such a thing. We should be saying to ourselves that, for at least 10 years, we

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should not be talking about this, because this Parliament should focus right now on devolved matters in order to make Scotland the most successful part of the UK.

Craig Hoy: I thank Lord Offord for giving way. In this chamber, he promised the smack of firm opposition, so why is there no Reform amendment to the woeful SNP motion?

Malcolm Offord: The answer to that is that we do not believe that we should be debating this matter.

Craig Hoy: You are!

Malcolm Offord: We do not believe—

Craig Hoy: Vote Reform to sit it out.

Malcolm Offord: Can I continue?

The constitution is a matter reserved to Westminster. We should not even be discussing it today, hence there is no Reform amendment—[*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Okay—members have made their point.

Malcolm Offord: The Tories like to call me some sort of closet nationalist—I accept that—and they say that Reform UK has members in it who previously supported independence.

To clarify, I would align myself with John Buchan, who was a Conservative MP. A hundred years ago, speaking in the House of Commons in 1932, John Buchan said that every Scot

“should be a Scottish Nationalist.”

He went on to say:

“If it could be proved that a separate Scottish Parliament were desirable, that is to say that the merits were greater than the disadvantages and dangers”,

Scots

“should support it.”—[*Official Report, House of Commons, 24 November 1932; Vol 272, c 261.*]

My view is that John Buchan was not advocating Scottish independence, as we are discussing today, but was a unionist nationalist. That is how I would align myself—strongly Scottish in identity and culture, but committed to the United Kingdom, which is the best place for us to build our prosperity. He argued for preserving Scotland’s national character within the union rather than dissolving the union. That is my position.

The question is, what is the SNP’s position? It has become increasingly clear that the SNP’s position on independence is that it does not actually want it. If it did, it would have spent the past 12 years actually preparing Scotland to become independent. It would have spent the past 12 years answering the questions that it could not answer in 2014, such as what our currency would be, how to borrow money without a credit card—that is pretty basic—and how to join the EU when its members are allowed only a 4 per cent deficit and Scotland has a 12 per cent deficit.

Emma Roddick (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP): I certainly look forward to never hearing Reform MSPs speak in this Parliament about reserved matters, but I am very keen that the member answers the earlier question—if this is a voluntary union, how does Scotland leave?

Malcolm Offord: It is very nice of the member to lead me exactly to that point.

There has been no answer on any of these matters: currency; the deficit—we have a 12 per cent deficit, but the EU needs a 3 per cent deficit; a hard border with England when 60 per cent of our exports from Scotland go to England; pensions, when Scottish pensioners are greatly protected by the umbrella of 65 million rather than 5 million contributors; and defence, when we have Russian submarines circling Scotland right now.

I say to the Scottish National Party that Alex Salmond did a pretty admirable job in moving support for the independence movement from 30 per cent to 45 per cent. I would argue that when he passed the baton to Nicola Sturgeon, he was entitled to think that she and John Swinney would move it from 45 per cent to 60 per cent, but what has actually happened? To answer the two interventions, polling in 2014 showed that 1.4 million Scots would vote for the separatist parties. In 2021, in the Holyrood election, that number was 1.3 million Scots. Three weeks ago, on 7 May, 1 million Scots voted for separatist parties. That is less than a quarter of the electorate voting for separation. How can that ever be considered a mandate to break up the UK? To quote the First Minister, how can that be presented as “compelling and demonstrable” evidence that Scots want to separate from the UK? I do not see it myself.

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I will finish with this little anecdote. When I was a Scotland Office minister, I went to the Arctic Circle assembly in Iceland. My job was to shadow “air miles” Angus Robertson. At every meeting that he went into, I had to go in afterwards, as he ran around the world telling everyone how monstrous Westminster was and that it would not let Scotland go. The Icelandic Prime Minister said to me that Mr Robertson had just been in and complained about Westminster being nasty to him and not letting Scotland have independence. I said that, in my reckoning, Norway went independent in 1905 after a 96 per cent vote in favour. She agreed. I said that Iceland went independent in 1944 after a 98 per cent vote in favour, and that we had a vote in 2014 and only 45 per cent of people voted for independence. She said that it is difficult enough to launch an independent country with 96 per cent support and it cannot be done with 45 per cent.

The fact is that the majority of Scots do not favour separation. This debate is just a performative ritual that rolls around every five years. The SNP has only got itself to blame for this. I think that, in the future, it will look back on the previous 25 years of Government and wonder why on earth it did not advance the cause by making Scotland indy ready and why, instead, all it ever did was talk and blame Westminster. The same old SNP—always the victim.

The Presiding Officer: We move to the open part of the debate. The first eight speakers are all making their maiden speeches and, therefore, there will be no interventions. Whoever is in the chair will remind members of that as we progress. The first person to speak in the open debate will be Kate Campbell, who has a generous seven minutes.

14:54

Kate Campbell (Edinburgh Eastern, Musselburgh and Tranent) (SNP): The first thing I will do is thank the voters of Edinburgh Eastern, Musselburgh and Tranent—a wonderful, diverse constituency that represents so much of modern Scotland, from our beaches to our castles and from our harbour to our university. The constituency stretches out from urban communities in the capital city to rural villages. There are large new-build estates, modern industrial estates, commuters, farmers, former mining and fishing communities, affluent communities and communities that are struggling with poverty. I thank all those communities, because every single one of them voted with optimism; they voted for positive policies to make life better. They did not vote for a negative, to stop something or to blame others; they voted with hope for Scotland’s future. I will carry the expectation of that hope with me for the next five years.

This week, the Scottish Government is getting stuck in to delivering on the promises that were made during the election campaign: to expand childcare, improve the NHS and tackle the cost of living crisis. Today, we are calling for a section 30 order to be made to transfer the powers to hold the independence referendum that the people of Scotland voted for a couple of weeks ago. There is now the highest number of pro-independence MSPs that has ever been seen in the Parliament. Today, a majority of MSPs will call for that section 30 order to be made. If the unionist parties want to call this a voluntary union and say that we are a functioning democracy, they, too, must support the transfer of those powers so that the people of Scotland can choose their future—because that is what they voted for.

The people of Scotland voted for that because Westminster is not working. In my lifetime, Thatcher decimated public services, asset stripping the common good. Then Blair saddled us with private finance initiative debt, took us into illegal wars and, during a period of economic prosperity, squandered the opportunity to tackle structural inequality. Then the Tories and Lib Dems, hand in hand, ushered in an age of austerity, allowing our infrastructure to deteriorate and our people to suffer.

Then there was the Brexit that we did not vote for, which has stifled Scottish businesses, damaged trade and pushed up the cost of goods for us all. There was no serious plan to deal with Putin’s war in Ukraine or the aftermath of the pandemic, just bluster from Boris, the most deeply unserious Prime Minister the UK had ever seen—until Liz Truss, who took a wild gamble that led to skyrocketing Government borrowing costs and skyrocketing mortgage costs for ordinary people who were already suffering.

Now, there is a Labour Government that is too paralysed with fear to do anything, clinging to power for power’s sake. It is a technocratic regime with no vision, no ambition and no sense of mission to make life better for the people who need it the most. It is lacking in leadership as Trump derails the global economy; instead, it is descending into internal psychodrama when people need leadership the most.

Looming on the horizon is Farage, the best friend of the billionaires, who wants to privatise the NHS and blame migrants for the cost of living. Let us put on the record that it is not migrants who have created the cost of living crisis but the successive failure of UK Government after UK Government. Westminster has not worked for the people of Scotland for a long time. When other members talk about voters being scunnered, this is why: decade after decade of abject failure by Westminster to respond to the needs of the people.

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It is for the members who have lodged amendments that are against having that section 30 order to defend that record, but they will not. Why is that? They cannot defend the record, because it is indefensible. Instead, they will talk about an amorphous concept of change and pretend that devolved powers are enough. However, the truth is that the people do not trust the parties of Westminster, and that is because they do not trust the institution of Westminster. People look around and they know that our society needs to fundamentally change.

The movers of the amendments by the unionist parties need to justify why they think that things should stay the same, because that is not what people voted for. People voted to have the opportunity to have their say on independence. The people know—even if the unionist parties do not—that we need our independence. We need it to be able to tax the wealth of the multibillionaires, rejoin Europe and fix our energy policy.

We need independence to make fiscal choices about investing in our infrastructure, our people and our communities—to foster economic prosperity, build wealth in those communities, tackle inequality and get rid of economically illiterate policies like the Labour UK Government's hike in employer national insurance contributions, which is a tax on jobs when the economy is already under pressure. Those are things that we simply cannot do with devolved powers alone.

We hear time and time again that we need to get on with the day job. This is the day job for the SNP: delivering the best that we possibly can for the people of Scotland. The SNP is ambitious for Scotland—not to patch things up or tinker at the edges with devolved power, but to achieve the constitutional change that we fundamentally need to radically transform our country, delivering prosperity, equality and hope with the powers that can come only from being an independent nation. The majority of MSPs today are calling for those powers, and I hope that all parties will recognise that democratic mandate.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): I call Donald MacKinnon for their first speech.

15:01

Donald MacKinnon (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (Lab): It is the privilege of my life to be elected to represent the islands that I love. I pay tribute to my predecessor, Alasdair Allan, for his 19 years of dedicated service to Na h-Eileanan an Iar. *[Applause.]* I also thank all those who supported me to get here: those who voted for me, all the volunteers who knocked on doors for me and, not least, our Scottish Labour MP, Torcuil Crichton, who was by my side throughout the campaign. For the first time since 2005, our islands are represented by a Labour MP and a Labour MSP—a team working together for our islands.

I am disappointed that the Government's first action of the new parliamentary session has been to lodge a motion that talks about independence. During the election campaign, I spoke to thousands of people across Na h-Eileanan an Iar, from Vatersay in the south to Ness in the north, and I can count on two hands the number of people who mentioned the constitution to me on the doorstep. That is not to say that all those people I spoke to do not support independence. We should all be cautious about how we interpret the mandates that we have been given to be here.

However, this is about priorities. I am here because the people who voted for me wanted change. They saw a Scottish Government and a Scottish Parliament that, all too often, were not working for them, and changing that was their priority.

I stood in the election because I was worried about the future of our islands. With the frightening population projections that cast doubt on the future sustainability of our communities, we are in a crisis, and much is at stake. That is what I believe that my constituents want me to focus on.

Far too many people from my generation want to make their life back home, but they cannot. A lack of access to housing, good jobs and childcare, as well as declining public services and a transport system that is not working, is holding back the next generation.

I want to focus on how we solve access to housing. I want to focus on how we grow our economy—not just here in the central belt but across Scotland and in our islands—to provide the opportunities and jobs of the future. I want to focus on how we can make childcare work in our islands and on delivering good public services. All too often, people tell me that they feel things are going backwards. That must change.

I want to focus on delivering a transport system that actually works. Currently, islanders are faced with a ferry service that, at times, is barely functioning and with eye-watering prices for flights. Last week, every ferry route in the Western Isles was either disrupted or had a warning of potential disruption due to technical or operational issues. Islanders know that ferries will not always be able to sail—we know all about the weather and that ships break down—but we are well beyond acceptable levels of disruption.

In the past fortnight, I have heard from constituents who could not get to hospital appointments, accommodation providers who are worried about the future of their businesses and islanders who are simply

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at the end of their tether as they try to go about their daily lives. The islanders I spoke to during the election campaign want the Scottish Government's priority to be delivering a ferry service that works for islanders, not talking about the constitution.

We will no doubt hear many claims in maiden speeches over the coming weeks that members' constituencies are the most beautiful in the country. They will all be wrong, because everyone knows that Na h-Eileanan an Iar is the jewel in Scotland's crown. From our stunning beaches to our crofting townships, rugged hills and towering cliffs, there is nowhere quite like it.

However, what makes our islands really special is the people. I was born and raised in Arnol, a crofting township, and, like many islanders, I had more than one job before coming here. I managed a community-owned estate, and I served my community as an on-call firefighter while also crofting. That grounding in community is what I want to bring to debates in Parliament. The place that I have grown up in, worked in and served has shaped me. I care deeply about its future, and I am worried that if we do not get things right here, that future will be in doubt. That matters for the survival of our Gaelic language and for our culture, and it should matter for all of Scotland.

Crofting and community land ownership are both deeply political. Without the actions that were taken by the parliamentarians of the past and driven by the activism of people who came before me, the world that I grew up in would not have existed. I will take every opportunity I can to stand up and raise my voice for the issues that matter to my constituents in this Parliament. This is what ambition for our islands and Scotland looks like. *[Applause.]*

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Lloyd Melville for their first speech.

15:05

Lloyd Melville (Angus South) (SNP): It is a privilege to make my first speech in this debate. I will start, as others have done, by thanking my predecessors—Graeme Dey and, of course, the late Andrew Welsh—who were both formidable voices for their communities and for Scotland. As Angus South's MSP, it is a real honour for me to represent the beautiful, diverse communities that I know and love. My pledge is to always put my constituents' voices at the heart of everything that I do in this place.

This debate is about ambition, and ambition begins at home. Members may know that the declaration of Arbroath was written and sealed in my constituency. It was a statement of Scotland's nationhood but also of Scotland's confidence—of the belief that this country had the right to determine its own future.

This Parliament was an ambition once, too—the ambition to bring power closer to home. People campaigned for it, argued for it, marched for it and voted for it. Now it is here—in the words of the late Winnie Ewing,

“a Parliament we can build a dream on”.—*[Official Report, 12 May 1999; c 6.]*

I have not known a Scotland without this place. That is a privilege for me, but it is also a responsibility to ensure that this Parliament lives up to the ambition of those who fought to bring it into being.

When we talk about ambition, we so often talk about the destination—the Scotland that we want our children and grandchildren to inherit. However, ambition does not begin at the destination. It begins with bairns waking up for school, looking forward to another day of learning. It begins with parents working hard to give their family a better life. It begins with young people being able to get to university without getting into tens of thousands of pounds of debt. Our ambition for Scotland should match the talent, wealth and energy of Scotland itself. That means no longer accepting a system in which our resources are abundant but our powers are limited, and in which our people are ambitious but our choices are constrained. The mandate given to this Parliament is not just to talk about ambition but to act on it, in people's lives here and now.

However, a mandate is not just a number on a chart or a line in a motion. It is built from conversations—on doorsteps, on high streets and in schools, community halls and homes across the country. Over the past year, I have spoken to thousands of people across Angus South. In our towns, villages and glens, I have listened to people tell me about what they worry about, what they hope for and what they want Scotland to become. What people told me was clear: they want a Government that understands daily life, that is focused on improving it and that has an ambition that matches their own. That is exactly what this SNP Government will be—a Government that understands that ambition is not a word in a motion, but what people are trying to build at home, at work and in their communities. It is in the business that is able to grow, in the farm that is able to keep producing, in the family that is able to pay the bills and in the young person who can look at Scotland and see a future that is as ambitious as they are.

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That should not be beyond us. A country with our talent, our resources and our energy should be able to give its people security and opportunity. However, under Westminster, Scotland is too often left doing more with less—paying higher bills on our own energy, watching wealth leave our shores while communities are told to wait and being forced to fit our ambition to choices made elsewhere. That cannot be as good as it gets for Scotland. That cannot be the limit of our ambitions for our country.

Independence is not only a slogan; it is the power to put Scotland's wealth to work for Scotland's people. Why is it that pensioners in Glen Isla cannot heat their homes in an energy-rich nation? Why is it that people in Arbroath can look out their windows at turbines in the North Sea yet still face bills that they cannot afford? Why is it that Scotland produces the power but too often sees the wealth flow elsewhere? The answer is not that Scotland does not have the resources, skills or ambition. The answer is that we are denied the power to use them. Our wealth is extracted. Our workers are discarded. Our people are told that their wishes do not matter.

Scotland can do better than that, and Scotland should not need permission to do better than that. That is why we must have a fresh choice on independence—not because of identity, history or for its own sake, but to improve the lives of the people who live here. That is what this debate is about: power with a purpose. We need the power to build a Scotland where, in the words of Hamish Henderson,

“a' the bairns o' Adam can find breid, barley-bree and painted room.”

However, we need not only poetry but a promise: a promise that Scotland's wealth will serve everyone who makes Scotland their home; a promise that no one will be held back by poverty, insecurity or decisions made elsewhere; and a promise that this country can become what every good home should be—a place of safety, dignity, opportunity and hope, where we can live well with our neighbours on our shared islands. That is the ambition that we carry and the future that we must deliver. *[Applause.]*

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Patricia Gibson for their first speech.

15:11

Patricia Gibson (Cunninghame South) (SNP): I am delighted to be called to deliver my first speech in our national Parliament. How fitting it is that it is on the very issue that brought me into politics in the first place: ambition for Scotland and the very normal and simple principle that the people of Scotland are the only people who should make decisions about the country in which they live.

First, I pay tribute to my predecessor, Ruth Maguire, who served in this place for 10 years. She is a truly kind and thoughtful person, of whom I am very fond. I wish her well and extend my best wishes to her husband Peter and her beloved girls as she begins the next chapter of her future. *[Applause.]*

I stand here with the honour of representing the constituency of Cunninghame South, which comprises the towns of Irvine, Kilwinning, Stevenston, Stewarton and Dunlop. Irvine, the largest population centre in the constituency with a population of around 34,000, is the birthplace of not one but two former First Ministers of Scotland: Nicola Sturgeon and Jack McConnell. It is a town where Robert Burns worked and that now has two streets named after him: Burns Street and Burns Crescent.

The town of Kilwinning, which is known as the crossroads of Ayrshire, dates back to the 600s. It boasts a rich heritage and was famous for its archery in medieval times, and it is tied to the ancient Kilwinning abbey. It is also the birthplace of world-renowned composer Sir James MacMillan, Booker prize nominee Andrew O'Hagan and celebrated author Janice Galloway.

Stevenston is also a town that boasts links with Scotland's national bard. It was the birthplace of Miss Lesley Baillie, who Robert Burns met in 1792 and with whom he was quite taken. A memorial stands to Bonnie Lesley in the town to this very day.

Moving from north to east, Stewarton is a thriving town that dates back to the 12th century, where Robert Burns's uncle helped guard the Stewarton laigh church graveyard against body snatchers.

Last but by no means least is the picturesque town of Dunlop, which is famed for its cheese, the Ayrshire cow breed and the beautiful Dunlop parish church, which dates back 400 years. That is the diverse range of towns that I now have the honour to represent.

As for the motion before us, the election a couple of weeks ago indicated that the Scottish public have placed their trust in parties that fully support an independent Scotland. This is the most pro-independent Scottish Parliament that we have ever known. Independence is a normal state of affairs, and it will serve Scotland as a means by which to fully realise her ambitions. It is the means by which we can build the fairer, more compassionate and more just Scotland that we all want to see. The reality is that, unless we are

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unshackled from a failing Westminster system, decisions will not be made in the best interests of the people of Scotland.

For example, Scotland has the energy, but we do not have the power. As a result, Scotland's energy wealth has flowed to the London Treasury while, in Scotland, we pay some of the highest energy bills in Europe. That is not good enough. Scotland needs the power to harness her own resources for the benefit of the people of Scotland.

Since the dawn of devolution, we have come so far—free university tuition based on the ability to learn, not the ability to pay; the expansion of childcare; free prescriptions; minimum unit pricing; and inroads being made in tackling child poverty through the Scottish child payment and other measures—but there is so much more to do to improve the lives of the people of Scotland. The ambition for Scotland among SNP members knows no limits and can be delivered through Scotland becoming a fully fledged independent nation.

We know that other small independent nations can thrive and prosper, but no other small independent nation has the vast resources that we have in energy-rich Scotland. In energy terms, Scotland has hit the jackpot. For Scotland, as an independent nation, the sky truly would be the limit. Moreover, let us not forget that Scotland has one third of Britain's landmass, half its territorial waters, more than 60 per cent of UK fishing zones, 98 per cent of its oil reserves, 63 per cent of its natural gas, a quarter of Europe's offshore wind resources and 90 per cent of the UK's fresh water. To be honest, if I were a member of the UK Westminster establishment, I would not want Scotland to leave the union either, but that must be a matter for the people of Scotland.

It is time for us to break the constitutional logjam and give the people of Scotland the right to determine their own future. Democracy is not an event. It is a process, and it is a process in which the people of Scotland have a sovereign right to assert their views. Those who advocate for the union have repeatedly failed to articulate what the route out of it is, because they cannot. Their arguments are exhausted, and all that they have left is stonewalling and attempts to trap Scotland in a union that simply does not work for Scotland. Opponents of independence seem to pretend not to realise or understand that independence is a means by which to pursue the highest ambitions for Scotland. They argue that, instead, we should focus on issues such as the cost of living, but we do. What those who support the union are really asking us to do is to continue to tackle the big challenges that Scotland faces with one hand tied behind our back in order to appease vested interests, and we will not do so.

It is time to put Scotland's future in Scotland's hands, with decisions being made in Scotland for the people of Scotland. That is why the motion seeks to devolve powers to consult the people of Scotland on this vital issue—then we can truly unleash Scotland's potential as an independent country to better support and improve the lives of all our people. *[Applause.]*

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Senga Beresford to make their first speech, for a generous six minutes.

15:19

Senga Beresford (South Scotland) (Reform): I give my biggest thanks to all the Reform voters in the south of Scotland who have given me the opportunity to stand here today. I am a mother of four and a small business owner from Dumfries. I am here in the chamber today not because I have a political ambition but because I grew sick of watching my beloved country be failed by a procession of incompetent SNP Governments and equally incompetent Opposition parties.

It was the country's declining education system that really opened my eyes. My own children range in age from 32 to 13, so I have seen such failures first hand. Spelling no longer matters, we do not bother to mark pupils before they sit their first exams at 15, and we have taken away any element of competitiveness. Because of that, my two youngest children travel across the border on a daily basis to a school that offers a better education. I wonder whether the First Minister would have them show their passports on that trip.

At a time when people across Scotland are worried about their failing public services, I find it astonishing that the Government has once again chosen to drag a Parliament that is meant to be focused on delivering for the people into this divisive constitutional debate. People did not send us here to endlessly rehash the arguments of the past; they sent us here to deal with the problems of the present.

Our NHS is under enormous strain. Expectant mothers in Stranraer, which is in my region, have needed to travel 75 miles to reach the nearest maternity unit since the Galloway community hospital maternity wing was shut down. A constituent even told me that his mother was sent to Liverpool for an operation, because our services are so backlogged this side of the border. It seems that the SNP wants to throw stones at the UK, but it is all too happy to accept Westminster's help when its failings become too extreme.

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Small businesses are being crushed and, in the hospitality sector, restaurants and pubs are closing daily. Those are not just Opposition talking points; they are the lived realities of people across Scotland—the people the Government is tasked to protect. Yet, instead of focusing on fixing the problems that it created, the SNP wants to spend parliamentary time debating independence. Why? Because constitutional grievance is easier than Government responsibility. The Government wants to distract and subvert, so that it does not need to answer for its abysmal record.

Let us remember what the SNP told the Scottish people: if it secured a majority, it would claim a mandate for another independence referendum. The Scottish people gave their verdict, and they did not give the Government a majority. Not only did the SNP fail to secure that mandate; more than 60 per cent of voters voted against it. That matters. In a democracy, mandates cannot simply be invented after the fact because a Government dislikes the outcome. If the Scottish Government respected the will of the people, it would recognise that voters are exhausted by constitutional obsession and want the Parliament to focus on the day job.

Frankly, after two decades in office, the Government should have enough confidence in its own domestic record to defend it. Instead, every time that pressure builds and standards fall, we see the same playbook being rolled out once again: the Government will change the subject, reignite division and whine about the constitution.

Scotland deserves better than permanent campaigning. People want competent government and they want outcomes, not distractions. Leadership is about priorities, and the Scottish people made their priorities clear, with the majority voting against separation, against division and against expensive referendums during a cost of living crisis.

I say to the Government: stop focusing on the politics of division and start focusing on the responsibilities of government. On behalf of the 62 per cent of people who voted against you, I say: just do your job and stop wasting everybody's time.

15:23

Alex Kerr (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP): I feel incredibly grateful to be able to stand here and represent the people of Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse in our nation's Parliament. During the campaign I travelled the length and breadth of the constituency. We spoke to people in every community: in Hamilton, Dalsersf, Quarter, Ferniegair, Netherburn, Ashgill, Larkhall and Stonehouse. It is an honour to represent such a diverse constituency, from the rural villages reaching to the Clyde valley to the populous towns of Hamilton and Larkhall. It is an area with a rich tapestry of history, from Chatelherault to being at the heart of the industrial revolution. I assure those people that I will never take for granted the privilege that they have given me to serve as their MSP.

I thank Davy Russell for the work that he has done for constituents in his time as an MSP. I know that he was focused on helping those in need and how grateful those people were for his assistance.

We in the SNP ran a campaign focused on hope—hope for a better future for Scotland as an independent country back in the European family of nations. While other parties spoke about how they would stop the SNP, we focused on telling the people of Scotland how independence and an SNP Government would make their lives better. The public considered our message and they sent the SNP back as the governing party of Scotland for a historic fifth term on 38.2 per cent of the constituency vote. That is a considerably more convincing result than the 33.7 per cent that Labour returned in the general election in 2024 or the 36.9 per cent that the Tories returned in 2015. Due to the UK's first-past-the-post electoral system, both those results returned unrepresentative majorities, but, whether regarding Brexit or scrapping the winter fuel payment, no one claimed that those parties' vote share delegitimised the manifesto that they ran on to be elected.

It is one of the most basic tenets of democracy that, if a party wins an election, it should be able to implement its manifesto. The Scottish people have now elected the largest-ever pro-independence majority to this Parliament. Fundamentally, it must not be forgotten that a request for a section 30 order is not actually a request for independence. It is simply a request for the power to allow the people of Scotland to have a democratic say in their future.

Such a short-sighted rejection from the unionist parties is an admission of weakness by those in favour of preserving the last vestiges of an imperial project that is long past its sell-by date. If they were confident in the strength of their conviction, if they were sure of the economic strength of their arguments, if they were sure about remaining shackled to an increasingly economically and politically isolated Brexit Britain and if they believed that the people of Scotland were with them, why would they fear giving them a say on their future?

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We only ask for the right to decide. The people of Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse put me here for the purpose of demanding that that right be respected. The people of Scotland, by sending the largest-ever group of pro-independence MSPs to the Parliament, are demanding that that right is respected.

People have had enough of Westminster decisions making their lives worse. Despite every council area in Scotland voting to remain in the EU, we were dragged out against our will because it was in the interest of the Palace of Westminster and the British state. In the end, that is the only interest that really matters in this broken political system. As a result of sacrificing the interests of communities across Scotland, what has happened? Food inflation compared with that in countries on the continent is up. The cost of energy compared with that in countries on the continent is up. Economic growth compared with that of countries on the continent is down.

If we had been independent, we could have protected our strategic resources such as the refinery at Grangemouth, which had been a crucial refinery of jet fuel—now in short supply around the globe. Instead, Anas Sarwar promised the folk at the refinery that their jobs would be saved, before the UK Labour Prime Minister sacrificed the workers at Grangemouth in order to save steelworks in England for the national interests of the Palace of Westminster.

In short, our people have been left significantly poorer in our living standards, our economy and our international standing. The question is no longer whether Scotland can afford to be an independent country. The question is how much longer Scotland can afford to be shackled to this increasingly damaging and dysfunctional political union.

The British political system is broken. The old ways are being swept away, and something new must rise to replace them. The Welsh and the Northern Irish can see it, too, having elected pro-independence First Ministers. For the first time ever, every devolved nation is led by a party that believes in a partnership of equal independent nations. I firmly believe that that is the only way to deliver the brighter future that our communities expect, and what is best for our communities will always be at the heart of what I do.

I had the privilege to work for Christina McKelvie, who represented the constituency that I now represent since its establishment for three parliamentary sessions. Her dedication to our communities, to serving the public and to standing up for what she believed in, no matter the cost, are things that I will spend the rest of my days trying to emulate. As a democrat, I am comfortable that the voters whom I represent will have the say on whether I succeed, because we should never fear the judgment of the public. That is perhaps a lesson for members on the Opposition benches.

15:29

Michelle Campbell (Renfrewshire North and Cardonald) (SNP): Presiding Officer, let me begin by congratulating you and your fellow Presiding Officers on your new roles. I wish you all the very best as you guide the Parliament through the years ahead.

As the member for the newly formed constituency of Renfrewshire North and Cardonald, I stand here deeply proud and genuinely honoured. I take a moment to thank my predecessors whose service helped to shape the communities that I now represent: former First Minister Humza Yousaf, who represented an area that is now part of the Cardonald addition to the constituency; and Natalie Don-Innes, who represented Renfrewshire North. Both have given years of commitment and care to their constituents, so I thank them sincerely and wish them well in the future.

Renfrewshire North and Cardonald is a remarkably diverse constituency. It runs from Langbank on the Clyde, through Bishopton, Erskine, Inchinnan and Renfrew and on to Penilee, Cardonald and north Pollok. I will not be walking that route any time soon, but I will make my way round those communities to ensure that they know that they have representation that matters to them. Each community has its own identity, strengths and aspirations. Having represented Erskine and Inchinnan in my role as a councillor, I am incredibly proud of what we achieved as part of a strong SNP administration in Renfrewshire Council. I will continue working collaboratively with councillors from across the constituency to deliver the best possible outcomes for the people we serve.

I turn to the motion before us. I served as a nurse in the Scottish NHS for more than 20 years. One of the greatest privileges of my life has been to stand with people in their most vulnerable moments in life and in death. That experience shapes everything that I believe about public service. It reinforces the responsibility on all of us to protect, support and invest in a modern NHS that can adapt and respond to the needs of our people. We face the brutal reality of a Westminster Government that is marching to the right, has different priorities and is dismissive of Scotland's voice. Only under an SNP Government have we been able to shield our NHS, public services and communities from Westminster's worst decisions. This SNP Government has

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stood as a barrier between our people and the chaos created at Westminster. In Cardonald, in my constituency, I am proud to see the delivery of Scotland's first GP-led walk-in clinic. Having knocked on many doors in the lead-up to the election, I know how important and welcome that investment is for so many. It offers diverse care and treatment on our community's doorstep.

However, even the best devolved Government cannot protect Scotland from a Parliament that treats our mandate as optional, our resources as its own to spend and our consent as irrelevant. The SNP Scottish Government's ambitious plans require long-term certainty to ensure the kind of stability that allows us to invest confidently, plan strategically and build for future generations rather than firefighting the consequences of decisions that have been made elsewhere. Scotland cannot deliver its full potential while operating within a constitutional settlement where the rules can be rewritten at any moment, where progress can be stalled by a Government that Scotland did not vote for and where our national priorities are too often treated as secondary. Those ambitions demand the full powers of independence, not a system in which Scotland's future is shaped by shifting political winds at Westminster, rather than by the people who live and work here.

Everyone has their own journey to yes. Mine was not inherited: I grew up in a family where support for the union was the natural position. In 2012, I was no, but, in 2014, something changed. It was like a light being switched on. I voted yes, and my conviction has only strengthened since that moment. I firmly and unapologetically believe that Scottish independence is the only path by which our nation can truly flourish and my previous work for a Westminster MP only reinforced that belief. I saw at first hand the sheer absurdity of trying to make progress within an institution that still clings to its own pomp and ceremony as if that alone imparts wisdom. It is an institution that is more interested in its own traditions, hierarchy and self-importance than in the people it was built to serve.

Regardless of the injustice that is presented, and regardless of the need, Westminster's instinct is always the same: to protect Westminster. Scotland's interests are at best an afterthought, and too often an inconvenience.

We have lived the consequences of that attitude. Scotland voted overwhelmingly to remain in the European Union, yet we were taken out of it anyway. Our voice was not just ignored; it was dismissed. When Scotland's Parliament, which is elected by the people of Scotland, sought the democratic right to hold a second independence referendum, that request was blocked. It was not debated or negotiated; it was blocked.

If a union is truly voluntary, the people within it must have the right to choose. If that right is withheld, it is not a voluntary union at all. We see that contempt in the refusal to work constructively with a Scottish Government that has been elected time and again by the people of Scotland. We see it in the sneers and the inflammatory language such as "separatists"—a term that is used to belittle legitimate democratic aspirations. We see it in the way that Scotland's mandate is treated as optional, our resources as theirs to spend and our consent as irrelevant.

Let me be clear: it is not the SNP or the wider yes movement that fuels division and hate. Scotland sees the reality of the union that is on offer and, more than ever, Scotland is saying, "No more": no more suffering from decisions made by a Government that we did not choose, no more having our Parliament's hands tied behind its back, and no more being made to feel lesser in our own nation.

Scotland deserves better. Scotland is better. There is only one answer that makes sense, and that is the full autonomous decision making of Scottish independence. The people of Scotland have returned the largest pro-independence majority that this Parliament has ever seen. That mandate is clear. This Parliament is at its best when it works together for a confident, fair and ambitious Scotland. That is the Scotland that I believe in, that is the Scotland that I will fight for and that is the Scotland that we can build with independence.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Kayleigh Kinross-O'Neill, who is making their first speech.

15:37

Kayleigh Kinross-O'Neill (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Green): I open by recognising what a huge privilege it is to speak in the chamber, as I am doing for the first time, not least in a debate about securing a positive future for Scotland—a fairer, greener and independent Scotland.

I was born only a couple of months before the reconvening of the Scottish Parliament in 1999. I say that not to make some people feel a bit old but to say that devolution and I have grown up together. Deputy Presiding Officer, I grew up in your constituency, in Motherwell, where the ghosts of cooling towers sit above hopeful regeneration while thousands of families who are still affected by job losses struggle to this day. I watched my uncles, grandparents and family friends become shells of themselves following years of underemployment and unemployment due to their livelihoods being pulled from under them. I did not live through the Thatcher years, but I lived through the trauma, uncertainty, austerity and anger that passes

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through generations in our communities. The failed Thatcherite experiments that still cause so much damage to those communities through issues ranging from privatised bus networks to sewage polluting our natural environment need to come to an end.

Independence provides a fresh start: a break from the past, and an opportunity to build a better Scotland that works for all. Because of that, the vision of an independent Scotland has always struck a chord with me on a personal level, and I know that a lot of people my age feel the same way. Because the subject is so important to me, it felt fitting that one of the first pieces of engagement that I undertook with my new constituents—an Instagram story—should be on independence. I asked a range of folk for their thoughts, and they said that independence is equality, democracy, internationalism and solidarity; it is trust in making our own decisions and the freedom to make our own laws for ourselves; it is the power to be radical and make the change that is needed for people and for the planet; it is hope and choice, and an opportunity to rejoin the European Union; and it is hope that there may still be any alternative to all that we are ever given.

I was not old enough to vote in 2014, but the result left me and many of my generation feeling helpless about our future—the same type of helplessness that was forced on us by the Brexit vote. The truth is that, when living with the threat of having personal independence taken away, seeing it happen to everyone in Scotland becomes painful. As a disabled person, I know all too well what it is like to have people above me tell me what I am and am not capable of. We are vilified by the media and the right-wing pundits in order to distract people from the real greed and fraud that prop up this system. Our existence and authority are constantly under scrutiny.

I will bring those comparisons together and touch briefly on the social model of disability. Scope, a disability equality charity, states:

“The social model of disability is a way of viewing the world ... The model says that people are disabled by barriers in society, not by their impairment or condition.”

That counters the medical model way of thinking, which focuses only on what a person currently has, instead of what they actually need. Scope goes on to say that that model

“creates low expectations and leads to people losing independence, choice and control in their lives.”

I will give an example that brings that a bit closer to home. Until this session of Parliament, we could not have had a Presiding Officer in a wheelchair—not because members should have been expected to fix themselves or sit aside and assume that they would never be elected anyway, but because the steps to the chair excluded equal opportunity.

I am disabled not solely because of my illness but because of the barriers that I face every day—in healthcare, in moving around, in accessing support and in just trying to live my life like anybody else. In that sense, Scotland has been disabled not by an inherent illness, but because we are held back by the needless barriers that Westminster has erected and the arrogant presumption that it knows better than we, the people of Scotland.

Following the election, and throughout the parliamentary session, I am determined to see bold change. We cannot go on under the same pressure, disrespect and uncertainty. We must create a fresh start with independence, with the emphasis on that being the start of Scotland’s progressive journey, not a final destination in itself.

I know that we cannot fix our inherent and systemic problems overnight but, with hope, honesty and respect, independence can and will be the real driver towards a better, greener future for all.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call George Adam, to be followed by Emma Roddick. You have up to a generous seven-and-a-half minutes, Mr Adam.

15:42

George Adam (Paisley) (SNP): Thank you, Presiding Officer. It is not often that I hear something like that when I rise to speak in the chamber.

Listening to the first speeches from members across the parties as one of the—I was going to say, “older”—more experienced members of the Parliament, I hope that we can maintain their tone as we move forward and have important discussions such as this debate today.

I am glad to be back as Paisley’s MSP. Someone has already won the Paisley bingo in their speech. However, I feel reinvigorated to do the good work that we have to do, because of the many conversations that I have had with people in Paisley. We spend so much time in the Parliament that we sometimes get

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sucked into its world and forget that there is a real world out there with real people, real problems and real issues. That is one of the things that I have always tried to focus on in representing the people of Paisley.

However, unfortunately, although the Opposition parties said last week that they would be a wee bit more positive, they have found themselves right back in the same place that they were in before we all left, as if they have not learned any lessons from the absolute kicking that they got at the election. The negativity oozes out of them during debates such as this one. They do not tell us their plans, their ideas or what the benefit is of staying in the union. It is just constant negativity and the same old tired arguments that we have heard time and again.

For me, this is not some abstract debate or constitutional argument. It is about people and families. It is about communities such as mine in Paisley and about the future that we leave for our children and, for those of us of a certain vintage, our grandchildren.

When I think about independence, I do not first talk about flags, slogans or headlines. I think about the people I grew up with in Paisley, the families that I represent now, the pensioners who are worried about heating bills, the parents who are trying to stretch every pound to the end of the week and the young people who are wondering whether they will ever get the opportunities that their parents had.

That is what this debate is really about. For too long, decisions about Scotland have been made somewhere else, by Governments that Scotland did not vote for and that pursue priorities that Scotland did not choose. The people who pay the price for all of that are communities such as mine in Paisley.

We were told that Brexit would strengthen the economy, but instead it damaged businesses, pushed up prices and made life harder for ordinary families. Scotland rejected Brexit but got Brexit anyway. We were told that austerity was necessary, but communities such as mine saw cuts to services, pressures on families and rising inequality. All the while, Scotland remains one of the wealthiest countries in Europe. It is rich in energy, talent and innovation, yet too many people are struggling to get by. That cannot be right. That is why I believe strongly that the people who live in Scotland are best placed to make decisions for Scotland.

Where this Parliament has had the powers, we have used them to make different choices. We have introduced free prescriptions, expanded childcare, protected university tuition, introduced a Scottish child payment and helped to drive down child poverty. Those are not accidents; they are Scottish choices and Scottish priorities with Scottish values. Just imagine what we could do with the full powers of independence.

Imagine an energy-rich country where no pensioner fears putting the heating on. Imagine an economy that is designed around Scotland's needs, not Westminster's political games. Imagine migration policies that are built to support our NHS and care services instead of damaging them. Imagine being back in Europe, looking outward again and giving opportunities back to our young people. As John Lennon said,

"You may say I'm a dreamer, but I'm not the only one."

All of that is not fantasy. Countries across Europe that are the same size as Scotland or smaller are already doing it. Nations such as Denmark, Norway, Ireland and Finland are wealthier, fairer and more equal because they have the power to shape their own future. I refuse to believe that the people of Scotland are somehow less capable than the people in those countries. We have everything that we need to succeed.

When I speak about independence, I speak about hope, because politics without hope means absolutely nothing. I think about my own family. I think about children growing up in Paisley today, running through parks, going to our schools and dreaming about their future, about the world that they could be part of and how they can change the world. I ask myself what kind of country we want to hand to them. Do we want them to inherit the chaos of Westminster politics, the endless cycle of austerity and division, with Governments that they do not elect making decisions against Scotland's interests? Alternatively, do we want them to inherit a country that is confident enough to stand on its own feet, a country that believes in itself and one where decisions are made here by the people who live and work here?

Independence is not about turning our backs on anyone; it is about taking responsibility for ourselves. It is about building a Scotland where prosperity is shared, where public services are protected and where opportunity is not determined by people's postcode or background. In communities such as mine in Paisley, that matters deeply.

Paisley has always been a town built on resilience, hard work and community spirit. Through the highs and hardships, our people have always looked after one another. That spirit and the belief in fairness, dignity and opportunity are the very best of Scotland. I believe that independence gives us the chance to build a country that reflects those values fully. It would not be a perfect country overnight—nobody is pretending that it would be—but it would be a country with the powers to choose its own direction, fix its own problems and unlock its own enormous potential.

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Ultimately, it comes down to democracy. The people of Scotland have repeatedly elected pro-independence majorities to this Parliament. The principle should be simple—Scotland's future should be decided by the people who live in Scotland. No democracy should stop at the border. Therefore, let us have confidence in ourselves again, let us believe in what Scotland can become, and let us build a future that is worthy of our children and grandchildren—a future in which communities such as mine in Paisley are not left behind and are not a statistic in some report, but are right at the heart of a fairer, wealthier and independent Scotland. Just imagine what that future could be like.

15:49

Emma Roddick (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP): When I look at today's motion, I feel a deep sense of hope, optimism for what we can do, and joy that, yet again, the people of Scotland have chosen to elect an SNP Government that uses its time and power in this place to tackle poverty and be ambitious, not just for those who are already well off and well placed to be successful, but for absolutely everybody who we represent.

I joined the SNP because I had never felt as much hope as I did during the 2014 referendum campaign. It was the first time that I, as a young person growing up in an area of deprivation and attending a school that I was advised not to mention in job applications, felt that politics was something that I had a right to have a view on, and felt that somebody was listening when I shared that view.

I was not supposed to be here—something that I was reminded of by my Facebook memories the other day, as a post from my younger self during the higher exams season came up, explaining my teachers' reactions when I announced that I was going to take up a job in politics instead of what they had hoped I would do, which was to become a musician or an engineer, respectively.

In learning about the arguments for and against independence, I gained true hope for a country where we make our own decisions—where the people we elect to represent our communities in this place can make decisions about energy, employment, social security and many other issues on which we are currently hamstrung and where young people's voices are heard, disabled people matter and pensioners get a deal that they really deserve.

That is the kind of hope that was illustrated by Kayleigh Kinross-O'Neill earlier, when she spoke powerfully about barriers, and it is the hope that I want to give to all those who have become eligible to vote in the past decade and to all those who voted in 2014 but have since seen Brexit, Covid and every other difference between Scotland and the UK highlighted since we last got a chance to vote on the constitution. I do not want those people to feel like I once felt—that this place, politics and having a view are not for them.

When I knocked on doors over the past year, people told me that their priorities were the cost of living, transport, the NHS and housing. Independence came up now and again but, like me, their immediate priorities were the cost of living, transport, the NHS and housing. Like most people, I have never seen independence as an end in itself. It is a means to the end of allowing us to do better in all those areas and more.

We are doing everything that we can to eradicate poverty, to support those who most need help and to create a country that is prosperous and responsible in meeting its global obligations and moral duties to tackle climate change and to uphold human rights for everyone. Over the past 12 years, I have seen far too much progress held back, far too many decisions taken on our behalf against our wishes, and far too many people struggling who do not need to struggle.

I agree with the Green amendment's point that we have a clear majority, not just for independence-supporting parties but for progressive values. I felt very motivated today, listening to some of our new members' first speeches, because that aspect has been shining through. The contributions of Kate and Michelle in particular—our new Campbells—really had me feeling echoes of that 2014 campaign. People have come here with purpose and a deep understanding of the why, not just the what, and an ability to convince people in the way that I was convinced in 2014, including the hundreds of thousands who—just as Craig Hoy did not get to vote for a Green candidate—have not yet had the opportunity to vote on independence.

We have to demonstrate that we can do better. I am confident that we will, but I am clear that, in order to do the best that we can on all the priorities that our constituents have and all the events and crises that will present themselves over the next five years and beyond, we need more power in this room. The suggestions in the weak unionist amendments today will not even touch the sides.

Many people have declared to me that they want to see more powers devolved to this Parliament. Not all of them are SNP, and not all are even close to being convinced about independence. Labour members in Scotland used to be among those people. Where are they now? In a similar debate last session, I pointed out to the Labour speakers who were claiming that all would be well once we had a Labour Government that

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Governments do not last forever and that the Tories would be back in at some point. How things change: I do not necessarily think that that is true any more, but, even worse, we have a Labour Government that has failed to devolve more powers to this place, failed to join us in tackling child poverty and failed even to meet its own campaign commitments.

It does not matter who is in power in London. Our voices are never heard strongly enough and our people are never given the attention and the respect that they deserve. All that Anas Sarwar and his colleagues can offer is that an ambitious future can and should be achieved through the devolved powers of this Parliament. Well, my ambitions are greater than that, and I think that Scotland's should be, too.

This is not a voluntary union—if it were, Opposition members in the chamber would be able to answer the simple question of how Scotland can leave it. It will be for them, after this debate, to explain to their constituents not only why they do not believe in independence, which it is their right to oppose as much as it is my right to support, but why they believe that their constituents should not have a vote on it and that this Parliament should not have the power to put that question to the public, meaning that Scotland does not have a route by which to leave. That is what they must explain, and I do not envy them that. I am far more comfortable sitting in amongst my SNP colleagues, calling for democracy, hope and a country with ambitions that can be met.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Craig Hoy—up to a generous six minutes, Mr Hoy.

15:55

Craig Hoy (Dumfriesshire) (Con): Thank you, Deputy Presiding Officer. I echo earlier comments in welcoming you to your new role and congratulating the presiding officers on their election. Although this is not my maiden speech, I also take the opportunity to pay tribute to my predecessor as MSP for Dumfriesshire, Oliver Mundell, who served the constituency with distinction. *[Applause.]*

There is a bitter irony in that, today, the day after the former First Minister's husband was jailed for stealing the SNP's independence campaign funds, the current First Minister is back in the chamber seeking another independence referendum. That is an irony that will not be lost on hard-working Scots, who cannot believe that repeating an argument that the SNP lost fairly, squarely and decisively in 2014 can, even for one moment, be the number 1 priority of Scotland's new Government.

David Barratt (Cowdenbeath) (SNP): Will the member accept an intervention?

Craig Hoy: In the recent election, in the south of Scotland, it was the Scottish Conservatives alone who stood up to the SNP and for Scotland's place in our United Kingdom. Despite the First Minister's best efforts, and those of his unwitting allies in Reform, the vitally important blue wall remained resolutely in place. So convinced was John Swinney that he could break it that he visited Dumfriesshire during a dash along the border, just days before the election. So, as I seek to increase my majority, I invite Mr Swinney to attend my constituency as often as possible over the next five years, because, each and every time that he raises the spectre of independence, my constituents are reminded of the reckless disregard that he has for their futures: the risk to their jobs, pensions and public services, their national security and their national identity.

Emma Roddick: Will the member give way?

Craig Hoy: I will, in a moment.

Those risks remain very real for those who live along the border. Had Reform handed the SNP my seat, could members imagine pro-UK voters living in Gretna looking their children and grandchildren in the eye and telling them that we put at risk their right to go forth into the world and to profess themselves proud to be Scottish and proud to be British, with all the doors that that opens and all the benefits that it brings? If it was not for the Scottish Conservatives preventing the SNP from taking those blue-wall seats and denying the First Minister the majority that he craved, we could be in that very dangerous place today.

David Barratt: Will the member take an intervention?

Craig Hoy: I will take Emma Roddick's intervention.

Emma Roddick: I am grateful to the member for giving way; I have heard a few members on his side of the chamber today call for us to live in the present and not the past, so I am curious as to why he is referring to arguments lost in 2014, rather than who won the election this month. Does he recognise that that referendum was 12 years ago, and that that is as many MSPs as his party currently has? Is he really in a position, therefore, to claim that we cannot go back and ask people for their opinion again?

Craig Hoy: Such is the member's complacency that she does not realise that her party lost 400,000 votes over the past five years. I knocked on 10,000 doors and not one person brought up independence. People

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brought up the state of the roads and the state of the health service, the parlous state of the SNP and corruption in the SNP, but never once did they bring up independence. I therefore make this appeal to John Swinney today: why does he not ditch his constitutional obsession and fix the mess that the SNP has created and ignored over 19 wasted years?

In this chamber, we are the only authentic voice making that call, because Labour's Sir Keir Starmer is now so weak and beleaguered that he is incapable of standing up to the SNP. Although Reform claims to be a unionist party, we know that it is weak on the future of the union. Reform promised to be the fox in the hen house, but after today's contribution from Malcolm Offord, it is clear that the hens have nothing to fear. In fact, after Lord Offord's performance, the hens are probably having a party.

Reform cannot be trusted on the future of the union. As exhibit A, we can take the self-styled "Sir" David Kirkwood MSP, who is sitting over my shoulder to the left. He remains committed to breaking up Britain. If Mr Offord looks to the Reform benches, he will see a clutch of cranks and constitutional chameleons who are weak on Scotland's place in our United Kingdom.

Thomas Kerr (Glasgow) (Reform) rose—

Craig Hoy: Presiding Officer, talking about cranks, I will take an intervention.

Thomas Kerr: Considering that his party stood a pro-independence candidate in Shettleston and accepted Lisa Cameron on to the Conservative benches, would Mr Hoy accept that it is a tad hypocritical to attack other people? We are happy to have people who change their mind on independence. I just wish that the Tories would do the same.

Craig Hoy: I recall Thomas Kerr when he was supporting Penny Mordaunt and Jeremy Hunt, before he reinvented himself as the Reform Genghis Khan that he is now.

Fundamentally, it is a sorry state of affairs that this is the first substantive debate that we are having in the new parliamentary session. If anyone beyond this Parliament is watching the debate, they will inevitably come to the same conclusion that I reached during the previous parliamentary session. This debate is a waste of space and a blatant waste of valuable parliamentary time.

David Kirkwood (South Scotland) (Reform): On a point of order, Deputy Presiding Officer. Mr Hoy continues to spout the same rubbish that he did all through the campaign and continues to misrepresent—

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): Mr Kirkwood, I appreciate that you are a new member, but you need to cite which standing order you are relying on for your point of order. If you want to go away and look at the standing orders and then come back, we can take your point of order at that time.

Mr Hoy, please continue.

Craig Hoy: I had finished, Deputy Presiding Officer, but this gives me the opportunity to remind the Parliament that Mr Kirkwood did indeed support independence and continues to do so.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The next speaker is Jackie Dunbar, who has seven and a half minutes, but we have time in hand.

16:02

Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): Thank you, Presiding Officer; I welcome you to your new role. I am also delighted to be returned by the good folk of Aberdeen Donside to their Parliament to represent them.

Today's debate is about being ambitious for Scotland. I will start with my simple and greatest ambition for our nation. It is an ambition that I have had since I was a bairn growing up on the farms across the north-east of Scotland, where my dad worked. It is an ambition that grew from when I got my first job in a petrol station as a teenager and throughout the 14 years that I worked for Tesco. It is an ambition that I wanted for my daughter's future, right from the very day that she was born, and it continued to grow as I was raising her. It is an ambition that I fully saw the need for when I was a councillor representing some of the most deprived communities in Aberdeen. It is an ambition that I will do everything in my power to realise as a member of our Scottish Parliament.

That ambition is for Scotland to be an independent country, not just so that folk have a real and meaningful say in shaping and determining their own destinies and those of their bairns and their bairns' bairns, but because of the difference that it will make when major decisions, which have so much impact on folk's lives, are taken in Scotland for Scotland.

Right now, the need for that feels especially obvious in Aberdeen, where decisions that are taken in Westminster are having a devastating impact on the city that I represent. I will take this opportunity to talk

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about Aberdeen and its future, how the Scottish Government is supporting the city to be ambitious and how the north-east has been failed by successive UK Governments.

When I moved to Aberdeen as a young quine, it was already known as the oil capital of Europe. The industry reached into every community and just about everyone had a family member or friend who worked on the rigs. For me, it was my long-suffering partner who would often go offshore. Today, it is now my daughter who goes offshore when needed for her work.

Throughout all that time, oil and gas—and now energy more generally—have defined Aberdeen, and they have treated us well. Yes, there have been downturns and, sadly, tragedies, but, for the most part, oil has meant prosperity for the north-east of Scotland, and oil and energy have become a part of Aberdeen's identity. However, oil is finite, and even before there was any suggestion of phasing out oil, and long before the windfall tax started forcing out oil companies—

Rachael Hamilton: Will the member take an intervention?

Jackie Dunbar: I will take the intervention.

Rachael Hamilton: Jackie Dunbar is very much in support of the oil and gas industry in the north-east. Will she back our calls to drill for oil in Jackdaw and open the fields of Jackdaw and Rosebank for gas and oil?

Jackie Dunbar: I will address the “Drill, baby, drill” mantra later in my speech.

There was an acknowledgement that we needed to start investing so that Aberdeen would continue to be prosperous after oil. I remember having those conversations nearly 20 years ago as a councillor, and the hope was that such investment would be made during prosperous times so that it would be there to see us through when it was needed. Unfortunately, in those 20 years, there has been the financial crisis, austerity, the oil price crash, the vote for Brexit, the pandemic and the actual leaving of the EU. When the oil price finally picked back up, the windfall tax was introduced and, with that, investment started moving elsewhere.

A lot of great work is being done by the business community in the city to diversify our economy and build us up as a hub for renewables, which has been supported by the Energy Transition Zone and Aberdeen and Grampian Chambers of Commerce—among many others—as well as the Scottish Government's £500 million just transition fund. However, so much of that work is being undermined by the energy profits levy.

I will share some of my ambitions for Aberdeen, one of which is perhaps rather lofty.

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): Will the member confirm that the SNP not only wanted a higher energy profits levy but wanted it without the investment allowances that the Conservatives brought in?

Jackie Dunbar: That was history. We then went and—*[Interruption.]* I am surprised that it was the member from the north-east, Liam Kerr, who asked me that question, and not his colleague, who I cannot see in the chamber. Perhaps he is not getting on with the day job but is instead out trying to find another day job.

One of my ambitions, which is perhaps rather lofty, is for Aberdeen to become the net zero capital of the world—I will never stop trying to push for that for Aberdeen—in order to reap the benefits of the well-paid jobs and strong local economy that would come with that. It would ensure that our region experiences a lasting legacy from North Sea oil.

My other ambitions are somewhat more humble. For example, it is my ambition that, in the energy capital of Europe, nobody should be afraid to put the heating on because they are worried about their energy bills. In a city that is surrounded by farms and fishermen, it is also my ambition that no bairn should go to bed hungry. All that ties in with the Scottish Government's commitment to eradicate child poverty, build a more prosperous economy, help folk during the cost of living crisis and tackle climate change.

All those commitments have been undermined by the UK Government, whether it is run by Labour or the Tories. I will start with the Tories, the party that introduced the windfall tax, which was brought in under Boris Johnson and maintained throughout the premierships of Liz Truss and Rishi Sunak. The energy profits levy and the years of lost investment that it led to are the legacies of the Tories. Now, they have the cheek to come out with the mantra of “Drill, baby, drill”. However, even if drilling started again tomorrow, it would still only be, by itself, a short-term solution. The Tories consistently fail to outline what should come next, let alone invest in it. They are actively campaigning against investment in renewable energy and infrastructure, which will support the next generation of jobs. The biggest asset that we have in Aberdeen is not oil and gas, wind or tidal power, but our workers—that innovative, pioneering, highly skilled and world-leading workforce. We need those workers for our long-term prosperity and for whatever comes next.

In the short term, yes, we should drill, baby, drill. However, if we want lasting prosperity, the focus must be on our workforce and on skills, baby, skills.

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Liam Kerr: Will the member give way on that point?

Jackie Dunbar: Not just now, Mr Kerr.

Then we have the Labour UK Government, which has increased and extended the windfall tax and now wants to close down Aberdeen's biggest industry altogether while opening the doors to Russian oil.

The Labour Party—irrespective of who is in charge—is betraying thousands of energy workers. The UK Government has failed to match the just transition fund, failed to fully back the Acorn project, failed to fix the windfall tax, failed to invest in renewables, failed to invest in the north-east, failed to support oil and gas workers, and failed to bring down energy bills.

What can I say? The UK is a failing state, so let us be ambitious and do better. Let us give ourselves and our country a fresh start with independence.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We move on to winding-up speeches. I remind members that the convention is that, for the first speech, no interventions should be made.

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